

Szopka Krakowska

The Nativity Scene Tradition and the Museum of Kraków

On the 29th of November 2018 the Intergovernmental Committee inscribed the “nativity scene (*szopka*) tradition” in Kraków (Poland) on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In the Polish delegation that took part in the 13th session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee in Port Louis, Mauritius, there were not only government officials, diplomats and legal advisors. There were also four nativity scene makers and one museum professional from the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków. The inclusion on the UNESCO list signified that the international community appreciated the transmission and vitality of the tradition. Would the nativity scene tradition in Kraków survive without the interventions of the museum? Would it have a different form? Which role did the museum and the museum professionals play in the transmission, and now safeguarding process?

The nativity scene (*szopka*) tradition in Kraków and its musealization

A history of the nativity scene craft can be divided into at least two main stages. In the first stage, before 1937, this phenomenon existed without any significant institutional support. The second stage is characterized by growing institutionalization. It started in 1937 with the first competition for the most beautiful nativity scene. Today, some authors suggest that a third period is beginning: the UNESCO-ization.¹

The beginning of the first period is difficult to indicate. There are indications that the nativity scenes were presented in churches in Poland since the Middle Ages, possibly responding to suggestions by Francis of Assisi.² With the passing of time these immobile scenes were developed into a sort of more active puppet theater in the churches. Descriptions of the spectacles called *szopka* or *jeselka* are known from the 18th century in Poland. Alongside the Bible characters like the Holy Family and the Three Wise Men also representatives of various social groups (Polish nobility, burghers, peasants,

1 The third period begins nowday and is called the UNESCO-ization of the nativity-scene craft, see A. Soćko-Mucha, ‘From “tradition” to “intangible heritage”: Kraków’s Nativity-scene craft’, *Etnografia Polska* 63, 2019, 1-2, p. 207.

2 A. Kozieł and J. Kubiśna, *The Kraków Bethlehem. The History of the Kraków Nativity Crib*. Kraków, 2003, p. 18-19.

soldiers, Jewish people, Romani people, Ukrainian Cossacks) were portrayed in these performances. The screenplays and dialogues of these popular plays (possibly influenced by the French puppet theater) are unknown. Its joviality and indecency could be the reason for the objection of the Catholic church authorities and as a consequence for the eviction these performances from the church buildings until the end of the 18th century.

But these kinds of shows continued to be played in inns and private houses. In the 19th century the nativity scene theatre acquired the local features. In the performances played in Kraków there were more figures from the surrounding cultural space like 'the lad and maid in folk costume singing local songs' or the legendary 'alchemist and sorcerer Master Twardowski who made a deal with the Devil'.

The set design for these performances also changed. A crib with Baby Jesus was surrounded with miniaturized buildings of a town. On the oldest representations of the nativity scenes, we are not able to identify specific cityscapes.³

Since the end of the 19th century, these elements of miniature urban architecture began to refer to recognizable buildings. In Kraków, it is the higher tower of St. Mary's Basilica with the characteristic 'helmet' that is presented in the oldest preserved Kraków nativity scene made about 1890 by tiler Michał Ezenekier from Krowodrza. Today this 'mother of nativity scenes' is preserved in the collections of the Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Kraków. It features a scene of adoration on the upper floor and, below, a stage where the dolls are shown. The symmetrical construction is topped with three towers, resembling constructions in Kraków. It is a representation of the cityscape, but not a realistic miniaturized copy. According to the words of titled creator Tadeusz Gillert: "The Kraków nativity scene is such a thing that when you look at it you know that it is Kraków, but it is not a copy of Kraków." The phenomenon of giving recognizable local characteristics to elements in the crib was not limited to Kraków, as examples from Lviv show.

At the turn of the 20th century, creators of Kraków nativity scenes organized themselves. The community included craftsmen and bricklayers and their families living in the outskirts of Kraków, in former villages like Krowodrza, Zwierznec, Grzegórzki, Dąbie, Ludwinów and Czarna Wieś. Their main motivation was not so much upholding traditions, but the need to generate income. The performances were played for a fee, in the Christmas season in the homes of wealthy townspeople or in the inns.

