

# PLACING MUSEUM COLLECTIONS IN CONTEXT: HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE

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## **Abstract**

The paper provides a critical reflection of the agency involved in collecting practice of museums and in shaping meaningful entities that were visualized in the past, and how they work today. Museums' relation to the past, which is a key part of the process how they convey the image of past to the audience, i.e. how they present their own view of history, covers the questions which history is preserved, what narratives are constructed in the museum mechanism, how they are transmitted and who they refer to. If we take the view that museum collections are created in specific socio-historical contexts, and in considering the agencies that shape them, we are to necessarily consider the processes generating those contexts in order to grasp the nature of the practice, then, we have to acknowledge that the practice itself may have a profound influence on shaping that very context. Highlighting the notion of museum collections as loci of encounter and negotiation between museum and society, the paper provides insights into the paradigm shifts of museum collecting in Macedonia and into its responses to specific social demands from 1945 to the present. Examining current strategies for bringing historical collections to the public and how museums handle the challenges of contextualizing them in today's institutional program, particularly in terms of identity and memory, the paper proposes that if museums are considered as critical instruments of fundamental social change, then providing important public influence can only emerge from a clear vision of their future course, which means that research into contemporary cultural and social relevance of historical collections must occur in the intellectual framework of the museum and its objectives in society.

**Keywords:** museum collecting, historical collections, socio-cultural context, historical narrative, cultural identity, cultural memory.

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## **СТАВАЊЕ НА МУЗЕЈСКИТЕ КОЛЕКЦИИ ВО КОНТЕКСТ: ИСТОРИСКИТЕ КОЛЕКЦИИ И НИВНАТА СОВРЕМЕНА КУЛТУРНА И ОПШТЕСТВЕНА РЕЛЕВАНТНОСТ**

### *Анстракт*

Во трудот се дава критички осврт на двигателите вклучени во практиките на колекционирање на музеите и во формувањето ентитети кои имаат значење што биле визуелизирани во минатото, и како тие функционираат денес. Односот на музеите кон минатото, кој е клучен дел од процесот како тие потоа ја пренесуваат претставата за историјата на публиката, односно како го презентираат сопственото видување на историјата, ги опфаќа прашањата која историја се чува, кои наративи се конструираат во музејскиот механизам, на кој начин се пренесуваат и кому се тие упатени. Ако го прифаќаме гледиштето дека музејските колекции се создаваат во специфични општествено-историски контексти и од таа причина при разгледувањето на двигателите за нивно формување неопходно мора да се земат предвид процесите кои ги генерираат тие контексти, со цел да се разбере природата на практиката, тогаш треба да се прифати дека и самата практика може да има големо влијание врз обликувањето на тој ист контекст. Нагласувајќи го сфаќањето на музејските колекции како места на средба и преговори меѓу музејот и општеството, трудот дава увид во промените на парадигмите на музејското колекционирање во Република Македонија, неговите одговори на специфичните општествени барања, од 1945 година до денес. Истражувајќи ги сегашните стратегии за донесување на историските колекции на публиката, и како музеите се справуваат со предизвиците на нивна контекстуализација во институционалната програма денес, особено во однос на идентитетот и меморијата, во трудот се предлага дека ако музеите ги сметаме како критички инструменти за суштинска промена на општеството, тогаш обезбедувањето на важно јавно влијание може да се произлезе само од јасната визија за нивната идна насока, што значи дека истражувањата на современата културна и општествена релевантност на историските колекции мора да се одвиваат во интелектуалната рамка на музејот и неговите цели во општеството.

**Клучни зборови:** музејско колекционирање, историски колекции, општествено-културен контекст, историски наративи, културен идентитет, културна меморија.

## INTRODUCTION

The relations between museums and society are permanent. Not only are they immediate, in the sense that when talking about the history of museums, it is always to some extent a history of the society in which they operate, but also they are inseparable and continuous because of their varied and numerous intersections in the past and today, which will surely be present in the future. Museology has long abandoned methodological reductionism which in exploring and interpreting existing contemporary relationships in museums follows their continuity within a linear, undifferentiated history. Due to many limiting circumstances, examining the origin of phenomena and processes, especially the development of museum collecting, has always insisted on knowing the socio-cultural context of certain historical periods, so the research of the Macedonian situation should adopt the same methodological approach according to which essential understanding of the past and present museum collecting practice can only arise from perceiving those domestic phenomena and processes, which in the search for their own chronology and developmental course from the past to the present, insist on understanding the terms and circumstances of their genesis, raising the questions how they differ, how they have changed and why.

But the issue we focus on here was prompted by something else. The Macedonian situation shows that key aspects of the relations between museums and society can be largely *obscured*, not only to the wider public but to the professional one, resulting in presenting the development of museum practices as a retrograde process. Museums seem, in considering their relation to the past and to the material world, to be dominated by an approach that presents the individual, basically *same* institutions as competitors, as if they were interchangeable. This further causes many prejudices which make the one more be regarded as the complete opposite of the other, which is not only inaccurate but also harmful as it implies exclusivity in which two separate worlds exist in parallel.

Then, what approach should be adopted in considering museum collecting practices in Macedonia's contemporary socio-cultural context? What reveals the potential of museum collections as loci of critical reflection on the past and present, especially regarding ideas of history, nation and identity? What conditions them to be relevant and to make a valuable impact in society?

As a basis that reveals the spirit in which this paper has been written and at the same time provides the general guidelines for how it should be read, we will only refer to one of the aspects of the approach advocated here. To understand the nature and essence of museum collecting, one must consider the relations and interconnections between museums and society in their totality, not just in terms of one set of aspects. Moreover, the various museum practices must be thought of in the manner of substantial complementarity, a separate contribution to building and creating the unity of the world of material things. Such an approach, which originates from the complexity, universality and globality of culture, creates that polyscopic vision where different practices are not two separate worlds but two halves of the same world, which enter into dialectical unity and can no longer be thought of and analyzed independently.

## MUSEUMS AND THE IDEA(L) OF HISTORY

On 8th September 2011, on the 20th anniversary of Macedonia's proclamation of independence, Skopje witnessed the inauguration of the "Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence, Museum of IMRO and Museum of the Victims of the Communist Regime"<sup>1</sup>, a specialized historical museum, whose primary theme of museological study was "the original presentation of historical, cultural and revolutionary traditions of Macedonia and of the Macedonian people in its centuries-old struggle to create a national state in the Balkans."

