

# Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage in North-East Hungary

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the intangible cultural heritage of north-east Hungary. After a brief introduction to the history of the Ottó Herman Museum (Miskolc, Hungary), the author defines the theoretical differences between tradition and heritage, and summarizes the institutional and practical frameworks of the intangible cultural heritage organisations in Hungary. The scope of the museum of Miskolc is Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, where, as of today, four designated intangible cultural heritage elements can be found. The study examines these cultural phenomena by their effects on the local communities and various layers of identities. The most important question is: how does museum activity relate to the definition of heritage, and how can the museum connect with cultural heritage bearer local communities?

## Muzea i niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe na terenie północno- wschodnich Węgier

**Abstrakt:** Autor omawia temat niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego na terenie północno-wschodnich Węgier. We wstępie prezentuje pokrótce historię Muzeum im. Ottó Hermana w Miskolcu (Węgry), następnie definiuje teoretyczne różnice pomiędzy pojęciami tradycji i dziedzictwa, wreszcie przedstawia w zarysie struktury instytucjonalne i organizacje wspierające niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe na Węgrzech. Zakres zainteresowań Muzeum w Miskolcu obejmuje region (komitat) Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, na którego terenie wyodrębniono obecnie cztery elementy niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego. W niniejszym artykule zbadano te zjawiska kulturowe pod kątem ich wpływu na lokalne społeczności oraz różne warstwy tożsamości. Najistotniejsze ze stawianych pytań dotyczą tego,

w jaki sposób działalność muzeum odnosi się do definicji dziedzictwa kulturowego oraz w jaki sposób muzeum może nawiązywać łączność z depozytariuszami dziedzictwa kulturowego w lokalnych społecznościach.

**Keywords:** tradition, heritage, folklore, folk art, communities, participation, valorisation, museum collections

**Słowa kluczowe:** tradycja, dziedzictwo, folklor, sztuka ludowa, społeczności, partycypacja, waloryzacja, muzealne kolekcje

## Introduction: The Ottó Herman Museum of Miskolc

The city of Miskolc is the capital of the north-eastern Hungary region. The city museum, which was founded in 1899, celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2024. The institution was renamed after the esteemed 19th-century scientist, ethnographer, writer and politician Ottó Herman in 1951. Its primary collection area focuses on Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County; however, certain collections within the museum's holdings are of national scope. The twelve collection units reflect the need for completion that characterizes encyclopaedic museums and cover such fields as natural sciences, mineralogy, archaeology, numismatics, history, ethnography, fine art, theatre, literary and photographic history, as well as contemporary art (Fig. 1).

The duties of the museum include the protection of intangible cultural heritage, providing professional support to heritage preservation communities, as well as the research, preservation and publication of their material heritage. The county-level tasks of the museum related to intangible cultural heritage not only involve maintaining museum collections, but also providing expertise, organising events, museum education activities and exhibitions, and hosting presentations. But the most important question is how museum activity relates to the definition of heritage, and how the museum can connect with cultural heritage bearer local communities.



Fig. 1. The main building of the Ottó Herman Museum, Miskolc, north-eastern Hungary, photo by Benedek Baranczó, 2023, © Ottó Herman Museum

## Tradition or heritage?

The dialogue about intangible cultural heritage in the reflection on the concept of cultural heritage emerged worldwide in the 1990s. The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention originally focused on the tangible, material, localised, physical heritage, such as in the case of World Heritage Sites; however, the notion to preserve nonmaterial forms of heritage was present from the beginning.<sup>1</sup> The potential elements that could be associated with intangible cultural heritage, such as language, folklore, handicraft, religion, beliefs, national and ethnic history, along with their criteria, were the subject of several debates and inspired a theoretical approach.<sup>2</sup> The development of the concept of intangible cultural heritage and its definition were the results of a lengthy process, and the adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Paris in 2003<sup>3</sup> was a pivotal milestone on that journey.

According to the definition of the convention, ‘the “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the

instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.’<sup>4</sup>

The list outlining the most characteristic types and forms of intangible cultural heritage featured in the introduction of the treaty is a good example of just how broadly this concept can be interpreted:

- a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- b) performing arts;
- c) social practices, rituals and festive events;
- d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- e) traditional craftsmanship.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Keszei András: *A megfoghatatlan nyomában*. [On the trail of the intangible]. (EFI Communicationes 16.) Budapest 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Sonkoly Gábor: “A kulturális örökség fogalmának értelmezési és alkalmazási szintjei.” [Levels of defining the notion of heritage]. *Regio* 2000, No. 4, pp. 58–59.

<sup>3</sup> *Cselekvési terv a szellemi kulturális örökség megővésére és újjáélesztésére (UNESCO Konferencia, 1999)*. [Agenda for the Safeguarding and Revitalisation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO

Conference, 1999)]. Eds. Mihály Hoppál, Eszter Csonka-Takács. (EFI Communicationes 9.) Budapest 1999; Soós Gábor: “A tevékenységről van szó... Világörökségtől a szellemi kulturális örökségig.” [It’s about practice... From world heritage to intangible cultural heritage]. *Műemlék* 2010, Vol. 14, No. 3. pp. 6–7.

<sup>4</sup> *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Ed. Eszter Csonka-Takács. Szentendre 2010, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *UNESCO Convention*, p. 8.

One of the important foundations of the concept of intangible cultural heritage is its emphasis on living community practices. It is important to determine the *heritage bearer communities* in all cases: who are the people who bear and use the given cultural element in live form even today and consider it a part of their heritage? The broad nature of the concept is highlighted by the fact that it can be interpreted not only in the context of traditional folk (orally transmitted, rural) culture, but also in the context of urban, civic and even national culture which crosses through all layers of society and local communities. From the perspective of intangible cultural heritage, it is not necessary (nor is it required) for a cultural element to be old, valuable, or even aesthetically pleasing; it can only be associated with the concept if it is kept alive and actively maintained, used and lived by members of a given community in the present day. Another important criterion of a living tradition is that the knowledge and the practice of it has to be *passed down from generation to generation*: from a practical standpoint, the cultural phenomenon should be traced back to at least three generations. The simultaneous culmination of these factors results in intangible cultural heritage providing a sense of identity and continuity for the community, helping people experience their identities, develop cultural links and connect with people from the previous and the following generations. Its most important characteristic is *cultural embeddedness*: something can only be considered to be intangible cultural heritage if the given community truly recognizes it as their own. Only those who create, maintain and pass on cultural elements can decide which of those should be considered a part of their heritage.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of intangible cultural heritage acquires its true meaning in the duality of tradition and modernity. The transformation of *tradition* into *heritage* is an excellent way to preserve certain features of the orally transmitted cultural elements of small, local communities that are endangered by modernization. In the 19th and the 20th centuries, the emergence of nationalism and the dominance of national cultures, followed by globalisation and multiculturalism challenged the cultures of traditional communities; in

