

Interpreting Intangible Cultural Heritage in Museum Practice: Krakow's Centre as a Model of Educational Innovation

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Interpreting Intangible Cultural Heritage in Museum Practice: Krakow's Centre as a Model of Educational Innovation

This article explores the role of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Interpretation Centre of Krakow (CINDK) as a model institution for the protection, education and dissemination of intangible heritage in Poland. Established as a branch of the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow, the Centre reflects contemporary museological trends by adopting participatory, inclusive and interdisciplinary methods. It operates at the intersection of research, education and community engagement, emphasizing the co-creation and living nature of heritage. The article presents the Centre's key objectives and activities, including its documentation projects, educational programs and cooperation with UNESCO. Special attention is given to flagship initiatives such as the Krakow Nativity Scene and the Lajkonik procession, which are presented as successful cases of safeguarding local traditions within global heritage frameworks. The analysis also identifies challenges – such as folklorisation, generational change, and the need for digital innovation – and discusses how the Centre addresses them through educational outreach and international collaboration. The case of Krakow illustrates how a local institution can function as a laboratory of heritage interpretation, connecting academic knowledge with civic practice and contributing to the broader field of intangible heritage studies.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, museum, tradition bearers

Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) encompasses practices, representations, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage and continuously recreate in response to their environment and history.¹ Since the adoption of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003, increasing attention has been devoted not only to identifying and documenting such practices but also to developing sustainable mechanisms of safeguarding that support their transmission in changing social contexts.²

The implementation of the Convention has generated an extensive international debate concerning the role of institutions, the ethics of safeguarding, and the impact of heritage policies on communities.³ In heritage theory, this discussion has been accompanied by a critique of the “authorised heritage discourse”, which questions the neutrality of cultural institutions and emphasises the social construction of heritage through power relations and community

¹ SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006.

² KURIN, Richard. *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004a.

³ UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, 2003

agency.⁴ Within this framework, safeguarding is increasingly understood not as the preservation of static forms but as a negotiated and participatory process.

In Poland, following the ratification of the Convention in 2011, safeguarding policies have gradually developed within a national institutional system coordinated by the National Heritage Board of Poland. Against this broader background, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Interpretation Centre of Krakow (Centrum Interpretacji Niematerialnego Dziedzictwa Krakowa; CINDK), established in 2018 as a branch of the Museum of Krakow, represents a distinctive municipal initiative focused on urban intangible heritage.

Rather than functioning primarily as a collection-based exhibition unit, the Centre operates as a research-oriented and participatory platform dedicated to documenting, interpreting and co-creating intangible heritage together with local communities. This article examines CINDK as a case study of process-oriented museology within a municipal institutional framework. The analysis explores how the Centre negotiates the relationship between institutional structures and community agency, and how it positions itself within both national safeguarding policies and contemporary debates in heritage studies.

The study adopts a qualitative case study approach based on the analysis of institutional statutes, project documentation, educational materials, digital platforms and public communication channels. The author's long-term professional involvement in the field of intangible heritage in Krakow – both as President of the Association of Lacemakers of the Krakow Region and as a researcher collaborating with the Centre on the “Atlas of the Intangible Heritage of Krakow” – provides additional insight into the practical and institutional dimensions of safeguarding while maintaining a reflexive analytical perspective. The study combines institutional analysis with elements of engaged scholarship but keeps a critical distance through reflexive positioning.

History of the Centre's establishment and mission

The establishment of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Interpretation Centre of Krakow (CINDK) should be understood within the broader framework of heritage protection policies in Poland, which have historically been shaped by a strong emphasis on the safeguarding of material monuments and historic sites.⁵ The gradual incorporation of intangible cultural heritage into this system required not only legislative adjustments, but also institutional innovation at the local level.

CINDK's primary objective is not the preservation of objects, but the safeguarding of practices, skills and social rituals that constitute the living heritage of Krakow. In this respect, the Centre aligns with contemporary understandings of intangible heritage as a dynamic and socially embedded process rather than a fixed cultural resource.⁶ Its activities focus on documentation, research, interpretation and the facilitation of intergenerational transmission, carried out in cooperation with communities recognised as heritage bearers.

