

How museum collections tell us stories about draft animals

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Abstract

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The museum's mission of collecting, interpreting and sharing knowledge of our ancestors' way of life is stored in a number of objects in agricultural and other collections, together with the stories they tell, field photos, field trip notes and footage, including of draft animals. Many of these materials can be seen in the museum's exhibitions, and on the website, which we find very important as draft animals disappeared from Slovenian fields, forests and roads about five or six decades ago.

Collections tell stories of the strong connections between men and draft animals, about their skills and interdependence. Slovenian farmers used to cultivate their fields and work in their woods with one pair of working oxen, from the 19th century on also with horses. In the museum, we are especially proud of the harnesses collection of yokes.

Collecting objects and other documents on draft animals is still going on. We see it as a bank of information for future generations, who we believe will find it interesting, inspiring and useful, despite the fact that the knowledge was not passed on directly, from generation to generation, inside of families or communities as it used to be.

Kurzfassung

Wie Museumssammlungen uns Geschichten über Zugtiere erzählen

Der Auftrag des Museums, Wissen über die Lebensweise unserer Vorfahren zu sammeln, zu interpretieren und weiterzugeben ist in einer Reihe von Objekten in landwirtschaftlichen und anderen Sammlungen verankert, zusammen mit den Geschichten, die sie Feldfotos, Aufzeichnungen von Exkursionen und Filmmaterial, einschließlich von Zugtieren. Viele dieser Materialien sind in den Ausstellungen des Museums und auf der Website zu sehen, was wir sehr wichtig finden, da Zugtiere vor etwa fünf oder sechs Jahrzehnten von den Slowenischen Feldern, Wäldern und Straßen verschwunden sind.

Die Sammlungen erzählen Geschichten über die enge Verbindung zwischen Menschen und Zugtieren, über ihre Fähigkeiten und ihre gegenseitige Abhängigkeit. Die slowenischen Bäuer:innen bestellten ihre Felder und arbeiteten in ihren Wäldern mit einem Gespann Arbeitsochsen, ab dem 19. Jahrhundert auch mit Pferden. Im Museum sind wir besonders stolz auf die Sammlung von Zugtiergeschirren und -jochen.

Das Sammeln von Gegenständen und anderen Dokumenten über Zugtiere ist immer noch im Gange. Wir sehen dies als einen Informationsspeicher für künftige Generationen, die es interessant, inspirierend und nützlich finden werden, auch wenn das Wissen nicht direkt von Generation zu Generation weitergegeben wurde, innerhalb von Familien oder Gemeinschaften - wie es früher der Fall war.

Résumé

Comment les collections de musée nous racontent des histoires sur les animaux de trait

La mission de notre musée consiste à collecter, interpréter et partager les connaissances sur le mode de vie de nos ancêtres. Ces connaissances s'expriment à travers un certain nombre d'objets des collections agricoles et autres qui racontent des histoires par le biais de photos de terrain, de notes de voyage et de films, y compris sur des animaux de trait. Un grand nombre de ces documents sont accessibles au public directement dans les expositions ou sur le site Internet du musée. C'est d'autant plus important que les animaux de travail ont disparu des champs, des forêts et des routes de la Slovénie depuis cinquante à soixante ans.

Les collections témoignent des liens étroits entre les hommes et les animaux de trait, sur leurs compétences et leur interdépendance. Les agriculteurs slovènes avaient l'habitude de cultiver leurs champs et de travailler dans leurs forêts avec une paire de bœufs de trait, puis, à partir du 19e siècle, avec des chevaux. Au musée, nous sommes particulièrement fiers de notre riche collection de harnais et de jougs.

La collecte d'objets et d'autres documents sur les animaux de trait se poursuit actuellement. Nous la considérons comme une banque de données pour les générations futures qui, nous en sommes convaincus, les trouveront intéressantes, inspirantes et utiles, malgré le fait que ces connaissances ne sont plus transmises directement, de génération en génération, au sein des familles ou des communautés, comme c'était le cas auparavant.

Resumen

Cómo las colecciones de los museos nos cuentan historias sobre los animales de tiro

En los objetos museales de las colecciones agrícolas se recogen como fue el modo de vida de nuestro antepasados. Muchos de estos materiales pueden verse en las exposiciones de los museos y páginas web. Esto es de gran importancia en el contexto de la Eslovenia actual, ya que los animales de tiro desaparecieron de los campos, bosques y carreteras de este país hace unas cinco o seis décadas.