many cases, these were completely eliminated or wholly transformed.<sup>7</sup>

What is the difference between tradition and heritage? Based on the latest synthesis of Hungarian ethnography, I interpret the concept of tradition as follows: ‘it encompasses all methods of recording, transmitting, and reproducing culture in social memory. (...) Tradition is characteristic of all formations and types of human development, from the most archaic to the most modern.’<sup>8</sup> At the same time, I use the concept of heritage in a complex way, based on Harrison’s approach which is gaining ground in contemporary academic discourse – his distinction between *official* and *unofficial heritage* brings us closer to understanding the duality of tradition and heritage.<sup>9</sup>

I would now like to draw attention to four important criteria of the differences between tradition and heritage,<sup>10</sup> based on the trends observed in literature<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 2). The first of these is *participation*: members of the community feel addressed to be active participants in preserving their own culture. Heritage constructed on a participatory basis, where members of the community are involved in such a manner, can provide a great framework and guidance in order to reinforce linguistic, cultural, ethnic and local identities.

The second factor is *consciousness*. *Tradition keepers*, having been born and raised in said tradition, live and utilize their cultural goods intuitively, as a natural part of their lives, fitting in with existing community practices. By contrast, *heritage bearers* make conscious decisions and view certain elements of culture with deliberate, strategic goals in mind and take a conscious role in ensuring that those get passed on. Heritage bearers perform their activities with responsibility and devotion towards their heritage.

The third factor is *organisation*. Tradition is usually something that develops naturally and exists within *organic* communities, whereas the vehicle for heritage is deliberately *organised* communities. Heritage communities are well-structured groups where individuals are capable of and willing to collaborate not only with one another, but also with external actors (offices, municipalities, institutions of public education, museums, etc.) in order to preserve their heritage.

<sup>6</sup> *Unesco Infokit 2011. What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?* [accessed on 26 February 2025]. Available online: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>; Soós Gábor: “Az egyezmény jelentősége.” [The significance of the convention]. In: *Szellemi kulturális örökség – a megőrzés útjai*. [Ways of safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage]. Ed. Eszter Csonka-Takács. Budapest 2008, pp. 37–40; Jacobs Marc: “The Spirit of the Convention – Interlocking Principles and Ethics for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage.” *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 2016, Vol. 11, pp. 71–87.

<sup>7</sup> Siikala Anna-Leena: “Quest for Identity: ethnic traditions and societies in transition.” In: *Protection and development of our intangible heritage: acts of the international seminar in Joensuu, Finland, September 1998*. (Studia Carelica Humanistica 15.) Ed. Heikki Kirkinen. Joensuu 1999, pp. 77–83; Hoppál Mihály: “Hagyomány és identitás. [Tradition and identity].” In: *Szellemi kulturális örökség –*

*a megőrzés útjai*. [Ways of safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage]. Ed. Eszter Csonka-Takács. Budapest 2008, pp. 12–18.

<sup>8</sup> Paládi-Kovács Attila: “Hagyomány, hagyományozódás, szójhagyomány [Tradition, traditionality, oral tradition].” In: *Magyar Néprajz I. 1. Táj, nép, történelem*. [Hungarian ethnography I. 1. Landscape, people, history]. Eds. Attila Paládi-Kovács, Mária Flórián. Budapest 2011, pp. 30–32.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison Rodney: *Heritage. Critical Approaches*. Routledge. London–New York 2013, pp. 14–15.

<sup>10</sup> For the author’s contribution to the tradition–heritage discourse see Tóth Arnold: “New Perspectives for Living Traditions: Intangible Cultural Heritage in North-East Hungary.” *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 2021, Vol. 66, No. 2, pp. 421–437.

<sup>11</sup> Illés Péter: “Örökség.” [Heritage]. In: *...Nyitott múzeum... Együttműködés, részvétel, társadalmi múzeum. Kézikönyv*. Ed. Zsófia Frazon. Budapest 2018, pp. 109–110.

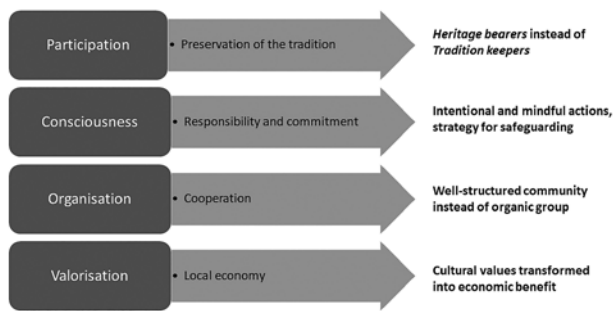


Fig. 2. From tradition to heritage. Essential characteristics of creating a heritage. Figure by the author, based on Illés Péter: “Örökség.” [Heritage]. In: ...*Nyitott múzeum... Együttműködés, részvétel, társadalmi múzeum. Kézikönyv*. Ed. Zsófia Frazon. Budapest 2018

*Valorisation* is the most important differentiating factor between these two approaches: while tradition is considered to be a natural part of life and does not represent any specific value to those practising it, heritage is considered to be of important value and something to be treasured by members of the community. Heritage (created as a result of the aforementioned three factors of participation, consciousness and organisation) is also suitable to *convert cultural value into economic value*. Local businesses, small homemade food businesses, festivals, gastronomic events, tourist attractions, agricultural products, handcrafted wares and stage productions can all be created through intangible cultural heritage. All of these greatly contribute to reducing the depopulation rate of settlements, improving the quality of life and strengthening local, ethnic, national, linguistic, religious, etc. identities.

