

Good practices for presenting crafts heritage in the Museum of Ethnography

Author: Gábor Kószegi, museum curator (crafts collection)

Museum of Ethnography, Budapest

Introduction

In the Hungarian museum structure, museums can be grouped according to their owner as state, municipal, private, foundation and church-run institutions. Regarding professional classification there are national museums, national specialised museums, county museums, regional museums, thematic museums, museum collections and exhibition spaces of public interest. The Museum of Ethnography belongs to the national museum category.

The Museum of Ethnography in Budapest was founded in 1872 than as a department of the Hungarian National Museum. Its collection of more than 237,000 objects includes not only artefacts from the folk culture of Hungarians and ethnic groups from historical Hungary but it has the largest international collection of all continents (almost 30% of the collection). The museum is also an important centre for research in contemporary culture.

One of tasks of the Museum of Ethnography is to provide further training to ethnographic museologists working in various museums in the country, within the framework of an annual 3-day-long conference, including presentations and workshops. This network is a very important forum for developing professional knowledge, as well as for building relationships and conducting joint projects and research.

The Museum of Ethnography plays a central role at national level in training and advising conservation professionals. In addition, the museum has a stock of equipment (including measuring instruments, dehumidifiers, etc.) that can be loaned to other museums to be placed in exhibitions and storage facilities for a limited period of time. The museum plays a central role in digitisation as well. We hold workshops in country museums and have a mobile digitisation station that can be loaned to other museums. In addition to these regular training and support activities, we collaborate with the national museum network on a number of ad hoc issues – for instance in joint researches, publications, exhibitions.

It is important to underline that the museum pays special attention to the free access of all to its collections. In addition to exhibitions and publications, we also make objects in our repositories available for researchers. Besides, we engage with source communities in collaborative work regarding artefacts, photographs and other materials through fieldwork and other activities, projects.

The actors and motivations of our collaborations are diverse. Collaborations can be initiated by researchers who visit the museum and examine objects in our collection for various purposes. In the same time other projects are initiated by the museum, for instance by visiting source communities, where objects were acquired decades or even hundred years ago – this can develop into a professional relationship as well. Our collaborating partners come from a wide

range of fields: craftsmen and scientific researchers, participants in public education, higher education, tourism and creative industries. These collaborations yield a variety of fruitful results.

We provide a list of some key examples from these collaborations:

Jozef Martini's silk scarf

In 1911, the Ethnographic Department of the Hungarian National Museum purchased hundreds of pieces of jewellery and costume, mostly from Albania, from a merchant named Palok Laca. All we know from the story is the name and origin of the collector, the year of purchase and the objects themselves. In September 2024, museologists Veronika Schleicher and Boglárka Mácsai spent a week in the Albanian cities of Shkodra and Tirana to research the history of the collection and the museological data needed to describe the objects. They received particularly great help from the director of the Marubi National Photography Museum, Luçjan Bedeni, as thanks to his contribution they were able to trace the family roots of the collection. One of Laza's grandchildren and two of his great-grandchildren told us about what the family still remembers of the collector and his travels, although they had not known about the existence of the Budapest collection before. To celebrate the news and honour the collection, one of the great-grandsons, Jozef Martini, a Milan-based designer, has designed the latest silk scarf in his collection. The designs for the scarf were inspired by a piece from the collection, a red coat called *japanxhe*, worn as part of Catholic women's wear.

Crimean Tatar objects

This collaboration was launched in the context of two museologists' fieldwork in Bulgaria with the local Crimean Tatar community. One of the goals of their research was to contextualize and provide more detailed data on the more than 350 textiles in the museum's collection – home textiles, ritual shawls, headscarves and clothing items. Most of the objects date from the early 1910s and were collected by István Györffy. In 2024, a Ukrainian researcher, Valeriya Levkivska, also visited the community and got in touch with the museum's researchers through the locals. Valeriya Levkivska, the president of the NGO Ritual Culture of Ukraine, is currently working on the reconstruction and popularization of Crimean Tatar culture. In February 2025 Valeriya visited the museum's collection to research the Crimean Tatar artefacts from the early period.

