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MUSEUM AS SPACE FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

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Contemporary museums go far beyond their traditional roles connected with amassing, preserving, conserving, or displaying collections in favour of many other social roles, e.g., in the area of health enhancing. As observed by John Orna-Ornstein of the Arts Council England *the museum sector is making an enormous contribution to improving people's lives and enhancing physical health and mental well-being. This is an exciting new era for the sector, which is leading the way in demonstrating how culture can actively contribute to prevention of ill health, quality of life, healthy ageing and human flourishing.*¹ This is confirmed by the results of studies conducted for many years. Thanks to them the notion of 'museotherapy' has been specified, and its definition formulated by Dorota Folga-Januszewska and Robert Kotowski has appeared in the *Dictionary of Museology* released in two languages: published by Routledge in English and Armand Colin in French. We read in it that museotherapy is *the use of collections, narratives, spaces, and museum displays as a therapeutic solution for the treatment for some illnesses. For its advocates, museotherapy shows how museums can participate in improving well-being, health, mental health, and emotional stability, as well as in the search for identity through direct contact with culture, art, and the surrounding nature. The tradition of treating museums as therapeutic spaces has its roots in Eleusinian Mysteries and has evolved in many places over the centuries. At the beginning of the 21st century, several museums (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Canada; National Museum in Kielce, Poland) and organisations (NEMO, AAM) introduced museotherapy as a part of their activities. Museotherapy activities proposed in museums (studied in the context of neuromuseology in Poland) benefit from the expertise and experience of psychologists, doctors, and educators.*²

As can be seen from the quoted definition, it is not a contemporary invention, actually it is more a return to the past and the beginning of museums when those institutions,

well before being identified with collections, served as venues for change, where a spiritual and creative transformation took place, this more extensively described by, e.g., Folga-Januszewska.³ The studies conducted in 2002 by the University of Aberdeen on the influence of museums, archives, and libraries on British society already confirmed those tendencies pointing to health and well-being as areas of museums' impact.⁴ Not fully 10 years after that research, in 2011, a report on other studies conducted by the Psychosocial Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire demonstrating how the activities of various museum types may affect health and well-being was published. The great potential of museum collections was pointed to; such collections made appropriately available to individuals in difficult situations may effectively enhance their frame of mind. That particular study assumed psychosocial framework whose goal was to understand the significance of the engagement in museum operations in many dimensions: individual responses, interpersonal relationships, or institutional and social contexts. The focus was put on the importance and use of objects and artworks by individuals as well as on the relations between the public and museum professionals, with additional attention paid to the objects' application in cultural integration. As can be read in the report, this occurs not only because the participants have new experiences and new opportunities for social interaction, but also due to the interaction with the museum. Under favourable conditions, museum objects give people an opportunity to find new cultural forms allowing to express emotions and experience. The discussed project demonstrated how museums can enhance well-being when referring to the character of their collection as well as its symbolic cultural meaning, and what symbolic and personal meaning collections have for individuals.⁵

This is also emphasized by the American expert in museum studies and museum educator Lois H. Silverman who claims that museum exhibits, objects, either natural or man-made referring to the history of the world and mankind provoke,

embody human goals and experiences, encourage the audience to act in the manner which can give them what they desire. In combination with a narrative and setting within museum space, they have a therapeutic power. They inspire emotions, opinions, reflections, recollections.⁶ Andree Salom, an art therapist and founder of the Colombian Art Therapy Association, adds that museum exhibits are physical expressions of creative powers in people, and as purposeful and analysed autonomic products they carry a powerful energy which can have a decisive impact on mental health.⁷ They feed an individual with the knowledge of human behaviours and problems analogical to theirs.⁸ They operate as identity symbols, recollections of a lived experience, as well as symbols of nature, society. This affects individuals' transformation and development, their relationships in society, it boosts their social capital.⁹ Additionally, every visitor arrives at a museum with his or her experience which translates into an individual interpretation of the museum exhibits and narratives.¹⁰

In this context, in 2013, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) drew attention to the fact that museums are places of interaction, learning, and communicating, and are particularly well-adjusted to providing health-related services and information. A number of various diseases were named in dealing with which museums could prove helpful, among them Alzheimer's disease, autism, mental diseases, PTSD, eating disorders, or blurred vision. Furthermore, the role of museums in health prevention and education was emphasized.¹¹

This list was confirmed and complemented by Elisabeth Ioannides of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens. She added other conditions to the health problems in which therapy could be conducted in museums e.g., individuals facing difficulties in their career, people working in stressful environments, soldiers, refugees, victims of sexual abuse, people ill with cancer, AIDS, depression, people in mourning, suffering from social fears and addictions.¹² She also pointed to the fact that individuals who visited museums, galleries, and took part in cultural events accompanied by other people boosted their well-being. This certainly encourages the inclusion of all social groups in visiting display spaces, providing them with multi-dimensional experience and supportive environment, irrespective of the social background every individual comes from.¹³

Furthermore, Helen Chatterjee and Guy Noble in their book *Museums, Health and Well-Being* published by the University College London Hospitals presented an overview of the results of hundreds of museum projects, reports, publications, and other evidence.¹⁴ The conclusion formulated in their study says that museums influence people's health and well-being in many ways, securing: a positive social experience, reducing social isolation, offering a learning experience and an opportunity to develop new skills; an appeasing experience reducing the fear level, positive emotions, such as hope, joy, and optimism; self-esteem and feeling of community bonds; a positive distraction from the clinical environment; greater opportunities to find a meaning; a new experience which can be inspiring or meaningful; communication within families, with carers and healthcare workers.

