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BREAKING DEFINITIONAL BOUNDARIES – MUSEUMS IN ICELAND

Abstract

The article presents the results of a research on Icelandic museums and their specifics. The analysis is based on the traditional concept of ‘land, nation and language,’ which form the core of the Icelandic culture and national identity. The first section of the paper describes the definitional problems which occurred during the research. Then the methodology is explained, also taking into consideration the difficulties in examining Icelandic museums using standard tools and guidelines. The last section is devoted to the results of the research, presenting a few examples of different Icelandic museums and their approach to heritage through the prism of the abovementioned trinity.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: dziedzictwo niematerialne, koncepcje muzeów, kultura Islandii, zarządzanie dziedzictwem

KEY WORDS: intangible heritage, museum concepts, culture of Iceland, heritage management

Introduction

The aim of the article is to present some thoughts resulting from an on-site observation on Icelandic museums proceeded during a research project named “Icelandic Museums: Between Tradition and Today,” conducted at Háskólinn á Bifröst. The research was about the specifics of Icelandic museums and similar activities. I examined how the image of the country is created through its approach to heritage and exhibiting in chosen museums. Into consideration were taken over twenty museums all across the country, which I visited, among others:

- Reykjavík: Árbær Open Air Museum, *Ásmundur Sveinsson* Museum, Einar Jónsson Museum, National Museum of Iceland, National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík Art Museum (Hafnarhús), Reykjavík Museum of Photography, Saga Museum, The Icelandic Phallogical Museum, The Settlement Exhibition Reykjavík 871±2, Víkin Maritime Museum, Volcano House;

- South-East Iceland: Eldheimar – the Pompeii of the North on Westman Island, Icelandic Wartime Museum in Reyðarfjörður, Skógar Museum, The Museum Transport and Communication in Skógar;
- Westfjords and West Iceland: Bjarnarhöfn Shark Museum, Borgarnes Museum, Eiríksstaðir – Living Museum, The Museum of Icelandic Sorcery & Witchcraft in Hólmavík, The Settlement Center in Borgarnes.

The data has been collected through field study in the mentioned above institutions and in-depth questionnaire interviews with representatives of the cultural sector in Iceland – from the University of Iceland, the Icelandic Museum Council, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, from the National Museum of Iceland, and the Reykjavík City Museum. A part of the interviews were meant to clarify how the Icelandic culture functions, what is specific about it, and helped me to gather some general background information about museums and heritage in Iceland. Others were more focused on particular exhibitions, practical information or personal impressions of the respondents.

As a base for this analysis I used the concept of ‘land, nation and language’ described by Gísli Sigurdsson.¹ Aspects like museum strategy, exposition design, usage of modern technology, the message from the museum to the visitors also were analyzed during the visits in the chosen institutions.

Generally the subject of Icelandic culture and heritage is well investigated, especially in terms of medieval history and literature. There is also a variety of English publications examining more current issues (e.g. Hafsteinnsson,² Árnadóttir,³ Sigurdsson,⁴ Sigurðardóttir and Young,⁵ van Hoof and van Dijken,⁶ various reports and official documents). Unfortunately many valuable publications and papers are being published only in Icelandic. Elements of culture and heritage management also appear in the context of tourism and natural heritage,⁷ or in terms of a more general Scandinavian characteristic.⁸ An interesting, recent topic worth following are all ini-

¹ G. Sigurdsson, *Icelandic National Identity. From Romanticism to Tourism* [in:] P. Anttonen (Ed.), *Making Europe in Nordic Contexts*, Nordic Institute of Folklore, University of Turku, Turku 1996.

² E.g.: S.B. Hafsteinnsson, *Museum politics and turf-house heritage*, Reykjavík 2010.

³ B. Árnadóttir, *Iceland country report – Storytelling at the Settlement Centre of Iceland*, Akureyri 2010.

⁴ G. Sigurdsson, *op.cit.*

⁵ M.S. Sigurðardóttir, T. Young, *Towards Creative Iceland: building local, going global. Quantitative and qualitative mapping of the cultural and creative sectors in Iceland. Report*, 2011.

