
INTERNATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMME



ITP Conference Support Grant Report: *Muze.x Shaping Museum Futures*

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ITP Research and Conference Support Grants

In response to International Training Programme fellows seeking support to attend conferences and carry out research, the ITP are offering financial assistance to attend and participate in conferences, and to conduct research which help to develop professional skills and networks in the museum and heritage sector. Ioan Oprea successfully applied for a conference support grant in 2021 through an open application process.

Overview

Since 2019 I have worked as a conservator in the newest department at the [National Museum of the Union of Alba Iulia](#), Romania; [Museikon](#). The department officially opened in 2017, when the museum decided to focus particularly on the collections of icons painted on glass, wood and metal and to the large collections of religious books from the last five centuries. Both the icon and book collections are a very important part of Transylvanian heritage and patrimony. Before this, I worked in the public relations office and cultural marketing department at the museum and progressing to Museikon meant that I could continue my work with the public in a much more specific manner and also be involved in the conservation field; collecting artifacts, records, micro-climate control, pest management etc. I curate one - two exhibitions per year, including the publishing of catalogues, on-line exhibitions, marketing, guided tours, general management of the building, interactive workshops of calligraphy focused on various writing supports (wax tablets, papyrus, parchment, papers, ceramics, wood, bones and shells) and engraving workshops using an 18th century replica of a printing press. I started my professional career as an archaeologist and I had the chance to work and excavate on various sites of national importance in Romania and also outside the country in Malta and Slovakia. I am also involved in ancient Roman reenactment, having my own group now and over eleven years of experience in this field; I consider having a hobby as being a very important part of life and I like to work with people who share this same vision.



Outside Museikon building, National Museum of the Union of Alba Iulia

The conference

I decided to apply to attend the [Muže.X Shaping Museum Futures conference](#), organised by the University of Malta in Valletta, due to the interesting and important themes announced to be debated by many specialists from all over the globe. I was particularly interested in themes such as ‘the importance and role of the museum in modern society’, climate change and sessions focusing on the impact of the pandemic on museums and their visitors. The subject of the role of museums is something that I am familiar with, but climate change is not a subject debated in Romania very often; earlier this Summer I applied for a workshop here dedicated to the impact of climate change, but it was cancelled because less than ten people registered to participate. So, when I heard about the themes proposed by the Maltese event, I thought it would be a great chance to combine both museum activities and climate change action. I really hope that some educational programmes on climate action will take place in Romania soon and that people will start to act more responsibly to protect the beautiful, natural environment we still have. This was the main reason I wanted to attend the conference in Valletta.

Funding for museum activities outside of the country is quite rare in Romania and because climate change is not a subject usually focused on by museums, it was unlikely I was able to secure financial support from here to attend this conference. However, I am grateful that I was able to officially leave the museum for a few days and take part in this event. By successfully applying for the International Training Programme (ITP) Conference Support Grant, I was able to fund my attendance and so I wanted to use my experience on the ITP programme to meet with colleagues in Malta to create connections that could also be useful for the whole ITP network. Personally, I am very grateful for an opportunity to work on my professional career, to grow and develop it further. Almost all the expenses were covered by the ITP grant and the rest I was able to fund myself.



Conference opening in Aula Magna, University of Malta

Conference experience

Although it looked promising to begin with, several presentations discussing different research projects were not so much related to the theme of museum futures or climate change action. The conference had parallel sessions and therefore I had to choose between them. I particularly liked the keynote speech from Jette Sandahl (European Museum Forum) who spoke about a clear vision of the museum in this uncertain present and future; she made a clear statement about what a museum is, its role, its

status in society and how important it is to take care of our heritage – this distinction was later (in my opinion) misinterpreted by some participants. For example, the definition of a museum is something often debated and this has been accepted for a long time now, but I noticed that some participants use the term ‘museum’ as a word or title given to actions unrelated in any way with the museum’s main purpose. Much discussed was the term ‘gamification & digitization’ and the role of social media applications in our museum lives and, in my opinion, those are complementary areas, not the sole purpose or focus of a museum. As museums, we use different ways to attract our visitors, but we do not forget our main definition. We are not in society to be 100% liked by everyone; we teach history to our audiences and share knowledge which can be a useful tool to tackle issues in society. In terms of philosophy, the museum has a core and an outside shape; the core never changes, but the outside shape will change with time, to the preferences of the people that the museum wants to attract.



His excellency, George Vella, President of Malta, at the opening of the event

A very interesting paper was delivered by Patrick Noack (Dubai Future Foundation) who talked about important changes planned for the future including the abandonment of old energy resources and moving into the hydrogen products world. Telling us that the main changes are planned to be implemented around 2030 and the museum world will not be excluded from their plans.