Unlike traditional museum departments structured around collections, CINDK operates through project-based methodologies that respond to specific cultural phenomena and community initiatives. Exhibitions such as *Od wielkiego dzwonu* (2024/2025), devoted to festive practices in Krakow, and the planned 2026 exhibition on the sounds of the city, exemplify this

⁴ BORTOLOTTI, Chiara; LÁZARO RAÑA, María Xosé (eds.). *Intangible Heritage: Conservation, Ethics and Impact*. Cham: Springer, 2020.

⁵ KLEKOT, Ewa. *Protection of Cultural Heritage in Poland*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2017.

⁶ KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

approach. Rather than presenting objects as autonomous artefacts, these projects foreground narratives, performative dimensions and social contexts, thereby positioning the museum as a space of interpretation and encounter.

This orientation reflects a broader shift in museology in which museums are increasingly perceived not merely as repositories of heritage but as active agents in its production and mediation.⁷ At the same time, as emphasised in scholarship on intangible heritage, safeguarding must carefully negotiate the tension between institutional frameworks and community agency. CINDK's declared goals therefore include not only documentation and promotion but also the strengthening of heritage bearers' competencies, support for networking among depositary groups and the development of sustainable forms of cooperation beyond the museum space.

Legal and organisational significance

The Intangible Cultural Heritage Interpretation Centre of Krakow (CINDK) operates within the legal and institutional framework established for the protection of cultural heritage in Poland. Since the ratification of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, municipal institutions such as the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow have been mandated to implement guidelines for the identification, documentation and promotion of intangible practices.⁸

The Krakow City Council's approval of a new statute in 2022 further defined the Centre's role, specifying its responsibilities within the municipal system of heritage protection.⁹ This formal recognition enables CINDK to integrate research, documentation, education and community engagement in a coordinated manner. By operating as part of a larger museum structure, the Centre gains both administrative legitimacy and access to professional expertise while remaining oriented toward participatory practices.¹⁰

From an organisational perspective, CINDK exemplifies a model in which heritage institutions act not merely as custodians of material objects but as platforms for the co-production of cultural meaning.¹¹ The Centre's work emphasises the documentation of living practices, the facilitation of community participation, and mediation between local knowledge and institutional resources. This approach underscores the dual function of the museum as both a legal entity responsible for safeguarding heritage and an active agent in the social and cultural processes that constitute intangible heritage.

Educational and popularisation projects

The Centre implements a wide range of educational and outreach activities aimed at promoting Krakow's intangible heritage to diverse audiences, including residents, students and tourists. A central component of this work is the organisation of handicraft workshops, often conducted in collaboration with the Association of Lacemakers of the Krakow Region

⁷ SMITH, Laurajane; AKAGAWA, Natsuko (eds.). *Intangible Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2009.

⁸ BOGUCKA, Maria. *Cultural Heritage and Education*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2015.

⁹ KOWALSKA, Anna. *Museums and the Protection of Intangible Heritage*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UJ, 2021.

¹⁰ KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

¹¹ KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, Barbara. Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production. In: *Museum International*, 2004, vol. 56, no. 1–2, pp. 52–65.

(*Stowarzyszenie Koronczarek Ziemi Krakowskiej*), which allow participants to engage directly with traditional skills such as bobbin lace-making.¹²

Digital platforms also play a crucial role in the Centre's strategies. The "Tell Me the City" (*Opowiedz mi miasto*) portal functions as an interactive repository, enabling residents to contribute local stories, customs and memories, thereby co-creating the documentation of Krakow's intangible heritage.¹³ This approach exemplifies participatory museology principles, emphasising community agency in heritage creation and interpretation.¹⁴

Temporary and permanent exhibitions complement workshops and digital projects by offering immersive, multi-sensory experiences. Examples include presentations on the Krakow Nativity Scene, the Lajkonik procession, and local lace-making traditions, which combine historical context with contemporary participatory methods. Through these initiatives, the Centre mediates between traditional cultural practices and modern educational techniques, highlighting the dynamic, processual nature of heritage.¹⁵

Educational programming extends to school-based initiatives – such as "From Folklore to Intangible Heritage" and "Intergenerational Connections: Cultural Observation of Intangible Heritage" – which introduce students to UNESCO frameworks for intangible heritage safeguarding while fostering active engagement and reflection.¹⁶

These projects collectively illustrate the Centre's model of integrating research, documentation and public engagement. By combining scholarly insight with participatory methodologies, the Centre demonstrates how municipal museums can serve both as educational infrastructure and as facilitators of living heritage, enabling community members to contribute actively to the interpretation, transmission and revitalisation of local traditions.

