
Jasmina Jurković

Virovitica City Museum

Virovitica

jasmina.jurkovic@muzejvirovitica.com

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The preparation and registration of ethnographic material – experiences of the Virovitica City Museum

INTRODUCTION OR „WHAT DO YOU ACTUALLY DO IN THE MUSEUM?“

Even today, talking to people in various situations, I face this question. It is mainly focused on generally under-represented museum occupations, but in a small community it also refers to the concreteness of what is presented to the public. In our Museum this applies to popular actions like *Museum Night* or the opening of guest exhibitions. The remaining professional activity does not appear, as it seems, to meet the anticipations of the interlocutor regarding the imagined projected work in the Museum and, of, course, the closely related issue of its funding. Some people say that this perception of the Museum and of the profession reflects the social conditions, but I find it difficult to resist the impression that we may have contributed ourselves to such considerations. Ignorance of the complexity of our work and the lack of society's interest in museum activity still follows us, unjustly I would say, in terms of public questioning whether there exists at all any need for professional workers, and even institutions. I believe that the answers need to be justified by concrete results, whether with respect to the profession (registration of collections) or with respect to the public (presentation of our work).

One of the more important jobs of the museum staff is the processing of the exhibits (objects) in line with the rules of the museum profession. While I have much understanding for the objective circumstances in the past work of museums and in the organisation of their activity, in the preparation of objects and data for the inscription of the Ethnographic Collection of the Virovitica Museum on the Register of Cultural Goods I have been able to detect many past oversights. These oversights could have prompted the questions in the sub-title, but there are also oversights we have inherited as undesirable ghosts of the past. Some personal contacts with other museums, mainly in the continental part of Croatia, have shown me that the Virovitica Museum was not alone with respect to such problems. The situation, as it appears with certain variations, is

the same in regional, municipal and even “larger” museums (in terms of staff and the number of collections). After all, this is also confirmed by the relatively low number of registered collections and thereby, probably, of professionally processed collections as well in our museums.

A justified answer to “what we are doing in the museum” and a way out of this situation – which I have always found unpleasant – can still be found, in my view, in personal, continuous and dedicated endeavour, in the presentation of museum objects, collections and separate departments in one’s community, and in lifelong education. Furthermore, I believe that the answer also needs to be sought in the structuring of the existing members of the staff and their broader education, and in the employment of experts for specific fields. Here, too, as we well know, the problems run deeper. On the one hand, the local community expects results in the form of a varied presentation of heritage; on the other, founders do not want (or do not see any purpose or need) to invest into professional museum workers. In smaller communities, professions like a pedagogue, photographer, restorer, documentarist, librarian, and even museum technician, were not a necessary option for the founders, and the work of the museum boiled down to one profession – the curator. Such an approach in regarding museum activities and general museum management exclusively through the curator profession unequivocally affects the further development of the institution. In terms of cycles, this bears significantly upon the work of the curator in the processing of museum objects and, ultimately, results in a long process of registration of the collections. A possible solution might be the supervision of work through the central activity or, possible, more specific control of annual reports highlighting specifically the processing of objects. I believe that links through institutions, contacts and consultations would make possible a higher quality of professional work.

In the continuous race to present exhibitions and engage in activities focused on increasing attendance less attention is paid to professional work in the processing of our objects.

In this paper I would like to present my experience in the preparation and inscription of a smaller collection (at the time just above 700 items) in a regional type museum on the Register of Cultural Goods. Today I would certainly deal in a different way with the problems I had and with their solution in 2011 and 2012. Today they might appear benign, but the reality of a part of “smaller” museums lies precisely in silence and in concealing the real state in museum management and activity. The wish to attain higher standards with respect to the public and the rationale of our existence do not allow us to solve the basic problems which ultimately become twice as large. I also thought, for a long time, that my institution and the very collection for which I was responsible was specific because of long processing, data input in the computer program and dealing with the backlog.

Therefore, I believe that the experience presented in this paper will also stimulate other colleagues in their future work and processing of ethnographic material in our museums.

PROCESSING OF MATERIAL AND PREPARATION OF THE COLLECTION

For me the preparation of my collection meant gaining very detailed knowledge of the collected material of the Virovitica Museum. Valuable physical contacts with every object and familiarity with basic data were complemented with intangible culture stories and possibilities of their documentary recording.

