

*History of Art*

## Communication Aspects of the Georgian National Museum

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**ABSTRACT.** The Georgian National Museum (GNM) is an administrative umbrella organization which covers research institutions, National Gallery and the major museums of Georgia. It was established in 2004, though its history goes back up to 1852, when the first Museum in the whole region of the Caucasus – Museum of the Caucasian Department of the Russian Imperial Geographic Society was founded. The Museum of the Caucasian Department exhibited culture of the whole region of the Caucasus and had rich collection of natural history. Caucasian Department was followed by openings of various museums, though due to constant political changes (usually reflected on cultural institutions as well) their functioning was not stable. Still, museums in Georgia met the demands of various audiences offering different exhibitions using techniques that were adopted in that period. However, since 19<sup>th</sup> century up today, the paradigm of museum communication drastically changed from a strict approach: “look but do not touch” to a friendly and interactive surrounding, where education is combined with joy and entertainment. Museums all around the world narrate history/art/science through its exhibitions. GNM also faces some major changes and one of the priorities is to create communication strategy that includes scientific and curatorial as well as managerial processes, where creation of the story line for communication is one of the key elements. For preparation of the exhibits so that they become the main channels of cultural communication we need to understand what type of the institution we are and what we have to offer to our stakeholders. © 2017 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

**Key words:** museum, exhibition, narrative, story line, Georgia

### Brief History

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and removal of the iron curtain followed by the dark 90s, Georgia burst out to the western world facing economical break down that was reflected on the cultural institutions as well. The systemic changes led to the creation of the Georgian National Museum (GNM), the administrative umbrella organization overseeing re-

search institutions, National Gallery and the major museums of Georgia in 2004. However, origins of the museum go back to 1852, when the first Museum in the whole region of the Caucasus – Museum of the Caucasian Department of the Russian Imperial Geographic Society was founded. First Director of the Museum was Gustav Radde, German naturalist and explorer. The Caucasian Museum exhibited culture

of the whole region of the Caucasus, moreover, it had a rich collection of natural history. Caucasian Department was followed by openings of various museums, though due to constant political changes (usually reflected on the cultural institutions) their functioning was not stable. Still, museums in Georgia met the demands of various audiences offering different exhibitions using techniques that were well known and adopted in that period.

However, since 19<sup>th</sup> century up today, the paradigm of museum communication drastically changed from a strict approach: “look but do not touch” to a friendly, interactive and open surrounding where education is combined with joy and entertainment. Museums all around the world narrate history/art/science and communicate culture through its exhibitions. In the transitional period, Georgian cultural institutions also face some major changes and reforms. During ten years of its existence, GNM’s progress is indubitable. Nonetheless, in some cases, the institution lacks the experience, which leaves the museum staff with some gaps that need to be filled. One of those directions is the planning of the unified communication strategy that includes scientific and curatorial as well as managerial processes, where creation of the story line for communication is one of the key elements.

For preparation of the exhibits so that they become the main channels of communication we need to understand what type of the institution we are and what we have to offer to our stakeholders (both internal and external).

## Museum Types

Today we can find several different classifications of the museums and all of them are based on the certain approach. Sometimes museums are classified according to the source of their funding (e.g., state, municipal, private), particularly in statistical work. Classifying by source of funding fails to indicate the true character of the museum’s collections. For example, institutions funded by the national government –

national museums – may hold outstanding international collections as do the British Museums or the Louvre; may hold specialized collections, as do number of the national museums of antiquities on the European continent or may have an essentially local character as do some museums of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. It is often convenient to group museums according to type, though with their diverse origins, varying philosophies and differing roles in society museums do not lend themselves to rigid classification. Geoffrey D. Lewis defines five basic types based on the nature of their collections, scale and quality: general, natural history and natural science, science and technology, history and art. General museums hold collections in more than one subject and are therefore sometimes known as multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary museums. Many were found in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, or early 20<sup>th</sup> century [1]. While, Elaine Heuman Gurain defines the following five types of museums: Object Centered, Narrative, Client centered, Community and National, still “almost all museums are mixtures and no museum is only one type any more” – she writes [2].

