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Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and Me A Different Exhibition About Toys

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ABSTRACT

Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and Me (Elefanți, cuci, cai și eu) is an exhibit made in Romania in 2017 to draw attention to the absence of a children's museum in the country. This article is a subjective account of the creation and development of this exhibition, written by two of its curators. It aims to give an example of curatorial and educational museum practices involving the young public's interaction with artefacts in exhibitions or museums.

The Iosif Herțea¹ toy collection was donated recently to the Romanian non-governmental organization *Asociația Da' De Ce*² (I Wonder Why? Association). The result was an exhibition of original artefacts dedicated to children and their careers. The article traces the evolution of the exhibition concept: adapting the design and wayfinding to different locations; addressing different categories of public; and adding or subtracting artefacts and stories. The exhibition *Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and Me* was displayed in Romania in three different cultural spaces for six months in 2017 and visited by almost 4000 children and adults.

KEYWORDS

Children's museum, Iosif Herțea, museum exhibition, heritage, toys.

1) Romanian composer and ethnomusicologist.

2) *Asociația Da' De Ce* is based in Bucharest and is known for the cultural projects it carries out in Romanian museums to coordinate youth activities in traditional exhibition spaces. Their goal is to bring the museum closer to its youngest visitors through programs and installations.

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Introduction. Theoretical background

Since the 1980's, museum education and visitor research studies have seen considerable growth in Western countries. One result was the development of children's museums and increased interest on the part of traditional museums in offering special exhibits and programs to children, mostly living history museums, art and natural history. In Romania, after 2000, we see well trained specialists opening the way to informal education and museum pedagogy. More recently, some Romanian museums have become committed to their

young public as they include not just in their missions, but also in their practices, the development of programs and exhibitions for them. Step by step, these museums are becoming children friendly by: setting up a permanent exhibition or workshop room; training or hiring specialists in early learning; researching the collection to make it accessible to kids; purchasing new artefacts; creating new exhibitions and graphic design; working together with and becoming involved in the community.

Some characteristics of children's museums:

- They address young patrons up to 12 years old and provide contextual and

3) Definition provided by the Association of Children's Museums (ACM).

4) Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia, U.S.A. opened in 1978 and, having undergone a long process of self-improvement, it can now claim to be "internationally recognized as a leader in 'purposeful play'."

5) One example is the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, which has developed and refined its family learning initiatives and strategies and become a case study.

interactive exhibits that are intended to stimulate educational experiences for children and families. "Many maintain permanent early-childhood exhibits that are appropriate for infants and toddlers" (Colbert 2011: 606).³

- They are part of strategies of cultural development for urban revitalization. A survey by the Association of Children's Museums concluded that 33 percent identify themselves as flagships in downtown revitalization projects (Colbert 2011: 606).

- They are complex "playgrounds." They focus traditionally on play as a means of supporting children's learning and development. For these institutions, play is a very serious thing. It has a learning value.⁴ Children's museums don't share the same definition of play and how it connects to learning and this is one reason why children's museums are so diverse (some have play at their core, some not).

- They carry out research focusing on exploring the role of adults in these early learning experiences. As a result, we see the support given to adults accompanying children in museums: indoor or outdoor, during planned educational activities for families or during free access in the museum environment (Wolf & Wood 2012: 5).⁵

- In general, they "seek to demystify the adult world, to help children acquire or shape special skills, attitudes and knowledge concerning the world around them. Children's museums strive to meet these goals by immersing young patrons in a unique, leisure/learning environment filled with multisensory, participatory exhibits. Here, the child assumes the role of keeper of the keys, master of the locks. The child is in complete control" (Judd and Kraft 1997: 22).

In some traditional museums, we see a transition from hands-off to hands-on displays, from non-tactile to interactive displays. There are exhibition areas with "please touch" labels. Museums launch scavenger hunts or open their "treasure chests" for their most curious audience: the children. We associate this also with a

change in the way otherwise restricted areas in the urban environment are approached. Open houses in various institutions, schools, archives or museum storage rooms, or open kitchens in restaurants, are all aimed to provide access to the "laboratory," the mystery zone where secrets are kept. We understand this openness as a social tendency to soften the isolation, the alienation or even the obstinate search for privacy of the urban dweller.