The Museum opening was an important event in many respects. Following a general passivity in museum activity in the 1990s and early 2000s, when due to various difficulties (non-recognition of the state's independence and constitutional name, an economic embargo, increasing political, ethnic and social tensions, difficulties in establishing rule of law and civil democracy, late adoption of legal and political instruments of cultural policy, etc.) it was largely neglected, this was the first expression of positive change aimed at revitalizing and modernizing museums in the country, which began with the introduction of new museum legislation in 2004 and continued especially after 2006, as the Ministry of Culture increased

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<sup>1</sup> Following the proposal of the special Commission appointed by the new Government to review the social justification of the Museum, its name was shortened to "Museum of the Macedonian Struggle" in 2019.

significantly its museum management and cultural heritage protection budget. Therefore, the Museum establishing in 2008 was of major importance for maintaining continuity with the previous (Yugoslav) period, which presented financial and logistical state support in starting or planning largescale investment projects in museum activity as a valuable initiative towards strategic and systematic interest and action in this area that was to contribute to its continuous development.

Opening the Museum was also important with regard to meeting long-term changes and reforms in cultural policy which, following country's independence in 1991, not only reflected the organizational and institutional network of museum activity, but also the area of critical ideas, concepts and notions of museum objects. Gaining, for the first time in its history, the ability to independently set the general directions of its own cultural development, the state's attitude to culture had changed radically in the new pluralistic social setting. Unlike the federal period when some institutions and individuals from other Yugoslav states in the 1980s showed striking tendencies of belittling the importance of Macedonian national contribution to culture, whose size was made equal to the territorial size of the individual Federation states according to the adopted principle of republican "keys" as a mode of selection; after Macedonia's independence, cultural policy priorities were clearly given to promoting and affirming Macedonian culture within the European and global cultural values and to preserving the authenticity of Macedonian cultural identity. For museum institutions, this meant a necessary shift in both consciousness and practice, especially in terms of collecting. However, while cultural policy priorities had been conceptually and strategically clearly defined, the opportunities for their implementation in practice were largely reduced owing to limited funding, lack of adequate or sufficient staff, space conditions, etc., which lead to museum funds being fortuitously replenished, often with items that did not fit either the institutions' organizational profile or the concept of their existing collections. Hence, the new Museum collections were the first example where the current social discourse on national cultural identity has been implemented by systematic and planned institutional policy.

The Museum quickly gained high international recognition as a modern institution, designed and implemented according to all professional standards. In short, its professional story was by all parameters rated as extremely successful, which is not a common case worldwide, let alone in Macedonia where it is a rarity. However, rather than causing high public affirmation, the Museum opening caused visibly divided and opposing reactions,

which continue even to this day when the institution has been well established in the domestic museum milieu. The public reactions were mostly caused by the fact that the Museum was a dominant part of the controversial “Skopje 2014” Project, so the strongest objections actually referred to the financial cost of its construction. Expert opinions have also raised questions about the real social need and justification of having such a museum, especially as there are other historical museums in its immediate vicinity that treat the same period, but such voices were significantly quieter and, in our opinion, the discussion was completely ill framed.

The views expressed essentially questioned the general approach in presenting the idea of national history, and so the Museum, as a mean for “mediating” the past into the present and a mode of expression, was primarily perceived as an active participant in “re-reading” history, the most important aspect of which was just how closely the “official” historical discourse was followed and how correct it was in every detail. Moreover, told from an *authentic Macedonian point of view*, “in order to come to a *true* picture of why Macedonia is as it is today”, its reread, *ideal* image of national history fully coincided with the political agenda of the then ruling party, which had apparently assessed well that the form of a “museum” was a particularly appropriate instrument for providing strong support to its current policies. Therefore, advocating a particular political stance, caused the Museum’s function to be viewed and re-examined exclusively through the prism of a pronounced connection to politics and as a form of political activism, although, of course, this was never its primary purpose.

What did the Museum exhibition actually present? As “a documentary, contemporary and objective visual tool for the most significant phenomena and processes in Macedonia’s recent history”, it presents “the historical experiences the Macedonian people went through to achieve its liberal vision, the original idea of the Macedonian revolutionary struggle for liberating Macedonia, for unifying and creating an autonomous and independent Macedonian state”, and “the resistance of the Macedonian citizens against the communist dictatorship, sacrificing their life for an independent, unified and democratic state.” Ideological reconsideration and reworking of history, therefore, involves not only disputing and completely “deleting” certain parts of national history related to the former social order, but also affirming “forgotten” or rather formerly forbidden parts of it that were now to be included in the official order of memory.

Their inclusion was neither gradual nor modest. It starts with the remarkable impression left by the Museum's grandiose building, located on the left bank of the River Vardar and constructed in the spirit of eclectic aesthetics or the so-called "Pseudo-baroque" style. It continues with a luxuriously furnished interior, where the museum's narrative of national history, in the form of a visually striking design solution, spreads on 2000 m<sup>2</sup> and two floors. The exhibition starts from the center of the official entrance hall, where the 1991 Declaration of Macedonia's independence is exhibited, and continues with a series of 19th and 20th century wax figures of world leaders on the second floor. Totaling 13 departments<sup>2</sup> it is actually composed of two parts (reflecting the Museum's name) – the former dedicated to the Inner Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, presenting the significant phases of its struggle for freedom and independence, and the latter dedicated to the victims of the communist regime in the newly constituted Macedonian state in the post-World War II Yugoslav federation. Wax figures and artworks (mass pictures of realistic narration) play a dominant and active role in presenting historical figures and events in individual chronologically arrayed rooms. Various original objects and substitutes (documents, photographs, newspapers, publications, weapons, personal and ethnological items, etc.) are also featured, although to a lesser extent.

