

# EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES IN THE BULGARIAN MUSEUMS – SOME GOOD PRACTICES

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## **Abstract**

The emergence of opportunities for contemporary education, based on knowledge of cultural heritage, meets the current trends in the educational process related to the development of the individual in the context of globalization and the information society. The cultural organizations which include the museums, according to the current Bulgarian legislation, have the task of researching, preserving and presenting cultural and historical values with a cognitive, educational and aesthetic purpose. The museum environment ensures the realization of the pedagogical process by facilitating the acquisition of new knowledge, the development of creative thought and communication skills.

The history museums in Bulgaria have a long tradition in the implementation of a variety of educational programs addressed to different target groups of audiences. This paper presents the results of a research conducted under the research project entitled “Research of Contemporary Educational Programs of Cultural Institutions in Bulgaria“, won in 2019 Competition for Financial Support for Projects of Junior Basic Researchers and Postdocs, organized by the Bulgarian National Science Fund, part of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria, Contract № KP-06-M35/3 from 18.12.2019, led by Assist. Sonya Spasova, PhD.

Museums in the country are the object of the current research. After the selection is made, this paper provides up-to-date information on initiatives taken by the National and some Regional History Museums in 2019 in several areas: sustainable educational programs (related to calendar holidays and traditional customs, national holidays, celebrated dates, events and personalities); long-term educational programs (courses, jointly with schools, universities, kindergartens, cultural organizations, etc.); thematic educational programs (discourse, museum lesson, workshops, etc.). The main criterion for the choice of the institutions presented is the presence of various and numerous educational activities during the studied period, outlining good practices in this regard.

The implementation of the current educational initiatives in a museum environment is one of the aspects for successful implementation of the communicative museum policy. Educational methods serve not only to acquire new knowledge, but also to form a public museum consciousness and a moral responsibility to cultural and historical values.

Keywords: museum, educational program, cultural heritage, good practices.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The Bulgarian state has a rich historical past, preserved traditions, ancient language, manners and customs. As a cultural and scientific organization that searches for, studies, preserves and presents cultural and natural values with a cognitive, educational and aesthetic goal, the museum must generate an idea of the integrity of the historical process, to form the spiritual and civil identity of the individual and last but not least to prepare young people for their adaptation and realization in the modern democratic society in the context of cultural diversity.

The main characteristic of museum education is that it takes place in a specially organized information and aesthetic environment. The exhibits included in the educational process have the following properties: informative, representative, attractive, expressive and associative. For this reason, objects of cultural heritage, as a collection of cultural values, carriers of historical memory and information on the development of the civilization process, could help to overcome a number of problems regarding the expected and actual results achieved in the quality of the educational process in principle.

Today, museum pedagogy occupies an increasingly important place in the practical activity of museums, which develops in an integrative field of knowledge, bordering on museology, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. Museums correspond to varying degrees with pedagogical science and practice and with the cultural and educational space as a whole [1].

## 2 METHODOLOGY

A preliminary study of educational programs and other educational activities, published on the official sites of cultural institutions in Bulgaria, conducted in 2019 and in early 2020, was done. 28 historical museums (27 regional and 1 national) were the object of the survey. An information card was prepared and completed for each institution, with quantitative and qualitative indicators regarding the educational initiatives they offered for the period. The main criterion for selecting the examples and institutions presented in this paper is the availability of a variety of educational activities in order to outline good practices in this regard.

## 3 RESULTS

The results of the survey relate to three main categories of initiatives:

- sustainable education programs (related to the celebration of calendar holidays and traditional customs, national holidays, notable dates, events and personalities);
- long-term educational programs (courses, jointly with schools, universities, kindergartens, cultural organizations, etc.);
- thematic educational programs (talk, museum lesson, work workshops, etc.).

One of the aspects of the educational activity realized in the museum environment is related to the museum-school inter-institutional cooperation. That's why, there is a tendency for museum programs to be targeted primarily at children of school age, and the thematic scope of educational initiatives to refer to the most significant national holidays and historical events.

In recent years, an increasing number of museums have been reorganizing their space in order to separate areas intended for children's audiences. The National History Museum in Sofia has set up a children's educational centre and a program named "Learning through experience", through which children and young people can get acquainted with the Bulgarian cultural and historical heritage in an unexpected and inspiring way. The purpose of the activities offered is to make learning fun, filled with positive emotions and new discoveries. The thematic modules are adapted according to the age of the participants and the seasons in which they take place [2]. The Children's centre is very active in the field of applied arts in several workshops. The children get acquainted with the forms, decoration and technique of performing Bulgarian ceramics from different historical periods in the expositions of the museum, after which they recreate them in their works in the studio "Ceramics". An interesting and very up-to-date program is "Wonder Wash (the soap and its history from antiquity to the present day)". The purpose of the studio is to create an interest in ancient and modern methods of washing products used in the everyday life of people, as well as in an entertaining and fun way to nurture aesthetic taste and skill in their manufacture [3].