Integrating the centre's activities into contemporary museology and heritage studies

The activities of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Interpretation Centre of Krakow reflect contemporary developments in critical museology and participatory heritage studies. Moving beyond the traditional model of the museum as a repository of objects, the Centre operates as an interactive space where local communities actively participate in documenting, interpreting and transmitting heritage. This approach aligns with Laurajane Smith's concept of heritage as a social practice, emphasising that heritage is co-created by communities rather than imposed by institutional authorities.¹⁷

By employing participatory formats such as workshops, digital platforms and collaborative exhibitions, the Centre enables residents to become co-authors of heritage narratives. In this sense, the museum functions as infrastructure supporting living traditions, rather than as an exclusive custodian of cultural authority. The Centre's approach exemplifies how urban

¹² KOWALCZYK, Joanna. *Artisanal Craft in Cultural Education*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UJ, 2019.

¹³ "Tell Me the City" Portal. <https://opowiedzmimiasto.mhk.pl/>

¹⁴ HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF KRAKÓW. Temporary and Permanent Exhibitions. <https://muzeumkrakowa.pl/>. DĄBEK, Tomasz. *Museology and New Technologies*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018.

¹⁵ DĄBEK, Tomasz. *Museology and New Technologies*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018.

¹⁶ "Tell Me the City" Portal. <https://opowiedzmimiasto.mhk.pl/>

¹⁷ SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006.

museums can facilitate dialogue, foster inclusivity and bridge diverse perspectives within the city's cultural landscape.¹⁸

Catalina González's analysis complements this framework by highlighting the active role of museums in shaping discourses about memory, identity and social representation. By integrating multiple voices and promoting reflection on cultural diversity, the Centre contributes to a more democratic and socially engaged understanding of heritage, positioning itself as a laboratory for participatory museology within a municipal context.

Challenges, institutional tensions and international frameworks of safeguarding

Safeguarding intangible heritage in a contemporary urban context entails navigating dynamic social, cultural and institutional transformations.¹⁹ Rapid urbanisation, globalisation and changing patterns of participation can disrupt traditional modes of intergenerational transmission, risking either the gradual disappearance of practices or their transformation into staged cultural performances detached from everyday life.²⁰ The Centre therefore operates within a constant tension between continuity and adaptation.

One recurring challenge is the phenomenon described as “national post-folklorism”, in which living traditions are simplified, aestheticized or strategically reshaped to function as emblematic national symbols. Such processes may enhance visibility but can also weaken social embeddedness and reduce complex cultural practices to touristic representations. In response, the Centre emphasises dialogue with heritage bearers, careful historical contextualisation and the reinforcement of community agency in decision-making processes related to representation and promotion.

Education and intergenerational engagement remain central mechanisms for addressing these risks. Workshops, school programs and digital initiatives are designed not merely to popularise heritage but to sustain embodied forms of knowledge transmission.²¹ The use of multimedia tools, interactive exhibitions and digital archives enhances accessibility while supporting continuity of practice within community networks.²²

At the same time, the Centre's activities are embedded in broader international safeguarding frameworks shaped by the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Poland's ratification of the Convention in 2011 positioned municipal institutions within a multi-level governance structure linking local initiatives to national and

¹⁸ GONZÁLEZ, Catalina. Heritage and the Politics of Identity: Museums, Memory, and the Politics of Representation. In: SANDELL, Richard (ed.). *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*. London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 119–134.

¹⁹ HAJDUK-NIJAKOWSKA, Janina. Heritage Protection or National Post-folklorism? In: ADAMOWSKI, Jan; SMYK, Katarzyna (eds.). *Intangible Cultural Heritage in Poland and its Protection*. Lublin–Warsaw: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2013, pp. 65–74.

²⁰ SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006.

²¹ SCHREIBER, Hanna. Intangible Cultural Heritage – The Missing Link in the Cultural Heritage Protection System in Poland. In: FATYGA, Barbara; MICHALSKI, Rafal (eds.). *Folk Culture: Theories, Practices, Policies*. Warsaw: National Centre for Culture, 2014, pp. 375–406.