At the same time, we must not ignore the fact that the valorisation of intangible cultural heritage cannot be interpreted solely from an economic perspective. Artistic,<sup>12</sup> social, cultural, local, and creative elements are also a part of the valorisation process, enhancing the value of local cultural phenomena in many regions, regarded as value generating features of the creative industries.<sup>13</sup>

## Organisational frameworks, the National Inventory and the National Register of Good Safeguarding Practices

Hungary joined the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006, which was followed by the launch of the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008. Since 2009, the Directorate of

Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Hungarian Open Air Museum in Szentendre has been responsible for coordinating the tasks related to the implementation of the international convention. As of 2024, the National Inventory consists of 56 articles and the National Register of Good Safeguarding Practices consists of 11 elements. On average, both lists receive three or four additions annually.

There are eight Hungarian elements on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity: Busó festivities at Mohács: masked end-of-winter carnival custom (2009), Folk art of the Matyó, embroidery of a traditional community (2012), Blaudruck/Modrotisk/Kétfestés/Modrotlač, resist block printing and indigo dyeing in Europe (2018), Falconry, a living human heritage (2021), Lipizzan horse breeding traditions (2022), Hungarian string band tradition (2022), Knowledge, craft and skills of hand-made glass production (2023), Csárdás dance tradition (2024). The Register of Good Safeguarding Practices includes the Táncház method: a Hungarian model for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage (2011), and Safeguarding of the folk music heritage by the Kodály concept (2016).

Within the Directorate of Intangible Cultural Heritage functions a network of county rapporteurs. The task of these rapporteurs is to map out those live community traditions that can be considered to be a part of intangible cultural heritage, which is followed by providing aid to said communities (offering information, consultancy, contact and guidance) in order for them to be added onto the National Inventory. Over the past nearly twenty years, we have sought out 10–15 communities within Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County and received several inquiries with my colleagues at the Ottó Herman Museum of Miskolc. So far, we have managed to add four entries to the National Inventory:

1. Matyó Heritage – Living Traditions of Embroidery, Dress and Folklore (2010)
2. The “Miller’s Wafer” Tradition in Borsodnádásd (2012)
3. Student Traditions of Selmec – Survival of the Student Traditions of the Mining and Forestry Academy of Selmecbánya in the Successor Institutions (2014)
4. The Tradition of Aristocratic Embroidery and its Continuation in Contemporary Embroidery Workshops (2022).

Aside from these, there have been several other attempts that have not been successful so far. The National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage has a strict set of criteria that need to be met, which requires a committed consciousness, cooperation that is able to bear financial burdens (such as the production of a short film), and a well-organised, living community that is capable of involving as many people as possible.

## Museum and intangible cultural heritage – four examples

The following section examines intangible cultural heritage elements that are located within Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, by comparing the types of communities

<sup>12</sup> Frey Bruno S., Pommerehne Werner W.: “Art Investment: An Empirical Inquiry.” *Southern Economic Journal* 1989, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 396–409.

<sup>13</sup> Aguado Luis F., Heredia-Carroza Jesús, Arbona Alexei: “Territory, Intangible Heritage and Value Generation.” *Creative Industries Journal* 2024, April, pp. 1–16. DOI:10.1080/17510694.2024.2329823.

involved, the valorisation and economic utilisation of each heritage element, the means of their survival, and the dangers they face. Through this examination, we also seek to answer the question of how intangible cultural heritage contributes to the strengthening of the identity of a given community.

### Matyó heritage – living traditions of embroidery, dress and folklore

‘Matyó or Matyóság is the collective term for the ethnographic group that emerged in the 18th–19th centuries in the historic market-town of Mezőkövesd at the juncture of the lowland Great Plain and the mountainous highlands in east-central Hungary.

The unique folk art of the Matyó people developed as a result of the traditional folk culture, social structure and way of life – also reflected in the layout of the settlement. These were born of an intellectual refinement rooted in a fervent Catholicism leading to centuries of economic, social and cultural development. At the time of the formulation of the Hungarian national cultural identity (turn of the 19th–20th century) Matyó folk art gained widespread popularity as the emblematic expression of “Hungarian-ness”. The expressions of Matyó folk heritage: folk art, religious traditions, celebrations and rituals, traditional handicrafts and trades, folk dance, songs and music, poetry and language dialect are all as yet living elements of community life and culture. The Matyó culture is not a static heritage, but one that is in constant flux, ever recreated in content by the community that lives it. This vibrance reinforces the sense of identity of successive generations.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of Matyó heritage, the delineation of the involved community is extremely difficult, if not impossible. The nomination form<sup>15</sup> that was accepted in 2010 includes a long list of the people involved, which suggests a complex historical and social stratification. Currently, the term “*Matyó ethnographic group*”<sup>16</sup> refers to a closed ethnohistorical categorization; in the present day, it is better to define the community as *the population of Mezőkövesd, Tard and Szentistván*. Similarly to other examples of heritage that are tied to a specific settlement or geographical region, we must also take into consideration the group of people around the world who are *originally from Mezőkövesd*. The narrower scope of heritage bearers is made up of the people and groups directly engaged in folk art and folklore. The motifs and designs are shaped by so-called “*writing women*” who, as individual creators, have been present in the local culture since the 1880s and 1890s. Since 1953, *Masters of Folk Art, Young Masters of Folk Art* and *Folk Artist-Craftsmen* have been the backbone of the continuation of the tradition, with their creative work forming the core of the heritage to this day. From 1991 onward, the Matyó Folk Art Association and its various groups, folk dance ensembles and embroidery circles provide the most significant organisational frameworks for activities. In addition to folk artists, the nomination form



Fig. 3. Matyó wedding as a tourist attraction in Mezőkövesd. Tourism is an effective way of valorising heritage, photo by the Matyó Folk Art Association, [http://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0\\_matyo\\_viselet](http://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0_matyo_viselet) [accessed on 27 February 2025]

also lists 19 local cultural, art, regionalistic and religious associations, foundations, institutions and organisations that contribute to the preservation of Matyó heritage.<sup>17</sup>

The aforementioned communities can be separated into three levels, based on their ties to the heritage. The largest of these groups consist of the former and current inhabitants of the settlements, as well as those who have moved out. These people certainly have some ties to the Matyó identity, but otherwise do very little in order to substantially shape or preserve it.<sup>18</sup> Currently active, registered civil organisations, associations, institutions, their members and the audiences attending their events form a more specific, smaller group of people. The smallest, but also the most significant and impactful group consists of *folk art specialists* who are the true heritage bearers and who are directly responsible for the forming of preservation efforts and the shaping of the tradition.