The visitor does not have to see the exhibition to get a strong sense of "identity", "belonging", "national pride" and "historical justice". The external context has implied all of that, starting with the museum's title, to the location and architecture of its building. The effects of the particular exhibition interior arrangement however, which avoids many of the traditional museum techniques, create a distressing and dramatic atmosphere that makes the museum experience cause pronounced empathy with the "tragic fate" of the Macedonian people. The dim lighting and the numerous, at times rather exaggerated, details and historical items, form a woeful and nostalgic setting, strongly interspersed with a sense of subjective lyric, enhanced by the use of other museological elements such as texts, video and audio recordings etc. Although some parts of the museum narrative may be judged as

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<sup>2</sup> The *first* section presents hajduk movement from 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century; the *second* reforms of the Ottoman Empire and their implementation in Macedonia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the *third* Razlovec and Kresnensko Uprisings of the Macedonian people during the Great Eastern Crisis (1875–1878); the *fourth* political and cultural-educational activities of Macedonian intellectuals from the pre-Ilinden Uprising period; the *fifth* MRO's activities in the period 1893–1903; the *sixth* 1903 Ilinden Uprising; the *seventh* activities of the MRO from the end of the Ilinden Uprising to the Young Turk Revolution; the *eighth* period of the Young Turks regime (1908–1912); the *ninth* Balkan Wars (1912–1913); the *tenth* Macedonia during World War I (1914–1918); the *eleventh* Inter-War period (1918–1941), the *twelfth* Anti-fascist and National Liberation War of the Macedonian people (1941–1944); and the *thirteenth* victims of the communist regime during Yugoslav federation (1945 to the 1990s).

overemphasizing of Macedonian historic figures as eternal sufferers and tragic fighters for territorial and spiritual freedom, there is no doubt that it strongly, clearly and directly addresses the people, those who still remember some of the events that make up the topic of the exhibition. The museum's "truth" appeals and it is actually based on activating what is still alive in people's memory, so the exhibition is experienced as something that has sprung from their memories and something that cannot be disputed for this very reason, something that is not "finished" or determined by the definitive curatorial authority.

Less than 500 meters from the new Museum, in the permanent exhibition of what is still publicly known today as the "old" Historical Museum, the unknown visitor could still see a completely different picture of national history. Established in 1951 as Museum of the National Liberation War, two years later it became a specialized history museum dedicated to "the original documentation, study and presentation of the socio-economic, political and cultural development of Macedonia from the arrival of the Slavs in the 6th century until today". It had worked independently until 1977 when, as a result of the general tendency of integrating museum activity, it was joined with the Archaeological and Ethnological Museum, thus becoming a part of the Museum of Macedonia.<sup>3</sup>

Housed in a building of emphasized modernist architecture, the Historical Museum existed in a parallel reality in Skopje's old urban and commercial center – Fortress Kale (6th century) and the Old Skopje Bazaar (12th century). In the modest interior, which speaks volumes about the institution's financial opportunities, the museum cabinets packed with original historical objects (photographs, documents, weapons, personal items, audio and video, etc.), presented a completely "outdated" idea of national history, systematized in a permanent exhibition opened in 1985 and not updated ever since.<sup>4</sup> Chronologically divided into six sections<sup>5</sup> its dominant part was devoted to the workers' and socialist movement in the

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<sup>3</sup> In the first few years, the three museums act as an affiliated organization (separate institutions with joint administrative departments and laboratories). In 1984 this complex organization was renamed the Museum of Macedonia, in which previous museums became departments. In 1991, an art history department was opened in addition to the existing departments. In this organizational structure, the Museum functioned until 2013 when the Department of Archeology was divided into a separate institution.

<sup>4</sup> The first permanent exhibition, dedicated to the NLW in Macedonia, was formed in 1953 in an adapted Skopje Fortress building. After the earthquake in 1963, in which this building was completely destroyed, the collections were placed to several locations in Skopje, until moving to the new building in 1977 when a new version of the permanent exhibition was formed. Due to the need for modernization, the exhibition opened in 1985 has been closed today.

<sup>5</sup> The *first* part refers to the Slavic-Byzantine period from the 6<sup>th</sup> to late 14<sup>th</sup> century; the *second* to the Ottoman rule in Macedonia (1371 to late 18<sup>th</sup> century); the *third* to the period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance of the Macedonian people; the *fourth* to the national-revolutionary movement from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until the end of World War I; the *fifth* to the Interwar period; and the *sixth* to the NLW and the Revolution in



country, to the Communist Party and to the organized armed resistance against the World War II occupation by fascist forces, ending with ASNOM's First Session (August 2, 1944), which laid the foundations of the modern Macedonian state. In all of its parts, alongside political, aspects of economic and especially cultural life were presented, with prominent attention to the role and work of the autocephalous Ohrid Archbishopric, to the Macedonian revivalists and their struggle for education in their mother tongue during the Ottoman rule, and to activities of individual public workers for affirmation of the uniqueness of the Macedonian people, the codification of the Macedonian language, etc., in conditions of increased assimilation and denationalization of the Macedonian people after the Balkan wars.

Without going beyond the frames and limitations of accepted museum practice, the mediation of institutional authority in conveying the museum's message has been restrained, with no overt explanation and drama. Minimal interpretation and almost complete absence of subjective context, leaves the visitor with the opportunity to independently "discover" the details of the historical "story", but to properly understand it, he nonetheless needs a solid prior preparation and knowledge of history. Moreover, the administrative and organizational setting of the Museum largely shapes his idea of history, so for him the museum is *part* of a museum complex where alongside history, archeology, ethnology and art history play an equally important role.

Hence, in terms of museum exhibitions, two decades after the state independence, there were two historical museums – one glorifying IMRO and the other glorifying of the NLW, or one historical museum with two historiographical conceptions of Macedonia. This fully reflected the social context itself, so how was the society so was the history – divided and partisan – which does not preclude the existence of different, separate or parallel "truths". Confirming the theoretical view that ideas of "truth" and "history" are emphatically subjective concepts, this fully reflected Macedonia's own historical situation in a wider Balkan context also, in which Macedonian historical past not only changes, but one historical event or historical figure very often has more, mutually opposing "truths".

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Macedonia (1941–1944). In 2014, the section on the Aegean Macedonia refugee children during the Greek Civil War (1946–1949), was established.

## CONTEXT, CONCEPT AND COLLECTIONS: A FEW REMARKS ON METHODOLOGY

Permanent exhibitions, being a dynamic rather than a static concept, and subject to constant review and verification in line with current social needs, may not be the most appropriate indicator of valuing the functions of museum collecting in relation to contemporary social and cultural context, which is the main research focus of this paper. Yet, having in mind that material exhibitions have created both knowledge and appropriate social links since the age of modernism,<sup>6</sup> and that the links between knowledge and power expressed in a museum building (its architectural form and the layout of the evolutionary narrative of curatorial conduct within the exhibition in the interior space) reflect the system of order applied to shaping the collection,<sup>7</sup> permanent exhibitions could be regarded as the most visible manifestation of applied ideology in museums, understood as the basic defined concept that presupposes the idea of history or the adopted system of social views and ideas, which reflects its interests and dominant values at certain levels, at a given time. Hence, permanent exhibitions, as a “special” use of museum collecting, can also be seen as an essential reflection of the approach and discourse to cultural heritage as an ideological and symbolic construction, whose unifying narrative, revealing the impact of historical, political and social conditions in which cultural meanings (including heritage)<sup>8</sup> are created and interpreted, can also reveal the paradigms that have played a decisive role not only for institutional policies regarding collecting, but also for how collections and museum functions are perceived at an individual and collective level.

