

Report on the János Kriza Ethnographic Society Museum Curators' Conference

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1.

On 14 October 2022, the János Kriza Ethnographic Society (Kriza János Néprajzi Tarsaság, or KJNT) held its travelling conference, an event organised jointly with the Applied Sociology Department of Sapientia Transylvanian-Hungarian University (Sapientia Erdélyi Magyar Tudományegyetem, or Sapientia EMTE), under the heading *Museum – Heritage – Communication*. The event took place in the Transylvanian Museum of Ethnography, which at the time was celebrating its hundredth year of operation. In his welcoming speech delivered at the opening ceremony, society president Albert Zsolt Jakab gave a brief account of the conference and explained why the year's choice of themes had fallen to the topic of museums. Jakab's contribution was followed by the welcoming address of Transylvanian museum director Tudor Sălăgean, which stressed his institution's intention of 'providing everyone with a place and home for communal thinking'.

2.

These addresses were followed by two plenary presentations. The first, delivered by Marianna Berényi (Museum of Ethnography, Budapest), concerned the importance and role of museum communication. The talk stressed the necessity of an institution's knowing its visitorship and assessing related needs, while also discussing the development and effectiveness of the Museum of Ethnography's new image. The second to offer thoughts was Lajos Lakner (Dér Museum), who spoke of changing visitor expectations as a result of digital culture, as well as of novel visitor behaviour (characterised by activity, directness, and an appetite for entertainment and relaxation). Lakner's talk stressed the importance of involving visitors and offering experiences so that each exhibition 'becomes a synesthesia,' engaging visitors via multiple senses simultaneously.

3.

Once the plenary presentations had been delivered, the conference split into two parallel sections. Addresses in the first section commenced with Ferenc Pozsony from Babeş-Bolyai University (Babeş-Bolyai Tudományegyetem, or BBTE), whose presentation pointed to the asymmetry – the significant skew from material culture toward folklore – that marks the institutional representation of Moldavian Csángó villages. Pozsony then provided an overview of the material held by various museums, regional home installations, and other institutions, drawing the overall conclusion that to date, most have collected only decorated objects, leaving the everyday objects of the Moldavian Csángó group only marginally represented. Pozsony was followed by Zsolt Sári (Hungarian Open-Air Museum), whose first presentation discussed the creation, start to finish, of the institution's Transylvanian unit, including various issues that arose in the process. Sári reviewed the Open-Air Museum's cooperative efforts with various Transylvanian institutions and addressed the question of why this comprehensive exhibition was not constructed in Transylvania itself. The presenter made clear that in all the Open-Air

Museum's exhibitions, curators strove to present not just the positive side of peasant life, but a complete picture, one that did not shy away from various taboos and problematic issues. Taking the podium from Sári was Tekla Tötszegi from the Transylvanian National Museum (Erdélyi Nemzeti Múzeum, or ENM) with a presentation on her institution's exhibitions and programmes for the visually impaired. Here, it was noted that very few museums to date possess material capable of engaging visitors with special needs in any meaningful way. The presentation went on to describe how the speaker's institution in particular had set to constructing its exhibition for special needs individuals and explained its specific programme for the sight impaired.

4.

Speaking first in the section running parallel to this were Emese Lengyel and Zsanett Lengyel from the University of Debrecen (Debreceni Egyetem, or DE), who spoke about a joint research project centred on digital curatorship. The pair analysed, in the form of a case study, exhibitions and projects created within the digital sphere of the National Museum and Institute of Theatre History (Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet). Conceived as a supplement to offline, in-person-type exhibitions, these projects are characterised by playfulness, an experience-based approach, stratified visual elements, and a focus on transmitting large quantities of information. Next up, Ágnes Lengyel, working for the Palóc Museum (Palóc Múzeum), examined how and in what ways peasant society can serve as a model today in questions of sustainability, as well as what opportunities and tools are available for museums to represent the peasant household so as to convey this message. As an example, Lengyel cited the opportunities afforded by the Palóc Museum's viewable storage installation. Lengyel's talk was followed by that of Gábor Limbacher from the Ferenc Kubinyi Museum (Kubinyi Ferenc Múzeum) concerning the history of Forgách Manor, the building in which the museum is located. Limbacher went on to outline both the institution's stratified current strategy, and its future objectives (including events and restructuring).