At a glance we could say that the Georgian National Museum should be classified as the general museum type, but if we go deeper it becomes hard to fit the Georgian National Museum into one classification – it obviously is the National museum, but bearing in mind its history, diversity of its collections and multidisciplinary approach to the subjects, we could say that the Georgian National Museum conveys all the above listed characteristics.

Structurally, the Georgian National Museum is quite like the State Museums of Berlin or Smithsonian Institution’s National Mall. Though, while the main museums of both Berlin and Smithsonian Institution are mainly concentrated in one area, the Georgian National Museum has branches in different regions all over Georgia and archaeological sites in its regions. So, when we talk about the united communication strategy of the Georgian National Museum, we should remember diversity of its components, in

every way, whether it is chronological, cultural or geographical. We should also define firstly – what is unique about the museum, what is that “something” that makes it so different and attractive and secondly – how this uniqueness should be communicated to both local and international audiences.

These were the main questions to the various museum professionals during the qualitative research held at the Smithsonian Institution (USA), Metropolitan Museum of Art (USA), the State Museums of Berlin (Germany) and the Georgian National Museum. During the research 38 foreign museum professionals were interviewed, including the Emeritus Director of the Metropolitan Museum of art Prof. Philippe de Montebello; the Deputy Director General of the State Museums of Berlin, Prof. Christina Haak; the director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Renwick Gallery, Dr. Elizabeth Broun; Director and Chair of the Museum Studies Program of the George Washington University, Prof. Kim Rice; Director of the Office of Public Affairs of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Melinda Machado, etc. Some of the experts were familiar with the Georgian National Museum as an institution and its collections and some of them not. Nonetheless, practically all of them suggested that uniqueness of the museum should lie through its diverse collections that are not alike to any other leading museum of the world, as they are based on the local archaeological findings starting from 1.8 million years ago; Georgian medieval art and unique works of Pirosmiani, eventually meaning that our museum is granted the possibility to become the tool for communication of the national as well as cultural identity of the Country. “You must understand, people’s thoughts are influenced by their positions, their locations and a lot of external factors. You need to propose something that is characteristic of who you are, you need to show your uniqueness. Be conscious of presenting yourself; do less requesting and more proposing – like sending exhibitions abroad. You should send some of the works of art you have, and organize exhi-

bitions in Paris, London, Berlin, New York and other centers of culture.” – said Philippe de Montebello during the interview and added: “Look at yourself as a country – if you pull resources from different places you can create exhibitions and programs to send abroad. In this way other people become aware of the great culture of Georgia”.

### **How we Interpret Science for Public**

Travelling exhibitions is only one aspect of the museum communication, where the Georgian National Museum is quite successful (famous shows of the Georgian archeological treasury, first Europeans, Pirosmiani, Dimiti Ermakov, wine culture, etc.), but to be successful in all fields of communications as an institution you need to have the well-thought and smooth communication strategy while renovating museums and preparing the permanent or temporary exhibitions within the institution. In this regard it is crucial to understand that internal communication between the staff members and different teams within the institution plays a vital role in building up successful external communication [3].

The Metropolitan Museum of Art tries to change its mentoring tone to a friendly one lately. Of course, transformation from a mentor into a friend, creation of joyful environment, engagement of public and spreading knowledge needs hard work, time and certain experience, which are more or less gathered in different museums. It covers many different processes, including creation of the general exhibition narrative that it distributed on the exhibition labels and different tools of media.