⁶ J. van Hoof, F. van Dijken, *The historical turf farms of Iceland: Architecture, building technology and the indoor environment*, “Building and Environment” 2008, 43.

⁷ E.g.: C. Halewood, K. Hannam, *Viking Heritage Tourism. Authenticity and Commodification*, “Annals of Tourism Research” 2001, Vol. 28, No. 3, Great Britain: Pergamon; D. Alessio, A.L. Jóhannsdóttir, *Geysers and ‘girls’: Gender, power and colonialism in Icelandic tourist imagery*, “European Journal of Women’s Studies” 2011, 18 (1); U.B. Karlsdóttir, *Nature worth seeing! The tourist gaze as a factor in shaping views on nature in Iceland*, “Tourist Studies” 2013, 13 (2).

⁸ M. Booth, *Skandynawski raj. O ludziach prawie idealnych*, Kraków 2015; P. Duelund (Ed.), *The Nordic Cultural Model*, Nordic Cultural Institute, 2003.

tiatives concerning memory and lost places in Iceland (e.g. *Dalir og hólar – Art Exhibition; Eyðibýli á Íslandi. The research in abandoned farms in Iceland*) which may fit into the popular urban exploration trend, although the investigated areas hardly can be interpreted as ‘urban.’

Museums in Iceland: The Definitional Problem

Museums are generally understood in the way The International Council of Museums defines these types of institutions. They are non-profit, permanent, in the service of society and society’s development, and available to the public. These institutions also acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit “the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”⁹

In my research I had to undertake also the study of institutions like ‘centers’ (e.g. The Settlement Center in Borgarnes) or ‘exhibitions’ (e.g. The Settlement Exhibition Reykjavík 871±2) which are not ‘museums’ according to the official guidelines. Although ‘museums’ are usually understood as in the above definition, the main feature of the Icelandic heritage is that it does not confirm to the material artifacts usually found in typical museums. Museums have difficulties working in the same way as in other European countries because of the lack of artifacts – not many things survived hundreds of years in the Icelandic weather conditions.

Another problem results from the immense role of storytelling and Sagas in the Icelandic history, which makes it hard to divide what is a fact and what is just a legend while analyzing historical texts. According to *Iceland country report*:

[...] culture, in the broadest sense, shall be one of the foundations of tourism in Iceland. [...] In recent years there has been a marked increase in all manners of small exhibitions and centers [...]. The remarkable thing is that most of these revolve around telling stories, using either the Sagas or folk beliefs so rich in Icelandic culture.¹⁰

This is why the commercial or less scientific institutions also had to be described, analyzed, and included in the research subject.

Apart from museums being accredited and supervised by the Museum Council of Iceland, some organizations call themselves ‘museums’ even though, they hardly have any artifacts or scientific background (e.g. Saga Museum). Another, quite confusing issue, are institutions pretending to be real ‘museums.’ They actually exhibit artifacts, do research, have archives but still they treat the visitor with a big dose of humor, and show things as real which are in fact fake or a part of the fantasy world from Icelandic legends (e.g. The Icelandic Phallogical Museum, The Museum of

⁹ ICOM, *Museum Definition*, 2007, <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/> [access: 27.10.2015].

¹⁰ B. Árnadóttir, *op.cit.*, pp. 24–25.

Icelandic Sorcery & Witchcraft in Hólmavík, Sea Monster Museum in Bildudalur). The problem of what can be called a ‘museum’ in the general meaning is very difficult to solve, especially when you consider that fantasy creatures and Sagas can be treated as, or even are, a part of the Icelandic intangible heritage.

This might be confusing at the first moment, but it is the result of the Icelandic cultural policy and heritage management in practice.

