

Corona Puppet

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Fig. 1: Collection: Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations – Mucem, Marseille; Object number: not accessioned yet; Name: ‘Corona’ puppet; Place & Community Details: France, Val de Marne, Chevilly-Larue; Materials: recycled materials; Collector: Mucem; Date collected: 2020. © Sylvian Maillet – Mucem.



On 20 April 2020, France was locked down for a month, and Mucem (the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations) launched a call for donations of objects during the lockdown period. The participatory collection entitled *Vivre au*

temps du confinement ('Living through lockdown') invited people to send in 'objects or documents that symbolize, embody, or express what lockdown means for you every day. What objects do you feel represent the situation in which you are living, working, spending time, or teaching your children? What objects reflect how you organise your outings and relationships with others, near or far, at home or outdoors, in France or overseas? Mucem is looking for objects that have become central to our lives in lockdown, whether expected or unusual, official or homemade, build connections or express isolation, show the remarkable solidarity and support expressed or, on the contrary, movements of rejection and fear...', as phrased in the official invitation published on the Mucem website and spread on social networks. Proposals were required to include one or more photograph(s), including some, if possible, of the object in the environment in which it was used or made, and a few lines explaining the reason for the donation and the importance of the object in the context of the time. By the summer, the museum had received over six hundred proposals. They are still being analyzed, and some of them will enter the museum's collections.

One of these donated objects includes this home-made puppet made from recycled materials, which might serve as a mascot for the collection. Its donor, a father locked down with his wife and 3-year-old boy, presented it as follows: '[This puppet] has gone through different versions so far and will no doubt continue to evolve or find new uses before the end of the lockdown... Initially, it was headless, and one of its arms was used to hold a Corona beer bottle cap for a head. So I called it Corona [...]' He explains how the puppet, in the hands of his son, ended up needing multiple repairs and improvements with whatever was available (like a short-lived eggshell head which was ultimately replaced by a rather more solid pebble). The wooden figure also became an educational tool for the little boy who couldn't go to school, and carried a small sign with the day's date, little messages for the household or others when photographs of the puppet were taken, or when it was exhibited via a video conference. The puppet thereby entered the homes of friends and family from whom the family was separated by lockdown. 'For me, this object will always be a symbol of my lockdown. In normal times I would never have "wasted" time making something like this because I like to go outside in the woods or countryside when I have free time.'

This example shows how people who participated in the collection also ended up sharing their feelings and some of their personal stories when describing the objects they proposed to the museum and their reasons for doing so. From the very first proposals we received, we were struck by the very intimate nature of what was being said. This phenomenon, undoubtedly facilitated by the relatively anonymous character of the museum to which people were writing, was almost universally observed as proposals arrived. It repeatedly gave rise to honest discussions with those making the proposals as they added to their initial words. In an undoubtedly modest, yet tangible, way, the museum played its social role through a very tense period, which

created a new kind of relationship with the public. The arrival of the Corona puppet at the museum was an opportunity for further communication. When I opened the package, I found a little letter with it saying that the little boy had grown attached to Corona and that he would love to receive a photograph of it in its new environment. So, I quickly took a picture of the little chap on my desk next to a pile of books and sent the image with a brief comment: 'Corona has arrived safely. He hasn't been able to enjoy the sea or the city, but he is doing very well in the comfortable offices of the Mucem Conservation Centre. He has even found something to read.'

Beyond the anecdote, this object and the *Vivre au Confinement* collection represents a new way for Mucem to connect with its audiences and a profound shift in our way of working. The collection helped us become a more *caring museum* by testing a more *inclusive* acquisition procedure. The museum tried to implement a form of *cultural mediation* suitable for the crisis we were experiencing by leaving space for expression and discussion. The project aimed to add to the museum collection while also helping participants *feel better*, and still remaining aligned with the means and objectives of a museum of society – investigating contemporary life, gathering testimonies, and collecting the tangible heritage of our time.

Fig. 2: Corona on arrival at the Mucem; July 2020; The sign says: 'I'm having a great holiday in Marseille. Love to all, Corona'; © Mucem.