The major characteristic of the Matyó heritage is that, compared to other heritage elements featured on the

<sup>14</sup> *Elements of the National Inventory*: [https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0\\_en.php?name=en\\_0\\_matyo\\_viselet](https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0_en.php?name=en_0_matyo_viselet) [accessed on 26 February 2025].

<sup>15</sup> *Nomination form*. Available online: [https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/doks/nyomtatvanyok/46\\_pdf.pdf](https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/doks/nyomtatvanyok/46_pdf.pdf) [accessed on 26 February 2025].

<sup>16</sup> Viszóczy Ilona, Viga Gyula: *Matyó népelet – Tárgyakban élő hagyomány*. [Matyó folk life – tradition living in objects]. Mezőkövesd–Miskolc 2006, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Berecz Lászlóné: “A hagyományörzés lehetőségei Mezőkövesden a 21. században.” [Possibilities for preserving tradition in Mezőkövesd in the 21st century]. In: *Eredmények és feladatok a matyóság néprajzi kutatásában. A Matyó Múzeum fennállásának 50. évfordulója alkalmából rendezett konferencia anyaga*. Ed. Ilona Viszóczy. Miskolc–Mezőkövesd 2006, pp. 273–277.

<sup>18</sup> Fügedi Márta: *Mitosz és valóság: a matyó népművészet*. [Myth and reality: Matyó folk art]. (Officina Musei 6.) Miskolc 1997.



Fig. 4. Traditional Matyó men's shirt with embroidered sleeves from Mezőkövesd, mid-20th century, Ethnographical Collection of the Ottó Herman Museum, cat. no. HOM NT 2007.1.19, photo by Géza Kulcsár, © Ottó Herman Museum

National Inventory, it is complex, comprehensive and extends beyond embroidery and dresses, including folklore and local folk culture as well. Therefore, the transmission of tradition and heritage is not limited to folk art specialists; several institutions and associations active in the local community, members of educational and cultural circles, the museum, major groups of the cultural scene, and even the Church are all engaged in this process. The passing on of the heritage to younger generations is a conscious act that can be organised at a municipal level within an institutional framework, therefore the connection to the Matyó identity more or less permeates the entirety of the local community.<sup>19</sup> Based on the previously mentioned three levels of involvement, it is possible to have looser or closer ties to the tradition (or no ties at all), which results in a system of relationships formed among the locals that is constantly in flux on a personal, familial and small community level.

What makes the Matyó heritage special, is that it reaches far beyond itself: since the 1910s and 1920s, the local folk art has been the starting point and the foundational element of the Hungarian cultural self-image, national representation and identity, as well as the renewed Hungarian

contemporary fine arts.<sup>20</sup> This is another reason why the intangible cultural heritage is of particular importance in all three of the Matyó settlements. It is evident that the heritage has been valorised and plays a significant role as one of the driving forces of the local economy. The heritage emerges as a well-known brand: the effects of cultural tourism, festivals and major events on the entire settlement, handicraft as a source of income and the economic utility of cultural values is apparent at the local, regional and national level as well (Fig. 3).

This heightened interest in the Matyó heritage also comes with great responsibility for the heritage bearers. Amidst the various factors of contemporary trends, design and applied arts, popular culture, souvenirs and giftware, it is difficult to control the processes that constantly endanger and seek to transform the heritage.

The ethnographic collection of the Ottó Herman Museum of Miskolc was established in 1903, with various Matyó folk art items serving as its first catalogue entries. The “Matyó room” collection, donated by the town of Mezőkövesd, formed the basis for ethnographic research and it also featured in the museum's first ethnographic exhibition. The material legacy of the Matyó people is the most significant unit of the entire ethnographic collection, boasting a total of 16,000 items. In 1953, the Matyó Museum of Mezőkövesd opened, becoming the place where the local community preserves its own material legacy to this day. The core of its holdings contains the 1920s regional history collection of the local secondary school titled “Homeland”. In addition to Miskolc and Mezőkövesd, the Dobó István Castle Museum of Eger, the Déri Museum of Debrecen, and the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest all feature vast quantities of items of the Matyó people's culture in their respective collections (Fig. 4).

<sup>19</sup> Berecz Lászlóné: “A kulturális örökségelemek közösségformáló ereje Matyóföldön. Esettanulmány.” [The community forming power of cultural heritage elements in Matyóland. Case study]. In: *Kulturális örökség – Múzeumi közösségek.* (Múzeumi Irányító 15.) Eds. Mária Arapovics, Ibolya Bereczki, Magdolna Nagy. Szentendre 2018, pp. 175–184.

<sup>20</sup> Fügedi Márta: *Reprezentáns népcsoportok a 19–20. század fordulójának népművészet-képében.* [Ethnic groups raised to a representative role in the image of folk art at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries]. Miskolc 2001.

## The “Miller’s Wafer” Tradition in Borsodnádásd

The miller’s wafer tradition in Borsodnádásd, which was chronologically the second example of intangible cultural heritage of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County to be added onto the National Inventory in 2012, has a very different character. The word order within the name of this heritage element is the result of a conscious decision, as it reflects the relationship between tradition and heritage. The miller’s wafer is a popular and well-known piece of local cuisine in many settlements and areas, particularly in the northern language area of Hungary (Palócföld).<sup>21</sup> It is even known among many of the neighbouring peoples (i.e. Slovaks, Rusyns and Poles) living in the area of what used to be the historical land of Upper Hungary. Borsodnádásd is one of the centres of the tradition, due to the irons used to cook said wafers being made there in the local industrial plant; however, it is not its sole location. This case demonstrates where the distinction between tradition and heritage becomes most apparent: the tradition of the miller’s wafer is alive in many places, but so far it is only in Borsodnádásd that it has been elevated to the level of a consciously organised, valorised and responsibly preserved piece of heritage.

