



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Museum Gugging and naïf arts

Gugging Museum, 01.04.2021 [ENA]

Art Brut – you are valued for the movements of your soul, not for external “sweetened” factors! The Museum Gugging has one of the largest naïve arts collection in Austria. This collection includes works of various Art Brut painters from Austria. The museum also organizes exhibitions of naïve arts outside of Austria and currently hosts the collection of naïve arts from Croatia.

Croatia is a country where several naïve artists were living and working including Ivan Generalic, Sava Sekulic, Mijo Kovacic – just to name a few. But what does “naïf arts” actually mean? “Naïf as a part of art history has a very strange name because naïf does not mean to be naïve”, - explains Johann Feilacher, the curator and the director of the Museum Gugging. “But the artists and their works are not naive. I want to show in this exhibition that this kind of art is very serious and has a professional background in spite of the fact that the majority of artists are self-educated artists.

This means they never have studied in an art academy or an art school. For the majority of them, the highest level of education was a small course in painting of around one month. Here, at the exhibition you see the works of people who became professional in their own way and their own style which they created”, - continues Johann Feilacher, who is a sculpturer and an artist himself. “The main point of this exhibition is creativity which does not necessarily needs to be combined with formal education.”

The exhibition of naïf arts from Croatia illustrates very well these words. The discovery of the entire naïf movement took place by chance in a small village Hlebine where a 15 year old boy has drawn up a drawing on a shopping bag. This attracted attention of an expert from the University of Arts in Zagreb and the boy was invited to come to Zagreb where an exhibition of his works was organized later on. The movement became its followers and the artists from Hlebine became the well-known naïf artists from Croatia.

While speaking about Croatian arts Johann Feilacher, who wrote several books about naïf arts including Croatian artists such as Sava Sekulic (Johann Feilacher: sava.! sekulic Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2010, ISBN 978-3-7017-3214-2), mentions what naïf means to him: “At the exhibition there are also paintings of artists which are considered to be naïf but they are not naïve, in contrary, they have a very profound look into reality. That is why the exhibition has the title ”naïf” with the question mark (?). This is a question of what can be really considered as naïf and what is not naïf.

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This is a question if the exhibited painters could be really considered as naive or not, and if everything or everybody, who is called naïf, is a part of this naïf art historian group of artists. This is what I wanted to show by this exhibition that naivety is a question of perception. This is another look into reality, this is another value system.” Not only the exhibition of naïf arts from Croatia but the entire Museum Gugging is an inspiring place. While walking through the museum people can really feel love and care in every detail of how the building is renovated, of how the exhibitions are organized or of how guests are welcomed.

The Museum Gugging became a real oasis of arts in a small town nearby Vienna, a place where everybody feels him/herself welcomed and accepted. But the story of the Museum Gugging is a story of a struggle, of how this museum became possible thanks to willingness and hard work of a small number of enthusiasts under the leadership of Johann Feilacher and his team, who dedicated their time and energy to create an art space for very special artists. It cannot be undervalued how commitment, time and hard work changed lives of several talented people, gave them a voice on the arts market, a place for their creativity, even an art gallery which artists could manage jointly.

Maria Gugging is a small village, it's about 20 kilometres north west from Vienna. In the year 1890 a psychiatric hospital was built in this village. This was one of two psychiatric hospitals which existed in the country during this time. The hospital consisted of 11 large buildings. People with mental diseases who could not be healed were brought to the hospital, to stay in a beautiful nature surrounding. During the second world war the patients of the hospital were murdered by Nazis. After the second world war time hospital filled very fast with patients again.

The talented psychiatrist Leo Navratil brought the idea of arts being healing and of creativity of some of his patients. This was the beginning of the Gugging arts, the so-called Art Brut. The term comes from the painter Dufuffet who talked about a special character of this art. The art which is like a brut champagne, dry and not sweetened. The idea was that this kind of arts could not be influenced by any of external factors such as money, wish for doing business or fame. This is some kind of “clean arts” which is not sweetened. Brut actually means the expression of the soul of the artists, of his real feelings.

The first exhibition of the Gugging artists took place in the 1970ies in an art gallery in Vienna. The exhibition impressed several people. During the following years a number of people were supporting the artists, further exhibitions were organized. Several books were published about the works of artists living in Gugging.

While speaking about the meaning of the Gugging house Johann Feilacher starts smiling and his eyes are shining with joy:

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“I was excited by the challenge to organize this artistic community, to organize exhibitions, to communicate with these people. From one side I am a psychiatrist myself. But from another side I am an artist, a sculpturer. I managed to organize several exhibitions of the Gugging artists in various countries, including US, Switzerland, Germany and Austria. In the 1980ies we received a change to have a building which became home for the community of artists. In this community people were not patients any longer, but they were artists, they were valued for their creativity. They were valued for their talent. This gave them a second live, a recognition. Everybody was valued for his or her talent.

