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A DEAD ROM IN A PHOTOGRAPH

- A CASE OF CULTURAL MOBILITY

OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

In museums, the difficulty of interpreting and managing cultural differences usually comes up in discussion regarding non-European cultures or recent immigrants. Many Europeans tend to forget that on our continent, well rooted in our societies, centuries-old ethnic and cultural minorities live, about whom the majority population is ignorant, even though these minorities are a part of everyday life. The most striking example of this is the Roma people, who have lived all over Europe since the Middle Ages and still remain virtually unknown.

In 2007, the Luxembourg City History Museum took the task of deconstructing the petrified myths and prejudices about the Roma and disseminating knowledge about their history and culture. The result was an extensive exhibition with a deliberately provocative title 'Watch out, Gypsies! The History of a Misunderstanding'. It was a success and created much discussion. As the Roma were also a subject of current debate in Finland, the Helsinki City Museum presented an adaptation of the exhibition in 2009. By preparing this exhibition in collaboration with the Finnish Roma, it provided an interesting lesson about the cultural challenges of showing Roma objects, and especially photographs, in a museum.

PURITY - KEY VALUE OF THE ROMANI CULTURE

The division into the pure and the impure is central in the Romani culture. Cleanliness practices have an effect on everything: living, housekeeping, eating, and dressing. Cleanliness and the modesty that is attached to it define the relationships between men and women, and especially older and younger people. The purity customs are particularly strict concerning Romani women of fertile age. These customs only apply to the Roma, so the majority population is not even expected to follow them.

As a Rom grows older, he or she becomes pure. The basis of Romani social customs is respecting all Roma who are older than oneself and protecting their purity. One must address old people respectfully, and one must not be indecently dressed in their presence. The elderly are the first to eat and are always given the best place to sit or sleep. A young Rom will never take a place above an older one, for example, upstairs.

Death is impure and corrupts everything that is in touch with it. For this reason, the personal belongings, for example clothes, of a deceased Rom are destroyed. No Rom wants to live in a home where someone has passed away. This does not mean, however, that the Roma would not inherit their parents' home. It is customary for old people to give their valuables, such as jewellery, as gifts to their children and grandchildren, who in turn cherish them as dear mementos.

The memory of passed away elders is treasured through photographs, to which the same purity rules apply as to living people. The photos of the deceased are kept in the kitchen, the purest and most valued room of the home. The photos of younger people are never hung above the photos of the elders. As the feet are considered impure, beds are placed so that the legs do not point to photos of the deceased. A photo album is never placed on a chair or on the floor, because these are also impure.

ROMANI PURITY PRACTICES IN A MUSEUM

Knowing that the Romani purity customs are linked with old objects and photographs, it seems at first sight very difficult or even impossible to create a museum collection about Romani culture. However, since the 1970s, Finnish museums have collected numerous Romani items, mostly clothes, lace, and jewellery, which are usually acquired through purchase. There are also some photographs, mainly as the result of documentation projects that have been organised by the museums and partly as donations from the Roma. These collections have been treated and used as any museum objects.

When the Helsinki City Museum was preparing the exhibition about the Roma, great care was taken in collaborating with the Finnish Romani organisations and respecting the Romani customs. The Roma were consulted about several details of the exhibition, and they also checked the manuscript. Before the opening, a group of Roma was invited to see the exhibition in order to avoid cultural mistakes that might offend Romani visitors. This was the first time that we realised that the main problem was the fact that the exhibition venue, the Hakasalmi Villa from the 1840s, has two floors.

Respect and trust

can bridge

a cultural borderline.

We were planning to place an old photo of a Finnish Romani family on the lower floor of the villa. Seeing that, one member of the group said that she could not go upstairs because of the photo. As mentioned, younger Roma, especially fertile women, should never be above older Roma. Now, we learned that this rule also applies to photographs of deceased Roma – at least according to some Roma. Even though the other Romani women in the group were ready to go upstairs and encouraged her, she was uncompromising. We decided to alter our plans and found a new place for the photograph upstairs.

This episode made it clear that, in practice, there are many differences in the interpretation and adherence to purity customs between the different Romani groups in Europe and also within our country. For instance, the Roma in Northern Finland are much stricter than their southern kinsmen. As there are neither rulebooks nor authorities on proper Roma life, the families and even individuals interpret the traditions according to their own feelings, which of course creates conflicts within the Romani community.

