

Digital Publishing in Lithuanian Museums in 1995-2010



Museum of
Birštonas Website

Introduction

The processes in the development of digital and electronic publishing at Lithuanian museums were closely related with general trends in information technologies and communication, and Internet expansion in Europe and in Lithuania in particular. The changing priorities and aims of the museums themselves as well as their partners in spreading information about museums and cultural values preserved there determined the evolution that could be roughly divided into six stages. In the present article each stage is discussed separately, highlighting its salient features.

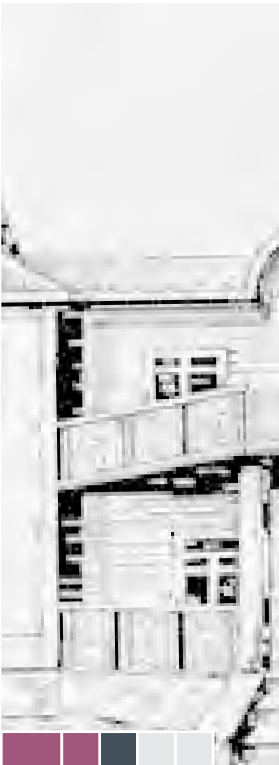
First stage

The years 1995-1997 may be considered the beginning of digital and electronic publishing in Lithuanian museums. At that time various private companies specialising in electronic publishing sought to make their way into business and thus looked for attractive potential content providers. They would make cost-free websites presenting textual and visual information that the museums themselves prepared. It was then that the first virtual exhibitions appeared. It could, therefore, be referred to as the beginning of digitisation and spread of digital information in countries' museums.



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Some museums administer several of them including virtual exhibitions and public access databases of cultural heritage



Such cooperation was mutually effective - for business representatives it was an opportunity to promote their still new-in-the-market services, whereas for museums it was a means to provide an ever-increasing number of Internet users with information about their activities, events, and collections. Doing it in an easy and original way could have helped to enlarge the number of potential visitors.

In a rather short period of only a couple of years the situation changed as private business companies took on a new direction in digital publishing and developed other interests in the field. The old websites including the ones that had been created for museums were then shut down. It is for this reason that nowadays those pioneer websites and virtual exhibitions are not available online.

Second stage

The first independent museum websites in Lithuania appeared in 1997-1998. The pioneers were the National Museum of Lithuania, the Lithuanian Art Museum, and the Lithuanian Aviation Museum. At this stage museums used their own financial resources to sponsor digital publishing. Two tendencies diverged: some museums did the entire job themselves - created, developed and administered websites on their own, whereas the others entrusted the technical part to private companies and managed only the content.

Third stage

In 1998 Lithuanian museums received a rather significant financial injection for digital publishing. Initially financed by the state, the competition of electronic publications dedicated to a virtual exhibition <http://alka.mch.mii.lt/> of a Millennium of Lithuanian Cultural Heritage was announced. Several museums joined

the project, and seven online publications were initiated.

The very first and most successful portal representing Lithuanian culture was M. K. Čiurlionis - a gaze from towers (developed by the M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum). The website distinguished itself through its professional design and user-friendly structure. In two years, however, the project lost financial support from the state; the development of the website was discontinued and it was shut down. The same happened to all of those seven online publications that were supposed to represent Lithuania - there briefly showed up and then quickly vanished *Art Deco Lithuania*, *Vilnius Art School*, *Sport in Lithuania*, *the Lithuanian Country Life Museum*, *the Lithuanian Museum of Ethno-cosmology*.

That same year, under the wing of *Alka* project, the first joint portal of Lithuanian museums was introduced, called *The Path of Samogitian Museums and Parks*. Initiated by the journal *Samogitian Land*, in 2004 it was transformed into the webpage of the Information and Culture Centre of the Samogitian Region.

The *Alka* digital publishing project revealed that at that time neither public nor state cultural and educational institutions in Lithuania had been ready to develop such high-volume Internet publications independently and with their own financial resources. Disabled by the abrupt withdrawal of funding, they would usually suspend the development of digital publications.

Fourth stage

In 1999, Open Society Fund Lithuania (established by the Soros Foundation, hereafter OSFL) initiated a project that aimed at

