

THE MUSEUM EXHIBITION A CHALLENGE TO MUSEOLOGY

Ivo Maroević
Universidad de Zagreb,
Croacia

RESUMEN

Este artículo es una disertación teórica acerca de la exhibición en los museos. Presenta una serie de conceptos museológicos fundamentales, tales como museología, musealidad, museo y exhibición, antes de llevar a cabo el análisis de términos, como comunicación, la exhibición como herramienta y público.

El análisis del término "comunicación" saca a la luz el proceso interactivo implícito en el objeto de museo, la exhibición *per se*, el museo y cualquier forma de expresión, emisión de información que pueden transmitir y, por último, las habilidades y potencialidades de los visitantes/público como receptores de dichos mensajes. En la presentación de la relación entre la exhibición como forma de comunicación y el público como receptor, el objeto de museo se presenta como el transmisor primario con la ayuda de algunos elementos comunicativos (i. e., textos, audiovisuales, etc.). El objeto es visto a través de sus varios componentes, tales como materia, forma, función, etc.; cada uno de los cuales porta varias capas de información del pasado, su viaje a través del tiempo y el presente y que por inte-

ractuar con su medio circundante emite varias capas de conocimiento. Debido a su condición efímera, la exhibición está ligada con el presente, en la medida que es afectada tanto por sus creadores como por la audiencia que transmiten y reciben respectivamente niveles de información específica. El público, ya sea un grupo o un individuo, posee diferentes niveles de conocimiento previo, de los cuales una buena exhibición debe ser consciente y dar cuenta.

ABSTRACT

This article is a theoretical museological discourse concerning the museum exhibition. It starts with the determination of basic concepts such as museology, museality, museum & exhibition before it proceeds to the analysis of the terms of Communication, the Exhibition as a tool and the Public.

The analysis of the term Communication brings up the interactive process that is implied by the museum object, the exhibition *per se*, the museum and any forms of expressions, the emission of information that they all can transmit and finally the

abilities and potentialities of the visitor/public as a recipient. In the Exhibition as a form of Communication and the Public as a receiver is discussed the museum object as a primary communicator with the presence of other communicative aids (texts, A/V, etc.). The object is seen with its various components, such as material, form, function, etc., which each carries multiple layers of information from the past, their travel through time & the present and by interacting with the surrounding environment emit multiple layers of knowledge. Due to its ephemeral status the exhibition is linked with the present as it is affected both by its creators and the audience who respectively transmit-receive focused layers of information. The public, individual or in a group form, has different levels of prior knowledge that a good exhibition should be aware of and address.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is conceived as a theoretical, museological discourse concerning the phenomenon of the museum exhibition. Accordingly, at the outset it is worth determining several basic concepts to facilitate the better understanding of the discussion. These concepts are important for a more precise determination of the theses set forward.

Museology is that part of the information sciences that deals with the study, identification, protection and communication of the museality of material testimonies of culture and nature (primarily, of museum objects or musealia) for the protection of the human heritage and the interpretation and transmission of its message. In addition, it deals with the forms of the organized and institutionalised human activities (mainly with museums) for the ac-

complishment of all these objectives (Maroević, 1993:92-3).

Museality is the feature or characteristic of objects of the heritage of being capable in one reality of being a document of some other reality, of bearing witness in the present about the past, of reflecting the real world in the museum, of being in a space a bearer of a message about some earlier spatial relationship. Its features are original, when the objects acquire them through their origins, and superadded, if they accumulate them during their lifetime and by being linked to a given space, to certain people or a society, to events or a time.

A museum is a museological institution that identifies, collects, keeps and communicates objects of the material cultural and natural heritage, and documents the material and non-material values of the heritage.

An exhibition is the most frequent form of museum communication. It is a kind of event, a creative act in which individual phenomena are shown and interpreted, as well as knowledge about them in a particular relationship of past and present, museal and real world. At the same time it is possible to create at the exhibition new knowledge that arises in the totally new relations of the objects of the material world with each other and their being made actual in the changing course of current time, or the time in which the exhibition is being held.