The New Icelandic *National Cultural Policy*

In 2013 the new Icelandic cultural policy was introduced – a document being the result of a long process. The government, seeing the importance of culture, creative sectors, and tourism for the development and economy of the country, encouraged the citizens to be more active in these areas:

The government considers a diverse cultural scene to be an important part of the national economy, and one which is likely to carry even further weight in the future. The cultural life in Iceland has a wide-reaching derivative economic impact, including in the tourism [...].¹¹

As a result, in all parts of the country, even in remote villages, private people or communities established cultural institutions. In contrast to museums in other countries, Icelandic museums often go beyond the standard museum subjects like natural history or art, which of course are necessary to “enrich and deepen our understanding of who we are and where we are heading.”¹² The museums offer a wide variety of exhibitions on different, less typical subjects (e.g. The Museum of Icelandic Sorcery & Witchcraft in Hólmavík, Bjarnarhöfn Shark Museum, Sea Monster Museum in Bildudalur, Nonsense Museum in Flateyri). As Sigurjón Hafsteinsson says:

The new policy also emphasized that it would be important for the cultural sector to enhance the entertainment value of its practices in order to improve its relations with the public and bridge the alleged cultural division between popular and official culture.¹³

Now over a million visitors come every year to see 162 museums and exhibitions¹⁴ – these statistics show the wide scope of the role of museums and similar institutions in the Icelandic cultural landscape and tourism, and proves that the new policy worked out well.

¹¹ Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, *Culture Policy, Iceland*, Reykjavík 2013, http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-pdf/Menningarstefna_ENSKA_LOKAutgafa.pdf [access: 27.10.2015].

¹² Icelandic Export Information Centre, *Museums in Iceland*, 2014, <http://export.is/pages/en/museum.html> [access: 15.05.2014].

¹³ S.B. Hafsteinsson, *The Phallogological Museum of Iceland*, Münster 2014, p. 24.

¹⁴ S.M. Ólafsdóttir, *Preface by the chairman of the Association of Museums and Museum Staff in Iceland* [in:] *The Iceland Museum Guide*, Reykjavík 2013, p. 10.

The focus on grass-root activities meant also a reduced role of the government. This in turn forced institutions, even the National Museum, to rethink their concept, to find new ways of attracting visitors, to work more financially efficient and independent. After introducing the new cultural policy, as Hafsteinsson says, the National Museum had to “reinvent itself in every aspect.”¹⁵ This means, not only the exhibitions were redesigned, but new management practices and outsourcing were implemented as well.

Another important aspect of the policy was the emphasis on cooperation between different organizations – also with entities: “The government works to facilitate the cooperation of the different participants in cultural life [...]. The government encourages the cooperation and participation of individuals and companies in cultural life.”¹⁶

The cooperation seems to work out remarkably good especially with fishing and logistic companies. For example the V/kin Maritime Museum is being supported by Eimskip, the Icelandic Steamship Company. Also fishing companies support the Sea Fest in Reykjavík by providing fish for exhibition and educational purposes, and catering of course.

Museums: Portraying a Nation

Museums are focused on preserving the memory and artifacts representing the past which is a part of the identity and which shaped the current state of it. In the way they show artifacts, how they describe the exhibitions, and how they introduce the subject to the visitor, they have the power to create a certain picture of the nation and the country. In the case of Iceland this task is even more interesting than in other countries, due to the lack of material heritage – the exhibition and its ‘story’ often has to be created around a non material core. It seems to be rather difficult to deal with history and to show it to the visitors in a reliable way, because of the uncertainty about the historical truth. In other countries legends are treated mostly as an additional source of information for historians, but even here Iceland is unique: “Sagas written in the early stage have customarily been regarded as reliable historical sources, almost to the present day. It is in fact evident that they are written as a history – according to the standards of the time.”¹⁷

Museums appear to be one of the most important creators of identity, as they show the created picture to foreign visitors who spread the experienced vision abroad. For most tourists and foreigners the museums, especially the national ones, might be the only place where they gain a picture of the nation and the country. The institutions should be aware of the responsibility they bear and act accordingly within a framework of honesty and non prejudice.

¹⁵ S.B. Hafsteinsson, *Museum politics...*, p. 268.

