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Sensory Heritage: Olfactory Dimensions of Epidemic Experiences in Museum Narratives

The presentation explores the potent yet underrepresented olfactory narratives associated with historical plague outbreaks, offering innovative frameworks for multisensory museum interpretation. By examining artistic and literary representations of plague-related smells, this research illuminates how overwhelming sensory experiences shaped both individual perceptions and collective social responses to epidemic disease.

Historical accounts reveal a complex olfactory landscape during plague outbreaks: the distinctive odours of illness and bodily fluids, the unmistakable scent of decomposition, environmental markers like rodent infestations, and intentional olfactory interventions such as ceremonial incense and purification fires. These sensory elements created a distinctive 'smellscape' that profoundly impacted psychological states and cultural practices during crisis periods.

This research positions olfactory experience as a critical yet underutilised interpretive tool for heritage institutions seeking more immersive and emotionally resonant visitor engagement. The presentation will demonstrate how carefully contextualised olfactory elements can transform traditional museum narratives about epidemics from purely intellectual exercises into embodied, multisensory experiences that foster deeper historical empathy and understanding.

Drawing from interdisciplinary approaches in sensory studies, medical humanities, and contemporary museum practice, this work advocates for thoughtful integration of olfactory dimensions into exhibition design, educational programming, and digital heritage initiatives. The presentation concludes with practical considerations for museums seeking to incorporate sensory experiences while maintaining ethical standards and accessibility for diverse audiences.

Mojca Ramšak, PhD in ethnology from the University of Ljubljana; Professor of Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Ljubljana and Professor of Anthropology at AMEU-ISH, Faculty for Postgraduate Studies in the Humanities. She is a researcher, postgraduate professor, and author who has published ten scholarly monographs that focus on applied research and the use of critical, experimental, and traditional forms of qualitative inquiry in the interest of social justice, human dignity, and human rights. Mojca Ramšak is the chair of the Ethical Committee at The Slovene Ethnological Society (2007–) and a member of scientific evaluation committees in Slovenia and Europe (2007–). Since 2015, she has been an evaluator of the ethics of research projects at the European Commission. Since 2009, she has been an evaluator of research projects for several European research agencies. She was a member of the Journalist's Court of Honour (2011–2013). Since 2020, she has been a member of the expert commission for cultural heritage at the Municipality of Maribor. Since 2022, she has been a member of the national expert commission on intangible cultural heritage at the Ministry of Culture of Slovenia. Since 2024, she has been a member of the Management Committee of Cost Action CA22159 – National, International and Transnational Histories of Healthcare, 1850–2000 (EuroHealthHist). She is currently the leader of a large basic project 'Smell and Intangible Cultural Heritage' at ARIS.

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