COMMUNICATION AND MUSEUM COMMUNICATION

Let us begin with the term *to communicate*, which means to make common, to make sure that something becomes a part of something (Maroević, 1988). Communication is a process of transmitting messages that goes on in communicational time. This time is almost always linked with present time, looked at chronologically. In this process, on the one hand, there is the sender, and on the other hand, the recipient of the message. With his model of the E-T-Ac-S-A complex (Figure 1), Boco Tezak clearly identified their relations, with the proviso that he put into the process of creating and communicating messages certain intermediate elements, of *accumulation*, *selection* and *transmission* (Ac, S and T) (Tezak, 1969) that help a message to be formulated from numerous data items (taken as fundamental units of knowledge).

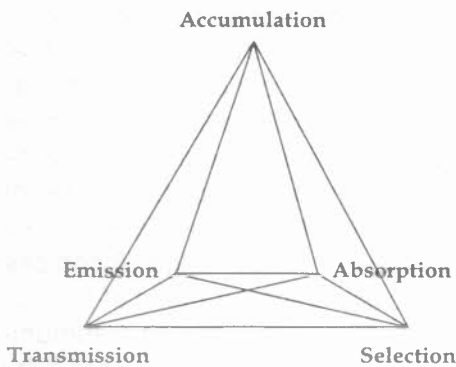


Figure 1: Tezak's model of the E-T-Ac-S-A complex.

It is worth saying that in the communicational attitude of man towards the things and phenomena that surround him, lower level communication processes constantly and very often go on at the same time, in them basic data arising, and later information, the more complex cumulative result of these processes. In these processes, human interest focuses on the object, with the proviso that man as recipient of message must have certain features, like openness, knowledge, ability to read the language of the object, imagination, the ability to adopt a point of view so as to be able to obtain the response of the object to the question asked, and to shape the data or information as a set of data items. In this context the message is the making concrete and current of the substance of this process stated. Finally, the model of the form of human communication (Tezak in: Tudman, 1983:192) indicates to us the importance of information as the central element of the message with the questions of identity: *who, what, where* and *when*. On the one hand information is followed by instruction, with the fundamental question *how*, and on the other motivation, which is marked by the question *why* (Figure 2), without which there is no proper communication.

From its part, museum communication allows museum holdings of the cultural and natural heritage to become sharers in the real world of people and their communities and by this very fact incorporates this heritage into their lives, making it

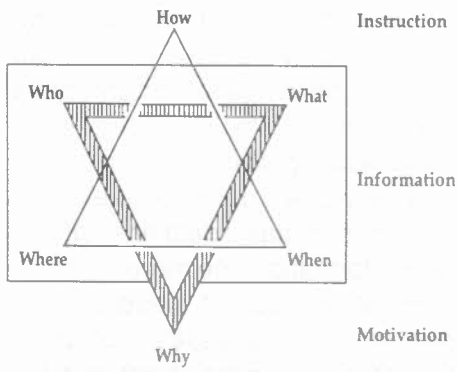


Figure 2: Tezak's model of human communication forms (Source: Tudman, 1983:192).

one of the features of a new quality of living. It engages first of all with the communication of messages based on the values of the material heritage, although the share of the non-material heritage in museum communication is far from negligible. Communication of heritage messages unfolds at several levels and in several directions in museums. The basic form is the exhibition or display of the object, with interpretations, and the orientation of visitors in such a way that they are able to pick up the complex message that has been transmitted. In addition, museum communication can go on via the media, like all kinds of publications, video and audio materials, lectures, or organized events in the museum. But this kind of communication is not exclusively linked with the museum space, direct contact with the museum collective fund, or even with any given time, as is the case with the museum exhibition. The phenomenon of the virtual museum, which has arisen as a result

of the powerful development of computer technology and networking of data, has opened up new forms of museum communication, which are very close to the museum exhibition and yet, in spite of the numbers of very valuable features they have, cannot yet replace or make up for the experience and results of holding communication with a real object.

