

Ethnographical Collections in the Modern Museum

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Curators of anthropological and ethnographical collections are (like museum curators generally) currently going through a period of uncertainty about their function. In the past, such collections were understood to have two distinct purposes: to inform ordinary visitors about the cultural history of different ethnic groups and to act as a centre of research material and expertise for professional researchers. Nowadays, researchers are more interested in the present than in the past, and ordinary visitors have many other ways in which they can find out about cultures that interest them. It is accordingly not surprising that talk of a ‘museum crisis’ is becoming more and more common. In this context, we invited a number of experts from Russian museums, and from museums in ‘post-Soviet space’ and in Western and Eastern Europe, to discuss the following issues:

1

Many ethnographical museums across the world are looking at new ways of displaying their collections so as to make these more attractive to visitors (e.g. remodelling extant buildings or building new ones, restructuring the way their

permanent collections are shown, setting up new temporary exhibitions). Are the reasons for the changes primarily technical (new facilities, new services for visitors, etc.) or do you see them as lying in a sense that it is essential to change the principles according to which items are displayed, the profile of the ethnographical museum, its name, its cultural, social, and educational mission? Are these changes symptomatic of a 'museum crisis'? If so, where do you see its causes?

2

The main reason behind changes made to museum displays and to the subject matter and contents of exhibitions has been new thinking about the way visitors react to what they see. What do you think visitors want from museums? How do expectations vary from group to group? Does material that relates to the past of different human cultures (their belief systems, occupations, way of life) still have any relevance? Should more attention be paid to the transformations that so-called 'traditional societies' are undergoing in the modern world, to the effects of globalisation and multiculturalism?

3

In the last few years, several new museums have opened that display large-scale ethnographical collections in a radically new way. To give a few examples: The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC plans to hold a rotating series of exhibitions drawn from its permanent collections. The opening displays included 'Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World', 'Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories', 'Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities'. Another approach has been adopted by the Världskulturmuseet [Museum of World Cultures] in Gothenburg, where there are no permanent displays at all. Recent exhibitions include 'Horisonter:Voices From a Global Africa' and 'Trafficking' (on human trafficking). The third example of a new kind of museum is the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, which describes itself only 'in the small print' as the Musée des arts et civilisations d'Afrique, Asie, Océanie et des Amériques (www.quaibrantly.fr). This museum also places a considerable emphasis on temporary exhibitions, and the permanent display is organised round a series of masterpieces of traditional art made by non-European peoples. Do you see cases like this as incidental, or are they part of an overall tendency? What are the causes of such new approaches to exhibiting ethnographical collections, in your view?

4

Where do you think the ethnographical museum should go from here?

VLADIMIR ARSENYEV**A Museum Crisis? A Crisis for Ethnography?
A Crisis for Civilisation?**

The discussion on the future of ethnographical museums raised in the pages of this journal is long overdue. This is one of those cases in which practice comes before it can be understood or seen in perspective. And even the initial conceptual work done by the organisers of this discussion clearly shows how experience in museum exhibition policy and practice beyond Russia (and most particularly in the West) has been taken as an opportunity to consider what is happening, why it is happening like that, and what the objectives should be in connection with the theory and reality of living ethnographical museums.

In itself the problem which is proposed, or even established — the ‘crisis of ethnographical museums’ — can, of course, be explained and even perhaps resolved on the level on which it is posed, when what is selected as an object of study is simply the situation in ethnographical museum-keeping and the state of practice in

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the work of the museums themselves. It would then be perfectly logical to seek ways in which this possible or actual problem can be dealt with, for instance, by finding answers to the question of how the flow of visitors to existing museums can be increased, how the work of museums can be made more profitable, or how a given museum can raise its prestige in various social and cultural groups and in public opinion as a whole. Such an approach will necessarily involve studying the motives behind museum visiting with a view to a coherent disposition of a museum's concept, ideology, and policy to meet the demand, and to embedding this conception in collecting, exhibition, and educational work, and of necessity in the research activity of the given museum.

Let's say that today, whenever a temporary or permanent exhibition is being mounted, the essentially populist and desacralising question of the 'comprehensibility' and 'accessibility' of the exhibition is raised — the 'accessibility' of everything, from a single object or thematic grouping to the whole collection of objects and materials, to any 'average visitor'. And the cases of the individual visitor, of visitors in smaller and larger groups, of visitors who are organised and informed by a tour guide or of independent and unguided (uninformed) visitors, are all discussed separately. As a variant, the visitor can be 'guided' through a particular exhibition or through the whole public area of the museum with the aid of technological and other information media. Under present circumstances this is a general problem, independent of the museum's profile. And the character of the provision made for visitors, its informative or emotional character, depends too on a principled approach to and solution of these questions of 'accessibility'.

In any case, however, an orientation towards the flow of visitors will place the museum largely, if not chiefly, in a position of dependence on the visitor (in fact, the mass visitor), on visitors' tastes, interests, informational and aesthetic needs and expectations, their consumer demand and the level of intensity or activity of this demand. In this connection the museum must decide whether it is happier with the role of forming culture, or with that of being just one more structural unit in the consumer system and service sector.

If we look back at the basic formulation of this Forum, we shall see at once the tendency it mentions for museums, in particular ethnographical museums, to be transformed into something like a 'supermarket' for information that is other than banal, routine, and everyday, a place of recreation with a distinct environment of images, objects, and themes, into something like a 'human water-park', a 'theme park', a 'menagerie', a 'cabinet of curiosities' dealing with the norms of taste and demand in the early 21st century.

And a thoroughly concrete conclusion can be drawn from this for museum organisers: the leading role of management in determining museum policy in all possible forms, including conception, research, collection, aesthetics, and design — the spatial and visual organisation of exhibitions and exhibition spaces.

For the time being, though, we are concerned within the framework of these reflections primarily with establishing what can be done, with really observable practice or with its tendencies, including at the Peter the Great Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) as an ethnographical museum at the stage of reconstruction and of trying to find its face — in connection with, but at a certain distance from, the ‘brand’ that has long been created.

The discussion can continue a little along the lines of what has been said so far by appealing to examples of international and domestic practice in ethnographical museums. Thus, doubtless, the antithesis that has been identified in the questionnaire between the ‘museum of art (albeit of non-European peoples)’ and the ‘museum for the reconstruction of a cultural environment (of a material cultural complex in its stable forms)’ is relevant for the positioning of ethnographical museums. Incidentally, the Musée des arts et traditions populaires in the Bois de Boulogne, which was closed as part of the great museum reform in France (the same reform that led to the creation of the Musée du quai Branly), seems, at least in its exhibits and in the conception that lay at its root, to have been a thoroughly successful example of the conjunction of the ‘museum of art’ with the ‘museum for cultural reconstruction’. It is particularly remarkable that its subject was the culture of the population of France itself, a living culture but one that was scarcely or not at all included within the standards of the industrial, transnational ‘mass culture’ of the 20th century when treated with no exoticisation: the culture of rural France, of its small towns, its recurrent historical and cultural regions, its various subcultures. And the theoreticians of the museum, such as Zeev Gourarier, were very consistent and convincing in showing, through temporary displays, the latest tendencies in the cultural processes of the ‘consumer society’ (take, for instance the abundant industrial and amateur material relating to the ‘neo-Gaulish’ myth connected with the characters of the *Astérix et Obélix* comic books). Perhaps it was here, indeed, that one could detect a certain soupçon of ‘exoticism’, consciously or unconsciously emphasised by the designers of the exhibition. But in the permanent exhibitions the culture of the historic regions and provinces of France was conveyed through an organisation of the space and display of objects so they lay almost on the floor, forming an environment into which one could step and imagine that one was crossing the threshold of reality.

On the same practical level, concerning the activity of ethnographical (and other) museums, one must obviously take a position as regards another very important dichotomy: the 'museum of things' versus the 'museum of ideas'. The actual holdings of one or another museum offer significant challenges. Their nature — full or otherwise, representative or not — is itself capable of determining what work is done in collection, research, and display [Arsenyev 2002]. The educational work of the institution is also dependent upon it. As far as temporary exhibitions are concerned, the problems of the representative nature of holdings are solved by means of inter-museum exchanges of objects. But for permanent exhibitions — if the museum considers such to be necessary (and this too must be decided!), to be a matter of honour, something that in fact gives the museum its character as a 'museum' rather than a 'gallery' or an exhibition hall with its own scholarly and artistic policy and its own staff representative holdings become an imperative. It is on this point that the museum's ability to realise itself as an independent entity depends, on the level both of its own claims within the museum community and of its status within the system of culture.

In this connection the Musée des arts et traditions populaires in the Bois de Boulogne, mentioned above, was essentially a 'museum of ideas', while the Musée de la Porte Dorée (Musée national des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie), which existed parallel to it on the edge of the Bois de Vincennes and disappeared in 2002 as part of the same French museum reorganisation project, was a 'museum of things'.

Until the end of the 1990s, when the picture gallery was transferred from the spacious complex in Dahlem into the centre of Berlin, the Museum für Völkerkunde was a synthesis, remarkable in its fullness and richness, and giving an idea of the unity of human culture: the high forms of élite professional art from Europe (from the early Middle Ages to modern times) and from the cultures of ancient Meso-America, ancient India and China, and the Arab world, together with the cultures of Africa, Australia, and Oceania, of the modern Amerindians, etc. And the display of living cultures that are close to the archaic, above all from Australia and Oceania but also from Africa, could stand in many respects as a model for ethnographical museums, demonstrating the principle of reconstructing 'the material cultural environment'. Now the various museums that formerly shared this single complex have been dispersed and new exhibition spaces have been formed, which have been filled chiefly with objects brought out from the ethnographic reserve collections, but selected and displayed largely on principles drawn from the 'museum of art'. The impression has been created that within one museum space there are two different ethnographical museums, based on somewhat contradictory conceptions. It is easy to suppose

that this state of affairs is a temporary one and that a solution will sooner or later be found in a new, integrated exhibition. Nonetheless, the problem of 'holdings driven' displays is a very real one.

But it would be a mistake if participants in the 'Forum' limited themselves to the scheme put forward by the organisers, a simple listing of numerous examples of what is happening, and how, in the activity of ethnographical museums. Argument would be superfluous: the crisis of museum ethnography, or of ethnographical museums, is a reality. But, in untangling the forms and circumstances of this 'crisis', we must recognise that museum-keeping can certainly represent a relatively independent scientific discipline of which ethnographical museum-keeping is a vital component. But this position is no more than one of technology, or at best of technique. Even the task of attracting visitors is a product of the museum's ideology, of the values that constitute its basis and which play the decisive role in deciding 'what we are attracting people to' as well as, indeed, whether it is worth attracting anyone at all.

For instance, in African countries the majority of 'national museums' are supported by the State, by UNESCO, and by foreign museums (above all, directly or indirectly, ethnographical museums from the 'rich North'.) But these museums, in the first instance, serve only as a necessary attribute of the 'nation-State'; their function is chiefly external. *'You're supposed to have one.'* The local populations, unfortunately, visit these museums extremely rarely. Normally visits take the form of school trips or cultural programmes organised in the museum. Within the culture of the general mass of the population, 'the museum' as a necessary and important element of that culture has not yet matured organically.

Not that our own regional museums, and even ethnographical museums, would get all that many visitors if it weren't for school groups and tourists. So far as the *Kunstkamera* is concerned, attempts have been made to improve visitor numbers and boost the cultural status of the name and of the activities organised there. In the middle of the 1990s efforts were made to put on theatrical shows based on ethnographical material. For instance, there were reconstructions of Indian mysteries, and at the beginning of the 2000s, a Christmas mumming show was organised. It must be admitted, however, that these were one-off affairs. They drew fellow ethnographers more than the general public. The same was true both of the creation of a mandala and of the experiment of showing work by St Petersburg avant-garde artists in the halls of the *Kunstkamera*.

These were all tricks, artefacts, simulacra, which created the illusion of a boost to the museum; they produced a kind of 'ecstasy trip', a sort of 'time out' from ordinary routine (whether the routine was named as stagnation or crisis). In essence they were all alike. In

practice, these examples indicate that the correctly-stated problem of a crisis for ethnographical museums cannot be solved by technical means. This is not a problem of good or bad management. The public visited our museum anyway, and will continue to do so — because the word ‘Kunstkamera’ has an indubitable charisma in Russian culture. And however much it might be said that *kunstkamera* with a small letter (cabinet of curiosities) sounds disparaging, contemptuous, pejorative, nonetheless in Russian culture *Kunstkamera*, when spelled with a capital letter, has for centuries been an indubitably positive symbol, and one also recognised as such by the general public. For the majority of our compatriots it is a gate that opens on the entire world — the bright and the dark sides at once, together in the same space. It is ‘Heaven’ and ‘Hell’, the ‘golden age’ and the ‘fall’ in one: angels and demons, the leaders and the outsiders of World History. That is why people come to the *Kunstkamera*. And they come for a wide range of motives, among which, sadly for professional ethnographers, the desire to visit an ethnographical museum is not decisive.

So once again we must say that it is not management in itself, but a museum ideology that meets the conscious and unconscious needs of culture, society, and Civilisation, that can resolve the ‘crisis of the ethnographical museum’ and turn this museum into a real breeding-ground for the formation of culture and public opinion and for the search for answers to the vital problems of social practice. This is a question of theory. But of a theory that involves generalisation and detail simultaneously!

Can there be a general theory of museum work in the field of ethnography, or indeed of museum work in general — not of the form, but of the essence? The answer is ‘no’, on the whole! For in any case, due to the peculiarities of the inherited forms of organisation of the cultural and cognitive process, the museum is mostly an applied sphere of culture. This sphere has its hierarchy of knowledge and its system. But it is derivative from more general insights, from a system of values and pictures of the world, which are the object of investigation for other, albeit related, systems of knowledge. This is just how the general theory of museum work is found expressed in vivid imagery in the work ‘The museum, its meaning and vocation’ by the 19th-century Russian religious philosopher N.F. Fedorov. For Fedorov the ‘museum’ is a kind of ‘place of worship’, somewhere where people gather with one another and with God, somewhere where existence is brought into harmony [Fedorov 1982]. It is not hard to see how far this is from management strategies!