• • • • •

The exhibition

We consider *Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and Me* to be a different exhibition about toys as it brings together familiar, culturally shared objects and novel objects. The elephants, cuckoos and horses in the title are familiar animals from the child's world, but the last name in the list, "Me," introduces an element of ambiguity and childish language: it could be *me* as in anyone who reads it, or it could be some new entity. In the exhibition, the visitor discovers many more animals than the title would let on, and that "Me" is a novel creature from the story *Little I-am-me (Das kleine Ich bin ich)* by Mira Lobe. Finally, everyone can build a toy that didn't exist before.

There are children's museums which exhibit toys as a representation of childhood, and others where toys are the museum's props. Our exhibition is different because it shows all types of toys together: handmade and mass-produced, old and new, toys belonging to both Romanian and international folklore, some with a name, some from a game, some made by children, some made of plastic and others environmentally-friendly, some damaged and others very fragile, etc. This apparent hodgepodge invites the visitors to differentiate among the toys, by sorting them, using them or inventing stories, according to their age group.

The project brings something new to the Association's portfolio and also to the museum field. First, as far as we know, there were few such donations made in Romania in recent years. Further, *Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and Me* is the first Romanian exhibition featuring heritage objects geared towards and available to children, as well as exhibition material to support adults accompanying children.

Second, some of our team members are interested in researching children's views of their museum experiences and more precisely, in what experiments they found most engaging (Piscitelli 2001: 271).

Third, knowing that Romanian exhibitions in general make little use of technology despite the big demand in this sense from the young audience, the exhibition dares to rely on the intrinsic complexity of the toy as a type of object and on the scarcity of multimedia. There are no ostentatious means of display, few museum props, and some art installations, and there is little contextualization.

Finally, from our adult perspective, we believe that we placed the public in a familiar setting, allowing them to reflect on, understand and distinguish between the different displays, as well as grasp the heritage aspect of the everyday objects.

One of the adult visitors commented:

In the first place, being an interactive exhibition for children on a cultural subject, it is an opportunity to familiarize children with this type of manifestation in preparation for, the organizers hope, the future opening of a children's museum. Further, it is an occasion to familiarize children with the idea of old toys—especially the care of old toys, and the

care of all that is old, but also the care of new toys as they have the chance to make their own, inspired by the ones on display.⁶

The exhibition *Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and Me* was shown at ARCUB, Hanul Gabroveni in Bucharest (8-30 June 2017), 717 visitors (352 children and 365 adults) and four educational programs; The Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania in Cluj-Napoca (1-17 September 2017), 999 visitors, five educational programs; and The

Mureșianu House Museum–Ștefan Baciú Memorial House [*Muzeul Casa Mureșenilor–Casa Ștefan Baciú*] (26 September – 7 December 2017), 2,253 visitors, of which approximately 400 participated in the twenty-two educational programs.

In 2018, the exhibition was displayed in one of the most prestigious cultural centres for children in Europe, the Galerie Hrou (Gallery to Play) in Sladovna Písek, in the Czech Republic. The centre is famous among its young visitors

as a place for them to master. Therefore, all exhibitions are interactive and dismantled as soon as they become obsolete and unsafe for children. Our exhibition, titled *Sloni, kukačky, koně a Já* in Czech, had to adapt to these conditions. The exhibition design was consequently upgraded.⁷ The fragile toys could be looked at through glass panes by opening drawers. One exhibition prop aimed to be the introduction and to embody the title: a rotating cube with the four compartments for horses, elephants, cuckoos, and me, a showcase designed to symbolically frame the toys. We unified the graphic design and created a new informational package: the intro panel, the topic panels for each station, the stories, and



Exhibition Poster. Graphic design by Gheorghe Iosif.

6) Andrei Manea, "Bucuria MEA, bucuria LUI... Bucuria TURUROR!" (My joy, his joy... everyone's joy!), *Artistu* (blog), 2017, June 7, <http://www.artistu.ro/jurnale/jurnal-de-tatic/bucuria-mea-bucuria-lui-bucuria-tururor/>.