Going back to our primary interest here, the first question is: what does the conceptual orientation of museum collecting reveal?

Understood as a system of mediating and interpreting the past, it reveals the museums’ relation to the past, which is a crucial part of how they further convey the idea of history to the audience, i.e. how they present their own view of history, which covers the

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<sup>6</sup> S. M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An investigation into collecting in the European tradition*, 139.

<sup>7</sup> A. Russo and J. Watkins, „Post-museum Experiences: Structured Methods for Audience Engagement“, in: *Virtual Reality at Work in the 21st Century: Impact on Society, Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Virtual Systems and Multimedia, Ghent, Belgium, 3-7 October 2005*, H. Thwaites ed., Ghent: International Society on Virtual Systems and Multimedia, 2005, 173.

<sup>8</sup> K. Konsa, „Heritage as a Socio-Cultural Construct: Problems of Definition“, *Baltic Journal of Art History* vol. 6 (2013), 125.

questions which history is preserved, what narratives are constructed in the museum mechanism, how they are transmitted and who they refer to.<sup>9</sup> Hence, among the different levels of social consciousness, museum collections can be regarded as the most structured, permanent and most prominent expression of the collective attitude to the past at a given time. Research into collecting practices reveals not only the changes in understanding the term “heritage”, how it was conceived and defined, and what measures were taken to preserve it, but also the circumstances that have contributed to creating various collections of objects that for whatever reason have been considered valuable in a given period of time, which essentially reflects the mentality of a particular historical epoch, reflecting both its driving and limiting forces. For this reason, knowing and understanding the nature and history of collecting and its impact on museum development is an important aspect of questioning museum collections as material and social structures. It provides the framework for considering not only their historical but their future development as well. Given that they are still ongoing, these topics are also relevant to contemporary museum practices and to today’s perception of the role and purpose of collections by the public and society at large, so museums should be well acquainted with the history of forming the collections they own and how they relate to a more general context of museum collecting.<sup>10</sup>

Drawing on the former, the second question is: why is the social and cultural context important for valuing the functions of museum collecting?

Given the big differences between museums (in form, structure, collections, level of activity, etc.), difficulties arise in adapting collecting histories due to the possibility of associating each of their different material manifestations with a different set of constraining circumstances. Hence, the context emphasizes historical specificity, meaning that in the search for the origin of phenomena and processes, it reveals and enumerates particular political, cultural, economic and ideological relations typical of various historical manifestations, thereby enabling proper understanding of the concepts of change within museums, which also entails flexibility in understanding current practices.<sup>11</sup> In other words, since cultural reality of collections is always a product, that is, the status and function of

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<sup>9</sup> J. Friedman, „The Past in the Future: History and the Politics of Identity“, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 94, no. 4, 1992, 837–859.

<sup>10</sup> As S. Keane emphasizes, it must be borne in mind that the collection is something quite different from the museum – the purpose of the museum as an institution can be radically changed, at some point it may even be considered superfluous, but collections should be recognized as resources more durable and valuable than the institution that accidentally, and perhaps temporarily, possesses them. W.: S. Keane, *Fragments of the World - Uses of museum collections*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the shaping of knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1992, 8.

objects constantly changes in line with their association with dominant ideas at the social (state) level, examining the context reveals what exactly defines a collection and how it becomes “public interest”. Context, therefore, is an essential precondition for the approach to exploring different forms of museum reality in which history is imagined as a relation of different forces and strategies, i.e. in which is highlighted the need to re-question known phenomena and events by means of the three basic structures of knowledge – the renaissance, classicist and the modern.<sup>12</sup> Insisting on grasping the conditions and circumstances of development by highlighting the perception of changes, posing the questions of how things differ, how they have changed and why, the context enables one to discover the *cultural paradigm* in conceiving the ideas of history, identity and nation in museums, which is crucial not only for critically analyzing and understanding past museum practices but also for adopting new elements in museum operation, highlighting their radical potentials as loci of critical reflection on the past and present.

And the third question: how is the context of museum collections understood in this paper?

We see it, above all, as a field of opportunities, a boundary between the realities of desires and opportunities – what should have been done and what could have been done actually – which makes a difference.

Not losing sight of the premise that museums formed in the past are not the same as today’s museums, and that today’s museums cannot be precursors to what museums will become in the future, more generally, both examples are to show the limitations of the commonly accepted typological approach to studying the museum collecting, which understands context as the sum of conditions that can be set, identified and justified within a linear and non-differentiated history. Since both museums are historical, it is undoubtedly useful to consider their collections as fundamentally similar structures, an approach that will, inter alia, provide the basis for formulating and establishing continuity in culture without which it is impossible to link past and present practices and view them as an integral part of a national aspect.<sup>13</sup> Yet, if we consider their collections primarily as a concrete form of abstract influences of social context but with a “continuing” function in the present and the future, it

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<sup>12</sup> Ž. Vujić, „Povijesna muzeologija na početku 21. stoljeća: besplodno okretanje prošlosti ili suvremeno poimanje discipline“, u: *Modeli znanja i obrada prirodnog jezika*, M. Tuđman ur., Zagreb: Zavod za informacijske studije, 2003, 155–157.

<sup>13</sup> J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 2.

would be much more useful to separate them and to think of them as “placed in context” that encompasses both their physical (societal) and institutional (museal) location. Stressing the changes and inconsistencies in their development, this will enable us to consider the historical collections, those that were formed in the past, as dynamic entities that can serve as a resource in fulfilling today’s mission of museums as institutions and, vice versa, newly created collections not to be seen as a radical contradiction or as some sort of a hybrid innovation.

