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ART HISTORY AND ITS DIALOGUE WITH THE WIDER PUBLIC: PROMOTION AND RAISING THE AWARENESS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

ABSTRACT

The paper is based on the results of the project All This Painting hasn't Gone to Waste, 2011, which deals with early 16th century sacral wall paintings in southern Slovenia. It tries to resolve out some dilemmas in communication with the wider public and presents main objectives in regard to awareness-rising and promotion of art heritage, for example encouragement of institutions and individual experts for more intensive study and/or conservation-restoration work.

Key words: art history, art heritage, public use, dialogue, audience

THE ALLIANCE OF ART HISTORY AND ITS AUDIENCE FOR THE SUCCESSFUL PRESERVATION OF ART HERITAGE

Art history is a scientific discipline which attempts to enlighten a specific *genius loci* or *genius populi* of our past times by studying individual works of art and making comparisons between them. In other words, it tries to describe the spirit of time which otherwise cannot be exactly defined. Monuments of art are the fundamental material platform without which art historians cannot tell their stories. Each of them can be considered as a unique *tessera* in a mosaic-shaped reflexion of life in past time. The more numerous they are and the better their condition, the clearer the image that can be constructed - the story they tell is more complete and detailed. For this reason, everyone who gains knowledge from the treasury of art heritage, also has to take care of its well-being.

Protection, conservation and preservation of monuments mainly depend on their trustees¹³. For the sake of national interest (Tercej Otorepec, 2007, p. 16), they are regulated through State legislation in accordance with European Conventions¹⁴ and directives of other public - national and local - institutions. In Slovenia, the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage is the most important among them. However, it is irrational to expect that professional organisations alone will suffice to ensure the monuments' optimum condition, regardless of how well-organized the system of institutionalized heritage-preservation is. The fund of monuments is much too extensive to be handled only by the professionals themselves (Višnar, 2004, p. 2).

¹³ For ownership and related responsibility for cultural heritage, see Bendix (2009, pp. 181-199).

¹⁴ For the legislation, see *Predpisi s področja varovanja kulturne dediščine* (1981-2011), for the issues of European Directives, related to this topic, see: Nypan (2007, pp. 493-500).

Constant and permanent care is, for that reason, only possible with the support of the general public, especially the people whose lives are connected with the monuments on a daily basis and therefore influence their fate significantly¹⁵. This is of even greater importance in case of immovable cultural heritage, for example architecture, which unlike the movable objects, cannot be safely stored in museums. Furthermore, its survival is tightly bound up with the local environment and the local people¹⁶. According to Janez Bogataj, this survival can only be ensured by taking an active, visual role in modern life (Bogataj, 1992, pp. 12, 25)¹⁷. In view of all this, the situation requires the art historian's effort to create new, alternative solutions. Some of them are to be found in the form of independent projects of non-governmental organizations, where the dialogue between professionals and laymen is most easily established¹⁸.

This article aims to point out some new possibilities of creating the necessary dialogue between art history as a scientific discipline and the general public, which is the key component in putting the theoretical discourse of monument-preservation into practice.

THE ATTEMPT OF ESTABLISHING DIALOGUE WITHIN AN INDEPENDENT PROJECT

The project *All This Painting Hasn't Gone to Waste* concerns a small church of St. Lenart, which is located in the southern part of central Slovenia, near the village called Krvava Peč. The church's simple, single-nave architecture was built in the first two decades of the 16th century (Höfler, 2001, p. 108). Its empty interior, decorated with a wooden baroque ceiling and an altar of a later date, did not attract any significant attention. Even the traces of wall-paintings under subsequent layers of paint, which were discovered some time after the Second World War, did not seem to be interesting enough for thorough examination, much less for their uncovering and proper future presentation. We can only find some brief remarks in scientific texts on related topics. Even among locals, the church was seen merely as a sacred building, where a few times a year religious ceremonies took place. In their eyes its cultural and historical value was limited to the opinion that "their parish possesses a very old church, which was once, a long time ago, also decorated with some wall-paintings."

In the spring of 2011, the idea of proper promotion of the church came up within the local non-governmental organisation Parnas¹⁹. The intention was to prepare an attractive presentation, pleasant to the widest public, but without harming the scientific value. The coordination of the project was taken over by the manager of the

¹⁵ For awareness-raising among the civil society, see Merode (2007, pp. 659–661).

¹⁶ "Monuments of culture survive only for the people, who live with them and for them and fall on account of indifference for their values, greed and carelessness. Every epoch brings new, different challenges, tasks and unexpected obstacles to custodians of cultural heritage". (Ramovš, 2007, p. 83).

