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VIRTUAL EXHIBITIONS AS A MEANS OF ENHANCING THE ACCESSIBILITY AND EXPERIENCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE: VIRTUAL EXHIBITIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY "SVETOZAR MARKOVIĆ"

Abstract: This paper examines the role of virtual exhibitions in preserving and presenting cultural heritage, focusing on the University Library "Svetozar Marković" in Belgrade as the case study. Virtual exhibitions serve as an efficient tool for preservation, presentation, and promotion of cultural heritage, offering unique insights into archival, library, and museum materials that traditional systems cannot always provide. Through digitization, these exhibitions ensure permanent protection of physical cultural artifacts while making them accessible to a broader audience, thus reducing the need for direct contact with original items. The study analyzes publicly available virtual exhibitions from the University Library, categorized into three thematic areas: exhibitions dedicated to prominent historical figures, cultural heritage presentations and specific thematic events. These exhibitions demonstrate how digitization can effectively bridge geographical and linguistic barriers while protecting valuable cultural artifacts. The paper highlights how these virtual exhibitions go beyond mere digital transformation, incorporating creative elements that combine biographies, bibliographies, and digitized materials including archival documents, books, manuscripts, and photographs. The results show that the University Library's virtual exhibitions represent a successful model of cultural heritage digitization, effectively democratizing access to national cultural heritage while promoting public engagement and cultural awareness.

Keywords: virtual exhibitions, cultural heritage accessibility, digital preservation, Serbian cultural heritage, digital humanities

1. Introduction

We are witnessing an ever-increasing acceleration of technological progress, and our cultural heritage stands at a crossroads between the traditional and digital worlds. Library professionals find themselves at an intersection between preserving tradition and embracing innovation. One of the most important tasks for librarians and other cultural heritage professionals is to preserve the cultural treasure under our guardianship, while also presenting to the public the contents of our collections.

This paper aims to convey a fragment of the University Library "Svetozar Marković"'s experience and showcase some of the ways in which modern libraries can face the challenge of preservation while also presenting and democratizing cultural treasures in the digital age.

As it approaches its centennial celebration in 2026, the University Library "Svetozar Marković" has established itself as a custodian of significant cultural heritage, accumulating both invaluable collections and expertise in preservation and promotion. The Library has emerged as one of the country's foremost cultural and educational institutions in digital transformation and innovation. Starting from the first completely digitized collection of Isidora Sekulić's manuscripts, through the scanning of old Cyrillic manuscripts and the establishment of the digital repository Phaidra, to participation in important international projects, the library has achieved significant results, including the digitization of old Serbian newspapers in the Europeana Newspapers project. [1].

2. Virtual exhibitions

Virtual exhibitions cannot completely replace real exhibitions. Physical exhibitions have their advantages over virtual ones, as they offer a tangible experience that cannot be fully replicated. Visitors can directly see and feel the exhibited objects, creating deep and intense experiences. Additionally, real exhibitions enable interaction with exhibits and other visitors, encouraging discussions and exchange of opinions. Curators and experts are often present at exhibitions, providing additional information and context, which enriches visitors' education.

Furthermore, the specific atmosphere and context of real exhibitions, such as the architecture of the space and lighting, contribute to the experience and understanding of cultural heritage. The social dimension of visitors gathering and exchanging ideas creates shared memories and adds value to the experience.

However, virtual exhibitions offer numerous advantages that make them important tools for preserving and presenting cultural heritage. The first advantage is accessibility—they make cultural resources available to a wider audience without geographical and temporal limitations. Visitors from different parts of the world can easily access exhibitions from the comfort of their homes, significantly expanding availability and stimulating interest in cultural heritage.

The second important advantage is the possibility of interactivity. Virtual exhibitions often include features such as 3D models, video content, and animations, which enrich the experience and provide a more dynamic approach to information.

Moreover, virtual exhibitions represent a significant step in preserving cultural heritage, as they maintain digital copies of important documents and objects, protecting them from deterioration and destruction. This is particularly important in light of dangers that may threaten physical collections.