7) Raluca Bem Neamu and Irina Hasnaș Hubbard, team members, collaborated with Sorin Chirică from Nod Maker Space workshop in Bucharest to create new props and furniture. Nod Maker Space is a dynamic ecosystem that welcomes designers, artists, engineers, inventors, freelancers and entrepreneurs.

8) Project team:
Alexandra Zbucnea
(project manager),
Raluca Bem Neamu
(PR specialist), Ioana
Popescu (researcher),
Cristina Dumitrescu
(custodian), Iulia Iordan
(curator), Irina Hasnaş
Hubbard (curator,
exhibition designer),
Daniela Mişcov (cultural
activities organizer),
Bruno Mastan
(puppeteer), Ozana
Niţulescu (cultural
activities organizer),
Marinela Barna
(museographer), Flavia
Stoica (museographer),
Cristina Toma
(museographer),
Ramona Caramela
(researcher), Silviu
Anghel (researcher),
Gheorghe Iosif (visual
designer), Maria Ghegu
(assistant). Volunteers:
Marius Andrieş, Alice
Csizmad, Teodora
Dumitrescu.

9) Ioana Popescu,
team member,
comment in the
guestbook, June
2017.

10) According to
Daniela Mişcov, team
member, Iosif Herţea
searched for toys
during field trips in
Romania and later
abroad in the (flea)
markets. In the 1970s,
he made donations
to a theater and a
museum in Hungary.
He participated in
exhibitions of musical
instruments and
toys, collaborating
with puppet theatre
specialists, sometimes
he completed the
exhibitions with his
own collection.

11) Consisting of over
one thousand pieces,
the collection includes
seemingly unrelated
objects, with diverse
backgrounds, albeit
largely Romanian and
German: ►

signage. Financial aid was provided by the Romanian Cultural Institute and Da' De Ce Association. Around 17,000 people visited the gallery over a period of three months, and most of them have seen and played in our exhibition.

About the team

Under the title *START: Children's Museum! (START: Muzeul Copilului!)*, the Association carried out a project involving acquisition, registration and conservation work regarding the toy collection donated to us by Iosif Herţea, culminating with the presentation of a selection of the collection to the public.

To manage this toy collection, the members of the Association built a team of specialists from different fields: curators, museum educators, researchers, historians, custodians, cultural managers, anthropologists, communications specialists, writers, directors and actors, psychologists, and, last but not least, volunteers.⁸

In my opinion, this exhibition is a model of good practice for specialist and amateur collectors; a demonstration of what is meant by a collection, how it can be utilized to maximum effect, how and to what extent it must be preserved, and how it can be promoted. (...) I admire the way in which all of the participants in the project worked side by side, according to the abilities of each, but lending a hand wherever necessary, which seems to me a rare thing, considering that it was a one-time collaboration on a fixed schedule, imposed by the needs of the project.⁹

The toy collection

Iosif Herţea spent over half a century assembling his toy collection.¹⁰ He describes in depth the chronology and the challenges he faced in his endeavour to collect traditional toys in the chapter "The Seriousness of Toys:"

Working in the music field, I found myself,

like it or not, unavoidably immersed in a much larger field: of toys in general. I had come to appreciate its importance through my readings in other languages. I struggled, then, to gather, carrying around large cardboard boxes, as many toys as possible, dolls and toys of all kinds from all of the regions in which I had had the opportunity to carry out research. Preserving and exhibiting them continues to be a challenge. One early success was the display of several sound toys at the inaugural exhibition of the collection of traditional instruments at the Brukenthaal Museum in Sibiu (...) (Herţea 2015: 160).