My favourite paper was from Caroline Tonna (Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum, Malta) who presented both a theoretical and practical session about how museums can be involved in climate change. As an example of how her workplace is doing this, since Malta is a very dry, arid place, this small museum covered their flat roof (flat roofs are widespread in Maltese islands) with local green plants. The action offered microclimatic

stability to the building, helped the local plants to exist (some of them were on the threshold of extinction), involved local people and taught these communities about their environment. I was particularly attracted to the speaker’s mix of theory and practice and this was the best paper I listened to during the conference.

The event felt 'normal' but in terms of COVID-19, masks were mandatory inside, vaccine certificates were required in most places and everyone kept at a safe distance most of the time; this made discussions seem a little distant. I enjoyed the talks delivered by the main organisers, Dr. Sandro Debono and Prof. Carmel Borg. I found out about their intention to develop another event next year, motivated by the high registration numbers for this conference. I also had the chance to talk with Manuela Greipel (Grimmwelt Kassel, Germany) about how a museum can be created and sustained from a story, in this case the story of Hansel and Gretel. I enjoyed other talks with Amy Hondsmerk (Nottingham Trent University) - during ITP 2019 I was lucky to be in Nottingham for a week and therefore we had lots to talk about including the city and the ITP programme during this opportunity to meet in Malta. Amy delivered a paper about digital games during the pandemic and people's interests that she had observed during this critical time. During the conference breaks I enjoyed the talks I had with Talal Al-Muhanna from Kuwait, a documentary and film producer who is familiar with ancient Romanian heritage and the legends of the Dacian gold in the mountains. Therefore, most of our discussions focused on cultural heritage crime – I wish there had been more time to talk about this because there is much of this kind of criminal activity occurring in the world and unfortunately it is difficult to know how to help.

Many of the talks were influenced by the pandemic and it was useful to find out about how other people and museums had been dealing with this situation – what kind of solutions were developed and how many visitors lost or gained, etc. I shared my idea of creating a COVID-19 memorial in our museum to help, in some way, the visitors and the locals and to remind them we are all in these hard times together. The pain and barriers created by COVID has been, and is, huge. Creating a memorial where people can gather to share beautiful memories about their dear ones lost to the virus seemed, to me, one of the few things we could do in such situations. The memorial is in an open space near the main entrance of the museum and all visitors (both in person and virtual) can leave a stone-plaster heart on the wall with the initials those who passed. The initiative is unique in Romania, but world-wide more than 80 museums dedicated memorials, exhibitions, cultural activities and artistic events in memory of COVID victims. I hope we can make clear that the museum is a tri-dimensional place: past, present and future, shaped by all of us and we can overcome difficult times with shared knowledge and experiences.



Valletta's Gardens – view of the former 'Three Cities', now part of Valletta

Observations

Sadly, the organisers didn't offer any kind of visits, not even to the local museum or to Valletta's main historical places. This was a bit strange in my opinion, and also for some other participants. I've been to Malta before and I enjoyed re-visiting places I used to go to during my scholarship there in 2012 and during visits with the Roman reenactment group in 2018 and 2019. Firstly, I went to Mosta, where I lived for two and a half months and Mdina, the very beautiful (and Roman) location in Malta. I spent the evenings in Valletta's magical spots, with its yellowish stone building and the smell of the Mediterranean Sea.



During a short break inside the university at the conference

Hybrid events (on-line and physical) are a hard thing to do. Some of the papers were hard to listen to, maybe because of the connection, sound effects etc., and so it could be difficult to take ideas and information from those. The event programme was merged across two days, with very short breaks; it started at 9am and finished at 5 – 6pm, with a lunch break of around 20-25 minutes. In my opinion it was a lot to take in over two days. It was very interesting content but the ability to focus decreased as there was so much to absorb in a short time.

Amongst the observations I made, another significant one relates to the question of museum status and where we place the museum in the future. Some papers were not really dealing with heritage problems,

but mostly focusing on themes related to mass-media and related activity which to me, were not linked to the classical museum definition. I remember a similar case in Bucharest, which I saw just before the event, where a chocolate shop took the name of 'Chocolate Museum', but having only various assortments of chocolate to sell, no story behind the products and no relevant information to make it worthy of carrying this title. I didn't pay too much attention to this in the past, but I feel we must make it clear to our visitors what a museum is; what its role is and how museums are an active part of society.

The event was well received in the local media and was organised under the Distinguished Patronage of the President of the Republic of Malta, as well as the [University of Malta](#) and the Department of Arts, Open Communities & Adult Education. Other collaborators included: Malta Conventions, Valletta Cultural Agency and Spaju Kreattiv. In terms of media partners, the event was advertised in advance by [Jing Culture & Commerce](#) and Finestre sull'Arte (Arte Antica e Contemporanea).



