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**GRASSI**  
**MUSEUM FÜR VÖLKERKUNDE ZU LEIPZIG**



**REPORT ON PARTICIPATION IN SKD RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP**

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***"THE CHANGING MUSEUM AND EDUCATIONAL PROJECT "AN OBJECT FOR  
DIALOG. FROM DIASPORA TO DIASPORA"***

***Dr. Davit Poghosyan***  
***Armenian State Pedagogical University after Kh. Abovyan,***  
***Chair of Museology, Armenia***  
***SKD fellow 2016, Grassi Museum of Ethnology***  
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## - INTRODUCTION / CONTEXT

Within the framework of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD) and the British Museum cooperation and offered special fellowship it was honour for me to be selected and invited to share my expertise and experience with colleagues of Grassi Museum of Ethnology in Leipzig. The museum is one of the oldest ethnographic museums in Germany and it has almost 200 000 collections from all over the world. I was invited to work with Dr. Miriam Schultze on educational activities and conduct research in this direction. My engagement in fellowship continued by following ways:

1. *My own observation of the museum communication context and the educational activities.*
2. *Working in the library, searching online materials and checking the guestbook.*
3. *Talking with colleagues and involvement in some activates.*
4. *Working on a special educational project.*

Grassi museum of Ethnology as one of the central cultural points in Leipzig is now on the way of transformation from the space of encyclopaedic narratives of the world to the interpretation forum for actual topics. Tradition of museum curatorial-academic narrative and sometimes its colonial perception of the world now is being replaced by the new museum space, where dialog, critical thinking, creative experience and discussions should reflect the parallel narratives and very often controversial issues in the multicultural society. This was reflected on changing process of the exposition, which is started with the new temporary exhibition: "In Between" and which is partly interwoven with the main exposition. So, during my observation I could see the following transitions:

- ✓ *From academic reflection and complex-geographical approach to topical presentation of the range of personal narratives by generally art and media installations.*





- ✓ *From explanation and concentration on the museum collections to the illustration with them personal stories, also art and media installations.*
- ✓ *From exploratory and didactic learning to participatory and inclusive experience*
- ✓ *From linear story to parallel interpretations, even “the museum's self -criticism” and different reactions from the audience.*

In this context I did my observation on two kind of educational programs: guided tours and guided tours with workshops, which I think are the general educational offers of the museum, like one of the main museum permanent services.

These programs were topical, interactive and dynamic with hands-on attributes and also creative involvement. This is priority of skilled educator and especially his/her willingness to work with the children. The active interaction with the audience, especially asking questions and answering them I found very important, concentrating on special topics and group of objects is also essential in the exhibition hall. Involvement in workshops and creative experiences is one of the opportunities for audience self - realization in the museum space. Though, I think that these were more effective engagement programs then educational one, because both formal and non-formal, also informal and alternative educational processes everywhere and especially in museum should have precise measurable outputs to find out how we were successful and what kind of content, values or may be skills or understanding we have developed.



I would like to point out again that museum is in process of changes and a lot of things are in experimental stage, though the following will be important on my opinion:

- ✓ *The balance between the art installations, technologies and its main collections as I felt that museum objects are in second plan or they are even hidden in their permanent place in the new exposition. Sensitivity to social issues can change museum image, but it will be also essential what kind of values is going to be transmitted by the museum now and what will be museum’s priority or peculiarity.*

- ✓ *Daily investigation of different requirements and responses, even the reasons of their absence are the most important base for further effective ways of changes in the museum.*
- ✓ *Environment of creativity, dialog, interaction and participatory engagement is the best way to transmit museum content, but for the education is also important to find out the results of museum communication.*

The hosting museum educational activities already cover interactive guided tours, workshops, educational parts in the exhibitions spaces. On my opinion the most important direction is to be developed those are special planned activities for the teachers and educators, mentors and volunteers involved outside the museum. In this directions can be useful the experience of the Pitt Rivers Museum and the British Museum, which have online methodical materials worked out for teachers etc...