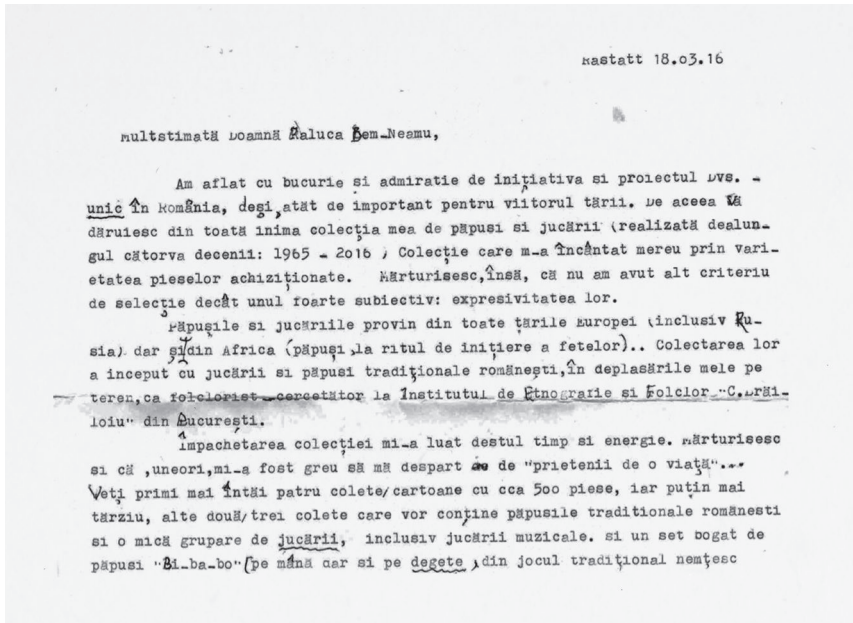


Toys from the collection. Photo credit: Iulia Iordan.

In 2016 he donated his toy collection¹¹ to *Da' De Ce* Association. The choice of recipient was based on the organisation's capacity to bring the collection not just to a museum, but to many museums. Herţea believed that the Association could be the ideal mediator between his collection and the public. Furthermore, he added the clear request that the objects should not be displayed only in cases, but placed within the visitors' reach to observe them closely, study or even handle them. This became the starting point for the curatorial concept.

The curatorial concept

At the heart of the exhibition was Iosif Herţea's wish to allow the children to play



Fragment from the letter sent by Iosif Hertea to Raluca Bem Neamu.

with the toys. But his wish fitted very well with the vision of the team members as they imagined a space in which children would play and communicate using toys, their favourite objects, while learning how to take care of a toy collection and their own toys.

The stated mission of the exhibition was to stimulate children to interact with a toy collection and to show them how to handle toys that are heritage items. We wanted to address both the museum specialists and the visitors with an aim to promote interactivity and co-creation in museum environments, to familiarize the audience with such spaces, and to encourage the adults to regularly look for programs aimed at families and school groups, coordinated by museums, school educators, and artists.

To help visitors explore the exhibition, we created a wayfinding system: signage, stories, interactive spaces, exhibition design.

The team imagined a conceptual framework, where five toys were selected to be the *icons*—the central artefacts—of the exhibition and to inspire the team to explore the great potential of these small artefacts. The idea behind this was to segment the exhibition into five themes and five stations inspired by the selected

artefacts and, moreover, to create five stories to be included in the exhibition as written texts and audio, further stimulating the public to create stories about new toys to be later included in the exhibition. The five stories were launched on air by the Itsy Bitsy Radio¹² as advertisements for the exhibition.

We also took into consideration the way young children would move in the exhibition space, how they would zigzag between objects we perceived as familiar to them. We wanted the young to be able to make sense of what they see and so reserved one station for them to explore. Here we expected to see the children using multimodal communication, which involved fast and complex movements between several modes: walking along the path, running, stopping, retracing steps, etc. (Hackett 2011: 8).

Under these circumstances, the team's main challenge was to preserve the collection while inviting the young public to interact with it. Additional challenges were: to bring adults to the exhibition and to make them stay; to persuade the young audience to handle the objects with care; to design an interactive space for individual and group activities; to prevent the loss of toys; to assure maintenance of the exhibition room; and to

► 11) artisan toys crafted by village children in the 1970's, mass-produced plastic toys, priceless limited-edition toys from various renowned European makers, decorative objects made from materials unique to Asia and Africa, miniature musical instruments created by traditional artists, theater props, etc.

