

Dora Bošković, senior curator
Head of the Cold Weapons Collection
Jelena Balog, curator archivist
Croatian History Museum
Matoševa 9
10000 Zagreb
Croatia
Phone: + 385 1 48 51 990; 48 51 900
Fax: + 385 1 48 51 909
d.boskovic@hismus.hr i
j.balog@hismus.hr

Databases of Museum Resources on the Web – Today's Necessity or Croatian Museums' Lost Revenues?

Summary

The legislation covering Croatian museums has defined the structure of the museum documentation of museum resources, as well as the necessity of making this documentation and resources accessible to users. In addition to this and following the eight-year tradition of the Seminar of Archives, Libraries and Museums, there is also another issue, namely a search for viable structures and standards whereby museum professionals can take part in an interactive coordination of exchanging information among related institutions and users.

In a parallel development initiated by exchanges of experiences among these three areas of information science and experiences of related European institutions some museum collections have been published in digital formats in various degrees of editorial presentation.

Taking into account all three – namely, the legislation, the already existing possibilities to discuss needs for new ways of communication and digital publications, this article should be an attempt to identify the level of awareness of this issue among members of the Croatian museum community as well as the level of their expertise and familiarity with this aspect, what expert preconditions are required to build databases of (museum) resources and whether Croatian museum science regards the web as the right place/medium to publish these materials in the first place and if so in what form. Particular attention would be paid precisely to this required form and necessary level of information about museum resources and the design of that particular web service in the light of different profiles of museums and the level of interest among its users/visitors. From this an answer should be derived as to whether publishing museum resources on the web threatens their printed paper equivalents, i.e., whether there is a need to protect access to information about museum resources on the web with passwords by way of charging certain fees.

The purpose of this contribution is to highlight doubts voiced by a number of museum experts in regard to publishing museum resources on the web – that is, making them accessible to a large and uncontrolled number of users while, at the same time, emphasising the necessity of such an approach. Furthermore, the question is also raised as to whether the Croatian museum community fears that information about museum resources, compiled thanks to experts and their efforts, will be used "unlawfully" and "free of charge" while the institution itself, that is the creators of information about museum resources reap no benefits from that.

To facilitate a debate on these issues we have listed and outlined a rudimentary analysis of publicly published literature:

1. Croatian museum legislation;
2. Expert publications and expert bodies by way of which members of the Croatian museum community can be informed about the needs and possibilities of presenting their resources on the web – with an emphasise on keeping this in line with the same aspirations of the related information sciences about archives and libraries.
3. Reports on the work of a group of museums over the past five years.

We regard the answer that should follow primarily as an appeal addressed to our fellow museum professionals and, secondly, to their founders and financial patrons to the effect that publishing museum resources on the web is, on the one hand, an inevitable necessity and on the other hand it is a serious responsibility by which we can contribute to Croatia's forging stronger relations with, and involvement in, the world and the popularisation of Croatian history, culture, technology, arts etc. to a far greater extent than by way of exhibitions, printed catalogues and glossy books.

1.

Although we are no legal experts and bearing in mind the old saying that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" we nevertheless believe, as experienced members of the museum community that this Croatian legislation is good at the moment. The most fundamental laws regulating museum activities in the Republic of Croatia¹ are primarily the Law on Museums², 1998, and its rulings³, that have been continuously issued since 1998. There is also the

¹ In addition to these, listed further on, one should bear in mind that there are also so-called "umbrella" laws regulating, for example, decision-making in (the Law on Culture Councils, 2001 and the Law on Culture Councils, 2004.), institutions in culture (the Law on Institutions, 1993, and the Law on Management of Public Institutions in Culture, 2001), financing culture (The Law on Culture Funds, 1990 and 1993, The Law on Financing Public Needs in culture, 1990 and 1993.), and awards in culture etc.

² The Law on Museums, Narodne novine (National Official Gazette) 142/98. Zagreb : Narodne novine, 1998.

³ Ministry of Culture. <http://www.min-kulture.hr>.