THE EXHIBITION AS FORM OF MUSEUM COMMUNICATION

Museum communication via the exhibition is particular since primarily it is museum objects that are used immediately, while in media variants, like text, image or virtual simulation, they are used only as aids. The museum exhibition is a special communicational form, and it serves as a mechanism for the generation and selection of information. In line with this, a museum object is the main bearer of the message at a museum exhibition. It is, as cultural asset, also a communication object. Its features, which we have called museality, bear witness to its identities, which cover a range from the moment of the origin of the idea about the object (the ideal identity) to its condition and appearance at the moment when we come upon it in the museum (real identity). The identities of the museum object (van Mensch, 1989:90) make possible a broad range of choices of possible interpretation of the objective world in museum communication. They open up the possibility of the aware and investigative response to the value of the object at

any moment of its life and purpose (*functional and historical identity*) or state and appearance of its material and form (*structural identity*), and not only that which gives ideal testimony about the moment of its creation, as is often the case when we are talking of works of art in a museum.

If we try to focus on the museum object analytically, we will determine that such objects, individually, as parts of a collection, and collections as components of the museum collective fund, constitute a museum reality in which values are structured in a way that is different to that of the real world. The museological context (van Mensch, 1992:135) gives objects a new life in which the communication of values that we have identified in them is their basic mission and in which they are protected from destructive treatment and social degradation. In the museum reality, the primary values of the object, from the time of its origin, are related to those secondary values that bear witness to its existence in time and its use, its rises and falls, its degradation and possible reincarnation.

In museological theory for quite some time relations have

been set up between the museum object and the sign that is dealt with by the separate scholarly discipline of semiology. Without going for the moment into subtleties about possible and actually established relationships, we will mention only that the fundamental determinants of the sign, the sign itself, the signifier and the signified, when translated in terms of museum object, are equivalent to the determinations of material, form and meaning (Figure 3).

Looked at more simply, the material would determine the temporal component of the object, the form its spatial component, while the significance is its social component. In other words, the duration of the material of the object bears witness to time; its structure and form live and have their being in space, while its meaning has a role of a kind in

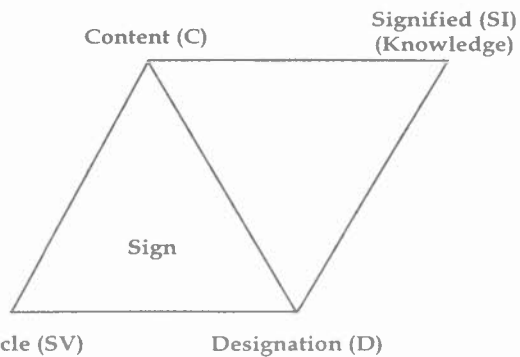


Figure 3: Modification of semiotic sign model
(Source: Morris in: Tudman, 1983:33).

society. At this time we cannot deal with the area of documentation that in some other medium creates a virtual world of the life of the object and thus extends its temporal component even after the material of the object has been totally lost or has totally decayed, that is, it transfers the temporal component according to the form and content of the object, with all the shortcomings relating to the impossibility of carrying out any further research into the material and structure of the object, and accordingly with the question of the authenticity (in the European sense of authenticity) that in certain situations is bound up with the originality of the material itself.

An exhibition is a special form of communicating, because communication time is linked with real duration. It is a specific medium that has a shelf life, and cannot, like a book or a document or an illustration, be stored totally in a library, an archive or any other kind of collection of documents. Its communication time is current time, as in all other communications of this type, but it is firmly linked with the present of the person, the visitor, in the space in which the exhibition is being held. In its own way it is like a theatrical performance, with the proviso that the actors, i. e., the objects, are talking with their own special speech and are using a language that we have to know in order to understand it. In a normal theatre performance, only the words are a kind of constant. In an exhibition about a certain theme, the role of the words or text is played by the thematic synop-

sis of the exhibition. Everything else is variable: the casting of the objects (the actors), the exhibition space with its museographic aids (the set), the authors of the exhibition (the director), and the visitors (the audience). The director/authors of the exhibition are behind the scenes. They are the *who* that selects the *what* to be shown, the *when* and the *where*. The message and the information are in their hands. The social scene and the actual time in which the authors of the exhibition and the visitors live stimulate the motivation and in a certain manner provide the conditions for that *why*, while the museological knowledge, integrated into all the earlier questions that determine information and motivation, gives the answers to the question *how*.