¹⁷ For the perception of Slovenian cultural heritage in general, different attitudes towards it and its involvement in contemporary life patterns, see Bogataj (1992, pp. 9–44).

¹⁸ For the importance of non-governmental organizations in cultural heritage protection, see Višnar (2004) and Višnar (2005, pp. 18–21).

¹⁹ For more information about Parnas, see: <http://www.zavod-parnas.org/news.php>.

organisation, Metka Starič. She composed a work-team of young local experts: a sociologist Rok Borštnik, a conservator-restorer Martina Tekavec and an art historian Marjana Dolšina.

The project was based on 16th century wall-paintings from the church of St. Lenart, which were at the time almost entirely covered by several layers of paint. Due to their somewhat lower artistic quality and specific art forms, the paintings were attributed to a group of fresco-painters, who were travelling from place to place in the area of what is nowadays central and southern Slovenia, and also in the Croatian part of the Istria region. The so-called "Croatian Group" was named after the remark in the Catechism from 1575, which was authored by Primož Trubar, the protestant writer and also the author of the first book in Slovenian language. In an anecdote related to his youth, he mentions a certain "Croatian painter", who supposedly painted the church in his home-village, called Rašica, which was later burnt to the ground. The comparison of wall-paintings in some other churches indicated, that the author or authors of wall-paintings in the church of St. Lenart, belonged to the same circle as the painter, mentioned in Trubar's book²⁰.

At first, all the activities were planned for setting up a simple movable exhibition. As the target audience was the entire general public, differing in age, education and interests, an expansion to some other media was required. For this reason, a production of a documentary, a creative workshop making frescoes, a heritage guidebook and an in-depth lecture regarding the working topic were added.

A short, 21-minute documentary was designed as a preparation or some sort of preface to viewing the frescoes *in situ*. Because its narration is in simple, almost anecdotal language, it is very suitable for audiences without previous knowledge. It is also of appropriate length for maintaining attention of viewers and is a perfect teaching tool for primary and high school lessons, since accompanied by an introduction and post viewing discussion fills up just about 45 minutes.

The story is divided into three main parts, which give some basic information about the church and define its place in a wider art-historical context. It begins with a description of historical background of the 16th century and then, by telling the stories of two old local folk-legends from that time, passes over to the discussion about the wall-paintings in St. Lenart. All information is supported by additional illustrative material of other locations with paintings, created by the very same authors or other painters of the same Croatian group. In the second chapter, the medieval technology of making *al fresco* paintings is demonstrated, which stands for wall-paintings, made on a fresh rough surface coating. In order to appear as authentically as possible, the whole process was simulated by amateur actors in 16th century costumes. For maximum reliability, every move and detail was made under the watchful eye of a professional restorer, who also made several full-size copies of frescoes in different phases of creation. Unlike the first two parts, the last chapter is set in today's environment. It discusses some aspects of wall-painting preservation. It provides an insight into the work of uncovering wall-paintings from underneath

²⁰ The date and attribution of frescoes in the church of sv. Lenart in Krvava Peč according to Janez Höfler (2001, p. 108). For the Croatian Group, see Mikuz (1973, pp. 13–29), for the art production of 16th century in southern Slovenia, see Mikuz (1991).

later layers of paint. The work was accomplished by an expert from the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, Tjaša Pristov. The conclusion is dedicated to a discussion dealing with the value of similar monuments for today's life. It also invites the audience to take personal responsibility for the well-being of their cultural heritage.

The main objective of the project was not only referring to the discussion of art history problems, related to wall-paintings of St. Lenart, but was, above all, focused on achieving and increasing susceptibility to local cultural heritage. For this purpose, people from the surrounding community were invited to play a great part in execution of all activities. Over forty of them responded. They helped as volunteers in all phases of project-realization: they acted in the documentary, gathered some costumes and requisites, manufactured certain scene elements, as for example the painter's scaffold, and took care of logistics. They supplied meals for cooperatives on set and helped with the organisation of the project's first public presentation.

The making of the documentary was entirely open to public view. For each day of filming, an invitation was even posted online, containing the time and location. That got the attention of other, non-participating locals. At the same time, a clear message was sent, namely that the monuments of cultural heritage belong to them, whereas we, the authors of the project, are only temporary visitors.

The movable exhibition is arranged on five panels. Each of them relates to a certain aspect of the topic: one panel deals with the church of St. Lenart, the others deal with the technology of making and uncovering frescoes, the most interesting motifs and arguments for their preservation. The text is complemented by photographs, which were shot during the filming.

