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Being held captive by time: history mythologization in the museum space

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abstrakt | abstract ▷

Z popisu vyplývá, že se muzea přesouvají k systematické prezentaci socioekonomických a kulturních procesů. A antropologický důraz přizpůsobil právě tu formulaci o zkoumaném problému, takže rozličné artefakty materiální a nemateriální kultury dodaly nový smysl a zvuk. Prezentace muzejních předmětů jako kulturního fenoménu kontext lidských znalostí poskytuje jedinečnou příležitost pro historické interpretace a rekonstrukce a stává se základem pro ucelenou studii a prezentaci sociálního a přírodního prostředí a především zlidštil výstavní prostory muzeí.

Navzdory obtížím muzea vytváří problematické syntetické expozice, kde skutečná osoba a život, rozporuplná a spleť historie, a hypotézy stimulující myšlení, zájem o téma, a přání nalézat odpovědi, dokonce ještě více stoupají na povrch z vnějšího zamyšlení nad sociální a politickou realitou. Při vytváření mýtu, skutečná podstata historie zůstává neviděna i se svými peripetiami.

From the description of events museums transfer to systemic presentation of socio-economic and cultural processes. And the anthropological emphasis adjusted the very formulation of the research problem, so diverse artifacts of material and immaterial culture acquired a new meaning and sound. Presentation of museum objects as a cultural phenomenon in the context of humanitarian knowledge provides a unique opportunity for historical interpretations and reconstructions and becomes the basis for a comprehensive study and presentation of social and natural environment, and, above all, human in the exhibition halls of the museums.

Despite the difficulties, the museums create the problematic synthetic expositions, where a real person and living, contradictory and intricate history, and hypotheses stimulating thinking, interest in the issue, and the desire to find the answers, ever more clearly emerge from the external abstraction of social and political realities. When creating a myth the real substance of history remains off-screen with its crotches and peripetia.

Irina Chuvilova

Being held captive by time:

History mythologization in the museum space

The complex methodological problems of historical knowledge have been being solved for over two centuries. The modern crisis designated as a crisis of historical metastory is not new. Already from the 19th century, irrationalism and subjectivism as well as “imagination” or penetration into the “epoch spirit” proclaimed by W. Dilthey, were proposed as the only possible methods for cognition of the past; and what is more, history was proposed to perceive as the art work rather than as a science. Today, the problems of knowledge are no less acute; they generate “the stress field” between fiction and objective reality” and between the historic narrative and historic knowledge.¹ Post-modern, disappointed in global historical and theoretical constructions², declares historic knowledge on the past and essential qualities of heritage as relative; in historic views of post-modern the dominating are “ignorance and unwillingness to know where the human society moves”.³ The value systems loose their uniqueness and significance disorienting a human in the museum and in any other space responsible for establishing and maintaining communication in solum.

However, it is still too early to limit to the search and presentation of “genius loci”, “symbol, image, legend”, and “cultural and symbolical meanings of heritage monuments” instead of communicating with real historical artifacts. Traditions of the Russian historical school, including the humanitarian knowledge, which was grounded and developed by it, focus on investigation of a real object – the historical sources, their aggregate and synthesis that

provides „an opportunity for logical construction of phenomenology of human culture”.⁴ In upholding these traditions allowing adequately presenting the heritage, today, the enormous role belongs to museums.

It should be noted that establishment and functioning of museums in modern society is closely, and perhaps more than ever, related to the “function of historical consciousness in dynamic civilization” (G. Lubbe). The problem is seen as follows. As a result of the rate of changes in the world “our past turns into someone else’s past faster than ever”, and understanding, saving and assimilating of this past “requires special work of scientific and disciplined historical consciousness” “compensating the loss of a sense of the familiar in the culture” and “allowing us clearly expressing what we are... The efforts of historical consciousness compensate the dangers of temporal dilution of identity”. This need is recognized by the society as more and more acute, and the society tends to “set up the connection between the shortening present and the expanding past”⁵, to update the heritage as a socio-cultural experience that is transmitted through time from generation to generation. The solution of such philosophical problems may take decades, but the traffic on this road is planned today for the museum space as well: by presenting the original heritage from the point of view of humanitarian knowledge, by creative presentation of scientific interpretations, and by responsible and accurate work with sources.