We shall have to return to worldviews, but now a few words must be said about ethnography as a discipline (ethnology, social and

cultural anthropology, culturology, etc.). Whether we like it or not, 'ethnography' has acquired — with a fair degree of justice — the reputation of being a 'colonial discipline'. One might add: not in a direct, but in a metaphorical sense. This sphere of knowledge reflects the expansion of one culture into the space where other cultures are realised. And it has developed, this discipline, hand in hand with colonial conquests and with the tasks of colonial administration. Whatever concrete names might be used, ethnography's task was and remains that of recording and understanding the principles of existence and functioning of other peoples and cultures, and the establishment of means of interacting with them in order to optimise the realisation of specific goals and interests. These are the interests of the side that regards itself as the 'subject' of these relations, as the active and initiating side, the leader, with the right to position itself thus. The 'object', meanwhile, might be one's own population, possessing specific cultural attributes, or it might be distinct cultural groups within that population, etc. Among museums, the dissolved Bois de Boulogne museum was a clear instance. In our country there have been many examples of a similar type — museums 'of landlord life', 'of working-class life', etc. Today these have been replaced by museums 'of bread', 'of vodka', 'of toys', and the like — spheres or separate components of a preserved or deceased mass culture, in accordance with a model whereby these components are identified as system-forming or central and significant for reflecting the integral profile of that culture.

There is a branch of ethnography that provides just such a pragmatic conceptual basis for museum work. But it is this discipline that is above all gripped by crisis, a fact that has in turn generated the crisis of ethnographical museums and also, directly or indirectly, the crisis of other museums of a similar kind. It is this originally 'colonial' discipline that was found wanting in its system of categories, a system that dates back to the obsolete knowledge of the nineteenth century. And its very procedures, its very method, the very worldview that stands at its base are now all subject to grave doubts. Even greater objections are aroused by the moral and ethical component of this knowledge, which is consciously organised to provide ethnography with the instrumental function of unifying cultural and social processes, of realising and reproducing hierarchies of leadership in the actually inherited configurations of inter-cultural and inter-ethnic relations. The function of 'mega-culture', meanwhile, is exercised by the globalised mass culture of the 'consumer society'. Within this tendency, ethnographers and their museums are transformed either into apologists or else into dispassionate registrars of the processes of 'the change of cultural stereotypes': they become forensic anatomists of cultures and ethnic groups.

There is also the likelihood of a reverse direction. Thus ethnographers and their museums can, consciously or not, become *Kulturträger*, ideologists of the fundamentalist ‘renewing’ tendencies in the environment they study, occupied with formulating or reformulating the ideologies of these cultures, and sometimes simulacra of these ideologies, sincerely or otherwise taken up and disseminated in the course of professional scholarly activity. There is an analogy, for instance, in the arysophic component in the culture of the Third Reich [Goodrich-Clark 1985]. But in today’s ethnography and linguistics one can encounter similar ‘educationalism’, say, about the ‘N’ko culture’ in the Western Sudan *vis-à-vis* Islamocentric fundamentalism. The same thing may be seen in the mythologising efforts of the followers of Lev Gumilev,¹ or in ‘neo-pagan’ researches into Slavonic and proto-Slavonic ‘antiquities’. These days an author, beguiled by his work, his theme, the ‘object’ of his research, may prove capable of destroying this object in the course of researching it, or of transforming it into a new entity. For instance, he might import attempts at self-identification or at differentiation from what was previously a unified community and cultural space. This is just what can be observed in the work of certain local ethnographical museums in the Leningrad Region, which do not just preserve artefacts made by residents of Finno-Ugric extraction for their descendents, but also actively propagate a certain reconstructed version of a virtually extinct culture—which has the same sort of relation to real folklore as the once-famous Beryozka ensembles and the Pyatnitsky Choir.² It’s a tricky question. But the very fact of such possibilities bears witness to a certain transitional state of world culture, a crisis of the old directions. And this is already a problem of worldview, an issue of principle that is directly related to the search for the sources of the ‘crisis of ethnographical museums’, and beyond that to the crisis of ethnography itself.

Today ethnography is not needed, or is almost not needed, to realise tasks connected with the management of social and cultural processes. The processes of economic, political, and cultural globalisation do not need our discipline as much as was the case in the era of direct colonial administration. Flows of money and commodities, together with the media, are more effective. Ethnography is relegated to the realm of the exotic, of entertainment, of the

¹ Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev (1912–1992), the most prominent recent exponent of neo-Eurasianism: his identification of different evolutionary phases in ethnogenesis, such as ‘passionarity’, has been extremely influential in post-Soviet Russia. [Editor].

² These ensembles were among the best-known groups staging ‘authentic’ adaptations of Russian folk music for an urban audience in twentieth-century Russia. On this general direction in popular culture, see Laura J. Olson. *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity*. London: Routledge, 2004. [Editor].

virtualisation of the cultural and psychological space. There is no need to decide whether this is good or bad. Here it is enough to acknowledge the fact, or at least to admit its existence.

What is more important is something else: ethnography and the disciplines associated with it are undergoing an undoubted crisis as a part of the general system of worldviews within Civilisation. This crisis of Civilisation, at varying degrees of depth, is acknowledged by a significant number of ethnographers, philosophers, culturologists, sociologists, and cultural workers. It finds its definition in a term that has been applied to characterise Civilisation and the state of its mental culture in the last third of the 20th century and today: 'postmodernism'. This is a condition of relative chaos, indeterminacy, eclecticism, the pursuit of obviously arbitrary values, relativism of moral and ethical systems. It is an epoch of fragmentary, 'clip' consciousness. It is a time for fingering beads and tesserae, for admiring an individual object or ornamental element, when what is important is not what it adorns, not the whole, but the fragment, the part... For neither consciousness nor feeling are capable, in this period, of grasping the whole. This is a condition of combined stupor and stock-jobbing. Fuss and bother. The drive to do something, for the sake of activity itself.

And it is in this very period that ethnography must objectively be needed, for by its nature, resting on facts from various cultures, it is closest to realising and formulating a new integral picture of the world. The simplest truths of accumulated ethnographic knowledge speak of the unity of humanity in its diversity and tell us that there are no 'good' and 'bad' cultures. There are only various forms of adaptation and harmony with the environment. But the realisation of the 'modernist' project and the industrial model have led a significant part of humanity to lose its outer and inner balance, and have led it to a profound crisis which no programmes of 'social justice' or 'unlimited consumption' or 'ecological harmonisation' can resolve. These are just palliatives.

Will ethnography be able to formulate the bases of a new paradigm for seeing the world and existing in it? Will it be able to introduce this new (but, for its object, thoroughly obvious) understanding of the tasks of correcting Civilisation into its museum exhibitions? Will it be able to avoid tailing behind the established demands of museum visitors, and to lead them to an understanding of the new tasks, new images of the world—not attractive, but demanding change?! It is difficult to answer in the affirmative. But if it 'will be able to', then, transforming itself, it will also transform its museums. It will play its part in the vital change of civilisational paradigms.

More concretely: the ethnographical museum is called to introduce people to the other-reality of other cultures through a conjunction

of rational with emotional components of reflection and cognition. And this must be achieved not only through electronic visual media, but in the first instance through a 'theatre of things', the reconstruction of the image environment of the culture in question. Then it will be a balanced and effective conjunction of the 'museum of things' and the 'museum of ideas', the 'museum of art' and the 'museum of cultural reconstructions'. And the organising basis of the activity of ethnographical museums must be not management, but an ideology of the cultural complementarity of all the divisions of humanity, their all-connectedness and unity in the womb of the natural-cultural world process, in which the highest value is the continuation of life in all its diversity [Arsenyev 1999].

Once, in the middle of the 1930s, Michel Leiris, for one, formulated a similar task in connection with the organisation of the Musée de l'homme in Paris. For various reasons, the project was not realised in accordance with this idea. Today this museum has ceased altogether to concern itself with ethnography, and its collection has passed to the Musée du quai Branly. But the idea has long-term value and is worthy. Sooner or later, then, people will return to it. On a new level of understanding, with new possibilities for realising it...

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The assertion that *'the main reason behind changes made to museum displays and to the subject matter and contents of exhibitions has been new thinking about the way visitors react to what they see'*, made in the questionnaire, strikes me at the very least as dubitable. A museum, after all, is by its nature an exceptionally conservative

social institution, created to preserve and transmit an actually existing cultural heritage, which in itself grants it the status both of a legitimate monopoly holder of knowledge about the past and about culture as a whole, and also of an interpreter of the past and of culture in the display space. This claim to a monopoly possession of knowledge lends the museum a relative independence from the outside world (in the first instance, from visitors) in the development of its exhibition strategy. The independence is relative, because knowledge is social by nature, that is, it can be penetrated by the influence of any discourse that bears no relation to science or scholarship, but which exerts a noticeable impact on society. But this knowledge (subjective and constructed) is stylised within the museum walls as being objective, natural, and authentic, and in this sense, considering museums' enormous authority in society, the leading link in the relation of the museum to the visitor is likely to be the museum.

But how does the process of objectifying knowledge take place, the process by which ethnographic reality presented at an exhibition is accepted as really existing? The point is that things (and the ethnographical museum is a collection above all of originals) are always ascribed the ability to give an 'objective' description of ethnographic reality. From the viewpoint of everyday consciousness, they are 'documents of an epoch', 'material realities of a culture'. In fact, the high status of the museum in society is founded on this very illusion, which arises from a failure to distinguish between things and museum exhibits.

So what is the principal distinction between the exhibit and the thing? One might think that this distinction would reside in the semiotic displacement that occurs when artefacts are brought into the museum space. The formation of the collection and the construction of the exhibition are always founded on existing scientific classifications, at the basis of which lie some or other principles. Exhibits are selected, and this selection inevitably acquires a paradigmatic character, even if the objective is declared to be an integral description of a culture. Whatever motives and principles might lie at the basis of the formation of ethnographic collections, in any case only those things are brought into the museum that satisfy some or other classifications accepted at the given moment; the classifying grid always, one way or another, runs visibly through the museum collection. And if we take into account the fact that any classifying operations presuppose identity and distinction, the transition from the uninterrupted to the discrete, then the formation of a collection is connected (and this is the essence of the museum space) with decontextualisation. This is one of the general distinguishing peculiarities of the museum: things are torn out of one (natural) context, and placed in another (newly created, artificial) context.

All these metamorphoses, which the thing undergoes on the way from its natural surroundings to the museum space, that is, during its transformation into an exhibit, have one very important consequence: torn out of its context and placed in artificial surroundings, the exhibit is transformed into a symbol, a metaphor, which often takes on the character of an arbitrary association. The point is not that *'the latent meaning that is implicit and unnoticed when an object is in its everyday context becomes manifest in display'* [Yamaguchi 1991: 61], but that the meaning of the exhibit depends in large part on the context created by the exhibition and on the associations which this context evokes in the mind of the visitor. This is the source of the visitor's varying, equivocal (and, from the museum worker's standpoint, incorrect) 'reading' of the exhibition.

These ideas, widely disseminated and surprisingly vital among museum staffs, bear implicit witness to the museum's claims to own the true meaning of things and the 'correct' interpretation or representation of a culture. The fact is striking in itself, since the last hundred years' existence of ethnographical museums demonstrates the changing and subjective nature of the classifications of ethnographic realities on which the understanding of a culture within the walls of a museum is finally based. In this sense the ethnographical museum is a space where, in the first instance, various classifications are concentrated and represented. Within its walls there is a constant process of the formation of new cultural meanings and new ethnographic realities by means of the reorganisation and renaming of things and the creation of collections and exhibitions.

The conviction that material objects are capable of reflecting the world as it 'in fact' is was born in an epoch under the banner of positivism, and it retains a strong position in the museum community even today. Thus the museum preserves its status as an institution for the preservation and retranslation of cultural heritage, and it is accepted as such by the public. The illusion of the reliability of the depiction of ethnographic actuality is constantly supported by the exhibition work of the museum, at any rate in its traditional version, through the stylisation of the fictive nature of the culture being represented as a factual reflection in an exhibition. A similar masking strategy is achieved with the help of particular methods of exhibition construction, of which two may be identified as particularly important. One of these is based on the use of costumed tableaux, 'dioramas', extraordinarily popular in the past and favoured in some museums even today, whereby a certain ethnographic reality — a ritual, a craft activity, an interior, etc. — is reproduced or imitated by the museum, down to the tiniest detail. The visitor will, in most cases, accept such a scene or exhibition as an adequate reflection of reality. The reason for such acceptance

is to be found in the double re-encoding which a thing undergoes when it comes first into the museum, and then into the exhibition: (1) from metonymic to metaphoric form, when the object is torn from its natural surroundings and included in a classification system (in the terms of semiotics, a paradigmatic chain) defined by the museum discourse, and (2) from metaphoric to metonymic, when the object enters a new, artificial context, becoming part of an exhibition (syntagmatic chain).

These dislocations of meaning are, as a rule, hidden from the visitor: he accepts the exhibits not as metaphors or symbols of a represented ethnographic actuality, but as a precise reflection of it. As an example, one could cite the exhibition in the Russian Ethnographical Museum of the interior of a Russian *izba*, filled with things collected by different collectors at different times in different places and spatially organised in accordance with the relevant ideas of the exhibition organisers at a given moment. But such an interior is 'read' as an organic whole, as something that exists or has existed in the culture.