Simply put, the strict and narrowed typological comparison examines the two examples one *against* the other and, emphasizing the heterogeneity of ideas about history, nation and identity (as a selection of exhibits and how they are interpreted regarding the unifying narrative and the presentation techniques used) it basically adopts the principle of *negation*, forming the perception of the relationship between the two museums that is shown in all elements as a series of opposites: both in terms of collecting motives, and in terms of organizing the collections, and in terms of the visitors, etc. Placing the collections in context, i.e. adopting the approach whereby both museums are viewed one *with* the other, in which the key principle is that of *recognition*,<sup>14</sup> or accepting the particularity in which their similarities are amalgamated, creates a new cultural perspective that builds unity in differences and which, pointing out the *similarities* rather than the *differences*, reveals that the two museums have much more in common than we normally think. This allows the new Museum not to be seen as a *separate* phenomenon in Macedonia and the “old” Historical Museum not to be seen as an *exhausted* idea.

## PLACING COLLECTIONS IN CONTEXT

The relevance of the Historical Museum in today’s Macedonian social and cultural context has been widely questioned. Founded “in the glory of the NLW” and to glorify the “communist past”, the idea of history it represents is perceived as completely outdated and, compared to that of the new Museum, it is also “full of prejudice and wrong.” Starting from the visibility of the former institutional structure and the former ideology in the exhibition complex, such views confront us visually with the contemporary Macedonian historical

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<sup>14</sup> Jessica Benjamin, cited in: Zlatko Kramarić, „Identitet. Tekst. Nacija (Interpretacije crnila makedonske povijesti“), Zagreb, 2009, 18.

situation, which is characterized by radical break with “historical fallacies” of the previous period. The criticism expressed is essentially a critique of the implications that the Communist ideology had regarding the formation of museum exhibitions related to socialist history, much more illustrative of which are the examples of how the period of Ottoman rule in Macedonia or the items related to religion were presented, for instance.<sup>15</sup> In our opinion, it is a consideration of museum practices solely for their own sake, understood as communion with the past for its own sake, which in fact leads to repeating previous “mistakes” in interpreting history and rethinking it with even lesser responsibility. The present generation, convinced that it has dealt with the historical prejudices of the previous one, cannot see that it has become a victim of its own prejudices.

Placing its collections in context, one arrives at a fundamental shift in which prevails the awareness of the need to interpret the past in contemporary terms, i.e., to search for, to discover and to contemplate the cultural past to serve the present. In this respect, it should be emphasized that Museum founding was a result of the social-cultural processes that are an indispensable precondition for modern museum institutions to emerge, whose establishment in Western Europe during the 19th century has been closely related to the national emancipation of the European nations and the birth of their nation states. These opportunities in Macedonia, before its Liberation in 1944, did not exist as a historical reality. The regular course of contemporary Macedonian culture began only after World War II, as the first Macedonian nation state was formed, constituted as part of the former SFR Yugoslavia. In the new socialist setting, cultural development was set on radically different grounds than in the previous period – on formally equal terms with other Yugoslav national cultures, for the first time in its history Macedonia was given the opportunity to present its own national cultural tradition through the work of the first professional state institutions that formed shortly after the Liberation.

The new political, social and economic system that began to develop in the country created optimal conditions for programmatic development of all cultural activities, especially of the museums which, given the state’s large material investments, was priority of social interest. Therefore, the activities that led to founding the Historical Museum were

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<sup>15</sup> As a mandatory part of historical exhibitions, the locals’ resistance to Ottoman rule was presented by objects that explicitly incited hatred of the Ottomans. On the other hand, recognizing the millennial Orthodox tradition’s richness and diversity on Macedonian soil, which could not be ignored, included removing any content of religious connotation from religious objects and interpreting and presenting them as historical and artistic rather than sacred.

undoubtedly part of the general tendency to expand museum activity in former Yugoslavia, which also reflected in Macedonia, where begun a period of intensive advance in museum collecting since 1945, both in quantitative and qualitative terms which, due to the discontinuity and lack of tradition in the previous period, can be described as a process of filling in the historically imposed gaps, desiring to reach the world's modern trends as soon as possible.

For Macedonians, this was also a period of discovering their own history, a time when the official state historiography was established, which up until then had been written by others and which was the subject of continuous revision and denial in the wider Balkan historical and cultural area. Affirming a primarily objectivist rather than polemical approach, in which the starting principle was a value-based rather than possession-based criterion, it offered its own view of Macedonian political history, or how the Macedonian historical science saw some paradigmatic cases, persons, events, historical phenomena etc., unlike the positions held by the national historiographies of other Balkan nations. Due to partial knowledge of the past and to extremely limited access to historiographical sources in foreign archives, Macedonian historical science largely formed based on a historicist concept in which history was understood as an enquiry in which the notions of *document* and *fact* were fundamental, yet with awareness that they become historical *testimonies* only by being interpreted and with the premise that only what was preserved as a cultural heritage is of trans-historic value in the past.

Museums were, hence, part of the process of discovering the historical image and historical awareness of Macedonia, contributing to “filling in” the data of past historical eras, in which historical and national memory was erased and could not have been objectively known until then. Their collections were formed by careful, one could call it archival approach to examining the past, which relied heavily on academic history, i.e., on discovering historical facts. Relying on the fundamental features of the modernist museum, according to which the term “knowledge” is based on the organization of material evidence, although historical museum collections were supposed to provide legitimacy to the social system that raised them, were in fact a fundamental element of the whole of historical science due to the systematic organization of the material.

Focusing on the Historical Museum, given that it was formed at a time when the museums' goals and objectives were mostly on ideological and political action, its approach to historical and cultural past certainly centered on the dominant political ideology. The

organization and content of collections were mainly subordinated to the political needs of the Communist Party and its involvement in the Museum's work, as in all other museums at the time, was particularly pronounced in determining the thematic structure and content of the permanent exhibitions<sup>16</sup>. That is why establishing the presence of "intentionally elaborated ideology" and "state-approved view of the past", which are only a few of the components of the specific features of socialist history, is of no great importance for the contemporary relevance of the Museum's practices, because this actually explains how history had been carefully orchestrated and used as a political instrument.<sup>17</sup> Much more important aspects are revealed by the analysis of the very content of the collections, which were largely composed of documentary evidence that could provide "textualization" to socialist history (documents, manuscripts, letters, photographs, etc.), objects that, providing the legitimate position of socialism in the historical past, simultaneously allowed for contemporary depictions of history to be built on the old.<sup>18</sup>

Starting from this premise, Museum's collections did not only play an important role in establishing relations between the Macedonian community and other national communities in the former SFRY in a sense that they "proved" its involvement in the historical events leading to the formation of the common state. They also played a particularly important role in seeking the dimensions (or multidimensionality) of the cultural and historical development processes of Macedonia, in placing Macedonians in history and in historical times, revealing that which contained what was *ours* and what was of *others*, what defined and conceived of us as a people. The main benefit of this epistemological apology of the past is that its cultural paradigm departed from the notions of "people" and "culture", an idea of history that the Historical Museum could directly support, with authentic museum objects.