12) Itsy Bitsy Radio is the only Romanian radio station for children and families. It broadcasts in many cities across the country

renew the educational materials. To prevent the risk of damage to objects, the entire team agreed on a signage system to emphasize three categories of objects: those that are not to be touched; those that may be handled carefully; and those that the children can play with to emit sounds or that they can temporarily remove as they move around the exhibition area. To this end, pictograms and texts were prepared to inform the public about the concept of the exhibition, the collection, and ways to approach it. Tags were placed next to the objects (“handle and experience,” “handle with care,” and “do not touch”). Next, a maintenance schedule was established to preserve the concept and aesthetic of the exhibition, to keep the space tidy, and to make sure that the visitors did not to interfere with each other.

the visitors might miss the opportunities we had prepared for them. In the end, we reached consensus that the conceptual framework would indeed encourage the public to go beyond discovering and using the given artefacts and information toward transforming them by means of their own creativity: they would make up stories, role-playing, or create new associations between the displayed objects.

What held the team together and on the same track throughout the project was our understanding of the paradigmatic change in the role of the museum, where the visitors are no longer passive subjects to be educated as part of a museum strategy, but active learners who want to make sense of the world. The entire team was well informed about this educational turn, which overtook the Western museum at the turn of the century, and about a new perspective on the definition of learning. In 2004, the British Museum Libraries and Archives Council launched a project “Inspiring Learning for All” where learning was defined “as a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. As such learning includes development of skills, knowledge, understanding, values, ideas or feelings” (Van Mensch and Meijer van Mensch 2011: 36). Regarding the exhibition visitors, Lynda Kelly wrote in *Learning in the 21st Century Museum* that “they will make their own meaning and construct their own narratives based on their experiences and interest. They want choice and control over their museum experience and their learning through providing multiple pathways and a variety of interpretative experiences suitable for both individual and groups” (2011: 5). According to these new ideas about learning, it is more important to analyse the action of the learner than to probe the nature of the subject to be learned (Hein 1995: 2). Since this is a constructivist theory, the central concern is not what we intend to teach, but what people actually learn. “What does the visitor (learner) make of our museum

Pictograms used in the exhibition: “Discover: touch, move, experience, play!”, “Fragile: handle with care!”, “Don’t touch: no direct interaction, just look”.



Pictograms used in the exhibition: “Discover: touch, move, experience, play!” (green), “Fragile: handle with care!” (yellow), “Don’t touch: no direct interaction, just look” (red).

The children were given handouts with the rules of the exhibition, that is, the signs that indicated whether an object could be handled with care or only looked at, and identified objects that they could play with. They were the most agreeable and carefully followed rules! “It was like a game! We had to look for the signs and check what they meant!” And they did this on their own, responsibly!¹³

Our two-fold vision to have the public both interact with and preserve the toy collection generated a constant debate among us about what the young visitors would do in the exhibition, whether accompanied or not by a guide or carer. We often argued about the possibility that

13) Haşegan, Despina. 2017. “Elefanţi, cucii, cai şi EU alinaţi la Start! Muzeul copilului” [Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and I at the start line. The Children’s Museum]. *Roata Mare* (blog), June 21 [available online at: <https://roatamare.com/2017/06/21/elefanti-cucii-cai-si-eu-alinati-la-start-muzeul-copilului/>].

exhibit? What does she understand?” (Hein 1995: 3) What does a painted wooden horse, a miniature marble elephant, a ceramic bird, a baby doll, etc. actually mean to the visitor?

Another important component of the constructivist theory is that “there is no necessary connection between learning and teaching.” “We cannot predict what meaning the learners will make from the experiences we provide for them. The more we construct a situation that allows and encourage learning, the more likely we are to construct something that is open, ambiguous and able to be manipulated in a variety of ways by the learner; thus the less likely we are to be able to predict precisely what has been learned” (Hein 1995: 3).

George Hein mapped out four types of museums, and the one that interested us was the Constructivist museum: where the knowledge is constructed by the learner—the opposite being the traditional museum or the Systematic museum where the knowledge exists independent of the learner and where the learner becomes familiar with the knowledge bit by bit (Van Mensch and Meijer van Mensch 2011: 37).

The entire team embraced the constructivist theory. In the exhibition, the objects were to be displayed without labels, so the visitor could imagine their names and purposes and observe or check their textures, weights and sizes, etc. By observing the public, we noticed that some of the toys had lost their original meaning or use, and become instead fictional characters of stories invented by children.