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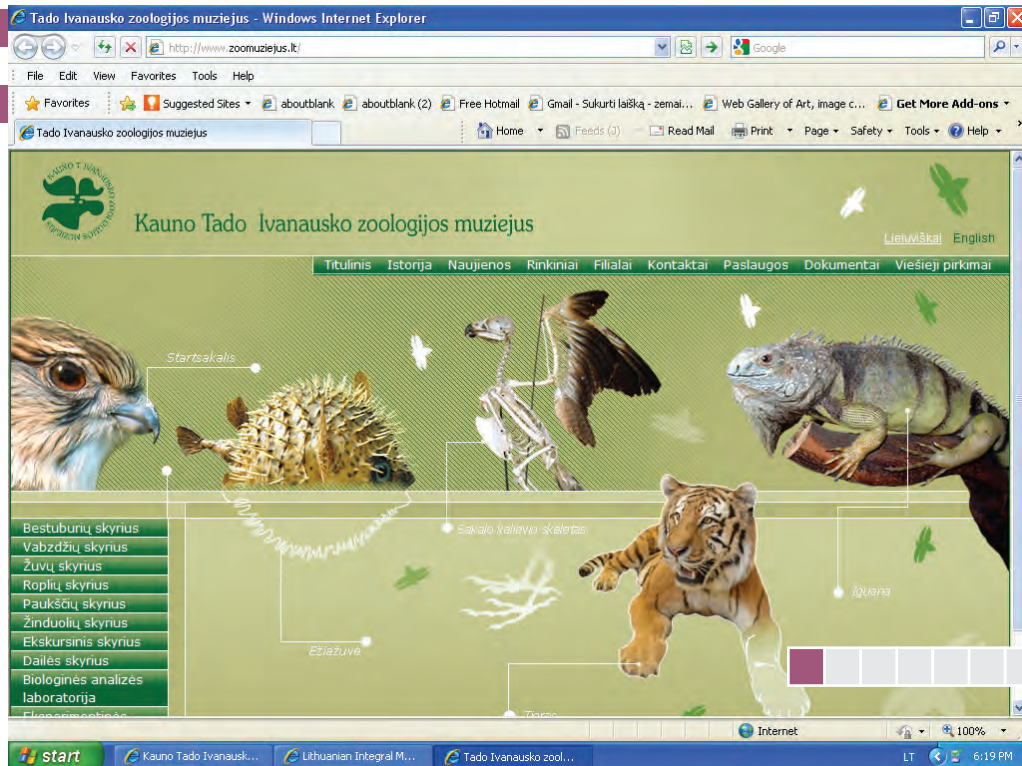
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Tadas Ivanauskas
Museum
of Zoology Website



prompting digital publishing in Lithuanian museums. That year OSFL announced a competition for the development of online portals of Lithuanian museums. The winner, which turned out to be the Lithuanian Art Museum, suggested creating a joint bilingual (in Lithuanian and English) portal for Lithuanian museums - each state museum would have its own page on the portal with the most important information on museum, events, and exhibitions. The initiator of the project LAM took on responsibility to maintain and administer the portal and take care of financial resources for further development of the portal (and still does today).

The project "Lithuanian Museums" was conceived and then developed by the Department



of Digital Publishing at the LAM (from 2009 it was reformed into Lithuanian Museums' Centre for Information, Digitisation and LIMIS) together with the UNESCO Chair in Informatics for the Humanities at the Lithuanian Institute of Mathematics and Informatics. The official website of the Lithuanian Art Museum was also a result of this cooperation.

In 1999, OSFL together with the founders of the "Lithuanian museums" portal www.muziejai.lt announced a competition for the webpage projects of the rest of the Lithuanian museums. Around a dozen projects were regarded as worth pursuing, which resulted in them being financed from OSFL resources; each of them received from 4 to 20 thousand Lithuanian litas. In 2000-2005 it was the only



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Uncommon
Culture



significant financial input into the development of museums' digital publishing. Most of the digital publications that were developed in 2000 with the support from OSFL are still functioning for example, the websites of the History Museum of Lithuania Minor <http://muziejus.moletai.lt/>, the Ethnographic Nalšia Museum www.nalsia.lt/, the Museum of Moletai District <http://muziejus.moletai.lt/> and others.

Fifth stage

Taking place from 2001 until the beginning of 2004, the 5th stage did not witness any significant change in the development of electronic publications. In 2004 one of the pioneer websites among Lithuanian museums, i.e. of the Lithuanian Aviation Museum, was updated whereas others vanished from the Internet. Among the newly developed websites at that time, those most worth mentioning are the websites of the Samogitian Diocese Museum www.varniai-museum.lt/, the Maironis Lithuanian Literature Museum www.maironio-muziejus.lt/, the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum www.jmuseum.lt and others.

The importance of digital publishing in the general context of museums' marketing and publicity was obvious, and yet a part of Lithuanian state and private museums did not have their websites at that time. The main reasons for that were:

1. Museum specialists, especially directors, underestimated the significance of digital publications for museums' public relations;
2. The development of information technologies did not provoke enough adequate changes in museums' policy of personnel which resulted in the lack of specialists competent in applying new information technologies and means of communication in their work;

3. Museums were short of computer equipment necessary for the development and maintenance of Internet publications;

4. Low wages in the museum sector did not motivate highly qualified specialists to come to work in the museums;

5. While developing the system of information gathering and dissemination in the museums little attention was paid to the particularity of Internet publishing;

6. The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania in which field of action museums belong did not pay enough attention to Internet publishing as well as digitisation of museum exhibits.

