Virtual Exhibitions of Lithuanian Museums

Introduction:
This article presents the evolution of virtual exhibition development in Lithuanian museums and introduces the main online resources where virtual exhibitions are located. The web portal “Museums of Lithuania” (www.muziejai.lt) is the most important of such resources with information available in five languages. Also during the last few years the Museums Information System for Virtual Exhibitions (www.muziejai.lt/emuziejai) has been created, as well as the virtual exhibition Treasures of Lithuanian Museums (www.muziejai.lt/lobiai). After the Lithuanian Integral Museum Information System (LIMIS) was completed in 2012, as many as 40 virtual exhibitions have been created and published on its website (www.limis.lt/virtualios-parodos). Advancing technologies provide new opportunities to present visual or text data attractively and to respond to the needs of potential museum visitors and tourists. As a result, development of a new virtual exhibition system of Lithuanian museums has started, which will allow creating virtual exhibitions via browser not only for Lithuanian museums, but also for their partners abroad.

Lithuanian museums began digitizing their cultural heritage objects in 1995-1999. At that time, digitized data (images) were mostly used to illustrate various publications or emerging websites. The first virtual exhibitions appeared online in 1999-2000 in the web portal “Museums of Lithuania” (www.muziejai.lt) or in museums’ websites. Generally, such virtual exhibitions consisted of blocks of images that were selected and linked together according to specific topic and could be enlarged online. In addition, some descriptive attributes and abstracts in Lithuanian and English were usually provided. Even during the first years of existence, the majority of Lithuanian museum websites were available in both Lithuanian and English. Nowadays it is mandatory for all official museum websites according to the existing legislation. In addition, sometimes websites of Lithuanian museums provide information in other languages. German, French, Russian, Polish and Italian are the most common.

The first online virtual exhibitions of Lithuanian museums were rather simple, static and monotonic. In most cases they were generated by real events, with the purpose of introducing and promoting new physical expositions and exhibitions. A similar trend has continued to the present day. However, during the last few years some new virtual exhibitions emerged, which were specifically created in order to present cultural heritage treasures to society that cannot be physically exhibited because of limited exhibition space. Sometimes such virtual exhibitions are available in physical museums or galleries spaces in order to provide visitor with additional information on specific exhibits.

Various new software plugins for creation and preview of virtual exhibitions are being introduced while modernizing old or creating new online resources. This helps to create more expressive, user-friendly and attractive virtual exhibitions. Usually the structure of virtual exhibitions remains the same: annotation, key metadata, detailed descriptions of the objects, and images that could be enlarged.

While the first virtual exhibitions were being created, contents and data were usually prepared specifically for them. During this period the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art,
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the Lithuanian Art Museum, the Lithuanian Theatre, Music and Cinema Museum, the Archaeological and Historical Museum of Kernavė, the A. Baranauskas and A. Vienulis-Žukauskas Memorial Museum, and the Samogitian Museum “Alka” were among the Lithuanian museums that developed interesting virtual exhibitions and published them online.

Even though MINERVA recommendations on providing continuous access to previously published digital content of cultural heritage objects while renewing online resources were known, the majority of early Lithuanian museum websites and their virtual exhibitions today are no longer accessible online. Lately most Lithuanian museums acquired new official websites with separate content management software instead of early websites which were created using Microsoft Office FrontPage. Commonly, digital content of previous websites had not been transferred to the new websites, and thus had been lost permanently. Today such content can only be found in the tapes of online resources at the M. Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania or stored in CDs at specific museums, if such measures were taken. In some cases such a situation arose due to the human factor. Developers of new websites at times seemed sceptical and disrespectful of previous work done, partly because of trying to justify their own existence and to emphasize their own performance.