Considering the complexity of the museum message, which we communicate in the museum exhibition, its creation seeks special knowledge and a comprehensive and overall approach from the authors of the exhibition. With simpler exhibitions it is possible to talk of a single person as author, while in the case of more complex exhibitions there have to be authorial groups at work, achieving the most suitable solutions by coordination of their approaches. It is logical that at the head of a group there is a curator, or a group of curators, who will define the basic contents of the exhibition and carry out the necessary research and selection of the materials. He or she or they are joined by the conservator, who will take care of the security of the objects exhibited

vis-à-vis the exhibition conditions, by the designer and artist who will give shape and form to the setting of the exhibition and by the use of an artistic language will help in the definition of all the museum aids, from the exhibition furniture and illustrations to the text and the manner of exhibition the museum objects, and finally the educationalist, who will input those parameters that are necessary for the message, furnished with the appropriate knowledge and method of presentation, to be able in the easiest and most intelligible manner to arrive at each of the levels of the visitors who are expected at the exhibition.

Naturally, this working group will take part in the shaping of the answers to the questions where and when, and especially that fundamental museological question, how. Although this museographic discourse has perhaps been overemphatic, it is important to mention that the exhibition message can be received and made actual as a complex item of information or knowledge only at an exhibition, and only at the time in which the exhibition lasts. This limitation of the communication time of the exhibition is at once advantage and drawback. Advantage, because it does not exhaust the theme and the motivation, which can be repeated at some other exhibition, in some other time, some other social context, with other directors, other conceptions, and thus provide the opportunity for building on and adding to them in the future. Drawback, because it is ephemeral, and remains recorded in the docu-

mentation only to the extent that the chosen documentation medium is capable of putting down all the relevant factors of the exhibition. An exhibition is as a rule not replicable, and passes, together with the time of its communication. It becomes part of history, of memory, of formatted knowledge, if it has actually been recorded.

In theory, it is incontestable that the exhibition, in line with its theme and motivation, gives a presentation of the knowledge or substance of some theme while respecting the available museum or otherwise accessible exhibition material and the knowledge extant up to the moment of the exhibition. Some of the new knowledge incorporated into the exhibition is the result of the research and preparatory procedures for the holding of the exhibition. At this moment I would not deal with the technique and the procedure for creating and devising an exhibition, for this would be to lead us off in a different direction. However, it is insufficiently known, and not always clear enough that at the exhibition itself, a new presentation of knowledge or substance of the topic is created that was not thought up or even foreseen. The exhibition, as creative whole, always reveals some new horizons, indicates some new ways of thinking about the interrelations of things that can be read off only in the experiential atmosphere of the whole of the exhibition concept, in the exhibition museum context. This new quantum of knowledge produced at the exhibition can be documented or registered in

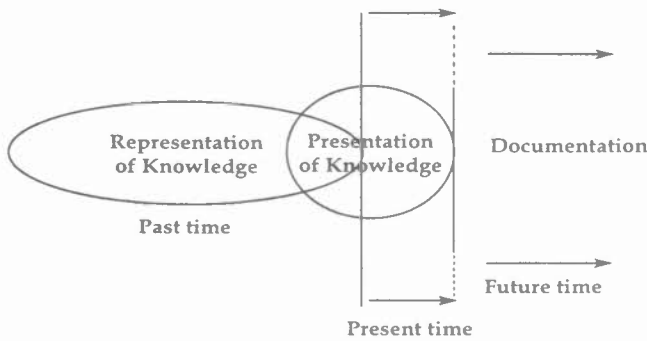


Figure 4: Identification of the representation and presentation of knowledge in museum exhibitions.