Later on, this ambiguity became even more obvious as we faced a genuine cultural clash. We had received from the collections of the National Board of Antiquities some old photographs of Finnish Roma. These were used in the exhibition book and brochure, which were available at the entrance, on the lower floor of the villa. An elderly Romani woman from Northern Finland visited the exhibition and found to her surprise a photo of her passed away father in the brochure. She was shocked and furious and said that her heart broke as any young Romani woman could step over her father. She accused our Romani guide and demanded that every single copy of the brochure and the book must be immediately taken upstairs. She also called several notable Roma and raised a ruckus over the exhibition.

Our Romani guide – an elderly woman of southern origin – was astonished by this reaction. She could have never imagined that someone would be offended by a photo printed in a book or a brochure. Logically thinking, it is

impossible to control the location of every single copy, as they were printed in thousands, so any photo might easily end up in many impure places and situations. But, as our guide said, this had nothing with logic to do. Somewhat reluctantly, we removed the brochures and books upstairs – and hid some of them near the entrance desk because selling the book would have been impossible otherwise. As a precaution, we also removed all the remaining very old photographs of the Finnish Roma from the lower floor. The bad feelings were settled and the rest of the exhibition's duration went on without further conflicts.

RESPECT AND TRUST CAN BRIDGE A CULTURAL BORDERLINE

Our case is an interesting example of the challenges of documenting and presenting a culture that is different from our own. The Romani notion of photographs is very difficult to adapt into present-day museum practices. Even if a museum is most willing to respect the Romani traditions, it might prove impossible to store and exhibit the photographs – even those printed in books or brochures – always on top floor. Today, as increasingly more historical photographs are digitised, published on the Internet, and watched on whichever computer screen all around the world, the idea of controlling the exact physical location of a photograph has become quite absurd.

Inevitably, a Romani photograph crosses a cultural borderline as it is taken into a museum collection. It loses its position as a dear and highly respected memento of a passed away ancestor, and becomes a collection item among hundreds of thousands of similar ones, as an example of an exotic culture, which is meant to be exposed to people who are unfamiliar with the set of values linked with it. Understandably, this hurts the Roma. They are not accustomed to museums, which are rather marginal, actually almost unknown, to them. For them, photographs are very intimate containers of memory, not impersonal historical documents with a more general meaning and importance, as museum curators tend to see them. In a way, this could be interpreted as a form of cultural exploitation of a minority.

Meanwhile, the Finnish Roma have become aware of the rapid change of their culture. During the past 50 years, the Roma have abandoned their former nomadic lifestyle in the countryside and settled in urban environments. This has caused a break in the transmission of tradition from the older generations to the younger. Subsequently, the Finnish language has replaced the Romani language, old Romani songs and tales have been substituted by commercial popular culture, and memories of the people's past are fading. At the same time, the education and organisation level of the Roma has improved in Finland, and they have begun to see their history and cul-

ture as a positive source of identity, something to be respected and preserved by themselves – and others. This has finally led to claims of founding a Finnish Romani museum and writing an academic history of the Finnish Roma.

The eventual founding of a Romani museum necessarily involves close cooperation with curators representing the majority population, as there are no Romani historians or professional museum workers in Finland thus far. Respect and trust are quintessential to this work. In order to pass their heritage into the hands of the curators, the Roma must feel secure with them and be convinced of their consciousness of the Romani customs and values. Nevertheless, even the most respectful approach will mean further acculturation of the Roma. Creating a Romani museum is welcomed by the Roma as a symbol of cultural equality and esteem, but that project will definitely also transfer the values of the majority to the Roma. Even in a Romani museum, their objects and photographs will be given new meanings and roles that are different from their customary ones. It is hoped that good compromises will be found between Romani traditions and modern museum practices. Maybe a positive, non-exploitative model for the cultural mobility of museum collections can be found this way.

JERE JÄPPINEN joined the staff of the Helsinki City Museum as a curator in 1999. He has a degree in Finnish and European history, ethnology and museology from the University of Helsinki and has also studied arts management at the Sibelius Academy (Helsinki). He has published popular and scientific articles. He is also the author and editor of a dozen books.