In response to the growing contribution of museums and galleries to health and well-being, in July 2015, the National

Alliance for Museums, Health and Well-being was founded in Great Britain; its goal is to coordinate information on museums and health, as well as counselling and support to the entities engaged in this area. As part of its activity the Alliance has elaborated reports on museums' activity in relation to health and well-being. The first of them: *Museums as Spaces for Well-being* was based on a comprehensive overview of literature and an online survey. Having analysed 603 projects from 261 museums of various type, it reflected museums' work contributing to health and well-being, engaging varied public, from e.g., senior citizens who were addressed the largest number of projects, constituting 29.68% of their total number, through individuals with dementia (18.73%), people with mental problems (17.74%), individuals with disabilities (13.59%), up to those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (2.15%), people with addictions (1.82%), or hospital patients (2.32%). It identified the areas of best practices addressed to respective groups of the audience.¹⁵ The second report was aimed at a more thorough investigation of museums' activity for health, and demonstrated their meaningful contribution in this respect. The data that the report was based on had come from different sources, including consultations, projects, trainings, and observations.¹⁶ Naturally, it goes without saying that the structure of health- and social care in Great Britain substantially differs from that operating in Poland. Our findings are inspired in their majority by foreign models, since this particular area of museums' operations has not been more deeply studied as yet. Therefore, in view of similar research still lacking in Poland, let us resort to the above reports in order to better understand and value benefits resulting from museums' activities for their public, for their audience's health and well-being. The research provided a number of convincing proofs that museums, regardless of their size, wealth, or type, can positively affect health and contribute to its enhancement in society. Very promising research results were also published in 2019 in *The British Medical Journal*. Daisy Fancourt and Andrew Steptoe of the Research Department of Behavioural Science and Health, University College London, Great Britain, presented a report on their 14 years of observation of thousands of individuals over 50 in view of their engagement in receptive art. The authors discovered that those who visited a museum at least once or twice a year were 14% less vulnerable to death than those who did not do it. The published results confirmed that the potential for a longer life increased when people more frequently communed with art. On the grounds of those results it should be concluded that the risk of death for people who went to a museum or the theatre at least once every several months decreased over that period by 31%.¹⁷

Further evidence in this respect was provided in 2022 by the Finnish Museums Association who published the results of their study of well-being during museum visits. Apparently, 99% of the respondents claimed that the visit to the museum had boosted their well-being for a longer period of time. The research was conducted by John Falk of the Institute of Learning Innovation, and encompassed eight Finnish museums. The study investigated four areas of well-being: personal, intellectual, social, and physical.¹⁸

Along with the growth of the number of research initiatives with respect to the impact on the visitors' health a number of museums worldwide has been for many years implementing



1. Scientific Conference 'Museotherapy 2019' at the National Museum in Kielce participated by Stephen Legari, a museotherapist of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

projects taking into account this aspect of their activity. One of the first to have done so was the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts who made their displays available for therapeutic purposes. Doctors associated in the Médecine francophones du Canada prescribed their patients visits to the Museum. The results of the programme confirmed the multifaceted health benefits, both in the mental and somatic condition.¹⁹

Similarly impressive results were obtained as a consequence of a programme addressed to dementia and Alzheimer's patients as well as their carer at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).²⁰ Another equally interesting and important example of a museum therapeutic activity worldwide is that at the Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art. It was there that a pilot programme for children who had suffered negligence, violence, or other traumas was implemented. Based on its results, the authors decided that a museum allows to see life in a broader context, it becomes a place where you can free yourself from different problems and find inspiration. Telling a story based on museum objects does not only allow to understand art, connect life and art, but also to solve different individual difficulties. The exhibits used in the process stimulate activity, thinking processes, and boost creativity. They allow emotional engagement, help unblock emotions and open to a revised perception of oneself and of the surrounding environment, and thus the interpretation of the world.²¹ Exactly the same conclusions were reached by the authors of the Arts for Health therapeutic programme based on the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, addressed to individuals suffering from chronic diseases,

raising awareness to the relation between lifestyle and health, also developing the appreciation of one's own strong points and resources through a creative expression and learning.²²

