

# LIVING PICTURES : MARDI GRAS AT THE MUSEUM OF ZAGREB

The event called Living Pictures at the Museum of Zagreb was held for the first time in 2000 during the weekend on the eve of Mardi Gras. It was at the same time the first challenge of introducing a museological interpretation and presentation of living history in our museums. The idea was put forward by architect Željko Kovačić, the author of the design of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Zagreb, with whom we had been intensively cooperating during the restoration of the museum building over a period of several years. The idea was accepted enthusiastically right away since we had come to think about museums in the same way through numerous discussions. The Living Pictures were a part of the project "Carnival in Zagreb" that was aimed at restoring the tradition of public merrymaking and feasting during the Carnival period before Lent. The aim of the project was to bring back life into the old centre of town with daily events on streets and squares, as well as to bring spirited visitors to the museum, thus removing the aura of exclusivity for many people who don't have access to historical knowledge. This would not mean playing down to them with masks, but rather providing an adequate way of encouraging their curiosity, with the objective of making the museum a place that enables visitors to make an agreeable reevaluation of their attitude to their own city.

The city can be described through various approaches. This primarily depends on the decision

to define the mission statement for the museum. Several years ago the Museum of Zagreb created its new permanent exhibition based on the principle of a concept-orientated museum rather than as an object-orientated museum. This led the way to the aim of presenting it using a contextual approach, through presenting the meaning of the objects in such a way as to serve the experience of a museumscape of the identity of the city. In contrast to previous exhibitions, the people-orientated approach was stressed, while objects as a part of the material cultural heritage were explored and catalogued as historical evidence, museum objects that hold a wealth of information. Having this in mind, the curators used the primary context of an object to define its new museum context, while avoiding, as a rule, any artificial reconstruction of its setting. But they also kept in mind the interpretation of the atmosphere of the time, the beautiful and the joyous, as well as the ugly and sad sides of life, social relationships, the adequate structure and number of inhabitants, the representation of various nationalities, as well as aculturalisation and assimilation, according to the power and significance of Zagreb through history to the present day. It is precisely this existing framework that evaluates social history that has proved proper in providing the possibility for describing the city in a human context because of the initial idea with respect to the concept of the permanent exhibition at the Museum of Zagreb.

Not only portraits of prominent figures from Zagreb, but other objects and themes that involve people, have proved to be an inexhaustible wealth of content for Living Pictures, a new form of communication with visitors, which has, through the introduction of living history in a manner of "first-person interpretation", made the Museum a place that has come to life, a place that is more open and speaks more loudly by allowing the visitor to pass through a gallery of quite distinct personalities, a gallery of authentic people. In this way we hoped to make the visitors understand the museum presentation of the city for the benefit of the quality of their visit through different characters who were intermediaries between the past and the present.

The special feature of the Living Pictures at the Museum of Zagreb is that the complete living history project and the method of interpretation were drawn up and carried out by professionals at the museum. This is in contrast to similar projects that, as a rule, engage actors and professional troupes that do this kind of work in cooperation with curators. The advantage of our approach with respect to professional interpreters is in that every curator chooses the role of a historical personality that is closest to his or her field of expertise, and which subjectively feels right. This is proved by the conviction of his or her speech, temperament, and identification with the character - in other words by things that they don't need to learn. They have complex professional knowledge, they are exceptionally educated through the content and periods they study, and they can easily accept any improvisation that might occur as a result of talking with visitors. The spectrum of concrete contents and information that can be used depending on the situation will always have a more positive effect when coming from well-trained person. Naturally, they are expected to have a talent for acting and to be, above all, communicative. Even if they are not perfect actors, the visitors will tolerate this with sympathy, since the first-person method of interpretation also holds an element of entertainment.

Apart from members of the curatorial staff who are responsible for the scenario, the Living Pictures project involves all other members of the

museum staff. This is not surprising since even they need to have knowledge about the museum they work in, even though they work there in a different capacity. The librarian, the computer systems administrator, the educator, the head of Museum PR, the photographer, the restorer, technical staff, and even the secretary and others receive instructions and training for their Living Picture in association with curators. This also includes associates, our children, who know the Museum very well, and retired staff members, since the population of the city does not exclude either children or senior citizens. The director of the Museum chooses the role of host – the mayor of Zagreb (this year he boasted that he was personally responsible for installing the first public toilet in the city).

Although it is a time for masks, we stress that we do not wear masks but costumes. And, let me be clear, we do not use items from the Museum holdings. Rather, through our presence we give meaning to the objects that surround us at the exhibition. We borrow period costumes and props from theatres, as well as film and television wardrobe departments. However, in order for the interpretation to be compelling and evidently based on historical evidence, we use details like copies of various documents, advertisements and leaflets for theatre and film shows that we distribute to interested visitors.

At the end of the event, our aim was justified. We succeeded in bringing the lives of people from the past closer to today's visitors, as well as in creating a context for original pieces at the exhibition that played a special part in people's behaviour. Communication was established with all categories of visitors: they were ready to talk, to ask questions and, finally, some of them even became engrossed in the period. They asked us to hold the event regularly, every week, or at least every month, but this was simply not feasible in this way, so we decided to hold it once a year for Mardigras. We also presented the Living Pictures this year, and the response of the public was very good – we had more than 2000 visitors over the weekend.

