
Silvia Vrsalović

Ethnographic Museum, Zagreb
svrsalovic@emz.hr

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Željka Jelavić

Ethnographic Museum, Zagreb
zjelavic@emz.hr

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Learning through Play: Educational Programmes with the Exhibition Project *Toys – Childhood Forever*

*The text presents an overview of educational programmes held with the exhibition project *Toys – Childhood Forever*. The programmes were held for different groups of museum visitors: kindergarten groups, elementary and secondary school students, university students, old-age pensioners, members of vulnerable social groups, adult individual visitors and families. The key elements of learning are interactions through play and emotional engagement as essential factors of museum experience.*

Key words: museum pedagogy, educative programmes, toys, learning and interactions through play

INTRODUCTION

The exhibition project *Toys – Childhood Forever* by Iris Biškupić Bašić, Ph.D., Museum Advisor, lasted almost a year, from 8th June 2021 to 22nd May 2022. The project included the eponymous central exhibition, the exhibition *Playing Around the World* as a part of a permanent Collection of Non-European Cultures, ten touring exhibitions and three exhibitions of creative works from the workshops held as a part of the project. The main exhibition on the ground floor of the Museum presented traditional, manufactured and artistic toys and games created in Croatia or by Croatian authors. The exhibition setup, designed by Nikolina Jelavić Mitrović, enabled both children and adult visitors to play with interactive content such as puzzles, board games and a large drawing board. In addition, visitors were able to have some rest and enjoy themselves with the popular cartoons *Professor Balthazar* and *The Little Flying Bears* produced by *Zagreb Film*, which was the partner of the project. Throughout the exhibition, the visitors could move in an unusual way by slipping through special passageways and sitting and playing in oversized toys



Picture 1. Game Forest Olympics, Photo by Nina Koydl

from Marija Bistrica. In this way, the impetus for independent research and learning through play was achieved, where visitors assumed an active role, certainly gaining a comprehensive museum experience. The dynamic setup introduced an element of fun, which contributed to retaining the attention of children visiting the exhibition.

On the other hand, for adults the exhibition was a kind of a time machine that took them back to childhood. This has been confirmed by a large number of nostalgic entries in the Museum's Book of Impressions. Visitors mostly recorded their memories and positive emotions evoked by the exhibition: "Going back to childhood and some more beautiful times, although it is difficult to accept that the toys we played with are now museum specimens" (5th January 2022) "Thank you for taking us back to our childhood days and for showing this younger generation the preciousness of toys and games" (29th April 2022).

Here we find a confirmation of the theory based on the research of Lisa Feldman Barret according to which life experiences of visitors are crucial for shaping their expectations and experience of the exhibition, which affects the way they participate and learn. "They are not universal but differ from culture to culture. They are not evoked; you create them. They appear as a combination of the physical properties of your body, a flexible brain associated with any environment in which both your cultures and upbringing develop."(Barett 2017: 101).



Picture 2. Workshop Bučar's Games, Photo by Nina Koydl

According to visitor entries, a conclusion can be reached that emotions are a significant factor in creating connections between visitors and the museum that affect their decision to visit the museum again. Since considerable additional content was provided in addition to the main exhibition – accompanying exhibitions and a rich educational programme – many visitors visited the Ethnographic Museum several times during this exhibition project.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES WITH THE MAIN EXHIBITION

Educational programmes are created for various groups of museum visitors: kindergarten groups, elementary and secondary school students, university students, pensioners, members of vulnerable social groups, adult individual visitors and families. The most frequent were visits by organised groups of lower primary school children, so the greatest attention was paid to devising an educational programme for the latter user group. Several types of workshops have been provided since this form of work has proven to be particularly suitable for the realisation of the tasks of museum education. That is because in the workshop form of work, non-hierarchical and collaborative communication between participants is established and their intellectual, sensory and emotional engagement is achieved (Jelavić and Petrović 2019:52).

