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In the Museum of Time¹

Notes in a guest book

While he was not a visitor but merely a passenger, from the tram window he only saw three colourful circles on the poster with four pairs of legs underneath and by the time he could have inspected them thoroughly the vehicle had started and so had the legs in the opposite direction, and the circles disappeared without anything being resolved. Then, at another time while the tram stopped for longer, he was able to ponder: would the golden circle be the Wheel of Dharma? As if a glove shape was embroidered with silvery pearls, a moon and star on the red circle.... Is the third a black plate with a white snake twirling on it? May these circles make up for the unknown faces of pedestrians invisible from the waist up?

A few days later another tram stops in front of the Ethnography Museum. The familiar poster above the steps receives visitors. *Images of Time*. In the hollow of the foyer the public at the New Year's Eve opening are said to have swum over to the new Millennium: with one-hand strokes they floated across the corridors and halls, careful not to let the champagne drops fall to the depth of time. The waves of merry-making died out, the walls swallowed up the clinking of champagne glasses, together with the worldwide

¹ The *Images of Time (Időképek)* exhibition of the Museum of Ethnography (Budapest), related to the Millennium (two thousand years of Christianity – thousand years of the Hungarian state), was inaugurated on New Year's Eve, 31 December 2000. See the bilingual catalogue, Zoltán Fejős – Mónika Lackner – Gábor Wilhelm (eds.): *Images of Time. Millennium Exhibition at the Museum of Ethnography 31 December 2000 – 31 December 2001*. (Időképek. Millenniumi kiállítás a Néprajzi Múzeumban: 2000. december 31. – 2001. december 31.) Budapest: Néprajzi Múzeum, 2001, and the studies In Zoltán Fejős – Péter Granasztói – György Szeljak – Zsuzsanna Tasnádi (eds.): *A megfoghatatlan idő* (Time inexplicable) Budapest: Néprajzi Múzeum, 2000. (Tabula könyvek 2.)

midnight bells. The sea has receded, the objects coming to the surface can still be drying in the semi-darkness and lamp light for a year.

The first floor, the first part of the experiment: does Chronos, carried in her womb by our mother nature, respond to Tempus being brought to the world by human society? One also has to stand about and walk around here, like at other exhibitions, but the two screens, guarding the entrance, are calling us for soaring and falling. The pilot with a rigid face seems to resist gravity, the bird's wings jerkily flutter, motion returns to itself on both screens. Both are put in boxes of the Kékes make.

First resolve the secret of the Wheel in the hall of the Mystery of Time, Visitor! What kind of spinning in what kind of light do you see? If it spins as you see it, the freedom of interpretation is yours. If it is, continue, if not, step forward anyway; new conundrums are expecting you. Look at the engraving by Hogarth, the forbidding old also passes away at one time. You have hardly set off and the world has ended. Aware of that, lose your compass between East and West, select from among the allegories of Time, lose yourself in the hollows of the eyes in an earthenware skull, sway away from the winged figure's scythe, elaborate on the Wheel of Dharma and if you achieved a span-long advance, think: how many more wheels there are compared to the present of Time and, after all, do these objects all speak about the same thing? The universe of Music also becomes spacious in your imagination. Because how much more time music has than a capriccio by Bach (a small piece from the universal master) that can be heard here, which you seem to see in different varieties of the notes. If a metronome signalled the acceleration of your heartbeat, it would surely beat little while you were standing by this corner. Think of the brief nature of your existence: it is only as much as a step over the threshold. It is as fast as a leap from Baroque music to 19th century bonnets, which are balancing in a glass box hung on the door: life flourishes and dries as the shade of colour and decoration do on a set of ladies' coronets.

