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## Museum Documentation Between Openness and Accessibility. The Example of the Ethnographic Museum, Zagreb

I would like to thank the Editorial Board of *Etnološka tribina* for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on open science and open data from the position of a museum documentalist. The text by Olga Orlić, which serves as a starting point for this discussion, has prompted me to reflect on how and to what extent are museums and the museum community involved in these processes. Therefore, at the very beginning, I would like to highlight the definition from the *Museum Act*, which states that museum activity entails the acquisition, research, professional and scientific processing, and systematization of museum collections, as well as the permanent protection of museum objects and documentation for the purpose of ensuring accessibility, education, interpretation, and presentation to the public as cultural heritage (official gazette “Narodne novine” 61/2018, Art. 3). Recognizing museums as institutions oriented toward sharing and opening up knowledge, with an emphasis on accessibility, encourages reflection on established practices and the role of museums in the processes of open science and open data.

In this text, I focus on the issue of opening data in the museum context, with particular emphasis on the practices of the Ethnographic Museum. Using the example of museum documentation, I aim to illustrate how data are collected and created through the process of professional processing of museum collections and documentation. Since organized data in databases are a prerequisite for accessibility and successful information retrieval, it is worthwhile to trace the continuity of efforts to standardize museum documentation systems directed precisely at more efficient data and collection management. I will reflect on these developments in the following text, using the example of the Ethnographic Museum, from its beginnings to today’s digital environment.

### The system of museum documentation management: the example of the Ethnographic Museum, Zagreb

Systematic documentation of museum objects and documentary collections at the Ethnographic Museum began immediately after its founding in 1919. The foundations of professional and scientific work were laid by Vladimir Tkalčić, the Museum’s first curator, through the formation of collections, inventorying of the material,

and establishment of documentary collections.<sup>9</sup> In the Museum's early years, alongside the inventory book, a main and several auxiliary card catalogs were introduced, as well as documentation concerning the introduction of objects into the Museum. This documentation was clearly structured and represents the beginning of efforts to standardize and ensure the transparency and accessibility of data at the Ethnographic Museum.<sup>10</sup> This organized documentation system represented a strong foundation for subsequent improvements in line with contemporary museological trends,<sup>11</sup> which continue up to the present day, when museum documentation is maintained digitally through the M++/Modulor++<sup>12</sup> information system and is harmonized with applicable legal frameworks and national standards.

The *Museum Act* defines museum documentation as “a systematically created, collected, organized, and stored set of data generated during the processes of professional processing, protection, and presentation of all museum objects, providing information on their creation, characteristics, history, acquisition, conservation, and tracing any other changes since they entered the museum” (official gazette “Narodne novine” 61/2018, Art. 3). It consists of primary, secondary, and tertiary documentation<sup>13</sup> and is created through “processes of research, inventorying, recording, presentation, and communication which represent a continuous process of data processing and updating” (official gazette “Narodne novine” 21/2023, Art. 2). The mandatory procedures for managing and using museum documentation are set forth in the *Regulation on the Content and Manner of Maintaining Documentation on Museum Collections and Activities and the Manner of Accessing Museum Collections and Documentation* (official gazette “Narodne novine” 21/2023).

Since 2014, as part of the program *Development, Publication and Maintenance of National Regulations for Cataloging: 2024–2016*, a joint initiative of three heritage communities (library, archival, and museum), the *Code for description and access to resources in libraries, archives, and museums (KAM)* has been developed as a standardized

9 Vladimir Tkalčić (1883–1971) was the curator of the Ethnographic Museum from 1919 to 1925, and later its director from 1925 to 1934.

10 For more on the beginnings of documentation management at the Ethnographic Museum, see Vlatković 2019 and Vlatković 2022.

11 When discussing standardization, it is also important to highlight the contribution of Paula Gabrić (1909–1989), curator at the Ethnographic Museum (1948–1978). In the early 1950s, based on an analysis of inventory and cataloguing systems in domestic and international museums, Gabrić drafted a proposal for managing documentation of ethnographic collections while following the system for recording museum collections in the former Yugoslavia, issued by the Federal Ministry of Science and Culture in 1950 (Vlatković 2019: 68).

12 The Ethnographic Museum began using the M++ information system in 2009.

13 According to the *Regulation on the Content and Manner of Maintaining Documentation on Museum Collections and Activities and the Manner of Accessing Museum Collections and Documentation*, primary museum documentation consists of: the inventory book of museum objects, entry ledger, exit ledger, deposit book, collection registry, study collection register, revision register, register of deaccessioned museum objects and documentation. Secondary museum documentation includes: registers of audiovisual collections, hemerotheque, plan archives, documentation drawings, records of exhibitions, conservation–restoration–preparation procedures, field research and collection activities, professional and academic work, publishing activities, educational programs, events, interactive, multimedia and digital products; documentation on the founding and history of the museum, and other records as defined by the museum's general act. Tertiary documentation consists of tools such as various catalogues and indexes, used for faster searching and use of data, which are derived from primary and secondary documentation (official gazette “Narodne novine” 21/2023, Art. 4).

framework for the identification and description of materials in heritage and information institutions. The standardization of collection data has been emphasized as a goal of KAM, in order to create the conditions for the exchange, sharing, linking, integration, and reuse of data.<sup>14</sup>

