

The professional processing of museum material and the registration of the collections of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb

- The paper is based on hands-on experience acquired in the professional processing of museum objects from the holdings of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, and reviews the initial working methods and documentation changes brought about by new laws and regulations.

Key words: Ethnographic Museum (Zagreb)
Professional processing of museum material, registration of collections

START OF PROFESSIONAL MATERIAL PROCESSING

Since its foundation in 1919 the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb has endeavoured to process its material in a systematic way meeting high standards. The basic part of the museum holdings was accounted for by five separately developed collections in which the objects were collected in accordance with the individual aesthetic criteria of the collector. Most of the exhibits were textile objects with no basic information at all. Along with Salomon Berger, the founder and the director of the Museum, the promoter of all actions focused on establishing museological standards was Vladimir Tkalčić. He laid the foundations of professional and scientific work, first as a curator and between 1925 and 1934 as the director of the Museum. He formed the first collections of objects, established the documentation pools, and started the inventory of the holdings. He collected ethnographic material during his field explorations throughout Croatia, and collected material for the museum collections in a systematic and selective way by applying photo, film and audio recording.

In the first years of its activity the priority in the activity of the Museum, in the words of Tkalčić himself: "...was focused on rigorous systematic classification of the material comprising more than 20,000 items, and its general arrangement in line with scientific museological principles; that will be the most pressing duty of my management. Therefore, this means producing inventory lists and catalogues, and exhibiting the objects in accordance with aesthetic principles and in a way affording easy overview. On the other hand, the inventories and catalogues must include, along with accurate critical indications and descriptions, good pictures, drawings or photographs of the object. These are major difficulties facing the present management, but the greatest difficulty of them all are the old, immensely defective object inventories... There is no other remedy but persistent museum work, rummaging through old inventories and documents, catalogues of countless other museums.." (1922: 74).

Thus, inventory books and catalogue cards were introduced from the very beginning of Museum work. Five closed collections which constituted the initial holdings of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb were entered into inventory books with signatures AH, B, BK, ŠM and UO named after the source.¹ The inventory book was started at the same time with the indication Et – Ethnographica; the mentioned collections were entered with the first five numbers, Et-1 through Et-5. The inscription of objects purchased or donated to the Museum followed from Et-6 on. Another inventory book, with the signature ZGZ, was introduced in 1928 for entering objects purchased by the City of Zagreb until 1940. Another inventory book was added for the collection ES – Ethnological Seminar, recording objects partly owned by the Ethnographic Museum and partly by the Ethnological Department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, and used for teaching purposes. Yet another inventory book, VA – Varia, was used to record perishable objects and objects subject to damage (painted Easter eggs, plants etc.). Along with the foregoing collections covered by the respective inventory books, another inventory book, Exota – Ex, was opened in the nineteen-seventies; it was to be used for inventorying material of extra-European provenance from the A.H. collection, but the principle was not applied consistently - and one part was still recorded in book Et 6, and the other in book Ex. In addition to these main inventory books, the documentation of the Museum also includes an inventory book with the signature G. It recorded objects which arrived at the Museum through the agency of Prof. Gavazzi, or were donated by him, but were inventoried in Ethnographica before that. The inventory book named Arcana was mentioned rarely – maybe because it recorded only three inventory numbers related to the intimate, "indecent" sphere; it was never expanded.² The first five collections were inventoried in hard-cover books of larger format; from book Et 6 the data were recorded in very heavy hard-cover books with a leather back and page corners, of large dimensions, and very unpractical. The following object data were recorded: ordinal number/inventory number/object (name)/ provenance/ way and time of arrival at the Museum/number of pieces/storage/purchase price/note. Ini-

1 Historical-Archaeological Department of the Croatian National Museum; B - Salomon Berger collection; BK – Berger – Chamber (owned by the Trade and Crafts Museum); ŠM – School Museum; UO – Arts and Crafts Museum.

2 The objects in the book were the following: *kalafićur*, wooden figure with a mobile male member, and two *nakurnjaks* – woollen and cotton slip-on cover used to protect the male member from cold.

tially the current number was also the inventory number; later on every subsequent year began with 1.

Along with the books, inventory cards were also used for every object; along with the foregoing, the card also listed a brief description of the object, often with even incomplete information on the material, technique and dimensions. The catalogue card was hand-written with an ordinary pencil and, later on, in ink. In some cases the back was used for a drawing of the object or a typical motif on it (Fig. 1/p. 174). Catalogues on object type and locality were also kept along the catalogue cards. Since museological rules require protection of material at several levels, accession and deaccession books were introduced as early as the nineteen-twenties as components – in current terminology – of primary documentation (Mokos 2011: 274).