¹⁶ Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, *Culture Policy...*

¹⁷ B. Árnadóttir, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

The Icelandic identity used to be described¹⁸ as a trinity based on: ‘land, nation and language’ and this might be helpful to find a key to the research subject. The land determined the settlement of the first people coming to Iceland. The lives of the first settlers are described in Sagas, which took place in locations unchanged for centuries. The nation can trace back its ancestors and the history of different families sometimes to the very beginning of the settlement. The language has not changed much for the last 500 years. For many countries their nation, language and land make them unique and shape their identity. In Iceland, however, we experience the same aspects in a much more coherent and deeper relationship than anywhere else. Being a quite small society on a remote island intensifies this phenomena.

The importance of the last aspect, the language, might be surprising for foreigners but the Icelandic nation still has an extraordinarily strong affection for its language. Gestur Guðmundsson explains several reasons for this situation:

The distance from the centres of power in Europe was one of the reasons why scholars were able to liberate themselves from Latin [...]. Language was a crucial identifier during its separation from Denmark, and when Iceland came under the American sphere of influence with the building of a military base during World War II [...]. Iceland is, for example, the only country in the world where legislation stipulates that designations have to be found in the local language for all IT hardware and software concepts.¹⁹

The following description reveals how the threefold perspective of ‘land, nation and language’ is still present in modern museums and whether this trinity is changing. The topics of the museums determine which features of the trinity will dominate and to what degree. A national museum emphasizes other moments of history and from a different angle than an art museum, for example.

Breaking Definitional Boundaries and Living Up Creativity

Björg Árnadóttir, referring to other researchers, explains that there is a difference between how natives and foreigners view museums: “Foreigners focus rather on the presentation of an exhibition, but locals have opinions on their subject matter.”²⁰ This statement shows the problematic of managing an exhibition in a way satisfying all visitors. Especially in case of exhibitions based rather on Sagas and archeological interpretations than on scientific research, it might be difficult to free them from excessive imagination. For example, “The Anglo-American stereotypical representation of Viking heritage is of sea-faring, sexist, and blood thirsty men raping and pillaging”²¹ – and this is a picture, which might be expected by foreigners coming to Iceland, but

¹⁸ G. Sigurdsson, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁹ G. Guðmundsson G., *Cultural Policy in Iceland* [in:] P. Duelund (Ed.), *The Nordic Cultural Model*, Nordic Cultural Institute, 2003, p. 113.

²⁰ B. Árnadóttir, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

²¹ C. Halewood, K. Hannam, *op.cit.*, p. 566.

natives in Scandinavia see their ancestors in a different light. Björg Árnadóttir²² mentions that Icelanders would probably not describe their ancestors as predators, rather as fighters who were dangerous abroad but peaceful and ordinary citizens at home.²³ So how can we depict history in a fascinating, but still reliable way?

Because of the fact, that the ‘Icelandic trinity’ has its roots in the very beginning of the country and the nation, it is easy to recognize all three elements especially in exhibitions dealing with the settlement era.

The Settlement Center in Borgarnes tells:

The story of the settlement in Iceland which was first permanently settled by people of Norse descent under the ninth century. It also tells the story of the Viking and Iceland’s first poet Egill Skallagrímsson as told in Egill’s Saga [...] both through the complicated visual and interactive mediums of today and the simple methods of a storyteller who captures his audience without the help of any tools.²⁴

Although the Center does not have any artifacts and is not a scientific institution, the owners worked out a balance between explaining history (or information treated as facts) using modern technology in a sensible way, without exaggeration and a Disneyland-effect.