The Ethnographic Collection of the Virovitica Museum is a relatively small collection. It was established, like most ethnographic collections in regional museums, at the time of foundation of the institution and provided the basic display. In spite of the fact that no ethnologist was available during these initial years (in the case of Virovitica, the mid-20th century), considerable material was acquired, mainly of valuable hand-woven fabrics and so-called folk costumes. In time, as experts and ethnologists were employed, the Collection was enriched with other objects, especially from family and economic life. Owing to circumstances in the institution over the following years, ethnographic objects were collected and stored rather than systematically processed and thereby scientifically interpreted. The processing of objects (inventory, photographs and catalogues) was even more neglected because of the founders' requests regarding the Museum's "visible work", and many other requirements in the protected building (a castle built in the early 19th century and a protected cultural monument), including the lack of professional staff members. Luckily, the situation changed with the arrival of computers and development of meaningful data bases facilitating operations with object data.

My first job after graduation involved great responsibility for the varied ethnographic material in the Virovitica Museum. The data input program was in its inception, and only basic, often insufficient data were available in the inventory books because of the already mentioned circumstances. As a trainee, and subsequently junior curator, I found getting to know the objects as well as the specific features of the region to which I had just moved a real challenge. However, the first step was the survey of the existing state of affairs, i.e., of the objects and their condition. Entering the storerooms of the Virovitica Museum looked like a real expedition and detective adventure. As I already mentioned, they were in a protected cultural monument presenting, unfortunately, more negative than positive sides, and one had to figure out the location of ethnographic objects throughout the castle. Because of the continuous changes of the permanent display from the nineteen-eighties, of the need to care for the objects during the war (between 1991 and 1995), and of the moving of objects, ethnographic material was consigned to several "hidden" rooms and corners of the castle. In addition, new material was temporarily moved from one room to another.

The mainly research effort also called for a high level of personal patience, resulting ultimately in combining (in the literal physical sense of the word) all descriptions and inventory marks with the actual ethnographic objects. The procedure worried me, primarily for ethical reasons, because marks were removed from some objects (in time they became illegible or fell off) and there were no detailed descriptions in the inventory book; the dimensions of the objects, which would have facilitated recognition very much, were not entered either. Finally, there were no photographs which would

have clarified every doubt about the objects and the respective mark. I was particularly concerned over the possible precision and certainty with which I could associate the inventory mark from the book with the object. I wanted to attain the highest certainty possible because otherwise I would have – in a way – faked the data. I sought help among the co-workers from the surrounding places, who were familiar with objects of a similar appearance, and that is certainly an advantage for a considerable part of ethnographic objects. Similarly, some professional references (exhibition catalogues with detailed catalogue units) helped me to compare and detect the material. Inadequate communication and consultation with the profession were also the result of attempts to conceal, in a way, the real conditions of the holdings and, certainly, unease over possible former oversights.

The slow processing of the objects was also due to mechanical cleaning and preventive protection. More often than not objects passed through several hands because of more accurate identification, and were then cleaned under supervision, then protected with one agent or another and, finally, removed to the storeroom. The entire process takes time if you depend on people (few technical staff members to help you), funding (accommodation of objects in the form of sheet metal cupboards, drawer units, acid-free boxes, cleaning agents, etc.) or the weather (all the rooms in the castle are not heated, and that makes work difficult in autumn and winter).

In our museum, with a staff of five to seven people, various technical jobs (cleaning and moving) “multiply”, and often one person (the curator) performs several operations over a large space (the storerooms are in the attic, and the office with computer facilities on the first floor).

PROBLEMS AND THEIR SOLUTION

The next step was the input of basic data (name, dating, place, dimensions, material) required for the registration of the collection. Finally, in the process every object got its inventory mark and the appropriate card. I am stressing this because many objects were grouped under one mark (or, formerly, inventory number in our museum). Thus, I noted a number of similar or identical objects, or even groups of objects entered under a single mark and a single description. This was for instance the case with several traditional women’s aprons from a village (all purchased from the same narrator), some trinkets for women’s headgear and other objects. They were eventually split and described separately, and that ultimately increased the collection. Quite a few objects were not even entered, or accompanied by any form of documentation on the purchase other than by word of mouth. Here I also had to be very careful and consult co-workers and interlocutors on the ground familiar with the material.