Over the recent years, similar initiatives and projects have been appearing in a growing number in various museum types: from art museums, through historical museums, up to technology or natural history museums. In 2022, a six-month pilot project was launched in Brussels: doctors wishing their patients to overcome isolation caused by depression prescribed them free visits to museums in Belgium's capital.²³ Also museums in Poland, e.g., the National Museum in Warsaw, the Royal Castle in Warsaw, the Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów, or the Krakow Saltworks Museum in Wieliczka actively participate in this kind of activity. Offering special projects, they establish cooperation with various specialist centres, engaging their potential as places favouring social inclusion, available and inspiring, and also a rich source of encounters with objects and various society circles. The pioneer and one of the leaders in this area is the National Museum in Kielce since 2018 hosting cyclical conferences serving as a platform to share different findings, observations, and research conclusions related to museotherapy, which additionally translates to various actions as well.²⁴

Furthermore, the National Museum is the venue where pilot projects are implemented in order to show the new area of museums' impact. This started with the workshops titled *Emotional Painting. Emotions in Jacek Malczewski's Paintings*. The project serves as an interesting example and



2. 'Emotional Paintings' museotherapy class at the National Museum in Kielce



3. 'Museotherapy to Overcome Stress' museotherapy class at the National Museum in Kielce

proposal of museums' therapeutic activity and the use of the collection for working with emotions. Its core is meant to demonstrate how museum objects and their narrative quality affect our perception, releasing emotions. The attempt to define, name, and experience them within the museum space turns into a kind of a therapeutic trip inside our own needs and understanding of ourselves thanks to the tools that museum objects, artefacts, historical mementoes, or artworks

turn into. The curiosity of the workshop participants and identification with the figure in a painting construct a peculiar beholder-painting relationship which leads to a perception change. The painting becomes something more than a painterly structure, turning into an emotion carrier. The participants try to comprehend their own feelings and talk about them, or, as was the case of the youngest participants: draw an event recalling the given emotion, which confirmed

the interaction and the impact of museum objects on the public. The results of numerous psychological studies confirm a positive impact of mindfulness on health. Connecting the knowledge of the positive influence of art on person's well-being the idea to introduce mindfulness techniques into museums was conceived. *Mindfulness in Museums* workshops were introduced at the National Museum in Kielce following the 5–4–3–2–1 strategy (searching for 5 things in the paintings that we focus our attention on, 4 things that we can touch, 3 sounds that we can hear, 2 smells that we sense, and 1 taste), helping the participants concentrate on a conscious perception of their senses. Additionally, the museum space was adapted (with particular care during individual meetings) as a place where one can focus on oneself, his or her internal experiences, impressions, or problems. The work of art chosen by a participant shows his/her formal preferences, individualism, sometimes also becoming a pretext for a conversation on art, or referring to forgotten experiences which account for the choice of the painting. Recalling definite places or family members in the course of the workshop shows how the association network increasingly develops, while the conclusions compile

that participant's emotions. The mindfulness workshops in museums also showed the participants museum space from a different perspective, often unknown and less formal. Another form of work is the pilot *Museotherapy to Overcome Stress* Project. It provides a series of meetings within the museum space during which the participants (adults forming a group) learn how to handle stress in everyday life. The first observations confirm that such classes boost in the need to commune with art in the participants.

The undertaken actions yield effects, and increasingly more often provide evidence that museums have a therapeutic effect, influencing our health and well-being. In order to facilitate that, a therapist is needed: to help shape attitudes and actions playing the key role in the therapeutic process. In this sense the museum activity is close to therapy through art, namely art therapy, although the two differ in the fact that museum objects are used. However, it must not be forgotten that museotherapy is not an autonomous treatment method, but only treatment's support in the form of organized workshops, programmes for different therapeutic groups, visits recommended by psychotherapists and doctors as a part of the conducted therapy, or, finally, individual visits.

Abstract: Museums have always been regarded as centres of knowledge and culture, places where we can extend our understanding of the surrounding world. Today, next to their basic tasks, museums also perform various social functions, playing an important role in establishing bonds with people and taking into account their experiences. New roles of the early-21st-century museums go far beyond the up-to-now areas of the functioning of cultural institutions in society, with a transformation occurring in their activities targeted at the application of the collection's emotional potential, narrative, space, and museum displays to have a therapeutic impact on the public suffering from civilizational ailments, all this conducted in cooperation with psychologists, pedagogues, and doctors. The activity in this respect has been yielding positive

effects, and more often and in an increasing number proofs demonstrating museums' therapeutic value as well as their substantial impact on people's health and well-being have been observed. This new contemporary form of museums' activity is called museotherapy. The definition of the concept prepared by Dorota Folga-Januszewska and Robert Kotowski has been published in the Dictionary of Museology published in two languages: by Routledge in English and Armand Colin in French. The paper aims at popularizing the knowledge of and disseminating so-far findings in museotherapy. Results of research in this respect conducted in various countries and museotherapy-related implemented projects have been presented in the article. All these may encourage museum curators to conduct classes in the discussed area.

Keywords: museum, museotherapy, emotions, health, frame of mind.

Endnotes

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