The exhibition shows the visitors how land, nation and language are related with and influence each other. On an interactive map, for example, the visitor can see in which fjords, the first settlers decided to live. It is amazing, how few inhabitants the country had and how courageous these people must have been to start a new life in the middle of nowhere. After being introduced to the settlers’ stories, we understand the distribution of population centers in Iceland today. The stories also reveal the specifics of the people’s characters which enabled them to survive the unfriendly and hard conditions. Graphs showing the relationship of contemporary Icelanders with legendary settlers present two aspects. The first aspect is the pride of being a descendant of strong, independent and brave people. The second being a nation which is small and hermetic. A description of the surrounding nature makes the visitor understand the decisions of the first settlers – basically the natural conditions determined a good place to settle down. The reasons were usually similar: hunting and fishing possibilities, access to fresh water etc. This information as well as stories about the relations between the first inhabitants can be obtained from stories and Sagas.

The Settlement Exhibition Reykjavík 871±2 is built around archeological excavations found in 2001 on Aðalstræti, which are considered to be the “oldest relicts of human habitation in Reykjavík.”²⁵ The exhibition is, although the name ‘exhibition’ would suggest being less scientific, the most research-based institution dealing with the settlement era of all those mentioned in this article. Unfortunately, there are not

²² B. Árnadóttir, *op.cit.*

²³ C. Halewood, K. Hannam, *op.cit.*

²⁴ B. Árnadóttir, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

²⁵ Borgarsögusafn Reykjavíkur, *The Reykjavik City Museum*, 2014, <http://borgarsogusafn.is/en/> [access: 6.07.2014].

many artifacts to see, except the unique walls from the 9th century. Therefore, the curators decided to arrange the exhibition in a modern way – using touch screens and visualizations they try to portray everyday life hundreds years ago. Not all of those modern items seem to be necessary. Perhaps the visitors would be more interested just in the excavation process itself. How is the trinity-approach realized in the Exhibition? Definitely, the aspects of nation and land are emphasized. The language is treated less in terms of Sagas – it is regarded more as an important and specific characteristic of the Icelandic society.

The Saga Museum in Reykjavík deals with the same subject as the institutions mentioned above, but there the focus is set exclusively on Sagas. Because of that the ‘museum’ should be rather treated as an artistic exhibition or even a wax figure cabinet. The Sagas, which of course also tell stories and are said to be Icelandic history, show how adventurous the life of the first settlers and their descendants must have been. As explained before, that exhibition as well shows clearly how the trinity functions. In general, as a form of entertainment and an easy way to get into the Sagas, this institution is really remarkable, however, the word ‘museum’ seems to be used due to the lack of a more adequate term.

Another category of museum is generally based on the Icelandic trinity too, but the three elements are reinterpreted and adjusted to the main subject of the museum. The main difference is visible in the ‘nation’ aspect. Whereas in the settlement museums nation was understood as the first settlers, here it has a more narrow meaning. Nation is represented by a specified group of real people’s stories living in the 19th and 20th century, whose memories are the cornerstone for the exhibition. Additionally, the museums of this type are quite often supported by private people who have contributed historical items or artifacts belonging to their families and want to share them with the public.

The Víkin Maritime Museum is located in a quite new building in the harbor of Reykjavík but a part of the exhibition is allocated to the famous Coast Guard Vessel Óðinn. The museum tells about fishermen and the sea, the development of the fishing industry and the harbor in Reykjavík. The exposure is based on ‘traditional’ artifacts, but the way they are arranged in the exhibition areas is modern and pleasant to watch. The subject of the museum is quite important for the country and in terms of identity it closes a gap in heritage management, because “Iceland’s past, present and future are intimately tied to seafaring. This activity defines the nation’s character, making it difficult indeed to know Iceland and Icelanders without knowing its maritime history.”²⁶

Of course, it is impossible to analyze a museum like the Víkin Maritime using the same strict outlines describing the ‘Icelandic trinity’ as in the settlement museums. But still it is possible to use the trinity as a base for further analysis. The sea and the shore stand for the ‘land.’ The ‘nation’ is represented by real stories of fishermen and their families. Especially emotional are boards with the names of all fish-

²⁶ Sjóminjasafnið í Reykjavík, *The Reykjavík Maritime Museum*, 2014, <http://www.maritimemuseum.is/english/exhibitions/> [access: 15.07.2014].

ermen who lost their lives on the sea – thus, the visitor understands that those are not only names, those lists mirror dramas of families who lost their beloved ones. Such boards can be found all over Iceland in harbors or in remote places near the shore. This shows the depth the exhibition is related to real life and the Icelandic landscape. Problematic is the aspect of ‘language,’ which is understood here in a very different way compared to the settlement museums. The language focuses mainly on the memories of the presented persons and on the specific slang of this professional group.