The second way in which represented cultures and ethnic groups are 'essentialised' is connected with the orientation towards monographic presentation in the museum space. The very names of the exhibitions at the Russian Ethnographical Museum — 'The Russians', 'The Ukrainians', 'The Belarusians', 'The Georgians', 'The Armenians', 'The Azerbaijanis' — mask their arbitrary, fragmentary, subjective character and explicitly reveal the attempt to demonstrate some cultural units with clearly delineated boundaries, while in reality the boundaries of a culture and of its structures are flexible. In fact, the museum presents some ideal models of cultures from the 'ethnographic past' (the decades around 1900), that have pretensions to constitute a complete description of what is represented, and which include the obligatory spectrum of characteristics of basic occupations, crafts, trades, settlement, dwellings, wares, clothing, ritual practices, and folk art.

All this permits us to agree, on the whole, with the words of the famous Japanese museum expert that '*all exhibitions suffer from the condition of being fake*' [Yamaguchi 1991: 67]. So how can we return (and should we return?) the status of authenticity to the exhibition? A way out of the current situation might be the enactment of a policy of transparency, whether that means transparency with regard to the holdings (showing things as they are 'in fact') or the rejection of exhibitions aimed at an integral description of a culture, which present not so much ethnographic reality as the image of it that has taken shape in the minds of scholars. The context of display must not silence or hide from the visitor the arbitrary, symbolic, and equivocal character of the representation. In other words, the ex-

hibition or display must be orientated both towards self-analysis [Pearce 1994] and towards a dialogue with the visitor, appearing as the co-author of the situation and, beginning from his own knowledge and experience, taking part in the process of forming some or other meanings. This does not at all mean the total modernisation of all existing exhibitions. The exhibition as a means of reflecting ethnographic reality may be of anthropological interest, which usually arises when the exhibition is out of date. In this connection the temporary display and the permanent exhibition are equally necessary for the museum.

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1

In order to answer this question, we must turn above all to the history of the development of ethnology as a discipline dealing with the traditional culture of the peoples of the world and to the history of the creation of ethnographical museums in the Old World and the New. The oldest ethnographical museums in Europe go back to museum complexes and collections of the Enlightenment period (galleries and chambers of curiosities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Ethnographical collections in such museums during the early stages of their creation and development were put together as collections of oddities, 'exotica', brought from distant countries. Naturally, the principles by which ethnographical collections were exhibited in such museums reflected above all a desire to show the unusual and unique character of objects belonging to the everyday life of world peoples. Things were combined in a composi-

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tion whose aesthetic task was above all to strike the imagination of the occasional visitor, rather than to give a more or less full picture of the characteristics of exotic countries' cultures. The clearest examples of modern ethnographical exhibitions whose history can be traced back to chambers of curiosities are the Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography in St Petersburg and the ethnographical department of the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen. The formation and development of the colonial system, which coincided in time with the formation of ethnology as a discipline, led to the emergence in the middle and in the second half of the 19th century of a number of major European ethnographical museums: the ethnographical department of the British Museum, the Museum of Tropical Ethnography in Amsterdam, the Museum of Africa in Tervuren in Belgium, the Trocadéro in Paris, museums in Berlin and Vienna, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, etc. The exhibitions in these museums were created under the influence of various schools of ethnography (evolutionary, comparative and typological, functionalist, etc.). At about the same time there arose a number of European national ethnographical museums which assembled and displayed ethnographical collections dealing with the peoples inhabiting one or another country.

All these museums, which carry the baggage of one, two, or three centuries of experience in assembling, studying, and displaying ethnographical collections, found by the end of the twentieth century that they were facing the need to think about their development concept for the coming decades. I see several reasons why this question has become extraordinarily relevant in the last few years, and why it has led to discussions lasting many years among professionals. One should underline in particular the combination of changing paradigms within anthropology (including ethnography — ethnology — social and cultural anthropology), shifts in the domestic policy of several leading European countries with regard to ethnic minorities living in these countries and to groups of immigrants from the former colonies (or, in the developed countries of North America, to the indigenous population), and the broad dissemination of the idea of political correctness: from the revision of a number of hitherto stable terms in the spoken and written linguistic tradition to the revision of a number of cultural concepts, including exhibitions in ethnographical museums.

Of course, no small role in this process — which might be called a crisis of ethnographical museums at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century — has been played by factors such as the technology and information revolution in museums: the need to expand exhibition spaces and to reconstruct existing halls, the creation of a modern museum infrastructure including climate control systems, new and strict technical and aesthetic demands on the

lighting of exhibitions, graphic design, and information provision, and the need to computerise the museum space.

These internal and external causes, only a few of which have been listed above, have led to a recognition of the need to project and carry out major reconstruction projects in a number of European and American museums, which has been accompanied in several cases by a substantial change of the museums' concept and even of their character, as well as their cultural, educational, and social mission.

I think that this aspiration towards a cardinal change in the concept of the ethnographical museum has coincided quite often with a recognition of failures in the exhibition policy of previous decades (as I see it, for instance, this has been one reason for the radical decisions to close the Musée de l'homme in Paris and the Ethnographical Museum in Gothenburg and to found new museums in these cities). Some museums, however, have decided to preserve their old exhibitions, which have an undoubted value for the history of science and the history of museums, and even partially to return to old exhibition methods. The most striking example is the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford: its exhibitions, constructed on typological principles by Edward Tylor and James Frazer when the museum was founded in 1884, have remained practically unchanged, and have even been supplemented in recent years by a number of sections organised on the same basis. In connection with the marked interest in the history of museums, a number of European museums have established exhibitions that restore an idea, in whole or in part, of the ethnographical collections found in chambers of curiosities (ethnographical exhibitions at the Danish National Museum, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Kunst- und Naturalienkammer der Franckeschen Stiftungen in Halle in Germany, etc.).

2

Every museum, when it plans its exhibition policy and discusses its development concept, must address the demands of visitors. Let us take the example of our own Peter the Great Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences. From museum visitor statistics in recent years we see that up to 500,000 people visit it each year. Of those about twenty percent are shown round by tour guides; more than forty percent of individual and group visitors are children and adolescents; foreign tourists comprise only two to three percent of visitors. The following points are important in understanding our visitors' demands: (1) this is the only museum of the ethnography of the peoples of world in the country, so it is only here that people can see collections dealing with the Amerindians, the ethnography of the peoples of China, Japan, India, Africa, etc.; (2) Russian visitors take more

notice of the museum's old name, the *Kunstkamera* ('cabinet of curiosities'), than of its new one, the Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography, which means that such visitors are interested above all in seeing the oldest museum in Russia; (3) many visitors (particularly residents of St Petersburg) visit the museum for educational reasons, so as to see original and unique collections dealing with the ethnography of the peoples of the world, illustrating and expanding their own and their children's knowledge about many school and university courses; (4) the modern museum visitor possesses enormous opportunities to acquire information (books, television, cinema, video, Internet, etc.).

Museum visiting cannot be seen solely as an educational process. Of course, it is extremely important that the visitor of any age, educational level, and personal interests should leave an ethnographical museum enriched with new knowledge and personal impressions of the striking collections. The modern museum enjoys popularity only if its exhibitions are well-organised, vivid, and memorable (original exhibition design, effective lighting, well-thought-out texts and labelling, audio, video, and multimedia accompaniment to the exhibitions, etc.). It is very important, in my view, that showing the visitor various aspects of the traditional culture of the peoples of the world should not reduce the exhibition to a display of masterpieces of decorative and applied art (that is an entirely different genre, which the Russian visitor can see in several halls of the Hermitage, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of the Arts of the Peoples of the East, etc.).

At the same time we should avoid attempting the monographic description of peoples' traditional culture: this demands corresponding exhibition spaces and collections which are not usually at the disposal of museums of the ethnography of the peoples of the world. Similarly unsuccessful have been attempts by a number of museums to introduce 'relevance' into museum exhibitions, for instance by visually reproducing fragments of modern African villages in the museum hall or by showing the results of colonialism and the life of those who have emigrated to European countries.

In my view, such problems as the transformations of traditional cultures in the modern world, the problems of the globalisation of cultural space, multiculturalism in modern society, etc., can be elucidated in the museum only in the framework of temporary exhibition projects.

3

I had the good luck to be a witness at the opening ceremonies of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington and of the *Musée du quai Branly* in Paris, to attend a conference in Washington and to take part in round tables in Paris devoted to the opening, and in the September of 2006 to visit the new Museum

of World Cultures in Gothenburg. In all three cases, an absolutely positive factor was the desire by the governments of the USA, France, and Sweden to create museums with completely modern systems of exhibition, with well-equipped stores, computer data-bases of collections, and education and information centres.

As is well known, the new museum in Washington received the collections of the Washington Natural History Museum and of the New York National Museum of the American Indian (all three organisations belong to the Smithsonian Institution). In Paris, the Musée du quai Branly received collections from the Musée de l'homme and from a number of other, smaller Paris ethnographical museums. In Sweden too there was an amalgamation of a number of ethnographical museums, above all those in Stockholm and Gothenburg. The amalgamation and centralisation of national holdings of ethnographical collections is inevitably accompanied by a substantial qualitative improvement in the conditions under which collections are stored, by their restoration and conservation, and by the creation of special computer systems of stock-checking and conservation. But the initial concept of the exhibition policy of these new museums has been a rejection or a substantial correction of the previous experience of the museums on whose basis they have been created. The motive is obvious to all: it's easier to invite new people, build a new building, and begin everything from scratch than it would be to reconstruct and redo.

Who is calling the tune here? I think above all it is politicians, calling for a politically correct museum whose job would be to combat xenophobia, intolerance, and racial and ethnic conflict. It turns out, meanwhile, that the story told at a museum exhibition about the shamanism of the indigenous population of America demeans that population just as much as when they were called Indians. Telling a story about initiation rites at an exhibition on African ethnography turns out to be just as impossible as showing the traditional dress worn by women in the Near East. It is claimed that this brings into the museum exhibition an evaluation of the level of development of the traditional culture of the peoples of the various continents, and when a significant percentage of people living in the country are originally from Africa or from the Near East then it is insulting towards fellow citizens. So in Paris they have created not a new museum of ethnography, but a Musée du quai Branly with a subtitle in smaller letters saying Musée des arts et civilisations d'Afrique, d'Asie, d'Océanie et des Amériques. In Gothenburg the newly built museum is called not the Museum of Ethnography, but the Museum of World Cultures. By a miracle the new museum in Washington is called the National Museum of the American Indian, not the National Museum of Native Americans.

All three new museums position themselves as innovative museum, education, and information centres, specially noting in their information materials that these are museums of a new type. Ethnographical collections are shown in the Musée du quai Branly as a graphic series of masterpieces of traditional art outside any cultural context; the Gothenburg museum has rejected permanent exhibitions entirely, in favour of big conceptual temporary exhibitions featuring ethnographical collections. The National Museum of the American Indian, too, stresses temporary exhibition projects, and the three permanent exhibitions are not dedicated to the ethnography of the peoples of America: they simply use some ethnographical collections as illustrative material.

At the same time one must also note that all three museums are superbly organised, that the buildings erected to house them are masterpieces of modern museum architecture, and that their exhibitions have been beautifully arranged by high-class museum designers. To assess these museums it is enough to stop regretting the fact that ethnographical collections are now displayed in museums of a different type, and to hope that not all museums will be willing to follow these examples.

It is essential to note that there are also other examples of the total reconstruction of ethnographical museums where these museums have not lost their titles and the exhibition policy has remained within the framework of showing the ethnography of the peoples of the world. These are the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden (Netherlands) and the Museum of Ethnology in Leipzig (Germany). It is obvious too that the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna, which is scheduled to be opened after reconstruction in the spring of 2008, will also remain within the scope of traditional museums of the ethnography of the peoples of the world.

4

I believe that the genre of the ethnographical museum has an unquestionable right to exist in the modern world. The hundreds of thousands of items stored in ethnographical collections, accumulated by the museums of the world from the 18th to the 21st centuries, will still evoke unchanged interest among museum-goers for many centuries. The process of globalisation, which leads in theory to ethnic traditions' being minimised and to cultural and ethnic identity's being erased, will only strengthen the nostalgic interest humanity feels in its past. The information revolution, of which we are all witnesses, will inevitably lead to the creation of enormous masses of information in the global computer network dedicated to the traditional culture of the peoples of the world. Already the idea of collective access to cultural values is one of the most popular ideas among staff at the various ethnographical museums and research centres. It has led to the appearance of dozens of interna-

tional projects to construct databases with remote Internet access to the collections of ethnographical museums. This will probably lead to a growing interest in ethnographical museums' exhibitions: the chance to see a reproduction of a masterpiece in a book or on a computer screen can only inflame the desire to see the original in a museum hall.

How will museums like those established in the last five years in Washington, Paris, and Gothenburg develop? What future awaits them? Only time will tell.

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The landscape of French museums has altered in a very significant way over the last few decades; one could say that we are experiencing the end of one era and the beginning of another. The changes relate not just to the reconstruction of the great art museums, above all the Louvre, or, in another area of specialisation, the Musée des arts décoratifs de Paris, but to something more fundamental: this is a period of dramatic change that has witnessed a number of museums go from something close to clinical death to a resurrection that was achieved (and that is still being achieved) at the cost of total re-invention.

Like a doctor at the bed of a terminally sick patient, Paris has just certified the death of the three great national museums most closely linked with the discipline of ethnography: le Musée de l'Homme, Musée des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (whose history coincided with the colonial phase of French history generally), and the Musée des arts et traditions populaires (which was primarily concerned with French culture, and with rural life within that). As a form of 'shock therapy', the powers that be decided that they would suppress these three major institutions and then recreate them in the form of museums of social life (or in the alternative term, museums of civilisation). Hard on the heels of the founding of the Musée du quai Branly (on which see Germain Viatte's

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contribution below) is to follow the opening of the Musée des migrations and then, in due course, of the Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM).