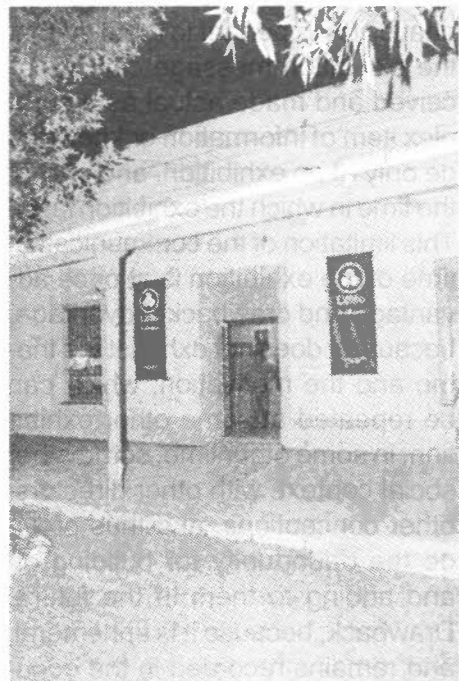
various ways, and it will thus become a part of the knowledge or substance of the theme, and will be able to be shown at some other, future exhibition, which will thus be the richer for the knowledge shown at some of the earlier exhibitions (Figure 4). And thus two forms of knowledge are manifested at exhibitions: the knowledge achieved in the process of the authorial ambition and desires is shown, as well as that new knowledge, newly born at the exhibition itself, result of the relationship of the visitor to the interrelationships among objects at this given moment of society.

If we sum up the exhibition as key concept of museum communication, then we can conclude that in the communication time of the exhibition the past is made actual in the present, and a certain symbolic system (like the language of the object, the collective fund, the standards of significance and society as community of people) in the system of symbolic objects that are constituted by the museum objects

with their form, material and meaning. At the same time the museum exhibition refers to the aspect of the present in the cognition of the past and the role of museum objects in one or other of the mentioned or some new symbolic systems. And thus the circle is closed. Symbolic systems (societies, institutions,

times) are made actual in the system of symbolic objects (museum objects), while these report on themselves in symbolic systems (Tudman, 1990:146) (Figure 5).

If we go back to the Tezak E-T-Ac-S-A complex, then without any great problem we will see that



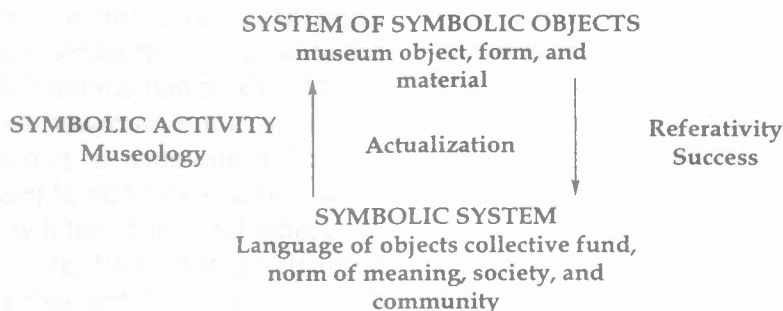


Figure 5: Modified model of the representation of knowledge applied to museology (Source: Tudman, 1990:146).

emission and absorption, as the original communication points at the exhibition, i. e., the relation of creator of the exhibition and the visitor, rest on three fundamental processes: accumulation, which means the research and the gathering of material for exhibition; selection, which from the museum collective fund and the available resources picks out the objects that will form the imagined message, and transmission, which with the help of a series of museographic aids will endeavour to present the messaged conceived to the visitor as faithfully as possible, with as little interference as possible in the communication process. And the visitor should approach the exhibition with a certain amount of prior knowledge, with some interest, and the ability to understand the speech and language of the selected world of objects. The creator of the exhibition in his message will make concrete and current some substance that the recipient will recognize and with his or her reaction to the content of the message will give shape to information

that will not necessarily be precisely the same for each visitor, each kind of audience. One level of information will be individual, adapted to the individual features of the visitor, and a second general enough to be able to generate a certain content of general knowledge that has been successfully made actual.

VISITORS AND AUDIENCE AS RECIPIENTS OF MUSEUM MESSAGES

On the other side of the Tezak communication structure, at the other apex of opposed pyramids, lies the recipient of the message. In the case of the communication by museum exhibition, this is the visitor, or, to use a collective noun, the public, the audience. It is to the public that the museum message is directed, and thus it is impossible to talk of a museum exhibition without considering the phenomenon of the public. As we have already mentioned, the communication process is directed from the sender to the receiver, with the proviso that the

recipient has to show some prior interest and through his or her expressed scope and level of expectation to be capable of affecting the shaping of the museum exhibition. For this reason, every good exhibition structures its message at the several levels of the assumed capacities of the visitors in order to be able to respond to the expected demands. As a rule this is not hermetic, rather it stimulates openness and imagination in the visitors, endeavouring to stir up their interest, so that the visitors should go out from the exhibition pleased, taking with them a certain quantum of new knowledge, without feeling any direct didactic pressure. Put in a theoretical vocabulary, a good museum exhibition should encourage and direct the constitution of the object of the message so that in the complex communication process information or a set of items of information should be formed as close as possible to the intended message of the exhibition. The authors will endeavour as much as possible to reduce anticipated interference in the communication channels and facilitate a better through-flow and acceptance of the messages.

