Latvian Cultural Heritage in the Digital Environment

The turn of the 20th and 21st century came to Latvia under the mark of knowledge-based society, calling for a quick and qualitative access to the most diverse information, provided that this information is exactly what one was looking for. Access to Internet has become a significant and irreplaceable value in the process of study, work or research, and lifetime education, allowing everyone to acquire and use the necessary knowledge, and apply it to their daily life, thus promoting the role of human knowledge in the nation’s development.

In accordance with the tendencies of the modern epoch, also in Latvian culture, the historic heritage that has been accumulated through centuries at museums, libraries and archives, as well as all noteworthy developments, events, trends, facts and data, are being concentrated in a new and impressive 21st century project entitled “Latvijas Kultūras mantojuma portāls” (Latvian Cultural Heritage Portal), becoming an entire wealth of information available and accessible to everyone. The goal of the project is to establish a united portal for Latvian libraries, archives and cultural heritage of museums – a search engine that will provide to any of the portal’s visitors access to the required information in the culture field. This portal will provide a qualitative work environment for both people working at various culture institutions, as well as academic staff, students, pupils and anyone else who is interested. The portal will also function as an information request system, which will enable, for instance, to register for a museum tour, get information about upcoming cultural events, book tickets, etc. The Latvian Cultural Heritage Portal will be also integrated in the united world and European electronic database of information and will become accessible to a wider international public.

Already in the nearest future, the Latvian Cultural Heritage Portal, accessed from virtually any place with Internet connection, will provide the opportunity to tour the Latvian and world museums, visit the Latvian National Library and use the vast opportunities provided by foreign libraries, as well as communicate and receive any information needed for work or studies. In order to implement these plans, the Culture Ministry has established a state agency “Kultūras Informācijas Sistēmas” (Cultural Information Systems) which carries out a gradual digitalization of Latvia’s libraries, archives and museums, makes collections of a range of cultural institutions available on the global network, works on creation and development of a Latvian culture map, and implements a number of other new and interesting culture digitalization projects in culture education, cinema, and other fields.

A significant precondition and factor for a successful implementation of the Cultural Heritage Portal is the Unified National Library Information System, also known as the “Network of Light”. The Network of Light is an indispensable part of a 21st century project called “Palace of Light”, which covers all Latvian libraries. Through the Network of Light, all municipal public libraries in Latvia will have free access to the Internet and will be equipped with the most up-to-date computer technologies for library visitors. An electronic catalogue that covers every part of Latvia will provide information about books or other printings held at any of Latvia’s libraries, and will allow each visitor to find the necessary book, order it and receive it in a quick and convenient way from any library in Latvia.
The Network of Light will also provide every reader in the library with electronic databases of most diverse fields and specializations in Latvian, English, Russian and other languages, giving the opportunity to acquaint oneself with scientific journals, popular encyclopedias, dictionaries and collections of articles. All librarians in Latvia have improved the knowledge and skills needed for their daily work and have diligently worked to acquire the skills for operating with the new computer technologies and software that have been installed at all libraries, and will be helpful and knowing assistants to library visitors.

Thanks to the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the “Microsoft” company, the state budget planned by the Culture Ministry and the attracted municipal funding, the Latvian Public Library Development Project is currently under development. This project will become a naturally integrated part of the Network of Light, adding an entirely new quality to it. Involved in the project are all Latvian local governments, and the project envisages changing all public municipal libraries into public culture, education and information centers. As a logical development sequence to the Network of Light, also being created is the Latvian Digital Library, which envisages digitalizing library funds to provide Latvian residents the opportunity to access these funds electronically. Using the Internet, readers will be able to acquaint themselves with both the latest publications as well as rare or unique antique editions in digital form, which physically are stored in different library collections throughout Latvia. Simultaneously with a digital storage of books and publications, created is being also the Joint Catalogue of the National Holdings of Museums. A considerable cultural heritage has been accumulated in Latvian museums – over 5 million museum artifacts are stored at an overall of 110 Latvian museum repositories, of which only a small part is currently displayed to visitors in expositions and exhibitions. The Catalogue of the National Holdings of Museums will give the possibility to every museum to digitalize its exhibits and add information about them in a joint catalogue available on the Internet. Everyone who will be interested will have a chance to acquaint him or herself with the textual, visual, video and audio information about any exhibit at any of the museums. Such a catalogue will become a considerable investment in the development of tourism as it will provide an informatively visual insight into the available exhibits of the museums even before visiting them – regardless, whether the particular artefact is a stone-age tool, a rare bug or an old master painting. For the creation of this joint catalogue, adequate material and technical base has been developed for all museums, including connections to the Internet and technologies for acquiring usage skills, uniting for this joint goal an overall of 80 Latvian local government, 25 state and five private museums. A considerable financing from the European Union funds has been attracted to establish the joint catalogue. Whereas, in order to ensure digital availability of archive documents, the Unified Latvian State Archives Information System is currently under development. The state archive repository will allow residents to receive information about the documents stored in archives more quickly, conveniently and completely. The same as in a library - a document requested by a client will be delivered to the preferred archive. It will be possible to request and receive archival references from the archive through the Internet, thus making archive services more accessible also to Latvia’s regional residents. The entire Latvian state archive system is involved in the creation of the unified archive information system, and a considerable European Regional Development Fund financing has been allotted for the implementation of this project. Another significant task in the digitalization of
the cultural heritage is development of the **Creative Industries and Cultural Educational Development Management Systems**. Taking into account the experience of the Latvian and best foreign practice, established will be an infrastructure of cultural educational institutions and communication technologies, that will also include interactive teaching for acquisition of necessary computer skills and other knowledge in the chosen profession. This will also create a platform for information exchange between students, schools and society, provide digital availability of learning materials and works created during studies, and in general prepare high level culture specialists in Latvia. Establishment of an infrastructure to support learning, education and training, which corresponds to the modern life demands in training room equipment, is another precondition for qualitative preparation of creative industry specialists.

Simultaneously with the library, archive, museum and other cultural information repositories, developed is also the **Culture Map of Latvia** [www.kulturaskarte.lv](http://www.kulturaskarte.lv), which includes the most diverse information about the cultural processes and institutions of Latvian regions – their location, type of activity, personnel, contacts, infrastructure and planned development. The digital Map of Latvian Culture is unique because it is the first digital database of such kind in the Baltic states, which comprises such voluminous information and gives every Internet user the opportunity to receive information about the type of activity, working hours and location of any culture institution in Latvia. Any moment now, work will commence on the **Development of the Latvian National Digital Encyclopedia**. The digital encyclopedia will allow one to pick from a virtual environment qualitative information about significant historical and topical events, facts and persons in Latvia and the world, as well as information on specific spheres of life. Involved in the creation of the Latvian National Encyclopedia will be notable Latvian academicians and branch specialists.

Links