The most popular and the most performed workshops with the exhibition were those in which children got to know the intangible culture by playing old games, singing counting songs and listening to stories. These workshops were integrated into the tour guide. Thus, the children got to know the exhibition in an interesting and entertaining way. At the entrance to the exhibition, a hopscotch was drawn on the floor and so by jumping in the fields of the famous game, the pupils actively began their exploration of the world of toys and games. Museum educators provided tour guidance in the form of a conversation with children, not unilateral presentation. Hence the pupils actively expressed their opinions, compared the exhibited toys with their own and readily shared their views about childhood in the past and nowadays. As the tour continued, they were given various tasks to find specific objects or answers to the questions, which they approached with great enthusiasm. They were divided into small groups to solve some tasks or use the already mentioned interactive elements in the exhibition, which resulted in additional dynamics to the activity. Pupils often showed a desire to compete between groups, such as in the game *Forest Olympics* (Picture 1), and the encouragement of the guides was aimed at strengthening co-operation and communication in the group. Different games were introduced based on the needs and wishes of the group during the tour. In addition to famous traditional games such as *Tzar*, *My Lord*, *What Time Is It* (step counting game), *Freeze Tag Game* or *Black Queen 1,2,3* which most children were familiar with, the emphasis was on less known games such as *Wolf's Tail* or *Prayer* and old counting songs, mostly completely unknown to today's children. If there was enough time during the group's stay at the Museum, some more recent drama games were introduced in addition to traditional games. Such a structured programme provided children with an enhanced museum experience and an understanding of what our ancestors' childhood looked like. The intensity of their experiences shown by the conversations of most of the children who participated in the programme: they mostly expressed a desire to extend their stay at the Museum, continue playing old games, and when leaving the Museum, they repeated the words of the just learned counting songs. That was also confirmed by the feedback received from their teachers. Children also expressed a wish to play "games from the museum" at school.

Exhibited objects – toys are material factors of play and hence play appeared to be a logical activity in the exhibition. According to Mirjana Duran, who gives a systematic account of all the aspects of play in her book *Child and Play*, play is the primary children's independent activity and a fundamental method of learning, as well as intellectual, physical, social and emotional development. Play originates from the child's inner need, so it is universal and inherent in all the children. Although it is predominantly associated with children, it is also possible for adults, but it then loses some of its functions. It is a very complex activity that the authors strived to explain, but it has so many aspects that it is an extremely difficult task to explain it. Play is a special experience, and the sensation of this experience is subjective. Play is often accompanied by special enthusiasm and behaviour during play is often described as new and unusual, uncharacteristic for other behaviours. In play children have the freedom to express themselves outside of real life. Children use their emotions, ideas, events and experiences in play. Play is unconventional, it has no goal, but it is an end in itself. There is a great diversity of play in childhood, versatility and complexity of play, correlation and overlapping, which means that it is difficult to classify it. There are many systems of classification of children's play and they are based on different criteria. Nevertheless, most experts agree with the division of childhood play into the following three categories: functional play, symbolic play and games with rules. The games we

played at the Museum are games with rules. These are games with sensorimotor combinations or intellectual combinations and they are regulated by some code (comp. Duran 1995).

In addition to games, storytelling is an indispensable method in teaching about childhood in distant past. It played an extremely important role in the past, as it does today in teaching children and building bonds within the community. Traditional stories provide security and help children explain and understand the world in which they live. Despite the irrefutable influence of digital technologies that jeopardise the idea of the experience of traditional linear storytelling, the human need for storytelling will continue. The act of storytelling is a method of communicating between the narrator and the listener, in this case children. Nowadays, this method of communication with children is often neglected and its potential to contribute to the cognitive, emotional, social, ethical and speech development of the child is sadly forgotten (Velički 2013).

Storytelling, folk fairy tales and stories are an important part of intangible culture and they are an indispensable part of educational programmes of the Ethnographic Museum. Storytelling as a method in direct work with visitors has proven to be an exceptional success and practical especially for the youngest visitors (comp. Jelavic and Cvitković 2016). As a part of the programme, with the exhibition *Toys – Childhood Forever* and the accompanying exhibitions *Playing Around the World*, storytelling, as well as games, were included in the exhibition, as an integral part of the guided tour. In addition to the central exhibition on Croatian toys, Croatian folk tales were told and with the exhibition that presented toys from the faraway corners of the world, stories were told from Africa, Latin America and Australia.

In addition to the workshops in which games were played and there was also storytelling, several different art workshops were held, which were preceded by the previously described interactive content with playing games, but in a shortened form. The most represented art programme was the workshop named *Paint a Traditional Toy* in which children showed their interpretation of traditional wooden toys – tamburitzas, horses and butterflies made by the master toymakers Zvonimir Majdak and Ivica Mesar. In the workshop named *Meeting with the Master*, the visitors had the opportunity to meet tradition-bearer, master toymaker Zvonimir Majdak from Turnišće in the Croatian region of Zagorje, who told them how the traditional toymaking skills, primarily in case of tamburitza, was nurtured in his family. In the workshop, he showed them the process of making a wooden tamburitza, after which the children painted the tamburitza and completed the toy together with the master.

