

## The *Let Us Give Children Roots and Wings* Drive of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb and partners



- The drive is based on the project *The World of Toys* and the exhibition *Children's Toys from the Croatian Heritage*. In addition to the popularity acquired through the recognition of the wish and need to acquaint the youngest generation with the traditional toys of their ancestors, it also highlights appropriate values at several levels of social and humanistic action. Within this scope emphasis is placed of the educational and museological components, and its significance is considered through the overlapping prisms of present-day requirements governing museum activity and international trends in educational – primarily preschool – theory and practice.

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The *Let Us Give Children Roots and Wings* drive launched by the Ethnographic Museum Zagreb and its partners (*Radio Kaj*, *Official Gazette*, *Croatian Forestry Ltd.*, *Croatian Chamber of Commerce*, etc.), started in September 2013 with the drive involving donations of traditional wooden toys to institutions for children (Fig. 1/p. 328). The idea, developed on the basis of the project *The World of Toys* and the exhibition *Children's Toys from the Croatian Heritage*, authored by Iris Biškupić Bašić, Ph.D. Senior Curator, was conceptually designed by Mirjana Drobina, Head of the Marketing and Public Relations Department of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb. The original idea, promoted through a regular radio show, whereby every children's institution

(kindergarten, children's hospital, children's home, etc.) was to get a set of traditional children's toys, was expanded by a performance, *Vilko and the Hairy Man* (Fig. 2/p. 328) by the Zagreb association *Entertainment Laboratory*. Picture books with accompanying attractions (stories, games, working sheets etc.) are also under production. All these actions, in the words of M. Drobina, are focused on giving the youngest the *roots* of identity and the *wings* of fancy, which they will take through life. In this way present-day children and their children will be able to convey to the world the valuable and internationally recognised Croatian heritage (cf. [www.korijeni.info](http://www.korijeni.info)).

The significance of this drive can be considered at several levels, more precisely in terms of its economic, environmental and educational aspect. Proceeding from my own role – that of educationalist, ethnologist and curator – I shall dwell on the first and the last. That, of course, does not reduce the important task of preserving, developing and sustaining the crafts based on the traditionally transmitted skill of wooden toy manufacture. In addition to a new life outside of their homeland, toys also gain a new tourist potential as souvenirs. This is especially true if we consider another feasible idea – the opening of a toy museum in Marija Bistrica, the production centre of Zagorje traditional wooden toys.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, by expanding the cultural highlights in the region, as an increasingly popular tourist destination for visitors from many European and other countries Zagreb is offered the opportunity to enrich the range of its attractions by an item of extreme heritage value, as confirmed by the inscription of the manufacture of Zagorje traditional toys on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2009. All this includes new jobs and new incentives for the domicile population, stimulating it to remain in its local setting and revive the tradition of their ancestors without being deprived of the comforts of modern life and business opportunities.

The foregoing is certainly linked with the environmental component of the *Let Us Give Children Roots and Wings* drive. I am referring to the replacing of dyes used in the past with new products harmless for the children and for the

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1 Hrvatsko Zagorje is not the only Croatian region known for this kind of folk creativity. A comprehensive survey of the development of traditional children's toys in Croatia again confirms that Croatia assimilated the cultural heritage of Central Europe and the Mediterranean, adding its own creative efforts and creating a complex and peerless cultural heritage, manifested – where toys are concerned – most clearly in Hrvatsko Zagorje, Prigorje and Dalmatinska Zagora (cf. Biškupić Bašić 2012: 18).

environment. This will then be a harmonious complement to wood – the basic material in toy production which hardly needs any particular emphasis as the optimum in the selection of didactic material for children of preschool age. There has also occurred a change in the choice of connecting parts (wooden rivets instead of nails) and in surface finishing (planes with no sharp edges). This transforms the final products of the traditional Zagorje craft into toys meeting all current safety standards.

During the already mentioned *World of Toys Project*, more precisely of its segment, *Children's Toys from the Croatian Heritage*, held for as long as six months (1 December 2012 – 2 June 2013), one could observe particularly great public interest in types of toys seen today only at country fairs or major urban market-places: clattering butterflies, doll furniture, horses on wheels, whistles and quite a few other wooden toys (Fig. 3/p. 329). For the adults they regularly had the effect of a time machine which took them back to the time of their childhood and emphasised the wish to convey all that joy to their children or, even more often, to their grandchildren. And the latter, as a rule, responded enthusiastically to the wealth of colour and form; but what totally engaged their attention was the story “behind the toy”. The story about the making of the toy, about the makers and the circumstances in which the toy was made, about inspiration, about its buyers and sales channels – and, last but not least, who played with and what significance did he/she attach to it. In this regard the *Let Us Give Children Roots and Wings* drive is necessarily accompanied not only by presentation but also by sensibilisation – of the children as well as of adults (primarily parents and educators) – to the potential hidden behind this at first only visually well-proportioned wooden object.