A museum children's corner has also been developed at the Regional History Museum in Blagoevgrad within the project "Improving the Work of the Bulgarian Museums with Children and Young People". The project aims to adapt museum exhibitions to the contemporary expectations of families and children and it is an opportunity for more effective binding between museums and the educational system. It is an example of introducing contemporary trends in the promotion of cultural and historical heritage by building modern and effective connections between families, schools, museums, and the academic institutions in Bulgaria. The Museum children's corner illustrates the findings of the museum's exposition through various games and interactive activities and this way adapts it to meet the needs of children and young people between the ages of 3 and 12. It is developed in two thematic parts: archaeology and nature. It is also suitable for individual family visits, as its specially designed games allow children to access without the need for a permanent museum guide. Thus, the museum children's playground provides a great opportunity for leisure, which combines play and new information for children [4].

The Regional History Museum in Kyustendil also offers a contemporary method of working with young audiences in its Museum Corner for children and adults. Its main theme is the way of life of people in antiquity, and its purpose is to provoke the curiosity of children to the history of the land where the town of Kyustendil is located today. Specially designed games invite the small visitors to play as children who once lived here, to prepare the dinner table for a family who lived 5 000 years ago, to tidy up his home and try out costumes from different periods. It is also attractive to parents who will discover a different face of museums, a full-fledged way to spend their leisure time with their children and new opportunities for their education and entertainment [5].

The opportunity for cultural institutions in Bulgaria to carry out activities on various projects allows museum professionals to organize innovative educational programs. For example, the Regional History Museum in Blagoevgrad is implementing the long-term project entitled “Children's Games on Saturdays”. The classes are intended for children from 3 to 13 years of age and have an educational character with an opportunity for individual works and creativity. These include interactive games through which children learn about various aspects of people's daily lives through prehistoric times, the Thracian period, antiquity and the Middle Ages. The scientific information is appropriate to the age of the audience and is presented in an attractive and accessible manner. Another project implemented in the same museum is named “Green Adventures in the Museum”, which aims to form a responsible attitude for children to conserve and preserve the natural and historical heritage [6].

An example of the implementation of a project policy regarding educational programs is the museum in Kyustendil. The Museum workshop “Game in prehistory” is part of the program “Culture and Art in Antiquity”. It is being developed within the framework of the project “CHILDREN AND THE MUSEUM. Cultural Heritage through the Prism of Children's Hands”, funded by the Ministry of Culture, which aims to upgrade the educational environment in the museum for the implementation of museum education [7].

Some museums take an innovative approach to conducting educational initiatives, attracting audiences during the students' summer vacation, which lasts about three months in Bulgaria. For seventeen consecutive years, the Summer Children's Museum School is held in the halls of the Regional History Museum in Blagoevgrad in June. The lessons are prepared and delivered by museum specialists and are fully in line with the curriculum for children from 6 to 13 years of age. The program includes interesting, entertaining, fun games and videos in the fields of nature, archaeology, ethnography, and history. In 2019, the four-week summer school covers 17 different topics, with more than 800 children from the city and the surrounding area taking part [8].

Another example in this regard is the “Summer at the Museum” program at the Regional History Museum in Kardzhali. The program aims to introduce children to the natural landmarks, flora and fauna of the region and how to take care for them. Practical games are included to help children develop their imagination [9].

An interesting initiative that receives very good reviews is the opportunity to celebrate some personal holidays in a museum environment. For example, the National History Museum in Sofia offers its visitors a “Have a Birthday” program. The program is suitable for children from 5 to 12 years' age. During the birthday, parents can view the museum's exhibits, while museum professionals organize interesting and educational activities for the children, including a photoshoot where children dress up with Medieval Costume [10].

## **4 CONCLUSIONS**

Today, museum education is part of the general educational process, and reflects the most important value orientations in society and contributes to a more complete and free adaptation of the entire educational system in social manners. Of course, there are many and varied models of educational activity in world museum practice. As vast as human imagination is, so many variants of museum educational models could exist. The main role is played by the museum specialists, who through observation and continuous communication with the museum audience create and realize the educational function of each museum. In Bulgaria, positive examples could be identified in this regard, and their systematic presentation and analysis will be carried out within the framework of the presented research project.

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