Exhibitions should relate to visitors. Broken exhibits, intimidating labels, and activities that visitors can not relate to are barriers to visitor enjoyment that lead to frustration, boredom, and confusion – notes the Exhibition Standards of the Smithsonian institution [4] and among ten deadly sins Beverly Serrell puts the labels written with a vocabulary that is out of reach for the majority of visitors [5]. One of the ways to avoid such complications of the exhibition

texts is to involve the person from communication or education department into the curatorial team from the very beginning of the creation of exhibition narrative to balance the amount of scientific information and terminology during the text writing. Even though some amount of tension is practically unavoidable between the scientist and the communication/education person, outcome is usually worth it. As an example we analyzed exhibition labels of the recently opened permanent exhibition of the GNM's S. Janashia Museum of Georgia "Stone Age Georgia". Looking at the labels from this approach was especially interesting. It appeared that in total there were approximately 2560 words used throughout the exhibition, including the main introductory texts and labels. Only 56 out of the total amount of words appeared to be the scientific terminology specific to the field, paleoanthropology. Most of those words were composed ones having non-Georgian origins (in some cases with two or more roots). Adoption of the new scientific terminology is quite a normal process for such an old language as Georgian. Still, to solve such problems, it could be considered to create some handouts with small explanations available on the exhibition to support better understanding of the information given.

### United Communication Strategy

The unified communication strategy that links the institutions under the Georgian National Museum to each-other can be discussed on the examples of three archeological sites, Dmanisi, Vani and Dzalisa. Earlier discussed exhibition at the S. Janashia Museum of Georgia, located in the very center of the Countries capital –Tbilisi, showcases Stone Age of Georgia (1.77 million - 8 thousand years) as well as anthropological material discovered in other parts of the world, presenting the time flow of human evolution. Visitors viewing the exhibition most probably will be interested in exploring more by visiting the archaeological site, which is located 85 km to the southwest of Tbilisi. Its renovation project was partially finished

in 2009 and the Visitor Centre opened. The main space where the archaeological excavations are currently held was roofed by the special shelter with the space for visitors to stand. This would save the site itself, ease the working process for archaeologists (by not being under direct rays of the sun) and most importantly give the visitors chance to approach the excavation area very closely, observe working process of archaeologists and interact with them.

The other archeological site that is under renovation process now is the Vani Museum-Reserve in western Georgia, on the left bank of the River Rioni. The oldest remains of Vani date back to 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. (cult place) and the rich burials of local elite, making the Vani archaeological site worldwide famous, date back 5<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. These finds explain why Colchis was mentioned as the land "rich in gold" in Greco-Roman sources along with Babylon, Sardis and Mycene. Considered the political-administrative and religious center of the kingdom of Colchis, Temple City of Vani was completely destroyed in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. To keep the main idea of being the part of the network of the Georgian National Museum the story of Vani begins in Tbilisi at the Janashia Museum's archeological treasury exhibition, where the objects from the Reach Burials are presented. After the rehabilitation of the archeological site and the museum it is planned to reinstall exhibition, which will cover the period between 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, which aligns to the chronological frames of the Archeological site. Fortunately, the rich material unearthed in Vani gives the possibility to present the Colchis - "Rich in Gold", both in Vani and in Tbilisi. The visitor seeing the objects from Vani in Tbilisi, hopefully will have a desire to go and see the archaeological context and historical background of the myth of the Argonauts.

The fascinating jewelry of the Iberian artists is also presented at the Archeological Treasury exhibition in Tbilisi. They represent the culture of the Iberian Kingdom developed in Eastern Georgia with the Capital City of Mtskheta, which later became the capi-

tal City of the United Georgia. This jewelry which is logical continuation of the century's traditions, still different from Colchian jewelry and distinguished with the polychromic style is the bright representation of power and strength of Kingdom of Iberia. Very close to Mtskheta we have remains of the whole settlement of Dzalisa. The site has been identified as the City of Dzalisa mentioned in the "Geographic Manual" by the Greek geographer Claudius Ptolemy. Dzalisa is one of the most important archeological monuments in the historic kingdom of Kartli (Iberia). Dated 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC – 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, it is an example of the development of rural life in Iberia. The archaeological expedition revealed cultural layers from different periods. Distinguished are mosaic floors one of which depicts Dionysus and Ariadne and a unique, 800 square meter swimming pool.