The naming of objects and the uniformity of literary names is one of the problems throughout the museum community. Here I also resorted to various forms and own versions of descriptive literary names, which I applied eventually to the whole collection or added practical changes. The vocabulary of notions and the determination of a thesaurus are not only the job of ethnologists. This is certainly the case when objects

are checked, but also when collections are balanced and, ultimately, when objects and materials are compared with other museums and similar institutions. I solved this problem by individual efforts and descriptive names, cooperation with colleagues but also by studying references. Even subsequent correction and completion of names is part of one's continuous concern and improvement of the system, helping primarily the museum curator but also other colleagues in the future to cope with their work.

Along with the measurement and recording of object dimensions, and the description of the current condition, objects also have to be photographed. Along with the overall representation of the object one also records details, linked after that in the computer program with the respective inventory card. This part of our work calls for concentration and sound organisation, especially in the case of similar objects and smaller dimensions. In our museum, over time the quality of the documentary photos in our computer program improved.

In describing objects I sought additional help in the local community and from many co-workers familiar with traditional materials. This is the advantage of regional museums: good and fast links with the stakeholders of the heritage we are looking after.

THE VIEW TODAY - WHAT DO I ACTUALLY DO IN THE MUSEUM?

The ethnographic material in the Virovitica Museum often very quickly attracts the visitors' interest. Along with national costumes and their artistic appeal, and the powerful message of national identity, it also presents a variety of objects of everyday use. Hand-worked and formed objects of marked functionality are distinguished by simplicity and constitute an element of the visitor's identification with familiar objects. This creates a link and a mainly romantic reminiscence of details in visitor's life, childhood or stay in the country with granny.

Since 2015 the basic collections of our Museum have branched out into departments presenting different collections. Thus, the Ethnographic Collection became the Ethnological Department with seven collections, which will soon require an addition to the registration. I find this job a source of pleasure but also of concern because of the new instructions regarding the filling of cards and because of the required changes. All the people are not yet familiar with the development of a thesaurus and the harmonisation of names. I often discuss with colleagues, during informal meetings, how to introduce objects in pairs (e.g., footwear, gloves and the like), or objects consisting of several parts (e.g., a dismantable loom, thread winding winch etc.). Eventually these discussions end up with specific decisions. I argue that frequent professional staff meetings are desirable in order to discuss current professional issues through the Museum's central activity. In this way, I believe, one can more readily tackle the registration and subsequent registration task.

Also encouraging, in my view, are the many workshops in the organisation of the Museum Documentation Centre related to data input into the computed program. They have generally helped me in my work and in data input, eventually resulting in

the registration of the collection. I believe their continuous maintenance in keeping with new solutions for current problems is a must. Unfortunately, in specific museums (including the one in Virovitica) funding limitations do not allow greater involvement and more frequent attendance of workshops, seminars and events.

Another shortcoming is the insufficient involvement of the profession and of the central service. This is of special importance in mentor support in “smaller” museums with one ethnologist in the staff. However good theoretical solutions may be, in practice we do not meet enough and discuss current problems (thesaurus, object introduction and number). I often talk on the phone with my colleagues in Slavonia and discuss problems in data input or other unclear points, that, however, is not enough.

The additional ordering of secondary documentation poses new challenges. It has been unjustifiably neglected. In my case, the issue is the photograph library and the separation of ethnographic material from the ethnographic documentation on the area and museum events. In this segment of museum work all the rules are not clear either, and I often consult fellow curators engaged in similar activities but also documentation experts. All this will make possible a clearer and more comprehensive ethnographic map of the Virovitica area.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the registration of the collection has contributed to the better and more professional knowledge of the collections and department for which I am responsible, to improving the quality of its presentation to the public (through thematic exhibitions, educational workshops, targeted actions, professional presentations etc.) and, finally, to the systematic and uniform survey of the objects. After the registration of the collection we prepared in the Museum a plan for the development of the Ethnographic Collection encompassing several years. Between 2012 and 2015 the plan resulted in the completion of a part of tangible and intangible heritage. Thus, the collection was enriched with new objects, but it also focused on explorations we did not cover in the Museum so far. The Ethnological Department was structured next with special collections which will systematically be completed with specific material. We shall continue to operate in this way supported by the always welcome suggestions of our colleagues and fellow professionals.