In contrast, the concept of the newly opened Museum departed from the notions of "nation" and "state", an idea of history that in Macedonia's case could, in a legal and political sense, largely be supported only indirectly or figuratively with "supplements" in the form of wax figures and works of art. This had further decisive impact on shaping such views of the Museum's practices, according to which the institution does not have the confidence of the

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<sup>16</sup> According to the guidelines for establishing museums, a section devoted to the NLW and the building of socialism was obligatory. Being a separate thematic wholes, the four-year NLW period and then ongoing period of socialist construction had to be given equal importance as previous historic processes. See: „Reorganizacija naših muzeja“, 5

<sup>17</sup> D. Kaneff, *Who owns the Past? The Politics of Time in a 'Model' Bulgarian Village*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004, 56–57.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 62.



majority as a public good created for public interest. Its idea of history, understood primarily as politics, is perceived as “theater” and as the historical “truth” of only one political party. Thus, the critique of the Museum, formed primarily in response to the questions of *who* and *how*, considers its contemporary function as a separate phenomenon and solely as a political instrument, which led to history defending politics and politics defending history, i.e., the views expressed becoming an integral part of the political confrontation.

In our opinion, these views essentially reduce to criticism of museum collections and museum exhibitions as their public act, to the way society gives legitimacy to some versions of history. If we have in mind that everything an authority (such as the state) determines to be worth preserving subsequently enters the political realm<sup>19</sup> i.e. that heritage is a fundamental instrument for promoting state ideologies,<sup>20</sup> public exhibitions are then merely the stage where political relations are played out and *what* is spoken of there is not of axiomatic significance but *who* has the right to speak on that stage. Placing its collections in context, one comes to a fundamental turn where the questions raised are complemented by *what*, *why*, *when*, and *where*, revealing that the new Museum has not only largely reiterated the functions and goals of the “old”, but the two possible methodological positions facing Macedonian historiography today: to explore the past from a present point of view or to explore the present from a past perspective.

There is no doubt that the Museum was part of the “revision” of national history that followed the country’s independence in 1991, when in Macedonia, as in all other countries where socialism was overthrown, the change in the socio-political order was followed by change in the ideological interpretation of history. In light of historical revisionism typified by marked attempts to redefine and transform national identity, museums were an important medium for channeling, disseminating and implementing the current social discourse on history and identity, which by interpreting their collections and through their permanent or temporary exhibitions were meant to construe meanings, notions and messages that had a profound effect on how it was perceived by the public. Macedonia was no exception to such tendencies but they appeared in most institutions either as an undefined position, without offering a different view of national history “in line with time”, or as a completely opposite effect, in the form of uncritical denial and marginalizing everything that belonged to the previous ideology by simple removal of the exhibitions.

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<sup>19</sup> R. Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a climate of decline*, London: Methuen, 1987, 144.

<sup>20</sup> R. Harrison, „Introduction“, in: *Understanding the Politics of Heritage*, R. Harrison ed., Manchester: Manchester University Press, 15.

Instead, the focus of the new Museum, both as a concept and as a way of presenting national themes of the past, formed a clearly expressed stance of the awakened national consciousness, in apparently changed social circumstances. Understanding the historical existence of the nation as unfinished up until the country's independence in 1991,<sup>21</sup> the Museum opened some of the most disputed chapters in Macedonia's recent history, especially the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century and some "taboo-themes" in Macedonian historiography that had not been scientifically elaborated until the mid-1980s. Hence, it was not only a place where a hitherto "banned", "suppressed" and "neglected" history was told, but also a place where an "unforgotten" one was memorized.

In other words, the Museum's exhibition "revised" the interpretation of the past in both the present and in the future thus encompassing the order of memory.<sup>22</sup> As the presented history relies heavily on the experience and memory of living people (in the section on the victims of communism), it is not only a history that anyone has the freedom and full right to tell, but also one that anyone can tell from their own aspect, as their *own* history. Although this raises the questions about whose history is most important, what aspects are to be presented and that the presented historical narrative may be viewed as a complete departure from the "official" discourse of history and heritage (which is otherwise one of the major objections to national museums today), the fact remains that in an environment where freedom of identification is perhaps what is most needed, the notion that the museum is what brings safety and renews confidence is crucial.

Therefore, its collections can be viewed as a way of presenting "difficult" history in museums, but also as a way of constituting it as a heritage relevant to a particular social and cultural context. Within museology, this issue is mainly related to the museums' sustainability, as a key aspect of the initiatives based on the story of the "difficult" past having valuable impact. For the Macedonian context, however, what is crucial is the very opportunity to raise the most difficult historical questions, the freedom to develop a museum that deals with the "difficult" past, even if sustainability is at stake because, owing to the nature of the subject matter they deal with, they contribute to rebuilding community of long-term value.

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<sup>21</sup> A. D. Smith, *Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, 1979, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> V. Simović, „Ideologija i ideologizacija sećanja: od socijalizma do kapitalizma i nazad“, u: *Izgnubljeno u tranziciji. Kritička analiza procesa društvene transformacije*, A. Veselinović, P. Atanacković i Ž. Klarić prir., Beograd: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2011, 233.

The closely understood frameworks of typological exploration of both museums, thus, raise the question of how much the Historical Museum is a *modern* museum in the contemporary sense of the word, and how much the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle can be considered a *museum* in a modern-day understanding of that notion, i.e. focusing on the collection itself, how much we can define it as *historical* and as *heritage*.<sup>23</sup> Placing their collections in context, it is precisely the answers to the essential questions about the future of museum collecting – what museums keep, for whom and why – that lead to the significant shift in perspective, which reveals that education has always been the priority of both institutions and that both museums can essentially be identified as elements of history science, which is of particular importance in determining their relevance in modern-day Macedonian social context.