Moreover, the intellectual and artistic elite of Kraków were inspired by the creativity of bricklayers and 'quoted' them in other performances. An example is the nativity scene played in 1906 in the famous Kraków cabaret *Zielony Balonik* (Green Balloon) in the art café of Jan Michalik. A crib and figurines can still be seen inside this place today. After the First World War, the context had changed. The inhabitants of Kraków preferred to go to the cinema or other venues in December rather than to invite a group of bricklayers with a nativity

3 Reproductions of the oldest representations see A. Szałapak, *Szopka Krakowska jako zjawisko folkloru Krakowskiego na tle szopki europejskiej. Studium historyczno-etnograficzne*. Kraków, 2012, p. 110 and 135.

scene to their homes and apartments. Therefore, the makers began to create smaller nativity scenes in order to sell them as a Christmas gift or for putting them under the Christmas tree. A number of individual creators with their nativity scenes wandered around the city and sang Christmas carols, expecting donations.

The older tradition of puppet theater was maintained by tram driver Walenty Malik from Zwierzyniec with his son Włodzimierz. They performed their nativity play in a club room of the tram drivers and in schools. In the 1920s and 1930s we note the first attempts to institutional protection of the tradition of Kraków nativity scenes. Established in 1868 as a private institution, the Museum of Science and Industry in Kraków made its cinema hall available to the nativity play of Walenty Malik. In 1926, museum workers took the initiative to make a set, puppets and acted themselves.

1937

A breakthrough took place in 1937. A new policy was introduced by mayor Mieczysław Kaplicki (1933-1939) to invest in local culture, including folk festivals and ancient traditions, as a development strategy for the city. Folklore was promoted with new measures and media, like radio broadcasts, posters distributed in Polish cities and abroad, and engaging a number of stars of popular culture. The goal was to attract a new type of visitors to the city: tourists.

To manage this policy the mayor appointed dr. Jerzy Dobrzycki, the head of the Propaganda and Art Office and deputy head of the Department of Education and Culture of the Municipal Council. Dobrzcki launched the summer festival called 'the Days of Kraków' (1936-1939) which included numerous traditional celebrations. His second initiative was a competition for the most beautiful Kraków nativity scene. The main idea of the competition was to raise the artistic level of small and medium-sized cribs used for the caroling. The competition



Figure 1. A group with the Kraków nativity scene, 1936. Photo: 'Światowid' Photo Agency, Museum of Kraków archives.



Figure 2. The first competition for the most beautiful nativity scene, 1937. Photo: 'Światowid' Photo Agency, Museum of Kraków archives.

regulations specified the rules. The shape of the crib had to be 'in accordance with tradition' with conventional towers or domes. The acceptable materials were colored paper, tin foil (*staniol*), colored tissue paper, glass or cellophane. Metal sheets and aluminum were excluded. The organizers also indicated the monument to the poet Adam Mickiewicz on the Main Market Square as the place where the competition had to take place. Winners were chosen by a jury which was composed mainly of museologists: Kazimierz Witkiewicz (a director of the Museum of Science and Industry in Kraków), Ludwik Strojek (director of the Archives of the Cracow City Historical Records with subordinate the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków) and dr. Tadeusz Seweryn (Director of the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków).

In the first edition, 86 cribs were submitted to the contest. Most of the participants were men, but a few women also took part. The winners received financial prizes, cakes, wine, sausages or even tramway tickets and books funded by the local companies. In 1938 the second edition of the competition took place, but only 48 cribs were evaluated. No competitions were organized during World War II. Activities of the groups displaying nativity play were forbidden. However, some groups continued secretly presenting their performances in the churches and monasteries.⁴ In some cribs, the King Herod's puppet was modified to symbolize Adolf Hitler.

The next competition was organized in 1945 by the Municipal Council of Kraków. In 1946, the organization of the contest was taken over by the Historical Museum of the city of Kraków and its new director Jerzy Dobrzycki. In the communist period, especially in the most difficult times of Stalinist repression in the years 1948-1954, the competition was conducted, but the authorities' attitude was ambiguous. On the one hand, the nativity scene as a presentation of the birth of God was in contradiction to the officially propagated atheism. On the other hand, the authorities did not want to give up on the competition of cribs whose creators were the bricklayers and workers, called by the communist propaganda 'a leading force of the nation'. During this period, in several cribs submitted to the competition the Holy Family was replaced with symbols of official ideology. Also the jury of the competition was ambiguous. Nativity scenes containing Bible figures were not disqualified, but won awards. The prizes were also given for cribs without the Holy Family. Anna Szałapak, a researcher of the Kraków nativity scene and a curator of the Kraków Nativity Scene Competition in 1987-2007, emphasizes that during this period the human figurines as a relic of the former nativity play had become less important. The architecture present in the cribs had become a determinant of the artistic level.⁵ The nativity scenes prepared for the annual competition have changed over the decades. The changes concerned using materials, mechanisms and lighting. In these nativity scenes created since the 1950s colored paper was replaced almost completely by the colored tin foil called *staniol*. The widespread availability of domestic electrical appliances allowed