5.

The starting presenter in round two of the first section was Zsolt Sári from the Hungarian Open-Air Museum, whose second presentation of the day discussed 1) the advantages of object digitisation, 2) the ways in which digitised objects can be used, and 3) in what forms and on what platforms museums can publish them. Also explored were the possibilities for the use of digitised objects in exhibitions and programmes and the important role they play in shaping a new type of museum experience. Next on the podium was Márta Bokonics-Kramlik (Hungarian Open-Air Museum) with a presentation on the institution's programmes on tolerance and acceptance. In the first half of her talk, Bokonics-Kramlik spoke briefly on how the topics of exhibitions can sensitise visitors to the need for tolerance before moving to the variety of programmes implemented for visitors with special needs, with emphasis on the Open-Air Museum's special programmes for individuals suffering from dementia and various integration projects organised on behalf of the homeless. In the final presentation of the round, Iringó Tompa-Horváth from the University of Pécs Faculty of Humanities (Pécsi Tudományegyetem Bölcsészeti és Társadalomtudományi Kar, or PTE BTK) gave an introduction to her research on the relationship between schools and museums. In Hungary, museums have taken on a supporting role to education, as a result of which teachers now have access to a growing array of digital museum education material. The findings of this research indicate that teachers rate both the role of museums in learning, and the type of learning available in museums as opposed to classrooms,

as important. Factors mentioned as hinderances to co-operation with museums were primarily external in nature. In conclusion, the presenter established a degree of advancement in co-operation between the two institutional systems over the course of the past fifteen years.

6.

The first of the series of presenters speaking in parallel to this was Áron Bakos (Babeş-Bolyai University) and Gábor Wilhelm (Museum of Ethnography, Budapest), whose talk broached a topic that, though little-discussed, holds great significance for museums in general: that of the moral issues surrounding the collection of 'problematic heritage' (such as the products of colonialism). The issue is one of researcher intervention and even collecting itself, as the acquisition, transportation, and display of certain objects can prevent the continued practice of the source community's traditions in their original environment. Bakos and Wilhelm were followed by Szilvia Beatrix Pikler (Hungarian Open-Air Museum), who presented the work and training programmes of the Central Directorate of Hungarian Regional Home Museums (Magyarországi Tájházak Központi Igazgatósága). Topics discussed included their achievements, the current situation of the regional home museum network, digital activities undertaken during the pandemic, and the opportunities these afford. Concluding the round of presentations was a talk by Zsolt Nagy (Babeş-Bolyai University) offering an overview of the objectives and research subfields of aedobotany, a comprehensive discipline encompassing the studies of ethnobotany and folk architecture. Nagy went on to outline the utilisation of aedobotany in museums and discuss the opportunities this affords through the example of specific institutions.

7.

Leading the next round of talks in section one was Levente Málnási (Szekler Museum of Ciuc), who guided participants through the entire history of his institution, from founding through operation in various buildings, including collection development, exhibitions, and supporting partners. Málnási additionally touched on various difficulties the museum has faced over the years: in particular, the lack until the 1970s of a permanent building with adequate space; and dependence on the whims of party politics. Following this was a presentation by Orsolya Tatai from the Mureş County Museum on 'object consciousness' in museum practice, a subject she approached through examples from the collection of her own institution's ethnography department. In the first half of her talk, Tatai covered the topics of museum object consciousness, the transformation of objects into museum artefacts, and the arrangement of such redefined objects into exhibitions. By way of example, the presenter offered the development and composition of the department's own digital photo archive. This talk was followed by one outlining the challenges faced by researchers of Transylvanian ceramics delivered by Attila Szabó (County Museum of History and Art, Zalău). Szabó first summarised the objectives of ceramics research and accompanying problems before moving to a concise presentation of both the researchers and collectors involved, and the paradigms they represent. Note was made of the large quantities of unidentified material held by the Muzeul Național al Țăranului Român, observing that this part of Hungary's national heritage is critically underrepresented in institutional exhibition spaces. The presentation concluded with a case study involving research on the ceramics of Zilah.