Finally, virtual exhibitions allow for easy updating and addition of new content, ensuring constantly updated information. These advantages make virtual exhibitions a significant tool in preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

3. Virtual Exhibitions of the University Library "Svetozar Marković"

The University Library "Svetozar Marković" in Belgrade has developed a system of virtual exhibitions as a means of preserving and presenting cultural heritage in the digital environment. "These virtual exhibitions, housed in the halls of "cyberspace", represent national cultural heritage and humanistic legacy originating from the University Library's collection. They are open to all internet users and serve as digital cultural oases, functioning as "electronic agoras" of the modern age." [2]

The exhibitions are accessible on the University Library "Svetozar Marković" website at: www.unilib.rs/sadrzaji/virtuelne-izlozbe/.

The virtual exhibitions can be categorized into three thematic groups:

- Exhibitions about prominent individuals
- Thematic exhibitions about specific events
- Exhibitions on particular subjects

This digital initiative represents a significant step in making Serbian cultural heritage more accessible while preserving valuable historical materials. Each category serves a unique purpose in showcasing different aspects of the library's rich collection, from biographical exhibitions about notable figures to themed presentations of historical events and specific cultural topics. This paper presents an overview of three virtual exhibitions, focusing on their role in cultural heritage promotion.

4. Exhibition "Vojislav Jovanović Marambo"

The exhibition, which belongs to the segment about prominent individuals, was authored by Dragana Mihailović, with Jasna Čanković serving as the expert consultant, and the portal was designed by colleague Dragana Janković, all of whom are employees of the parent institution. [3]

Vojislav Jovanović Marambo (Belgrade, 1884-1968) was a prominent Serbian and Yugoslav literary historian, translator, diplomat, and scholar. His diverse work encompassed folk literature studies, journalism, bibliography, satirical playwriting, and archival work. He was also known as a book collector, bibliophile, and photographer. [4]

The exhibition consists of the following segments:

- Introduction
- The Home of Vojislav M. Jovanović Marambo
- Vojislav M. Jovanović Marambo: Life and Work
- The Library of Vojislav M. Jovanović Marambo
- About the Archival Materials
- Marambo and Theater
- In Search of Times Past—The Photographic Collection of Vojislav Jovanović Marambo
- Marambo and Film
- References

This virtual exhibition presents a comprehensive overview of Vojislav M. Jovanović - Marambo's life, work, and contributions across various cultural domains. It showcases his personal library, archival materials, and his significant involvement in theater and film, while also featuring his valuable photographic collection that documents an important period in Serbian cultural history.

Among the listed sections of this exhibition, particular emphasis is placed on Section "Marambo's Home". In this beautiful house, built in 1883, lived the large family of Mate Jovanović—his wife Julka and their seven children, including Vojislav. Slavka Jovanović, Mate's youngest child, bequeathed her brother's legacy and the family house to the University Library. The house became the home of the Department of Folk Literature of the University Library in 1988.[4]

Among the preserved authentic furnishings are striking glass-front book cabinets, antique stoves, an oriental-style furniture set, a large travel trunk, an antique radio, a phonograph with a collection of rare records, framed photographs of family members, and a family icon of Saint John. Each room in the house reflects the lifestyle and style of the late 19th and early 20th-century upper middle class.

A particular treasure of this house is the fully preserved study of Vojislav Jovanović, with its authentic desk, items on it, and notes in the drawers (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The study room of Vojislav Jovanović Dragana Popović, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Another important section of this exhibition refers to the Library of Vojislav M. Jovanović - Marambo.

Vojislav M. Jovanović carefully built his library over sixty years, acquiring books primarily from Belgrade antiquarians, Zagreb's Stepan Kuglija and Mirko Brajer, as well as from Vienna and Leipzig booksellers, and major publishers like the Serbian Literary Cooperative, Nolit, Prosveta, Ljubljana's Cankar Publishing House, and others. He also exchanged books with friends such as Tihomir Đorđević, Jaša Prodanović, and Dragoslav Petković. Many books in need of restoration were meticulously cleaned, repaired, and rebound by trusted craftsmen. Jovanović's collection is particularly significant for its rare and well-preserved editions of Serbian literature, including early works like "Fortis's Travels Through Dalmatia" (1778), Bogišić's "Folk Songs from Older Records, Mostly from Coastal Regions" (1878), and numerous editions of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić's collections from 1823-1865. It also contains important works on the Battle of Kosovo, such as the 1833 Vienna edition of Vuk's "Serbian Folk Songs" and studies by Stojan Novaković (1878) and Miloš Đurić (1918). Other rare texts, useful for studies of folk literature, include Adam Mickiewicz's 1841 lectures on Serbian folk poetry and the 1927 English translation of "Serbian Folk Songs" by John Baring. For sample books from the library, see Figure 2.