The world changes, and museums change with it. In his introduction to the conference held a decade ago to inaugurate the future MuCEM, Michel Colardelle (the director of the project) noted that the alterations in recent years to our political, economic, social, and cultural environments had already provoked a 'flowering' of museums of social life [Colardelle 1997].

The transformation of ethnographical museums into museums of social life is a consistent phenomenon observable in Europe generally since 2000, as the cases of the Musée de Bretagne in Rennes and of the Musée d'ethnographie in Geneva also demonstrate. But there are also instances where a museum belonging to this new genre is created *ex nihilo* (or nearly so, as we shall see) — as with the Musée des confluences in Lyon, the Museo d'Europa in Turin, the Musée de l'histoire de l'Europe in Brussels or the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg.

This is a case, then, where the global philosophy on which museums are founded has undergone a mutation, and where there has also been an alteration in attitudes about the appropriate place to site them. So far, certainly, only one major museum of social life has been decentralised from Paris. The MuCEM is getting ready for its relocation, from 2010 to 2012, to a splendid old fort, construction of which began in the fourteenth century with a tower built by King René and continued into the fifteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, and which dominates the Vieux Port of Marseilles. Alongside this will be built a new wing of 14,000 square metres in area on the J4 quay overlooking the sea frontage of Marseilles (the rade de Marseille). The two elements — the ancient and the modern — will be interlinked by an elegant pedestrian bridge.

This new phase of museum creation is only the last link in a formidably long evolutionary chain which has frequently been described by historians of museums already. As is well known, the first major institutions of this kind (which were mainly based on the collections of rulers and princes) were art museums, traditionally laid out according to major national schools, presented in chronological order. They were primarily intended for contemplation and were supposed to be presented for the '*delectation*' of the public and for the education of taste, as Colbert already registered in the seventeenth century when he was drawing up the idea for a museum in the Louvre Palace.

Ethnographical museums, on the other hand, did not come into being until the late nineteenth century, and their famous collections

of wax dolls in glass cases were hardly ever placed in any concrete context, given that the main point was to emphasise the idiosyncratic homogeneity obtaining within a given culture, and to indicate the affiliation of what was represented with a local or national homeland. This was the case in 1898, for example, when the Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral set up the Musée Arlaton in Arles, or when the Musée basque was set up at Bayonne, or the Musée breton at Quimper.

Here we have cases of regional museums that differ from ‘great’ museums of the classical variety in that their holdings were put together as ‘research collections’ intended to embrace the major themes of local life. In 1904, a museum of this kind was set up by Hippolyte Müller at Grenoble, the ‘capital’ of the French Alps, but in this case a historical dimension was added to the representation of local life. Another of Müller’s achievements was to accord a specific place to material culture by setting as his aim *‘to recreate the thought that created the object’*.¹

A few years later, an epoch-making shift took place in Northern Europe with the founding of the first museum in the open air, set up as a ‘museum of life’ by Artur Hazelius at Skansen, outside Stockholm, in 1891. Museums of this kind were soon springing up all over Europe. In the words of Georges-Henri Rivièrè, founder of the Musée des arts et traditions populaires, they were *‘museums of domestic life’*, or to be more accurate, of peasant life.

Thus the first ‘museums of social life’ were created; almost a century later, the first ‘ecomuseums’ started appearing — Marquèze in Les Landes being a pioneering endeavour of this kind. Also at this era came museums of working-class life (for instance, the one at Creusot, opened in 1973). In contrast to the open-air museums, which invariably consisted of dwellings that had been dismantled and then transported for reconstruction to a single site, the ecomuseums set themselves the task of representing milieux in contexts that were as close as possible to those in which given domestic and work practices were carried out. Likewise, neighbourhood or communitarian museums in the USA (for example, the Casa del Museo in New York, or the museum set up in Anacostia in 1967), saw their mission as being to offer populations that had been made marginal by unemployment and/or ethnic origin the chance to commune with their own culture, to recognise its value and thus to acquire the capacity to take charge of their own future.²

¹ See the excellent note by Jean-Claude Duclos on <<http://www.musee-dauphinois.fr/Commun/docs/1/Doc88.pdf>>.

² Ibid.

Not long ago (in January 2002),¹ a law was passed in France that gave cognisance to these processes and marked a turning point in perceptions of the role and the position of the museum with regard to the demands of society. The whole understanding of the key question had changed: no longer ‘what are museums for?’, but ‘who are museums for?’

Thus we see the museum gradually coming to accommodate a wide public (and not just the elite public who had once favoured ‘temples of the arts’). Another important step along the way was represented by what one might term the ‘explanatory museum’. One has only to think of the Musée de la Cité des sciences et de l’industrie at La Villette (Paris), which fosters understanding and interpretation at one and the same time. It engages with different sectors of the public in a way that does not represent an exercise in vulgarisation, but the elaboration of a dialogue with interested people, with temporary exhibitions used as a means to achieve this. The aim is to illuminate the analytical procedures of the museum and make them seem appealing, playful, even, while at the same time giving due recognition to the intelligence of people who have had enough interest to turn up in the first place. Museums of this kind have their strengths in the ability to link cognitive and affective elements in order to make sense of what they place on display.

The last link in the chain of museum evolution, at least in France, was the ‘philosophical museum’. As Michel Colardelle argues, museums of this type should not seek to impart certainties, but to register the uncertainties that are inevitable in any branch of knowledge, thus mitigating the temptation we all have to impose our own version of the truth, the origin of all violence and conflict [Colardelle 1997]. Another aim is to measure the continuities and discontinuities of social and cultural existence.

It is towards this type of museum that MuCEM essentially gravitates, presenting as it does the civilisations of the European shores of the Mediterranean according to five overarching themes that are used to constitute ‘evolving exhibitions of information’ (paradise, the city, water, roads and routes, masculine and feminine). Their task is to locate analysis of the past in a thematic framework and accord this analysis a sense of *longue durée*. Alongside this handling of the permanent exhibitions, a series of temporary exhibitions will present reflections on topical issues, seeking not to present ready answers to these but to stimulate further and deeper thinking about them.

The MuCEM is therefore conceived as an important force in the cultural production of identities. On the other hand, many ethnographical museums depart from the position that identity is something real that may be defined, or, as temporal distance may require,

¹ *Journal officiel*, 5 January 2002.

recaptured, but at all events displayed and demonstrated. Presented as fact, identity was in reality made up of those selected elements of the past that were considered 'pure', that were the inverse of the 'distortions' held to afflict the present day. Yet identity is itself in a constant process of being constructed, and museums of identity such as ethnographical museums must take into account the historical process, or risk extinction. However, this shift of consciousness is sometimes very difficult for them, as is indicated by the tragic demise of the Musée des arts et traditions populaires.

This museum, killed off on 1 September 2006, had for decades reposed in a kind of unassailable perfection: the permanent exhibition was still essentially in the state in which it had been set up by Georges-Henri Rivière. A combination of the anti-historicist perspective characterising the Structuralist orthodoxies of the 1960s, an intrusive and dogmatic sociological approach (which was out of step even with some of the materials in the museum's own collections), and an all-consuming focus on museography made the work of the museum sterile. In addition, the museum was not willing or able to take on board the evolution that had overtaken ethnology as a discipline, its transformation over the last twenty-five years. As is well known, the study of rural practices and small village communities has given way to analysis of cities and to the contemporary world, which has generated '*the emergence of a multi-layered ethnography open to comparative approaches*' <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/sef/revue/97_3/97_3_04r.htm>.

It was thus, in isolation from the new intellectual directions fostered by historians, sociologists, and indeed ethnologists, that this museum of popular arts and traditions, this 'museum laboratory' that had once been intended as something 'ultra modern', ended up by going into a sclerotic old age. It had become over-cerebral, fixated on the practices of conservation and of self-preservation — to coin a phrase, it was in an incurable condition. This is why MuCEM, its successor, chose to base its work on a reversal of priorities and values. It takes as its starting point the question of how the world evolved in order to arrive at the condition familiar to us now — that is to say, at the modes of behaviour, communication, and social interaction of our own era, the new forms of sociability and solidarity.

This museum replaces the old hierarchy, with curators at the top, by a hierarchy that gives first place to the public and to the messages that are to be transmitted to that public, while at the first time refusing to turn the museum into mere *son et lumière*. The emphasis has thus shifted towards a museum of social life that would act

¹ See the forthcoming article by Michel Colardelle, the head of MuCEM, and the museum's deputy director, Denis-Michel Boell.

as a space for cultural synthesis rather than as an encyclopaedic institution, which would set out its interpretations in order to emphasise the relativity of the status of any one particular culture. The crucial requirement is therefore to set out both the shared elements and the distinctive dynamics within the range of cultures that fall within the museum's remit, those of the European Mediterranean.

The purpose of a comparative approach of this kind is to problematise, to propound relativism, to 'cool down' first reactions.¹ This requires that we get used to decentring our own view of things in order to learn (or relearn) tolerance, *pace* Samuel Huntington's strictures about the '*clash of civilisations*' in his 1993 response to Francis Fukayama, whose famous article on the '*end of history*' published a year earlier celebrated the collapse of the Soviet bloc, but without giving sufficient attention to the already visible signs of a resurgence of international terrorism. The museum of social life should allow us to open up to the world in its infinite plurality, and in order to do this, it selects themes that are open to doubt, question, and controversy (relating to similarities and differences, influences and idiosyncrasies, for instance), which allow us to look at our own views from a suitable distance.

Thus, the museum becomes a space for communication, something that makes it distinct from the mass media as such. And this is beneficial in that it makes the museum truly part of contemporary life, locates it securely in its 'public service' function. But this also brings with it the need to negotiate Scylla and Charybdis: an excessive emphasis on the museum's didactic mission, on the one hand, or an undue stress on its status as a tourist destination, on the other. The first mission is noble enough in its way, but there is always the danger of over-ideologisation, as the history of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes has made very clear. But the second mission — fostering the museum's links to cultural tourism — may well be justified in economic terms, but brings with it the risk of banalisation, of 'lowest common denominator' policies, of commitment to maximising profits at all costs and hence of over-commercialisation.

It could be that the solution to this very modern dilemma, paradoxical as it may seem, may lie in the past, but only in the sense that we should remember one important thing: that museums (in France, above all) have their origins in the age of the Enlightenment, an era when not just the educational, but also the civic functions of the museum were considered essential instruments for the formation of taste, the generation of intellectual points of orientation, and above all the spirit of rational criticism that was expected in the enlightened, those in whom the thinkers of the day vested all their hopes.

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MIRELLA DECHEVA

The Museum and the Mass Media (the Bulgarian National Ethnographical Museum: Experiences and Problems)

The opinion expressed in the present article provides information about the questions of policy and of practice that face the National Ethnographical Museum (NEM) attached to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.¹ At the same time it might lead to a discussion, as might the issue of any museum faced by the demands of modern society — demands created on the one hand by the greater range of alternative ways in which free time can be spent (as compared to previous periods) and on the other hand by the transition period, which, in relation to the museums of Eastern Europe, is still symbolically defined as a 'crisis' period despite the unity of the European economic and social space. In other words, this is a question to which no answer has yet been found: how, and to what extent, museum employees are using the mass media, which is certainly a powerful factor in the formation of public opinion, being a way of popularising museums' activity.

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of Sciences, Sofia

These reflections have been sparked by a 'hot' topic, as far as museum questions are con-

¹ The Ethnographical Museum in Sofia is the heir to the Popular Ethnographical Museum, one of the first cultural and educational institutions in the Bulgarian State that was re-established after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–78. Its foundations were laid in the first Bulgarian ancient monuments law (1889), which led to the creation of a Popular Museum with three departments: numismatic, ethnographic, and antiquarian. In 1892 the ethnographical section was enriched with an extremely valuable collection made at the First Bulgarian Agricultural Industrial Show in Plovdiv. In 1906, due to the richness of its collection, the section was separated off as an independent organisation under the name of the Popular Ethnographical Museum. Since 1949 it has been attached to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences with the status of a national museum in the framework of the Ethnographical Institute.

cerned: that of the communicative chain ‘museums — media — public’. In the Bulgarian museum literature there is a widespread opinion that museum institutions have been insufficiently active in attracting the public to events in museum life [Nacheva 2003]. This is explained by the absence of a clear media strategy on the part of museum experts.

To attempt to find an answer solely in the museums’ conservatism and lack of interest would be disrespectful towards colleagues, and in many respects would not correspond to reality. The fact is that museums need communication specialists; but the difficulties of achieving this are also obvious, both as regards the personal (academic) training and motivation (primarily financial¹) of possible candidates, and as regards administrations’ recognition that such specialists are necessary.

I fully share the opinion that each museum needs a specialist in public relations, and I believe that links with the public are a strategic, rather than a simply administrative, function. These are not just pretty words: this is a job that must be done. However, considering the realities within which museums are living today, I cannot but note the efforts colleagues are making to include this type of work in their daily responsibilities. ‘Conservatism’ exists, but one can scarcely accuse museum staff of ‘lack of interest’ in view of their efforts to maintain the institution’s exhibitions policy, advertising policy, and especially collecting policy. I think it would suit the present situation better if one were to consider the shared responsibility museums and media have to society, so that both museum employees and journalists would cultivate a responsible attitude towards museums on the part both of the public in general and of the guild of journalists, for whom events in a museum tend not to be ‘news’ unless they are of a dramatic or scandalous character. The media in Bulgaria have a tendency towards ‘anti-communication’ with regard to cultural and scientific institutions.² Turning the sharks of the pen into friends of museums — that is the area where there is a distinct chance of achieving real results.