Here it is worthwhile recalling some Venn diagrams presented quite a long time ago (Miles, 1988:86) in which there is a differentiation of several types of audience, in order to take in all the complexity of this other apex of the communicational model. The broadest circle covers the potential public, which we can draw into the exhibition by a certain advertising

apparatus, and for which the broadest and most elementary level of the exhibition is meant. Within this circle is the narrower circle of the actual audience or public; we know that an exhibition of this kind is suitable for it, and that it will find something for itself at it. The broadest level of the exhibition should be aimed at it. The narrowest circle is made up of the target public, at which we have aimed the professional subtleties and most delicate and most specialist part of the exhibition. The layer of the message for this public is the deepest, and requires the greatest knowledge of the exhibition material. Since the actual public is that level to which the greatest attention should be devoted, because it is both interested and also very highly layered, the second Venn diagram deals with circles within the field of the actual public. Within it, Miles distinguishes the receptive public, which without difficulty will be able to accept and respond to the exhibition message transmitted, and the *hit public*, which will be totally satisfied with what it has seen, and which will consider that the exhibition was meant precisely for it (Figure 6). This diagram is just one of the vivid models leading to the conclusion that a public is not a compact organism that will accept museum messages in some homogenous manner; it is also one of the key elements in the creation of a good exhibition.

For this reason, an exhibition has to communicate with visitors at three levels at least. The first is the individual, which is to say that the visitor

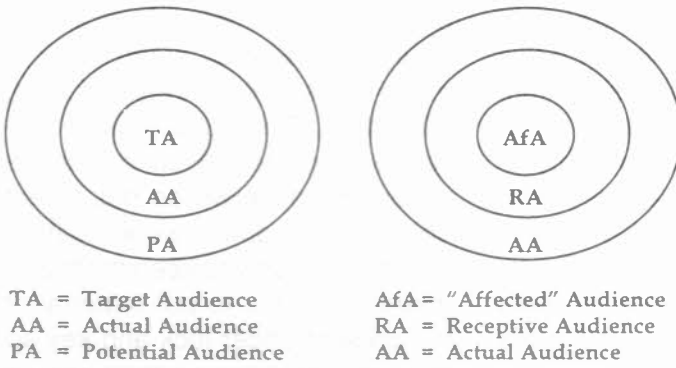


Figure 6: Venn's diagrams of audience relations with the museum
(Source: Miles, 1988:86).

has to be able to respond to the exhibition message and go round the exhibition him or her self, without the aid of guide or catalogue, with as much influence from museographic aids as he chooses himself. The second level is the group level, where the individual goes round the exhibition as part of a group, and tries to take in the offered message with the help of a guide. He combines what he sees with what the guide draws his attention to, and supplements his knowledge in consultation with members of the group, taking over part of the manner of thinking of the group he belongs to. The third level is the orientational, where the individual or the group has the exhibition explained bit by bit, the purpose being to combine the exhibition with the acquisition of new knowledge or habits.

CONCLUSION

A museum exhibition is a product of someone's (an expert's) will and desire, the impact of the given time