But the overblown family tree can only be set up in a huge hall. What separates the family's genius from its genealogist, who would be hastily catching the rolling away apples, unless he was not hanging on a tree meanwhile? The tree trunk stands in between the root and the branch. It is necessary to dig down or climb up, and again originating from there, stand on shoulders and hang onto the other's hand. An ancestor figure carved in the secret society of a Nigerian tribe.... a board compiled by a retired state secretary, a Budapest resident from the documents of the National Archives in 1940 about his fam-

ily going back to the battle of Muhi (1241), who then sets up an association to preserve its traditions on the 750th anniversary ... Idols bear curiosity with mask-like faces, but when you move on they seem to wink at each other: is the trick successful, will you succumb to the tempting idea of human universality or slip off?

A satisfactorily bordered world receives you. The time of the tribe for you is much more complicated than that of the family, as is the tribe's structure much more complex than the family's. That may be the reason why the multi-cultural game cannot continue: everything here is from the region of the river Amur. The way of life is fully shown, but where is time? It is how life is adjusted to the changes of seasons. People belonging to the objects remain distant, their absence is attempted to be made up for by four dressed-up dummies standing on a runway borrowed from a fashion show. Winter men and summer women. The objects are silent, imagination supplements numbness, chill and basking in the sun. But step over to the hall of village and town and it is not only your intellect being trained but your body is also having a refreshing adventure, where the theme is getting more complicated and the sophisticatedly simple representation makes the objects disappear and lines up people in a dreamlike photo-montage. In the middle there is elliptical ribbon, which can be viewed from the outside and, if you go under and through, then from the inside, too. Outside the residents of the 19th century towns of Miskolc and Diósgyőr and inside their provincial cotemporaries are standing, peasants from the northern central hills, eternal small players in a self-rewinding reel. Your physical exercise itself will properly show you the tiring migration between village and town, but if you do not dare come forward from an observer's security, you may have a peep: turnable disks open up a window to another world, a motor car appears by the horse and cart, village people appear in the Miskolc high street. Noises of the country and town mingle.

It is not the official history writing that gives an account on "the time of the nation" but the memory of "the people". On the carved sticks there are great heroes and great events. Two hussars: Rákóczi and Thököly, princes of Transylvania. The mermaid is telling the future under a sorrow weeping willow: "A fish maid am I, alas for thee Hungarians". The shepherd carves the picture of the highwayman Sándor Rózsa on his stick and also his best wishes to the beautiful countess and the baron. "Long live his excellence, the minister Kálmán Tisza in Pest." But what does the lordly impishness give in return? The guild society's slogan is inscribed on the plate border from

Tiszafüred: “I buy a plate made in my country, from which do I lunch”. Our potters continue to make their green glazed jugs with unbroken enthusiasm when the communist-type coat of arms is in fashion instead of the one with the crown. And what kind of hands cut out the huge oak tree and mark the historic events in the age-rings from the Rákóczi War of Independence to the Hungarian Council Republic of 1919?

How was Hungarian folk art discovered at the end of the 19th century? This could be the theme of the next room, but since it happened on the occasion of the Millennium the mixed collection of kerchiefs, tablecloths, Zsolnay plates, some of which remained from the displays of the Millenary exhibitions, supplemented by two icons of the Last Judgement, can take pride in the title of Millennium, Last Judgement, Turn of the Century. Who knows? Let’s take it as encouragement: there were some, who, at the end of the world a hundred years ago, quietly strove and discovered at ease. And right away back to the beginnings, back to the time of the earth. After we have taken in the fossilised ancient crocodile, ammonites, maple-leaf and mammoth tooth, we follow the traces of discoveries on the maps of the early New World. We are in a school lab, where, between the lessons of palaeontology and cartography, pupils draw fantastic monsters living on map edges with chalk on the slate boards (with fossil on the fossil) during the mythological break. The monsters, if you like, are relatives of calcified creatures: as a result of the presented facts, the long-missed holistic view of the world finds its place in the pupils’ heads. Should they feel like scribbling, there is the whole length of the main wall. Space is generously provided, not so the light. Searching for traces is not that easy in the labyrinth of time.