The community and gallery gave them a chance to have equal opportunities with other artists. As these are special people who could have difficulties to manage everyday routine I helped them with the establishment of the community and of the gallery. They were making pieces of art and my team and me, we were arranging everything which was needed for a life of an artist. That means to organize the sale of artists' works, to get good material, to organize national and international exhibitions. All of this, which sounds so short and somehow easy, in reality required a lot of time. During the 80s we had exhibitions in various parts of Austria as well as in Germany.

During the 90s we had exhibitions in Sweden and Finland and afterwards in the United States. We had exhibitions in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities. Later on, we had an exhibition in Japan, in the Setagaya Museum in Tokyo. But despite this international success we did not have a place in Austria where we could hold permanent exhibitions because our house was too small and with every year the collection was growing. Then suddenly we got to know that the building of a former psychiatric clinic became vacant because psychiatry itself changed its meaning. It became an open psychiatry and there was no need any longer to keep people in a clinic.

This was a chance for us. The building was about 3500 square meters. It was a real El Dorado for us. We started its restoration together with our friends. We were restoring this building little by little. We managed to turn it into own gallery where Gugging artists could present their work. I found a non-profit organization to manage the art gallery. The building which we restored had possibilities for a gallery but also for studios for the artists. They got large space for working and expressing their creativity. But we did not have funds to restore the entire building. So we decided to offer courses in arts. Everyone could join the course, also people who were unemployed for a long time joined the courses.

For them arts became a way to return back to professional life, to regain confidence. We called it integration cultural center. In five years we managed to collect sufficient funds to restore the building. We are also very grateful to several friends and volunteers who helped us. All these five years we all were very hard working and in the year 2005 we could open our own gallery. The government of Lower Austria, when they saw how efficient we are, provided us with funds to restore the second floor of the former

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hospital. The second floor of the building became a space for our museum.

During the following five years our center turned into a large international gallery, with around 600 square meters of space. The gallery was getting recognition and we established cooperation with several international galleries in New York, Tokyo, Chicago, Paris and other cities. In the year 2006, we could open the Gugging museum and the Gugging artist community became known to the world. It became a vibrant center of culture, a place for meetings for different artists, a creativity magnet.

It was important for me to present the arts of the Gugging artists to broad public, to make arts to be recognized, to show that this is not a kind of arts which should be presented in a dark room but that this is a bright colorful arts which has deep social meaning. This is the art space. This is a home for artist where they live and express their creativity, where they are recognized and where they have equal chances with other artists. This recognition was extremely important for the Gugging artists, for many of them it changed their lives, it have them a new meaning”.

Johann Feilacher: Das rote Zebra. Zeichnungen von Oswald Tschirtner Verlag Wienand, Köln 1997, ISBN 978-3-85033-067-1

Johann Feilacher: Menschen mit Heiligenschein. Zeichnungen von Oswald Tschirtner Verlag Wienand, Köln 1997, ISBN 978-3-87909-563-6

Johann Feilacher: Carom.! Kunst aus Gugging in der Sammlung Essl Eigenverlag, Klosterneuburg 1999

Johann Feilacher: Sovären. Das Haus der Künstler in Gugging Wachter Verlag, Heidelberg 2004, ISBN 978-3-89904-127-9

Johann Feilacher: blug. gugging – ein ort der Kunst Christian Brandstätter Verlag, Wien 2006, ISBN 978-3-902510-91-4

Johann Feilacher: animo.! michel nedjar Springer Verlag, Wien 2008, ISBN 978-3-211-78710-6

Johann Feilacher: duo.! Anton Dobay/Oswald Tschirtner Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2009, ISBN 978-3-7017-3127-5

Johann Feilacher: hauser's frauen.! Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2010, ISBN 978-3-7017-3191-6

Johann Feilacher: judith.! Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2010, ISBN 978-3-7017-3224-1

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Johann Feilacher: shields.! kunst aus neuguinea Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2010, ISBN 978-3-7017-3225-8

Johann Feilacher: gaston chaissac.! Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2011, ISBN 978-3-7017-3239-5

Johann Feilacher: der korec johann...! Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2011, ISBN 978-3-7017-3269-2

Johann Feilacher: walla.! weltallende Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2012, ISBN 978-3-7017-3275-3

Johann Feilacher: faces.! braschler/fischer Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2013, ISBN 978-3-7017-3312-5

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Johann Feilacher: small formats Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2013, ISBN 978-3-7017-3324-8

Johann Feilacher: gugging.! meisterwerke Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2014, Softcover ISBN 978-3-7017-3334-7

Johann Feilacher: gugging.! meisterwerke Residenz Verlag, St. Pölten 2014, Sonderedition ISBN 978-3-7017-3337-8

Johann Feilacher dedicated himself to study arts of Gugging artists. The several years of experience, of discussions with the artists and or studying their work got reflected in various publications which provide fascinating description of personalities of the artists as well as of their works.

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