

## “Museum from the Couch”: Online Educational Program of the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb, 2020

### Educational Program Review

The museum's quest for a greater presence in the virtual world has been a growing trend for almost two decades. The Internet has proven to be an ideal medium for the mission of the museum to make its content available to as many users as possible. In line with modern trends, the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb presents its collections in digital format, and for many years has been conducting Internet communication with its audience through several of its own channels. These are the Museum's website ([www.emz.hr](http://www.emz.hr)), the Facebook page and the “Newsletter of the Ethnographic Museum”.

All these online communication channels aim to inform the public about exhibitions and other activities and encourage visitors to come to the Museum. The situation in which museums found themselves at the beginning of 2020 further emphasized the importance of this type of communication. Museums throughout Croatia have closed to the public due to the coronavirus pandemic, and online tools have become the only way for museums to communicate with the audience. The museum's online content called for togetherness, socializing, creativity and solidarity.

The Ethnographic Museum was closed to visitors on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The educational team of the museum consisting of Željka Jelavić, Anastazija Petrović and Silvia Vrsalović found themselves in a situation where they had to develop various educational activities relatively quickly using online tools. We wanted to offer content for different types of audiences from adults to children and we agreed that video workshops could be interesting to both or to a very wide population. Workshops can also be presented in other ways through tools that combine text and photos. However, we chose video as a medium, because we wanted to present a part of the permanent exhibition in the introduction to the workshop, as we normally do in regular live programs. Although video is a more complex format for realization, we thought that it would reach a larger number of users.

On the closing day, Museum employees began working from home. Museum pedagogues started a test recording of workshops in the empty Museum. As early as 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020, a devastating earthquake struck Zagreb, which damaged, among other things, the permanent exhibition of the Collection of Non-European Cultures, in which test videos were recorded. Our plan for the realization of filming in the museum was disabled due to the earthquake, so we each carried out further filming at home, test recordings from the Museum were later edited and broadcast. Through numerous video call consultations, we have designed an online educational activity for the audience called “Museum from the couch”. Under this name, a program was conceived that was published in the period from 31<sup>st</sup> March to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020 on the Facebook and website and the YouTube channel of the Museum, which was then opened. The

content of the program included video workshops and storytelling, stories about museum objects, recommendations for reading museum online catalogues, presentation of the Museum's online collections and a series of films "City on Four Legs" directed by Nikola Šiško realized within the exhibition "Of Animals and Humans" by Željka Petrović Osmak, Tea Rittig Šiško and Gordana Vilječić. During the planning, we set several goals, among which was the one that it is important to maintain contact with the audience during the closing of the Museum, providing interesting and educational content during the closing, which provided a break from everyday life marked by pandemic and earthquake and creating a sense of community and support during the crisis. We also wanted to promote existing online content and communicate with potential audience who had not visited the Museum until then.

Listening to the needs and in accordance with user feedback, the designed concept has changed and was added during the three months of its existence. We harmonized the content with the holidays and celebrations, so our first video workshops published at Easter time were the ones about decorating Easter eggs. We monitored, analyzed and adjusted the amount and selection of content, time and schedule of publications and the length of texts.

During the implementation, we encountered many challenges and difficulties. Working from home where the same space is shared by multiple family members, sometimes multiple generations, to perform different activities carries a number of challenges. The unavailability of museum resources such as space, equipment and recording personnel, and workshop materials required innovation and finding new solutions. The choice of workshop topics was limited by material that was easily accessible to users because we wanted to provide content that viewers could realize at home. Workshops and storytelling were filmed by members of our families with their own mobile phones using improvised tripods, and the workshops were attended by children, sometimes pets. Also, we first encountered video editing which we mastered through the available online tools. A careful eye will notice the differences in the quality of our workshop videos and storytelling shots professionally made by a member of the family *pro bono*.

As part of the "Museum from the couch" programme, 40 posts were presented, the visibility of which on the museum's Facebook page was 98,494 users who saw the post, and 3,280 audience reactions - "likes", comments and content sharing. Visibility on the Museum's website at the time, unfortunately, could not be tracked because the site did not have a built-in tool to collect attendance data. The first posts had a much larger reach, which was expected, because during the so-called lockdown a large number of online content was released, which created great competition and audience saturation. For this reason, we have continuously adjusted and changed the program. These figures show that greater accessibility of the Museum has been achieved, but also numerous comments, emails and oral feedback testify to the achieved two-way communication with the audience and the success of the "Museum from the couch". The program was recognized by the teaching staff and published materials were used in teaching. We were provided with numerous photographs of children's works inspired by our workshops, which was a special reward for our work. In addition to the increase in the number

of followers of the Museum in the virtual world, the development of a new audience visiting the Museum has been achieved. There are many examples that confirm this, and I will cite one of the most impressive: after the reopening of the Museum, the first workshop held live, was attended by a visitor, a librarian in primary school, who had never been to the Ethnographic Museum, and learned about it through the program “Museum from the couch” which was shared at the County Professional Council of Primary School Librarians as an example of good practice.

This programme showed us what content the audience wants and guided us in the further development of online activities. In a wide range of various contents, the users showed the greatest interest in interesting and different stories about museum objects, so even after the reopening of the Museum, we continuously publish such content on our online communication channels. We no longer record videos with mobile phones, but when applying for educational programs, we also apply for financial resources for the purpose of professional video production, and in accordance with the allocated funds, we realize short educational videos. We create a plan of educational online posts on a monthly basis. Of course, there is still a lot of room for the development of the Museum's online programmes, and it would be useful for all museum departments to be involved in these activities, apart from video professionals

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