Since one of the objectives was also to engage the youngest audience, viewing of the documentary was accompanied by a creative workshop of making frescoes. The procedure is quite simple: first, we have to prepare the grounding - on the back of an enamel plate we evenly spread some plaster, made of sand and slaked lime. Then we make a drawing on a sheet of paper, which is to be copied to a plate with a thin wooden stick. We colour the drawing, using natural pigments, made of different sorts of soil mixed with water. When the painting is done and has dried out, we get our very own fresco-painting. Following this authentic technique and at the same time using their own creativity, the children were able to put themselves into the shoes of medieval artists and experience the frescoes in their individual way. Very often they made some important conclusions of their own, such as: the colour pigments are nothing but dry dirt, until they are mixed with water; the colours, used in fresco-technique are too opaque to enable corrections; the uneven surface of the rough coating is much more challenging for drawing straight lines than a smooth paper or - rough coating, which is piled up on an enamel plate in the form of a wet paste, dries out and becomes solid, almost stone-like.

A more in-depth interpretation with additional comments was presented in a heritage-guidebook. The booklet also offers an explanation of more interesting motifs and artistic details, mentions the origin of the Croatian Group, and makes some wider art-historical connections. Its text and comparative illustrative material is concluded by a bibliographical list for the possibility of further studying. The text itself

still remains simple and avoids obscure scientific terminology. To fulfil the expectations of experts, two lectures regarding art-historical and conservation topics, were prepared separately.

If we leave out of account all later presentations, the whole process - the arrangements as well as the final execution of the project - was accomplished in only eight months. The costs were relatively low as well, owing to outstanding motivation of the volunteers²¹. Nevertheless, the project created some significant changes, for example the church has attracted some attention of individual experts and professional organisations. The community members built up their awareness in valuation of local heritage. They became prouder of their cultural environment, and on this basis created a more positive self-image. The project even made an impact in a wider public and was given an award by the Slovenia Nostra organisation²².

DISCUSSION: DILEMMAS AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of all activities was simply to inspire the general public. For that, all outputs, based on written or spoken language, had to communicate with the reader or viewer in very personal ways that were short and to the point, yet humorous and pleasing. At this point, an art historian can quickly find himself in an awkward situation concerning text formation. To ensure the scientific credibility, the texts have to be founded on grounds of serious study and fieldwork, but in spite of that demand, their final form and message has to be adapted for an audience with minimal or no formal knowledge whatsoever. By these very efforts another problem can be evoked. Over-simplifying and inappropriate generalization of scientific statements can lead the audience away from the essentials. Despite the possibility of utterly correct data, they can unintentionally give questionable information about the current topic. The lay reader or viewer is not critical of the information received and usually does not attempt to verify it, so misconceptions can be formed. We can try to spare ourselves the trouble by preparing lectures of different comprehension levels and by including quotations of additional literature.

Another dilemma, which has to be pointed out, is the correct definition of the target audience, in our case the entire general public. Such a widely chosen target audience decomposes into various minor target groups which are hardly alike. In the desire to please all of them at once, we can achieve quite the opposite, so in the end, we satisfy no one. For example, the text happens to be too complicated for children and youth, too tedious for adults and too banal for students or experts. Instead of putting all eggs in one basket, the better option is to plan more activities with the use of different media for each group separately.

²¹ The Ministry for Culture of Republic of Slovenia estimated the project's costs at 7000 € and invested 4900 €. The project manager estimated the work costs at 4500 € and the costs of material at 2500 €. Considering also the value of voluntary work, which was done in the extent of more than 300 hours, the project can be valued at approximately 10000 €.

²² Slovenia Nostra: non-governmental organisation, founded in 1997, which encourages civil initiatives in the field of research, presentation and preservation of Slovenian natural and cultural heritage. For more information about the organisation, see Slovenia Nostra (2008).

The final challenge refers to the consideration that sustaining an active dialogue with the general public is an art historian's professional obligation. Regarding our example, the most crucial is finding the right balance between the answers to two main questions: "what to tell" and "how to tell it"? The first question refers to the content, which has to remain scientifically accurate and verifiable. The other is related to the specific manner of communication, requiring intelligible language, packed in an attractive wrapping. Above all, we must not forget that each attempt of such dialogue should be handled as a complete interdisciplinary project. Working in a team of experts provides extended scientific background and at the same time offers more space for methodological innovation and creative flexibility²³.

By intense planning and a little bit of luck, projects like *All this Painting* can set off a chain reaction of changes, which do not expire with the completion of the project, but permanently remain within the local community. By educating the general public about the cultural heritage surrounding them, we gradually form a more responsible attitude towards the monuments. Thus, such attitude is more and more a result of an inner-motivation, and formal demands are no longer needed. It increases people's aesthetic sensibility and susceptibility to other heritage related topics and by that ensures better chances for survival of the art historian's research material.

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