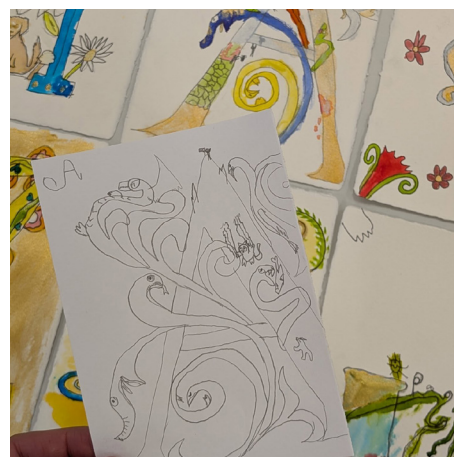


Cultural Laboratory 2025/2026 – GA.DGII.708.2025
Methodological Manual of Selected Lessons



* Regionální muzeum Žďár

* Knihovna Matěje Josefa Sychry

Cultural Laboratory and the Exhibition *Secrets of European Gothic*

The Cultural Laboratory club, implemented in cooperation between the Regional Museum of the Town of Žďár nad Sázavou and the Matěj Josef Sychra Library, represents an educational platform where, for the third consecutive year, children explore cultural heritage through inquiry-based, creative, and experiential activities. Under the guidance of educators Martina Schutová, Magda Smejkalová, and Soňa Janáčková, an open space is created for experimentation, sharing, and the development of personal perspectives on history and its relevance in the present day.

A group of 15 children meets regularly with the educators every Monday from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. throughout the school year. Their stable base consists of the premises of the Žďár museum and library; however, as part of the programme they also take part in numerous excursions, not only to cultural and educational institutions but also to heritage sites.

The third year of the project was supported by a European grant within the framework of the European Heritage Days initiative, which enabled the involvement of experts from various institutions as well as international collaboration. The Cultural Laboratory thus connects local experience with the broader European context of cultural heritage. The main outcome is the exhibition *Secrets of European Gothic*, which combines expert historical interpretation with children's perspectives. Visitors can see authentic collection objects alongside original works created by the children—such as frescoes, illuminations, madonnas, or exhibition installations. The exhibition demonstrates that Gothic culture is not merely a historical period, but also an inspiring source for contemporary creation and intergenerational dialogue.

The opportunity to obtain the grant arose from the long-term and systematic involvement of the town of Žďár nad Sázavou in the international Cistercianscapes network, which connects a total of 17 Cistercian monastic landscapes across five European countries and highlights their fundamental importance in shaping European cultural identity. This network, based on the principles of cross-border cooperation and the sharing of cultural heritage, was awarded the prestigious European Heritage Label in April 2024. This designation is granted by the European Commission to sites of exceptional significance for the history and integration of Europe. Receiving this recognition not only confirmed the uniqueness of the Žďár monastic landscape within the European context, but also opened new opportunities for international cooperation and funding of educational and cultural projects.

Collaboration with other holders of the European Heritage Label has also significantly influenced the implementation of the Cultural Laboratory project, with the Slovak initiative Gothic Route becoming its international partner. This project focuses on the presentation and preservation of unique Gothic wall paintings in the Gemer region and represents a parallel to the Žďár experience in interpreting cultural heritage. The connection between these two locations—the Cistercian landscape of the Žďár region and the painted Gothic churches of Gemer—enabled the sharing of methodologies, inspiration, and specific educational approaches. As a result, the project gained not only an international dimension but also a deeper conceptual level, reflecting the historical reality that Gothic art and culture naturally transcended regional boundaries and formed a shared European cultural space.

Methodology and Educational Strategy of the Cultural Laboratory

The Cultural Laboratory represents a thoughtfully designed and long-term educational model based on the integration of inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, and experiential pedagogy. Its methodology is grounded in the belief that children acquire knowledge most effectively when they are actively involved in the learning process as its co-creators. Throughout the year-long programme, participants do not act as passive recipients of information, but as researchers, interpreters, and creators who, through their own questions, experiments, and creative activities, gradually discover cultural heritage and its significance in the present.