We cannot waste time infinitely in the empire of immensurability; let us be careful with our time in the virtual universum of the museum, too. The alarm clock goes off, the dream finishes for the time being. If our exhibition settled for the topic of measuring time, these two rooms would be its focus. In the first we start with, we proceed from astronomical devices to calendars. In the other we can compare clocks. There is no need for special metaphors here, the connection between object and time is given *ab ovo*. The objects lined up in nearly encyclopedic order display the stages of the history of measuring with due precision. They also show the varieties of equipment and with their beauty reflect the aesthetic nature of the practice. The attempt to be distanced from the ethnographic theme and collection, which often presents surprising associations and clever visual effects (of course we can also

see the opposite when the collection at the museum's disposal overcomes thought: as folk art dominated the room of final times), creates the meeting of bibliography and the history of technology and art, and ethnography. Do we see a lot or a little here? Would it be better to have fewer objects, but those to be touched? The many does not present crowdedness in the available space. In these two rooms the use of space seems to be just right. Clanging, ringing and clicking suggest motion. Suddenly a railway time-table makes its way in the line up of clocks with a model train next to the clocks. And a pottery flask with an etched-on clock, railwayman and Aunt Mary. There is the manuscript of an 18th century codex with a clock –Sultan Suleyman's present – in it.

These are rare moments because systematic knowledge, which displays clocks and calendars in a large quantity and good quality, is only seldom made easy by the ingenuity of the exhibition. Although it is possible that the regularity of measuring is actually represented by the systematism best, it is also possible that the objects themselves present us with the game. It is quite an entertainment to read the front pages of calendars and glimpse at the dandy-like chief-tain Lehel, who is "No. VII Chief Captain of the Hungarians", see the picture of Shiva and the "famous Spanish bull fight" on the same page of the 1838 calendar from Kassa (Kosice), thanks to the editor attracted by far-away lands. "A self-respecting farmer, tradesman or agricultural labourer discards flawed and trash calendars." Here is a pocket calendar from 1948, which provides all the holidays for the followers of different religions. A tiny sign, which refers to a great opportunity: the holidays of an ecclesiastical year could have found their place at the exhibition about time in the museum of ethnography.

"Egg, Ring, Fig, Virgin, Wreath, End". And here is the end of the floor. After the many motionless clock hands the visitor checks the unchanged transitoryness on his own watch. He is half-way, the gate to life will at last open in the second half. He receives a new question: "What does 'to live in time' mean?" The answer is not given free. Downstairs it all started with a puzzle and it is not different here, either. How can time be "accumulated"? If storing really meant to preserve food or knowledge in time, then the first cabinet in the first room would really be about the storing techniques of the Incas. But textiles, arms and birds caught forty years ago (they must have stored them in the past to make the feathers into head-gear; two colourful pieces can be seen here, too) give us a taste what has been compiled in Budapest from the culture of the Incas and their late predecessors. Eyes of the soul

open up perspectives, eyes of the body wish for objects. If these requisites were to suggest more about preserving than being preserved themselves, material things marked by the passage of time would nicely respond to them. It is clear who the main hero is in this second act of the drama of preserving. Our hero is a restorer. His life spent in time is an everyday battle. Mostly the damaged and restored pairs of objects witness his fight against repainting, fading, breakage, wear and tear, and dirt. Not only the beginning and the end of the process can be seen, but the process itself, i.e. improper storing. The cover of the museum newsletter, a piece of iron and metal slowly perish in the humid glass box seen in the corner.

At last life arrives in the form of a wedding. The transition rite is coming from nowhere else but the Tunisian Berbers. Hopefully the young couple will be blessed with more lasting health than the perishables seen before. Neither will the expensive fabric disintegrate when the painted beauty marks are wiped off the bride. Perhaps the gracious merchandise will maintain her charm for ever. She sits upon the camel's back easily, which is represented by two hanging draperies and a muzzle. The visitor is the uninvited guest to the wedding preparations. He goes along the stages of the rite and sees them on the pictures above his head and on the way he perceives the time passing between each step. He is looking at the wedding-bed with interest. Next to the bed there is plenty of perfume in authentic bottles. "Authentic to which age?" he may ask in the next room, that is, on Mexican soil, where ghost creatures cut out from a school exercise book's squared sheets fly about, and at a healing rite Coke and Coronita beer are offered to the gods, and the egg for the demons to eat is being dug in the soil just in front of a picture of the Madonna. Thus he steps from the time of rite over to the "parallel" historical ages, and will gain another extraordinary spatial experience. He walks in the atmosphere of a fictitious sanctuary to the copies of the realistically imaginable altars; the apse is replaced by an arched photographic montage with scenes from the life of an Indian village. Around the middle, four corn cobs create a cross and Christ's statue cannot be absent either. The reel-like series of pictures seen beforehand refers to the ways how time is articulated here again; the fact that they live together in the same way as the cultures of ages mingle remains in the back of the altars. After all, spatial thought is a faithful partner to the space of thought.

