

Рубрика культура

Photographers of People

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When dealing with the protection of Roma rights, you get to know a lot, not only about Roma themselves — such lively and unusual —, but also about the creative people who are interested in them: painters, photographers and writers, about those, who strive to express the attractiveness of the Roma world in their own works once they fall under its fascination. Of course, something from such a „creative“ approach to the Roma theme has little to do with the protection of human rights — art, just as literature, admits the possibility of distortions, exaggerations, and inaccuracies, whereas in research and analytical work, they are unacceptable. But there are genres also in the arts (or on the boundary between art and documental reflection) enabling to show reality with extreme precision, even if it is through the prism of the artist. This very genre is photography.

In the latest years, a lot of artists turn to colourful pictures of Roma life. In the modern world, which is becoming more unified, the traditional Roma settlements seem to be a great source for new and interesting images. But not everyone who comes to the settlement with a camera is able to understand and express in his own work something more than just the mere curiosity and amusement of a stranger. The Roma world is complex — it has its own greatness, and its own tragic peculiarities. In order to be able to express its multitude and unity, its joyful vividness and dark misfortune, its refusal to obey, and inevitable dependence on the people around, one needs to know a lot, to see and feel.

The life of Roma looks very different depending on whether we see it from the “outside” through the eyes of the stranger, or from the “inside” — as it is seen by Roma themselves. It is well known that the opinion of the uninitiated is often predefined from childhood by prejudices, intolerance towards alien customs, ethical and aesthetical views. Not surprisingly, a lot of non-Roma people think of Roma clothes as too flashy and vulgar along with the blatant jewellery of Roma women, and the behaviour of the settlement Roma on the streets of the city causes condemnation and protest. But also the „internal“ look is not free of the same prejudice — the supporters of the “own conceptions” often do not wish to accept any unusual kind of work, house or traditional clothing as suitable to Roma people. The verdict “We don’t do it” often means a condemnation and a refusal to accept people who are different.

Only those who possess a good knowledge and a broad scope are able to understand that the world in itself, and the world of the Roma in particular, is extremely diverse, rich, and original; that different life conditions and circumstances among different nations were forming different habits during centuries of wandering, and contributed to the development of new occupations, acquaintance with other customs, and adoption of other religions. Therefore, the genuine photo-researchers spend a lot of time, travelling in Roma settlements and stationary stops, not only owing to take kilometres of film and amaze the world with the colourful pictures, but also to better get to know, see, and hear how Roma live in a modern world.

The artists express their personal view and understanding not only by taking pictures of Roma, but also by taking photos of where they went and what they put the value on. Some of them are shocked by the poverty, desolation, and hopelessness of Roma settlements in Central Europe. The art works of the Hungarian photo-artist Balasz Gardi gives exactly such impressions of the artist — this is also a fervent reproach of those who remain indifferent to the sufferings of Roma, to a hard reality and the dark sides of the lives of people who are living in a state of utmost need, and an expressive, true protest of the conscious and merciful person.

Another completely different approach to the photo-story about the life of Roma is specific for Joakim Eskildsen — a Danish artist who lives in Finland and takes photographs of Roma around the world. If Balasz notices everything sad and tragic, Joakim is driven towards the vividness, naturalness, and solemnity of the Roma — not without reason, he for the motto of his Roma project chose the words of Roma school kids of the Peri settlement: “Che mundró o miró— So beautiful the world”. The exhibition of his works has been opened in the beginning of 2007 in Helsinki, and soon

his wonderful photo-shots will be shown to the people in other Scandinavian countries — Sweden and Denmark. The seven years of work by Joakim and author Cia Rinne has finally been recognised, as them being photographers and experts, by the modern arts as well as by defenders of Roma rights, and representatives of the Roma community — all those who appreciate the documentary and enlightening importance of the project of Joakim and Cia.

During many years, Cia and Joakim were travelling across different countries, religiously collecting data about local Roma, their history, traditions, and way of life. Cia, who speaks different European languages, was conducting long discussions with the inhabitants of Roma settlements, recording their stories and her own impressions from what she saw and heard. Joakim was diligently taking photos. Genuinely interested in everything that has to do with Roma, Cia and Joakim did not miss the possibility to talk with any specialist – anthropologist, linguist, historian, or to get to know every new publication, to learn something about the arts of the Roma or about the works of those who deal with them — were it painting, literature, or journalism.

Their work from the beginning was having a concept, and they did not just go somewhere (Roma can be found everywhere!), but rather to those countries, where, according to their idea, there was something principally new and important. The exhibition, called „The Roma Journeys“, depicts this approach — by going from one hall to another, the viewer gradually gets to know the figures of the same but at the same time different people; there are nomads of India — in turbans, with the desert in the background, and the Central-European Roma from poor villages in Hungary and Romania as well as inhabitants of carton cities in Greece, caravans in France, and “tabors” in Russia. The visual impressions of the visitor are accompanied by the soft music — on the journeys, Cia recorded a lot of different Roma songs and melodies — which were processed by the composer (the brother of the photographer) Sebastian Eskildsen, and have become an additional decoration of the exhibition. In the centre of the hall, visitors could get to know the main result of the work done by Cia and Joakim — a model of the future book (that is currently being prepared to be published in Germany). The book represents the big photo-album with short essays, written by Cia. When reading short but precise and expressive sketches, you get amazed by the fact of how Cia Rinne could grasp the very core of what was happening around, understand the specifics of local life, and deliver it in simple and comprehensible words for people who do not know anything about Roma, even by staying only for shorter periods in the Roma settlement.

Several years ago, we had the chance to be the guides for Cia and Joakim on their trip within the North-West of Russia; we were travelling together in the Leningrad, Pskov and Novgorod districts. By working many years in this region, we knew very well the whole complexity and uncommonness of the conditions of different Roma on our part. But how to explain this to foreigners who were for the first time in Russia? It came out that people, who can see, hear, and compare, who have seen a lot and do not try to declare their knowledge as absolute, ready for perception of the new information, could understand our reality without any help from the side, and organically integrate it into the overall picture of the life of Roma.

Those who happened to work with Eskildsen could see the little books which are now displayed in the showcase of the exhibition hall, the first unique “publications” of their book — collections of photographs in different formats, bound by Joakim himself. These books keep the traces of hands of thousand people — men and women, children and elderly, all those, who living in wagons and tents (in Romania, the Kelderari-Roma are still travelling this way), in cosy Finnish houses, and in compact “tabors” on the edges around Saint Petersburg could see Joakim’s photographs and curiously look at the faces of Roma from different countries which seemed familiar. This is also one of the aspects of the awareness raising project of Joakim and Cia — owing to their work, not only the non-Roma world can learn more about the Roma and understand them better, but also Roma themselves could hear, sometimes for the first time, about other Roma groups; they had the opportunity to touch on a kindred, but yet little known culture.

The publication of the book by J. Eskildsen and C. Rinne will definitely become an important event for all those who love and value the multitude of life, the beauty of people and countries, and the joy of knowing.