A fundamental pillar of the educational strategy is the work with a stable group of approximately 15 children, which has proven to be optimal for combining an individualised approach with effective group dynamics. This number enables the teaching team to respond sensitively to the needs of individual participants, support their personal development, and at the same time foster cooperative learning within smaller working teams. The stability of the group creates a safe environment based on trust, sharing, and open communication, which is essential for the development of critical thinking, the ability to formulate one's own opinions, and the willingness to reflect on one's own work.

From a methodological perspective, the programme is structured as a long-term project aimed at a specific outcome—an exhibition that represents a synthesis of acquired knowledge and children's creative outputs. This framework makes it possible to systematically develop competencies across several domains: cognitive (understanding historical context), creative (artistic and interpretative work), social (collaboration and communication), and presentation (sharing results with the public). Individual lessons combine various pedagogical approaches—from guided discovery and field-based learning to “learning by doing” and multisensory learning—and connect expert interpretation with practical experience.

An important component of the educational strategy is systematic reflection, which takes place both at the level of individual activities and the project as a whole. Children are encouraged to evaluate their own learning process, share their experiences, and become aware of connections between individual topics. Reflection strengthens their ability for critical thinking and supports a deeper understanding of the content.

A specific strength of the Cultural Laboratory lies in its interdisciplinary nature and the involvement of experts from various fields, enabling children to gain a comprehensive view of cultural heritage as a living and multi-layered phenomenon. The connection of historical knowledge with artistic, musical, and craft-based experience leads to authentic understanding of the topic and allows children to create their own interpretations, which are subsequently presented to the public.

Overall, the methodology of the Cultural Laboratory can be characterised as an open, participatory, and process-oriented approach that emphasises long-term continuity, individual development, and collective creation. It is precisely the combination of a stable group, a well-designed project structure, and an emphasis on experiential learning that creates the conditions for deep and meaningful education, the outcome of which is not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of key competencies and a relationship to cultural heritage.