‘Making “miller’s wafers” (*molnárkalács*) is a vibrant local tradition in the town of Borsodnádásd (in north-central Hungary). Development of the sweet wafer derives from the holy Eucharistic wafer in the Roman Catholic liturgy. The miller’s wafer was originally a customary treat during the Lenten season, Easter and Christmas celebrations, in traditional spinning rooms and at weddings. The tradition has been passed on from generation to generation within family units. The wafers are made with two purpose-designed circular cooking irons. Borsodnádásd became the centre of wafer iron-making following the establishment of the nearby Sheet Metal Plant (1864). Wafer irons were common utensils in Borsodnádásd kitchens since the establishment of the local Sheet Metal Plant where the raw materials, machinery and technology for preparing wafer irons was readily available to the rapidly urbanizing inhabitants. Among the hundreds of wafer irons in the households of Borsodnádásd no two are alike. Each has a unique decorative pattern and inscription. The local history museum also boasts a multitude of wafer irons on display. In the last decade the city municipality together with NGOs and interest groups have recognized the community building effect of the tradition

and have organised wafer-making demonstrations and festivals to safeguard and perpetuate their folk heritage. Thanks to the concerted effort of heritage preservation, increasingly greater numbers of young people are becoming active participants and bearers of the tradition<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 5).

The heritage bearer community of Borsodnádásd is smaller than those of the Matyó settlements, but it is similar in character. Separate larger and smaller groups can also be identified, with the former consisting of *the population of Borsodnádásd* and the people who were *born there but later moved from the town*.<sup>23</sup> Working class people who used to commute to Borsodnádásd for work also belong in this group; they represent the typical dual lifestyle (rural and industrial) of the broader ethnographic microregion known as the Barkóság. The local plant of the Rimamurány-Salgótarjáni Vasmű Rt. (Rimamurány-Salgótarján Ironworks Ltd) recruited its commuting workforce from a considerable area, although several men from Borsodnádásd worked far from home instead, such as at the ironworks of Ózd.<sup>24</sup> These workers significantly contributed to the regional spread of the otherwise local tradition.

The smaller group consists of the communities that actually bake miller’s wafers on a regular basis. During the nomination for the National Inventory, the municipality listed both individual people and five organised groups (associations, clubs and informal groups) within the form. In the past decade, the number of these groups and their members has increased; furthermore, new and different groups have also formed; however, the main characteristics of the heritage bearer community have not changed.<sup>25</sup> As opposed to a folk art type of heritage, such as the Matyó tradition, we can notice that there is a lack of an innermost group of expert professionals in Borsodnádásd: the preparation of these wafers is a more general, family tradition. Technically speaking, baking is easier to master than the creative activity of highly-skilled folk art which requires a lot of studying, specialized tools and materials, and even its own workshop. Handicraft tradition is present in the form of creating wafer irons: these are in part family heirlooms inherited from previous generations, in part handcrafted forged items, and in part provided by the local small metal plant for the families. Each wafer iron boasts its own unique decorations<sup>26</sup> (Fig. 6).

Consciousness can be observed in several different forms. The small-scale demonstrations and public baking occasions hosted by dedicated individuals and families have

<sup>21</sup> Bódi Erzsébet: “Molnárkalács a magyar népi kultúrában.” [The miller’s wafer in the Hungarian folk culture]. *Ethnographica et Folkloristica Carpathica* 1985, Vol. 4, pp. 61–79.

<sup>22</sup> *Elements of the National Inventory*: [https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0\\_en.php?name=en\\_0\\_molnarkalacs](https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0_en.php?name=en_0_molnarkalacs) [accessed on 26 February 2025].

<sup>23</sup> *Nomination form*: [https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/doks/nyomtatványok/57\\_pdf.pdf](https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/doks/nyomtatványok/57_pdf.pdf) [accessed on 26 February 2025].

<sup>24</sup> Paládi-Kovács Attila: *A Barkóság és népe*. [The Barkóság and its people]. (Borsodi Kismonográfiák 15.) Miskolc 1982.

<sup>25</sup> Arkhely Fruzsina: “Nehézipari központból idegenforgalmi vonzerő – hogyan alakult ki a molnárkalács sütés hagyománya Borsodnádásdon?” [From heavy industrial hub to tourist attraction – how did the tradition of miller’s wafer baking develop in Borsodnádásd?]. SkanzenBlog – A szentendrei Skanzen szakmai blogja [online]. 15 September 2020 [accessed on 26 February 2025]. Available online: <https://blog.skanzen.hu/2020/09/15/molnarkalacs-sutes-hagyomanya-borsodnadasdon/>.

<sup>26</sup> Sági Tibor: *Molnárkalács sütővasak Borsodnádásdon és környékén*. [Miller’s wafer cooking irons in Borsodnádásd and the surrounding vicinity]. Borsodnádásd 2008.



Fig. 5. Making a miller's wafer with a cooking iron in Borsodnádásd at the Miller's Wafer Festival, photo credit: [http://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0\\_molnarkalacs](http://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0_molnarkalacs) [accessed on 27 February 2025]



Fig. 6. Miller's wafer cooking iron from the early 19th century. (Ethnographical Collection of the Ottó Herman Museum, cat. no. HOM NT 89.35.8, photo by Viktória Mészáros, © Ottó Herman Museum)

grown into the Miller's Wafer Festival. During this summer event, groups of friends, associations, families and other small communities all bake wafers in their own respective tents.<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that the preservation of heritage is not only performative, theatrical and done for the purposes of tourism, but also a part of the everyday lives, celebrations and family gathering of the locals. To foster this, the baking of wafers is also practised at the local primary school. An increasing number of young individuals embrace the tradition.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Katona Franciska Dorina: "A molnárkalács borsodnádásdi hagyományának szerepe a turizmus fejlődésében." [The role of the miller's wafer tradition in the development of tourism in Borsodnádásd]. In: *Kari tudományos diákköri konferencia, tanulmánykötet*. [Proceedings of the faculty student research conference]. Eds. Tamás Tánzos, Julianna Csogány. Eger 2016, pp. 15–31.

<sup>28</sup> Sági Tibor: "A molnárkalács borsodnádásdi hagyománya. Egy újjáéledt népszokás Észak-Magyarországon." [The tradition of bak-

Valorisation shows a high level of organisation: the municipality established a local bakery where baking evolved into a small-scale mechanized process, which allows the town to sell the miller's wafer of Borsodnádásd as its own brand of product, not only locally but also nationwide. The local community was able to turn its cultural resource into an economic resource, which, considering the poor labour-market conditions of the region, is no small feat.

