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## **How Covid and social distancing affected the work of the Liepāja Museum**

We know from historical sources that there were different pandemics at different times in the past, but until recently, we had only read about them in history books, and although the most serious pandemics in history, as well as their effects were described most vividly, it seemed that we would never be affected by such an experience directly.

However, 2019 came along, followed by the year 2020, and we were indeed being forced to face the effects of a pandemic, the consequences of which we still feel today.

Obviously, the pandemic drastically changed everyone's lives worldwide, and for many it turned their daily routine "upside down".

There are scores of stories on how restrictions, including social distancing, affected people's private and professional lives. I want to share with you my story which is about the impact the pandemic had on museum life.

Here are my three most vivid memories:

*No. 1*

One of the most recognized painters in Latvia, Līga Ķempe, who was born in Liepāja, had finished setting up her solo exhibition in the large exhibition hall of the Liepāja Museum. Invitations to the opening ceremony of the exhibition had been sent out, when, just on the day before the opening event was planned, a complete lockdown of the country was announced, which meant a complete ban on all gatherings. Consequently, the Liepāja Museum was closed to visitors. Both, the artist, and the museum, as well as the guests invited were very disappointed, but they kept hoping that the museums would be reopened soon ... meanwhile the exhibits of Kempe's collection remained standing in darkness, in silence, and nobody saw them because the restrictions were only lifted when the end of the exhibition had come and the next artist was already waiting to set up ... Sadly, Līga Ķempe's paintings were removed from the walls in the hall, without being seen by a wider public, except the museum personnel.

## No. 2

The restoration process of the new branch of the Liepāja Museum – the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Century Interior Museum “Madame Hoyer’s Guest House” – had just been completed and work had begun on the arrangement of the museum's exhibitions. We mainly planned to look for objects from the collection of the Liepāja Museum and there was the further idea to get exhibits from other museums in Latvia, but it turned out that there were only few objects available and not all of them corresponded to the concept of the new museum. The decision was made to start searching for objects in Europe, primarily in the Netherlands, since the original owners of the building were of Dutch origin and the exposition on the first floor of the building is dedicated to a historical retrospective, which depicts the original use of the building – it was a 17<sup>th</sup> Century guesthouse.

Originally, there was a chance to go on “a shopping tour” to the Netherlands and Belgium, but all too soon the pandemic started, which restricted any movements across borders, imposing quarantine on people upon arrival at their foreign destination and upon returning home. The museum, of course, could not afford such a waste of time, so we decided to make long-distance purchases from European auction houses and private collectors, and that was when “the story of trust” began. The museum had to be confident that the item being purchased was exactly of the period expected and in such a state of preservation that it could be put on display in the museum. It must be said that, for the most part, the transactions were successful, though sometimes there were disappointments.

When receiving another shipment from abroad, it felt like opening Christmas presents because it was as if we knew what it was going to be (as we had put it on Santa's wish list), but it came still as a surprise - what quality the item we had received would be like and whether it was exactly what we were looking for. We have learned that nowadays you can improve photos quite well by *Photoshop* and other photo editing programs and thus make things look more beautiful in a photo than they look in real life. But in general, the result was quite good. You can make sure of this by visiting the museum. Welcome!

## No. 3

The third memory I want to share with you is about our Museum Education Classes, which is a very popular activity. In Latvia, a state-supported program

called "the School Bag" has been implemented, which allows schoolchildren to attend concerts, theatre performances and other cultural events, as well as free classes in museums. Many schools take advantage of this opportunity, and the Liepāja Museum had booked several hundred lessons for the entire school year. However, during the lockdown, the museum was closed to visitors. What to do? How to deal with the situation?

The Liepāja Museum staff organized a "brainstorm" and the idea of the museum developing some kind of distance-learning educational programs was born. Of course, it was not without challenges because not everything can be shown through a *PowerPoint* presentation, ... and a museum educator standing in front of a computer on a *Zoom* platform would be quite boring ... and above all we realized that the museum does not have any professional video equipment ... so we looked for the best mobile phones with the best video cameras among our museum staff and ... created a new role as video operator ... and – the result was good, young people liked it and the goal was achieved! For schools that are far from Liepāja and cannot come to the museum, we can now offer one of the distance-learning programs prepared during the lockdown.

I hope that we will not have to face such challenges again!

Dieser Artikel ist veröffentlicht im Projektband:  
Ulrike Kurth (ed.), *Overcoming Social Distancing*, Bielefeld 2024, S. 119 ff.



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