

Latvian Museums - Myths and Reality

In characterizing recent developments in Latvian museums, one cannot help mentioning the economic crisis and significant drop in funding that has struck all social spheres - of which culture, including museums, is no exception. There is a danger of many cultural institutions being closed and a pervading uncertainty about the future. Yet there are also a rising number of larger and smaller municipalities and NGOs that take the decision to create their own museums. How can this paradox be explained? Different explanations are possible, yet this phenomenon - interest in museums - is an apparent sign of the prestige and trust that the public associates with museums. This perception has been created and cemented by more than 200 years of history of the Latvian museums. The first public museum in Latvia was established in 1773, and now it is known as the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation.

Possibly the tendency to create new museums is an indication of much deeper processes in the mind of the public. Collecting art works for the private needs of wealthy people, gathering old tools and utensils that have lost their practical application and exhibiting them in the farm yards, studying one's family history and charting its genealogy - all those are processes of musealisation which can have very different motivation; yet, taken together, they reveal certain tendencies in the public value system. The fact that these processes have often been connected with establishing new museums has not always been the optimal conclusion of the process of musealisation. Performing some museum functions is not enough to create a sustainable, professional museum. The accreditation of museums - which, according to Latvian law, is compulsory for the state and municipal museums - currently reveals that many decision makers have had insufficient understanding and knowledge

about the responsibility and duties that the work of a professional museum entails. A number of museums have ceased their existence as rapidly as they had been established.

The museum sphere is benefiting from the clearly defined criteria of what constitutes a professional museum in Latvia. A museum is characterized by its three basic functions: 1) gathering and storage of holdings; 2) scholarly work of studying and analyzing the collected objects; and, finally, 3) the communication function, whereby the museum communicates with the public by means of its permanent and temporary exhibitions and otherwise. These criteria as well as other essential principles of the museum sphere are registered in the normative acts - first of all, in the Museum Law, adopted by *Saeima*, the parliament of Latvia, in 1997. The creation of the normative basis of



Pucessakta (Owl fibula).
Aglonas Kristapinu cemetery.
153rd tomb. 9th century.
Bronze, silver, iron.
Dimensions 10.6 x 8.7 cm.
National History Museum
of Latvia collection.



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the field can be regarded as one of the most important achievements of the Latvian museums.

Currently, the network of Latvian museums includes 28 state-financed museums, 84 municipal museums of different levels, and about 100 private or autonomous institutions that call themselves museums (they include museums of industry branches, educational institutions, etc.). Of those private and autonomous museums, 14 have been accredited, i.e. have gained the status of officially recognized museums. (These numbers could be put in context of the fact that Latvia has a population of about 2.25 million).

To provide a structured characterization of the Latvian museum sphere, let us briefly examine each of the basic functions of a museum.

The basis of museum work is the **collection**. Currently, the Latvian state and municipal museums have gathered more than 5 million cultural heritage objects that, taken together, comprise the National Holdings of Museums. The Museum Law defines it as a national treasure under the protection of the state. The National Holdings of Museums ensure thematic and chronological reflection of the national cultural history. The average growth of the Holdings is 100 thousand objects per year. The National Holdings of Museums include not only locally, but also internationally important history, art and nature collections and separate museum objects. It has to be admitted that the state of preservation of museum objects and resources for their restoration are by no means sufficient. The growth of the museum holdings has not been accompanied by the funds needed to preserve them. A challenge and qualitatively new step is the project "Joint Catalogue of the National Holdings of Museums", realized with the support of the EU structural funds. It will facilitate the organisation of work on the Holdings and also enhance the availability of the heritage materials. The Latvian project is a special one because it aims to create a unified system and data base, covering all regions and the museum sphere in its entirety, with maximum respect for the needs of the users. It is being created with the idea of merging, in the future, this resource with the data bases of the libraries and archives.

Scholarly work. Taking into account the fact that each display, exhibition, catalogue, or monograph in the museum is a result of scholarly work, and also that every year the professional Latvian museums provide their visitors with around 700 displays and 1300 exhibitions, it has to be concluded that substantial scholarly work is being done in the Latvian museums. Indeed, many museum

Museum Nights
performances

specialists, especially those from the so-called large state museums, have greatly contributed to the development of the fields of study connected with the profile of the museums. The situation is less optimistic in those museums with smaller staffs whose qualification is not always relevant to the profile of the museum. Their efforts are centred on their work with the public, while scholarly work unfortunately is often neglected, and the quality of museum offerings decreases. Therefore, one of the priorities of the Latvian museums is strengthening the scholarly work being carried out.

Communication function. It is undisputable that the Latvian museums strive to become institutions that not only store their collections, but are actively public-orientated, caring about the needs, interests, education, and entertainment of the visitors. In 2009, Latvian

museums registered 2.1 million visits. We see a potential for growth, since this number was above 4 million in the 1980s. The contemporary situation is different when compared to that of the 1980s. Museums face tough competition and need to be active to attract visitors. The Latvian museum specialists are aware of the changed situation and work to offer their visitors new quality products and services.

Along with the traditional forms of communication, Latvian museums are increasingly active and skilful in developing their educational programs, analyzing their target audiences and creating accordingly specific offers. There is still much to be done to improve the availability of museums - adjusting the infrastructure for the people with special needs, setting more flexible opening hours, preparing quality information and guide services in fo-



Performance in the Column Hall of the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation.





reign languages. The dialogue with the tourism industry is becoming more constructive. Museums are also aware of their potential in the enrichment of the educational system, and there exists cooperation both between separate museums and schools and between the ministries of culture and education. Cooperation among the museums themselves has been fruitful as well. A good example of that is the traditional Night of Museums, when the Latvian museums join the European Night of Museums.

During the past years, much work has been done in the strategic planning of the museum sphere. Currently though, economic problems force us to make corrections in our plans. Still, there remains a conviction that the key precondition and main resource for the development of museums is the professional level of museum specialists. Therefore, a system of

professional education of museum workers has been consistently developed in Latvia. It works on three levels: 1) informal education in the museums, by museum specialists; 2) continuing professional education, i.e. training courses, seminars, specialist literature (since the mid-1990s, a book series "*Library of Museology*" is being published), organized by the Museums and Visual Arts Division of the Ministry of Culture; and 3) academic education MA program in museology in the Latvian Academy of Culture. These educational possibilities let us hope that the Latvian museums will be joined by young professionals who will skilfully use their cultural heritage for the benefit of the public.

Remaining self-critical in our thinking about the place of museums in the Latvian society, we could say we have just begun breaking the stereotype that links the museum work solely with the past, with something conserved and of secondary importance for the contemporary public. Recently, the weekly paper *Kultūras Forums* characterized a project of a new TV culture broadcast by saying, "The broadcast" will be developed as a comprehensive view of cultural processes. The aim is to show that culture is not only a museum value. If "museum values" are understood as frozen, dead relics of the past, then these kinds of values are not needed by modern museums either. The Latvian museums work with the aim of actively incorporating our cultural heritage into the life of contemporary society.

Translated from Latvian by Jānis Elsbergs

Jekabs Kazaks.
Ladies in beach. 1920.
Oil on canvas. Dimensions 110 x 100,5 cm.
Latvian National Museum of Art Collection