

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

The National Museum in Sarajevo

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The National Museum in Sarajevo is a unique monument, not only of culture, but also of an innovative concept of interdisciplinary collaboration between the humanities and social sciences. It was established in 1888 as a showcase of the new Austro-Hungarian rule following the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹ It brought together the study of geography, geology, archaeology, and folklore; it was conceived not only as a place of presentation, but also as a place of exploration and research. A group of international scientists within the Empire of Austria-Hungary, particularly Czech, started working there. In terms of concept, the National Museum is in accordance with the concept of regional museums that popped up across Austrian provinces (*Länder*) in the 19th century at the time of major construction operations: the same year, 1888, saw the opening of the Regional Museum in Ljubljana and, in 1889, the imperial *Naturhistorisches Museum* twinned with the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in Vienna. The national museums that appeared across Europe within and beyond the Austro-Hungarian Empire (in Prague and Budapest as well as Belgrade, Athens, Bucharest) had a totally different concept, although they were equally interdisciplinary – they were supposed to present the versatility of the national spirit and creativity. The National Museum in Sarajevo, however, did not fit into any of these categories and their ideological concepts: it is a region, a province,² though not unique, but rather marked by mutual interaction of cultural and linguistic groups that jointly create a new cultural identity. Its neo-renaissance appearance was designed by the brilliant Czech architect Karel Paržík, who conceived the key representative buildings in Sarajevo and designed them as architectural style games: the synagogue, Marijindvor,³ the Evangelist church, the City Hall. The National Museum of Sarajevo as well is a rare example of a building designed for that purpose.

The National Museum in Sarajevo rests on an unusual hypertext: It is versatility that constructs a particular identity, but this identity is not based on power. At the same time, it is not a candid colonial museum, such as, for example, the *Tropenmuseum* in Amsterdam – look at what we have conquered (and stolen). In a sense, it is close to the concept of the *Musée de l'homme* in Paris (founded in 1937) and its successor, *Musée du quai Branly* (founded in 2006). The identities shown by the National Museum, inviting its research in an international environment, are first and foremost equal constituent elements of a new identity, though certainly integrated into the Empire.

As an interdisciplinary scientific and representative institution of culture and research centre, the National Museum preserved this identity in the post-war Yugoslavia, primarily thanks to the interdisciplinary determination of its director - Alojz Benac (1947-1967). The publishing activity of the National Museum, the yearly journal entitled *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja*, was an impressive addition to the major work provided by this institution to the Bosnian and the Yugoslav academia.

Because of unresolved financing or rather because of the impossibility of the different divided parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina to reach an agreement, the National Museum has been closed for more than a year with little prospect for it to be reopened soon. Is the possibility for reflexion of new identities completely gone? Is the academy unable to organise itself, let alone think critically about its epistemological status? For in a modern state striving towards the European Union, a primitive "economic" response to this scandal can be nothing other than another proof that such an expectation is unrealistic.

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Notes

1. Occupation or takeover following the 1878 Congress of Berlin, since formal annexation happened in 1908. [←](#)
2. The original name, *Zemaljski muzej*, is derived from the German *Landesmuseum*, lit. museum of the province, region. [←](#)
3. A housing complex in Sarajevo. [←](#)

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