²² BORTOLOTTI, Chiara. From Objects to Processes: UNESCO's “Intangible Cultural Heritage”. In: *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 2007, 19, pp. 21–33. DĄBEK, Tomasz. *Museology and New Technologies*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018.

global policies. Cooperation with UNESCO enables the international visibility of Krakow's traditions and facilitates the exchange of safeguarding strategies across cultural contexts.²³

A significant example is the inscription of the Krakow Nativity Scene on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2018. The Centre functions as a coordinating and interpretive hub for activities related to this recognition at the municipal level, mediating between community practitioners, city authorities and international heritage standards. Such mediation illustrates the dual role of the institution: it must simultaneously support local agency and comply with transnational regulatory frameworks.²⁴

Beyond UNESCO-related activities, Krakow participates in broader urban heritage governance structures, including the City's Intangible Heritage Team, which integrates municipal officials, museum experts and community representatives.²⁵ Transnational cooperation is further developed through initiatives such as the Living Heritage Journeys project, co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union, which explores innovative models for integrating intangible heritage into sustainable tourism while maintaining community participation.

These multi-scalar engagements highlight both opportunities and constraints. International recognition enhances prestige, funding opportunities and comparative learning, yet it may also introduce formalisation pressures and standardised safeguarding models. The Centre's ongoing challenge lies in maintaining a balance between institutional accountability within global heritage regimes and the preservation of local autonomy, flexibility and community-driven practice.²⁶

International cooperation and the importance of UNESCO

The Intangible Heritage Interpretation Centre of Krakow operates within the broader context of global safeguarding of intangible heritage, closely cooperating with UNESCO and implementing the standards of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, to which Poland has been a signatory since 2011.²⁷ This collaboration allows for the international promotion of local traditions and enables the exchange of experiences and best practices with museums and cultural institutions worldwide. Given that intangible phenomena often transcend national borders, their protection requires an intercultural and transnational approach.²⁸

A key example of such cooperation is the joint documentation and promotion of Krakow's nativity scene (*szopka krakowska*), inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural

²³ HAJDUK-NIJAKOWSKA, Janina. Heritage Protection or National Post-folklorism? In: ADAMOWSKI, Jan; SMYK, Katarzyna (eds.). *Intangible Cultural Heritage in Poland and its Protection*. Lublin–Warsaw: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2013, pp. 65–74.

²⁴ SMITH, Laurajane; AKAGAWA, Natsuko (eds.). *Intangible Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2009.

²⁵ BORTOLOTTI, Chiara; LÁZARO RAÑA, María Xosé (eds.). *Intangible Heritage: Conservation, Ethics and Impact*. Cham: Springer, 2020. KOCKEL, Ullrich. *Intangible Heritage and Social Change*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2013.

²⁶ KURIN, Richard. Museums and Intangible Heritage: Culture Dead or Alive? In: *ICOM News*, 2004b, no. 4, pp. 7–9.

²⁷ UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Paris: UNESCO, 2003.

²⁸ BARTMIŃSKI, Jan. The Specificity of Intangible Cultural Heritage – Issues of Protection, Documentation and “Revitalization”. In: ADAMOWSKI, Jan; SMYK, Katarzyna (eds.). *Intangible Cultural Heritage in Poland and its Protection*. Lublin–Warsaw: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2013, pp. 35–49.

Heritage of Humanity in 2018.²⁹ The Centre functions as the main coordinating hub for activities related to this project in Krakow.

Beyond museum networks, Krakow engages in urban heritage governance through formal bodies such as the City's Intangible Heritage Team, which brings together municipal officials, museum experts and community representatives to plan and implement safeguarding measures aligned with the 2003 UNESCO Convention.³⁰

The Centre also participates in transnational initiatives such as the *Living Heritage Journeys* project, co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. This collaborative initiative involves partners from Belgium, Croatia, Italy, Sweden and Poland, including the Museum of Krakow. Its aim is to explore innovative approaches for integrating intangible heritage into sustainable tourism experiences across Europe.³¹ By adopting co-creation among heritage practitioners, local communities, researchers and tourism stakeholders, the project translates research findings into guidelines and training materials that enhance the social, cultural and economic benefits of heritage safeguarding. The inclusion of the Krakow nativity scene as a pilot case demonstrates the broader applicability of the Centre's methods and highlights the alignment of Krakow's experience with international trends in participatory and community-focused heritage practices.³²

The Potential for Comparative Research and International Networks

Although the Centre cooperates with UNESCO, its engagement with comparative research and international museum and academic networks remains limited. Active participation in platforms such as ICHCAP (International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region) or Horizon Europe projects could strengthen Krakow's international visibility and provide insights from other countries' experiences in safeguarding intangible heritage.