Las colecciones del museo cuentan historias sobre los fuertes vínculos entre los hombres y los animales de tiro, sobre sus habilidades y la interdependencia. Los agricultores eslovenos solían cultivar sus campos y trabajar en sus bosques con una pareja de bueyes, a partir del siglo XIX también con caballos. El museo se siente especialmente orgulloso de la colección de arneses de yugo.

La recopilación de objetos y otros documentos sobre los animales de tiro continúa. Esto forma parte del banco de información museal, el cual favorecerá a las generaciones futuras, ya que el traspaso generacional interfamiliar de estos conocimientos es casi inexistente en la actualidad.



What is the role of museums, in particular of the Slovene ethnographic museum in researching, collecting and presenting materials connected to draft animals, knowing that draft animals disappeared from Slovenian fields, forests and roads about five or six decades ago? After the 1980s, an ox- or horse-drawn cart became a sign of social exclusion or poor adaptation, often connected with poverty.

As in many parts of Europe, after WW2 people were abandoning the peasant way of life. The share of the farming population dropped from the pre-war 70 % to a mere 20 % in the 1970s and to 8 % in 1991, when Slovenia gained independence. Since then, the share has continued to fall and is today estimated at 4 %.

The museum's mission of collecting, interpreting and sharing knowledge of our ancestors' way of life is stored in a number of objects in our agricultural and other collections, together with the stories they tell, field photos, field trip notes and footage, including of draft animals. This can be seen at our permanent exhibition entitled *Between Nature and Culture*, and much more in our storage depots, archives, articles and books. Many of these materials can be seen on the museum's website.



Figure 1 – Yokes from the display case with implements used in harnessing, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana

On the medium-heavy soil covering a great part of Slovenia, a small country in Central Europe, where we have steep Alps, the hilly Dolenjska region, the Pannonian plains and a Mediterranean area, the most common draft animals were oxen, in level areas also cows. The most numerous group in Slovenia – the medium-sized farms – cultivated their fields and worked in their woods with one pair of working oxen.



Figure 2 – Work on the field, painted beehive front panel from 1897

It was not until the end of 19th century that horses became important as draft animals. "A small horse takes away a large fortune", was a proverb saying that not every farmer could afford a horse.



Figure 3 – Ploughing with a pair of horses, around 1910

In the Mediterranean area, donkeys were also used, mainly for transportation. Until the establishment of machines and transport vehicles in the second half of the 20th century, animals were used as draft or pack animals and for riding.



Figure 4 – Istrian women farmers with their donkeys on the way from Trieste, where they used to sell milk, meat, vegetables and fruits, 1910

In Slovene areas, livestock was harnessed into yokes or horse collars. Yokes were used for cattle; our ancestors were using them in the time of settlement of what is now Slovenian territory in the 6th century AD or even earlier. They were used for centuries whenever carting or ploughing was done using oxen or cows. Yokes were designed for either pulling with the head or with the neck. There were also Mediterranean yokes with *cambas* for harnessing one or two animals together, and we have Slovene yokes known as *telenge*. Yokes were most often made at home and were frequently decorated.

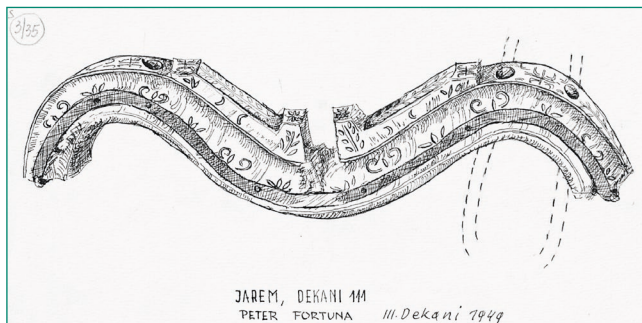


Figure 5 – Yokes were most often made at home and were frequently decorated

Horse collars were occasionally used for cattle or donkeys. They were made by saddlers from wood, covered in leather and had metal decorations. There were a number of local variants of the collar, but they differed generally between working and festive collars, and collars for pulling light or heavy weights. After WW2 horse collars started losing their original function and began being used as decoration, and were put on animals only on festive occasions.