Because nostalgia is not what the *new*<sup>2</sup> museum, as the key mover of this project, should go by. Quite the contrary: success, and thereby the objective as well, lies in personalising the museum experience, in the personal experience, in the actual moment, whether with one's arrival in the museum institution or with museum's public appearance. In the *Let Us Give Children Roots and Wings* drive, the museum assumes the position of a go-between – not only between the object and the audience but also as a factor in production-consumption terms. However, the presentation approach must not remain at the transmission level; it must necessarily be enriched with two-way attractions

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2 The new, third wave museum, according to Tomislav Šola's definition, implies a reformed museum, as opposed to the old, traditional idea about the mission and operation of a museum institution (cf. Šola 1997: 50.-52).

at all the included levels – from children through educators and parents to the local and general community.

From the children's angle, saying that the box contains toys (Fig. 4/p. 329) with which their grandparents and great-grandparents used to play does not mean much. The preschool child has not developed abstract thinking, and for him/her age classification is not a quality information. Just as in a game, which is the most productive when it is interactive, the key point is bringing the matter closer in an attractive, engaged, engrossing, amusing and concurrently educational way. Therefore, whenever toys are delivered the Project stages an accompanying performance which thematically follows the story about their origin and at the same time allows the children to acquire – through active participation in acting – a personal experience and develop an awareness of the significance and value of the received toys.

Additionally, the educator can also prepare the children for the event which will take place in the kindergarten, whether by a story and talk, or by visual material, an appropriate song and possible follow-up activities. This at the same time opens up the opportunity to provide information on traditional toys, and this is where the museum again plays a role as a source of information and partner in the realisation of the mentioned ideas. The same line is followed by the intention to develop within the Project a number of materials to be used not only to announce the drive but also as guidelines for the development of additional incorporation of briefing on tradition into the existing preschool curriculum.

There is another mistake that needs to be avoided: the single, festive act of donation (Fig. 5/p. 329) must not mystify toys as objects the value of which exceeds the child's everyday wish and need to play with them whenever he/she feels like it. The toy must be, and that is its sense, an always accessible and suitable prop for a greater or lesser transformation of reality towards the areas of the child's interest. Although designed, traditional toys also offer a number of possible scenarios of play through which the child will learn and understand the world around him/her, and his/her own role in it. Since toys often realistically reflect everyday objects from the past (e.g., old-fashioned furniture, everyday objects, instruments, farming tools, etc.), they are an excellent foundation for presenting the traditional way of life through appropriate stories and even, in older groups or school age children, through independent research of the theme with the help of parents, grandparents and other informed adults.

In the same spirit, and having the same objective in mind, it would be worthwhile to brief adults as well about the programme, stir up memories of their own childhood, spotlight the meaning of the drive, and their role in sensibilising the youngest to the respect and appreciation of their own heritage. This can be done in a variety of ways – from specific lectures, briefing by educators to informative brochures and/or thematically oriented, materialised or electronic *parent's corner*. Workshops (playrooms) involving both children and adults have been shown to be especially rewarding; the involvement of older persons, who are regularly an inexhaustible source of information on past times, would also be desirable. In this way the drive could also include, in addition to children's institutions, senior citizens and nursing homes; in smaller places with no institutional care facilities of this kind the oldest local inhabitants can be used for the purpose. The benefit of such socialising and learning is truly invaluable, and it is on the track of true and not merely proclaimed intergenerational solidarity. After all, many of the toys under consideration are interactive and one needs to know how to use them properly (push, pull, turn) – and who can provide better assistance than those who had spent their childhood testing their limits and devising new ways of their use.

The value of interactive toys, although theoretically and empirically demonstrated a long time ago, is often forgotten nowadays under the onslaught of omnipresent consumerism. Children's room often become crowded store-rooms of toys in which children lose interest even before investigating them. Indeed, not infrequently the child is more engrossed by the decorative wrapping than by the contents of the package. The reason lies in the broad range of possibilities offered by paper – just as all other formless materials. This is why it is important, when choosing children's toys, to examine the possibility of play in different ways, of stimulating the child to think, feel and act independently. The same consideration applies to the development of physical, mental, social and emotional skills, design aesthetics and quality (including colour, texture and natural sounds), the degree of interest/amusement the toy can offer in the context of the child's cognitive and motoric abilities, and – no less important – safety in use (blunt edges, natural dyes and materials); finally, we need to check whether packaging meets international environmental standards and practices.