Such international cooperation would also facilitate the adoption of innovative approaches to the documentation, digitisation and dissemination of heritage, addressing contemporary challenges posed by digital society. By situating Krakow's practices within a global comparative framework, the Centre can foster cross-cultural dialogue and scholarly exchange.

Existing participatory practices, such as collaboration with women's handicraft groups, illustrate how local knowledge can be integrated into research while supporting both hobbyists and professionals. Regional initiatives, including the National Lace School in Zakopane, highlight how local craft heritage can connect to broader national and international educational and cultural networks.

The role of the centre in documentation and research

A central task of the Intangible Heritage Interpretation Centre of Krakow is the systematic collection and analysis of materials documenting local traditions and customs. The Centre

²⁹ HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF KRAKÓW. *Intangible Heritage Interpretation Center*. <https://muzeumkrakowa.pl/oddzialy/centrum-interpretacji-niematerialnego-dziedzictwa-krakowa>

³⁰ SZALAPAK, Anna. *The Kraków Nativity Scene as a Phenomenon of Kraków Folklore Against the Background of the European Nativity Scene Tradition*. Kraków: Wydawnictwa Naukowe, 2012, pp. 203–211.

³¹ BARTKOWIAK, Ewa. *Ethnography of Kraków*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2017.

³² KOWALSKA, Anna. *Museums and the Protection of Intangible Heritage*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UJ, 2021.

cooperates with researchers, ethnographers and local communities, creating a comprehensive database of source materials and documentary knowledge.³³

A primary instrument in this work is the “Tell Me the City” portal, which continues earlier research initiatives implemented since 2013.³⁴ The portal gathers narratives from residents about Krakow’s intangible heritage, encompassing both traditional and contemporary practices. This ensures diverse voices are represented, supporting an authentic dialogue between past and present.

The Centre also employs social media to promote events and engage broader audiences. For example, its official Facebook page advertises community workshops and related programs, reflecting a commitment to accessible public engagement.

Educational and popularisation activities, including artistic handicraft workshops, enable participants to learn traditional techniques such as embroidery or lace-making.³⁵ These initiatives contribute to the continuity of folk crafts and support local artisans and enthusiasts.

The Centre has conducted documented research on urban rituals, such as the Lajkonik procession, through sound recordings and ethnographic interviews with participants and local tradition bearers, mapping intangible heritage practices to specific urban spaces.³⁶

Diversifying forms of heritage and applying an intersectional approach

While the Centre primarily focuses on well-known examples of Krakow’s intangible heritage, such as nativity scenes and the Lajkonik procession, incorporating lesser-known or marginalised practices could enrich the representation of the city’s heritage landscape. Considering the heritage of ethnic minorities, religious communities and migrant groups would broaden the Centre’s scope and align its activities with contemporary inclusive approaches to heritage.

Targeted initiatives for youths, seniors and groups with limited access to cultural resources could further reinforce the Centre’s social mission. Additionally, although the primary focus is on intangible heritage, the Centre engages with material collections as interpretive tools. Objects are not treated merely as autonomous exhibits; rather, they serve as entry points to narrate social practices, skills and knowledge transmitted across generations. Material heritage thus functions as a medium through which intangible heritage is interpreted, contextualised and communicated, bridging conventional museum practices with process-oriented approaches to heritage interpretation.

Examples of project implementation: Krakow Nativity Scene and Lajkonik

The Centre serves as a guardian institution for numerous traditions listed in the register of Krakow’s intangible heritage. A prominent example is the Krakow Nativity Scene, a unique phenomenon of local folklore with a rich history and deep ties to the identity of the city’s inhabitants.³⁷

³³ KOWALSKA, Anna. *Museums ...*

³⁴ SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006.

³⁵ SZNAJDER, Anna. Women’s Handicraft Groups: Role and Importance for Hobbyists, Professionals, and Researchers. In: BRZEZIŃSKA, Anna W.; PAPROT, Anna; TYMCHOWICZ, Maria (eds.). *Contemporary Issues in Folk Costume Studies*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo UW, 2018, p. 166.

³⁶ KOWALSKA, Joanna R. Laces Inspired by Podhale Folk Art. The National Lace School in Zakopane and Its Impact on Fashion during the First Half-century of Its Existence. In: *Rozprawy Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie. Seria Nowa*, 2014, 7, pp. 27–48.