Creating new stories about museum objects is bringing fiction into museums. Fiction can be a curatorial method, an educational tool, or a means of artistic expression to help the visitor deal with a historical truth or a real story. A recent example of a fictional museum is The Museum of Innocence, maybe the first museum designed after a novel. The writer Orhan Pamuk claims to have conceived the novel and the museum together. “This is not Orhan Pamuk’s museum. Very little of me is

here, and if it is, it’s hidden. It’s like fiction” (Kennedy 2012).

Another concept adopted by the team was the one of participatory public and participatory museum. Behind this concept, there is an endeavour to make cultural institutions more dynamic, relevant places, to change the museum’s programs and mission. In the Preface to her work *Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon (2010, n.p.) claims that her aim is to

define a participatory cultural institution as a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content. *Create* means that visitors contribute their own ideas, objects, and creative expression to the institution and to each other. *Share* means that people discuss, take home, remix, and redistribute both what they see and what they make during their visit. *Connect* means that visitors socialize with other people—staff and visitors—who share their particular interests. *Around content* means that visitors’ conversations and creations focus on the evidence, objects, and ideas most important to the institution in question.

The authors of *Enhancing Young Children’s Museum Experiences: A Manual for Museum Staff* suggest that adults should guide children in museums following some learning-teaching principles. The process should be: 1. child-centered (the adult finds out what learners know and builds on their existing knowledge base), 2. developmentally appropriate (children’s cultural background, age and individual differences are taken into consideration), 3. responsive (teaching-learning encounters are characterized by dynamic, two-way, respectful exchanges between adults and kids), 4. flexible (multiple entry levels into teaching-learning dialogues and situations allow for children of all ability and skill levels to take part in some way), 5. play-based (kids are encourage to engage in hand-on, minds-on, self-directed, enjoyable play situations), and 6. empowering (opportunities are provided for children to





Bucharest 2017. Photo credit: Iulia Iordan.

make choices and be agents of their own learning) (Piscitelli *et al.* 2003: 12).

We imagined a design where the child would discover the environment in her own way: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, linguistic, or naturalistic. We eventually noticed that the public approached the artefacts in both inter- and intrapersonal ways. Researchers in the museum field talk about three main interactivity types for facilitating strategies and activities in children's learning: child-adults/peers; child-technology; and child-environment (Andre 2017: 47). The toys elicited different reactions from different visitor groups, according to their interests and expectations: parents and grandparents relived their childhood, triggered by a single toy or a game; groups of children experimented with toys, make-believe, and creating objects; not to mention the organizers' own subjectivity which was reflected in the whole exhibition.

It is one of our aims to further encourage parents' contributions within the play frame of toy exhibitions and other exhibitions

for children. We believe this will enhance the time spent together between parents and children, encourage the young ones to communicate their thoughts, and allow children to be on equal footing with parents (Shyne and Accosta 2000: 45).

The Exhibition Stations

Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and Me was built on several levels: 1. the familiar—some toys were put in open boxes or simply on the floor, as they would be at home; 2. the studio—making musical instruments and dolls, tinkering, story writing, sensory exploration of textures, the puppet theatre, etc.; 3. the teaching place—sounds, technical information, multimedia; 4. the museum—the restoration laboratory, with tools and instructions how to heal the “sick” toys, as well as the three pictograms with visiting rules.

Each station was attributed a name, its *icon* toy and accompanying story, and several categories of artefacts. Each hosted specific activities and addressed a certain type of public. Following the activities proposed by

the curators and educators, the visitors were able to fashion their own objects, which they could then take home or display in the room, next to the heritage objects.

The stories used as teasers for the exhibition were recorded professionally and broadcast on Itsy Bitsy FM, and are now available on the Association's website. As the project progressed, the objects that inspired the stories no longer corresponded with the stations; they were instead reassigned to other groups of toys, as the *stars* of other installations in the show—such as the Wooden Elephant or the Doll in the Cradle. Gradually, a sixth station began to take shape and took on a central role: the one dedicated to the collector Iosif Herțea himself.

All stations had to provide free access to toys. The fragile ones had to be placed on a higher level or fixed on a board or protected with transparent sheets.