Figure 2. Books from Marambo's library

The archival collection of Vojislav Jovanović Marambo includes his research notes, bibliographic records, unfinished works, and documents that offer valuable insights into Serbian history (e.g., post-World War II nationalization) and the private and social life of the middle class in the 19th and 20th centuries (such as correspondence, photographs, and materials on Belgrade's theater scene; for examples of the archival materials, see Figure 3). The documents are organized into seven sections, each with a brief description including date, content summary, and format (handwritten or typewritten).



Figure 3. Archival Material and Marambo's Doctorate

Vojislav M. Jovanović's collection of photographs includes over 1,300 and numerous negatives from 1901 to 1941. His photographic collection is a significant part of Serbian photography history, one of the best-preserved from the early 20th century. Initially influenced by the aesthetic of Pictorialism, which saw photography as a form of painting, Jovanović's approach evolved over time, increasingly focusing on capturing reality and daily life. Early works feature artistically stylized portraits and landscapes, while later works document everyday life in towns and villages he visited during his travels. His most mature and notable works, created in 1933 during his stay in England, include Smile in the Sun, Bridge, April Evening in Sarajevo, Obelisk, and Arcade - Tun, all of which were likely prepared for public exhibition. A photograph of the photographic collection is given in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Marambo's Photographic Collection

It is also important to highlight Marambo's involvement with film. This part of the exhibition contains a newspaper article about the only surviving footage of the coronation of King Peter I. During his stay in the United Kingdom as a diplomat, he managed to locate the film and, using his own funds, purchased the film, bringing it to Belgrade in 1937. This film is now preserved in the Yugoslav Film Archive.

The exhibition presents a comprehensive view of Marambo's contributions to Serbian culture across multiple domains, from literature and theater to photography and film preservation, while documenting important aspects of Serbian cultural life in the early 20th century

5. Digital Cyrillic Collection

Among exhibitions on particular subjects this section focuses on the holdings of Father Pahomius from the Monastery of Crna Reka (Black River). The online exhibition provides access to digitized manuscripts and books related to the work and significance of Cyril and Methodius, as well as translations of Slavic literary works into Serbian, published from the mid-19th century to the beginning of World War I. The exhibition was created by Zoran Bajin, Milena Kostić, and Vesna Vuksan.[5]

Section named "Cyrillic Manuscripts" features seven books in PDF format, including the Gospel Book containing all four canonical Gospels manuscripts (Četvorojevanđelje), known for its unique artistic decorations and beautiful handwriting. The exact time and place of its creation remain uncertain, but a note from 1685. on the cover provides some context. Other notable works include: "Panegyric" (Panagirik) by scribe Veniamin (1595), "January Menaion" (Minejzajanuar) with the Divine Service to Saint Sava, "Psalter with Office" (Psaltir s posledovanjem, 1652), "Service Book" (Služabnik, 16th century), and the "Baranja Copy of Dušan's Code" (16th century). A sample of manuscripts is given in Figure 5. The collection also includes a compilation of ancient tales containing Indian moral stories.







Figure 5. Cyrillic Manuscripts

"Books on Cyril and Methodius" (see Figure 6) is the second part of this exhibition. Digitized books on the lives and work of Cyril and Methodius include PDF files of:

- A Serbian translation of Theophylactus of Ochrid's work (1823),
- "The Millennium Celebration of Saints Cyril and Methodius" (1863) with a speech by Dimitrije Matić and a biography of Methodius by Janko Šafarik,
- The illustrated "Geschichte der Heiligen Slaven-Apostel Cyrill und Method" by Jan Bili (Prague, 1863).







Figure 6. Books on Cyril and Methodius

The next section is "Translations of Slavic Literature". It features translations of Slavic literature into Serbian, published between the mid-19th century and the start of World War I. Seven titles are digitized and made available for download, including:

- "The Captain's Daughter" by Alexander Pushkin (1849),
- "The Overcoat" by Nikolai Gogol (1902),
- "Hadji Murat" by Leo Tolstoy (1914), his last fictional work, translated just before World War I.

A separate section is dedicated to the old library card catalog system and the digitization of the card catalog of the University Library. This digitization project enables users to search the library's holdings through two complementary systems: the electronic COBISS catalog and the digitized card catalog collection. The catalogs provide access to:

- Latin catalog 1 (Publications from the library's founding to 1963),
- Latin catalog 2 (Publications from 1963 to 1998),
- Cyrillic catalog (Publications from the library's founding to 1963),
- Periodicals catalog,
- Catalog of the Department of Old and Rare Books.