Hardly does the merry-making of the Berber wedding calm down, the Buddhist worship sounds. After having gone through the way and going up

to the altar you should be sitting. Please do, would the master of Zen suggest if you got as far as wishing to stop and summarise time in the presence and present reality of motionless meditation. You are waiting for the 'self' to disappear and the great something appears. The meditator has been lost but not his trace: aureoles fall down on where the round-headed monks were in the semi-darkness. While the 'not-self' would spend some time there, it would let the 'self' think about the meaning of the creations Zen art displayed all around. If he knew something about Zen, he would ask: "Is it what meditation lets go that seizes these objects, or does meditation become an object and be conscious in them?" If he knew nothing about Zen he would want to know: "what are these nice things for and what have they got to do with time, and anyway what are the props for?" Should he day-dream so, the master's stick would poke his back; and he would only be surprised if he did not know that "Buddha's finger" was knocking.

You would find yourself in "dream time" past realisation or your mind's splitting behind the screen representing the wall of the Zen room, where the ancestors of the Australian aboriginals rest. It used to be possible to contact them via the churinga. The flat pebbles and pieces of wood are lying in the coffin of the display cabinets. In vain may the brown and red colours be so lively, or in vain may the beauty of the etched pattern cast a spell on our glance. All this is merely the attire of death; ghosts do not come to life either, they keep on resting. So that your sorrow would be deeper while dreaming, go to the chamber of death. Beyond the cordon there is a Transylvanian death chamber from around the middle of the 20th century. The wall clock shows nearly midnight. It is dark. A dummy is lying on the deathbed. Take your leave of mourning, too. Bereavement is going away, the woman's dress from Kalotaszeg is becoming more colourful: remember the fading colours of bonnets.

After the mournful speech those who are still here are talking; their calming chatter is sometimes near perversity. Yes, somebody else's death is an ante-room for mourners, its door opens to a ceremonial hall. The over-joyously gathered collection of "anti-transience" remedies allows us to learn and shiver from death, human nature or this swirl of objects, according to taste and sensitivity. The ancient statues, our old acquaintances return, there are plenty of masks, a real skull sounds hollow and a hairy one shrinks. Finally one has to pass through the worst: the house of the dead really opens up over the marble pillars dividing the enormous hall into three. A male mummy from the crypt in Vác is next to the Egyptian child's sarcophagus. Bow to the

omnipotence of death over gender, life and historical ages and civilisations. Or improvise a moral line of thought on the well-known theme of “whether we have the right”.

We might as well come to the end here but persons who had enough time to create in their brief passage of life give a comforting encore in the form of the work. What else would connect the residents of monasteries and prisons than patience, which creates ornamented shrines, relics and dried-out wooden crosses? There are some who independently of where they are and their bond, persevere: they are making a patience glass faithfully. If we have come to a hard-working state of awakening from the depressing dream, we can rise straight to a state of ecstasy, even at this sacred place. Some dull murmur could have already been heard in the chamber of death but the ritual sounds can only be heard clearly now. On this new spiritual journey a Mongolian shaman’s accoutrements would help us provided the accessories of his trade gave a clue as to their use and purpose. Still, boding resolves mystery and the objects are showing the heavenly way floatingly. He who judges everything by seeing, what need may he have for shamans? He deserves to come down to earth once again and look at himself in the dim mirrors of the fixed moment. How can a lover’s gift, an engagement memento and the first communion gift go together with Melius’s Herbarium, Istvánffy’s history, psalm and prayer books, a diary, letter or a postcard? While we are pondering this question, we are overtaken by a disturbing feeling of plenty, just like in the room of clocks and calendars. While contemplating, moments somehow become history. We may have a glance into the secrets of future and fortune without magic. There are cards and games all around. “The scythe brings only devastation and pushes you in deep sorrow. It can be avoided: mingle in fortunate cards.” In the middle there is a game with the game: the fate of the figures on the large board from India is governed by the constellation of the European sky over them.

