

Museums and COVID-19

Adaptation of Content and Practice in the Trilj Regional Museum

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The COVID-19 disease pandemic has significantly affected the established museum practices and initiated numerous changes in the functioning of the museum, primarily in communication with the museum audience. The Museum Documentation Centre researched the influence of the pandemic in Croatian museums in 2020, which was primarily related to the problem of attendance and adjustment to the new working conditions. The research showed that most Croatian museums recorded a high percentage of decrease in attendance and the loss of incomes, but, at the same time, the museums noted an increase in communication with the audience via digital channels and social networks (Rihtar-Jurić, 2020). Lockdown and travel restrictions in Croatia and the whole of Europe have left extremely negative consequences on cultural tourism, but most museums have successfully adapted to the new situation and became active in creating new digital content (Kocijan, 2020). With the desire of keeping the Trilj Regional Museum a vital part of the local and museum community in the "new normal", changes were made to the existing practices in interaction with the users and visitors, the content was adjusted, and new activities were implemented in the online environment.

Working with reduced capacities in the controlled environment

Museums in Croatia were completely closed for the public between 4 and 6 weeks, and after opening the number of visitors was limited, which made it impossible to hold museum programs that took place in front of and/or in interaction with the audience, such as presentations and lectures, promotions and introductions, opening ceremonies of the exhibitions, group tours of museum exhibitions, etc. With the ending of lockdown during the summer months in 2020 and opening of the museums for the public, the possibility of holding museum programs with reduced capacities reopened. Thus, the Trilj Regional Museum's priority was to continue the earlier activities which were carried out as a part of the museum pedagogy program. Different research showed that the lockdown, as well as the inability to attend classes normally and to socialize with friends, had a negative effect on children, so the priority of the Trilj Regional Museum was to reactivate creative-educational workshops for the youngest in a safe and controlled environment without the danger of spreading the infection.



Fig. 1. Lecture in lapidarium of the Trilj Regional Museum with keeping the social distance. (© Sanja Budić Leto).

During the summer and autumn months in 2020 there were several more events organized in front of the audience; the opening of two smaller art exhibitions and popular-scientific lectures (Figure 1), but due to the limited number of visitors and the necessity of keeping social distance, the response was lower than in the previous years.

The period of complete closure of the museum was used for the work on preventive protection of materials which would require closure anyway, more precisely for the gas fumigation of objects from the Ethnographic collection of the Trilj Regional Museum. Due to the evaporation of harmful gases, the procedure prevents the physical presence of people in the room in which it is conducted, and it serves to prevent wormholes and other pests in wood and textile.

Presence of museums on social networks and development of digital contents

With the desire of keeping the interaction and communication with the museum audience, new content was initiated on social networks Facebook and Instagram. The first of these contents intended for a wider audience was an online action called *Tuesday in the museum fundus*. The basic idea of the action was to present the objects or groups of objects every Tuesday until the reopening of the museum for the public and to encourage social network users to interact, i.e., to comment and react. The feedback of the social network users was extremely positive (which can be monitored through analytics tools), so the action took place for eight weeks, that is, it continued even after the partial opening of the museum for the public until the possibility of holding the museum programs outdoors

reopened again. Virtual walk through¹ the museum exhibition also facilitated the communication with the museum audience in a way that it helped the users to gain the impression of the space and achieve initial communication with museum objects and exhibition. Furthermore, communication with the audience during the pandemic was also facilitated by the application 3D-3LJ: the Trilj Regional Museum and the legionary camp of Tilurium. It presents the results of systematic research of the archaeological site and presents the architectural remains and archaeological finds which are located in the archaeological display of the museum. During the pandemic, it was also necessary to adjust the museum manifestations that have been held regularly for years at an international and national level, such as the International Museum Day in May and the Museum Night in January. Since the Trilj Regional Museum is a smaller museum that cannot accommodate a large number of visitors without creating crowds, those manifestations were held in a virtual environment – online lectures and presentations were held through Facebook Live options and Zoom platform, and the viewers were invited to participate by commenting. The first virtual exhibition “Let’s go to *mačkare!* Traditional carnival customs of the Trilj area in 1966” was held in February 2021, which presented specific forms of traditional culture and intangible cultural heritage to the wider museum audience. The virtual exhibition was extremely well received due to the absence of traditional masquerade processions during the carnival, and it filled a certain “void” in 2020.

One of the outcomes of the pandemic is the greater availability of various professional training for museum staff which began to take place in an online environment. The professional staff of the museum gained the possibility to participate in numerous national and international meetings, as well as to attend various courses and webinars which were unreachable in “normal conditions”, for real reasons. Finally, it can be concluded that the pandemic did not leave only negative outcomes in the world of the museums, but it also additionally connected museums and local communities and encouraged them to rethink and revalue the way they work and communicate with the world.

References

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¹ <https://www.muzejtriljskogkraja.hr/VR/>