The plans of our collaboration is an exhibition in May 2025, at two Bulgarian locations, where costumed dolls and local Crimean Tatar objects will be presented, thus involving the Bulgarian diaspora in the reinterpretation and preservation of the Crimean Tatar cultural heritage. According to our plans, the partial results of our research so far will also be presented at these two locations - we originally planned to exhibit these independently of the events, but they will now fit into the concept of the joint exhibition.

'Férc' project

In this project the museum wanted to show how textiles that are not suitable as museum objects but remain in the museum, can be brought back into our everyday lives in a creative way, while respecting traditions. The project also aims at environmental sustainability, which is illustrated by the textile chosen as the "face" of the project: the stitches suggesting transformation have served several functions; repairing and mending the fabric indicates its endless use and the value of the handicraft. The birth of the project was made possible by the relocation of the Ethnographic Museum between 2017 and 2022. During this process, objects of textiles were discovered that did not end up in the collection. As the starting point of the project a call for proposals in 2024 was

made, to create objects of use and works of art using the aforementioned materials: to give new functions for the objects. Anyone, amateur and professional textile artists could apply with their designs. The results were announced in March 2025 and the certificates were awarded on 5 March. Three winners and one special prize were announced. A pop-up exhibition of the completed pieces was set up in the Museum of Ethnography. We see this project as a sample project, and we hope that other projects with other objects and materials will be created in the future.

Chair pairs exhibition

The starting point of the Chair Pairs exhibition is seating furniture, seating items, chairs and stools from the Furniture Collection of the Museum of Ethnography. The selection of the objects from the collection is very diverse: they range from prestige furniture of the peasant households to the furniture used out of necessity.

The curators asked the Architecture Uncomfortable workshop, a Budapest-based architectural studio to reflect on the objects from the collection and create new objects inspired by the artefacts. However, the adaptation is not only a formal inspiration: the use, the everyday function and the method of creation itself form the basis of a contemporary interpretation. The exhibition included 35 chairs: 18 objects from the collection and 17 new pieces. The exhibition creates a connection, a dialogue and a creative mental space between the objects in the collection and their contemporary adaptations.

The exhibition questions what we actually call a chair. Is a chair the object that was designed for sitting on or just anything we sit on? The answer is not always simple. We would like to show with this exhibition the creativity and craftsmanship in the making and also in the usage beyond the most ordinary even found objects from the peasant household and our everyday life.

The exhibition was made suitable for travelling: it is easily adaptable to different locations, where local curators are encouraged to collaborate with the exhibition and extend the exhibition with a chair from their museum's collection.

Motif creator

There are countless patterns and decorations on museum objects in both Hungarian and international collections. The Motif Creator digital application (<https://motivumalkoto.neprajz.hu/>) collects more than a thousand vectorized ornaments and motifs from these. Its aim is to reach not only museum visitors, but also other users. In a travelling exhibition, it has travelled to various locations around the country, where visitors can not only create new decorations using the motifs, bring them to life in a stamp-printing workshop, but also learn about their hidden meanings. The digitised material will also be used by craftspeople in their work. Digitized patterns also appear on the products sold in the Etnoshop.

Examples of Etnoshop products

Among Etnoshop products you can find newly created objects made by designers, university students, craftsmen, who were inspired by our collection items. Here we list only a few examples of these products:

In 2024, as part of a product design competition between the Budapest Metropolitan University (METU) and the Museum of Ethnography, students of the Department of Fashion and Textiles

designed objects and clothing for the museum's Etnoshop, which offers unique collections inspired by domestic and international motifs. METU students drew inspiration for the design process from the permanent exhibition and online collection. During the semester, they also visited the Etnoshop, where Gabriella Novák, head of the museum's Marketing Department, gave them a presentation about the museum shop's product range and the main aspects of sales.

The collaboration between Romani Design and the Museum of Ethnography not only brings value in the field of design and art but also showcases the richness of Roma culture. The motifs and colours on the backpacks express a deep respect and appreciation for Roma culture.

Figures of a fox and turtle in felting creative boxes were taken from an artefact, based on which the felt maker designed the prototype and assembled the boxes. The felting technique also fits the museum's profile.