An outsider cannot see the inner courtyard of the museum on other occasions. Now there is a stage and the space is similar to the temporary theatres of Renaissance palaces. Where did they set up a sea battle filling the courtyard with water? Perhaps in the Pitti Palace in Florence. On the stage representing the world, however, there are TV monitors and projection screens replace the curtain. The present attracts you on the TV sets while history looms on the large screens. Their parallel rule can be studied through the glass from the corridors on both floors. Would you be able to have the upper hand if you

were watching from the second floor? You turn your head away and face motionless pictures on the wall. The pieces always on view compete with those coming out of hiding in the storerooms. Expertise cannot forget the items of its own history when it systematises the tiny mosaics of past lives in a corridor, in the 'time machine' of the museum. Science turns the estate of enthusiastic collectors into the objects of self-reflection in three glass cages. Embroideries left by Mrs Zsolnay and a chemical engineer's tin soldiers are squeezed into glass cabinets similar to the crowded displays of old exhibitions documented on photographs, and on the basis of a photo it precisely reconstructs the Africa exhibition of 1910. The flicker of running pictures to the left, the glitter of its motionless companions to the right. Where is your time and life left in between? And where is the initial freedom of flying? Sunlight and the sky are absent. If you came through the curtained-off halls in semi-darkness and dim light up to here, then now you are surrounded by dark night.

The visitor turns the pages of a guest book and in the catalogue he wants to find out what the three circles on the poster mean. One depicts the shaman's cloak, the other symbolises the sack, which is pulled on the Berber bride's hands. The third has hidden waiting for a new search. One can return, the doors of the Ethnography Museum are wide open this year in many senses of the word. There is another thick purple volume, whose title says that time is not graspable. Several of the exhibition themes can be found in essays in an extended version, but the studies go beyond what one could see. Zoltán Fejős had the idea of the exhibition, he is the chief director and the editor of the volume. Seventeen of the twenty-four authors participated in the team of thirty-four who selected the material for the exhibition. The book may contribute to answering the question arising during the walk in the museum.

Time cannot be grasped but we have some images of it: objects cannot get near to its essence. Objects show the images and reflect on the knowledge about time. Where is time? Are we straying in the labyrinth of Everywhere and Nowhere, or just wondering freely? And is it us who can decide? The human effort to encompass time is simultaneously elevating and aimless. Thus the exhibition bravely approaches totality while boldly tempting nothing. It groups objects around time experiences and it happens that time does not really get involved more or less than objects representing it. What can be seen sometimes follows the speed of thought slowly. Thus heaviness and flying

give sense to this museum walk: this is exactly what the two TV screens in the Kékes sets at the first door suggested.

Objects drifting on the waves of water are motionless moments in time. Should we leave the museum with this idea, the exhibition said enough. If the visitor learnt something but still cannot bring the objects to life, he may set off in two directions when he leaves the museum; he either gives up trying or continues learning. Thus he can take the volume in his hands later. How do the images of time relate to the text? Both are means of demonstrating knowledge about time. A more precise criticism could be made about the transfer of knowledge than the serious and playful attempt to make time visible. This cannot, however, be done by the visitor as such but at and in another time. At the stairs the time for choice arrives. Shall he look at his watch? Or at the sun? At neither? So much choice can be achieved from understanding: he cannot grasp time and neither can he grasp what could be touched. The pool in which we are learning to swim is good. Is there a way through to the sea?

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