Profiles of Individual Lessons

15 September 2025 — Introduction & Framing of the Topic

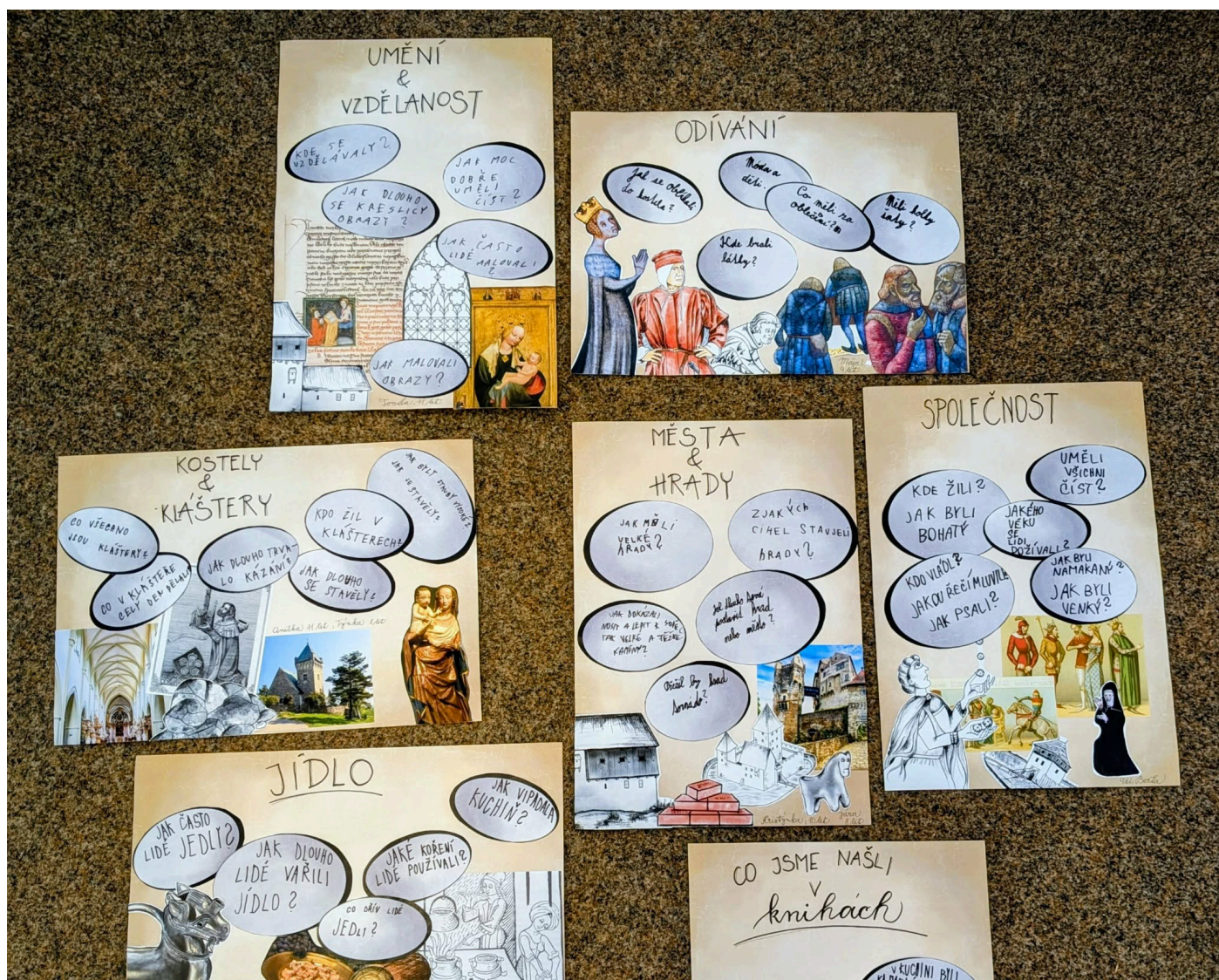
Teaching team: Martina Schutová (educator and historian, Regional Museum of the Town of Žďár nad Sázavou), Magda Smejkalová (educator and visual artist, Regional Museum of the Town of Žďár nad Sázavou), Soňa Janáčková (librarian and educator, Matěj Josef Sychra Library, Žďár nad Sázavou)

Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: The introductory session focused on opening the topic of Gothic culture and jointly establishing the direction of the year-long programme. The children first introduced themselves through the activity “three dots,” in which they shared what they already knew about the topic and what they would like to find out, thereby naturally activating their prior knowledge and motivation.

This was followed by a brainstorming session during which participants wrote down their ideas on sticky notes—topics included life in a medieval town, monasteries, knights, food, and clothing. These inputs were subsequently sorted into thematic categories, forming the basic structure of the future exhibition.

The methodology of the session was based on the principles of participatory learning, cooperation, and inquiry-based learning. The children formulated their own questions (e.g., “How was a Gothic cathedral built?” or “What did monks eat?”) and divided roles within their teams (speaker, recorder, coordinator).

Outcome: a board of research questions, division into working groups, and an initial draft of the exhibition scenari



22 September 2025 — Archive Excursion

Teaching team: Vít Křesadlo (Director of the District State Archive Žďár nad Sázavou)

Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: The lesson took place in the form of an excursion to an archive, where the children became acquainted with authentic historical sources and their importance for understanding the past. The introductory part explained what an archive is, what types of documents it preserves, and why it is important to handle them carefully and with respect.

- Subsequently, the children worked in groups at three thematic stations:
- at the documents station, they attempted to read fragments of old texts and search for specific information (such as names, dates, or places),
- at the seals station, they examined their shapes, symbolism, and function as a means of verifying the authenticity of documents,
- at the school documents or inventories station, they explored aspects of everyday life of past generations.

For example, at one station they identified initials or simple Latin expressions; elsewhere they compared differences between various types of scripts or estimated the meaning of heraldic symbols.

