

Munkácsy's audiences and communities

The Déri Museum (Debrecen) is one of the most significant museums in Hungary. The richness and diversity of its collections make it a suitable place for intercultural events. One of its aspirations is to strengthen co-operation between all branches of museology and to benefit from having both local and universal historical collections.

Mihály Munkácsy (1844-1900) is considered by many to be Hungary's most important painter. Three of his finest works, the pieces of the *Christ trilogy* (*Christ before Pilate*, *Golgotha* and *Ecce Homo*) were exhibited in the Munkácsy Room of the Déri Museum side by side for several years. When *Christ before Pilate* had to be returned to its Canadian owner in December 2007, the leadership of the museum planned to install in the Munkácsy Room, next to the other two works, a montage of children's drawings and contemporary artists' works inspired by Munkácsy. This idea sparked off a heated debate. The leadership of the museum considered the trilogy to be a work that today's artists and audiences can react to and enter into dialogue with. However, most visitors consider the paintings as works beyond art that deserve unconditional respect and devotion. The pilot project was devised to try to bring the two views together.

Objectives

- To raise awareness of different viewpoints and to promote understanding;
- To develop intercultural attitudes and skills such as questioning one's own point of view, discovering the many-sidedness of identity and being open to different cultural groups or individuals.

Process

Organisers carried out background research by studying the visitors' books in the Munkácsy Room. The notes were usually "confessions" about their religious or nationalist sentiments. They also recorded visitors' attitudes during the farewell ceremony of *Christ before Pilate*.

A lecture series involving diverse viewpoints was organised to articulate the different interpretations and make clear that there is no single correct view. The lectures were followed by moderated discussions.

A competition was held for visitors to express their own ideas in creative form as well as look at the works and ask questions about them. Visitors were given a chance to plan a virtual exhibition called *My Munkácsy* by selecting ten to fifteen of his paintings they thought should be part of a representative exhibition.

The museum planned two other exhibitions: one devoted to Munkácsy relics, the other showing paintings by contemporary artists demonstrating the relationship between cult and interpretation. The closing event of the project was a conference where both experts and laypeople were given the opportunity to speak. Changes in participants' attitudes were measured before and after the project by means of the same questionnaire.

Organisers knew that the project would make people conscious of the relativity of their own points of view, and were aware that shaking the firmness of cultural identity could pose hardship for individuals. Therefore they emphasised the continuity and long duration of the project. They hoped that the diversity and frequency of the methods

used would not discourage participants, but make them realise that different cultural identities can exist side by side, complementing rather than contradicting each other.

Outcomes

Participants gained an understanding that behind the homogeneous cultic image of Munkácsy there is a face reflecting contradictions and tensions that is open to various interpretations.

Audience activity increased from event to event: towards the end both sides accepted opinions expressed by the other and welcomed the opportunities arising from the project. At the same time, one of the more surprising observations was that people still tended to rely on an external authority rather than themselves. They preferred conforming to an apparently firm opinion than taking the risk of making a mistake. Another conclusion was that people would rather take part in a celebration, where they can experience belonging to a community, than in a debate, which did not give a reassuring sense of unity.

The success of the project is also shown in that the audience accepted both the idea of exhibiting Munkácsy relics and the announcement of a competition for contemporary artists to express their relationship to the artist. This change was encouraged by the acknowledgement on the part of organisers that they should not display the contemporary artists' work in the Munkácsy Room. In other words, the museum recognised that the sanctity and cultic nature of the room must be respected, as there was tremendous need for experiences provided by such spaces. Organisers and participants had to accept different viewpoints. That is how the project became a real dialogue.

Institution

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Target audience

The Society of the Déri Museum's Friends and the Public Foundation for the Munkácsy Trilogy