

Vaccinations with a dose of art

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The Bavarian town of Straubing, located on the banks of the Danube, is proud of its rich history. Almost 2000 years ago, the large European river formed the northern border of the Roman Empire and was the main transport route to supply the Roman frontier troops. The Romans maintained military installations and forts in the area for around four centuries. The core of today's town was founded 800 years ago. Since then, the city has developed into a modern business location. The historical heritage is the foundation of the city's cultural life, which the city administration promotes in many areas.

For 70 years, the visual artists of the town and district have been organized in an association, the Gemeinschaft Bildender Künstler Straubing e.V. (GBK), which presents its works twice a year to the public: The summer exhibition takes place in August during the 10-day

Gäuboden Folk Festival. During this time, numerous visitors from near and far flock to the city. Art lovers take the opportunity to visit the traditional GBK exhibition. The winter exhibition begins on December 27 and ends 10 days later.

The city administration opens usually one of its beautiful halls for the GBK group exhibitions: The late-Gothic Knights' Hall of the 15th-century ducal castle or the renovated Salzstadel, a former service building attached to the castle. In the Middle Ages, it served the lucrative salt trade, at that time a ducal privilege.

The Straubing artists prepared their winter exhibition in the Salzstadel last fall as usual, with all required hygienic measures in place during this pandemic time. But the government tightened its lockdown rules towards the year end. Finally the prepared exhibition had to be cancelled for good.

During the same period, the federal

government, together with state and district administrators, initiated the establishment of local vaccination centers. First vaccines were expected and it was crucial to immunize as much of the population as possible quickly and efficiently. In a great rush, 440 vaccination centers were set up throughout Germany, one of them in Straubing, which was to go into operation at the end of December.

Clever minds in the Straubing artist community were not content with the situation. Since the spring of 2020, the pandemic implied for visual artists the closure of galleries, cancellation of exhibitions and loss of income. Just during the weeks when the GBK winter exhibition was being prepared, the city and district administration were working on the installation of the regional vaccination center in a municipal trade fair hall. Why not move the canceled exhibition to the center, where over 1,000 city and district citizens were to receive their vaccinations each week? The artists approached the city and district administration and were listened to. The proposal to enhance the waiting areas and immunization stations with artwork was accepted, to the artists' delight.

Within a few days, the group of artists got all the works, paintings, graphics, sculptures, and objects into

the vaccination center, arranged sculptures and hung the paintings in time for the opening at the end of December 2020.

Erich Gruber, president of the GBK, states, "The vaccination center is not a comparable environment for art like the representative rooms in the ducal castle. But the chance to introduce our work to several tens of thousands of visitors who have never visited our exhibitions before, seemed unique to us. The mayor of the city and the district administration were receptive to our proposal and supported it at short notice."

The Straubing artists' initiative caught the interest of dpa, Germany's largest press agency, which reported on it in its network. Numerous regional, national and even foreign media, daily newspapers, TV and radio stations, carried the story in their publications. The action became a PR coup, the most extensive coverage ever given to a GBK exhibition. Within weeks, the idea inspired artist associations and municipalities nationwide to copy it. In several other cities, paintings, sculptures and art objects now decorate the premises of vaccination centers.

The vaccination sites are expected to remain in place throughout 2021. Close to 100,000 people on average are expected to turn up at each center for the inoculation, a huge audience and opportunities for the fine artists to connect with new interested individuals and art lovers.



Paintings in the Vaccination Centre - Waiting Area



Art in the Vaccination Cubicle



Sculptures in the Vaccination Centre Straubing



Knights' Hall in the Straubing Ducal Castle