The methodology was based on inquiry-based learning and teamwork—the children completed specific tasks, shared hypotheses, and recorded their findings in worksheets, thereby acquiring basic principles of the work of historians and archivists. An important component was also reflection, during which they became aware of how difficult it is to interpret historical sources and how valuable original documents are.

Outcome: so-called “discovery cards” summarising the collected information, as well as the first concrete answers to the research questions formulated in the introductory session and further developed throughout the project.



6 October 2025 — Monastic Books & Illuminated Initials

Teaching team: Lucie Ó'Súilleabháin (bookbinding conservator and educator at Vyšší Brod Monastery)

Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: The lesson introduced children to the world of medieval books, monastic libraries, and scriptoria as places where some of the most valuable artefacts of their time were created. At the beginning, the children became familiar with the process of manuscript production—from the making of parchment and the preparation of ink to the writing and decoration of the text—and learned how demanding and time-consuming this work was.

The instructor complemented the explanation with specific examples and demonstrations, enabling the children to better imagine the daily work of medieval scribes and illuminators. They also drew inspiration from authentic historical models they had encountered during excursions or through reproductions, perceiving the richness of ornamentation, colours, and symbolism of initials.

Subsequently, they created their own illuminated initials—some following historical patterns, while others developed original designs inspired by natural motifs, animals, or imaginative elements.

The methodology combined expert explanation with practical artistic activity and an emphasis on experiential learning, allowing children to understand the complexity and value of handwritten books through their own creative work. Reflection was also an important component, during which they shared their experiences and compared different approaches to creation.

Outcome: original illuminated initials that became part of the exhibition, along with a deeper understanding of the significance of books as precious carriers of knowledge and cultural memory in the Middle Ages.



13 October 2025 — *Basilica Excursion*

Teaching team: Adéla Tlustošová (educator, Parish of Žďár nad Sázavou)

Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: The lesson took place in the authentic environment of the Basilica of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and St. Nicholas in Žďár nad Sázavou, where children explored Gothic architecture directly in situ and learned to perceive it as a historical source. Using prepared worksheets, they identified specific architectural elements such as pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and preserved wall paintings, recording their observations through drawings and short notes.

The programme also included an introduction to the history of the monastery and its founding family, including reference to the chronicle *Chronici Domus Sarensis* associated with the figure of Jindřich Řezbář. In this way, the children connected their visual perception of the space with historical context and the story of the site.

The methodology employed guided discovery and field-based learning—the children were not passive listeners, but actively searched for information, interpreted the space, and discussed its meaning. Emphasis was placed on the ability to “read” architecture, perceive both detail and overall composition, and identify connections between the function and form of architectural elements.

Outcome: worksheets enriched with drawings and notes, which became an important basis for further development of exhibition topics—for example, in the creation of profiles of the monastery’s founders or the interpretation of historical sources.



3 November 2025 — Fresco Painting

Teaching team: Jaroslava Neubauerová (educator, historian, and lecturer of the Gothic Route project)

Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: The lesson focused on the technique of fresco painting as one of the key artistic forms of Gothic art. The children were first introduced to the historical context—where frescoes were located, what function they served in sacred spaces, and how they were created. They were inspired by specific examples from the Slovak region of Gemer, as well as paintings they had seen during excursions in the basilica or in photographs and reproductions.

They then experienced the creative process themselves: working with damp plaster onto which they applied pigments prepared from coloured powders. They had to respond to the time constraints of the technique, as painting must be done quickly while the surface is still wet. They selected motifs—such as fragments of figures, ornaments, or parts of scenes—and adapted them to their abilities and the format.

The methodology was based on the principle of “learning by doing,” emphasising direct experience and experimentation, allowing children to understand both the technique and the demands of fresco painting through their own creative work. Reflection was also an important component, during which children shared what they found successful and what they found challenging.

Outcome: original fresco fragments that were installed in the exhibition and together formed a visual whole inspired by Gothic wall painting, while at the same time reflecting the individual artistic expression of each participant.