4 During this period the following groups were active: the family of Malik, family of Dudzik, family of Tabor, group of Ferdynand Kijaka-Solowskiego and Tadeusza Grzesło.

5 Szałapak, *Szopka Krakowska*, p. 217.



Figure 3. Szopka with a symbol: Six-Year Plan instead of Holy Family, 1952. Photo: Museum of Kraków archives.

the creators to put mobile mechanisms in their cribs. Thanks to the recycling of electric engines they could for instance set in motion several figurines. Candles were replaced by electric bulbs (today LED bulbs).

In the 1970s and 1980s, new types of materials appeared, factory-made components: haberdashery ribbons, synthetic beads and thin metal plaques. In the beginning, the jury was against this innovation. But when the best artists like Stanisław Paczyński, Bronisław Pięćik, Tedeusz Żmierek, Andrzej Morański started to use it, the museum experts had to accept these controversial materials. This case reveals some tension between the creators and the museologist. The conservative attitude of the latter can hold back the changes of the phenomenon, but the consistency of the creators can transform the 'canon' of the Kraków nativity scene. Indeed, some trends have been stopped by the jury and the museum, such as making nativity scenes from unusual materials: food or fabrics.

In this period the jury introduced four categories according to the height of the cribs: small (up to 70 cm high), medium (from 70 to 120 cm high) and large (over 120 cm high) and miniature nativity scenes (up to 15 cm high). In 1978 cribs made by adult creators were separated from work done by children and adolescents. In the last decades nativity scenes makers also began to look for new inspiration in the architecture of Kraków, besides the Gothic and Baroque church towers references, namely to the architecture of the 19th and 20th centuries. As a result of all these changes a new type of Kraków nativity scene built especially for the competition was formed which Anna Szałapak defined as follows:

“The nativity scene is a small, slender, multi-level, tower-shaped, symmetrical, richly ornamented construction, depicting the place of the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. This construction, which is made of light, perishable materials, is characterized by the piling up of miniaturized elements of Kraków’s historic architecture, transformed and combined in a fantastical manner.”⁶

The definition was introduced into the official regulations of the Kraków Nativity Scene Competition. Some passages of the definition were questioned by members of the jury, but it indicates the basic characteristics of the Kraków nativity scene for the contestants. However, some creators do not pay attention to such regulations. One of the most titled creators claimed that he only learned about these rules many years later from his granddaughter. For years he created the cribs in accordance with his inner belief about what the Kraków nativity scene should look like.

Community or individuals?

After 1945 a group of about forty Kraków nativity scenes makers participated each year. Over time, they passed on their passion and skills to their children who continue the tradition. They were not the bricklayers of old times and only the family of Malik upheld traditions of the pre-war ancestors. The Kraków nativity scene makers were and are workers, craftsmen, teachers, artists, engineers, academics, pensioners, students and schoolkids. Did they create a community or were they a group of individuals?

All initiatives leading to the formalization of this group have not been successful to this day. At the end of the 1960s, the nativity-scene makers’ club was established on the initiative of the director of the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, but it quickly ended its activity.⁷ To this day nativity scene makers have not established their association. Likewise, most scene makers don’t want to belong to the Folk Artists Association, which they perceive as an NGO caring more for the heritage of the country than the city. In the 21st

6 Szałapak, *Szopka Krakowska*, p. 216, translated by Michelle Granas in: Soćko-Mucha, *From “tradition”*, p. 208.

7 E. Fryś-Pietraszkowa, ‘Szopkarze Krakowscy a konkursy szopek’, *Polska Sztuka Ludowa – Konteksty* 26, 1972, fasc. 1, p. 58.