### Conclusion

When it comes to the united communication strategy of the GNM, there are number of directions we should address. Communication covers every aspect of visitor experience and "translation" of the scientific language into the understandable museum narrative is as much important as to have a communication strategy that cannot be literally read but should

be giving the sense of unity to the viewer. This can be reached if general communication strategy will include the connections between different institutions united under GNM, such as in terms of the archeological sites, the Georgian National Museum tries to make bridges between the museums united under it. The main museum of the Capital City – S. Janashia Museum of Georgia gives the visitors possibility to observe and study objects unearthed at the archeological sites that are presented in chronological line and show the flow of development of Georgian culture starting from the oldest finds on our territory, while on site the visitors are given a chance to view the archaeological context the objects came from and reconstruct the history of our Country. "We are neither a temple nor a storehouse. Instead we are an active community learning center that links our past with our present, to better prepare us for tomorrow" [6].

**Acknowledgments.** This work is financially supported by Rustaveli National Science Foundation grant PhDF2016\_239 and the Carnegie Research Fellowship Program. The author is grateful to advisors Nino Lordkipanidze, Natela Jabua, consultant Kym Rice and Academy Member David Lordkipanidze for their guidance and kind support.

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ასპექტები****ნ. ხულუზაური***საქართველოს ეროვნული მუზეუმი, თბილისი, საქართველო**(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის დ. ლორთქიფანიძის მიერ)*

საქართველოს ეროვნული მუზეუმი აერთიანებს სამეცნიერო კვლევით ცენტრებს, ეროვნულ გალერეასა და ქვეყნის მთავარ მუზეუმებს. ის 2004 წელს შეიქმნა, თუმცა, ჯერ კიდევ მე-19 საუკუნეში ჩაყარა საფუძველი, როდესაც თბილისში რუსეთის საიმპერატორო გეოგრაფიული საზოგადოების კავკასიის მუზეუმის დეპარტამენტი გაიხსნა. კავკასიის მუზეუმში მთელი კავკასიის კულტურა და ბუნების ისტორიის მდიდარი კოლექცია იყო წარმოდგენილი. მის დაარსებას სხვა მუზეუმების გახსნაც მოჰყვა ქვეყანაში, თუმცა, მუდამ ცვალებადი პოლიტიკური სიტუაციის გამო (რაც პირდაპირ ისახებოდა და ისახება კულტურულ დაწესებულებებზე) მათი ფუნქციონირება არასტაბილური იყო. მიუხედავად ამისა, ქართული მუზეუმები ყოველთვის უწყობდნენ ფეხს დამთვალელებელთა მოთხოვნებს და სთავაზობდნენ მათ გამოფენებს იმ დროისთვის არსებული სამუზეუმო სტანდარტების შესაბამისად. მე-19 საუკუნიდან დღემდე სამუზეუმო პარადიგმა “უყურე მაგრამ არ შეეხო” შეიცვალა. დღეს, მუზეუმები დამთვალელებს სთავაზობენ მეგობრულ, ინტერაქტიულ გარემოს, სადაც განათლება შეზავებულია დროის სასიამოვნოდ გატარებასთან. 21-ე საუკუნეში მსოფლიოს წამყვანი მუზეუმები ცდილობენ გააგრძელონ ცოდნა ისტორიის, ხელოვნებისა და მეცნიერების შესახებ თანამედროვე გამოფენების საშუალებით. გამონაკლისი არც საქართველოს ეროვნული მუზეუმია და მის ერთ-ერთ პრიორიტეტს სწორედ ისეთი კომუნიკაციის სტრატეგიის შექმნა წარმოადგენს, რომელიც გულისხმობს როგორც სამეცნიერო და საკურატორო, ასევე სამენეჯერო პროცესებს, სადაც საკომუნიკაციო ნარატივის შექმნა ერთ-ერთი მთავარი მიმართულებაა. იმისათვის რომ შევქმნათ გამოფენები, რომლებიც კულტურის კომუნიკაციის მთავარ არხებად გადაიქცევიან, კარგად უნდა გვესმოდეს თუ რა ტიპის ინსტიტუციას წარმოადგენთ ჩვენ და რას ვთავაზობთ დაინტერესებულ საზოგადოებას.

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*Received December, 2016*