³⁷ SZALAŁAPAK, Anna. *The Kraków Nativity Scene as a Phenomenon of Kraków Folklore Against the Background of the European Nativity Scene Tradition*. Kraków: Wydawnictwa Naukowe, 2012, pp. 203–211.

This urban tradition dates back to the nineteenth century and was initially practiced by craftsmen from the suburbs of Krowodrza and Zwierzyniec. Over time it evolved into an artistic form, combining depictions of the Christmas scene with elements of Krakow's historic architecture. The oldest preserved nativity scene, created by Michał Ezenekier in the second half of the nineteenth century, is housed in the collection of the Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Krakow. Known as the “mother nativity scene”, it established the canonical multi-level, tower-like, symmetrical structure characteristic of later Krakow nativity scenes.

The first Competition for the Most Beautiful Krakow Nativity Scene took place in 1937, aimed at maintaining and promoting this tradition.³⁸ Except for a hiatus during World War II, the competition has continued annually, bringing together artists who present their works at the Main Market Square. In 2014, the Kraków nativity scene was included on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and in 2018, it became the first Polish element to be inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.³⁹

The Centre, in collaboration with UNESCO, supports not only protection but also the promotion of nativity scene-making as a living tradition integrated into the city's cultural life. Activities include research, collection inventorying and documentation of workshops dedicated to the craft.

Another significant tradition is the Lajkonik, or “Zwierzyniecki Horse”, a distinctive Krakow ritual rooted in both urban and folk culture.⁴⁰ The Centre organises lectures, exhibitions, and events highlighting the Lajkonik's significance within the city's collective memory.⁴¹ The parade occurs annually on the octave (eighth day) of Corpus Christi, beginning at the Municipal Water and Sewage Company headquarters on Senatorska Street and proceeding through the historic centre, including Na Stawach Square and the Main Market Square. Participants dressed as Lajkonik riders and Tatars, accompanied by musicians, perform traditional symbolic acts such as lightly touching passers-by with a ceremonial mace made of wood and adorned with ribbons, which according to local belief brings good luck.

The ritual originates from a legend celebrating the victory of Krakow raftsmen (*włóczękowie*) over invading Tatars. A victorious raftsman dressed as a khan rode into the city, inspiring joy among residents. Since then, the Lajkonik figure and procession have become enduring symbols of the event. The parade's costumes, combining stylised Tatar and bourgeois attire, were established in the nineteenth century and later incorporated into official city celebrations. In 2014, the Lajkonik procession was inscribed on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage as one of the first five Polish traditions to receive this distinction. While Krakow nativity scenes were the first Polish elements inscribed on the UNESCO list in 2019, the event also highlighted the cultural significance of other city traditions, including Lajkonik.

In addition to exhibitions and documentation activities, the Centre implements structured educational programs that support intergenerational transmission of skills. Particularly significant are the regular nativity scene-making courses addressed to three age categories:

³⁸ UNESCO. *The Kraków Nativity Scene*. UNESCO Intangible Heritage Lists, 2018.

³⁹ BARTKOWIAK, Ewa. *Ethnography of Kraków*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2017.

⁴⁰ SZOKA, Andrzej Iwo. *Lajkonik – the Zwierzyniec Hobby Horse. The History of an Intangible Museum Exhibit*. In: KLIMEK, Łukasz (ed.). *The World of Lajkonik. The Hobby Horse Around the World*. Kraków: Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, 2014, pp. 31–73.

⁴¹ KWIECIŃSKA, Magdalena. *The Zwierzyniec Hobby Horse as a Local and Universal Rite. Social Memory, Folk Beliefs and Urban Rituals*. In: KLIMEK, Łukasz (ed.). *The World of Lajkonik*. Kraków: Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, 2014, pp. 178–188.

children, youth and families. Each workshop group consists of approximately six to eight participants, ensuring direct and intensive contact with an experienced Krakow nativity scene-maker. This small-group format enables close interaction, practical guidance and the gradual acquisition of complex techniques. More importantly, it facilitates what heritage scholars describe as *transmission in situ* – the passing on of knowledge within the social and material context in which it is practiced, rather than through abstract instruction or detached institutional mediation.