As it is known, the museum has to deal with a particular historical source – the subject of museum being “a clear and perfect memory” according to the definition of T. Shola. It seems obvious that in contemporary situation, when mercenary-minded ideologization of historical knowledge is thriving and positive ideas are

¹ Медушевская О.М. Исторический источник: человек и пространство [Historical Source: A human and Space] // Исторический источник: человек и пространство: Тезисы докладов и сообщений научной конференции. М., 1997. С.39.

² See: Румянцев М.Ф. Историческая память и музейная экспозиция в ситуации постмодерна [Historical Memory and Museum Exposition in Post-Modern Situation] // XVIII век в истории России: Современные концепции истории России века и их музейная интерпретация / Труды ГИМ. М., 2005. Вып. 148.

³ Померанец Г. Авангардизм, модернизм, постмодернизм [Avantgardism, Modernism, Post-Modernism] // Опыты: Литературно-художественный, научно-образовательный журнал. 2000. № 3. С.113.

⁴ Медушевская О.М., Ibid, p. 51.

⁵ Люббе Г. В ногу со временем. О сокращении нашего пребывания в настоящем [Keeping up to date. On Reduction of our Being in the Present] // Вопросы философии. 1994. № 4. С. 94-113.

developed with difficulty, the historical source (the museum subject), projecting the culture in space and time, shall become the point of stability and to help to avoid subjectivity and recurrent stamps of historical knowledge and consciousness. Certainly, for museum workers “it is hard to remain independent and objective in front of the problems” faced by society⁶. This is one of the reasons for appearance of the patterns of historical myths, which gradually pervade the entire cultural space, including the museum design, development of cultural brands, and formation of the territory image. The museum play an important role in this process, often contributing to the development and promotion of a new mythology.

The relationship between the museum and the subject develops in stages. As it is known, the starting point for various historical constructions in the museum halls is setting a research problem, which is a special topic for further discussion. It is only necessary to remind that the choice of research methods and further interpretation directly depend on the nature of the tasks and the level of the researcher's preparedness to their solution. At that, the basis of investigation and cognition remains the same, namely, the sources and monuments providing several options for interaction that may lead to formation of pseudo-historical plots in the museum space.

First.

Specificity of the museum as an institution and as a repository of social memory often gives the impression that these are two autonomous and independent objects. This refers primarily to the following: in the work with the museum collection there is a persistent disregard of some monuments (monument complexes) but ongoing use of the same items. The monuments may be in exile for many reasons. Most often it is a deliberately avoided demonstration of the problem historical artifacts which need:

- a) additional serious scientific research;
- b) interpretation;
- c) bringing up and revealing a topic being uncomfortable, controversial, politically incorrect, etc.

Insufficient attention to the composition of collections often results in the lack of demand or monotonous or uninteresting use of the unique cultural potential and poly-cultural richness of the museums. Whereas, it is the introduction of new sources that helps



foto No. 1



foto No. 2

⁶ M. Zhauhl, *Ethnographic Museums Today*. Museum, No. 175, p. 4.

to solve the research and educational tasks, expanding the museum space and integrating it into the socio-cultural one.

The performed campaigns similar to "Excavations in the Museum" (1990-ies, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, USA) prove: in common practice of museum expositions, consciously or unconsciously, the racist views are supported and national problems are ignored. The "mining exploration" in many museum funds brought into light the objects that had never been exhibited or noticed by the museum workers; these objects relate to the life and culture of national and religious minorities. As a result "the heritage partly loses its meaning if no one sees it, and if it is not a symbolic property of every person"; and the "visible" part of heritage subjected to a rigorous selection builds an incomplete (distorted, one-dimensional, tendentious – underline) space of social memory and often a false picture of the world.

Meanwhile, the relations with the "problem" exhibit can help to build a new system of relations with the visitor. For example, the ever more important is searching for the ways of interaction with local people, for a balance between the interest in preserving the cultural heritage in museums and the rights of indigenous people for their property and control over their relics; and the desire to preserve the context, ritual and symbolic meaning of the artifacts. Being appropriately addressed the visitor may become a co-designer of the museum, and what may be more viable that such dialogue?

