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The Childhood Museum – Guestbook



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A distinctive feature of the European project *Childhood. Remains and Heritage* was that it required visitors of all ages – now more than ever – their absolute immersion and participation in reaching the main objective of the project: creating a **virtual childhood museum**. Moreover, in addition to the virtual tour, an archive of graphic, audio, photographic and audio-visual documents, as well as collections of objects, has been compiled and can be accessed and updated continually by those interested in the topic.

In order for this project to come to life, a museographic discourse on the theme of *childhood* was conceived and organized in seven thematic rooms (six for exhibitions and the seventh for workshops) within the same space – the Irina Nicolau Hall of the Romanian Peasant Museum. At each thematic exhibition, the visitors had the chance and were even invited to leave traces behind; they could bring objects, photographs, texts and any fragments kept over the years that might depict the remains of their own childhood. Furthermore, for each exhibition, a space was provided for the public to leave their own mark: they could stick photos from home on the boards, they could draw little crosses or write their names on the blackboard, add (old) sayings and memories on a string or write in the guestbook. As I was saying, time-wise, visiting the six exhibitions was at maximum intensity.

Therefore, such a rhythm could only generate spontaneous words and thoughts, as such situations demand prompt and lively reactions. And the guestbook gathered it all unfailingly, becoming more of a childhood journal

toward the end, like the ones many of us used to have. And today, just like in the past, the charm of these journals resides in the handwriting, which is simply unique. It is the most natural gesture, setting us apart and bringing us together through the incessant and rhythmless flow of words and giving time for reflection. It is a gesture that does not upset or balance, it bears different degrees of eloquence and substance from one person to the other. This skill, one of a kind and, thus, essential, should be a habit in everyone's life. And our guestbook proves precisely that this vital ability of mankind has not been utterly forgotten. And that many of us still wish to remain citizens of the Gutenberg Galaxy and not only of





the computer and TV one.

So here we are, strolling through the guest-book of the six exhibitions as if in a miniature copy of the virtual tour. This loyal witness gathered together the writing of the young and the old who knew how to look, ask and wonder, be unenlightened and confused, be either appreciative or outraged and confused, but all of them honest and kind.

We launched the series of exhibitions with the question: „Where do children come from?” and we also saw what happens to them after death. We would go on a journey of initiation, of lights and shadows, offering glimpses of rural and urban Romanian and international traditions, from magical practices and spells to the holy baptism. The climax of the first exhibition was embodied in the material and palpable expression of the question „Where do babies go?” The answer was given by the little winged shirt: *I was about to leave the exhibition hall when I saw an object I had missed. The little shirt cut in the back so that the dead baby's wings could grow is simply breathtaking!*

Inspired by the ladder of the human ages, many perceived the exhibition as a bridge between old and new, *a connection between past*

and present, between the way in which our grandparents were welcomed into this world and the way in which we welcome our own children today...

In addition to the generous words of appreciation, we were interested and actually looked for objections, queries and criticism. We knew the part about the abortion would shock the most: *It's very difficult to explain the abortion contraption. This makes me wonder: who is really the targeted audience of this exhibition? or: Rather sinister, yet highly interesting.* When I would open the series of the six exhibitions, I would recommend and warn at the same time they be looked at cautiously, and without any playful expectations or subtleties. Therefore, despite the bluntness and an exhibition method intentionally expressionistic, we could not skip this slice of life, which in the life of the old rural village was severely punished.

The very broad theme of the exhibition (*a huge theme in a wonderfully small exhibition*) approached indeed the subject of childhood, but it wasn't meant only for children's eyes (*this is an exhibition for parents, right? It's very interesting, especially for the children who are now adults*). Once the message had been under-

stood, each visitor, young and old, could relate their memories and preferences to something specific. Some perceived the exhibition *as unique and subtle*; others would have wanted more explaining (interpretation) and localization in time and space, while some more objects. We might have interpreted more from one exhibition to the other (although the hall texts were clear and showed the way), but it definitely was not our intention to explain every gesture and object as it would have been too pedantic and dull for those visiting the museum precisely for what it is: a museum that suggests, that references something that must be discovered on one's own, with more or less of an effort, but in whose absence one cannot „rise“. *Something that makes one ponder*, someone who guessed our intention wrote. That is exactly what we wanted.

But, in the end, the value of the guestbook consists precisely of this beneficial and rhythmic oscillation of opinions ranging from ecstasy, praise and thanks to reserved and even straightforwardly disapproving manifestations: *Wonderful ideas and content vs. We expected more, a wider range of approaches. Little joys for great happiness vs. I will never again step foot in such an exhibition... A mix of kitsch*. And it was only natural that we would stir such reactions as the project itself implied various perspectives on childhood. Capitalizing on this period meant, on the one hand, as wide and as minute an approach as possible to the subject and, on the other hand, a setting in the European context of meanings and concepts connected to this subject. Issues related to the birth of babies (we called it “The Emergence”) and choice of names, oral texts about children, holidays and education, clothing, food and hygiene, diseases and cures, games and traditional toys were tackled and last, but not least, all this had to be confronted against current opinions and debates on the matter.

This raised even more question marks, queries and unexpected interpretations. Some admired the originality and non-conformity of the exhibitions, others found them curious, different from their own expectations, some



thought only of the good memories of their childhood, even if it was in „those days“, others transposed the images in the exhibition over their own memories: *The net reminds me of a fairytale...the one with the bright, poor girl...the girl dressed in a fishing net...* There are others who revisited their childhood with joy and sadness at once. For grandparents, project childhood did not represent just remembrance, but also an opportunity to come to help with things known only to them: *Being older, I would like to add some things...*

The children's impressions were also highly interesting and conveyed in an optimistic voice. We have also noticed that almost all children wrote their age next to their name, understanding, perhaps unwillingly and only in jest, the importance and the benefits of thresholds from one life stage to the other. We welcomed their texts, such as: *A small world*



for tiny people / with a memory to keep. We liked it here a lot / Dear museum, we'll come back here / To learn new things / And admire old ones, or the one that amused us the most: The museum was very nice, especially this part, texts that will complete the virtual museum archive. In the same luminous and cheerful vein were some opinions of our foreign visitors, French, English and German, whose ideas we have kept in their true and simple form: *Du passé au présent, l'enfance est éternelle!*¹.

When we got to the moment *The Creation of the World. Games and Toys* (the last exhibition), everyone unleashed in a torrent of happiness as if for a new beginning: Persevere!, We are looking forward to the next exhibition!, We hope to visit a childhood museum... The best of luck! And that was when a few precious materials for the archive were set to paper: *A bottle of ink / Full to the brink / Will you, please, tell me / What colour it will be? and an even older counting game: A fish came out of the sea/ And he said to me: / "Grab me by the tail, / And along we'll sail!"*.

The guestbook will not end here. There are many more pages waiting to be written. Browsing through it, I found among its pages a handmade piece of paper on which I had written *Bring your own school photos!* and which I had stuck to a white board at one of the exhibitions. It must have come unstuck and somebody put it in the guestbook. We would like to extend this recommendation and the invitation to continue to stay by our side. Especially since one of the strengths of the *childhood* exhibitions – revealed also by the guestbook – has been continuity, that is, the same public returned from one exhibition to the other, highly interested and curious.

I would also like to add that the six exhibitions were seen by 3556 visitors / year, of whom 187 wonderful people have left us their impressions, opinions, suggestions and thoughts.

1) From the past to the present, childhood is eternal.



Translation by Alina-Olimpia Miron