The Living Pictures 2000 CD, with witty commentaries and an attractive design can be viewed in the entrance-hall of the Museum as well as a selection of other "serious" CDs from our own production like "The Chronology of Events in Zagreb" or other thematic exhibitions at the Museum. The material from the CD can also be found on the Internet, on the web site of the Croatian Museum Society : [www.hrmud.hr\(fun\)](http://www.hrmud.hr(fun)).

The list of different characters in the Living Pictures event that were following the presentation on slides :

1. Guard at the guardhouse at the entrance to the Museum
2. Uniform for the cloakroom attendant
3. Princess from Budinjak, prehistory settlement 8th c. BC
4. Mašić (archaeology curator) as a prehistoric inhabitant of the yet unnamed settlement at the touch-screen with the programme "The Archaeology of Zagreb"
5. The Croato-Hungarian king Bela IV (curator historian) with the Golden Bull from 1242
6. The bishop in the cathedral
7. Our children as altar boys calling us to Mass
8. Guild apprentice with a "witch" that was supposedly the cause of all evil
9. Mother superior Petronilla of the nunnery of the Order of St. Clare; the nunnery is now the building of the Museum of Zagreb
10. Canon Adam Baltazar Krčelić wrote "Annue or History", the chronicle of life in Zagreb between 1748 and 1767. The writer Salih Isaac prepared the text for the theatre in 1987
11. The living picture of Baroness Rauch is almost a copy of her portrait
12. Baroness Rauch giving advice about her book "Vračba za marvu" – the first veterinary handbook printed in the 18th century
13. Women of the Illyrian Movement next to a model of the Upper Town from 1864
14. Mayor Mošinski next to Ban Josip Jelačić, who has a strong physical resemblance to the professor of museology Tomislav Šola
15. Learning the tarot card game during the Biedermeier period
16. Emperor Francis Joseph I (director of the Museum) and Empress Elizabeth during their visit to Zagreb in 1895
17. Strolling through Ilica street at the end of the 19th century
18. In front of a top hat shop in Ilica street
19. Owner of a bakery
20. The museum photographer as photographer Julije Hühn in his studio
21. Newly arrived passenger at the new railway station seeking assistance from a member of the City Watch in 1891
22. A pleasant stroll through the parks of the Lower Town
23. The painter Ljerka Njerš as the painter Marijana Mücke painting the portrait of the opera diva Milka Trnina – announcing the next thematic exhibition at the Museum of Zagreb
24. Going to the opera – the primadonna of the Croatian National Theatre Ivana Boljkovac singing the arias of the Wagnerian singer Milka Trnina
25. Ida Feller, the wife of the wealthiest man in Zagreb at the beginning of the 20th century advertising her husband's lucrative product and inviting ladies to shop at a fashion salon for elegant clothes
26. Feller's magic tonic "Elsa-Fluid", which guarantees good health and eternal youth, a copy of an advertisement that was distributed to visitors
27. Advertisement from 1911 of the fashion salon Roset at the Shopping Arcade of the First Croatian Savings Bank : ready-to-wear or tailored English suits, skirts, blouses, jupons and morning dresses
28. An airman from the Turul balloon that flew over the city in 1905
29. A nurse from World War One with a medal of merit
30. There were always people standing in line at the Librić barber-shop
31. My colleague Hela, the head of the Collection of the Bequests of Architects, as architect Mladen Kauzlarić providing a demonstration to potential investors into modern residential buildings – she is finishing her MA thesis on the work of architect Kauzlarić

32. Joint portrait as a sign of historical reconciliation after 1990 : bourgeois citizen, Ustashe, Tito's scout, an officer of the Wermacht and a partisan
33. Joint photograph taken at the insistence of visitors
34. The architect Željko Kovačić, the initiator of the idea for the "Living Pictures", the author of the design of the permanent exhibition seen in a different light
35. Group photograph of all the participants of the Living Pictures 2000 on the poster for the event in 2001
36. Group photograph at the end of the 2001 event

**FRANÇAIS :** Les tableaux vivants du Musée de Zagreb ont été pour la première fois organisés en l'année 2000. L'intention était d'attirer un secteur du public qui voyait le musée comme quelque chose d'exclusif, et également d'animer le centre historique de la ville. On a tenté de faire en sorte que les personnages réels installés dans les salles soient un pont entre le passé et le présent. Une des caractéristiques est que les personnages n'étaient pas des acteurs, mais le personnel du musée qui, bien sûr, connaissait aussi bien le matériel exposé que l'époque qu'ils représentaient. La réponse du public fut si exceptionnelle qu'on a décidé de répéter l'événement tous les ans.

**ESPAÑOL :** Los cuadros vivientes del Museo de Zagreb se organizaron por primera vez durante el año 2000. La intención era atraer a un sector del público que veía el museo como algo exclusivo y también animar el centro histórico de la ciudad. Se intentó que los personajes reales instalados en las salas del museo fueran un puente entre el pasado y el presente. Una de las características es que los personajes no eran actores, sino personal del museo, que por tanto conocían perfectamente tanto el material expuesto como la época que representaban. La respuesta del público fue tan excepcional que se decidió repetir el evento anualmente.