Law on Protection and Safe-keeping of Cultural Heritage,⁴ 1999., including also its rulings⁵ as well as “other regulations relevant to culture”, including the Law on Copyright⁶, 1998. These laws regulate in practical terms all forms and rules of treating and maintaining museum resources. It should be pointed out in particular that they mention and regulate the duty of the custodian of a cultural valuable (that is, a museum or gallery) to make it, as well as information about it, accessible to the general public. (Behold! documentation about a museum exhibit is also a cultural valuable as museum documentation is deemed in legal terms as being equal to museum exhibits.) Although this “general public” is defined under the law,⁷ it has nevertheless been delegated to the institutions themselves to regulate, by way of their in-house codes of practice, their own protocols of providing access to and treatment of museum resources documentation so as to allow for the specific features of their valuables as well as the features of the buildings where they are kept.

Subsequently, given the fact that in the light of the legally stipulated activities of the museum profession⁸ collecting, safe-keeping and treatment are regarded as one of the priorities it often happens that “providing access to and use of”⁹ is limited by the architectural flaws of an unsuitable building where the resources are kept or else because of these same resources or the documentation on them being in bad condition.

2.

However, the Croatian Museum Community is deeply aware that there are other media, in addition to exhibitions and printed materials about their exhibits, which can be used to publish and provide an insight into museum resources and knowledge about them. This is borne out by the active participation of museum professionals in the eight-year tradition of the Seminar «Archives, Libraries and Museums – possibilities of cooperation in the environment of global IT» (hereinafter, ALM-Seminars).

⁴ The Law on Protection and Safe-keeping of Cultural Valuables. Narodne novine issue 69/99. Zagreb : Narodne novine, 1999. i 2003.

⁵ Ministry of Culture. <http://www.min-kulture.hr>.

⁶ The Law on Copyright. Narodne novine issues 9, 76 i 127/99 i 67/01. Zagreb : Narodne novine, 1999. i 2001.

⁷ Articles 6, 30, 44 and 52 of the Law on Law on Protection and Safe-keeping of Cultural Valuables. Narodne novine br. 69/99. Zagreb : Narodne novine, 1999. i 2003.

⁸ Museum activities include: collecting, safe-keeping and research into civilisational, cultural and natural heritage and its expert and scientific treatment, classification of a collection, permanent protection for museum resources, museum documentation, museum locations and excavation sites, their direct and indirect presentation to the general public by way of permanent and temporary exhibitions, publication of data and findings about museum resources and museum documentation by expert, scientific and media channels. Article 5. of the Law on Museums, 1998.

⁹ The Code of Practice on Conditions for and Ways of gaining Insight into Museum Resources and Museum Documentation. Narodne novine br. 115/01: Zagreb: Narodne novine, 2001

Searching for viable structures and standards, whereby museum professionals can take part in an interactive coordination of exchanging information among related institutions and users, can be regarded as a shared topic in a highly varied range of approaches to this extremely interesting problem.

Some of the articles published in the Editions from these ALM-seminars aimed to present achievements and works in the digitalisation of the resources of individual institutions in Croatia; others pointed out identical works in the world, presenting the tools and protocols to be used to facilitate such works in our country, too, including existing foreign projects and even Thesauruses.

The museum community paid little attention, though, to those rare articles stressing that a well-structured database rooted in standardised definitions of terms and norms must be the principal precondition for any kind of web-based or digital work. The fact was also little pointed out that the standardisation of terms needed for museum resources is not different from the one used by librarians and archivists and that, in fact, it has to comply with the rules as set out for all IT professions and products by the National Catalogue Centre.

In addition to these ALM-Seminar professional publications, mostly targeted at the museum community, are published to deal with this documentation and the introduction of IT into museums: this is, for example, a very interesting magazine *Informatica museologica*,¹⁰ which presents a broad range of topics about the documentation and IT in museum resources and particularly foreign experiences. Despite their indisputable value and interesting issues in these articles two basic approaches seem to stand out between their lines: on the one hand, tools are sought to make electronic catalogues or presentations while insisting on a visual evaluation of such works while, on the other hand, there is a degree of uncertainty as to whether or not we (in Croatia) need such a thing in the first place.

The Croatian Museum Association and its News bulletin of Museum Professionals and Restorers are also a part of this scheme.

3.

We have used the Work Reports on Zagreb's museums¹¹ from the years 1999 to 2003¹² as indicators to what extent the legislation and the exchange

¹⁰ *Informatica museologica*. No. 31 (1-2) 2000. Zagreb: Museum Documentation Centre, 2000. the entire issue is about this topic «New Technologies in Museums and Galleries».