The catalog can be accessed and searched online via the University of Innsbruck's system¹.[6]

The final section of the exhibition is about "The Magic Box" virtual browsing system that can simulate physical interaction with protected library collections. Situated on the library's ground floor, the system consists of a transparent box which can contain actual physical objects, one side of which can be used as a screen that displays their digitized content. This interface can provide access to various digitized materials, ranging from historical manuscripts and newspapers to rare books, maps, video content, and three-dimensional objects. The system enables users to experience these protected materials in an immersive way that closely mimics natural interaction with physical items, without the possibility of damaging the items.[7]

The Magic Box is developed by CCS Content Conversion Specialists GmbH from Hamburg and uses files in METS/ALTO format to present digital objects. While the files are typically produced with docWorks, proprietary software by CCS, METS/ALTO is an open XML format maintained by the US Library of Congress. Here, METS files contain metadata about digitized images and ALTO files, as well as the document structure, while ALTO files contain digitized text that enables searching through the collection. The use of an open format ensures compatibility with digital documents created by different software solutions.[8][9]

¹https://webapp.uibk.ac.at/alo/cat/startpage.jsp

6. Donations to the Library

Additionally, we will briefly examine the virtual exhibition dedicated to valuable bequests that the library received from various donors. While this exhibition contains less digital material, it is more informative in nature. The concept and text of this virtual exhibition were created by Danica Filipović, while the idea and organization were carried out by Adam Sofronijević.[10]

Through a steady stream of donations, the University Library has acquired a large number of valuable and significant books. These donations have played an important role in gradually, but consistently, enriching and expanding the library's collection. This has been particularly evident in the years immediately following World War I, when many donors contributed, but continued in the following decades, until the present day.

The first part of the exhibition focuses on the generous donation made by Gedeon Dunđerski, a great benefactor of the University of Belgrade.[11] He came from a well-known family, graduating from the Novi Sad Gymnasium in 1892 at the age of 17, and earned his law doctorate in Budapest at the age of 21. He was involved in politics, serving as a member of the Hungarian Parliament from 1910 to 1918, and was president of Matica Srpska from 1911 to 1920. In 1923, he founded the Ikarus aircraft factory in Novi Sad, later relocating it to Zemun. He was also the head of the Novi Sad Rotary Club and a philanthropist, sending food to famine-stricken areas during hard times.

In 1929, he purchased the valuable library of Novi Sad bibliophile Petar Stojadinović for 320,000 dinars and donated it to the University Library in Belgrade. Stojadinović, the director of "Zastava" in Novi Sad, had been selling his extensive collection, which attracted international interest. Initially, the University Library lacked the funds to buy it, but Mihajlo Pupin suggested that a group of ten wealthy individuals might pool resources to purchase the library, with him as one of the contributors. Meanwhile, dr Dunderski stepped in, securing the library and ensuring it remained in Serbia.

This library is considered one of the most valuable private collections, second only to the Joca Vujić collection, with over 8,000 books, including rare 16th-century Serbian prints. The highlights include the "Gospel of Trojan Gundulić" (1552), a 1494 printed excerpt from the Cetinje Oktoih, and numerous manuscripts and periodicals that are crucial to understanding Serbian cultural and political history.

Along with the library, dr Dunđerski also donated 160 original letters from the 18th to 20th centuries, including correspondence of prominent figures such as Vuk Karadžić, Sava Tekelija, and Petar II Petrović Njegoš. This collection remains an invaluable resource for the study of Serbian history and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The collection is cataloged as PB5.

The second part of the exhibition is about Jovan "Joca" Vujić (1863–1934), an art collector, bibliophile, philanthropist, large landowner, and the founder of the first private museum in Serbia.[12] His legacy is preserved in the City Museum of Senta, Matica Srpska in Novi Sad, the University Library "Svetozar Marković," and the Association for Culture, Art, and International Cooperation "Adligat" in Belgrade.

The Joca Vujić Collection represents an extraordinary four-decade effort to gather materials vital to Serbian cultural heritage. This vast collection encompasses books, manuscripts, and rare pamphlets, complemented by an extensive archive of approximately 4,000 documents.