The heritage is connected to the museum in two ways. To begin with, the Ottó Herman Museum of Miskolc also has several wafer irons that originate from the region in its holdings. The second, and by far the more significant connection point is the Local History Collection of Borsodnádásd which consists of an exhibition, a stock collection, as well as local publications and community spaces, which all actively contribute to the conscious preservation of heritage.

### Student Traditions of Selmeč – Survival of the Student Traditions of the Mining and Forestry Academy of Selmečbánya in the Successor Institutions

"The origin of student traditions of Selmeč is connected to the students and their self-organisation of the Mining Educational Institution (founded in 1735) – and later the Mining and Forestry Academy. The traditions, after the institution's migration first to Sopron and then to Miskolc, survived, what's more, were expanded with new local elements and are still alive. The conservators of the student traditions of Selmeč are the undergraduates of the successor institutions, who are held together by the "Valéta Committees". Simultaneously some of the students are also concentrated in different student organisations (friend circles, table companies, youth circles, associations). To wear the uniform, to operate the fraternities with strict rules, the different ceremonies, the student songs collected in song-books, the bursts of singing, the custom of "valétálás" (goodbye ceremony) with torchlight procession and with the "valéta" ball are all essential parts of the student traditions. Beyond the external formalities the internal contents are much more important. That's what we call "Moral of Selmeč" and its main features are happiness, friendship, patriotism and the sense of vocation. The student traditions of Selmeč enhance the binding to the educational institution through the revival and the transmission of old positive patterns as well as it can develop an inward connection between the upper-year students and their younger fellows."<sup>29</sup>

ing miller's wafer in Borsodnádásd. A revived custom in northern Hungary]. In: *Kulturális örökség – Múzeumi közösségek*. [Cultural heritage – Museum communities.] (Múzeumi Iránytű 15.) Eds. Mária Arapovics, Ibolya Bereczki, Magdolna Nagy. Szentendre 2018, pp. 135–148; Arkhély Fruzsina: "Nehézipari."

<sup>29</sup> *Elements of the National Inventory*: [https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0\\_en.php?name=en\\_0\\_selmecci\\_diakhagyományok](https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0_en.php?name=en_0_selmecci_diakhagyományok) [access 26/02/2025].

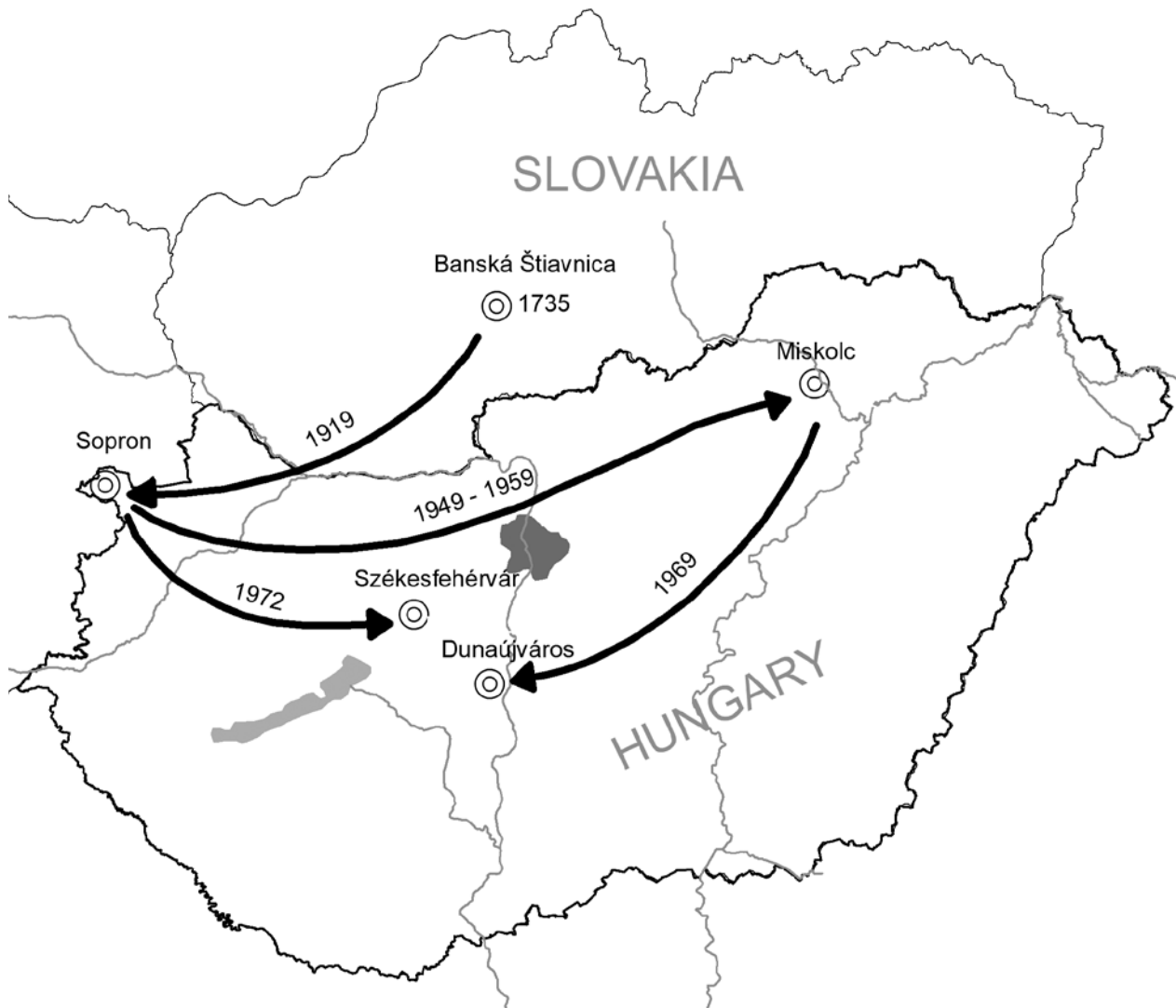


Fig. 7. Migration of the Selmec Mining and Forestry Academy in the 18th–20th centuries, map by Zoltán Nagy, © Ottó Herman Museum