Figure 4. Anna and Rozalia Malik with their nativity scene, 2012. Photo: Andrzej Janikowski, Museum of Kraków archives.

century, a group of nativity scene makers created a website to facilitate the sale of the cribs, but only a few were interested in this idea.⁸ However, we must remember that many tasks that an association of nativity scene makers could take on, have been carried out for decades by the museum: attracting buyers of the cribs, arranging meetings of the community, obtaining public funds, organizing exhibitions of the Kraków nativity scenes, issuing publications, etc. Perhaps this is the reason why the creators do not see the need to establish their NGO.

The Kraków nativity scene makers are closely integrated with the Historical Museum of the City Kraków (from 2019 onwards called the Museum of Kraków). It has roots in the communist era when this institution seemed for *szopka* makers a safe haven in opposition to the officials who were unfriendly to their Christian tradition.

In the surveys conducted by the museum staff among the nativity scenes makers in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they emphasized their good relationship with the museum and they considered the jury as the highest authority (although some of them also pointed out some 'unfair' decisions that concerned them personally).⁹ In communist times the museum was subordinated to local authorities, nevertheless it had a limited autonomy. And it can be mentioned that in 1980 most of the museum employees joined the first non-governmental trade union 'Solidarity'.¹⁰ In 1986 a censor ordered



Figure 5. Jury of the contest, 2012. Photo: Andrzej Janikowski, Museum of Kraków archives.

8 *Szopki Krakowskie*, <https://szopki.eu> (25/02/2020).

9 Archives of the Department of folk and traditions of Kraków in the Museum of Kraków.

10 M. Niezabitowski, *Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa w latach 1945-1996* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Kraków, 2019), p. 131-132. Available via: <http://rep.up.krakow.pl/xmlui/handle/11716/6239> (08/03/2020).



Figure 6. The seventeenth competition for the most beautiful nativity scene, 2012. Photo: Andrzej Janikowski, Museum of Kraków archives.



Figure 7. Szopka makers during the Lauksnos International Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival in Klaipeda, 2019. Photo: Andrzej Szoka.

to withdraw a candidature from the contest. A nativity scene of Andrzej Morański contained a figurine of general Wojciech Jaruzelski, the leader of the communist government. As a result of negotiations between the museologists and the officials the nativity scene could stay in the competition, although the controversial figurine had to be removed. This nativity scene was purchased and it is now in the museum collection.

The creators have a particular respect for Anna Szałapak, not only as the ethnographer employed at the museum, but also as the singer called 'the White Angel' and as an artist of the famous literary cabaret *Piwnica pod Baranami* (the Cellar under the Rams). Many nativity scene makers commemorated Anna Szałapak after her death in 2017 by placing a figurine of a white angel in their works.

The opinions of museum staff had an impact on the careers of the creators. For example, in 1983 the curator of the competition Tamara Petryk convinced the disappointed creator Marian Dłużniewski to return to the craft after a three-year break. After his comeback, he won several awards.¹¹ The good reputation of the museum amongst the nativity scene makers is partly the result of obtained benefits. The museum gives financial awards in the competition and buys the works from the creators for the collection (already 270 objects in 2019). Furthermore, the museum also organizes educational lessons and workshops and pays the creators for their involvement in these activities.

For decades the museum focused on the popularization of the material aspects of the phenomenon: post-competition exhibitions *in situ*, exhibitions of the Kraków nativity scenes in many places around the world, making and distributing albums presenting cribs from the museum collection. The identity, skills, passions of creators and the intergenerational communication were left aside.

In 2012 the museum has realized a project of interviews with the most active creators who were interviewed in their workshops by dr. Magdalena Kwiecińska. The result of the project was a series of three documentaries: *Kraków in Miniature*¹², *The Tradition of Generations*¹³, *From Competition to Competition*¹⁴. A publication presenting the profiles of thirty artists was also published.¹⁵

A significant step in the interaction between the creators of nativity scenes and the museum was cooperation in preparing applications for entry on the national intangible heritage list in 2014 and then on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2018. During the meetings and consultations, the community has revealed its needs: lack of

11 Szałapak, *Szopka Krakowska*, p. 347.

12 M. Kwiecińska e.a., *Kraków w miniaturze* [*Kraków in miniature*]. Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, 2012. Available via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrFrVXW4QYM> (10/03/2020).

13 M. Kwiecińska e.a., *Tradycja pokoleń* [*The Traditions of Generations*]. Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, 2012. Available via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1YNUKJ9nQA> (10/03/2020).