Tools such as catalogues and indexes, which facilitate the searching and use of data, are today maintained in computer systems with controlled vocabularies.<sup>15</sup> Work on the standardization of terminology at the Ethnographic Museum has been present since its earliest years, when a system of auxiliary card catalogs organized by object type and locality was introduced, accompanied by the creation of card-catalog vocabularies. In the early 1980s, Croatia launched the project *Basics of Documentation and Classification of Museum and Gallery Objects in the Socialist Republic of Croatia*, within which a *Classification of Museum and Gallery Objects by Object Type* was developed. This classification system was intended to ensure uniform processing and searching of objects across various museums and galleries and was open to amendments (Muzeologija 1987). The Museum actively participated in this project with a working group that drafted an amendment proposal in the field of ethnography<sup>16</sup> (Fruk 1990: 22, 25–34). Activities aimed at standardizing museum terminology continued with the system of central museum activities, and in 2006, a national project was launched to develop terminology, i.e., a thesaurus for ethnographic museum objects in Croatia.<sup>17</sup> However, despite efforts toward standardization, in practice it has been only partially implemented when it comes to terminology. Terminology in databases was either entered inconsistently or the terminology control tables did not establish relationships between terms to enable more efficient searching and access to information. Instead, the uncoordinated entry of terms led to the creation of unstructured vocabularies.

### From openness to accessibility

From the very beginning of the Museum's activities, there has been a continuous effort to make its collections accessible to the public, through exhibitions, printed catalogues, professional publications, dissemination of academic papers, and a long-standing practice of granting access to museum materials and documentation upon

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.kam.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/KAM\\_letak-A4.pdf](https://www.kam.hr/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/KAM_letak-A4.pdf) (accessed 23 September 2025). For more on KAM see also Willer et al. 2023.

<sup>15</sup> According to the *Regulation on the Content and Manner of Maintaining Documentation on Museum Collections and Activities and the Manner of Accessing Museum Collections and Documentation* they are part of tertiary documentation (official gazette "Narodne novine" 21/2023, Art 4).

<sup>16</sup> The proposal for the amendment of the *Classification of Museum Objects* in the field of ethnography was prepared by a working group of the Ethnographic Museum consisting of Mirjana Randić Barlek, Ivan Šestan, Aida Brenko, and Nerina Eckhel, and was adopted on 15 June 1990, at a meeting of the Working Group for Classification (Fruk 1990: 22–25).

<sup>17</sup> The project was initiated by the Ethnographic Museum, as the institution responsible for implementing the first level of central activity for ethnographic museums, collections, and materials. The thesaurus was developed by Irena Kolbas and Aleksandra Vlatković between 2006 and 2012 (Kolbas and Vlatković 2009).

request.<sup>18</sup> This approach demonstrates that the Museum (and indeed museums in general) has long been part of the broader process of opening data and sharing knowledge with users. Contemporary concepts for managing museum documentation and data emphasize digital accessibility, which, alongside the protection of materials, enables better insight into collections, improves availability and search quality, and ensures fast, simple, and comprehensive access to information. The Ethnographic Museum strives to achieve these goals through its completed digital projects, as well as those currently in preparation.<sup>19</sup>

Given that museums create and share data and thus contribute to disseminating knowledge and the development of shared resources, I consider it important that the museum community has a say in discussions on open science and open data. The practice of openness in museum documentation and data undoubtedly enhances the accessibility of museum collections, encourages interdisciplinary research, and promotes transparency. However, despite ongoing efforts to make museum collections and documentation open to users, such openness does not necessarily imply full accessibility. On one hand, the process of organizing and standardizing data, aimed at improving searchability and accessibility, has begun but is still ongoing. On the other hand, the opening and responsible sharing of data require clear guidelines as well as ethical and legal frameworks. I would therefore conclude by agreeing with Orlić, who emphasizes that, according to the FAIR principles, the openness of data does not necessarily mean their full disclosure, but rather their availability under “well-defined conditions” (Landi et al. 2020). This is further confirmed by the EU Horizon 2020 Open Science guidelines, which state that data should be “as open as possible, as closed as necessary” (Mons et al. 2020).

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18 In a 1922 text, Vladimir Tkalčić wrote: “As much as possible, the administration has met the needs of anyone who wished to make use of the museum’s collection material in any manner” (Tkalčić 1922: 75). Tereza Paulić, in the article *Activities at the Museum in 1937 and 1938*, mentioned individuals who, “for the purpose of professional study, worked in the museum during the previous year, for longer or shorter periods” (Paulić 1938: 234). These quotations confirm the existence of a practice of granting access to the museum’s materials from the very beginnings of the museum’s operation, a practice that was formalized in 2001 through the *Regulation on the Conditions and Manner of Access to Museum Collections and Documentation* (official gazette “Narodne novine” 115/2001), the currently applicable regulation is the *Regulation on the Content and Manner of Maintaining Documentation on Museum Collections and Activities and the Manner of Accessing Museum Collections and Documentation* (official gazette “Narodne novine” 21/2023, Art 4).

19 A portion of the Ethnographic Museum’s materials and documentation materials is available via the online catalogue (<https://katalog.emz.hr/hr/>), while parts of the museum collections are also presented at virtual exhibitions available on the Museum’s website (<https://emz.hr/virtualne-izlozbe/>). The Museum is also involved in the eKultura – “Digitization of Cultural Heritage” project, within which selected objects from the museum’s collections are published on the project’s portal (<https://ekultura.hr/>).