Workshops for playing games, storytelling and wooden toy painting were held for a large number of school groups, but also as Saturday workshops for the general public and as a part of a programme aimed at socially vulnerable groups of visitors. A description of workshops ensues that, because of their duration, are not suitable for kindergarten and school groups, but were held as workshops for the general public and they predominantly saw the participation of children and the whole families.

The shape of the traditional wooden toy clatter inspired for the brooch workshop which in addition to children saw also the participation of adults. Fine motor skills were practiced in sewing workshops in which the children designed the toy themselves and sewed it from the industrial material of felt.

The dolls on display in the central exhibition provided inspiration for a workshop in which children made two versions of their own doll, those on wooden mixing spoons and those from yellowish raw cotton fabric. In the workshop named *Colourful Collages*, children very successfully mastered the task of creating their own poster for toy exhibition using a combined technique.

The exhibition opened just before the start of school summer holidays, when the Museum regularly hosts multi-day workshops for schoolchildren, so the content of this programme named *In the Shade of the Museum* was linked both with the central and the accompanying toy exhibitions. During the exhibition, three cycles of these four-day workshops were held for children aged seven to twelve. As a part of the programme, children played drama games, they got to know a different topic or exhibition in connection with toys every day and they participated in creative workshops. Since an accompanying exhibition of the Croatian History Museum was staged during the first cycle of the workshops, two workshops were held along with this exhibition and within the programme of the third cycle of workshops, Nikola Tesla Technical Museum was also our guest with a workshop with its touring exhibition.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES WITH ACCOMPANYING EXHIBITIONS

In the permanent exhibition of non-European cultures on the ground floor of the Museum, an accompanying exhibition *Playing Around the World* was staged in which toys from Asia, South America, Africa and Australia were presented. In the selection of toys from the Collection of Non-European Cultures, different types of toys are represented: from those for the youngest, toys for symbolic play, sports toys and to board games, which provided a wide range of opportunities for holding educational programmes. Several types of workshops were held: playing games (African strategic *mancala* game and Brazilian *peteca*), art workshops (making Brazilian Litjoko clay dolls and painting boomerangs with dot painting techniques inspired by Australian paintings on eucalyptus bark) and the previously mentioned storytelling (African, South American and Australian stories).

In the hall on the first floor of the Museum within the cycle named *Visiting the Ethnographic Museum*, there were several smaller touring exhibitions in which museums from the city of Zagreb were presented which keep children's toys in their collections. The Museum hosted touring exhibition by the Croatian History Museum, Nikola Tesla Technical Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Croatian School Museum, the Museum of Arts and Crafts, the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb and the Croatian Sports Museum. In addition, two exhibitions were held in which the work of Zagreb women artisans designing children's toys, Jasmina Kosanović and Lea Vavra was presented and an exhibition in which the oldest organisation for children in Croatia – the Alliance of Societies “Our Children” of Croatia presented its rich toy collection. In co-operation with the authors of exhibitions and museum educators, colleagues from the previously mentioned museums, an interesting educational programme was provided.

In addition to the exhibition *Games and Toys – Witnesses of Time* of the Croatian History Museum, an educational programme was held, devised by Jelena Roboz, Senior Curator Educator of the Croatian History Museum. Three workshops were held – within the cycle of workshops for schoolchildren during school holidays *In the Shade of the Museum*, workshops of *the Games of Honour and Power* were held in which children, while making their own toys, learnt about

knightly games and *Board Games – Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow...* in which many interesting things about the past of board games could be learnt with the practical application of knowledge and children creating and making their own building blocks. *My Favourite Toy – Doll* was a Saturday family workshop on paper doll making.

The touring exhibition of Nikola Tesla Technical Museum with the exhibition *Toys – the Path to Dreams Come True* was enhanced with workshops *Fly, Fly* by the author Katarina Ivanišin Kardum, Museum Consultant Educator and it was realised by Zvonimir Ambruš. In the workshop, in addition to making and painting of model cardboard planes, the museum collection Means of Transport was presented. The workshop was held in two sessions – once as a part of summer workshops for pupils and as a Saturday workshop for the general public.