After years of negotiations, Joca Vujić bequeathed his entire library and archive collection to the University Library "Svetozar Marković" in 1931, with the exception of certain items he deemed insignificant or wished to keep in Senta. The collection was transferred to Belgrade in late 1932 and remains a significant archival resource of the Library.

Initially stored in a separate department, it was later moved to general storage. In May 2012, the Joca Vujić Collection was returned to a dedicated space within the Library.

The archive is meticulously organized into four sections, featuring:

- Eighteenth-century correspondence (272 letters)
- Prince Miloš Obrenović's correspondence (1,427 documents)
- The Kosta Anastasić papers from Bucharest (540 documents)
- A diverse collection of modern correspondence (approximately 2,000 documents) from notable figures including Hristofor Žefarović, Vuk Karadžić, and Jovan Jovanović Zmaj

The third part of the exhibition presents Živojin Simić (1896–1979), who was a translator from English to Serbian, an essayist, and a lexicographer. He was also the King's envoy to the National Assembly and served as the secretary of the Čupić Foundation for 40 years. He was actively involved in charitable work and published numerous books, primarily focused on Serbian grammar and grammatical teachings. The Živojin Simić Collection at the University library comprises 876 works across 2,138 volumes, encompassing literature, linguistics, and legal studies, predominantly in French. This donation was enriched by personal artifacts, including a bust of Branislava Simić Simic's child (Симићево дете), now located in the Professors' Reading Room of the Library, alongside family photographs and literary lithographs that grace the Rare Books Department corridor. A sample of documents belonging to Živojin Simić is given in Figure 7.







Figure 7. Documents of Živojin Simić

The fourth part is about perhaps one of our most treasured bequests, which came from the distinguished writer Isidora Sekulić (1877-1958).[13] Isidora Sekulić is one of Serbia's most distinguished literary figures. She earned recognition as the most erudite and intellectual Serbian woman of her time. As a polyglot and scholar well-versed in various cultures and artistic expressions, Sekulić's work as a writer, translator, and literary interpreter delved deep into the essence of Serbian vernacular and its artistic expression. She viewed language and speech as fundamental reflections of a nation's cultural identity [14]. Her academic achievements were marked by two significant appointments: she was elected as a corresponding member of the Serbian Royal Academy in February 1939, and later became the first female full member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences in November 1950. Isidora's personal library of nearly 2,000 titles spans over 3,000 volumes and includes approximately 80 different journals. The collection is particularly notable for its 170 books bearing personal inscriptions from luminaries of Serbian literature, including Ivo Andrić, Miloš Crnjanski, and Desanka Maksimović. Finally, the collection includes personal belongings of Isidora Sekulić,

several of which are shown in Figure 8. All manuscripts from Sekulić's collection have been digitized and are accessible through electronic catalog of University Library².



Figure 8. The writing desk of Isidora Sekulić

Each of these generous donations has not only preserved valuable cultural heritage but also continues to inspire and educate new generations of scholars and readers.

7. Conclusion

Virtual exhibitions at the University Library "Svetozar Marković" demonstrate successful integration of traditional cultural heritage preservation with modern digital accessibility. These exhibitions serve multiple purposes: they protect valuable artifacts through digitization, make cultural heritage accessible to a global audience, and provide interactive ways to engage with historical materials.

The Library's virtual exhibitions, ranging from biographical presentations of notable figures like Vojislav Jovanović Marambo to comprehensive digital collections of Cyrillic manuscripts and donors' legacies, showcase the institution's commitment to both preservation and innovation. The implementation of advanced technologies, such as The Magic Box system, further enhances the visitor experience by providing an immersive interaction with protected materials.

These digital initiatives have effectively democratized access to Serbian cultural heritage while ensuring the preservation of original artifacts. The success of these virtual exhibitions demonstrates how modern libraries can balance dual responsibilities of preservation and accessibility in the digital age. As the University Library approaches its centenary in 2026, these virtual exhibitions stand as a testament to its successful adaptation to technological advancement while maintaining its core mission of cultural heritage preservation and dissemination.

This model of virtual exhibitions provides a framework for other cultural institutions seeking to enhance their digital presence while preserving their physical collections. It shows how traditional cultural institutions can embrace digital transformation without compromising their fundamental role as guardians of cultural heritage.

²http://ubsm.bg.ac.rs/cirilica/zbirka/knjiga/rukopisi-isidore-sekulic

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