

# The Living Museum



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## NIKOLAUS HOFBAUER

Nowadays, living history is a popular concept in the world of interactive presentation techniques. A scenic performance of historical everyday life works most effectively in historical settings such as historic sites or reconstructed buildings or villages. But what about the traditional museum with its approach of showing a historical object in a modern environment? A lot of institutions already offer interactive concepts but still the conventional form of (audio-)guided tours through their collections, without any possibility for the visitor of first-hand experience with the shown objects, is the most common way of visiting a museum.

The „living museum“ concept is designed for the atmosphere of a conventional museum. Our experience shows that not only children appreciate a hands-on approach to objects of the past. Whether it is the surface of pottery, the sensation of fabric under one's fingers or the weight of a weapon or armour, the visitor is able to experience the objects in an entirely new way within the original daily-life context. To achieve this, detailed reconstructions of the original according to scientific standards are needed. Some museums already offer the possibility of touching reconstructions and replicas, but an object is still silent. Therefore a living, breathing intermediary, able to respond to visitor requests during the representation of real objects, is vital. It's the intermediary only who can breathe life into the objects presented, a pursuit which addresses the visitors' expectations and adds value to their visit. What is the actual task of this intermediary? An interpretation of historic characters (first-person interpretation) for example would miss the mark by losing the focus on the object and further superimposing the scene. Therefore, the intermediary should remain a modern person effectively being able to interact with the modern visitor on an interpersonal basis (third-person interpretation). A visual separation is desirable, therefore, intermediators should work in clothes meeting the same scientific requirements as the presented replica. We believe that this small step of

„historically wrapping“ the intermediary piques the visitors' curiosity, draws their interest to the subject and overall makes it easier to start a conversation. The importance of correctly reconstructed clothes instead of simple carnival costumes needs to be emphasized. Their mostly inauthentic design would be figured out by the educated museum visitor in a second - which immediately diminishes the credibility of the intermediary. Consequently, a pseudo-historical appearance would decrease the quality of experiencing the presented reconstructed objects. In fact, the clothing and outfit of the intermediary, both detailed and of excellent craftsmanship, has to act as a small and intimate stage to provide a highly plausible scenery for replicas and reconstructions of museum objects. Some objects may also be presented in modern clothing, but the embedding especially of objects of daily use or fashion in the context of historical clothing and daily routine is inevitable.

### Planning and Execution

The idea of the „living museum“ is applicable to the classic museum as well as similar institutions. Co-operation with the curators and managers is highly important. Success very much depends on an appropriate topic that can easily be prepared by the performing group or individual and fits the museum's specialization. Let's take „light and illumination in the 14th century“ as an example: After deciding on the respective topic, a creative dialogue between the intermediators and the persons responsible for the related objects at the museum has to be established. In most cases it will involve the curator or the collection. Brainstorming will be most efficient in this preparation phase. Since the „living museum“ is focussed on material culture, it is necessary to decide which objects should be presented: either

those already on display or objects from the archives, which can be temporarily presented for this special occasion. A generous period of preparation allows for providing functional replicas in order to demonstrate the use of objects.

With „illumination and light“, a wide field of ideas opens up for us: historic sources of light, such as kindlings and their respective holders, ceramic lamps and their fillings, candle-making, lanterns, glass windows, chandeliers as well as stained glass windows of Gothic cathedrals can be made a subject of a presentation in the context of a „living museum“. After choosing the appropriate objects, a specific presentation method has to be defined. An „open house“ concept offering to the visitor a free exploration of the exhibition needs a different approach than a museum concept based on guided tours. The „open house“ is to be favoured as audiences can organise their visit according to their own schedule within opening hours. This concept facilitates the visitors' desire to handle replicas or discuss specific questions, meeting individual needs. On the downside, it is difficult to present drafted lectures scheduled precisely during the day. It is necessary to provide enough space in an appropriate part of the museum in which the expected number of visitors can comfortably explore the objects hands-on and discuss things with the intermediators. Sometimes additional requirements have to be met. For our example, the intermediary needs to be able to light a fire, in other cases it might be necessary to have access to

water, sufficient ventilation etc. It is a requirement that the host shows a certain openness and flexibility, as the heart of the „living museum“ is the experience of colours, smells and very personal sensations. The scent of a dipped beeswax candle in comparison to that of a tallow candle or a kindling is a sensual experience which will last in the memory of a visitor much longer than a verbal description or visual experience. An adequately narrow frame of period and place allows for a more detailed mediation and enables the intermediary to answer very detailed questions. Nevertheless, it is possible to incorporate theme-relevant con-

tents from other periods or regions. With „lighting from the Stone Age to the modern era“ it is possible to illustrate the continuity of objects throughout history, although the intermediary cannot possibly know every detail of this large timeframe and information may have to be gathered in cooperation with the museum. It's vital for the „living museum“ that the intermediary has first-hand experience of the utilisation of the presented objects. The ideal angle of a burning kindling or the smooth handling of a ceramic tallow-lamp might seem trivial to the visitor at first, but soon yield new topics of conversation.

### Resumée

“ It's the intermediary only who can breathe life into the objects presented, a pursuit which addresses the visitors' expectations and adds value to their visit.

Visitors are fascinated by the practical handling of daily objects in past periods. In the highly developed 21st century, the simple yet broad knowledge of our ancestors draws our interest. The mediation of this knowledge from human history is the core of the „living museum“. Only the sensorial experience, accompanied by explanations, can teach a view of history which does not present people from long gone periods as primitive and ignorant but brings light to the so-called dark ages. If we can convince our visitors to respect their own cultural history as an example from which they can

gather not only practical skills but also new points of view for their daily lives - and not just a reason to feel superior - we have achieved an important goal. ■

The „Interessensgemeinschaft 14. Jahrhundert“ is a union of about 15 active living history interpreters. All of them have chosen the 14th century in Austria to be their main period of interpreting. All of our members are connected by a great interest in in-depth research and a practical implementation of our knowledge in order to create a high-end reconstruction of Austrian way of life in the chosen period: <http://ig14.at/>



Nikolaus Hofbauer represents the Interessensgemeinschaft 14. Jahrhundert in this article. Coming from a technical background, he practiced living history - at present with the IG14 - for many years as a hobby and passion. The mediation of real history, especially to children and youngsters, is a crucial matter to him.



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