One of the ways I found important is giving an opportunity to visitors to find alternative narratives of the objects, which some kind of the reflection of 19<sup>th</sup> century collecting tradition, but also can be actualised by looking them in new context. For example the issue of migration, which was the subject for range of parallel personal stories presented by the art and media installations in the exhibition "In Between", where authors tied to use original and permanent collections as an "illustrations" for the topic or alienate them by hiding. The roll of collections as a "fremd" and the interpretation mode of museum permanent collections prompted to think about "one object: different stories" concept in the context of changing museum.

## **EDUCATIONAL PROJECT "AN OBJECT FOR DIALOG. FROM DIASPORA TO DIASPORA"**

### **- *The concept***

My observations on changing communication environment of the museum and thoughts about the new interpretation of main collections of the museum under actual topics were essential to conduct research and work out a project. The main approach for this project was *universality*, which intended to find a model to put into practice by using each time one of the museum object's rich potential and provoke dialog between different generations and communities. Such an object-based educational model could actualise different stories and give opportunity to think about issues which are not so new in the world. I kept on thinking about the context of new contemporary exposition

(Dazwischen/in/between) and the programs related to it. The core of this new museum platform are the personal stories and issues to be discussed and reflected. These personal stories remained me a lot of stories about Armenian communities in different countries historically formed as result of Genocide, forced exile and migration, movements beginning from unknown times. My attention attracted some objects from the temporary exhibition collected in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century from an Armenian diaspora: New-Julfa in Iran, near former capital Isfahan. Especially a plate with lacquer paintings depicting seven scenes from a wedding ceremonial-symbolic process, which once had a huge importance for the community life.

This once famous Armenian diaspora was formed in a result of the terrible march through deserts and wastelands from their mother land in the beginning 17<sup>th</sup> century by one of the Iranian shah (Shah Abbas I) struggling with Ottoman Turkey and intended to devastate the places near to border, also to transfer active Armenian craftsmen and merchants near to the capital. Only half of people survived the terrible march and it is like the sad parallel of the later deportations of during Armenian Genocide in 1915. In short time this community became very famous in Iran developing not only crafts and trade across then known all continents, but also the spiritual life and education. One of the best examples of it was foundation of the first publishing enterprises in Iran .This community completely integrated in the Iranian environment and at the same time kept its identity. So returning to the plate which was created in 1829, it could be like very interesting symbol of integration, creativity also keeping traditions and identity, thus, it could be an actual point for nowadays European multicultural society. The object as “a migrant” can make us reflect on stories not only related traditional wedding ceremony and community life in 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also how the migration issue is the same during centuries and now in the world.

So, this symbolic original object itself is a kind of “migrant”, which has not its equivalents in Armenian museums. It can tell or remain different stories about diaspora for reflection of the Armenian nowadays community /another diaspora/ in Leipzig, Halle or may be from other places becoming a mean of education and dialog on the topic, which is actual for their common life in Germany today. So, the title of educational project was chosen “An Object for Dialog. From Diaspora to Diaspora”. Intended educational project can be one of the cycles within the framework of very well developed workshops at the museum. This model can be offered from children to adults. It is universal as it can be also adapted for other communities in Leipzig by changing the focal object and the narrative in it.



- *The object*



The object is obtained during scientific mission /Dr. W. Ph. Schulz was head of the mission/ in Iran in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is described as a wedding plate, which was used during ceremonial process or created as a memory after one of the weddings by local craftsman from New Julfa.

The technic is "Papier-mâché" covered by lacquer paintings, which are not so clear and the esthetically not so interesting as scientifically. The seven circular scenes on the surface of it telling us the main process of traditional Armenian wedding in the diaspora. The object was analyzed by Inge Sievert in her special article, which is giving us an opportunity to understand some Iranian and oriental influence on the community, but the main process and tradition is common to other traditional Armenian weddings described in works of Armenian ethnographer S. Lisitsyan. The object is very important source to understand not only the marital relations, but the importance of wedding and family for community.