Here I will say a little about the practical actions that have proved useful for the NEM. The policy of opening the museum space and broadening the social groups attracted as visitors, and often also as partners, is gaining strength, albeit too slowly. The efforts of the museum staff have been directed over the past ten years towards

¹ Simply for information, it should be noted that the salary of museum workers, even those with senior titles and advanced knowledge, is lower than the average in the public sector, which is in its turn lower than the private sector average.

² If we are to believe media specialists, the same is true in many other countries; cf. [Alvarado, Gutch, Wollen 1987].

the creation of a rich and varied programme of exhibitions, which have not passed unnoticed by the cultural community and which have not been ignored by the media. The natural result of this programme has been an increase in the number of visitors, which in 2002 was nearly twice what it had been almost consistently over previous years. The thematic orientations of the programme are a matter of the first importance. The first orientation, naturally, was related to the fundamental task of national ethnographical museums — the preservation and popularisation of the national tradition and of ideas about the life of traditional society. This theme found expression in a series of shows: *The World of the Bulgarian Woman* (1995), *Hopes for Prosperity* (1996), *Popular Culture and Christianity* (2000),¹ *Colours of Macedonia and Thrace* (2003), *Bulgarians through the Eyes of Feliks Kanits and Konstantin Irechek* (2003). This theme was given a chronological development in the show *Sofia: a European City* (2003), which depicts the achievements and ambitions of the builders of modern Bulgaria.

A second orientation in the NEM's exhibition work has been linked with thematic shows depicting the wealth of Bulgarian folk art: *Chiprovtsi Carpets: Traditions and Modernity* (1997), *The Magic of Colour: Traditional Bulgarian Weaving and Knitting* (1999), *The Magic of Colour: Bulgarian Folk Embroidery* (Sofia 2002; Bratislava, Slovakia 2004; Skopje, Macedonia 2006), *Beauty and Secrets: the Structure of Traditional Female Costume* (1999), *Christian Images and Symbols in Traditional Bulgarian Garments* (Sofia 2005; Martin, Slovakia 2006). The invitation by the National Archaeological Museum to undertake joint work on the exhibition *Treasures of Gold and Silver* (shown in the NAM in 2004) is a good example of interdisciplinary exhibitions showing the historical development of an art form, in this case that of jewellery.

Another important theme in the NEM's exhibition programme has been the representation of the life and culture of the ethnic communities that inhabit the Bulgarian lands, which began with the exhibition *Roma in Olden Times* (1995) and has continued with exhibitions devoted to Jews (*The Sacred Path of the Jews*, 1998), Armenians (*Armenians in Bulgaria*, 2000–2001), and Karakachan (2001).² Some of these exhibitions have become known and recognised outside the Bulgarian capital, when collections have been shown in other Bulgarian museums (Varna, Plovdiv, Tărgovishte, Silistra, Ruse, Blagoevgrad, Haskovo, etc.). In conclusion I will note only that the themes touched on in the NEM's exhibition

¹ For more information about NEM exhibitions in recent years see [Teneva 2002].

² For more details see [Decheva 2001].

policy correspond with the interest of the public and of the wider circle of our regulars.

What can be learnt from our experience in popularising these exhibitions? Preparatory advertising is of particular importance for each new show. Above all this means information posters, which must themselves be works of art, so as to attract and to hold the attention even of the 'casual' observer. I would cite as good examples the posters for the exhibitions *The Japanese Kimono* (2002), *The Karakachan in Bulgaria*, and *The Magic of Colour*. They would have achieved a greater impact if they had been disseminated not only in the museum itself, as usually happens, but throughout the city, where current cultural events are normally advertised. The second place belongs to reports in print and broadcast media. The NEM was able to broadcast repeated information on several radio programmes a few years ago, due to our Easter show for children. It turned out that the greater part of the children who visited the museum (many more than had been expected) had heard or read our advertisements, and the Programme also found a voluntary sponsor in the person of a businessman from Velingrad who provided the decorations for the Easter eggs free of charge.

Press conferences, unfortunately, are not always held, but they are very useful: they provide full, accurate, and adequate information about an upcoming show, and allow an exhibition to become news at the moment it opens, rather than after the fact, as usually happens. We became acquainted with this practice during Europalia 2002, the major European festival, when the NEM staged an international exhibition entitled *Face to Face. The Mystery of Life* at the Huis van Alijn museum in Ghent, Belgium.¹ I shall not comment on the statistics showing that 13,410 people visited the exhibition over the nearly three months it was there, which impressed and delighted the festival organisers. I shall similarly refrain from commenting on the undoubted success of the exhibition, reflected in the three stars it received in Ghent's traditional rating of the shows put on in various museums over the course of each year, in which even two stars counts as a success. I shall remark only on an article which appeared in one of the chief Belgian newspapers, *La Libre Belgique*, on the very day the show opened. Its timely appearance was the result of a press conference, beautifully prepared and organised by our hosts, and held on the morning of the day before we opened. Each journalist invited received a catalogue of the exhibition and was informed in detail concerning the various thematic sections and the various exhibits. Thus a direct connection was established between the museum specialist and the journalist.

¹ For more details see [Decheva 2002].

The fact that exhaustive information was provided influenced the concrete presentation given to the event in the media. Guy Duplat, the author of the *La Libre Belgique* article, wrote that *'The exhibition shows that the Belgian and Bulgarian peoples, apparently so different in religion, language, and writing, have nonetheless the very same customs. The exhibition shows the European character of this country, which is a candidate for membership of the European Union.'* The title of the article, 'A path to the heart of a people', is also a great acknowledgement of the work of the team that assembled the exhibition. The timely appearance of such print materials and the numerous posters with amusing 'funny little people' on them, which were displayed even on the sides of city trams as an invitation in motion, provided the show with good preliminary advertising. Here I might add that links with overseas museums are very fruitful for any museum, not only as a basis for comparing the level of exhibition work, but also with regard to the authority that Bulgarian museum collections are winning abroad. This is a point of departure both for self-assessment by museum staffs and for the domestic public, to whom the museum's work is directed. In this context it should be said that virtually nothing is known in Bulgaria about the Ghent exhibition...

In order to avoid giving the impression that such practice can take place only abroad (and only in the 'heart' of Europe), I shall mention another, much earlier show mounted by the NEM. The 1995 opening of the *Roma in Olden Times* exhibition was accompanied by a broad and well-planned advertising campaign. Along with a press conference held almost a week before the show opened, some media organisations were sent a special information pack with photographs and other details about the exhibition. As a result almost all the newspapers reported the event in their pages. This provided varied material describing the rich possibilities of the show. This excluded the possibility of advertising through a chance or momentary assessment by the media; but it avoided possible conflicts around this delicate topic, and it ensured that the event was widely reported in the media, which found reflection in the number of visitors to the show.

From this concrete experience one must note that joint work by museums and media before and during a particular event is only one side of a dynamic dialogue. This work generally lasts a whole year, following the cycle of holidays in Bulgaria, which the media have found very attractive over the past 15 years. There is no doubt that this is the right moment for specialists to popularise traditional Bulgarian culture. But it can also be used rationally to create the conditions for successful joint projects between museums and the media, which could satisfy both sides. I mean the creation of thematic popular-scientific films or recordings of authentic holi-

days — something that is usually beyond the range of what a museum can do. In this direction the initiative usually comes from the media, in the form of a request for specialised consultants. The activation of ethnographers in this direction could ultimately raise the quality of museums' exhibition production. Much has been written about visual anthropology, but in this case it is important that such films are both a good visual illustration for any exhibition and also, via the media, a way of reaching a much wider audience than is possible for a museum. In the last three years more than 15 such films have been made by the Ethnographical Institute and Museum (*Ogāniar*; *Baba Marta*; *Velikden*; *Trai, babo, za hubost*; *Zabradkata*; *Kitkata*; *Trapezata*; *Glinata*, etc.) along with the Bulgarian National Television production *Ritual and Music*. Finding mutually advantageous conditions for both sides is a question of reaching an agreement, but it is more important that the audio and video material should be included in the museum's exhibition and enrich its expressive possibilities.

The importance of popularising traditional culture and its values as being typologically different from modern ones is indicated by the following case, which became a scandal in the press in the spring of 2004. After a film was shown dealing with the 'Dog Monday' customs associated with the Monday seven weeks before Easter, a television rubric that usually deals mostly with parodic commentary on television programmes received a furious and condemnatory tirade from a group of anonymous conservationists protesting against the 'barbaric' nature of what had been shown. As the media 'war' developed there were even calls for such 'cannibalistic' rituals to be banned and for books in which they are described to be burnt! Sadly, there is nothing funny in these authors' desire to ban folk customs and consign books to an *auto da fê*. We live in a complex time, but it would be cynical to permit oneself silence when one sees an aggressive pseudo-culture encroaching on popular values that have been preserved for centuries, and sees a cultural system that comprises the faith and the hope, the work days and the holidays of the people, that has its tradition of preserving inner foundations, subject to such unceremonious attacks. People sometimes forget that traditions are preserved and supported not for commercial reasons, not for a noisy 'storm in a teacup' which can make us interesting (of course, scandalously so) for a day, but in the dramatic experiences of epidemics, military clashes, and the change of political systems. It is the job of the ethnographer to remind people of this systematically. It is an honour to both national institutions, the Ethnographical Institute and Museum and Bulgarian National Television, that they maintained clear convictions in making the film. This story about dogs, folk culture, and manipulations is a good illustration of the difficult job that ethnographical muse-

ums must do in their public work alongside their colleagues from the media, who have a broader access to the people.

The point is that today the museum as a cultural institution is an important part of the modern sphere of communications. The historical development of this institution from the closed private collection to a space that is open to all and permits everyone to penetrate into the context and details of the past, present, and future unavoidably poses new and specific problems. The globalisation of the information society concretises these problems in the contemporary life of the museum in the direction of the significance of the product it offers, which must arouse interest and hold the attention. In this sense any attempt to find new ways to widen the relations between the museum, the public, and the media is not only helpful; it is essential.

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STEVEN ENGELSMAN

Museum Collections, Problems, Activities

The National Museum of Ethnology — a glorious past

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Let me start by introducing my museum. It is an ethnological museum, that is to say, it deals

with peoples from all over the world, outside Europe. And its collections reflect several centuries of Dutch contact with faraway countries: Japan, Indonesia, Africa, the America's, the Arctic region.

The NME is, as a matter of fact, the oldest ethnological museum in the world. It goes back to 1816, when Dutch king William wanted to systematically inform his people about Japan. The Dutch were very proud of their settlement in Japan, especially then, because during the Napoleonic era this was the only spot in the world that flew the Dutch flag. The Dutch held a trading post and a monopoly on trade with Japan; effectively this only ended when American gunboats forced Japan to open up in 1854. Especially during the early 1800s, large collections of Japanese artefacts were brought to the Netherlands, and they were placed in what later became our museum.

By 1937, over a century later, the museum had moved to an abandoned hospital building. We are still in it today. Back then, it was a museum with a proud and threefold mission:

- To inform audiences at home about far away colonies.
- To organise fieldwork in those colonies, bring home collections, study them and put them on display.
- To provide advice about colonial policy to Dutch government.

At this time, the NME certainly was a bridge between the home country and its settlements overseas. Quite a unidirectional bridge it was, facilitating a range of Dutch interests. As for the people in the colonies, they didn't even have any idea they had been put in a museum in the first place.

The museum today

But the situation of course has radically changed over the last fifty years or so. No more colonies, no information monopoly for museums where the lives of faraway peoples are concerned — we all watch National Geographic and the Discovery Channel at home and see much more interesting presentations there than museums can ever produce. There aren't any 'faraway peoples' left in any case, because the world is small now and we can go everywhere ourselves. And faraway people have immigrated, they're now our neighbours — they could even be us ourselves. So the traditional role of the ethnological museums has vanished. Go to any large European ethnological museum, and you will see that it is dealing with this crisis in its own way. So the only things remaining from the past are the large collections that were formed at the heyday of the ethnological and colonial museum.

Obviously, unless we act, we will indeed become obsolete historical institutions. The challenge is, of course, to use those collections as the material to build new bridges to the world of tomorrow.

Big changes in the 1990s

In 1992, I became the NME's thirteenth ever director. I come from outside the field of ethnology. I'm a mathematician, actually, with some prior experience in a museum of the history of science. It was fairly unusual to appoint a non-specialist to a director's post, back then in 1992. But then, the situation itself was unusual at the time. Let me explain.

In 1988, the National Audit Office had come up with a report on the situation in the seventeen National Museums in the Netherlands, and its conclusions were devastating:

(1) There was a leadership crisis.

That came as no surprise, in reality. A few years before all this, the Director General of Culture had interviewed all seventeen directors of the National Museums. The one question he put to them all was: *'Who do you think your boss is?'* The answers were all different; they ranged from *'I have no boss'*, *'the Queen'*, *'the Minister'*, *'Parliament'*, *'Dutch society'* to *'I have as many bosses as I have problems I'm not authorised to solve myself'*. No one came up with the answer expected: *'You, sir, I regard you as my boss.'*

(2) The collections were in disorder.

And especially so at the famous ethnological museum in Leiden.

I have never seen devastating reports have such beneficial effects. Government swiftly took two major policy decisions: make available vast amounts of money for maintaining the collections, and privatise the national museums, in a liberal sense that mainly focused on getting responsibilities right. Parliament was an ally in this process; it demanded that museums should only be privatised once their collections, organisation, and premises were all in good shape. In my museum, none of the three was. So we took a large share of the money to get things changed. My brief was to redefine the museum's mission, to get the collections back into shape, and to renovate the museum building and the galleries. In 2001 — that is, nine years, fifty million dollars, and our due share of institutional trauma later — the Prime Minister reopened the new museum.

