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Documenting the Senses: The Inclusion of Smell in the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia

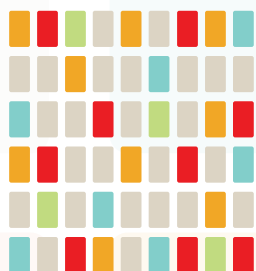
In the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, the importance of multisensory documentation is increasingly recognised, yet the olfactory dimension remains significantly under-represented in official heritage registers. This study explores the role of smell in the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, filling a critical gap in contemporary register practice that traditionally privileges visual and auditory elements over other sensory experiences (Dečko, Zidarič, & Ramšak, in press).

In this research, a comprehensive analysis of the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia was conducted, in which all registered entries were systematically analysed for explicit and implicit references to olfactory elements. The methodology included a qualitative content analysis of the register entries, structured interviews with heritage bearers, and a comparative assessment of current register protocols. Data collection focused on identifying patterns of odour-related content across different heritage categories and assessing the discrepancy between the entries in the register and the experiences of heritage bearers. The analysis revealed that fewer than 4% of the registered entries explicitly mention odour, representing a significant under-representation of the olfactory elements of cultural heritage. However, in-depth interviews with heritage bearers showed that odour is afforded much greater importance in different heritage areas. Four main categories of smells emerged: food aromas that serve as quality indicators of traditional culinary practices; plant and animal scents associated with agricultural and pastoral traditions; medicinal scents associated with healing practices; and characteristic craft smells that characterise artisanal production processes. Heritage bearers consistently emphasised smell as a key indicator of the quality of traditional practices, underlined the central role of olfactory memories in the transmission of traditions between generations, and reported the regular inclusion of smell-based elements in public heritage presentations and educational activities.

These findings reveal a significant gap in the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia and demonstrate a discrepancy between the lived experiences of cultural heritage and the entries in the register. This suggests that current

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registration practices do not capture the essential sensory dimensions of cultural heritage. The research shows that olfactory elements are more than peripheral features—they serve as fundamental markers of authenticity, quality-control mechanisms, and powerful means of preserving cultural memory.

This study demonstrates the importance of systematically integrating multisensory approaches into the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia. It recommends the introduction of specific protocols for assessing the sense of smell in the register's entries; the development of standardised terminology for describing olfactory characteristics; and the creation of a systematic framework for recording subjective sensory experiences of heritage bearers. These improvements would significantly increase the authenticity and completeness of register entries and ensure that future generations have a comprehensive understanding of traditional practices. The results also have far-reaching implications for international heritage registers and suggest that multisensory approaches are an essential evolution of heritage recording methods rather than optional extensions.

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References

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