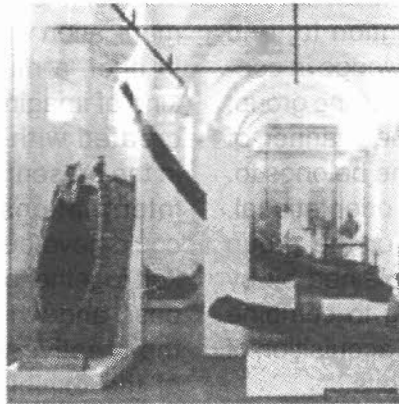
and society, and the objects of the heritage available from which to make actual a part of their museality consciously chosen and induced by the interrelationship of things. At the same time it transmits messages and knowledge to a broad circle of visitors, and broadens the field

of museal definiteness of the very museum objects taking part in the exhibition process. The superadded new values are the result of the influence of the context on the individual museum object, whether it is real, created by coexistence of objects in a given ambiance and visualized with the assistance of museum aids or virtual, the consequence of the social climate or circumstances in which the exhibition and its communication with the public goes on. In brief, a museum exhibition is a kind of imaginary reality of the past created with real museum items in the present, in the context and in interrelationships in which they could have been together and worked together only very seldom in the past, and which are the results of the creative wishes of the author of the exhibition and the laws of some of the fundamental scholarly or scientific disciplines that deal with a given segment of the relevant world of objects (archaeology, history of art, ethnology and so on). The exhibition is an intellectual

construct of selected phenomena of the past created through the knowledge of the present about that same past. This combination of virtual and real is the basis for every interpretation of the past at a museum exhibition and its basic premise.

I would close with a few thoughts of Siegfried Lenz expressed in his award-winning book *The Homeland Museum*. He wonders what happens after the closing of a homeland museum. Stressing the connection of museum objects and public, he goes on to say that the objects were of value only as long as others were looking at them, and while, during their looking at them, they learned something about themselves. When they were isolated from the public, they were just alone, witnesses of the human past, marked and carefully distributed among cases, cupboards and display shelves, redeemed from decay,

but in this new, shady refuge, almost as if they had died some other, if more prestigious death (Lenz, 1986:405). The museological challenge seems to well up from these words. Because we do not collect objects, the moment we are gathering them in, only to keep them and guard them, but to put material of the present under lock and key so that through keeping they should gain a patina, layers of noble mould, one day becoming witnesses suitable for museum exhibits (Lenz, 1986:418). In this, this well-known author perhaps even inadvertently described the phenomenon of museality, which is the foundation of a diverse exhibition activity, a spur to the creation of relations between past and present. The true museological challenge of the museum exhibition is in the recognition of museality and in making a statement about it in the present.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Lenz, S. (1986). *Zavičajni muzej*, Grafički zavod Hrvatske, Zagreb (original: *Heimatmuseum*, Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, Hamburg, 1978).
- Maroević, I. (1988). "Komunikacijska uloga muzejske izložbe [The communicational role of the museum exhibition]", *Informatica museologica*, 1-2(82-84):90-91.
- Maroević, I. (1993). *Uvod u muzeologiju [Introduction to Museology]*, Zavod za informacijske studije Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu, Zagreb.
- Maroević, I. (1995). "The museum message: between the document and information", in: *Museum, Media, Message* (Ed. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill), Routledge, London, 24-36.
- Maroević, I. (1998). "The museum exhibition as presentation and representation of knowledge", *Museological Review*, 5:1-13.
- Maroević, I. (2000). "Museology as a field of knowledge", *ICOM Cahiers d'étude/ Study series - (ICOFOM)*, 8:5-7.
- Mensch, P. van (1989). "Museology as a Scientific Basis for the Museum Profession", in: *Professionalising the Muses* (Ed. Peter van Mensch), AHA Books, Amsterdam.
- Mensch, P. van (1992). *Towards a Methodology of Museology*, Ph.D. thesis, manuscript, University of Zagreb.
- Miles, R. (1988). "Muzeji i javna kultura: Kontekst za komuniciranje znanosti [Museums and public culture: the context for the communication of knowledge]", *Informatica museologica*, 1-2(82-84):83-87.
- Tezak, B. (1969). "Informaciono-dokumentaciono-komunikacioni (IN-DOK) sistem [The Information, Documentation and Communication (IN-DOK) system]", *Informatologia Yugoslavica*, (1)1-4:1-11.
- Tudman, M. (1983). *Struktura kulturne informacije [The Structure of Cultural Information]*, Zavod za kulturu Hrvatske, Zagreb.
- Tudman, M. (1990). *Obavijest i znanje [Information and Knowledge]*, Zavod za informacijske studije Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu, Zagreb.