I would now qualify our museum as the youngest and the most beautiful ethnological museum in the world. Not everyone agrees, though. So let me summarise. By 2001, the museum was a real museum again: the galleries are innovative; it's a no labels museum, and that makes it visually much more beautiful, open and inviting.

It's a fairly classic design, driven by a desire to show the collections in an inviting setting. Audiences like it and so do children and school groups. However, audience figures are not yet up to the levels we expected. So there is still a lot of hard work to be done.

A lot of effort also went into collection management. The collections are in good shape again, with new storage fifty kilometres away to house them. Mass conservation programs have been set up. The whole catalogue is now on the web,¹ the exhibitions are on the web, and curatorial research into the collections is also on the web. Most of the annotatory texts are bilingual. The collections are not visibly deteriorating, as it was clear they were in the past. No, it's really all up to standard now — ISO-certified standard. The issue of large losses from the collections in the past has been fully and openly addressed. There are no more scandals lingering — at least, so far as I know.

Basically then, the targets and goals set back in 1992 have been accomplished. Let me quote from the mission statement as of 2000, which neatly summarises the rationale of what we have been doing:

The National Museum of Ethnology takes care of, studies and presents cultural heritage from the world at large.

By doing so, the museum wants to provide insight into the differences and similarities between cultures, and into the worldwide interconnections between them. Thus the museum hopes to enhance understanding and respect for the culture and identity of others among a broad and diverse audience.

What next?

But is everything fine now? All done, relax, have a good time? No, I don't think so.

There are issues preying on my mind that make me feel uneasy, where I think we have to make policy shifts and get on the move again. Basically, I have two worries.

The first is the vast, but dormant and untouchable collection in store. It amounts to some two hundred thousand objects, yet only 1.5 percent of these are on display. Why are we putting heaps of money into conserving collections that are not going to come to

¹ Go to <www.rmv.nl> or <www.netherlands.national.ethnology.museum> and click on 'collections', 'exhibitions', or 'digital publications'.

² Countries participating in the ASEM process include: Austria, Belgium, Brunei, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxemburg, Malaysia, Netherlands, Philippines, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, Vietnam and the European Commission. Cf. <<http://www.asemus.org/smvk/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=284>>.

life in the foreseeable future? Why and for whom are we keeping them? As a repository of curatorial source material only? Or are there other modes of usage, which we haven't explored and discovered yet?

ASEMUS

Yes, there are new modes of using collections. This is where the ASEMUS 3 network² comes in. The network operates under the auspices of ASEM summits, that is heads of state of twenty-five European and Asian countries. It is financed by the Asia-Europe Foundation in Singapore, and its mission is to share collections of Asian cultural heritage in museums in those twenty-five countries.

A fine example of such sharing of collections is the long-term loan that we have recently given to the new Singapore Asian Civilisations Museum. They wanted to show Indonesia's history but did not have the proper collections. We have many of them, given the history of Dutch involvement in the region. So the deal was obvious. There is some sponsorship here from Dutch industries based in Singapore.

ASEMUS actually brings together a small group of museum people from these 25 countries on a fairly regular basis. On a practical level, its aim is getting a series of long-term projects of cooperation going. The network was launched at the Barcelona session of the International Council of Museums, and we reported back in 2004 at Seoul ICOM.

Showing people by showing objects?

The second issue is this. The museum is now primarily about people, and makes this clear by creating a high quality atmosphere and a setting for better mutual understanding and respect. But still, it considers collections and curatorial expertise its main assets and instruments of operation. Can you really properly and adequately present people by focussing almost exclusively on their and their ancestors' objects? I have some doubts.

Minpaku

My first encounter with being ethnologised myself was in Osaka Minpaku — this very large and prestigious new Japanese Museum of Ethnology — a few years ago. Minpaku has a small display about Europe, and shows three stories: Europeans use beautiful but primitive wooden tools for farming — no machines like tractors or harvesters. They live in gipsy caravans — that is a sort of Dormobile powered by a horse — and they have small distilleries at home — so they obviously drink a lot of hard liquor. Is that my Europe? No,

not really; and neither is it the Europe of my father, mother and grandparents. It's Europe as it has accidentally come to be represented in Minpaku's collections, assembled by Japanese professors of anthropology.

Andries Botha

Let's go on creating problems. Here is my next example, from closer by. We commissioned works from twelve artists from all over the world. Okwui Enwezor helped us make the selection. Andries Botha from South Africa was one of the artists invited. His work is called 'An Outdoor Archive', and it consists of a small collection of day-to-day items, collected during an anthropological fieldtrip through the Netherlands. Botha wanted to document the essence of Dutch life in a small collection of artefacts.

With the objects come very authoritative texts in Afrikaans — explaining the Dutch character in terms of those objects. For instance, models of houses in Delft blue china, as given by the national airline KLM to business-class passengers, are described as symbols of power, wealth, and status. Again, this is at best only slightly funny, or insulting if you wish. It certainly generates a very strong feeling: but that's not me!¹

What Botha actually did — and what he set out to do — is mirror the way ethnological museums have always dealt with other people. The objects on display were the curator's choice, placed in solemn isolation and autonomy. The explanations given articulated institutional or curatorial wisdom, and were in no way endorsed by, or in tune with the views of, the victims of the exhibitions — the people under study themselves. And that's the essence of being ethnologised!

This strongly raises the issue: what is an adequate way of presenting people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, values and beliefs in a museum? That I consider to be the most important bridging task facing us now. Actually, we started working on it a while ago, and ICOM-ASPAC chairman Amar Galla — with his experience in inclusiveness — is helping us to develop experimental settings and solutions. I will give you one example of what I feel is a promising new development.

Werwat

Werwat is a sculpture from the Moluccan Islands that was brought into the collections of the NEM some century ago. There is also a

¹ According to a notice on the Internet, *These objects, which he came across during his 'safari' through the Netherlands include speculaas (traditional spiced cookies), bicycle parts, dildos, dog turds and a football.* See Stichting Kunst en Openbare Ruimte: Art as Cultural Critique, <<http://www.skor.nl/artefact-634-en.html>>. [Editor].

Moluccan community in the Netherlands that immigrated some fifty years ago, after Indonesia became independent. A few years ago, we staged an exhibition on the South-East Moluccan Islands: Tanimbar, Kei, and the other islands. People from the Moluccas were involved in the preparation of the exhibition. One of our curators took an old man to our store, where the objects selected for the exhibition were already laid out. When he got to Werwat the old man suddenly stopped dead, and started talking to the figure in his native tongue. Having done that, he was ready to go on.

The curator then discreetly asked him what he had said to the statue. 'I recognised this statue', the man said, 'It is a protective ancestor from the village my family comes from. I have made apologies to the ancestor for the fact that he is so far from home, that he is now buried in this inadequate place. I have asked him to forgive us and told him that it is very important for us, Moluccans in the Netherlands, that he will soon be visible again in our exhibition.'

This is an experience I will never forget. All of a sudden, a wooden sculpture — one like many more in the museum's collections — comes to life again through an encounter with an old man.

When the man started talking, he was actually recreating the cultural setting from which both he and the statue originated. The tangible object suddenly started shining again with this intangible — but very real — cultural context coming to life again. The exhibition was very successful with the Moluccan community in the Netherlands.

The intangible cultural heritage

To me, Werwat has made clear that there is a vast area to be explored: the intangible heritage of the people from which our collections originate.

I have come to appreciate this notion of 'intangible cultural heritage' through my contacts with colleagues from Eastern Asia, especially Korea and Japan, in the ASEMUS network. Last year, they invited me to give some thought to the question as to whether and how my museum paradigm might be informed and fertilised by this notion. It was a very fruitful exercise! These are my main conclusions:

- (1) It can resolve paradoxes in our conservation ethics.
- (2) It gives oral traditions a new status.
- (3) It can connect the museum with new stakeholders.

A bridge across the Pacific is being offered, and making the crossing can be very fruitful. We can learn a lot over there.

EIJA-MAIJA KOTILAINEN

Are we living in the golden age of the ethnographical museum?

Over the whole history of the existence of ethnographical museums,¹ or museums in which various world cultures are represented, their tasks and their place in the cultural context have been the topic of constant argument. The significance of ethnographical museums has changed over time. In the period from the 1890s to the 1920s American ethnographical museums, for instance, played a leading role in the development of anthropological field research, in theory, and in the training of specialists [Collier 1954: 768–779]. Later, scientific work and the training of anthropologists became a prerogative of the universities. The link between universities and ethnographical museums was not broken: the Pitt Rivers Museum is part of Oxford University, and there is also an anthropological museum in Cambridge. The staff of these museums take an active part in teaching and in university research. Today's ethnographical museums vary widely in their size, in the composition of their collections, and in their exhibition policy. Michael Ames's remark [Ames 1986: 28] that *'the prevailing attitude today in anthropology towards museum anthropology [...] is that it is drifting about in the swampy backwaters of the discipline, suitable only for clowns and dead ducks'*, is not entirely applicable to them.

Eija-Maija Kotilainen

Museum of Cultures, Helsinki

¹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [1998: 17–18] defines ethnographic objects as objects created by ethnography. She considers that something falls under the category of an ethnographic object not on the basis of its provenance, but through the decisions of people and institutions which create ethnography by various means through their research and exhibitions. Not every object is originally or inevitably ethnographical. The category is created by scholarly and museum tradition.

One element that all ethnographic museums have in common is that the birth and development of their collections is more or less linked with colonialism. A significant part of the collections of European museums was collected by people who served in colonial administrations, or by travelling traders, researchers, or missionaries. If the collecting activity of these people were assessed in accordance with the ethical norms of the present day, the picture in most cases would be decidedly unattractive. It is obvious that in countries that have administered extensive colonial territories — the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany — collecting could not have existed without the colonial administration. However, even some smaller countries were part of the network of European colonial powers. When Finland had the status of a Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire (1809–1917), many Finns worked in Russian colonies in Alaska, in Siberia, and elsewhere in that extensive empire. Finnish officials and soldiers in Russian service often collected objects for museums. These years were also extremely favourable ones for Finnish researchers, who had the chance to organise expeditions to various corners of Russia. This period enriched the National Museum of Finland with several valuable collections.

All ethnographical museums, both earlier and today, face the problem of their colonial past. Many countries have only recently taken note of this painful aspect of their history. The colonial history of Belgium, its relations with the Congo Free State in 1884–1908 and with the Belgian Congo in 1908–1960 have only recently become the object of broad public discussion. The Royal Museum for Central Africa, in Tervuren, became involved in these debates in the spring of 2005 when it opened the first exhibition in the history of colonialism to have the title *Memory of Congo. The Colonial Era*. The countries of Northern Europe have also begun critical research into their role in the history of the modern Democratic Republic of Congo. An example was the travelling exhibition *Traces of Congo. The Countries of Northern Europe in Congo, Congo in the Countries of Northern Europe*.¹

Kenneth Hudson [1991: 457–464], in his critical article ‘How Misleading Does an Ethnographical Museum Have to Be?’, has given an unprejudiced account of the arguments around this problem in recent decades. He discovers that none of the museums of which he is aware can convey the characteristic features of the communities represented in their exhibitions. Films, television programmes,

¹ This exhibition was shown at the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm in November 2005 and in the Helsinki Museum of Cultures in May 2006. At the time of writing it can be seen at the National Museum of Denmark, in Copenhagen, and in the spring of 2007 it will move to the museum of cultural history at the University of Oslo.

and public lectures turn out to be much more successful in this regard. Museum exhibitions provide some visual enjoyment, but they are prone to avoid showing fears, poverty, illness, the harsh climate, and physical suffering—in other words, reality. According to Hudson, ethnographical museums give a disproportionate share of their attention to traditional culture and thereby promote an arrogant and alienated attitude towards the living people who belong to these cultures. This researcher suggests that the time of the ethnographical museum may simply have passed.

So far, Hudson's prediction has not come true. Despite the critical remarks, or, perhaps, because of them, western European ethnographical museums have devoted much energy in recent years to development and self-reform. In 2001, the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden (Netherlands) reopened, and shortly before that the expanded and thoroughly renewed Horniman Museum opened its doors in South London. The J.P. Morgan Chase Gallery of North American objects and the Sainsbury African Galleries have been part of the British Museum for many years. A completely reformed Museum of World Cultures opened in Gothenburg in 2004, in a new building. The Musée du quai Branly opened in Paris in 2006, dedicated to the arts and civilisations of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and America.

The right to one's own cultural heritage

Who has the right to control the information that is disseminated by museums? What rights to that information belong to the cultures or minorities that are represented in museum exhibitions? The critics of ethnographical museums say that the museums have appointed themselves as preservers of the material culture, and interpreters of the history, of other people and other peoples [Ames 1994: 98–106]. This problem comes down to the question of who has the right and the power to interpret history and culture.

The curators of exhibitions that represent traditional cultures and communities are often accused of showing these cultures and communities not as dynamic, living phenomena, but as something that belongs exclusively to the past [Simpson 1996: 35–43]. Museum visitors might come to the conclusion that the community being represented has either died out, or that its life has not been subject to change. This type of stagnation is connected with the very nature of a museum collection, as well as with the means by which exhibits are presented. Earlier, the aim of museums was to depict a culture in its 'purity', placing the accent on traditional values and styles and on authentic objects and customs. Such exhibitions simply did not include materials which bore witness to Western influence or to the modernisation of traditional cultures. Thus an image was

created and maintained of societies that were not subject to change, that were static.