Some time ago a museologist T. Shola designated another danger: „With the spread of new views on the nature of the museum exhibit (because in practice it may be any subject)... there is a temptation not to consider the subject as a necessity anymore... Today we often face the opinion that the museology program should be based on the ideas that the museums intends to convey to the visitor rather than on the monuments belonging to the museum. The consequences of such an approach may be unpredictable. The collection is a matter of the material, while the goals of museum activities are metaphysical in nature, and only a creative approach will help to overcome this gap, as we should first of all remember”.⁸ Correlating to the current situation, it is necessary to add the scientific method. Indeed, the presence of the genuine, the real object today is not considered

by some researchers as necessary for presenting „images“, „symbols“ and „chronotopes“ constituting postmodern palimpsest. The museum quality is given to certain „images“ that arise before the mind's eye of the adepts of „virtual reality“: the real thing crumbles into mosaic consisting of impulses and unconditioned and conditioned reflexes of a „feeling“ subject in the process of self-admiration and self-citations

The so-called „Symbols of heritage“ create a new myth, pseudo-history, „fiction, wrapped in a historic wrapper“ (Ya. Shimov). For example, the formation of the „nostalgia market“ in recent years often implies such presentation of a heritage when „the public must „determine“ the past, to „feel“ it and to succumb to the adapted illusions“.⁹ Although, the Norwegian explorer G. Westheim added that „there is a significant difference between the presentation of the past, based on respect for the historical sources and the criteria for emotional effect, and the nostalgia market,“ i.e., between heritage updating and sale of its momentary-profitable fragments. This gap is likely to be deepened further, and in this situation, the museum needs to set a clear line of demarcation between the provision of real heritage, spiritual and emotional experience, and the elements of „living culture“ to a modern man, and the implementation of the order to meet the corporate interests of certain social groups. The creation of such a parallel (virtual and symbolic) reality is closely connected with the use of improper methods for manipulation of public opinion, the substitution of the real values to the best-selling market interpretations of history.

Second.

A number of scientists now mention the „atomization“ of historical knowledge and the decay of historical integrity, being a consequence of the crisis metahistory. „In these circumstances, the museum has to independently design the historical whole. Otherwise, there is a risk to gradually turn from the repository of social memory first into an assembly of monuments, and then in an antique shop, and then... into a storage of forgotten things, forgotten in the literal sense of the word, i.e. disappeared from memory.“¹⁰ „What can the museum presentation of history offer in this situation, and whether can it offer anything

⁶ M. Zhauhl, *Ethnographic Museums Today*. Museum, No. 175, p. 4.

⁷ F. Mehro, *New Type of Museum Network in France*. Museum, No. 194, p. 47.

⁸ T. Shola, *Subject and Peculiarities of Museology*. Museum, No. 153, p. 51.

⁹ Вестгейм Г. Инструментальная культурная политика в скандинавских странах: критический исторический взгляд [Instrumental Cultural Policy in Scandinavian Countries: Critical Historical View] // Экология культуры: Информационный бюллетень / Ком. по культуре адм. Арх. обл. Архангельск, 2002. № 1 (26). С. 252-269.

¹⁰ Румянцев М.Ф., *Ibid*, p. 11.