In Macedonia, there is a persistent belief that the links between museums and science are strong and inseparable and this mixing of functions continues to this day, as does the belief that museums are primarily an educational force that develops material collections. It is these understandings that share meant to have crucial impact in forming critical judgments about their practices and the perception of their collections in the contemporary national context. But they should depart from culture, from the intellectual framework of museums and focus on collecting practices themselves as an opportunity to establish continuity, rather than depart from politics, or the socio-political ideas and ideologies that shape museum practices, in which, as in politics in general, discontinuities reign supreme.

Starting from the presented *idea of history*, it turns out that the new Museum's practices are just a continuation of the development and dissemination of views on the role, methods and goals of museum collecting in Macedonia, i.e., that it essentially continues the

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<sup>23</sup> If acquisition, preservation and utilization of a permanent collection is considered a central museum function, then this was clearly not a priority for this institution. The views of the exhibition as more of a dramatic reworking of history start from the concept of collecting and acquiring knowledge that was typical of 19th-century museums, neglecting the notion that the new museum paradigm, strongly marked by postmodern deconstruction, has been set in the complex of an interconnected and intertwined mix of media, methods and philosophies contributing to the individual way of acquiring knowledge, which means that personal meaning, beliefs and politics inside of it are elevated above the former philosophy of disinterested and rational objectivity (See: E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, 152–153). The idea of a universal truth expressed in museum collections and their interpretations has now been replaced by the accepted notion that knowledge depends on historical and political circumstances, on class, gender, ethnicity, and on a number of other factors and that henceforth there are no necessarily unified views but many perspectives on the meaning of particular items or collections (Ibid., 4). In other words, it must be borne in mind that, in addition to stridently recognizing the importance of intangible forms of heritage, this new approach also reconfigures the role of the collected object that increasingly loses its central place not only in generating knowledge, but also in communication.

Historical Museum's educational role in society. Here, the important distinction identified between the two approaches, which emphasizes that their collections have been shaped in line with the political and ideological discourse of the day, suggests that in rethinking all aspects of collecting in both museums, the individual features of their practices are more culture-relevant as they do not obey the "historical narratives of the past that the museum focuses on."<sup>24</sup> This shows that the two museums have essentially the same methodological approach to collecting and to the subject matter they deal with, in that the changes observable in perceiving and comprehending the concepts, images and messages they project onto the public regarding identity, nation and belonging are the result of changes or the different understanding of history, in line with time, rather than changes in museum practice or the functions of museums in society.

Both museum collections have been primarily shaped as an articulation of the relation between the objects and the official discourse of history established in scientific literature, which means that their legitimacy, from the aspect of content, rests on the ability to substantiate and reinforce the perceptions of the specific national narrative on history, nation and identity depending on the ideological and scientific context. Therefore, since the interest of museum collecting was primarily directed at those objects that were important to support the "ideologically approved" view of history, that is, the wider "educational" program of the state (government), the educational nature of museum institutions fundamentally define their collections as well. Only based on such understandings do both museums gain meaning, direction and credibility. Neglecting this aspect not only undermines the reputation and status of the two institutions but it can also have severe and irreparable consequences to the nation's own historical and cultural consciousness.

This shows that the concept of "heritage" in terms of its capacity to retain the values it embodies and carries, and the role and function of museums in society have never been questioned in Macedonia. Cultural content in museums continues to be regarded as an authoritative, quality and useful source that draws on the general public, hence the relevance of the historical content is determined by the cultural form itself – "museum", and not so much by the "authenticity" of the objects and materials exhibited. Consequently, the relevance of museum collections should not raise questions about the role of the museum as mediator and interpreter in the knowledge-forming process. Rather, it should move the examination of museum practices within the framework of the thought matrix that has its

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<sup>24</sup> D. Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993, 204.

source in understanding the social context and its demands, and in which social responsibility of museum institutions in seeking, shaping and conveying cultural identity of the environment they work in is strongly emphasized.<sup>25</sup>

(Moving on henceforth, perhaps, what we really need to talk about is the relevance of history, its methodological and philosophical position, in Macedonia and in the Balkans?)

### ON THE NOTION OF RELEVANCE

Both museums' collections show that national identity is a dynamic, changing category that conforms to new historical, social, economic and cultural circumstances,<sup>26</sup> not a fixed and stable concept, as it is believed in today's Macedonian society. They also show that it is difficult to truly and permanently find out what has actually happened in the past from museum collections, precisely because they are *selections* and because the way of (re)thinking history in museum exhibitions depends on its departing points, which means that it is not just about the objects and "objectivity" of the museological approach, but it is also about the objectives.

In Macedonia, however, museums cannot be places of critical reexamining and rethinking the ideas about history, nation and identity, because society itself has not yet reached the maturity of critically thinking of itself. Moreover, owing to the traditional notions museum institutions relate to as a concept – "continuity", "durability", "reliability", "trust" (precisely the values that are missing and which should be reclaimed by society) – history in museums is not only a *represented* history, it is a history that is valued and verified and, above all, one that cannot be disputed because it can be seen and touched, leading to understanding that museums are not places where the idea of history is *discovered* but places where history is *established*.

Hence, when the identity of communities in one social context is so closely linked to the construction of heritage, the essential question for relevance is not only *which* history is selected and exhibited, but also *how* it is told, and in particular, *what* its effect will be. In this

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<sup>25</sup> P. Davis, „Place Exploration: museums, identity, community“, in: *Museums and their Communities*, S. Watson ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2007, 57–59.

<sup>26</sup> See: J. Habermas, „Citizenship and National Identity: Some Reflections on the Future of Europe“, *Praxis International*, 12/1 (1992), 1–19.

regard, the primary question is not how much can a comparatively clear instrumentalization of the objects in the context of historicism and nationalism can be observed in the functional application of museum collections, but how they are mutually identified in the national project. Given Macedonia's current political and cultural situation, both internally and externally, regarding relevance, much more attention should be paid to the implications that (may) underlie the choice what to collect, than how and based on what criteria that choice is actually made. In other words, the relevance issue cannot be reduced solely to what are or what the ideological drivers were in shaping the notion of history in museums that led to its different reading, but what are or what may be the consequences of such "different" reading of history in museums, especially of its re-reading from the prism of the current political situation.