Five team members were chosen to be each “in charge” with one of the five stations: the Cuckoos station was designed by Ozana Nițulescu; the Laboratory – Toy Hospital station by Alexandra Zbucnea; the Stick, Cloth, Plastic station by Iulia Iordan; The Kasperl Theater station by Bruno Mastan; and the Small Toys aimed at young children by Daniela Mișcov; all integrated in a single coherent concept by the curators.

The space of the Arch Room (Sala Arcelor) at ARCUB Hanul Gabroveni, which hosted the first exhibition, was the one that shaped the curatorial concept and the design solutions. As the exhibition had to be visible from the street as well, some pieces were displayed in the window frames. Thin plastic sheets, polyethylene tubes and tracing paper created a visual rhyme with the translucent light fixtures hanging from the ceiling, contrasting with the brick

Bucharest 2017, Opening. Photo credit: Iulia Iordan.



walls. Small toys—the elephants, horses and cuckoos (suggested by the title) were to be found throughout the exhibition space.

The Cuckoos Station

Including the most representative musical toys from the Herțea collection, it was displayed near the entrance to attract passers-by through visual (silhouettes of birds hung in the window) as well as auditory means (the sounds from the musical instruments in the exhibition). The station was assembled from objects hanging in the air or displayed low enough to permit observation but high enough to be out of reach, due to their fragility, but also to create a magical atmosphere as only flying objects can. There were musical instruments mounted on a fixed tether within children's reach that the visitors could try out, accompanied by a brief description about how they were made. On a digital screen, visitors could listen to the five stories or follow the short movie with demos of the cuckoo sounds made by the fragile objects they were not allowed to touch. At a small table in the midst of these diverse activities, visitors could build their own harmonicas, with materials and instructions provided by the organizers.

The Laboratory–Toy Hospital Station

The goal of this station was to introduce children to the restricted areas of a museum: the storage rooms and the restoration workshops, and to teach them about the collector's role and his responsibility towards his collection. Of all the stations, this one became the pivotal point, without being labelled as such, because here children could think and ask themselves about what a museum and heritage are, as it was intended to stimulate reflection.

They were invited to sit down at a desk, analyse the objects brought to them, fill out a museum card, repair toys (or pretend to using specific tools), or create a personal collection according to their own criteria.



Bucharest 2017, The Laboratory. Photo credit: Iulia Iordan.

The Stick, Cloth, Plastic Station

Still on the path that took the visitors around the exhibition space, there was the Stick, Cloth, Plastic Station. Using both the width and height of the space, this station, characterized by contrasts, consisted of a highly diverse range of toys: handmade, limited edition or mass-produced, made of plastic, wood, or cloth.

Three flat human silhouettes were displayed on the wall. One was labelled “I am Plastic. Give me a shape, and I will fill it!”; another “I am Cloth. Give me a shape, and I will wrap around it!”; and the last “I am Stick. Give me a shape, and I will fix it!” Visitors were invited to approach and fashion toys with their own hands at the worktables. Children could ultimately attach their creations to the silhouettes. The aim of this station was to encourage the visitors to ask questions about the history of toys, to ask themselves about their own qualities as consumers, the qualities of traditional or handmade toys vs. mass-produced toys, etc.

The fact that the *materials* themselves became *characters* owes to their very different backgrounds and means of display. While the plastic toys were displayed as a dense rain falling from a cloud of transparent sheets (next to a box where visitors were invited to leave broken toys to be recycled), traditional toys were displayed in dioramas, and their stories were attached to them on handmade labels.



The Kasperl's Theatre Station

Moving on, we advanced further into the world of stories through the medium of theatre, at the Kasperl's Theatre station. The leaflets included a short description of Kasperl's Theatre and its characters. As the Herțea collection contained a huge number of puppets used in this traditional German puppet theatre, we decided to integrate a small stage on which stories and role-plays could be imagined. The success of this space was obvious from the opening of the first exhibition, thanks to the convenient placement of the puppets, the colourful rug for kneeling and sitting, and the pieces of fabric that could be operated as cloaks or curtains. Children engaged with passion in creating hand puppets—by drawing faces on gloves and then using them as theatre puppets.