As a curiosity, the Žiberna family, about 20 years ago, after three decades break, started raising a pair of oxen, but they use them only for festive occasions and public events. Such use of draft animals is referred to as *theatre of history*. Everywhere they go, they attract a lot of attention from people of all generations and can make especially the elderly, who still remember working with and driving oxen, quite emotional. To perform at a few events a year, they have to put a lot of work into caring for the animals and into demanding preparations.

Our museum has an interesting livestock collection from the 19th and 20th centuries, represented mainly by harnesses. In the 1950s-1960s, right at the time when extensive museum field research was being carried out in the Slovenian countryside, the use of draft animals was still an everyday phenomenon, and the museum is especially proud of the collection of ox yokes built during that time. Moreover, we have extensive documentation from that time: photos, drawings and field trip notes. For two decades now, my colleague Inja Smerdel has been researching and publishing articles on the relationship between human and ox, and the cultural aspects of working oxen in peasant civilization. She focuses on testimonies about oxen within the peasant family and the village community, about working companionship in some basic farm tasks – ploughing, harrowing, towing and driving, about castration, shoeing, feed and grazing, about naming oxen, about learning, harnessing and commands, about diseases and treatment, about choosing new and selling "used" oxen, and so on.



Figure 6 – The Žiberna family with their two oxen, Nabrezina 2019





Figure 7 – This used to be our family, Dekani 2012

Collecting objects and other documents on draft animals is still going on. We see it as a archive of information for future generations, who we believe will find it interesting, inspiring and useful, in spite of the fact that the knowledge was not passed on directly, from generation to generation, inside of families or communities as it used to be. Life has changed and we can never go back. Throughout history, people always found some new way forward, but by knowing our past, we can be wiser and more effective in the future.



Figure 8 – Children used to work with draft animals and were very attached to them from an early age, Kal-Koritnica 1952

Today, both individuals and families live a more or less self-contained life, relying on themselves, their employment possibilities, and various state and social institutions, but with this, they became very vulnerable. The uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and so on.

People, in general, are not very skilled at physical or farm work and have little knowledge of the environment and nature. They spend most of their working and free time indoors, but we all know that physical work regenerates, reinvigorates the mind, and it has always been the basis of human development.

The German political leader Konrad Adenauer’s saying “To look back into the past only makes sense if it serves the future”, is also true for museums. The motto of our museum is that we are a museum “about people, for people”, a link between the past and the present, between traditional and modern culture, between the natural environment and civilization.

Now, more and more people feel that we live in a time of insecurity and those who know some history are aware that such crises might predict drastic changes for the future. Our generation depends on many networks and technologies, driven by systems that depend greatly on different energy sources, sometimes also with limited resources. What we observe in the museum is that even through new technologies, the knowledge and skills of our ancestors are becoming of increasing interest – from schoolchildren to elderly people and all ages in between – but especially to the latter, as they try to find relief from their stressful life in gardening or small-scale farming.

At our permanent exhibition, *Between Nature and Culture*, we present objects related to transport, growing and processing crops connected to draft animals in ways that have not been practiced for decades. Observing the visitors, we have noticed that in particular older people born in the countryside strongly relate to these collections, because they are associated with memories of their youth and work on the land. However, what can such objects tell today’s urbanized people, who have never worked the land and have no experience with draft animals? We try to start from a personal experience and build on what a person knows and is familiar with. We have to be innovative to interpret to the visitors the former values defining the rural environment and the significance of draft animals in it. It is also necessary to explain that draft animals were regarded as means of subsistence. The attitude towards these animals was sometimes different than we might initially think – as was the general attitude towards animals. Over the last century, these values have greatly changed. Due to many cases of mistreatment, manuals and even decrees were passed as early as the mid-19th century to protect draft animals from neglect and cruelty.



Figure 9 – Blacksmith shoes an Istrian ox, Krmci 1950

We never idealize life in the past, we try to interpret it as realistically as possible. It was hard and people had to work hard, they had to be very skillful and persistent, to never give up, they had very complex knowledge of the care and use of draft animals, about the environment, which was built on from generation to generation.

We try to illustrate work with draft animals by including audio-visual material that illustrates the use and functions of the exhibited objects, but what fascinates visitors most is human's strong ties to the natural environment in the past, which actually enabled people to survive.

Knowing our heritage, we can be surer and more confident of a sustainable future, of the challenges and opportunities of safeguarding traditions in which draft animals might again play an important role. The knowledge incorporated in museum collections could be a good example of how to make the most of our history and the achievements of our ancestors for generations to come.

Related Literature

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