The evolution of virtual exhibition development in Lithuanian museums from 1999 up to now can only be seen in the portal “Lithuanian Museums” (www.muziejai.lt) and in the Lithuanian Art Museum’s website (www.ldm.lt). Both of these websites were launched in 1999 and are being administered by the Lithuanian Art Museum’s specialists from its department the Lithuanian Museums’ Centre for Information, Digitisation and LIMIS (LM CID LIMIS). The Lithuanian Art Museum is the only museum in Lithuania that has preserved all of the digital cultural heritage content published before. All of it is still available online with the same URLs. This is achieved by patient work - if previously published digital content cannot be transferred to the newly modified online resources automatically, it is being moved manually. In some cases, the old museum’s online resources are being integrated into the new ones as separate sections, retaining the same URLs.

Panoramic
Alka -
fragment of the panoramic
image of the
Samogitian
Museum
“Alka” as can
be seen in
the portal
“Lithuanian
Museums”
(www.muziejai.lt)

One of the largest and the most popular of early virtual exhibitions of Lithuanian museums was the virtual exhibition Vilnius Classicism (www.muziejai.lt/Prev_vers/Klasicizmas
as/Vilniaus_klasicizmas.html). It was created in 2000 by the Lithuanian Art Museum as a digital alternative to the physical international art exhibition under the same name. It attracted a lot of online visitors and is still being used as an educational tool. Many scientific, educational, and private sector institutions provided links to this virtual exhibition at their own websites.

In 2001 the Lithuanian Art Museum created the virtual exposition Lithuanian Applied Decorative Arts (www.idaile.lt). It is still annually updated with new information and available
In 2002, another virtual exhibition "Old Lithuanian Sculpture, Crosses, and Shrines" (www.tradicija.lt) had been created by the Lithuanian Art Museum in cooperation with the public organization "Regional Centre of Cultural Initiatives". It is also still available online.

For many years a large part of Lithuanian museums were without their own websites because they lacked both human and financial resources needed to create, manage, and continuously develop them. At that time, the most important information about those museums was presented in Lithuanian, English, German, French, and Russian languages at the portal "Museums of Lithuania" (www.muziejai.lt). At this portal there is a section called "Virtual Gallery", specifically designed for presenting virtual exhibitions of Lithuanian museums (www.muziejai.lt/virtuali_galerija/index.htm).

Today in this section one can also find virtual museum tours, panoramic images of museums' physical exhibitions, videos, and URLs to other Internet resources with virtual exhibitions. Among these are the links to the "Virtual Exhibition System of Lithuanian Museums" (www.muziejai.lt/emuziejai), virtual exhibition "Treasures of Lithuanian Museums" (www.muziejai.lt/lobia), created in 2012, and virtual exhibition section of the Lithuanian Integral Museum Information System (www.limis.lt/virtualios-parodos).

As in the past, even now Lithuanian museums are willing to create virtual exhibitions in the portal "Lithuanian Museums" because online users got accustomed to searching and finding virtual exhibitions here. However, since the beginning of 2013 the LIMIS web portal and separate LIMIS public accesses (at the moment 21 of Lithuanian museums have them) have been launched, and new virtual exhibitions are being created here.

The Lithuanian Integral Museum Information System (LIMIS) for all Lithuanian museums has been created in 2010-2013. It allows making automated stocktaking of museums' cultural heritage and archive objects, to link metadata with digital files, to store information in LIMIS databases, to publish this information in LIMIS websites, and to export digital files with metadata to other databases or portals. LIMIS has a section for virtual exhibitions that allows creating virtual exhibition from objects in LIMIS databases. While developing a virtual exhibition, museum specialists select digitized objects with linked metadata in LIMIS and submit a list of them to the LIMIS administrator at the Lithuanian Museums' Centre for Information, Digitisation and LIMIS. The administrator of LIMIS creates the exhibition, also adding annotations. The LIMIS portal has Lithuanian and English versions; thus, virtual exhibitions are also bilingual. As of 1 September 2014, 38 various virtual exhibitions have been presented in the web portal of LIMIS. In addition to that, 4 national and 17 state museums of Lithuania with the largest number of, and the most valuable exhibits can create such virtual exhibitions on their own at individual LIMIS public accesses.
During the period of creation of LIMIS in order to teach museums to digitize cultural heritage objects, to record metadata, and to create virtual exhibitions on their own the Lithuanian Museums’ Centre for Information, Digitisation and LIMIS launched the “Virtual Exhibition System of Lithuanian Museums” (www.muzieji.lt/emuzieji). It is still available online and is being used by museums. Here dedicated digital content not only for the creation of virtual exhibitions, but also for the testing of the LIMIS system was stored. All the content gathered in this system during the period of 2010-2012 has been transferred to the databases of LIMIS.
For the content providers the “Virtual Exhibition System of Lithuanian Museums” is quite simple and easy to use. After logging in to the system via browser, museums can enter and edit all the information or create virtual exhibitions on their own. Such virtual exhibitions present key metadata on cultural heritage objects being exhibited, along with detailed description and images of 3 sizes. Online users can browse this information quite easily and conveniently.