24 November 2025 — Medieval Music

Teaching team: Petr Hudec (methodologist of educational programmes, National Heritage Institute)

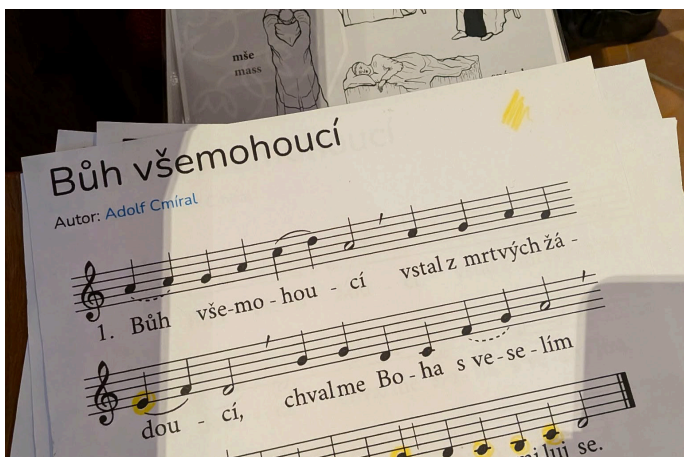
Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: The lesson took place in the authentic setting of a church and focused on medieval sacred music, particularly Gregorian chant and the musical culture of Cistercian monasteries. The children were first introduced to the role music played in the daily life of monks—as part of prayer, the rhythm of the day, and spiritual practice.

They then actively engaged in singing simple chant melodies, performed the well-known children’s song Monks Are Quiet, and one of the oldest European sacred songs, Almighty God, which they also tried singing using a modified colour-coded musical notation. Guitar accompaniment was provided by the instructor Petr Hudec, who also guided the children in perceiving rhythm, melody, and collective harmony.

The programme also included playing handbells, through which the children practically experienced the principles of melody and cooperation within a musical ensemble.

The methodology combined experiential and multisensory learning—the children not only listened to music but actively created it, connecting auditory perception with movement and visual orientation in musical notation, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of its function through direct experience. The atmosphere of the space was also an important element, enhancing the experience and helping the children to empathise with the medieval context.

Outcome: a musical component of the exhibition, including the possibility to play a sacred melody on handbells and listen to recordings, as well as a deeper understanding of the role of music in medieval society.



29 November 2025 — Excursion to Olomouc

Teaching team: Hana Lamatová (educator, Archdiocesan Museum Olomouc)

Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: The excursion enabled children to explore Gothic architecture within a broader geographical and cultural context and to situate their existing knowledge within the real environment of significant monuments.

The morning programme took place at the Archdiocesan Museum Olomouc, where the children participated in an educational workshop focused on Gothic and Romanesque elements, working with exhibits, and interpreting historical contexts. They subsequently visited St. Wenceslas Cathedral and, after lunch, the Church of St. Maurice, where an engaging interpretation was provided by a local priest. The children were particularly impressed by the monumentality of the space, the characteristic features of Gothic architecture, and the striking stained-glass windows, which became an important source of inspiration for their subsequent artistic work.

During the excursion, participants recorded observations, sketched details, and compared architectural elements with those they had already encountered in Žďár nad Sázavou. These experiences were later reflected in the exhibition—for example, in stained-glass designs or in the installation dedicated to Madonnas, which gained a prominent position in the exhibition space.

The methodology employed field-based learning, guided observation, and comparison, encouraging children to actively compare different monuments and identify connections between them, with an emphasis on personal discovery and experience.

Outcome: inspiration for further artistic and conceptual work, as well as a deeper understanding of Gothic architecture as a living and diverse cultural phenomenon.