The Mining and Forestry Academy of Selmecbánya which was founded in Upper Hungary in 1735 had to be relocated to Sopron in 1919, around the time of the Treaty of Trianon. In 1949, the institution split into two, with forestry training staying in Sopron and mining and metallurgical training relocating to Miskolc. In 1969, the College of Dunaújváros became a member institution of the Technical University of Heavy Industry in Miskolc; meanwhile, Sopron had launched its own faculty branch in Székesfehérvár in 1972 (Fig. 7). Together with the Slovak secondary training school that remained in the mother town, these five successor institutions carry on the heritage of the student traditions.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the current number of students being estimated at tens of thousands (which is completely renewed every couple of years), only a few of them can be considered heritage bearers. Student organisations are one of the characteristic elements of the Selmec traditions: in 2014, when the tradition was registered in the National Inventory, 22 organisations were active at four Hungarian university locations.<sup>31</sup> This circle of heritage bearers extends in two directions. On the one hand, in the fields of forestry, mining and metallurgy, we can observe a sort of continuation of the

student years. A lifelong preservation of tradition is present within the institutional frameworks of the National Forestry Association and the Hungarian Mining and Metallurgical Society, as alumni stick together even after graduation. On the other hand, the transformation of the university world and the establishment of new faculties and training centres represent a different form of expansion. In addition to the three oldest faculties of forestry, mining and metallurgy, the heritage of Selmec was initially also adopted by the faculties of engineering and wood sciences, and later on by the faculties of geoinformatics, law, economics, health and art as well.

<sup>30</sup> Zsámboki László, Tar Sándor: *Selmectől Miskolcig (1735–1985). A magyarországi műszaki felsőoktatás megindulásának 250. évfordulójára*. [From Selmec to Miskolc (1735–1985). Anniversary publication for the 250 years of the Hungarian technical higher education]. Miskolc 1985.

<sup>31</sup> *Elements of the National Inventory*: [https://szellemikulturalisok.rokseg.hu/index0\\_en.php?name=en\\_0\\_selmecei\\_diakhagyomanyok](https://szellemikulturalisok.rokseg.hu/index0_en.php?name=en_0_selmecei_diakhagyomanyok) [accessed on 26 February 2025].



Fig. 8. Student traditions of Selmec – *Szalamander* (torchlit procession, graduation rite) in Miskolc, 2019, photo by Ákos Juhász, © MIKOM Miskolci Kommunikációs Nonprofit Kft, 2025, www.minap.hu

However, it is important to reiterate that one of the main differences between tradition and heritage is the aspect of consciousness: a person is born and raised into a tradition, but choosing one's heritage is a conscious decision. Whether a university citizen (be it student or faculty) embraces the traditions of Selmec or not boils down to individual choice. One can graduate from the said universities without ever participating in the activities of student traditions.

This heritage is multifaceted and consists of several small elements and detailed customs. The uniforms, badges, rings, mugs and other forms of memorabilia represent the material environment of the tradition.<sup>32</sup> There are various customs, rites and ceremonies associated with each of the five years of university training: these rites of initiation ("baptism") and graduation (valete ceremony, Salamander) outline the framework of the detailed and regulated relationships between junior and senior students. Singing is an essential part of the community events organised by the student organisations, with the various "Selmec songs" collected in songbooks being important elements of the heritage<sup>33</sup> (Fig. 8).

Because of its significant social impact, the heritage of Selmec reaches beyond itself and influences the student traditions not only of the entire Hungarian language area,

but also those of the neighbouring countries within the Carpathian Basin. The graduation traditions of Hungarian secondary schools (*szalagavató*, serenade, school leaving ceremony, banquet) all originate from the student traditions of Selmec, as well as the songs "Gaudemus igitur..." and "Ballag már a vén diák..." [The old student is leaving now], which are both rooted in the same song tradition. The identity-shaping power of the heritage is, therefore, significant not only in its own environment, but also far beyond.

The two main locations of the museum's ties with the student traditions of Selmec are Sopron and Miskolc. The heritage bearer communities are able to connect with their shared past through the university history collections of the libraries, museums and archives of the University of West Hungary in Sopron and the University of Miskolc in Miskolc.

### The Tradition of Aristocratic Embroidery and its Continuation in Contemporary Embroidery Workshops

Out of all the pieces of intangible cultural heritage from our county, the tradition of aristocratic embroidery is the most recent addition to the National Inventory (2022).

"The aristocratic embroidery is a special Hungarian embroidery style of the mid-16th century, which was shaped by a number of historical influences. It is characterised by a specific stitching technique, fine materials, embroidery threads and a complex sample collection, incorporating

<sup>32</sup> Szemán Attila: "A magyarországi bányászegyenruhák történeti rétegei." [Historical layers of miners' uniforms in Hungary]. *Bányászattörténeti Közlemények* 2008, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 3–42.

<sup>33</sup> Szemerey Tamás: "A mi nótáink" története. [The history of "our songs"]. Miskolc 1985.



Fig. 9. Intangible cultural heritage is transmitted from generation to generation: young folk artisans are learning the art of aristocratic embroidery, 2022, courtesy of the Folk Art Association of the Hegyalja Masters, [https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0\\_urihimzes](https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0.php?name=0_urihimzes) [accessed on 27 February 2025]

Western and Eastern influences. The embroidery was used to decorate the festive textiles of the royal court, the noble and aristocratic mansions, expensive costumes for festive occasions and church liturgical textiles. The patterned embroidery on liturgical textiles associated with the religious practice of the Reformed Church was of particular importance. The value of folk embroidery was enhanced after World War Two by the amateur folk art movement, which sought to develop folk art. This historical embroidery style was revived in the 1980s in embroidery workshops in Tokaj-Hegyalja and north-eastern Hungary: researching museum materials, redesigning original motifs, applying innovative solutions to the textiles producing today.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast with the previously discussed three elements of heritage, aristocratic embroidery stands out as something different both in terms of its affected communities and heritage bearers, therefore its identity-shaping effect is also of a different nature. Embroidery is practised by individuals who form close and personal, physical communities, as well as virtual, long-distance communities. Its three most significant workshops are the Decorative Art Circle of Tállya, the Folk Art Association of the Hegyalja Masters (Tállya), and the Lórántffy Zsuzsanna Sewing Circle (Sárospatak). Additionally, there are several individual creators, formal groups and informal communities practising aristocratic embroidery in the Carpathian Basin, both within and outside the country's borders. These groups foster close personal and professional ties with one another.<sup>35</sup>

