
Gabrovo, BULGARIA

The Project “Craftsmanship for the Future” Supports the Artisans in One of the Most Attractive Open-Air Museums in Europe

Since the very beginning of the crisis, provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic, the cultural and tourist sectors in Bulgaria—one of the Member States of the European Union—have been among the most affected by the imposed limitations, and it is difficult for them to carry out their activity. Culture has been defined by the national and local authorities as one of the priority areas that need an urgent programme for support. This engagement has been directed also towards the masters of traditional crafts in the museums and ethnographical complexes in Bulgaria.

Especially difficult were the months March, April and May of 2020 when the museums were closed, and the craftsmen were in real danger to give up practicing their crafts and their skills—intangible cultural heritage to disappear. Facing this situation, the state authority came up with various ways for protecting the cultural sector.

Some of the undertaken measures were general towards the whole labour market (such as tax incentives, subsidization of employment and benefits for unemployed persons) and others were more specific, directed only at persons with proven experience in the field of culture and arts or keepers of traditional crafts.

Several municipalities in Bulgaria (local institutions with functions of legislative and executive power), with open-air museums and ethnographical complexes of national importance, appealed to the Ministry of Culture for assistance and support for the masters of traditional crafts in serious financial difficulties, many of whom are owners of small family firms.

As a result of these efforts in support of the crafts, the project “Craftsmanship for the Future” has been carried out with an estimated budget of 85,000

Bulgarian leva (around US\$ 48,771.25). The purpose is to promote the skills of the masters in the workmanship of traditional and design articles. The project is carried out at the Regional Ethnographic Open-Air Museum “Etar,” located in the central part of Bulgaria, and financed by the Ministry of Culture.

In fact, “Etar” is among the most popular cultural and tourist sites. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was visited by more than 200,000 persons. Between 18 and 22 active craftsmen’s workshops and facilities are presented at “Etar” Museum depending on the season. The project has been realized by the museum team; the beneficiary is the Municipality of Gabrovo—the institution that presents the local executive power, and the financing authority is the State through the budget of the Ministry of Culture of Bulgaria. The fund is allocated to the masters at “Etar” Museum who use it to buy materials, to present skills, to pay for the work of a documenting team and their own labour costs and office materials. Each of the craftsmen included in the project receives around 5,000 Bulgarian leva—this sum is sufficient to pay for the functioning of the workshops and the allowance of the masters for a period of 2-3 months, and is equal to US\$ 2,877.76. In 2021, the year when the project started, the minimal salary in Bulgaria was 650 Bulgarian leva (around US\$ 374.11).

The project “Craftsmanship for the Future” aims to support financially in documenting, preserving and promoting the skills of the masters at “Etar” Museum. Each craftsman in the project makes one traditional and one design article. The whole process is documented by video. The process of making the traditional article is documented in all stages and becomes part of the film. Seventeen short films and a trailer are made for the general public.

The making of video products has a purpose in a long term for promoting the articles of the masters. The museum team plans to present the films at the tourist markets, conferences, craftsmen’s fairs, in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) and in the Creative Tourism Network of which the town of Gabrovo is a member. The finished products and their documented recordings will be shown at the exhibition in the Regional Ethnographic Open-Air Museum “Etar.” In 2022, they will also be presented in other museums and cultural institutions in Bulgaria.

The project “Craftsmanship for the Future” was presented as a good

practice for preserving the cultural and historical heritage during the 4th interregional seminar (November 18-19, 2021) of the international project “Code Crafts.” At the same time, Prof. Svetla Dimitrova, director of “Etar” Museum, and Dr. Svetlozar Todorov, head of the “Cultural Management” Department, presented the project at the Management Board Meeting of ICOM for South East Europe.

“Craftsmanship for the Future” is an initiative that through direct financing gives an opportunity to masters-bearers of skills, which are intangible cultural heritage, to continue practicing their crafts. These skills are documented and preserved for the future. Through video productions, the interest of the new generation towards the craftsmanship is provoked and a chance is given for acquiring knowledge related to craft.

Through this project, the central and local authorities in Bulgaria and the museum specialists from “Etar” Museum contribute to the preservation of the precious skills of the artisans working in the museum. This project has been a great measure against the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic, and can be applied and adapted successfully in different situations as well.

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