

# Use of the Ethnographic Film in the Contemporary

## Collecting of Heritage

By

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In numerous ethnographic museums, there is a notable production of ethnographic films created for the purposes of individual exhibition and scientific research projects. It is known that visual anthropological research started in museums in the early 20th century, when film material became, besides photographs and sound recordings, an integral part of museum holdings. As part of their documentation, ethnographic museums collect and preserve not only museum objects, but also audio-visual material, i.e. intangible heritage, which represents an important segment in the contemporary interpretation of museum objects.

The question is what is actually the future of collecting in ethnographic museums? Museum experts have been trying to answer this question from various aspects and viewpoints. I consider one possibility for the future of our collections to be collecting stories about items in our repositories. Such stories can be told by recording various visual materials in order to place them in the context of the present time. Such complete data, which represent tangible and intangible heritage of every museum holdings, can be integrated into museum databases and presented to a wide circle of users via Internet in the future.

This presentation will show and analyse methods and ways of using this medium in ethnographic museums of ten European countries, focusing on the presentation of the importance of new technologies in the documentation and interpretation of heritage. Short versions of films to be presented here have been published in electronic form on

the DVD called: *Conference Works – Ethnographic Film: Museums, Documentation, Science*, held at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb in October 2006.<sup>1</sup>

At the permanent exhibition of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (SEM) Ethnographic film *Čupa, the vessel of the Slovene fishermen* interprets the story of *čupa* Marija, the only completely preserved dugout of the Trieste Littoral and the most exposed object at the exhibition *Between Nature and Culture*. The only completely preserved *čupa* named Marija is presented as a museum object by Polona Sketelj, the curator of SEM. The reconstruction of rowing was shot with the replica of *čupa*, which was prepared by the members of the Yacht Club *Čupa* in Sesljan (Sistiana, Italy) in 1998.



In 2000 the Museum of Recent History, Celje opened a new permanent exhibition, which tells of life in the Celje region in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Part of the exhibition presents the reconstruction of a crafts street. The several years of research for the permanent exhibition also involved continuous, targeted and planned AV documentation of selected material on the subject of urban crafts. Part of the AV material created alongside the research was filmed on the basis of scenarios for short, 10-minute documentary films on urban crafts that are shown as part of the permanent exhibition. Both media – the exhibits and the AV – address visitors with the same ideas and even with the same objects. The screening and exhibition coexist in the same space,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.etnografski-muzej.hr/intro.html>

complementing each other, while at the same time each preserves its own integrity and unity.

The documentary *Shears and Linen* presents one of the most popular trades with one of the longest traditions: the tailor's profession.

The film *Figaro for ever* presents the hairdresser's tradition in Celje in correlation to the situation today.

The film *What's hiding under the hat?* presents the milliner's profession, its importance and status in the past and today.



In the Ethnographic Museum, Budapest the film *Gift of the Elves 2002* visits the village of Tótújfalu, 40 km from Szigetvár, where ethnic Hungarian Pál Gadányi, a bagpipe-maker of Croatian nationality, lives with his family. He learnt the art of making this extraordinary instrument by watching his next door neighbour Pavo Kovács but, being a dexterous and inventive master, he is forever enriching the art of making instruments which relate organically to the types of bagpipe common among Central European peoples. The style in which Gadányi plays his self-made instruments represents one of the richest individual tones and playing styles produced on the bagpipe.



Two exhibition projects of the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art and the Ethnographic Museum in the castle of Kittsee used the film medium with the aim to intensify the presence and the reception of the told content and to emotionalize it. The use of audio-visual means was subject to different intentions.

In the first case, the camera was a quiet companion in a field research under the general topic of regional culture and identity. The film material formed a contrast point in the exhibition to the deliberate museological distance of the currently collected and historical objects. Both protagonists and consumers of regional culture refer to the created identity space and enrich it emotionally. The integrated film material should underline this process.



In the second case, an exhibition about the topic of *money saving* within a chronological frame starting with 1945, filmed interviews formed one base of the exhibition concept. The aim of this use of the medium was to elevate individual views towards a common practice and a collective everyday life's action, which is respected generally as well as part of social morality – saving money and its economic/social environment.

The National Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions in Paris is the work of one man, *Georges-Henri Riviere*, who devoted his life to the founding of a museum based on a new field of study that he helped to establish as a scientific discipline: the ethnography of France. For more than half a century, from the mid 1930s to the beginning of the 1970s, all of Riviere's efforts went towards building this temple for the works of a people – a place where one could understand, admire and recognize the culture of the popular classes.

Through unpublished sources (films, sounds, photographs, archives), the film shows how this museum, conceived before World War II, made field researches, collected the lore of the People, organized many temporary exhibitions, till the opening of a brand new building, whose museography appeared as a model for many other institutions all around the world.



For the exhibition *Weavers in Istria*, Ethnographic Museum of Istria, decided to use film to document a weaving process. It was not only useful for documentation purposes; it was also a way to safeguard this particular traditional craftsmanship as part of

intangible cultural heritage (traditional craftsmanship is specified as IHC, UNESCO, 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage). Therefore we decided to include the film documentation of the entire process of making the new loom (the copy of the old one existing in the museum's holdings) and the complete process, from preparing the weft to the final product, as an integral part of exhibition. After the exhibition had opened a project of documenting the processing of raw materials used for weaving in Istria on film was initiated. Filmed interviews with weavers that did not become a part of the exhibition *Weavers in Istria* will definitively become an important part of the new permanent exhibition of EMI.



For about one year (2003/04), Museum of Folkways of Trentino has been studying Camillo's collection, filming hundreds of implements, asking each time the correct denomination in the local dialect and collecting information as to the history of every object. The result is a sort of dictionary in film *The alphabet of things. A visual notebook of ethnographic documentation*, of overt ethnographic and/or ethno-linguistic significance. Camillo Andriollo (1911-2005), a farmer from Olle in the Valsugana, had amassed in his old stable a huge collection of the traditional wooden and iron tools for haymaking, cheese making, forestry work, and every branch of farming and domestic craft.

In a fast sequencing of sketches, the film *Carnival of Valfloriana* introduces *màtoci*, *arlechini*, *paiaci* & *spósi*, i. e. the main characters of the Carnival of Valfloriana, which is among the most interesting of the whole of the Alps. The concept is that of condensing the most relevant information as to the complex structure of such winter

ritual masquerading, for didactic and/or museum purposes. The film was on show within the exhibition *Shepherd demons and peasant ghosts. Winter masquerades from the Eastern Alps to the Balkans* (Trento 21st April – 14th May 2006).



As illustrated by the examples of using ethnographic films for exhibition purposes or in scientific research projects, museums have found another way of collecting intangible heritage. This enables, above all, to contextualize museum objects with various social events, establishing a direct link to the present time. Precisely this is, in my opinion, the value and importance of ethnographic films, which has been recognized in many ethnographic museums. Other possibilities have been identified in the international networking through conferences, in DVD publications of such films in the DVD and, finally, in presenting them on the Internet and making them available online to the audience. The present time, but also the future, facilitates an increasingly accessible and fast communication, interconnection and presentation of all museum objects as part of the world heritage.