The workshops operate according to a master–apprentice model characteristic of many forms of intangible cultural heritage. In this sense, they can also be interpreted through the lens of the concept of “communities of practice” developed by Etienne Wenger, understood as groups that sustain knowledge through shared activity, repetition and social engagement. Participants do not merely learn technical skills; they gradually become embedded in a network of practitioners, absorbing aesthetic conventions, workshop ethics and narratives connected to the history of the tradition. The Centre thus functions less as a traditional museum space and more as a platform enabling the formation and continuity of such communities of practice.⁴²

Similarly, the Centre supports traditional bobbin lace-making through workshops organised twice a month by experienced lace makers. Each two-hour session gathers up to twelve participants – the maximum number determined by the availability of lace pillows provided by the Centre – as well as additional participants who bring their own materials. The cyclical and regular character of these meetings fosters continuity and stabilises a community of practitioners. As in the case of nativity scene making, the workshops exceed the framework of technical instruction: they create a social space for mutual support, informal exchange of knowledge and collective reflection on tradition.

By maintaining limited group sizes and regular schedules, the Centre prioritises depth of engagement and relational transmission over mass participation. In doing so, it implicitly challenges what Laurajane Smith has termed the “Authorised Heritage Discourse”, which privileges expert-driven narratives, monumental heritage and top-down forms of interpretation. Instead, the Centre’s practice aligns with contemporary critical heritage studies, understanding intangible heritage as a dynamic social process sustained through embodied learning, repetition and community participation rather than institutional authority alone.⁴³

Cooperation and development of projects within the Centre

Rather than functioning as an isolated institution, the Centre operates within an extensive network of municipal, regional and international partners. This cooperation enables the exchange of knowledge, the development of research projects and the implementation of joint initiatives aimed at documenting,⁴⁴ archiving and promoting Krakow’s intangible heritage.⁴⁵ By recording local histories, legends, rituals and customs, the Centre not only preserves cultural

⁴² WENGER, Etienne. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

⁴³ SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006.

⁴⁴ “Tell Me the City” Portal. <https://opowiedzmimasto.mhk.pl/>

⁴⁵ HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF KRAKÓW. Activity Report of the Intangible Heritage Interpretation Center. Kraków: MHKK, 2022. KOWALSKA, Anna. *Museums and the Protection of Intangible Heritage*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UJ, 2021.

memory but also fosters social engagement and strengthens awareness of the significance of local traditions within contemporary urban life.⁴⁶

The Centre combines ethnographic research with educational and exhibition activities. It organises handicraft workshops, offers instruction in folk art and prepares both temporary and permanent exhibitions devoted to practices such as Krakow nativity scene making,⁴⁷ the Lajkonik procession and regional lace-making.⁴⁸ A notable example of revitalising historical customs is the Babski Comber initiative, traditionally celebrated during the carnival period, when women symbolically assumed authority through ritualised festivities. Reinterpreted today in a participatory format – including workshops, lectures and a public procession – the event enables contemporary audiences to engage with the historical meaning and social dimensions of this living tradition.

Beyond the local context, the Centre situates its activities within broader regional and international frameworks of heritage practice. Comparative examples such as the community-centred safeguarding model developed by the Serfenta Association in Cieszyn – recognised with the European Heritage Award / Europa Nostra Award in 2024 – demonstrate the potential of combining craft documentation, intergenerational skill transmission and civic engagement.⁴⁹ Such parallels provide inspiration for methodological development and create opportunities for professional exchange, comparative research and the strengthening of transnational heritage networks.

The Polish institutional context and scholarly reflection

The activities of the Centre are situated within the broader Polish system of intangible heritage safeguarding. Since Poland's ratification of the 2003 UNESCO Convention in 2011, national safeguarding policies have been linked to the implementation of the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, coordinated by the National Heritage Board of Poland. The inclusion of Krakow bobbin lace (2016), the Krakow Nativity Scene (2014) and the Lajkonik procession (2014) highlights growing institutional recognition of community-based traditions.

The Centre functions not only as a municipal institution but also as a site of scholarly reflection. Through cooperation with researchers, projects such as the "Atlas of the Intangible Heritage of Krakow" and publications devoted to intangible heritage, the Centre contributes to national discourse on participatory heritage governance. Its activities thus bridge institutional practice and academic inquiry, reinforcing the role of urban museums in contemporary heritage studies.