Traditional wooden toys, modernised in terms of safety and placed with the appropriate context, meet all these requirements and make up a unique tool

allowing the child, through play, to acquire and practice life skills; they also provide a latent support in one's own tradition, the origin of respect and understanding of cultural diversity. Early intercultural education is a necessary means in the achievement of homeostasis in the global world of tomorrow, and one of the ways of its promotion is also the intervention in the toy as a prop which, by engaging the child's thinking, defines the environment in which he/she grow up, often with greater power and more significant influence than is usually expected.

Unlike any other activity, work in particular, play is characterised by freedom, spontaneity and purposefulness. The only reason for play is satisfaction derived from it.<sup>3</sup> However, in developmental-psychological terms its significance for the player is manifold. Through play the child experiments, sets and solves problems in a specific and his/her own individual way. This systematises latent experiences and transmits them to an ordered system of knowledge, abilities and skills. Symbolic interaction in the social environment has a decisive, lifelong influence on human mental abilities, and its significance is multiplied in the sensomotoric and preoperation phase of the preschool child.<sup>4</sup> Proceeding from the child's individual characteristics and abilities we must properly choose and offer games and toys which – while supporting psychophysical development – reflect social values (cf. Zlatković 2008: 4-5) and culture, although it is theoretically questionable to which extent the latter has priority over play and how much such a sequence is hierarchically founded.<sup>5</sup>

Coming to the world and living in a mass consumer culture deprives the children of the development of imagination and inventiveness – the experience remains on the surface since the potential of games and toys which it offers is mainly based on self-sufficiency and autoregulation. The solution for preventing superficiality already at the earliest age lies in a gradual and adjusted but persistent development of the sense of aesthetics and ability of critical thinking, and the provision of foundations for the formation of a mental shift between oneself and the surroundings with a maximum stimula-

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3 According to Johan Huizinga, amusement deriving from play resists any analysis and any logical interpretation – as a concept, it cannot be reduced to any mental category (cf. Huizinga 1949: 3)

4 According to the cultural-historical theory of psyche development of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky and Jean Piaget's theory of the cognitive development phase.

5 I have in mind Johan Huizinga's initial thesis about play as a phenomenon older than culture and one of the foundations of civilisation (cf. Huizinga 1949: 1).

tion of creativity in the expression of all kids and forms – kinetic, musical, art and literary. By offering subject matter which teaches children about the community and the world in which he/she lives, such as traditional children's games and toys, and stories behind them, and related activities allowing direct creative participation, we make possible the establishment of a network of internal and external links and relationships, both with oneself and with others, and thereby stimulate the child for a healthy building of social reality, identity and tolerance. The result is precious – the child's awareness of himself/herself in the role of the creator, active participant, capable – with his/her procedures and behaviour – of building and changing his/her world - in other words, of maintaining the link with himself/herself and his/her interior, while respecting and accepting everybody else and everything different.

In multicultural conditions, such as also prevail increasingly in Croatia, additionally burdened by the reflections of past war events, we must necessarily proceed from building the foundations for a healthy and productive life of future generations – not by imposing grandiose and inefficient proclamations but through little everyday things like this project – small on the international scale but locally certainly significant – and associated efforts invested perseveringly into the achievement of inclusion at every social level. For example, high-grade, modern educational institutions have for some time been using nationally, ethnically and culturally diverse material (dolls, picture books, food, music) which unpretentiously introduces this small educational nucleus into the broader social context. Recent trends go a step further, suggesting concentration on the fostering of internal diversity such as specific habits, traditions and customs of members of an educational group (cf. Ponciano and Shabazian 2012: 27). In this regard, and on the local scale, knowledge of the traditional wooden toys of continental Croatia fits into the preschool curriculum even in terms of the parameters in the international educational guidelines.

The logical sequence of this formal plan and programme of education implies quite a few informal and formal forms of learning, inevitable including the museum as a place of joyous encounter, communication, creation, interaction, inclusion and sensibilisation – in a nutshell, of continuous cognitive, intellectual and emotional progress not only of the child as an individual but also, over a longer term, of the community as a whole.