8.

At the same time, in the parallel section of the conference, focus fell to the relationship between ethnographic curatorship and tourism, beginning with an

overview of the research of presenters Éva Schultz from the Budapest Business school (Budapesti Gazdasági Egyetem, or BGE) and Bernadett Bószné Gász from the University of Pécs (Pécsi Tudományegyetem, or PTE), which Schultz delivered. The pair's joint project centred on various points of intersection between museums and the tourist industry in Hungary. Schultz first familiarised the audience with the team's years-long effort, then summarised by expressing a number of further opportunities and recommendations. Whereas the Schultz-Gász presentation examined the situation in Hungary via quantitative methods, the one subsequent, delivered by Alpár Horváth (Babeş-Bolyai University), took a qualitative approach to the topic of Transylvanian museums, exploring the relationship between Székelyföld touristic geography and museums as service providers within the field of cultural tourism. Horváth's talk stressed in particular the general importance of appeal and, regarding the case of institutions in Székelyföld, the shortage of overall capacity and the need for sales development. The researcher additionally pointed out that the 'value of the museum resides with the people themselves'. Presenting next was Dóra Pál-Kovács (Hungarian Open-Air Museum), whose treatment of the opportunities surrounding the inclusion of dance in museum exhibitions reflected on the observation that, while dance had previously been presented in such settings only through the medium of its material vestiges, it would be important to give some account of its community function, as well. Pál-Kovács then discussed which segments of Hungarian folk dance might be presented in the museum environment in what ways and by what devices, emphasising that such efforts would depend on community involvement and a living, active exhibition format.

9.

Returning to the first section of the conference, the final round of presentations commenced with that delivered by Attila Dimény from the László Incze Museum of Guild History (Incze László Céhtörténeti Múzeum) on the topic of the museum's influence on society. Dimény first gave brief accounts of the museum's founding, the development of its collection, and the permanent exhibitions that accompanied it. Emphasised here was the observation that the creation of a museum depends on the will of the community. The presentation went on to cover the museum's temporary exhibitions and education programmes, held variously in the museum and in the city, and concluded with an account of its building renovation project and ideas for its interior design. Dimény was followed on the podium by Balázs Törő (Dezső Laczkó Museum), who discussed the institution's *Archaeology of Wine* project, tasked with the excavation of an old press house in Dörgicse. The talk covered the various phases of exploration and their findings, including the discovery of the missing half of a Roman headstone, the first half of which resides at the Balaton Museum. The two halves were subsequently displayed together as a joint programme of the two institutions.

10.

The final round of presentations held in parallel to this section commenced with an account of the digitisation activities of the Zoltán Kallós Ethnographic Collection, delivered by museum employee Ágnes Mogyorósi. Here, the presenter outlined the institution's participation in the Public Collections Digitisation Strategy pilot project, involving the digitisation of a total of two hundred objects, before offering a look at the collection's newly developed audio guide system, an application by the name of *Kallósnál*. Mogyorósi concluded her talk by listing the museum's future objectives: to disseminate information on the collection as widely as possible and fill in gaps in what is known about them. The final presentation in

the round was delivered by András Vajda (Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania), who first familiarised attendees with the opportunities available to, and digitisation activities pursued by Székelyföld museums during the time of the pandemic before moving to the topic of changes in institutional social media use.

11.

The conference closed with an address by Albert Zsolt Jakab emphasising the necessity of asking questions and the importance of dialogue between a museum's present and future. Organisers regard the conference as having been a successful and productive one, whose presentations the János Kriza Ethnographic Society intends to publish in an edited volume, as it has done with the material of previous years.