The exhibition *Unforgettable Cartoons – The Little Flying Bears* of the Museum of Contemporary Art presented the popular animated film of the Croatian film company “Zagreb Film”. To accompany the exhibition, the Ethnographic Museum’s Education co-operated with the reputable animation director Božidar Trkulj, who devised a workshop programme involving Private Gymnasium of Arts students. High school students participated in animation workshops held in four sessions and as a short animated film *The Games from Our Childhood* was created as a result of their work. The programme ended with the promotion of the film, which was uploaded on *YouTube* channel and social media of the Ethnographic Museum.

In addition to the exhibition of the Museum of Arts and Crafts *Traces of a Romantic Childhood*, we have established an extremely good co-operation with the Education Department of the Museum of Arts and Crafts comprising of Iva Novak, Marta Kuliš Aralica and Vedrana Ceranja, who devised the programme named *Playing at My Neighbours’ Place*. Two workshops, *Small Rooms and Houses* and *Dress Up on your doll*, were held within the programme on eight occasions, each workshop was repeated four times in Saturday morning and afternoon sessions. The inspiration for the first workshop was a lavish dollhouse on display, so children used various materials to make miniature furniture and other household items, as well as to equip rooms with them and build houses. The second workshop’s starting point were exhibited dolls from the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, which show the fashion and social trends at the time. Children were given the role of fashion designers and they devised, designed and made clothes for their own dolls. The programme was successfully completed with an exhibition of creative works made at the workshops.

Jasmina Kosanović’s Christmas Fairy Tale is an exhibition that presents the toys made by the designer Jasmina Kosanović. The inspiration for her work is the world of fairy tales and since the exhibition was held during the Christmas season, the exhibition in which the main role was assumed by handmade toys of animals and different dolls evoked the appearance of fairy-tale winter landscapes. To accompany the exhibition, a programme named *Tea with Jasmina Kosanović* was organised, in which every Saturday in December the author presented her work through socialising with visitors.

The Croatian Sports Museum presented sports props in the exhibition *Sport as a Game*. The author of the exhibition Marijan Sutlović, curator of the Croatian Sports Museum, in co-operation with the museum educators of the Ethnographic Museum, devised and performed an educational programme with the exhibition. Two playrooms of *Bučar’s Games for Companies and Schools* for the students of the Private Gymnasium of Art (Picture 2) were realized. Remem-

bering the best-known Croatian sports “illuminator” Franjo Bučar, students were presented the beginnings of physical education at school through activities. There was also a Saturday workshop *A Healthy Spirit in A Healthy Body*, which had a similar content as the workshop provided for high school students, yet it was adapted to meet the needs of younger participants. The objective of the workshop was to provide the participants with a new insight into the content through interaction, to encourage them to engage in physical activity and to raise awareness of the human need to move and play.

EXHIBITIONS OF CREATIVE WORKS

During the exhibition project *Toys – Childhood Forever*, three exhibitions of works from creative workshops were held in the Educational Hall on the second floor of the Museum. The previously mentioned exhibition of works from creative workshops *Playing at My Neighbours’ Place* of the Educational Department of the Museum of Arts and Crafts was the first in the series of exhibitions. The eponymous exhibition presented works created at the workshops held with the exhibition *Traces of a Romantic Childhood – Toys from the Holdings of the Museum of Arts and Crafts*, which was realised in November 2021, while the exhibition *Playing at My Neighbours’ Place* was realised in March 2022.

The exhibition *Traditional Toys* was held in April 2022 as a result of co-operation of the education team from the Ethnographic Museum with one Zagreb kindergarten. Creative work by the children of Montessori educational group named Stars from the kindergarten Srednjaci made after visiting the exhibition *Toys – Childhood Forever* has been exhibited.

The last exhibition presented a part of the works created in creative workshops within educational programmes held to accompany the exhibitions *Toys – Childhood Forever* and *Playing Around the World*. Since the participants of the workshops held at the Ethnographic Museum are used to taking their works home after the workshop, only a part of the works from the workshops held has been collected and exhibited. Painted traditional toys are on display – tamburitzas, horses and butterflies, handmade dolls and colourful collages, while from the programme accompanying the exhibition *Playing Around the World* painted boomerangs and the *didgeridoo* instrument are on display. The exhibition was open from 30th April to 15th June 2022.

CONCLUSION

In the end it needs to be pointed out that within the educational programmes to enhance the main and accompanying exhibitions in less than a year, a total of 192 instances of expert guidance and 141 workshops were held, which saw the participation of 4164 users. A wide range of programmes that have engaged visitors of different ages emotionally, cognitively and kinetically contributes to enrichment of museum experience and positions the museum as a place for research, learning and play.

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