Analogically constructed is the exhibition in The Icelandic Wartime Museum in Reyðarfjörður. The subject of the museum is truly interesting, because Iceland has never been armed and has never had soldiers but was still involved, more passively than actively, in the World War II conflict. This makes the museum important, especially from the perspective of visitors coming from the continent, who usually know only ‘their’ part of history. The ‘land’ is understood here as the territory of the country, which hosted allied forces. The ‘nation’ is represented by people who had to be hosts for soldiers coming in numbers exceeding those of the inhabitants and who were confronted with a totally new culture, whose elements they surprisingly quickly adopted. The nation is also represented, maybe in a less visible way, by locals who donated their own artifacts to the museum. The ‘language’ is, as in the Víkin Maritime Museum, present in the form of memories and reports of witnesses of that time period.

At first sight it might seem controversial, that art museums such as The Einar Jónsson Museum and the Ásmundur Sveinsson Sculpture Museum, both located in Reykjavík, are included in this ‘memory museum’ group. The reason for this inclusion can be found in the subjects the artists worked on. Ásmundur Sveinsson is said to “praise the Icelandic common people, folk-tales and nature”²⁷ through his art and Einar Jónsson “drew inspiration from the Icelandic folklore heritage”.²⁸ They both reinterpreted Icelandic Sagas, saw the radical and enormously fast changes in society, and contemplated the surrounding nature – all those things formed the basis, the ‘Icelandic trinity’ for their works. The mentioned museums rely on memories about the artists and the ‘old’ Iceland.

The ‘ironic’ museum is quite a specific type of museum. It is mainly devoted to an unusual subject and tries to confuse the visitor either by showing him artifacts which cannot be treated as scientifically correct, or by displaying the exhibits in such a way that they may be more likely understood as an art installation than a museum item. Museums of this kind can be found all over Iceland. This is partly the result of the Icelandic cultural policy which was supposed to motivate inhabitants to more creativity towards tourism and the generation of more touristic attractions.

Definitely representative for this group is The Icelandic Phallogical Museum in Reykjavík. The museum offers the visitors a great view into the Icelandic fauna

²⁷ Listasafn Reykjavíkur, *Ásmundur Sveinsson*, 2014, http://www.artmuseum.is/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-2187/3385_read-6288/ [access: 10.07.2014].

²⁸ Listasafn Einars Jónssonar, *Einar Jónsson*, 2014, <http://www.lej.is/en/einar-jonsson/carreer/> [access: 10.07.2014].

in a unique and entertaining way. The immense effort applied by the owners while establishing the exhibition is obvious with every detail – starting with the preservation process of all artifacts, inventing the science of ‘phallology’, up to writing funny and clever descriptions, even very museum-like in Latin. Sigurjón Hafsteinsson describes the artistic aspect of the exhibition as follows:

The institutional critique of the museum is manifested in the curatorship of its founder. He has been unafraid to introduce into his collection his own imaginative creation [...] the museum can be compared to an artistic happening or a performance that employs multi-disciplinary techniques and demands active participation on behalf of its audiences.²⁹

At first sight the museum resembles a classical natural history museum, but the visitors soon realize, that it is not only about nature. The museum makes the visitors rethink their attitude towards manhood, what is seen as natural and why some subjects are still treated too embarrassing or inelegant to talk about them in public. It also shows how obviously we treat parts of animal bodies in museums, but how different our relation to humans and their bodies is:

The museum also collapses established categories of the classical division between human and animal worlds into one representational space, as the quest for human specimens for the collection exemplifies. The museum practices institutional critique and ridicules established discourse, whether it is scientific discourse in general or the ways in which museums have thematically specialized and, consequently, divided up the natural world.³⁰

One part of the Museum is devoted to the Icelandic culture – to fantasy creatures and legends. This makes it hard to classify it as a real ‘museum.’ Usually, in a museum there is no place for ‘artifacts’ connected with unreal creatures. But what if these creatures, even if they are imaginary, are an indigenous part of the society’s heritage? Many of the objects presented in the Museum appear to be artistic items only after a deeper research in other sources. For example, in scientific books, they appear to be false. As long as the visitors do not expect anything better and treat the museum with a pinch of salt there is no problem. But the situation gets deteriorating as soon as the beholder looks for information which may verify the presented truth as there is no fair access to it.

Another example of such a museum is The Museum of Icelandic Sorcery & Witchcraft in Hólmavík, in the Westfjords. Generally, the Museum explains to visitors that part of the Icelandic history and heritage which deals with magic, unexplainable phenomena and people practicing socially not accepted rites to achieve their goals. Witches and their burning in medieval Europe is a subject well known and scientifically researched, but in Iceland the matter was different. First, witchcraft was a domain of men. Only one woman lost her life accused of using black magic. Second, because of a quite small community, the total number of victims of the anti-

²⁹ S.B. Hafsteinsson, *The Phallological Museum...*, p.15.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

witchcraft movement was, compared to continental Europe, insignificant and all cases are described with names and background.³¹ These recordings make it possible to follow all the stories of the particular examples of witchcraft and, what is also interesting, to analyze the relations between the victims. The visitor may get the impression, that in some years the problem of witchcraft was rather a problem of a few families accusing each other, than a subject of making agreements with the devil. The third aspect is, that in comparison to other countries, in Iceland it is even more understandable that their ancestors reached for magic forces trying to explain the devilish-looking phenomena happening outside – lava, hot springs, geysers etc.

Why is the Museum considered an ‘ironic’ one? Because of the subject of course, which will not pass any scientific scrutiny, especially keeping in mind the Icelandic characteristic of not having enough physical evidence except texts and sagas. The other aspect is, similar to the Phallogological Museum, that the visitor is uncertain whether the few artifacts in the Museum are real or whether they are just visual interpretations of what is described in the texts.

In these museums the ‘trinity’ is treated less literally than in the first two types. The nation is shown from an unusual perspective, through artifacts and subjects which present its uniqueness and specificity with a big dose of humor and irony. The land is represented by objects coming from different places in the country. The landscape itself serves as the background and as the context to explain and distinguish particular artifacts or phenomena. The language in turn functions as a tool for creating a story about the exposed artifacts.

Conclusions

Even though the legal regulations were meant to order and define the differences between museums, centers and exhibitions, reality proves that there are still inaccuracies, for example, in the names of the institutions. Professionals and people working in the culture sector know and/or recognize what kind of institution they are visiting, but it might be confusing for tourists who expect to get some ‘true’ information in a museum, which in fact is rather an art installation.

Which feature of the Icelandic museum landscape is definitely unique and worth adopting? It is the prominence of creativity apparent in the museums. Not only the individual items are important, but also the concepts of their presentation and the way the exhibitions are laid out. In Icelandic museums the visitor feels the pride of the Icelandic people without being oppressed by unnecessary nationalism. These are two aspects of museums exhibitions which other countries would do well to emulate.

³¹ Galdrasýning á Ströndum, *The persons executed for Witchcraft*, 2014, http://www.galdrasynning.is/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=27&Itemid=67&layout=default&lang=en [access: 14.06.2014].

As it was mentioned before, Iceland's problem of authenticity is much bigger than that of other nations. It is hard to build a credible and scientifically correct depiction of the past having nearly no proof except Sagas and legends. Of course, the fantasy elements can be regarded as a part of the intangible heritage as well – then they defy the definition of a museum. Connected with the issue of the Icelandic intangible heritage is also the problem of how to present that which cannot be seen and the question how to create exhibitions including elements of the past, which are only conveyed orally? This is a difficult topic which is not foreign to museums in continental Europe. Often the problem is solved by creating a modern museum with a lot of technical solutions – a triumph of form over content.

