

Museum Roma culture festivals challenging the public (opinion)

“Everybody should be encouraged to assume their own diversity, and see their identity as the sum of their various backgrounds instead of mixing it up with one single identity erected as the supreme origin, as an exclusion tool, sometimes as a war tool”(Amin Maalouf, *Les identitiés meurtrières*)

A standfirst: *More and more European museums are joining Roma culture festivals or even initiating new festivals because they are becoming aware of their power to challenge the public (opinion).*

Roma¹ are an ethnic group that has moved from northwest India about a thousand years ago and now has 10 to 15 million displaced people worldwide - most (9.8 million) live in Europe. Because of persecution, many lived until the mid-20th century a nomadic way of life. They became the most discriminated, persecuted and marginalized ethnic community in Europe², and every year the Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe states they »continue to be a subject to racism and pervasive discrimination across all social sectors in most of the 47 Council of Europe member states«.³

One of the projects which wants to deconstruct ideologies and practices of exclusion is *Route of Roma Culture and Heritage Project*, a joint project between France, Germany, Greece, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom and Slovenia initiated by the Council of Europe. The objectives are to increase the knowledge about Roma history, culture, values and lifestyle, to encourage the contribution of Roma to Europe's cultural life and diversity, and ultimately, to contribute to giving a positive value to the image of Roma. Engagement through cultural heritage is a non-confrontational and attractive method of communication, which allows Roma people and their culture to be seen, recognised and understood. With the initiative of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Slovenia joined the project in 2008. A relatively small number of Roma population have lived in Slovenia since at least the 15th century, but it is significant venue of discrimination and marginalisation. In the frame of this project the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, together with a Roma and non-Roma NGO, started the first Roma culture festival in Slovenia, *Romano Chon / Romski mesec /Roma month* in

¹ Romani, Romany, Romanies, Roms, Romane or Rromane, Manus, Gitanos, Kale, Sinti depending on dialect; exonym Gypsies.

² It was not until the 1990s, that Poraimos (pharraimos /Holocaust) was acknowledged, when more than half a million Roma died in concentration camps in Nazi Germany.

³ Thomas Hammarberg: *The discrimination of Roma in Europe: A Human Rights Perspective.*

April 2009.⁴ We choose April, because April 8th is the International Roma day⁵ and spring is the metaphor for openness and optimism. The festival provided above all a dialog among Slovene and Roma cultures and included Roma artists, which is a crucial issue. It dealt with the presentation of different aspects of the Roma culture(s) and its affirmation, and it sustained interest in the engaged Slovene museums while enhancing its appeal to visitors.

Festivals can engender social cohesion, confidence and pride (McDonnel, 28, 1999), with the help of the festivals we make the Roma and non-Roma public aware of their immense cultural contribution to the humanity. There are a number of Roma festivals which emerged in Europe in the last decade.⁶ These festivals didn't emerge in museums, but increasingly European museums are joining them or even initiating new festivals because they are becoming aware of their power to challenge the public .

These museum festivals celebrate Roma culture and history by tackling negative stereotyping and prejudices and trying raise awareness among the vast »European majority« of their xenophobic attitude towards the biggest »European minority«. They emerged as a response to the discrimination against the Roma and their culture. This is the source of the main difference between them and *Pelerinage des Gitans*, Roma/Gypsy festival and pilgrimage in Saintes-Maries de-la-Mer Camargue region, France, the oldest known Roma festival in Europe.⁷

The leading goals of the Roma culture festivals are to combat racism and xenophobia, to help to protect and respect human rights and to teach tolerance towards the Roma minority. The aim is to make a broad public aware about old and rich Roma culture(s), as any other ethnic group or nation which should be equally respected and enjoyed, to develop social inclusion and intercultural learning of Roma youth from different cultural, local and religious backgrounds, and to develop intercultural working methods used to enable participants to participate on an equal basis.

⁴ It is growing; in April 2011 the third Roma culture festival will take place in several towns, museums and other cultural institutions in Slovenia.

⁵ At the first international meeting of Roma representatives in April 1971, in Chelsfield near London April 8th was designated International Roma Day. There, a single description of their people with the name Roma, which means people, was agreed upon. The banner and anthem was also chosen.

⁶ *Khamoro World Roma festival* in Prague, the children Roma festival *Open Heart* in Veliko Turnovo, Bolgaria, *Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month* in many parts of Great Britain, *Romart festival* in Subotica, Serbia, *International Romani Art Festival* in Timisoara, Romania, *Roma Truba Fest* in Kumanovo, Macedonia.

⁷ We can trace its religious roots down to the 15th century; but not until 1935 that the statue of Sara , the patron saint of the Roma/Gypsies, was brought to the sea. It was not until 1953 that priests participated in the procession.

The concepts of the Roma festivals differ, although most of them combine artistic components like museum or photo exhibitions; concerts of traditional »Gypsy« music as well as new wave like Gypsy Swing, Hip-hop or even Rap, dance; different workshops, films , lectures, debates, and theatre and puppet shows. As »centres of celebration of Roma culture and its richness« for a few days, they gather very different kinds of public and provide the opportunity to communicate a wide range of knowledge of Roma history and culture. Whilst not wanting to romanticise the Roma, the festivals are intended to investigate their culture, which allows the audience to meet develop an understanding of it.

In the time of global inequality, tensions, and uncertainty the time is right for ICOM to emphasize “Museums for social harmony” during the 22nd General conference in Shanghai. Cultures coincide less and less with geographical maps, continents and countries. There has always been a mutual cultural impact. Will museums be able to facilitate the terms of that dialogue and prepare a humanity reconciled with its multiple identities, or shall we prepare for the shock of civilisations – or more prosaically said – to the shock with underprivileged (Focroulle,15,2009) ?

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A short biography:

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Born in 1955, graduated in ethnology and psychology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. 26 years of work in different museums (provincial, city, ethnographic) in Slovenia. In 1991 he co-initiated Museoforum, an informal museological education which is after 19 years still going on. Two mandates chair of Museum Association of Slovenia (1991 - 95), two mandates chair of ICOM Slovenia National Committee (1997- 2003). Member of the board of ICOM/ ICME (1989-1992 and 2007-2010) and ICOM-Europe (2002-2007), member of the ICOM Task Force on National Committees and Regional Organizations (2005-2007). In 2010 nominated for the ICOM Executive council. Published 170 articles and 2 books, was co-author of the Museums Guide in Slovenia (1992) and organised (was author or co-author) of 20 museum exhibitions. In April 2009 he initiated the first Roma Culture festival (exhibitions, music, theatre, puppets, lectures, dance, films, poetry) in Slovenia and organised it together with Roma Academic Club (NGO) and Association of creative people in Culture (ZULK/NGO).