INVENTORIES AND CATALOGUES

The importance and value of high-quality professional object processing have been the subject of discussion for years as the best solutions were sought. In the mid-20th century more intensive consideration began to be paid at the international level to the best methods of this part of museological work, and in 1953 the subject was given due attention at the 3rd ICOM Conference in Paris.³ In Croatia the issue was discussed by the well-know Croatian museologist Antun Bauer who believed that “professional inventories of museum material are perhaps the most neglected part of the work of our museums” (1955: 5). However, as good example he noted: “The most soundly thought-out professional study is undoubtedly the one by Prof. Paula Gabrić, curator of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb. She presented the solution of the inventory problem in ethnographic collections. Owing to her work the museums in Đakovo and Osijek introduced her inventory system for ethnographic material in their collections. These are probably the best arranged museum inventories in our museums” (Ibid. 1955: 20). Paula Gabrić worked as a curator, and later as a museum advisor, in the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb between 1948 and 1978.⁴ In her professional paper “The Catalogue of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb: museum object inventory and inventory book system, and cataloguing with special reference to the specific features of the ethnographic profession”, she endeavoured to develop methodological frameworks in the management of primary documentation, aware of its indisputable value: “... inventory and cataloguing work is the core of any true, appropriate and deliberate museum work. The best and methodically well-directed collecting effort will not yield good and durable fruit unless it also methodologically covers work focused on cataloguing of the collected objects. This is why the establishment of a good, functional inventory system in the form of a conscientious and professional processing of each museum object is of

3 A detailed review of the Conference was written by Vanda Pavelić, curator of the Arts and Crafts Museum (1956: 1-15).

4 Paula Gabrić: „Processing her material professionally, she specialised in folk woodworking, wickerwork and basket-making, and some archaic textile techniques. She authored or co-authored exhibitions of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, complex exhibitions of ethnographic departments of regional museums... and abroad” (Muraj 1998; <http://hbl.lzmk.hr/clanak.aspx?id=6516>).

primary importance for all museum work” (Gabrić 1954: 5). Similarly, she also suggested a new form of professional material processing: detailed instructions on the assignment of inventory numbers, dimensions and material of the main inventory book, appearance and content of catalogue cards and of object files, reference card indexes etc. (Fig. 2/p. 175). Basically she followed the mandatory system of museum collection recording for all museums in the former Yugoslavia laid down by the Federal Ministry of Culture and Science, Belgrade, in 1950 (Ibid. 1954: 30). Her final suggestions were preceded by a deeper analysis of the contemporary situation, not only in national but also in major international museums. In the Museum record office there are several documents confirming her extensive correspondence with the leading European ethnologists and museum experts and disclosing their inventory and cataloguing methods.

Detailed descriptions of the work and of the procedure of inventory number assignment at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris were sent by Claude Lévi Strauss (Fig. 3/p. 176), by George Henri Rivière, founder of the former Parisian Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires⁵ (Fig. 4/p. 176), and by Dr. Andreas Lommel of the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich.⁶ In her study Paula Gabrić listed the names of all institutions and elements in the processing of material in their museums.⁷ Only some of the suggested solutions were accepted in the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb. A number of new sections was introduced in the inventory book: inv. No./category of cultural monument/accession book/collection, department/description/author, producer/dating/material, technique/size, weight/no. of pieces/, condition, protection operations/time of production/site of discovery/mode of purchase, date, doc. no. /name and address of seller or donor/price/photo, slide/object file/storage/note. The appearance and the content of the catalogue card, adopted as late as the nineteen-nineties starting with inventory number 19000, also changed (fig. 5/p. 177). From the very beginning, the material was documented in inventory book Et 6 through catalogue object processing by the curators⁸; the documentalist then copied the data by hand into the inventory book so that the information entered in the inventory book and the catalogue were almost identical. Every object has its own inventory number and following analysis data were recorded on its structural (material, form, technique and functional (purpose, use) properties. There are no photographs of the object in the catalogue, but it may often contain a drawing of the object or a decorative motif. Records of dialectal names of parts of objects and of people who made them are also very valuable. In addition to the data disclosed by the object, data were also recorded on the mode and date of purchase, dimensions and – accounting for most of the space on the card – detailed description of the object.

5 No. 132, received on 19 April 1949.

6 No. 137, received on 25 June 1949.

7 From the record office of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb.

8 An exception was Blažena (Mohaček) Szcenci who processed the objects by cataloguing as a preparator but also as an excellent textile expert.