1 December 2025 — Glass Painting: Gothic Rose Window

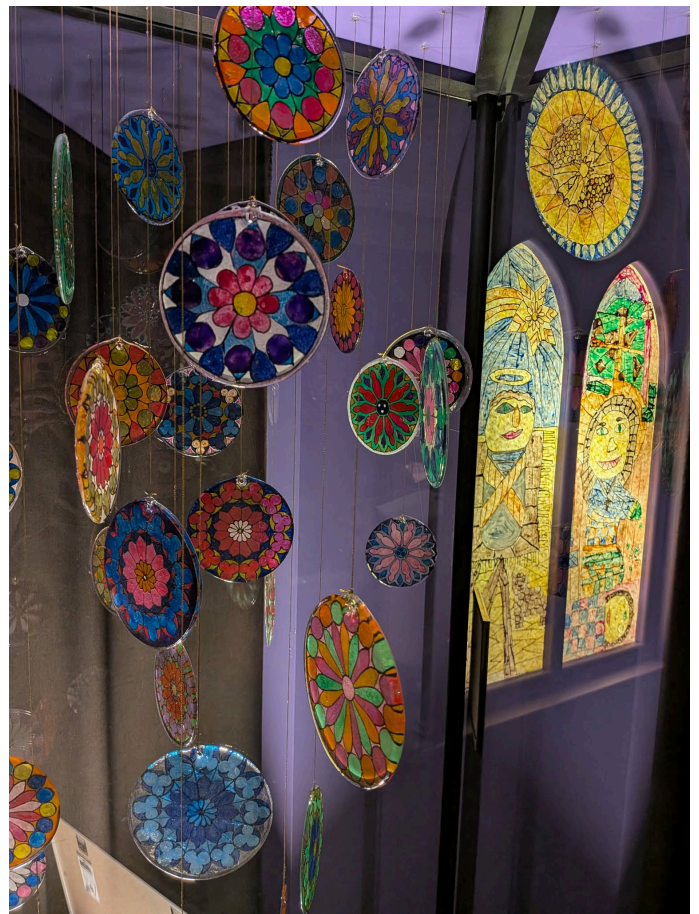
Teaching team: Dagmar Vernerová (glass artist and educator, Karlov Glassworks)

Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: The lesson focused on the artistic interpretation of Gothic rose windows and the use of glass as one of the characteristic elements of Gothic architecture. The children were first introduced to the significance of stained glass and rose windows in cathedrals—their function, symbolism, and the aesthetic effects of light and colour in sacred spaces.

They then worked with prepared glass plates, onto which they painted their own motifs inspired by Gothic rose windows using special paints. Some participants followed geometric patterns, while others enriched their designs with figurative or ornamental elements. An important part of the process was experimenting with colour transparency and layering, enabling the children to understand how light influences the final visual effect.

The methodology combined theoretical explanation with practical artistic work and visual analysis of historical models. Emphasis was placed on observing detail, working with colour, and understanding stained glass as a medium.

Outcome: original glass artworks—rose window motifs—which were subsequently incorporated into the exhibition installation and contributed to creating a visually compelling environment inspired by Gothic interiors.



12 & 17 January 2026 — Art Workshop (Madonnas)

Teaching team: Kristýna Hamáková (visual artist and illustrator, author of the project *Cat in the Bush*)

Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: This series of two consecutive lessons focused on the interpretation of Gothic Madonnas as one of the key motifs of medieval art. The children drew on visual experiences gained during previous excursions (e.g., in the basilica or during visits to other sacred sites) and actively sought inspiration in books and online resources. They familiarised themselves with different types of Madonnas, their symbolism, gestures, and artistic representation.

Based on this research, they created their own original interpretations, combining traditional iconography with a personal perspective. They worked on large-format cardboard surfaces, using spray paint, soft pastels, and other artistic techniques. A distinctive feature was also the use of gilding, which the children particularly enjoyed and which resulted in striking contrasts between surface, colour, and light inspired by medieval aesthetics. An exceptional outcome was, among others, a large-scale “Strakonice Madonna” measuring 186 cm in height, which became a dominant feature of the exhibition.

The methodology supported experimentation, individual expression, and the ability to reinterpret historical models in a contemporary visual language. Emphasis was placed on the creative process, working with inspiration, and the development of visual literacy.