The significance of the Centre for the protection of intangible cultural heritage

The Centre plays documentary, educational and social roles. In conditions of rapid social and cultural change, it contributes to maintaining the continuity and adaptation of traditions,

⁴⁶ NOWAK, Piotr. *Local Culture and Digital Media*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2020.

⁴⁷ SZALAPAK, Anna. *The Kraków Nativity Scene as a Phenomenon of Kraków Folklore Against the Background of the European Nativity Scene Tradition*. Kraków: Wydawnictwa Naukowe, 2012, pp. 203–211.

⁴⁸ BORTOLOTTTO, Chiara; LÁZARO RAÑA, María Xosé (eds.). *Intangible Heritage: Conservation, Ethics and Impact*. Cham: Springer, 2020.

⁴⁹ KARNET KRAKÓW. Kraków Women's Comber Festival 2025: Woman – the River. <https://karnet.krakowculture.pl/58147-krakow-krakowski-babski-comber-2025>

which is crucial for local identity.⁵⁰ It operates within Poland's broader heritage protection policy framework, shaped by the ratification of the 2003 UNESCO Convention and its incorporation into the Polish legal order in 2011, which reinforced the understanding of heritage as a factor of social cohesion and community building.⁵¹

Safeguarding intangible heritage requires interdisciplinary methods combining museum practice, ethnology, education, and digital technologies. Through its projects, the Centre demonstrates effective local implementation of these approaches.⁵²

Capacity-building and institutional challenges

Sustainable heritage safeguarding depends on both institutional mediation and strengthening the capacities of heritage bearers. Community-based practices often rely on project-based funding, requiring skills in grant writing, organisational management and public communication. Capacity-building efforts can empower communities to act as autonomous partners, complementing institutional support and fostering agency in heritage projects.

Networking among depositaries of diverse traditions promotes experience exchange, intergenerational knowledge transmission and collaborative innovation. The Centre thus functions as both a facilitator and mediator, supporting sustainable intangible heritage ecosystems within the urban context.

At the same time, critical reflection on institutional framing remains necessary. While municipal support enhances visibility and legitimacy, over-formalisation risks reducing living cultural practices to events or performances. Maintaining balance between institutional guidance and community autonomy is essential to preserve the authenticity of traditions.

The Centre as a laboratory of participation

The Centre exemplifies a participatory model within a municipal museum. Rather than asserting authority over cultural practices, it provides infrastructure for heritage bearers to articulate, transmit and negotiate their traditions. The museum functions as an enabling platform, supporting documentation, networks and visibility, while primary agency remains with communities.

This approach positions heritage as a dynamic, collaborative process rather than an object of institutional control. Krakow's case illustrates how municipal institutions can foster sustainable intangible heritage ecosystems without fully institutionalising living traditions, contributing to contemporary debates in participatory museology and urban cultural governance.

Conclusions

The Intangible Heritage Interpretation Centre of Krakow demonstrates a modern approach to heritage protection, integrating documentation, education and community participation. Its work preserves and revitalises Krakow traditions, enhances local identity and strengthens cultural education and tourism.⁵³ Cooperation with local communities, researchers and national

⁵⁰ HAJDUK-NIJKOWSKA, Janina. Heritage Protection or National Post-folklorism? In: ADAMOWSKI, Jan; SMYK, Katarzyna (eds.). *Intangible Cultural Heritage in Poland and its Protection*. Lublin–Warsaw: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2013, pp. 65–74.

⁵¹ UNESCO. Ratification of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by Poland: *Journal of Laws of Republic of Poland*, 2011, No. 172, item 1018.

⁵² KOWALSKA, Anna. *Museums and the Protection of Intangible Heritage*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UJ, 2021.

⁵³ SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006.

and international institutions allows the Centre to function as a laboratory for participatory, reflexive and socially engaged heritage safeguarding.

Its activities resonate with international museology and heritage trends, illustrating that intangible heritage can be maintained as a living, evolving process in conditions of globalisation and digital transformation. The Centre thus provides valuable insights for scholars, cultural practitioners and policymakers seeking to implement community-based, participatory approaches to heritage management.⁵⁴ Krakow's case suggests that municipal museums can act not only as implementers of UNESCO frameworks but as experimental sites redefining the governance of living heritage in contemporary urban Europe.

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⁵⁴ SEIFERT, Nena. *Cultural Heritage Education in a Globalized World*. Cham: Springer, 2014.

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