¹¹ Although some other (in museum and geographical terms) regions publish their work reports, this one covering Zagreb's museums provides a relatively large sample and has been systematically published for over five years, hence it provides a suitable

of experiences at the ALM-Seminars, as well as the knowledge of the (above mentioned) literature, have contributed to the presentation of museum resources and their publication.

Reports on all 34 museum institutions (hereinafter, the museums) from area of the Zagreb County have been compiled within the Work Reports by Zagreb's museums. These Reports make it evident that over the past five years only 0.4% of the museums have had permanent exhibitions whilst 1534 exhibitions¹³ have been held, reportedly attracting 2.024.867 visitors¹⁴. Most of the exhibitions were accompanied by a catalogue or a brochure at the very least. In addition to this the museums have published parts of their research and findings in digital formats too – on CD-ROMs and the Web. It is not possible to find out from the Report as to how many works there have been due to a total lack of consistency in treating entries¹⁵. At the same time it can be sporadically construed that some of these digital works have been issued in only several copies and are not in public distribution, at least not yet. Some of them are, however, uploaded on computers in the museum lobbies (serving as guides to permanent set-ups) while some of them can be found on the Web. By liberally interpreting the data we have identified 13 works¹⁶ («websites of a general informative nature» and “special projects”) on the Web and 53 works of various profiles and contents on CD-ROMs (by unknown publishers).

The reports provide very precise information on printed publications. It turns out that every museum has sold 4,9 publications per year. The circulations vary from 50 to 2000 and more copies as the average catalogue/brochure has been printed in 756 copies. Information about the distribution of these copies is very imprecise. Comprehensive data about the distribution can be retrieved for only 10 (major) museums and even where they do exist they only relate to the number of copies sent as mutual exchanges among museums (and libraries). There is very little information on the numbers of copies sold. These (major) museums in Zagreb have released over the past period 6.8 titles on the average with an average circulation of 800 copies, of which an average of about 670 copies, or 83.75% of the total print run, have been sent away as exchanges. The Croatian museums, which can hardly afford to replenish their libraries by buying books, find it extremely beneficial to be able to take part in

source to derive statistical data and conclusions which can, possibly, be applied to Croatia in its entirety.

¹² At the time of writing this contribution the 2004 Report has not been published yet

¹³ Which is to account for 306,6 exhibitions per year, that is 9 exhibitions per museum per year.

¹⁴ In their reports many museums use the phrase «more than ...».

¹⁵ For example, some museums report on their work on a certain CD-ROM over a number of years, while inconsistently citing its title and topic.

¹⁶ From their reports it is impossible to determine whether or not some museums enter their own websites as part of their participation in the project Croatia's museums on the Internet carried out by the Museum Documentation centre.

the inter-museum exchanges although there are no publicly accessible information showing by how many copies (as well as what kind of titles) the numbers in the museums' libraries increased. In this regard one should bear in mind these 83.75% of the distributed circulations end up in: a) specialised libraries or related museum institutions, most of which in turn have a semi open access policy if not barring access to their resources – that is, they select users and b) that the certainty is dubious of what a museum can expect from the exchanges!

One should also bear in mind that Zagreb's museums (just like other Croatian museums) by and large (if not solely) print their publications with funds allocated to this purpose by their founders- financial patrons. Hence, such a gallant percentage of materials distributed¹⁷ in this way (actually free of charge) makes it clear that museums do not publish catalogues to make money¹⁸. This is something the financial patrons are aware of, too, as they comply with and approve of the demands by the museums for printed catalogues.

When these same patrons face a demand to finance some digital work targeted at WEB users their answer, according to our experience, is most often a negative one, usually delivered as a warning that there should be no free distribution of information about museum resources! Perhaps it is this negative attitude on the part of the patrons that explains the inconsistency (or indecisiveness?) demonstrated by the museums when disclosing in their Reports information about their digitally published resources!

Conclusion

By passing good laws the law makers have expressed their awareness and desire to have Croatia's museum heritage/resources published as extensively and in so doing they provided a precondition for each and every museum to have the right and duty to publish its resources. Drawing upon the experience of the example set by Zagreb's museums it is clear that the museum professionals are aware of the need to publish albeit being uncertain whether this kind of publishing can and should go beyond the medium of print. It is also a fact that the museum professionals have their specialist interest in getting familiar with IT skills and education and they are enabled to satisfy it – via ALM-Seminars, Informatica museologica...!