What makes aristocratic embroidery unique is that the individuals join the contemporary embroidery workshops preserving the tradition out of personal choice and interest. This type of embroidery is not associated with any specific settlement, area or region: due to its historicity, it goes beyond the bounds of folk culture and carries generally applicable Hungarian cultural historical and aesthetic values.<sup>36</sup> In the case of an aristocratic embroidery style, integration and learning in a natural environment is wholly different than those found in the folk art of peasant communities. This



Fig. 10. Embroidered cloth for the Lord's Table from the Calvinist Church of Diósgyőr, Hungary, 1750. Historical Collection of the Ottó Herman Museum, acquisition in 1917, cat. no. HOM TGY 53.804.16., size 74 × 74 cm, photo by Viktória Mészáros, © Ottó Herman Museum

conscious choice of heritage is also defined by the extremely high degree of dedication showcased by the communities and individuals involved. Out of the many forms of passing on this heritage, summer camps, workshops and training sessions became the most significant, due to the scattered geographical location of its practitioners (Fig. 9).

A characteristic feature of aristocratic embroidery is its strong association with religion, particularly the Reformed Church, but also with other historical churches. The decorations used on the cloths for the Lord's Table and other religious textiles are the most well-known and common forms of this style of embroidery.<sup>37</sup> Its community identity organising effect is present on two levels: in a narrower sense, it provides a framework that corresponds with the identity of the creators; in a broader sense, an embroidered cloth for the Lord's Table or other pieces of decorative liturgic textiles can represent local attachment or a sense of belonging to the members of a given congregation. The religious context ensures the

<sup>34</sup> *Elements of the National Inventory*: [https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0\\_en.php?name=en\\_0\\_urihimzes](https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/index0_en.php?name=en_0_urihimzes) [accessed on 26 February 2025]

<sup>35</sup> *Nomination form*: <https://szellemikulturalisorokseg.hu/doks/nyomatvanyok/urihimzes.pdf> [accessed on 26 February 2025]

<sup>36</sup> Supka Magdolna F.: *A magyar úrihímzés*. [Hungarian aristocratic embroidery]. Budapest 1938.

<sup>37</sup> Pocsainé Eperjesi Eszter, Rádainé Bodnár Katalin: "Le-gyen kedves az Úr előtt ez ajándék..." *A Sárospataki Református Kollégium Múzeumának úrihímzéses úrasztali terítői*. ["Let this gift be pleasing to the Lord." The embroidered cloths for the Lord's Table in the Sárospatak Reformed College Museum]. (A Pataki Iskola-múzeum Gyűjteményei I.) Sárospatak 2014.

valorisation of the heritage, in the form of museum collections, publications or even through historical research.

Out of all the heritage elements presented here, aristocratic embroidery boasts the oldest and the most valuable museum items. The Scientific Collections of the Reformed College of Sárospatak contain a rich set of 17th- and 18th-century materials: the patterns and motifs used today are usually modelled on these historical textiles. The Ottó Herman Museum of Miskolc also possesses some ornate and intricate samples of original embroidered cloths from this period in its holdings (Fig. 10).

## Conclusion

The general lesson that can be learnt from these four different examples of intangible cultural heritage is that the difference between tradition and heritage is made clear in all cases. The aspects of participation, consciousness, organisation and valorisation are all present to varying degrees.

However, the heritage bearer communities are disparate and diverse. Local communities, institutional ones (universities) and community networks organised according to shared thematic interests all show different patterns. A common feature among all of them is the fact that the sense of identity and continuity outlined by the definition of intangible cultural heritage is provided by each heritage element towards its own respective community.

Although we did not mention the close interconnectivity of intangible cultural heritage and material heritage, it cannot be overlooked that significant museum collections are available in all four of the examined cases. The collections of the Matyó Museum of Mezőkövesd (founded in 1953), the Ottó Herman Museum of Miskolc, the Dobó István Castle Museum of Eger, and the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest provide authentic sources of research material for the Matyó heritage. The Local History Collection of Borsodnádásd serves as an important foundation for the miller's wafer tradition in Borsodnádásd, along with the wafer irons found in several Hungarian public collections. For the student traditions of Selmec, the university history collections of the libraries, museums and archives of the University of West Hungary in Sopron and the University of Miskolc in Miskolc provide the means to connect with the past. Finally, in the case of aristocratic embroidery, key pattern repositories mainly rely on the museum holdings of the Scientific Collections of the Reformed College of Sárospatak; several public collections, including the Ottó Herman Museum, feature some superb original pieces as well.

However, museums are not just depositories of artefacts associated with intangible cultural heritage. According to the museum definition adopted by ICOM in 2022, museums operate with the participation of the communities, 'offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.'<sup>38</sup> As a result of the paradigm shift that began in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the idea of the participatory museum model worldwide coincided with a strengthening discourse on heritage.<sup>39</sup> Museums became spaces utilized not only for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, but also for the creation and transmission thereof.<sup>40</sup> Following the patterns of several international examples, in 2025 the Hungarian museums initiated an experimental pilot project on safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of displaced Ukrainian persons in Hungary. Five museums with different profiles and various collections were involved to create inclusive community practices, based on participatory museum methods. The Ottó Herman Museum of Miskolc implemented such a pilot project, where the museum functioned 'as living community spaces: places where people – whether locals or displaced persons – can meet, share their stories, and reinterpret their cultural roots.'<sup>41</sup>

For communities, traditions that function as a preserving force can be passed on by several means. Intangible cultural heritage is one of these well-established models, which involves the consciously organised transformation of tradition into heritage, in accordance with UNESCO principles. It can also be used as a tool to ensure that the identity-shaping effect of cultural values prevails among smaller and larger communities.

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<sup>38</sup> ICOM (International Council of Museums) *Museum Definition*: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> [accessed on 08 December 2025].

<sup>39</sup> Simon Nina: *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Yoshida Kenji: "The Museum and the Intangible Cultural Heritage." *Museum International* 2024, Vol. 56, No. 1–2, pp. 108–112.

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