Small Toys

The theatre was followed by the Sensory Station aimed at the youngest visitors. Considering the target age, a large and safe

surface was chosen, with toys that were very different in texture, form, and weight, multifunctional and appropriate for small children to play with. The space was filled with an array of tubes and balls, jingling toys, a tent with puppets, in which visitors could stay and draw, large sheets of paper and crayons, hiding places, a collection of stories that could be read to children in a comfortable chair, and dioramas crafted from objects that could constitute excellent materials for imagining new stories.

The Collector's Station

The path ended with a presentation of the collector. Next to a piece of fabric with his name hand-sewn on it, which had hung on his office door for many years, was a screen playing an interview with Iosif Herțea conducted by children, using their own questions: "When did you start to collect toys? Which was the first toy? Do you have any funny stories about the purchase of any of the toys?"

Bucharest 2017, The Kasperl's Theater. Photo credit: Iulia Iordan.



Itinerary

Another curatorial challenge was to maintain curatorial coherence while adapting the display to fit the architecture and devices of several exhibition spaces. In this consideration, in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca the display was similar. When we took the exhibition to Braşov, at the Ştefan Baciú Memorial House (*Casa Ştefan Baciú*, administered by *Casa Mureşenilor Museum*), the concept of the exhibition had to be adapted to the specifications of the space. The toys were integrated into the space of the memorial house, and the original arrangement of the furniture and other interior objects and the spirit of the early twentieth century were kept intact. The exhibition allowed for several interpretations. One was an invasion of the toys as in a game animated by the children's imagination. For Valer Rus, the head of *Casa Mureşenilor Museum*, the "curatorial and exhibition concept" meant removing all the toys from bags or boxes, lining them all up, as in an attempt to play with all of them at the same time. The several open old suitcases displayed in the room were meant to give another perspective on the collections—the toys had made a voyage through time and space and landed in the house of a man who himself had travelled around the world. This was an experiment to make the Baciú

14) Raluca Sofian, visitor, comment in the guestbook, June 2017.

Braşov 2017. Photo credit: Roxana Cornea.

and Herţea collections talk to each other, to move the focus back and forth from one subject (the house) to another (the toys).

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Conclusions

One of the visitors wrote in the guestbook: "No, this is no menagerie, but a solution project that I, for one, have long been waiting for. It comes from an association that is impossible not to love. Named "Da' De Ce" (I Wonder Why), it chases many rabbits, but it stands a good chance of actually catching them. Under the general goal of bringing kids closer to their heritage, we see many colourful, impeccably documented ideas."¹⁴

One of the outcomes of our exhibition building process was the confirmation that very good interactive exhibitions can indeed be created in Romania; that places willing to host such events exist, as well as the audiences to engage in the activities and use their potential in a creative way. At the end of our exhibitions, we gathered stories and objects made by children, names of possible future donors and partners, and new ideas about ways to further explore the collection.

The positive public reception of this exhibition is a strong reason for hope. It also encourages the design of new exhibitions to make heritage accessible, to show it in new contexts that stimulate visitors to interact with objects, not only cognitively and affectively, but also creatively. "But if you can go deeper, you can go further. If you can be relevant to how people define themselves in their hearts, you can open more doors" (Simon 2016: 56).

We can summarize that, in each of the four locations, the target public and the marketing were different. In Cluj there were programs developed by the host museum, in Braşov most of the visitors came as school groups, and in Bucharest there were educational programs organized by team members Daniela Mişcov and Bruno





Písek 2018. Photo credit: Petr Bruha.

Mastan and several embassies. In Písek the majority of the visitors were very young.

The team believes that *Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and Me* sends a message to museums to create spaces, programs and collections dedicated to the young and very young public—to search their collections for objects suitable for children; to hold objects besides heritage particularly for this purpose; and to include, in temporary and permanent exhibitions, principles and elements adapted to the needs of young people.

Da' De Ce Association is open to taking the exhibition *Elephants, Cuckoos, Horses, and Me* on the road again and is looking for institutions interested to participate in this work-in-progress project.

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of the collector Iosif Herțea (March 2018, Germany). Fortunately, he knew that his collection was in safe hands, and that many toys had already been exhibited for children, which brought him great satisfaction.



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