The usage of such objects during traditional wedding ceremonies is not usual and I also tied in vein to find its equivalents in Armenian museum collections after the fellowship program. I. Sievert's mentioned article remained me about existences another such type of plate with one scene in the collections of Grassi Museum of Ethnology. It seems such objects were ordered by one of the rich Armenian families from New Julfa for memory of its life event. The manner of painting and the technic are another argument that the creator or the client had a tight relations with European and Eastern counties due to very well developed international trade and famous merchants living in this community.

- *Implementation:*

- ✓ The first part of the program will be guided explanation of the focal object and its context.
- ✓ Second part will be given to participants to draw their own plate and seven symbols in it, which will be presented and discussed.
- ✓ Organization of the project can be briefly described by following:
  1. *Approval of the proposal.*
  2. *Dissemination the offer and advisement in German, English and Armenian via museums web-site, Social Media.*
  3. *Registration and the price.*
  4. *Realisation at the Gallery of Orient and educational space.*
  5. *Methods: presentation, focusing attention on one object, interaction, discussion and workshop: drawing own symbolic plate by participants.*
  6. *Audience: All interested public segments, preference to teenager and students from 13 to 30.*
  7. *The focal object: Armenia Wedding Plate, Isfahan / Hochzeitsteller Armenier, Isfahan.*
  8. *Scientific source: Inge Seiwert, Eine armenische Hochzeit // Mitteilungen aus dem Museum für Völkerkunde Leipzig, N. 54, pp. 41-47.*
  9. *Equipment: Beamer, flipchart, A3 papers, pencils.*
  10. *Duration: 60 minutes.*

#### - Legacy

The project will raise an interest inside new audience and it can be also developed for other community, which are passive towards the museum and heritage as well. There is another aim to support the new course of changes, which has an aim to develop new image of the museum and its new socio-cultural mission.

The preliminary outputs from the project are:

- ✓ New audience for the museum.
- ✓ New learning experience for the public.
- ✓ Respect and knowledge toward heritage.

- ✓ Compering and reflective skills using the original objects and the stories behind them.
- ✓ Opportunity to share personal experience and connect the object to the real life
- ✓ New outlook towards the museum and its important social roll.

The educational outputs can be measurable through the further research of the process and the participants' feedback.

- *Experimental stage*

During my fellowship in Grassi Museum of Ethnology I also tried to put into practice my project. As one of the cycles or offers within the framework of already very well developed workshops at the museum I suggested it to educational department. During my Dresden visit the project was discussed with the colleagues (Dana Korzuscsek, Julia Fabritius, Claudia Schmidt) working different departments of SKD.

Target audience was selected a group of teenagers and students from Armenian community in Leipzig and Halle for the experimental stage. And I talked with some of members (Anahid Babayan, Hakob Matewosyan, Jeanne Réelle) of Leipzig Armenian Students Union, who supported me and who were ready for further collaboration.

Main parts of experimental stage of the project that were planned: guided tour in the galleries and concentration on an object, discussion on a different transformation of it and workshop, which would give opportunity to participants to draw their own plate with the key seven symbols showing the important things for their common life now in Germany.



I completed the posters in three languages by the help of representatives of Armenian Student Union and I worked out also a material for workshop.



All materials were sent to the museum educational department and they were included in my final presentation at the end of fellowship with hope that they would be used by the further joint efforts of museum staff and Armenian community.



- Thank you

I would like to express my huge gratitude to SKD for supporting me during British Museum International Program, then for inviting last year and now to be part of its professional life.

I would like to say words of thanks to my colleagues (especially Nanette Snoops, Dana Korzuscsek, Christine Fischer, Miriam Schultze, Rolf Schwarzer), who did they best to make possible my participation in this effective international program.