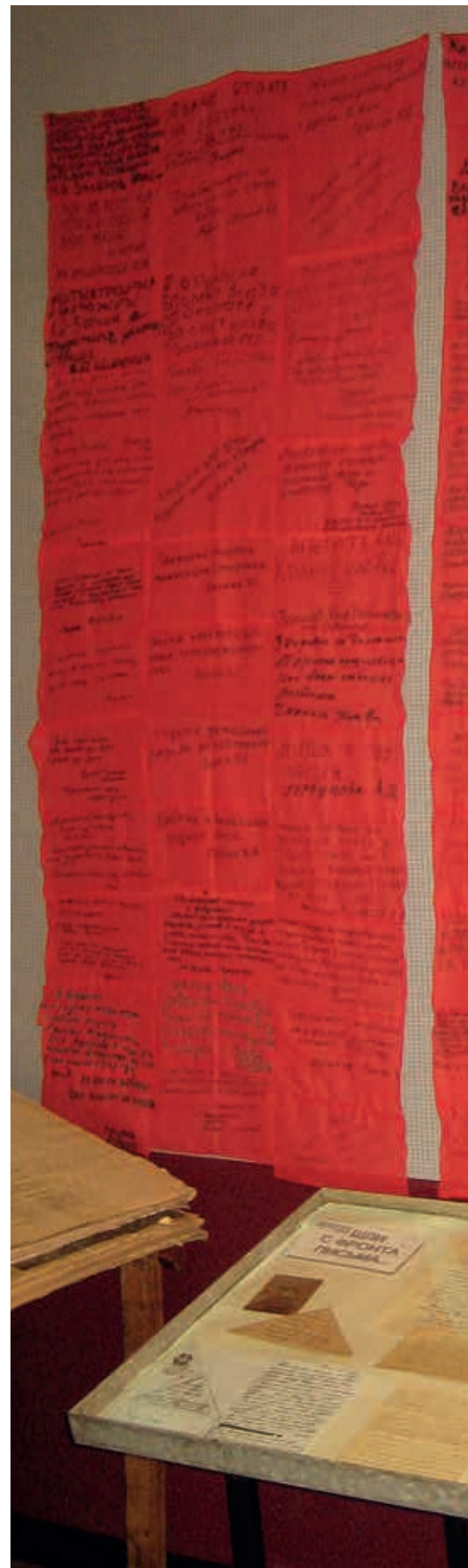




foto No. 3

at all? Is adequate interpretation of the monument, i.e. full identification of its informational capacity, giving a holistic historical vision rather than a postmodern subjectivist history „in the ruins”, possible?

From the description of events museums transfer to systemic presentation of socio-economic and cultural processes (in modern Russia the process is extremely slow and difficult.) And the anthropological emphasis adjusted the very formulation of the research problem, so diverse artifacts of material and immaterial culture acquired a new meaning and sound. It is the monuments of the material culture that are today attributed with the role of „involuntary evidence“ (M. Block), which allows the researcher (unlike, for example, the written sources) to come into contact with the past without intermediaries, objectivizing historical reality to the utmost; to conduct an interdisciplinary research and the integration of objects in the museum space. Presentation of museum objects as a cultural phenomenon in the context of humanitarian knowledge provides a unique opportunity for historical interpretations and reconstructions and becomes the basis for a comprehensive study and presentation of social and natural environment, and, above all, human in the exhibition halls of the museums.

The researcher himself plays the role of interpreter of material monuments; this increases the degree of responsibility, but the process of solving is creative and truly scientific. Obviously, the researcher, „projecting the topical problems on the material of the sources, becomes involved in the respective interpretive reflection.“ Accordingly, there is a question on constructing of the reliable knowledge, and this is possible when the historian actively communicates with the monuments, compiling the questionnaire for the sources distinguishing the essential, and including them in the appropriate historical and cultural context.¹¹ Moreover, this „three-dimensional“ view of the sources is reciprocal: the sources enter into a dialogue and open, becoming the multi-layer and wordy structures. The communicative potential of the artifact is revealed, and the nature of the question formulated by researcher changes its interpretive role. At this point, the cultural dialogue so much discussed today begins; and it becomes possible to „get objectively valid knowledge“ (O.M. Medushevskaya) and to recreate an integral picture from the surviving fragments of culture, and arbitrary constructions and reading of meanings become impossible. In this respect, the statements

of some researchers are puzzling, in particular, that some museum objects have lost their informational nature, having been studied to the end and for all, and being now a serious and unnecessary ballast in the crowded museum repositories.

However, „only a professional is capable to establish a genetic order in the chaos of relics. Contemporary amateur, a simple lover of art, no longer perceives genetic sequence, but chaos, and the proportionate response to perception of this chaos is eclecticism.“¹² Perhaps because of this, not having coped with a highly complex source, some researchers become committed to postmodern constructions, eclectic museum spaces, where history appears as an arbitrary mixture of dreams and symbols. Back in the early 20th century, the French geographer Vidal de la Blanche, who had well studied the ethnographic collections of the world, said: „When placing of exhibits was directed by consistent thought, we immediately noticed that the objects of the same origin are united by a deep inner connection. Individually, they amaze only by their quirkiness, and taken together, they display a mark of community.“¹³ The reluctance to create scientifically verified texts for expositions, covered up by the arguments about the subjectivity of knowledge, the uncognizability of the past, and etc., often results from the lack of professionalism, the fear of responsibility, and the ideological environment. A specialist, „moving in line with the priorities of the mass consciousness, of course, may only record the conflicting interpretations and their elusive and dancing sense, finding the fascinating self-sufficiency in this state. However, it is more important to actively form a methodology of scientific certainty, creating the repeatable results of investigation of a qualitatively new reality.“¹⁴ The unique power of science to configure the space, placing their benchmarks for human and society, allows adequately representing the heritage and to save a cultural code of communication in the interests of the society.