It should also be noted that certain museums and institutions¹⁹ in Zagreb (and in Croatia too) have produced a number of digital products presenting

¹⁷ The figure of 83,75% does not include those copies that every museum is duty-bound and needs to give away for free!

¹⁸ For example, my museum, the Museum of Croatian History, retails its catalogues with a price tag that covers only production costs!

¹⁹ For example, Croatia's Museums on the Internet.¹⁹ / The Museum Documentation Centre in Zagreb. <http://www.mdc.hr>.

Croatian museums and Croatian museum heritage. These works come in various degrees of editorial presentation and show inconsistency in this kind of treatment.

They primarily differ in their respective initial intentions, forms and structures reflecting the differences in perception stemming from either the existence or non-existence, respectively, of exchanges of experiences among the three branches of IT sciences (archives and library science and museology) and, likewise, from differing perceptions of the experiences of related European institutions. If grouped these works would be seen as presenting their institution, reflect its activity (topic), the history, appearance, spatial set-up and the structure of the collection, while showing a minimum number of monumental units from museum resources – the «so-called general information website of the institution». Such a popularisation of museum institutions is extremely useful. Although it was not the intention of this contribution to reflect in particular upon these «so-called general information websites of the institutions» it should be briefly noted nonetheless that in case of the existing works greater attention should be paid to the consistency and harmonisation of the data presented by these institutions. Besides this, particular attention ought to be paid to the visual identity of the digital presentation of each institution, something that must be derived from the topic or the realm of topics the museum is designated for. Such a visual identity should underpin all further digital works of that same institution (as opposed to producing subsequent works dependent on the taste and affinities of its author).

The notion of «digital databases of museum resources on the web» implies works that present a certain collection or a part of the resources and while documenting a certain exhibition or event in the museum. There are such digital products, as we could read in the Report, in Zagreb (and in Croatia too)! Some of them are on the WEB and some are for the time being only on CD-ROMs. (Signpost, Meštrović, Museum....)

Their levels of editorial presentation of data differ to a great extent and so do their mutual linkability and operational sophistication. These levels primarily depend on the awareness and expertise of the creator of a database (preceding the production of a digital work) and on the resourcefulness of the IT professional (or the person who has created this IT work). Some of them are, in a layman's terms, printed catalogues which are simply transferred into the digital medium = book on CD-ROM. But there are also some that are exceptionally well structured.²⁰ It is the general impression that in most works priority was given to visual appeal (mostly without identifying clues) rather than to the quality of contents and a standardised form of structuring and linking the data. And it is exactly these three that ought to be seen as the fundamental criteria and the cornerstone by both an expert creator as well as his/her financial patron! Without a certain degree of quality in contents and

²⁰ CD-Rom Ivan Meštrović, for example.

data that should correspond with the given category, topic and the range of activities of a museum we are going to disappoint and drive away the user.

Without a standardised form of entries it is impossible to link the data – both at the level of the Web of Museums as well as at the level of uploading data online on the Internet or their inclusion in some of the already existing databases. One should continue to remind museum professionals that the entries and keywords by which we want to provide users with access to museum resources in our museums and to our research into these artefacts must be in compliance with international standards – such as those standards covering, for example, the way the names of persons, institutions, geographical terms, celestial bodies and suchlike are written.

And finally, it is certain that in the course of publishing on the WEB we should not be afraid of the «theft» of intellectual property and unauthorised publishing any more than we are in case of print publishing. Likewise, to paraphrase «the lament of one IT expert»,²¹ just as TV broadcasts of good sports events have not decreased the numbers of spectators at these events nor will there be a decrease in the numbers of physical visitors in museums and we are not either going to create a «virtual museum» that visitors can explore from their chairs at home if we publish resources on the WEB, including accompanying interpretations. On the contrary, by providing basic information about our exhibits we can stir up the interests of «virtual surfers and skaters» so they can personally «surf and skate» to see how we have contextualised a certain exhibit and made it fit in with the topic we deal with.

²¹ Zvizdić, E. IT Lament. *Informatica Museologica* 31 (1-2) 2000. Zagreb: The Museum Documentation Centre, 2000.