In 2004-2005 Lithuanian museums had around fifty Internet publications (portals, websites, virtual exhibitions, educational publications) but it was quite obvious that they lagged behind the leading world museums concerning the pace of digital publishing, the structure of publications, and software and services. Such a situation was conditioned by several circumstances:

1. There was not enough financing for digital publishing, and museums had no high-qualified IT specialists to develop complex projects;

2. There was still not enough attention paid to marketing and publicity;

3. Slow Internet connections and inadequate mastery of computer programming prevented museums from applying the newest software in the development of their websites and increasing the number of services available;

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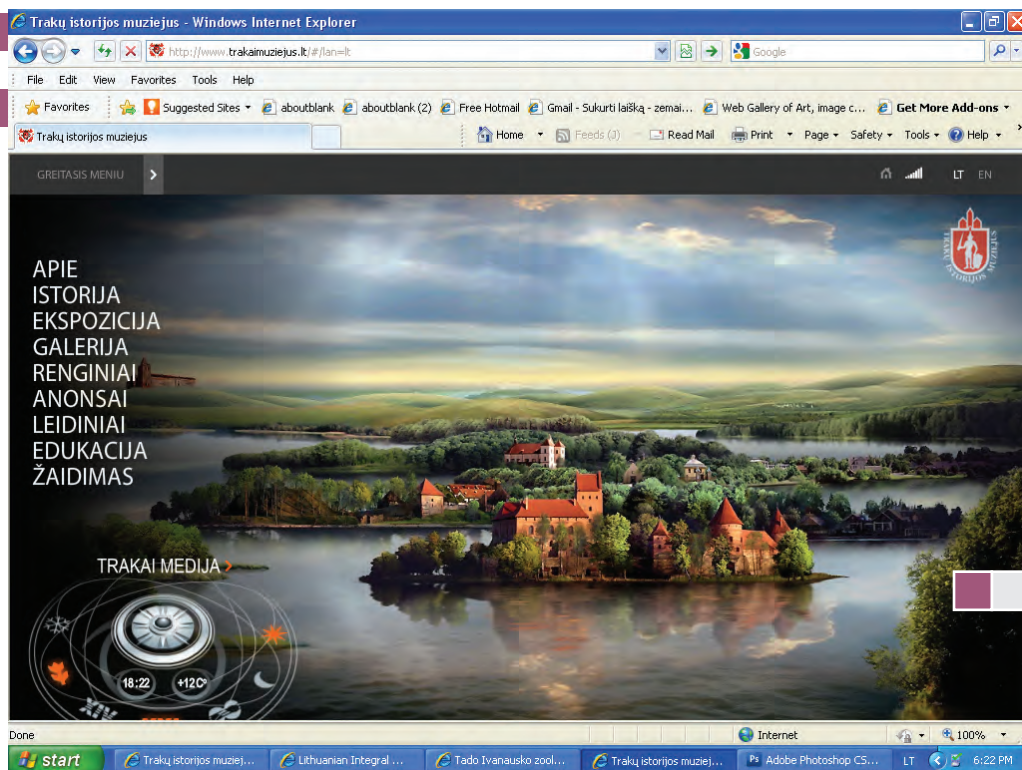
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Trakai
History
Museum
Website

4. Most of the museums did not do automated stock-taking, and had neither digital images and descriptions of their exhibits nor databases of artist biographies; for this particular reason the information available on the web-sites was rather shallow.

Sixth stage

The beginning of this stage could be symbolically marked with Lithuania joining the European Union in May, 2004. From 2005-2006 onwards many municipalities in Lithuania have received funding from the European Union for the development of tourism infrastructure. Some of it went to museums, as

they are considered to be part of the infrastructure of tourism. From then on museums could join international and national projects for cultural heritage digitisation, participate in the dissemination of information about museums, and raise the qualifications of their museum staff.

By the end of 2010 almost all state museums in Lithuania had their own websites. They could be accessed through the constantly updated portal "Lithuanian Museums" www.muziejai.lt. Available in four languages (Lithuanian, English, German and French, with Russian on the way), it provides its users with key information on each of the museums. From



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the recently created or updated websites some of them clearly stand out with regard to their structure, design, appeal, scope and depth of information, virtual exhibitions, etc. These are the Lithuanian Country Life Museum www.llbm.lt, the Trakai History Museum www.trakaimuziejus.lt, the Biržai Region Museum "Sėla" www.birzumuziejus.lt, the Druskininkai City Museum www.druskininkumuziejus.lt, the Kėdainiai Regional Museum www.kedainiumuziejus.lt and others.

In recent years, the digital publications on the Internet have been springing up like mushrooms after the rain. Some museums administer several of them including virtual exhibitions and public access databases of cultural heritage. More and more information about cultural assets available in Lithuanian museums is entering international portals like Europeana as well as the national portal of Lithuanian cultural heritage "ePaveldas" www.epaveldas.lt/

Translated by Agnė Pulokaitė