Another positive feature of Icelandic museums are the various child-oriented attractions and the numerous hand-on stations which make even traditionally arranged institutions more attractive and gripping. For example there are special companion books for children explaining the exhibitions, interactive games on screens or just coloring papers and riddles, all animating to follow the story of the exhibition.

The 'Icelandic trinity' seems to be still present in museums and in heritage management, but first of all as a basis for reinterpretations of the three elements. This is positive in a general sense. We have a cornerstone defining what makes the nation, even though these three elements are treated in a much broader sense today. I think it would be interesting for many museums in other countries, especially the national ones, to define their interpretation of 'what makes us a nation' and make this the core of their exhibition, because the visitor often has the impression of a thoroughly chronological presentation about the nation's past without any connectivity to the artifacts and the role they played for the national identity.

The discussions during the interviews, resulted in some interesting conclusions and ideas concerning that subject. Overall, everyone agreed that the trinity-principle is a bit outdated and that it should be transformed or extended through new elements in future. There are several issues to be taken into account.

Iceland is no longer a homogeneous nation – more and more immigrants are living on the island. It is a popular tourist destination and the Icelanders themselves have become a nation of travelers. All that influences the society and should be reflected in discussions to define the national identity today. The National Museum in Reykjavík solved this problem excellently in the *Making of a Nation* exhibition. The whole exhibition is devoted to the Icelandic history – it underlines that through hundreds of years nothing really changed in the way people lived. In the last section, the curators show that the fast and big changes happened in the 20th century – on a conveyor belt, similar to a luggage claim area at the airport, there are artifacts representing the last decades. The arrangement shows perfectly how Iceland has caught up with other 'civilized' countries only in a few years.

Furthermore, there are some visible changes in terms of language. Of course, the Icelandic language is unique and the Icelanders are proud of the fact that they have managed to preserve it in an unchanged form. For example, in Germany with its different dialects it would be difficult to pick the one which represents the nation best. Concerning the trinity, the language was represented mainly by Sagas, but my

interlocutors mentioned that that element should also be broadened. The language is no longer merely about the Sagas: it is likewise about literature, especially crime stories which are actually a very popular genre in Iceland. It is – not to forget – about lyrics, because music is quite a new but significant element of the Icelandic cultural life and should therefore in future be regarded when discussing the national identity.

What makes Iceland special, comparing to other countries, is the fact that the original understanding of the trinity can be helpful to describe the nation's identity from its very beginning until present, also in terms of the land. For example, for Central European citizens it would be even hard to define clearly what 'the land' means to them – is it the land of the first warriors which are said to be the founders of their country, or is it also the territory which got lost during military conflicts in the last 100 years, or is it just the land which comprises the respective country now?

The transformation of the proposed threefold perspective is a recent process which started just after World War II. It leads the 'old' version of the trinity into a globalized, less hermetic interpretation of 'land' replacing it by 'space' and including all people living on the island. It is no longer a strictly understood 'nation.' It is no longer 'only' 'language,' rather communication. That process took place in other European countries through hundreds of years and mostly in a chaotic way as the result of military conflicts. In Iceland there is the unprecedented opportunity to see it happening now, peacefully but immensely fast.

"Historical sites in Iceland are filled with memories instead of buildings"³² – in my opinion this sentence is the best description of the characteristic of Icelandic heritage in general. It is, similarly to memories, based on facts, but they are embedded in good stories, which make them more beautiful and interesting. Memories are selective, but they define us and make us who we are. The Icelandic heritage is difficult to describe or capture using standard outlines, but that is why it should be treated even more carefully because it makes this small nation as intriguing as their landscape and language. The Icelandic museums are obligated to this task and are fully aware of it.

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³² B. Árnadóttir, *op.cit.*, p.13.

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