

DIGITALISATION OF THE HERITAGE IN THE CROATIAN HISTORY MUSEUM

Jelena Balog Vojak, B.A.
Documentalist
Croatian History Museum
Matoševa 9, 10000
Zagreb
Croatia
tel: +385 1 4851 900
fax: +385 1 4851 909
j.balog@hismus.hr

Since so much has been written about the digitalisation of the heritage in general and its vast importance, I think it needless to repeat that material. The intention of this short address is to refer to the digitalisation of the heritage in Croatia taking as an example the Croatian History Museum, the institution in which I work and in which I take a part in the digitalisation process.

Since 1997 the Croatian History Museum has used an application for the processing of the museum material, while the computer programme for the handling of museum documentation was brought in during 2005. When the two applications for processing museum material and handling museum documentation were introduced, the organisation of the process of digitalising the cultural heritage that the Museum collects and preserves was addressed. Since then, a number of issues related to the computer processing of material have remained unresolved, and new problems arise all the time. Hence these computer databases constitute a living tissue that is in development and that needs constantly maintaining.

Since the Croatian History Museum works at two sites, to date there has been no united database about museum objects not only not accessible to the public or to experts but even to the employees of the museum itself; the process of digitalising the material nevertheless continued. In 2007 a project was started to merge the two databases into a single united entity. For this a long period of preparation was

required, both by the creators of the bases and by the Museum. The Museum had to invest in the updating of its hardware. The software experts had to improve the functioning of the base to the maximum to make the splicing feasible. The bases were joined by being seated on the server, while the co-workers at the different sites were able to log on via the internet. Thus the base was at last functioning as a whole, by which a quicker and better insight of the whole of the material was facilitated. In addition, it made possible the normal functioning of the documentation department.

But still, this has not meant that the documentation part of the operation is anything like finished. Now it is necessary at last to clean up and edit the glossary, in which, to say the least, chaos rules. This is the consequence of the many data conversions, of rash inputs and the absence of skilled enough personnel to settle these problems at the outset. For example, Austrian Empress and Queen of Croatia Maria Theresa exists in five different versions. Such trifles, when there are really many of them, slow down the work of the database and create confusion in the search for information. Hence the cleaning up of the terminology is one of the primary jobs. Of course, one might ask why this problem was not solved earlier. But as I mentioned earlier, this was primarily because of lack of staff with expertise combined with a large volume of material that the documentalist has to cope with.

The next step is a project to make the finally united databases about museum objects, as well as the museum documentation, available not only to museum staff and other experts, but to the general public as well. In the first phase of the project this information will be available within the museum at a kind of info-desk, so the visitors can get to know the museum better.

The next step is to put the basic items about objects on the Web, while, of course, avoiding any abuse of the laborious research work that has been carried out by the curators. This would enable an insight into the museum collections and the activity of the museum in general at a higher level than the ordinary web site with data about opening hours, exhibitions, collections and employees in the museum. This kind of approach would certainly make work for researchers easier, saving the time that they

would otherwise spend digging in the contents of the stores with the help of the curator, seeking the information needed for their investigations. It would also cover the educational section, which is an extremely important segment of the work of the museum and of communications with the public.

The ultimate aim of the project is to update the public's approach to the museum profession and to stimulate awareness of the wealth of the national history that is concealed in the stores. Also, the process of digitalisation is of great importance for the preservation of museum objects and the knowledge assembled about them, and hence directly for the preservation of the cultural heritage.

While the project is being effectuated, it is important to pay attention to the fact that in Croatia there is an idea about a comprehensive Internet culture site, CultureNet or www.culturenet.hr. This is a project started off by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia and the Open Society Institute Croatia, the aspiration of which is to bring together all the available information resources about Croatian culture – organisations, associations, projects and so on, and to foster their elaboration and to enable people in culture and the arts to find the information that concerns them and partners for their projects in a single place. CultureNet thus aspires towards the improvement of cultural collaboration in Croatia and work with foreign countries, as well as towards the better communication among Croatian cultural institutions, among institutions and arts people, and all of them and the general public for the arts. Thus it would be good if our little project could be incorporated into CultureNet, because this would naturally also indicate recognition of the quality of our work.

It should be mentioned however that this is not the very first project of the Museum that covers the publication of material over the Internet. The long-term project for the publication of the Yatagan Collection received its recognition this year by being placed on the CultureNet pages. The Digital Yatagan Collection of the Croatian History Museum has about 600 digital entries/files. The physical collection contains about 200 objects. Yatagans, as a matter of fact, are a sub-collection in the Cold Steel Collection of the Croatian History Museum.

Both the digital, Yatagan project and this new and large project of the whole Museum on the Web require extensive preparatory works. The basic precondition for the realisation of them is a museum collection processed completely on the computer and the digitalisation of the photographic documentation. This is, particularly for some collections, which include up to twenty or thirty thousand items, an enormous job. But the job is nevertheless unfolding, although sometimes it seems that it is without ending. It might in fact be necessary for us to publish collection by collection. Whatever the case, the job has started, and will one day be bound to end.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

At the end, instead of a few sentences pointing up what has been stated already, I would rather go on by announcing something new.

In September 2007, the Croatian History Museum, after 150 years of subtenancy, finally acquired new premises and the ability to mount a permanent display. Although the works on doing up the premises will last from three to five years, in this project we will be able to announce a new and more contemporary image for our Museum. We wish to show thereby that we are, indeed, a history museum, but we do not live in the past, rather, we are keeping pace with modern trends in the museum profession, to the extent this is possible with respect to our eternal problem, shortage of funds.

Of course, this project would contribute to the preservation of the Croatian cultural heritage with the help of modern instruments such as digitalisation. At the end, perhaps the next step in this computer story might be a virtual walk through the museum. I hope that there will be more about this at one of the forthcoming encounters.