In conditions of deep societal division, not only in terms of different ethnic communities but also within the dominant ethnic community, the Macedonians, if the presented national narrative of history in a museum serves not to demarcate the present concept relative to the former but to delegitimize it completely, it is irrelevant that the depicted history can be seen as "continuity" and "connection" by one group, and as something leading to isolation and division by another because, in that case, in the forming of the collections, it was completely neglected the traditional use and definition of heritage by its greatest connoisseurs – the museums, and so the historical "truth" becomes a halved truth. With the state still struggling against denials and negations, starting with the name, language, culture and identity, that come from Macedonia's closest neighbors, the halved historical "truth" can be seen as untrue.

Therefore, in today's historical thought and in presenting historical narratives of national identity in the Macedonian context, a responsible attitude to the past is, above all, necessary. Studying exhibitions in historical museums, one may find two drastically polarized views on national history and national identity coexisting which, in our opinion, should not be merely a methodological issue reduced to the question of how much the idea of these notions we get in museums is presented through a critical historical perspective. Whether and to what extent this practice undermines the notions of the autonomous professional authority and competence of these institutions is yet to be discussed and, at this point, it is not an essential issue for Macedonia. Such practice raises the question of having a stable version of national history and national identity, which then results in numerous political manipulations in interpreting Macedonia's past and identity, which is essential for

Macedonia in the context of the current denial of these issues by its neighboring states in the present or in the past and also in the larger context of globalization. This issue needs serious attention because, if museums continue to be actively used as important resources in shaping ideas of history and national identity, then the question is not how much the contemporary practices of Macedonian museums are in line with political propaganda and what is the public perception of these institutions at the local level. Rather, it is how much they contribute to stabilizing national identity outside the local framework and how much they can serve to build a strong defense against political voices that continue to (re)examine the limits of the nation, its independence and uniqueness.

### CONCLUSION

The relations between cultural objects and social entities, i.e., the role of material culture in the life of society, is a recurring theme regarding relevance, so the central assumption must be that they are mutually constitutive.<sup>27</sup> If we consider museum collections to be socially created places and if their formation and use occur in the context of placed and established social practices,<sup>28</sup> then it must be borne in mind that such structures do not only reflect social relations but they also help them to be construed and to be given meaning,<sup>29</sup> that is, in turn, they dialectically create the social product.

In this context, recognizing that museums and the classification systems they embody are products of historical processes is very important because such recognition is the first step to rethinking the museum practice, which must embed the awareness that in presenting history, museums reshape and reassess the past in another context, that is, they construe the past with present intentions.<sup>30</sup> From this point of view, relevance refers to the basic defined concept of museums that presupposes the idea of history, which has a decisive role based on which museums (can) justify their choices in shaping their collections. But dangers lie in the

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<sup>27</sup> D. Miller, *Material culture and mass consumption*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987; A. Sayer, *Method in social science – A realist approach*, London: Routledge, 2010; T. Ingold, *Evolution and social life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

<sup>28</sup> A. Giddens, *The constitution of society - Outline of the theory of structuration*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984; P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; A. Sayer, *Method in social science – A realist approach*; D. Miller, *Material culture and mass consumption*.

<sup>30</sup> D. Lowenthal, *The past is a foreign country – Revisited*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

museums' dual mission, which, while preserving heritage, should also present it as a contemporary value and idea. This, as is well known, may include a strong tension and conflict between professional priorities and the social and communal expectations, and such pressures may cause harmful compromises whose impact is multifaceted, not just regarding the scientific aspect of performing museum functions. Moreover, if the consequences of the necessary compromise that is always present in exhibition solutions can be determined as temporary, the consequences of such a compromise on museum collecting are permanent and far-reaching.<sup>31</sup>

It is precisely these understandings of the relations between museums and society that should serve as a basis for examining museum collecting practices in Macedonia, which will serve not only for their appreciation in national context, but also in a universal sense, for their incorporation into the general order of experiences relevant to the wider, global context. If contemporary theoretical perspectives on the future of museum collecting emphasize that the validity, importance and purpose of the museum context can be determined only by collections, this must be adopted as the basis for a significantly altered attitude towards museum activity in Macedonia, where the museums' fundamental values will not be understood as normative, without understanding the dialectics of the relations between society and museums.

Museums, like all other cultural values, change over time in line with how the understanding of their social role evolves, with the emergence of new scientific knowledge, the development of institutional structures, the change of relationships in society, and so on. The impact of these factors has led to the critical examination, evaluation, review and supplementing of some aspects of professional museum work on a number of occasions within museology in line with contemporary needs, so there is no reason why they should not be the basis for critical (re)examination of museum practices in Macedonia as well.

Relevance is an ongoing process. Therefore, the question which museum practice criticism should focus on is not how value judgements that define "heritage" at the state (national) level are shaped, but how value judgements that determine it on a cultural level, in and through museums, are shaped. Heritage is always a political idea, but what is of

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<sup>31</sup> A. De-Shalit, *Why Posterity Matters: Environmental Policies and Future Generations*, London: Routledge, 1995, 129–130.



axiomatic significance here is that it is a real but *potential* ideological/political instrument.<sup>32</sup> It is precisely the questions that indicate how important social responsibility museums have in designing the concepts, images and messages they project to the public regarding identity, nation and belonging that emphasize the need for such an approach to their work and practices, which will encourage museums to take sound and responsible steps towards specific social (government) requirements, aimed at promoting the museum work more professionally than ideologically/politically.<sup>33</sup> There is no doubt that the success of museum work largely depends on social (state) support. But they should be autonomous, creative institutions thinking beyond ideological constraints and trying to overcome them, otherwise they may miss the opportunity of further having the confidence of the public, which always recognizes the ideological or political instrumentality of museum work.

This means that museums will accomplish their mission in modern society when they adopt such a methodology in approaching the past and to collecting, in which they will strive for greater awareness of not only what they do, but of how and why they do it. Museums cannot change what has happened in the past but they can change what the past has been used for and thus what it symbolizes. They cannot depoliticize or de-historicize history, but they can *humanize* it and, offering a fundamentally *cultural* view of history, relevance should assume how a museum initiative changes the way the past or history is understood, how their influence, use and purpose are transformed. In this understanding, the idea of history is primarily (or merely) an instrument for successful heritage management and in our opinion, this should be considered particularly important as it has the potential to transform society.

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<sup>32</sup> J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The management of the past as a resource on conflict*, Chichester; New York: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 1996, 46.

<sup>33</sup> *National Museums Making Histories in a Diverse Europe*, EuNaMus Report no. 7, 2012, 40. Available at: <<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-85590>>.

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