Outcome: original Madonnas installed alongside authentic museum artefacts, creating a strong dialogue between historical objects and contemporary children’s interpretation.



26 January 2026 — Archaeology and Crafts

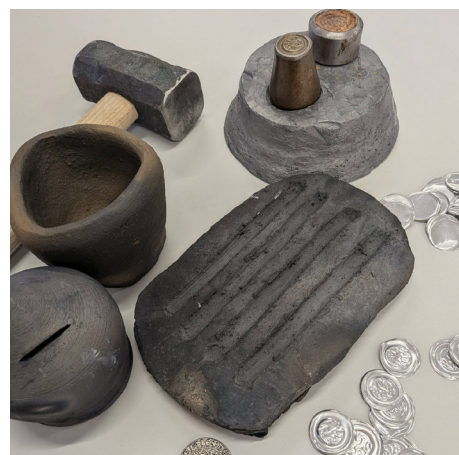
Teaching team: Kateřina Těsnohlídková (archaeologist, founder of the project Old Pots focused on experimental archaeology)

Theme, activities, methodology, and outcomes: The lesson focused on introducing medieval crafts and everyday life through hands-on activities. The children were first introduced to the role of crafts in medieval society and the skills essential for everyday life—from pottery production and coin minting to textile work.

They then tried the individual activities themselves: modelling simple clay figurines inspired by historical toys (such as horses or dolls), minting their own bracteates as an example of medieval coinage, and learning the principles of tablet weaving while creating decorative bands. During the process, they explored material properties and technological procedures, comparing them with modern production methods.

The methodology was based on the principle of “learning by doing,” i.e., learning through direct experience, enabling children to acquire knowledge through their own activity. Emphasis was placed on connecting theoretical context with practical experience and on developing manual skills. Reflection was also included, during which children shared what they found challenging and what interested them most.

Outcome: replicas of medieval artefacts created by the participants, which became part of the exhibition, along with a deeper understanding of material culture and everyday life in the Middle Ages.



30–31 January 2026 — Scenography Workshop

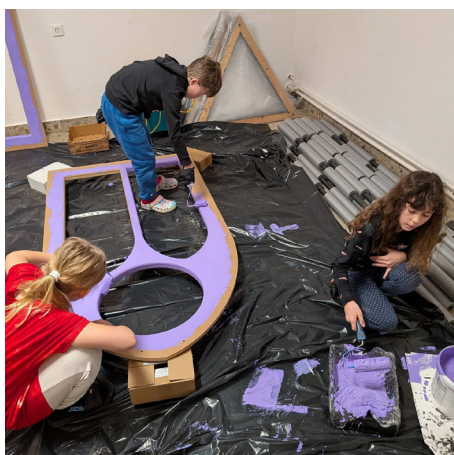
Teaching team: Lukáš Urbanec (designer a scenographer)

Téma, aktivity, metodika a výstupy: This intensive two-day workshop focused on the design and realisation of the exhibition space, representing a transition from individual outputs to their meaningful arrangement within a shared exhibition concept. The children worked with designs developed throughout the project and, together with the instructor, transformed them into concrete forms—designing and creating stained-glass windows, preparing installation elements, and contributing to the creation of a landscape theatre and other interactive parts of the exhibition.

They were involved not only in artistic but also technical implementation: painting, gluing, drilling, screwing, and assembling individual components, thereby gaining experience with the real process of exhibition installation. The work also included ongoing consultations of design proposals (e.g., landscape composition or spatial arrangement), through which the children reflected on both the functionality and aesthetics of the final outcome.

The methodology was based on the principles of project-based learning and teamwork—each participant had a defined role and responsibility, while communication, planning, and the ability to respond to emerging situations were essential. Emphasis was placed on combining creativity with practical skills and on understanding how an exhibition is created as a whole.

Outcome: the completion of installation elements and the final form of the exhibition, reflecting the collaborative work of the children and their ability to translate ideas into a physical space.