The majority of colonial countries received their independence long ago, but cultural colonialism still dominates with regard to them. Museums that show objects of culture and art from the former colonies, by indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities, are guilty of cultural imperialism [Shelton 1997: 33–34]. Even national museums, traditional bastions of national identity and unity, now face new problems [Sandahl 2001: 92–101]. Around the world, demands can be heard for museums to take better account in their exhibition policy and in other activities of the interests of aboriginals, minorities, and immigrants. The threadbare remnants of museum colonialism are disappearing with particular obviousness in the United States and Canada, where well-organised indigenous peoples and minorities have been firmly disputing the museums' claim to be their representatives, lawful heirs, and benefactors ever since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Although North American museums have been taking notice of indigenous and minority demands and have significantly modified their actions and display policy in accordance with them, the clash of opinions has not stopped. In 1992, when the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to America was marked, several exhibitions were mounted around this theme and a number of them attracted protests and criticism [Simpson 1996: 40–43].

All world museums have responded to political pressure on the part of indigenous groups and minorities and, taking account of changed public values, have changed their exhibition policy. This relates to European museums as well, although here the arguments about the rights of aboriginals and minorities to their cultural heritage have been milder than in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. But powerful immigrant groups have exerted a significant influence on the situation in Europe over the course of recent decades. Many European cities are now multicultural in the full sense: the world has come to us, in the person of the immigrants. Michael Ames [1994: 104–108] justly remarks: *'Museums and anthropologists can continue to speak about others, though of course no longer for them (a right they once may have assumed but never really had). They can speak jointly with those whose materials they keep or study. They can continue to speak about cultural encounters, the careers of objects and institutions, and the complicated objectification that occurs during them'*.

What do modern visitors expect from an ethnographical museum?

Exhibitions are part of a wider Western tradition of representation. This relates to ethnographical exhibitions and to museums dedicated

to world cultures. Ethnographical museums face a specific problem: that of how to represent and comment on the phenomenon of the 'foreign / exotic' to the modern viewer and on his behalf. Today people have extensive experience of direct contact and personal acquaintance with various countries and cultures. As a result, ethnographical museums are finding it ever harder to offer something unique and unexpected. People can now find in reality things for which they once had to go to museums. In the 19th century museums exhibited 'real' Laplanders or Africans alongside original artefacts. Museums must compete with the latest technological systems, which can translate a sound and an image from any corner of the world in real time. As before, museums appeal only to one or two of the senses. The exhibits do not include taste and smell, even though these are central elements of many cultures.

Only a few years ago, the use of technology to create a new and unfamiliar experience seemed the only chance museums had to win in the competition for viewers' attention and entertainment. Experience is very subjective, so it is difficult to evoke it in any predictable way. In creating an experience, memories have been used successfully. The viewer's personal recollections can work thoroughly successfully in those cases where the exhibition depicts a cultural heritage which the viewer considers to be his own. But when the museum visitor sees a display of a culture that is alien to him, the use of personal experience becomes more difficult. Here the exhibition must rely not on personal experience, but on more distant and universal forms of experience and identification. Today practically all museum workers agree that the best exhibitions combine the presentation of facts with an appeal to experience. The activation of personal experience aids the acquisition of knowledge on a more profound level and allows intuitive reception, and a new approach to the most varied problems.

As has already been said, technological progress has rendered our way of life much more dynamic: it has created opportunities to work, travel, and communicate at an ever greater speed. In 2000, James M. Bradburne [2001: 17–34] gave an interesting lecture in Stockholm on museums and their role in the rapidly changing modern world. He said:

I believe our museums are now in crisis — assailed on two sides by changes that threaten the very core of the institution's mission. On the one hand, museums, the repositories of the real, are becoming victims of their own success. The enormous number of visitors drawn to large museums by «blockbuster» exhibitions and aggressive marketing now makes it almost impossible for those visitors to experience the museum collections in any but the most trivial sense. On the other hand, many smaller museums are seeing visitor numbers drop drastically, as the

museum visit is considered to be «old-fashioned», and many new educational opportunities formerly provided by the museum visit are now available, at home, on the computer.

In essence, Bradburne advises museums to turn to an ‘old-fashioned’ model, after the manner of libraries. A museum, in his understanding, must first of all be a freeform learning environment to which people can return again and again. Visitors are to be users, to whom the museum offers its materials and information. Success would not be reflected in visitor numbers in a crude sense, but by repeat visits over a continuous stretch of time. The job of a museum must be to equip these visitors/users with tools to understand the world in which we live, to understand and to grasp reality. The key element here is the museum’s own collection, presented in an optimal fashion.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [2001: 55–66], reviewing the Swedish exhibition *Svåra saker/farliga saker* (‘Difficult Questions: Objects and Narratives that Distress and Disturb’), called for an analogous ‘old-fashioned’ approach. The exhibition was made up of objects that evoked distress or threat, selected by museum professionals and by regular visitors and equipped with narrative texts. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett praised the temporal motionlessness and simplicity of the exhibition, which left visitors the physical and mental space to pay careful attention to the objects on show. For financial reasons, museums will scarcely be able or willing to abandon the ‘blockbuster’ exhibition; but perhaps they will combine them with smaller exhibitions, ‘old-fashioned’, simple, considered and thought-provoking, compiled essentially out of the museum’s own collection.

What are the solutions to the new problems?

Criticism of ethnographical museums has played a positive role, because it has both spurred on museums and encouraged them to change. Many ethnographical museums in Western Europe have been restructured. The renewal and refitting of museum premises has frequently been followed by the opening of new exhibitions devoted to world cultures. Some museums have continued with permanent exhibitions organised on the geographical principle (Leiden, the British Museum), but both permanent and temporary exhibitions are ever more frequently organised around some specific theme. There are several reasons for this. Exhibitions arranged by geography risk being superficial. They usually lack historical depth, which makes it impossible to illustrate the dynamic of the given society’s life. In addition, it is not easy to represent the full spectrum of cultures from an extensive geographical area. Ethnographical museums are forced to develop new, more attractive ways of presenting cultures.

Ethnographical museums are in competition not only with one another, but also with museums whose exhibitions include works of art and culture from outside Europe. Fine art museums' exhibitions have come to resemble those in ethnographical museums, and vice versa. Until recently there were arguments over where modern non-European art should be housed, in museums of fine art or in those of ethnography. Today it is represented in both.

In order to attract the attention of the public, museums have to offer something new and unique. Earlier, people went to ethnographical museums in order to see things that they could not have seen anywhere else: exotic objects from distant countries. Now they have the chance to travel to distant countries themselves, or else to get an impression of life there in front of the television in the comfort of their own homes. Financial reasons are forcing ethnographical museums to organise shows that can attract large numbers of visitors. Some ethnographical museums have started to show non-Western fine art, and have thereby 'renewed' their collections in the fine art sphere. Another approach has been to underline the historical character and value of ethnographical collections: many of them are very ancient, and represent the past of a particular field better than they do the present. There is a significant body of material in Western museums that is not represented in museums in the countries of its origin. Some ethnographical museums could justly be called museums of world history.

Many ethnographical museums do have an acute sense of their social responsibility and have adopted a decided political stance on important public questions. Museums do not stand aside from difficult or controversial problems. Among the exhibitions that have discussed hard and relevant questions is the Gothenburg Museum of World Cultures exhibition *The Fever of Namelessness. Aid in the Age of Globalisation and Trade*, devoted to human trafficking and slave labour. In the last few years, ethnographical museums have radically changed the content of their exhibitions and have made use of technology, but this development need not stop here. If museums want to become really open institutions, capable of responding quickly to relevant questions and possessing a weight with the public, they will have to move in the direction of pluralistic opinions and methods [McFadzean 2001: 76–91]. Museum staff must recognise that they are addressing a public that is socially and culturally very diverse, and must take corresponding account in their exhibitions and programmes of themes of cultural diversity. Recently museums have quite often invited representatives of local communities to interpret their own culture and history as consultants, guest curators, and producers of exhibitions and other programmes. Cooperation between museums and local communities

can take place in the sphere of collecting an oral tradition, collecting photographs, in research, and in consultation. A new problem that has arisen for museums is that of how to tell children from immigrant families about their own history and origins.

An important target for all museums is young people. Will museums remain in their consciousness when parents and teachers stop taking them to exhibitions? Do museums have anything to offer people who have grown up in the thick of information technology and the entertainment industry, and who are very capable of selecting the facts and experience that matter to them out of the turbulent flow of information that surrounds them? Museums are losing, in the field of making an impression, to the entertainment industry. Their strength lies elsewhere. One possible goal is to structure the information flow and offer critical and creative ways to analyse the phenomena of today's global and multi-cultural world.

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As was shown in the contributions and discussion during the Round Table on ethnographical museums at the Sixth Congress of Ethnographers and Anthropologists of Russia (St Petersburg, 28 June — 2 July 2005), the dominant view of the museum at the present stage sees it as a social institution included in the information and communications strategy of post-industrial consumer society. This social emphasis in the definition of the phenomenon of the museum among cultural anthropologists seems slightly unnatural, even paradoxical, given their aspiration to the fullest, most unified, and most integrated description of the spaces of ethnic culture.

For an ethnologist who has spent a long time working in museums, the museum doubtless seems to be a fact of culture, and the expert on museums to be above all a researcher of a culture's world of objects. For more than 15 years now I have been reminding students, in my course of lectures on the conceptual space of the museum, that we know of cultures without writing but we know of none without objects. The human being always exists in an organised space, and naturally extrapolates the rules of its construction into other spheres of activity. We see a museum exhibition as a natural text, whose structure is subordinated to the logic of understanding the world. These socio-cultural functions of the museum, so important and so constantly stated, belong to the field of communication, while the object of culture exists independently of attempts by modern readers, who have a poor knowledge of the language of things and struggle to master the grammar of the objects' code, to interpret its texts. In this sense the museum is immanently inherent in culture. It is not just linked with the universal models of the transmission and preservation of heritage: it is itself a part of that heritage.

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Modern discussions around the crisis of the social functions of the museum, the crisis of the

museum as worldview, etc., reflect in essence a crisis in the heads of the *Kulturträger*. The problem is not on the museum plane: it is in our attitude to cultural heritage, which, unlike a museum, is constantly changing. The relevance of cultural heritage is determined by the level of stability in the ethnic stereotypes of a concrete society. This level is always present, either in obvious form in the traditional societies or in latent form in the so-called civilised societies: only the communicative strategies change. The modern museum crisis, in essence, is the condition in fact undergone by all the traditional institutions that serve to transmit cultural heritage, which have been drawn into total consumption and are trying to adapt themselves to it. In this situation museums take on the unfamiliar function of managing cultural processes and engaging actively in the market of simulacra, which is harmful to their nature. The main misunderstanding of the development and role of museums consists of the idea that the majority look at them as an institution that preserves cultural values. It is very important to understand that what needs protection is not the cultural values that museums preserve, and which modern managers try to manipulate, but the museums themselves as naturally-formed parts of cultural heritage.

The museum, as an organised space in which the constructive elements are things, is valuable in itself. Any entry into this space, or conceptual impact on the museum as a perception of the world, is a fact of culture rather than a product of *Kulturträger* activity.

Cultural heritage cannot be a product on the market. The strategy of ritual, symbolic exchange: this is what belongs to the nature of its functioning and of the demand for it as a mechanism of communication. The distinctive function of the museum consists in the fact that there must necessarily be a demand for the information it transmits in space and time, in any forms. If this does not happen, the collections gradually lose their potential and turn into loads of meaningless objects. This distinctive paradox of the relevance of cultural heritage requires special approaches and different consumer models, unlike those offered us by modern economic strategy. The values of a museum cannot be traded like oil and gas. They are not raw materials. But we can see such approaches in the tremendous growth of exhibition activity, which serves not only scientific and educational purposes but also commercial ones. Museums cannot 'make money', as the new-minted managers tell them to. And this is all the more true in Russia and in St Petersburg, where the majority of museums are State institutions. Here we should remember that cultural heritage must develop in market situations in accordance with a different law from that governing the trade in natural resources, which are mostly not renewable. The special feature of the reproduction of cultural heritage is that the more we use it for its direct purpose, the more of it we have.

Another important aspect is the phenomenon of the communication crisis in the museum sphere, which cannot at all be reduced to the system of interaction with new categories of social partners and investors: above all it exists in the relations between museums and their visitors, between one museum and another, between museum professionals working in different museums, and even between close colleagues who belong to different generations or who work in different departments of the same museum. This gives rise to many of the commoner problems of museum life, such as the fall in visitor numbers, the disproportions in the development of the museum network (the appearance of twin or surrogate museums and of various forms of quasi-museums: museums without stock, museums without visitors, exhibitions without museum objects). It is obvious that new communications techniques represent the most likely means by which Russian museums can solve the complex of problems characteristic of the transitional post-Soviet period.

Will these techniques change the substance of the ethnographical museum as a space that preserves the natural mechanisms by which cultural heritage is transmitted? Will we be able to enter a dialogue with the works of great artists on computer monitors, or will the depictions of them remain just visual information? We suggest not: they will still remain in the field of interpretations and analytical strategies, which are so important to maintain cultural dialogue in a dynamically developing information civilisation.