For the sake of illustration, an easily feasible programme of intercultural activity among ethnographic museums with national and world culture col-

lections could include a comparative presentation of toys from their own heritage and those related to the traditions of other peoples. This could be followed up by presenting workshop experiences with which children would not only hear explanations about museum objects they are seeing but also enrich that two-dimensional experience with touch, use, traditional play, stories, songs, films, plays, creative replicas or active artistic repetition of the theme the results of which they will take along as a reminder of the museum experience. However, within the scope of such a simple, feasible, humanistic-developmental variant of work with preschool children, we must not lose track of the fact that each child is a unique person with an individual development pattern which must be matched by all actions taken by the educator – in this case of a museum educationalist and/or curator – which regard the child's interests and abilities, and opportunities to participate in interactive play processes as a kind of active learning.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the mandatory individual approach also implies work with vulnerable social groups, and the many educational programmes, creative workshops, interactive classrooms and networked communications confront museums with the challenge of progressive social involvement resulting in the inclusion of socially sensitive persons and helping them in their integration in the community (cf. Brstilo and Jelavić 2010: 145). Therefore, the museum communicators, just like educators, really need to be special people. Regardless of their age and experience they must always be interested and enthusiastic. Goethe said: "We only learn from the people we love" (cf. Šola 1997: 141). And that is necessarily a two-way process, I would add.

Drawing on my own experience, I would like to stress two potentially aggravating circumstances in museum work with children. The first regards the preparation of children for an organised visit to the museum before the actual arrival in the museum institution. This requires top quality communication at the museum educationalist/curator level which is often missing, probably because of the so-called split responsibility, especially with group visits of kindergarten and school age children, as opposed to the variant when the child

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6 According to one of the definitions of active learning, it implies engaging the children physically, cognitively and emotionally, and promoting action, so that children learn how to recognise their own capacity and efficiency; it also places children in the centre of the learning process, ensuring that its substance is relevant for their own life; it must be stimulating and requires an atmosphere of trust and support, ensuring the children's participation and feeling of safety in expressing their own views and testing new skills (cf. Tormey 2005: 53).

is brought to the museum by a parent who, as a rule, informs the child about what he/she can expect and connects the unknown-seen with the known elements in the child's life. The second factor refers to the available time frame of the workshop which is often insufficient for the full achievement of the educational potential and of the optimum, comprehensive museum experience of each child. In such conditions one rarely crosses the boundary between the apersonal, ready-made concept based on the instruction/get-it-over-with principle and a child-centred atmosphere within which the educator/museum educationalist/curator only supports and assists allowing the child to develop his own autonomous activity. Briefly, asking the preschool child to be attentive, to concentrate and remember, is doomed even before the beginning. A task given the child makes sense only if is interesting – the motive is the wish to imagine internally one's own world (Mlinarević acc. to Bredehamp 1992: 61). and that, among other things, also requires sufficient time with no distraction by urging. Finally, we must not forget the ideal of every educational process – children choose themselves the activities from different learning areas, from what the educator/museum educationalist/curator has prepared and from what they started spontaneously (cf. Miljak 1996: 31).

In the context of the foregoing, any effort made to bring a traditional (museum) object into an educational institution in which the educational process unfolds in a known and pleasant setting unencumbered by time limitations should not be regarded as something threatening the development of the habit of visiting cultural facilities but, rather, as an adequate preparation and harmonious complement to the cultural asset offered to the youngest. In this sense the *Let Us Give Children Roots and Wings* drive is a long-term contribution of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb to the formation of a whole generation of museum-goers which will not regard (and avoid) the museum through the prism of an elite (and boring) commitment but rather as a partner in the better understanding of oneself and of others, with the ultimate goal of correct identification and sensibilisation, indispensable for the brave new world of the intercultural tomorrow.

For the end, instead of a conclusion, let me quote the thinking of Dr. Alison Gopnik, professor of psychology at Berkeley:

“One of the worst things when you begin to write about the importance of children is that whatever you say begins to sound like a Xmas card. Yet, clichés become clichés because they are true, and the cliché that children are our future is in the simplest terms a literal truth. This cliché is particularly

deep for human offspring. Children are not our future just because they carry our genes. For us, human beings, the feeling that we know who we are, as individuals and as a group, is essentially connected with our origin and our destination, with our past and our future. Man's capacity to change means that he cannot discover what it means to be a man if he regards his existence only in the present. Instead of that, we must look at the widespread expanse of human capabilities. The researchers we see there, at the farthest edges, are very much like our children" (Gopnik 2011: 202).

However, the researchers are not only great scientists, pioneers or inventors. So are we, the museum staff, who meet in our everyday work the *forgotten words*, essential for the survival of identity and preservation of collective memory, with the noble commitment to turn heritage into an instrument of human development and wise knowledge (cf. Bellaigue acc. to Šola 1997: 14). The meaning of our work lies in the fact that we operate in real time, with real people, "kids and adults" alike. And that is what we do by giving them roots and wings.

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