2 March 2026 — Opening of the Exhibition *Secrets of European Gothic*

Teaching team and Co-authors: Martina Schutová, Magda Smejkalová, Soňa Janáčková, children from the Cultural Laboratory group (co-authors and exhibition guides), Michaela Marková (educator at SVČ Active Žďár nad Sázavou – leader of the Little MasterChef club, which provided themed refreshments), the band Loucká struna

Téma, aktivity, metodika a výstupy: The ceremonial opening represented the culmination of the year-long work and at the same time a specific form of an educational session in which the children took on the role of active guides and interpreters of cultural heritage. The programme was conceived as a lively and multisensory experience—visitors were not only able to view the exhibition, but also to experience it through music, taste, and personal interpretation.

The children themselves guided visitors through the exhibition, presented its individual sections, and shared their own experiences from its creation, thereby learning to communicate the results of their work in an authentic and accessible way. The atmosphere was enhanced by live music inspired by the Middle Ages and themed refreshments—ranging from modern interpretations to reconstructions of historical dishes prepared over an open fire, such as gnocchi or flatbreads, which introduced visitors to aspects of everyday medieval cuisine.

The methodology of this “session” was based on the principles of experiential pedagogy, the presentation of project-based learning outcomes, and learning through sharing. The children assumed responsibility for communicating the content and took on the roles of both guides and co-creators of a cultural event. An important element was also the integration of different sensory dimensions (visual, auditory, and taste), which supported a deeper understanding of the theme of Gothic culture.

Outcome: not only the installation and opening of the exhibition itself, but above all the strengthening of children’s competencies in presentation, collaboration, and reflection on their own work. The opening also confirmed the ability to connect expert interpretation with children’s perspectives and to create a dynamic dialogue between the past and the present.



Conclusion

The Cultural Laboratory represents a comprehensive educational model that combines expert knowledge with creativity, personal experience, and active participation. Throughout the entire programme, children do not act merely as passive recipients of information, but as researchers, creators, and co-creators of a shared outcome.

Through collaboration with experts from various disciplines—from historians, archaeologists, and heritage professionals to visual artists, musicians, and designers—participants are introduced to cultural heritage in its full breadth and interconnectedness. This interdisciplinary approach enables them to perceive history not simply as a collection of facts, but as a living and evolving phenomenon that can be interpreted in multiple ways.

An important role in the entire process is also played by the emphasis on experiential and project-based learning. Children acquire knowledge through their own activities, sharing, and reflection. Gradually, they learn to formulate questions, seek answers, collaborate within a team, and present the results of their work to the public. In doing so, they develop not only their knowledge of the Middle Ages and Gothic culture, but also key competencies essential for further education and personal development.

Tajemství Evropské gotiky
hlaselem historie i dětskýma očima

KDY: 3. března – 31. května 2026
denně mimo pondělí 9.00 - 12.00 a 12.30 - 17.00

KDE: Regionální muzeum města Žďáru nad Sázavou, Tvrz 8

Na výstavě objevíte gotiku očima historie i dětské zvědavosti!

Čekají vás autentické exponáty, historické příběhy i hravé výtvarné pohledy dětí z Kulturní laboratoře. Na výstavě objevíte mnoho zážitků – středověký šatník a fotokoutek, linoryt gotických motivů, stavbu krajinného divadla.

Přijďte se inspirovat barvami, symboly a příběhy středověku, který rozhodně není zaprášený!

Výstava byla podpořena z projektu Cultural Laboratory: Exploring Gothic Heritage
Kód projektu: GA.DGII.708.2025

Logos: European Commission, COUNCIL OF EUROPE, OZNAČENÍ EVROPSKÉ DĚDICTVÍ, Regionální muzeum Žďár, * Knihovna Matěje Josefa Sychry

The exhibition *Secrets of European Gothic* represents the culmination of this process. It is not merely a presentation of results, but above all a distinctive outcome of collaborative work that connects expert interpretation with children's perspectives. It demonstrates that cultural heritage can be shared, open, and inspiring—that history is not a closed chapter of the past, but a living story that can be continuously rediscovered, interpreted, and passed on.

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