COMPUTER PROCESSING OF MATERIAL

Computer data processing started first in the Modes program, then in Promus⁹ and since 2009 in M + + . The initial efforts required a fair amount of coordination in noting the specific features of every museum because of its specific material. The staff of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb took active part in the elaboration of the new documentation system and additions to the integrated classification of objects for ethnographic museums. I have to note, however, that the origin for standardisation were precisely the information from old, “paper” cards. Most of these data are also contained in the *International Guidelines*¹⁰ and in the *International Core Data Standards*¹¹ which certainly served as signposts for a valid solution of standardisation problems (Zorić 2002: 316). The information formerly recorded in Promus were converted into M + + which further transmits the information. The new technology introduced a new appearance and structure of the inventory book, but with minimum changes (Fig. 6/p. 177). After filling in the information and linking the photographs to the record, the inventory sheet is written and, at the end of the year, bound in hard covers. The multimedial M + + program (which also includes S + + for processing secondary documentation) provides fast data input, data base formation, the integration of photo, video and audio records and searching for getting information from the data base according to a variety of criteria (name, storage, locality, material). The program greatly facilitates the printout required for the registration of collections provided the collection is properly arranged and validly documented. Digitisation improves material accessibility and protects the originals. The museum staff started off by scanning old catalogue cards used as data sources for decades and often damaged by frequent use. They recorded detailed description, dialectal names and drawings. Their scanning and the linking of their content to the object card will preserve valuable data, and filing protects them as originals.

INTEGRATED INVENTORY BOOK AND THE REGISTRATION OF COLLECTIONS

After the achievement of its independence, the Republic of Croatia enacted a number of laws and respective regulations, including those related to cultural goods and museum activity. The changes in that sector were initiated by Božo Biškupić, M.S., then Minister of Culture. Following insight into the condition of museum collections, and into their incomplete or even nonexistent documentation, he endeavoured, with the assistance of the museum community, to determine the priorities, forms and ways of managing primarily museum documentation. The Museum Bill¹² entered into force in 1998. It was followed by the *Regulations on the content and management of museum material*

9 For more see Zorić 2002: 315-321.

10 International guidelines for museum object information: the CIDOC information categories, International Documentation Committee (CIDOC), International Council of Museums (1995).

11 International Core Data Standards for Ethnology/Ethnography, CIDOC Ethnoworking Group, International Council of Museums.

12 Official Gazettem 142, 1998. It superseded the Museum Activity Bill of 1977.

documentation.¹³ Article 6 of the Regulations introduced the integrated inventory book of museum objects as a part of primary documentation, which determined the museum's ownership of the holdings. Until this obligation entered into force, inventory book Et 6 had on record inventory marks up to 30 494. The sum total of objects of all the abovementioned collections was added to that number, which resulted in the figure of 45 352. However, objects with old inventory marks (AH, B, BK, UO, ŠM, Ex, Es, ZGZ, V) were not re-inventoried with numbers making up a void of 14 858 but kept their inventory marks and that produced a gap of so many non-assigned numbers. However, that was accepted by all museums with a similar situation in order to set up an integrated inventory book.

The next obligation involved the registration of all the collections in the museums, and that required the revision of former decisions regarding the registration of monuments of culture. According to the 1974 decision of the Regional Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Culture in Zagreb¹⁴ the museum collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb was as a whole eligible for the status of a cultural monument and for inscription on the Register of Mobile Monuments of Culture. According to the argumentation "the museum collection of the Ethnographic Museum consists of ethnographic material objects of the SFR of Yugoslavia, non-European countries of Africa, Asia, Australia and Oceania, and South America, and single objects from other European countries (Rumania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia etc.); it was founded in 1919, and it is the largest collection of ethnographic material in the SR of Croatia and an institution of national status." The application for the inscription of the museum collection on the Register of Mobile Cultural Monuments lists the inventory books with signatures of closed collections which entered the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb as initial holdings. The inventory numbers of the abovementioned collections which entered in 1974 the application for inscription on the Register of Mobile Cultural Monuments totalled 41 985 with a total of 53 579 objects. According to Nada Gjetvaj, by mid-1989 the holdings of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb increased to 58 865 inventory numbers, i.e. about 70,000 objects (Gjetvaj 1989: 19). The foregoing *about* means that the exact number of objects could not be determined since a group of objects was often assigned one number (especially with national costume ensembles which may consist of two to a dozen parts).¹⁵

The disproportion between the sum total of inventory marks and the number of objects is not clear, but the exact number of objects currently in the Museum holdings will be known only after the computer processing of every object, revision of all collections and, ultimately, registration.

The new *Law on the Protection and Conservation of Cultural Goods of the Republic of Croatia* was enacted by the Croatian Parliament in 1999. Along with the change of terminology the new Law specified the types of cultural goods, protection measures,

13 *Official Gazette*, 108, 2002.