14 M. Kwiecińska e.a., *Od konkursu do konkursu* [*From Competition to Competition*]. Historical Museum of the City of Kraków 2012. Available via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkqtFJKHgaU> (10/03/2020).

15 M. Kwiecińska Magdalena and M. Niechaj Małgorzata, *Portrety twórców szopek Krakowskich*. Kraków, 2012. The biographies of the creators are also published on the museum's website: <https://opowiedzmimiamsto.mhk.pl> (10/03/2020).

space at home to store the annually-made cribs, difficulties in renting workshop spaces, lack of funds for the purchase of materials, difficulties with selling the finished works. The creators pointed out that the museum's support was also insufficient. These numerous meetings furthermore had a social aspect and brought the community together. There have always been friendships and animosities among the Kraków nativity scenes makers, but as one artist emphasizes: "So many meetings, and such a good spirit of cooperation have never occurred before." The ties between creators are enhanced. For example, a group of creators reached an agreement during a meeting at the museum that they will jointly order the larger quantities of tin foil from a producer and thanks to this everyone will pay less.

Today, the museum's activities, in cooperation with the city authorities, have an impact on the phenomenon of the Kraków nativity scene. The latest example is the project 'The Walk All Around Nativity Scenes'. As part of this project, the museum ordered the big nativity scenes which can be viewed from four sides (the typical Kraków nativity scene is viewed only from the front). These cribs were placed in showcases on squares and in city parks as a way to promote the competition and post-competition exhibition and the phenomenon as such. However, this affected the phenomenon because the two-sided nativity scenes have recently appeared among the works submitted to the competition.

UNESCO and what's next?

In 2018 the decision of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee brought joy and hope to solve the problems of the community. The application for inclusion on the Representative List was submitted by Poland's Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, but the safeguarding measures should be implemented with the involvement of several institutions: Culture and National Heritage of Kraków City Hall, the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, the Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Kraków, and the Friends of Kraków's History and Historical Monuments Society.¹⁶ One year later, it can be said that the Museum of Kraków initiates and manages the implementation of these measures. The museum staff has a closer relationship with the creators than the officials. Together they prepared a proposal for a resolution of the Kraków City Council including a designation of the communal flats as studios for the Kraków nativity scene makers or a promotion of the Kraków nativity scenes as the official city souvenirs.

The nativity scene makers and museologists joined the network of international contacts concerning the intangible cultural heritage. An example is the participation of a group of artists and museologists in the Lauksnos International Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival in Klaipėda. The festival took place in July 2019 and was held under the auspices of the Lithuanian National UNESCO Commission. The participants from Kraków had

16 *Nomination file No. 001362 - Nativity scene (szopka) tradition in Krakow*, <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/38977-EN.doc> (13/03/2020).

the opportunity to meet with actors and networks of phenomena inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity from other countries: Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Serbia and Ukraine. During the festival a group of ten makers created one crib together which was a very unusual practice.¹⁷ Another tendency is the participation of creators in the projects of the exhibitions in Poland and abroad. In addition to the Kraków nativity scenes from the museum collection a living heritage is presented through the meetings with the artists and the workshops of the craft.

Conclusion

For decades museums had a great impact on the phenomenon of Kraków nativity scenes, starting with the inventing of the competition and ending with the inclusion on the UNESCO list. Alicja Soćko-Mucha considers that it is possible to claim that these persons are co-creators of Kraków's nativity-scene heritage.¹⁸

It is difficult to say whether the Kraków nativity scene craft would have survived the last eighty years without the museum. Certainly, this phenomenon would look completely different because the scale of the museum's interference was very significant. There is also no doubt that the Kraków nativity scene craft and the collection of the cribs are a motor for the Museum of Kraków. Much of this institution's activity is related to the Kraków nativity scene and its creators. Without this phenomenon the museum would be a completely different place. The nativity scene is also a continuous commentary on the changing city that the museum needs. What's more, without the eighty years of cooperation between the Kraków nativity scene makers and the museum, the practice and the safeguarding of the intangible heritage in Poland would look different and many institutions build on these experiences.

17 M. Niechaj, *Fenomen szopkarstwa krakowskiego. Od tradycji do listy UNESCO* [The Phenomenon of Nativity Scene-Making in Kraków. From Tradition to UNESCO list]. Kraków, 2019, p. 73-76.

18 Soćko-Mucha, *From "tradition"*, p. 217.