This virtual exhibition has also been created by the Lithuanian Museums’ Centre for Information, Digitisation and LIMIS. Digital images linked with metadata are provided by the specialists of the involved museum. They log in to the exhibition via browser and enter information similarly as in the “Virtual Exhibition System of Lithuanian Museums”. The administrator of the exhibition adds the museum’s location to the map and enters other information about museums involved in the exhibition. At the moment, there are 40 Lithuanian museums presenting their exhibits at the virtual exhibition *Treasures of Lithuanian Museums*. Like the “Virtual Exhibition System of Lithuanian Museums”, this project is not exhaustive. At any time, museums can log in to the systems and create new virtual exhibitions of their own or update already published ones.

LIMIS is the national system of Lithuanian museums. Digital cultural heritage objects here are being organized in accordance with the existing Lithuanian standards. Because of that, descriptions of objects and key metadata

In Lithuania, the year 2012 was declared as the Year of Museums. On this occasion, the new virtual exhibition *Treasures of Lithuanian Museums* (www.muziejai.lt/lobiai) has been created. In this exhibition Lithuanian museums were able to introduce the most valuable and unique exhibits (from 5 to 15 objects from each museum). In this exhibition, Internet users can find all the basic information on museums involved and their location on the map, the key metadata about the objects being exhibited, to examine digital images and to enlarge them up to the greatest detail in order to see their textures or other distinctive features.
published in LIMIS websites can sometimes appear academic in nature. Moreover, at the moment it is not possible to reach high quality images with one click, even at the sections dedicated to virtual exhibitions. Such a way of presenting digital information, whereby one must take several steps before reaching high quality images at the virtual exhibition, for most modern online visitors is not very attractive and pleasant. Taking this into account, there is a plan for the coming years to modify LIMIS public accesses, design, and structure of virtual exhibition sections, as well as making them responsive and adaptable to screens of various resolutions. Because modification of such large systems as LIMIS requires a lot of time and financial resources, in 2014 it was decided to launch a new portal for virtual exhibitions of Lithuanian museums while changes in LIMIS are being implemented. The newly planned system will provide museums with the latest software plugins for the creation of virtual exhibitions. It is envisaged that the new web portal will enable museums to develop and promote virtual exhibitions for potential museum visitors and tourists. In addition, virtual exhibitions of Lithuanian museums’ partners abroad could be presented in this portal. It could help to attract online visitors interested in cultural heritage exhibits to become the physical visitors of the museums. Links to those virtual exhibitions will be presented at the websites of tourist information centres and tourist agencies, as well as the portal “Museums of Lithuania”.

The Lithuanian Art Museum is the national coordinator and organizer of digitization activities in Lithuanian museums. It is involved as a partner in various international projects, such as AthenaPlus and EuropeanaSpace. While implementing those projects new tools and products for the reuse of digital cultural heritage are being created and tested. Those new tools will make it possible to present digital cultural heritage to the public more dynamically and attractively. Thus, participation in international projects provides Lithuanian museums with new technical possibilities and ensures future development of the reuse and promotion of digital cultural heritage in Lithuania.