14 Based on Articles 30, 33 and 62 of the *Law on the Protection of Monuments of Culture (Official Gazette*, 7, 1967) and the *Regulations on the Registration of Monuments of Culture, Official Gazette* 8, 1968).

15 In modern museum documentation management the assignment of one inventory number to a group of objects is not acceptable because every museum object must have a single inventory mark.

owner obligations and rights, and a number of other issues related to the protection and conservation of cultural goods. It laid down the division of cultural goods into immovable, movable and intangible goods. The status of cultural goods, based on professional evaluation, is decided by the Ministry of Culture. After that the cultural goods are inscribed on the *Register of Cultural Goods of the Republic of Croatia*. In accordance with Art, 14 of the Law, the Register consists of three lists: *List of Protected Cultural Goods*, *List of Protected Cultural Goods of National Significance* and *List of Preventively Protected Goods*. In line with the foregoing, the collections of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb are inscribed on the Register as movable cultural goods on the list of protected cultural goods. The following collections have been registered to far: Bag Collection; Collection of Children's Toys and Games; Collection of Instruments; Modern Apparel Collection; Easter Egg Collection; Collection of Painting, Printmaking and Applied Graphic Art, Collection of Smoking Accessories, and Souvenir Collection. The number could be higher, but computer input is not a mere transfer of information from old cards¹⁶ because many of them are incomplete. This requires direct contact with the object in order to obtain data which are part of the mandatory documentation for the determination of a cultural asset. Another reason for relative slowness is taking photographs, which is a very demanding for some types of objects, and it is done by the heads of the collections.¹⁷ Since no curator is an expert photographer, a lot of time is wasted on processing photographs (centring, levelling, focusing, deletion of casually photographed details, etc.). The next reason are the many objects in some collections. It is known that most of the holdings of the Museum is accounted for by textile collections, some of which run up to five thousand objects, and a longer period is therefore required to document the collection for registration. Moreover, in some cases the object is very often catalogued, making processing longer, and then stored for a longer time. In some collections, e.g., the Furniture Collection or the Economic Collection, access to objects is not possible because of the dimensions of the objects. This would require the assistance of a technical team for moving the objects, measuring them and taking photographs. New space-related solutions (building reconstruction, moving of storage facilities to new rooms with appropriate microclimatic conditions) are the conditions for higher processing quality, free access and adequate material storage.

According to the latest division and systematisation of the holdings, the Museum owns 37 collections.¹⁸ At present the Museum is intensively engaged in digitisation of its material and review of the overall holdings in order to finally determine the exact number of objects, this being the condition for the registration of all collections. The rate and pace of object processing will depend on the solution of the mentioned problems and the maximum effort of the staff included in the processing of the Museum material.

16 Completely scanned catalogue cards would accelerate the procedure.

17 The Museum has no photographic studio, and photographs can only be taken in summer months. Because of the lack of proper lighting, and heating in winter, photographs cannot be taken all year long. Moreover, specific textile objects of larger dimensions or a more complex structure need to be prepared for shooting, and that implies the assistance of the preparation service.

18 <http://www.emz.hr/Zbirke/Organizacija%20zbirki>.

REFERENCES

- Bauer, Antun. 1956. „Neke primjedbe na stručno inventiranje u muzejima“. *Muzeologija* 5: 16-27.
- Gabrić, Paula. 1954. „Katalog Etnografskog muzeja: inventiranje muzejskih predmeta i sistem inventarnih knjiga te katalogiziranje s naročitim osvrtom na specifičnosti etnografske struke“. *Muzeologija* 4: 3-66.
- Gjetvaj, Nada. 1989. „Etnografski muzej u Zagrebu – u povodu 70. obljetnice“. *Etnološka istraživanja* 5.
- Mokos, Jasna. 2011. „Dokumentacija Etnografskog muzeja u Zagrebu“. *Etnološka istraživanja* 16: 273-276.
- Muraj, Aleksandra. 1988. *Hrvatski biografski leksikon*, ur. Trpimir Macan, izdanje 1983-2009, <http://hbl.lzmk.hr/clanak.aspx?id=6516>
- Pavelić, Vanda. 1956. „Razni modeli inventara u muzejima“. *Muzeologija* 5: 1-15.
- Tkalčić, Vladimir. 1922. „Etnografski muzej u Zagrebu“. *Narodna starina* 1: 73-75.
- Tkalčić, Vladimir. 1930. „Etnografski muzej u Zagrebu 1919-1929“. *Narodna starina* 9: 132-148.
- Zorić, Vesna. 2002. „Iskustva u primjeni računalnog programa Promus u dokumentaciji zbirki Etnografskog muzeja u Zagrebu. *Etnološka istraživanja* 8: 315-320.