Presentation/on-line speaker; hybrid session

Networking

Other than those mentioned above, I spoke with Fabio Viola (Tuomuseo), one of the main speakers about his ideas on the 'gamification' of the museum. Fabio understands the museum world from his point of view as an entrepreneur and for him, the museum represents an infinite world of inspirations (mentioning a lot about Star Wars productions and their global inspiration sources from stories and legends). He also proposed the idea of visitors going from *consumer* to curator - his idea was to empower visitors and to make them co-authors of the stories we display in the museum. With Roman reenactment in my mind, I can agree with this; the museum could be presented to society as a huge source of inspiration for business and activities and I hope to continue our conversation, perhaps for a Roman project in the future. Similar discussions took place with Karen Haldaway (University of Aarhus, Denmark). During the event, some of Malta's university students accompanied us for various reasons; for example, Sandra Dingli and her husband, both local Maltese people, had a great interest in this event due to the tourism company they run and from their desire to make Malta better known in the world and for content inspiration for their business.



La Giara Restaurant, welcome dinner and reception

The future

... *“change is the only constant in life”* (Herakleitos, 535-475 a.Ch.)

I will always see Malta as one of the places I started my career in the history field and one of the first countries where I lived abroad. Each visit here has enriched me with something new - more knowledge, more connections. Participating in this conference has been the highlight of my visits to Malta so far and has been a very important moment in my career, supported by the British Museum and the ITP. I am grateful for this opportunity to experience a huge amount of information and knowledge presented by different people across the museum sector. My wish was to find out more about how museums can combat climate change and to start implementing a series of actions in relation to this, at home. Our museum hosts a series of workshops for children and teenagers and for the next year, with my colleagues, I wish to create themed workshops to talk about climate change and its effects and what each one of us can do. This activity and action can be promoted in an on-line space and in partnership with other cultural institutions in our city and as a first step, I hope to make a stand for recycling, keeping our environment clean and safe for everyone. I am generally a ‘green person’, in that I like nature, plants and all that is green. Soon our department will create a *lapidarivm* space to house our collection of stone artifacts and having been inspired by the paper from Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum (Malta), I aim to make this project more environmentally friendly than initially planned. I hope to remain in contact with Fabio Viola about the gamification project as so many aspects of the museum have been waiting to be brought back to life and so this has made me think, why not commercialised? Also, I am not forgetting the sensitive topic of cultural heritage crime and I hope I can look more closely at this subject in the future, perhaps working on projects related to this field and taking practical action to save and protect heritage.

After many inspiring sessions and discussions, the organisers offered the chance for the participants to submit their work for review and they plan to publish the papers related to the main three topics of the conference (digitalisation, democratising the museum space and climate change action) which will be published in their electronical journal. In terms of the future of this conference, the organiser announced a desire to continue events in the coming years and news will be announced in line with and depending on the evolution of the COVID-19 situation.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you very much and wish you all the best!

Dr. Ioan Oprea



Sea view from the last day spent in Malta

Related links

Ioan Oprea grant [announcement](#) on the ITP blog

National Museum of the Union of Alba Iulia social media pages:

<https://www.facebook.com/museikon>

<https://www.facebook.com/muzeulnationalaluniriialbaiulia>

Conference media links:

[https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/debating-museum-](https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/debating-museum-futures.906214?fbclid=IwAR1mVto89exzXW_DxglxU1hFz9YG4kCYS7dlul86Yi1FXrTBvLelzmF8CZk)

[futures.906214?fbclid=IwAR1mVto89exzXW_DxglxU1hFz9YG4kCYS7dlul86Yi1FXrTBvLelzmF8CZk](https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/debating-museum-futures.906214?fbclid=IwAR1mVto89exzXW_DxglxU1hFz9YG4kCYS7dlul86Yi1FXrTBvLelzmF8CZk)

<https://www.um.edu.mt/newspoint/news/2021/10/muzex-shaping-museum-futures-conference>

<https://newsbook.com.mt/en/muze-x-shaping-museum-futures/>

<https://www.museumsaotearoa.org.nz/news-and-events/events/muzex-shaping-museum-futures-conference-2021>

<https://jingculturecommerce.com/muze-x-2021-takeaways/>

<https://jingculturecommerce.com/event/muze-x-shaping-museum-features-spring-webinar-series-danielle-kuijten/>

Front cover image (From left to right) Prof. Carmel Borg, Dr. Ioan Oprea (Romania, ITP 2019) and Dr. Sandro Debono.