Third.

Another way to have a beautifully packaged „pop-cave“ version of the history/myth in the museum space is the method of demonstrating the sources „without comment“ (or rather, out of dialogue), presented by some museums today as the experience of „pure“ presentation not clouded by a subjective intrusion

¹² Люббе Г., Ibid.

¹³ Февр Л. Проблема «человеческой географии» [The Problem of «Human Geography»] // Бой за историю. М., 1991. С. 161.

¹⁴ Медушевская О.М., Ibid, p. 38.

¹¹ See: Блок М. Апология истории или ремесло историка. [Apology of History or Historian's Trade]. М., 1986.



foto No. 4

of the “expositor”. Such experiences may be of interest, but not because of the declared „objectivity.” In this case, the declaration of „objectivity”, brought to the sterile condition (in which there is no room for creativity or science), nevertheless, contains the element of guile. The very choice of the topic, the problem for the presentation, the definition of the cognitive objectives, and selection of appropriate artifacts for inclusion in the exhibition imply a definite position of the researcher, who, being aware of it or not, directs the viewer’s judgment on a favourite historical subject. The object, extracted from a variety and placed in an appropriate context (or devoid of it), is already a specifically built information field, inevitably marking the position of „observer” in this field.

The result is ultimately dependent on the task, whether it is updating of the heritage or creating of another myth, building of ideas based on the sources or search for the right monument to confirm your own hypotheses. But the question: „To what extent this „conflict of interpretations”, the ambiguity of the investigation results, is the objective quality of humanities, and to what extent they are a consequence of incorrectly posed problems, unpreparedness of historians, or the peculiarity of the humanitarian model of education?”⁴⁵ is to be addressed to each individual researcher.

Museum, understood by some researchers too literally as „Heraclitus archive fluctuating

in time” (B. Groys), today becomes a place for different kinds of manipulations with historical memory. One of the genetically defined functions of historical sources, to be a bearing in an unstable world, where „relativity in natural sciences and relativism of historical judgments” (H.S. Hughes) thrive, is lost. If most of the exhibitions and shows now appear „in order to create a new order of historical memories, to offer a new concept of collections, which will recreate a new historical past”⁴⁶, then, how great is the share of subjectivity in the selection of „memoirs”, how strong is the temptation to create „a new set and a new order”, and even more to create their own „historical past.” Unprofessional or mercenary-minded reading of the preserved heritage, filling of gaps, missing words and fragments for the sake of the undemanding audience (or its part who „calls the shots”) give rise to the historical – museum – space monsters, as a result absorbing the reality, which set them.

Modern museum is a living and evolving system, whether it is the educational or hedonistic model of the museum, a museum-temple or a museum-forum. Despite the difficulties, the museums create the problematic synthetic expositions, where a real person and living, contradictory and intricate history, and hypotheses stimulating thinking, interest in the issue, and the desire to find the answers, ever more clearly emerge from the external abstraction of social and political realities. When creating a myth „the real substance of history remains off-screen with its crotches and peripetia, with its ambiguity and irreducibility of logic from different historical periods to a common denominator... Historical myths, created by an educated stratum of society, sometimes not devoid of difficulty and original beauty, descending a floor below the social ladder, are often oversimplified and turn into simple, squalid and harmful stereotypes”.⁴⁷ The myth in the modern museum space is an obvious reality, though hardly consistent with the national tradition of deep and responsible study of history and culture. And if history could help to reduce the way to the past, the creation of myths makes this path not only difficult, but dangerous.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Шимов Я. Как не стать рабами истории [How Not to Become the History Slaves] // www.polit.ru/analytics

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 42.

Klíčová slova:

mytologizace historie v muzeích, vědecké interpretace, zodpovědná práce se zdroji

Keywords:

the mythologization of history in the museums, scientific interpretations, responsible work with sources

About foto:

all photos are of historical exposition of the various regional museums. Examples are given of various points of view on "the selection of memories". For example, a photo 1 – Museum objects are shown on the contrast of the same historical period (Lenin and Tsar Nicholas II); in the photo 3 – on the contrast between the generations (letters from the fronts of the Great Patriotic war and the message of our young contemporaries war veterans); on photo 2 and 4 – the use of identical objects to create a completely different historical interpretations.

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