The history of the formation of the collections of the ethnographical section of the Russian Museum of Emperor Alexander III is highly revealing. Their significance is growing at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, when ethnographical reality seems practically to have disappeared, and takes on a significance that was not present when these collections were formed. Museum collections have become a full-fledged source, which adds to the descriptions of ethnographical reality made at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and in part allows these descriptions to be re-understood. A hundred years later, we see that the definition of traditional society as the base category of anthropology is a result of the way reality was understood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At that time culture was the most fully described and categorised, but ethnographical realities became a kind of standard by which ethnographers constructed their interpretations, typological schemes, and methods for researching the life of the people: '*the ideal form of the life of the peasants*'. Today this system of representations has undergone substantial changes; work at the level of empirical descriptions and comparative-historical interpretations of ethnographical facts is relatively non-productive, and the modern understanding of ethno-cultural traditions demands new complexes of methods

and approaches. In this situation the ethnographical works of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century are being re-understood: they are beginning to be seen not just as sources, but are entering the history of science and knowledge on the level of the analysis of facts. While possessing lasting value as a source of information, they need to be understood afresh from a conceptual point of view. Museum collections and their value as information, in contrast, seem solid and constant. In the real process of study and understanding, however, there emerges a dialectical view of the collections' existence in the bowels of the museum as an integral and self-sufficient information space. Now we are fully aware that these collections were mostly assembled by researchers who had their own ideas about ethnography and their own methods, and that the materials they collected, reflecting general tendencies, are shot through with a spirit of subjectivity or, to be more exact, of individuality. So far as the REM was concerned, there was a general Programme [Programma 1903], but each collector interpreted and followed it in accordance with his own scientific tasks and research passions. These passions reflected the scientific intuition of the researcher, which corresponded to a general scientific picture. In this sense the Programme is an invariant model, reflecting the objective level of development of ethnography as a discipline; and this level is reflected in the entirety of the variations of concrete research. In the museum collection there is an obvious imbalance in the collecting landscape: the apparent completeness of the collection actually reveals lacunae whose explanation is not coincidental, but rather linked with the objectives of each researcher, however broad the overall remit that might have been given him or her.

Ethnographical exhibitions are above all a modelling of ethno-cultural space. The assembly of collections, drawing objects out of their cultural context, would be meaningless if they were not included in a new context, used to construct a new text, which in its turn would be impossible without the scientific description and interpretation of museum objects. The exhibition is just such a text, organised out of things that are meaningless from the point of view of pragmatics: 'exhausted artefacts', extracted from the real context of a culture.

Things, within the museum collection, continue to live their own lives and to enter into relationships with other museum objects: sometimes we have to dig to find the meanings and significances that led them to be included on the shelves. An object in a museum is above all a part of culture, preserving memories of its own experience. In the medium a thing becomes self-sufficient. What excites us, when we display a cracked pot? The context, or the preserved form? The perfection of the craftsman, or the chance to approach a vanished culture and glimpse behind the curtains of an evasive reality?

Museum exhibitions as a sphere of scientific and educational activity represent objects of culture interpreted with reference to the leading scientific theories, and with their help create a new reality, refracted through the prism of our conceptually organised experience. From the viewpoint of the logic of the development of the museum as a phenomenon of culture, the exhibition is its attempt at self-description. The museum gives birth to texts which pass beyond the limits of its own competency — in terms of semantic structure and a given communicational model. The museum, as a cultural space that gives birth to new meanings, is a tool for the creation of mythological discourse.

Models of communication in archaic cultures or in societies of traditional type were organised as systems of rituals. Much of their meaning is lost for a modern person, and the preserved forms seem obsolete, fragments of the meaningless exotica of a vanishing aesthetic. We have difficulty in understanding the logic of the rituals for obtaining sacred fire by rubbing bits of wood, or the meaning of the ritual offering of loaves and the breaking of the vessels in a wedding ritual. At same time it does not strike us as paradoxical that we do not know the schemes and logic of the construction of the models of modern means of communication — the computers and telecommunications networks to which we entrust information and grant priority in dialogue. How accurately do they convey the information? Doesn't the abundance of forms of communication create a situation of epistemological catastrophe?

Visits to local and school museums in settlements from Tobolsk to Salekhard as part of a programme of research into inter-ethnic communication and the preservation of local ethno-cultural traditions unexpectedly revealed an important problem: a difference of principle in how the autochthonous population treats the museum space. Khanty, for instance, treat as sacred objects not only the exhibits in ethnographical exhibitions, but even the model bear in the 'Nature in the Region' section (in Oktiabrsky settlement), and make ritual offerings to it. The Russian population also treats Orthodox objects in an exhibition, such as icons, as sacred objects. Entering the museum, women cover their heads with scarves and say prayers, making the exhibition complex into something like a shrine in a church or the traditional 'holy' red corner in the home. The mechanisms of museum communication are organically linked here with the traditional system of perceiving the world: in essence, the model of ritual communication is extrapolated on to museum objects.

From our, ethnographical, point of view the museum space is interesting to the extent that it provokes the reaction of archaic traditions to innovations, to contemporary systems of viewing the world. In the given case we observe semantic inversion: the object

in the exhibition's 'new reality' remains sacred to the bearer of a traditional world picture, retaining traditional meanings and models of communication that determine the strategy of his behaviour in the museum space. The semiotic functions of the museum space and of the ethnographical exhibition are realised by means of the coexistence of two parallel semantic systems: the scientific/museum metatext and the ethno-cultural context, the archaic tradition, representing, in essence, the universal archetypes of everyday consciousness.

In archaic cultures, ritual does not reproduce vanishing forms of culture only in order to preserve and maintain a tradition. The reproduction itself is a condition of the culture's existence. In this sense the reconstructed forms in ritual are an attempt by the culture at self-identification. Reconstruction is not only an operation to restore vanishing forms, it is also an inseparable part of culture — the internal mechanism that secures the adaptive processes of the self-identification of phenomena of the culture and the person in a permanently changing space. In this connection one can say that the function of the ethnographical museum and the experience of scientific historical thought, in turning to the methods of reconstructing phenomena and events (for instance, by creating museum exhibitions), go back in essence to the traditional of ritual practices.

From this position the object of ethnographical research in museums turns out to be not an ethnos, but ethno-cultural traditions: internal mechanisms for the regulation of links between generations, guaranteeing the stability of the ethnos as a social organism.

In the ethnographical realities of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the traditional picture of the world appeared above all in 'ritual forms of behaviour', in rules for the construction of ritual objects, and also in other semiotic functions of the objectified forms of the culture. The point is the category of the sacred and its reflection in the mentality of the ethnos with reference to the environment in which people lived. The sacred is always drifting in cultural space, but it is subordinated to the rules for its construction and interpretation in the algorithm of tradition.

In ethnographical expeditions or when visiting museums we can observe that attitudes to traditional objects still vary today. There is plenty of evidence for this. In the museum space, an icon might be incorporated into the most varied exhibition complexes. Variations on the given theme might run from traditional art-historical conceptions, systematising icons by chronology, school of icon-painters, iconography, to the memorial expositions of historical

museums, where icons might turn up next to the exhibited person's weapon and clothing. It is obvious that in all these cases the icon as a sacred object and as a cultural symbol loses a significant part of its semantic wealth. As an example one might cite the exhibition of the Dutch miniaturists in the Hermitage, which was organised on a chronological basis and included some outstanding masterpieces. However, these works were not always masterpieces deserving delight and admiration: in their day, many hung in the drawing rooms and bedchambers of ordinary citizens. The Hermitage collection possesses a beautiful collection of furniture from the period, which would make it quite possible to recreate an interior and display them in their natural context, their ethno-cultural space. That is probably what an ethnographical museum that sought to reconstruct the everyday would do; but it is not the job of an art museum, where other conceptions are dominant.¹ Conversely, one can say that the art-historical paradigm destroys the ethnographical-museum discourse. At the same time a conceptual show of original art by Australian aborigines, in the Hermitage rather than in an ethnographical museum, would need totally different exhibition decisions both on the level of concept (structure) and on that of design (integral visual image).

Thus the museum as a cultural phenomenon is immanently inherent in space that has been grasped by human beings. I would say that it is one of the ways of taming reality. The past pursues people. It has lost its limits and needs clear horizons and firm lines. So the museum appears: a model of the past which opens before us in things and in vanished forms. If the past pursues us, we go to the museum and find answers to the questions that have arisen. In this connection a museum exhibition is an arena, where 'domesticated' things from past experience, an experience that does not belong to us, can be found. But what makes them interesting? The attempt to know the experience of our ancestors and to see vanished objects — or the chance to stop time and prolong experience? Probably it is all these things at once.

Reference

Programma dlia sobiraniya etnograficheskikh predmetov [A Programme for the Collection of Ethnographic Objects]. SPb., 1903.

¹ It is in fact increasingly common for Western art galleries, at least, to show furniture and artefacts from a given period alongside paintings: see for example the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. [Editor].

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Ethnographical museums are facing a tough problem in the 21st century: they have to continue fulfilling their traditional mission of collecting, preserving, studying, and publicising one or other ethnographical culture, but they must also compete in the rapidly developing field of the leisure industry, if they are to attract visitors (especially of the younger generation) who now have many other places to go for entertainment and who seem rather uninterested in traditional glass cases full of ‘grandma’s old stuff’. In any event, that is the situation in Armenia for museums of an ethnographical bent.

This does not mean that museums need to attract, for instance, teenagers by using the methods employed by some American advertising agencies: they do not need to dispatch ethnographers to study the fast-changing youth culture ‘in the field’ and offer goods in accordance with teenagers’ demands and taste. But this culture must be known, if elements within it are to be used to introduce young people to museum culture. For example, over the last five or six years, the house museum of the poet Avetik Isaakian (1875–1957) in Yerevan, has been working like this: pupils from the top forms at school who are studying the poet’s work are brought to the museum, but they are not simply acquainted with the exhibits. The tour guide conducts a thematic lesson with them, during which they read Isaakian’s poems or their own, sing songs setting Isaakian’s words, etc. In the end the best two pupils — a boy and a girl — are selected, and as a prize they are allowed to put on a nice felt hat, fashionable at the beginning of the 20th century and familiar from photographs of the poet, and a lady’s hat with a feather that belonged to the poet’s wife. The boy is given a chance to lean on the poet’s walking-stick, which Yerevan people know well from the city centre statue, a popular place to meet up. The winners are allowed to be photographed in that get-up, which they react to with pride

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and triumph, and with great pleasure, and with scarcely suppressed merriment as well. The whole thing takes on the character of a sort of rite of initiation: the hats and the stick are brought out from the cupboard and put on with due ceremony, thanks to which their doubles in the glass classes, the obligatory dumb and ‘boring’ exhibits of similar house museums, take on a particular meaning and become filled with life. The pupils are thus made to feel like guests of honour in the poet’s home, rather than ordinary museum visitors. We should also note that this is a way for them to get to know city interiors and city life of the 1950s, because any real house museum (one that functioned while its subject was alive and that still holds his spirit, rather than one that was built or reconstructed subsequently) is in fact a museum of ethnography.

It is interesting that in the town of Giumri (formerly Aleksandropol), where Isaakian came from, there is another Isaakian house museum, but this time one that reflects the rural-town ethnography that surrounded the poet in his youth. This is, in fact, a museum of the everyday life of the town of Aleksandropol at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, including details of rural life that the house inherited from the poet’s parents, who moved there from a nearby village.

A project has recently been completed, also aimed at schoolchildren, funded by the Open Society Institute, and entitled *One Day in Isaakian’s House*. The children had to spend the whole day in the house museum, where, on top of the regular tour and a chance to get to know the house and its exhibits more freely, they took part in baking traditional *lavash* bread, during which they were introduced to the corresponding household equipment and its cultural context. They also recited the poet’s verses, sang settings of his words and also folk-songs of the time (modern songs were not allowed), and engaged in folklore — riddles, ritual formulae, and jokes — for which Giumri was always famous. Everything could be photographed and recorded on video, which was done with great enthusiasm. At the present time the museum directors are looking for the means to continue this new tradition, on a smaller scale, perhaps.

It will perhaps be guessed that I do not think ethnographical museums are in crisis. I understand, of course, that high technology is transforming museums and attracting new visitors by quite other means. At the same time I believe that even in the absence (temporary, I hope) of this technology it is quite possible to find ways, even simple ones, of attracting visitors with the most varied requirements into ethnographical museums. I have already discussed house museums as potential ethnographical museums. I want to note that even those house museums where the celebrity concerned never lived, or lived only briefly, become centres of ethnographical ‘mem-

ory' and organisers of new traditions. For instance, in the house museum of another well-known Armenian poet, Egishe Charents (1897–1937), the tradition was restored in the 1980s of *dastakhum*, the annual autumn treat—a tradition begun by the poet himself, seemingly on the basis of his own childhood memories. On this day he would treat friends, fellow writers, artists, performers, students, and passers-by to fruit and wine. In the new, museum tradition the first to take part in the *dastakhum* were people who had known the poet, together with his admirers, and the event took on the character of a typical city holiday. Today the circle of participants has narrowed significantly, but it is quite capable of expanding again if the museum becomes more prosperous.

In another museum, which never became a house museum because the film-maker Sergei Paradzhanov (1924–1990), for whom it was built, died a year before the house was finished, there is also a tradition for Paradzhanov's friends to gather at least once a year. Fortunately the number of living people who knew Paradzhanov is quite large, but every year new people come along to these memorial days, and discover the unexpected, richly coloured ethnographical world of Paradzhanov — although this is ethnography of quite another type, combining elements linked to the Tbilisi life of the Paradzhanov family with the pseudo-ethnography created and often mystified by the film-maker himself. Here, I think, there lurks another answer to the question about a crisis of ethnographical museums. There is no crisis in the true sense, because ethnography appears in museums in the most unexpected forms. We have just not got used yet to the new boundaries of ethnography and to how it can be reflected in museums.

Among the exhibits in the Paradzhanov museum is a collection of hats which Paradzhanov made in memory of unplayed roles for the Georgian actress Nato Vachnadze (chief place in the museum is given to collages and plastic and conceptual works by the film-maker, who was also an artist of enormous importance). The museum continued Paradzhanov's tradition of letting women visitors try on hats that obviously suited them or that they expressed a wish to try on. But soon the museum director noticed that the hats were visibly losing their original form (Paradzhanov had put them together out of the most unexpected and sometimes fragile elements), so he had to order special glass cases quickly in order to save them. However, visitors are still brought into contact with the exhibits, albeit in a different way: for instance, they are given wine from bottles labelled 'Paradzhanov's wine', copied from a bottle in the Paradzhanov collection.

In general, museums' 'Don't Touch' attitude seriously annoys many visitors and at the same time intrigues them. To that extent it was

unexpected that the exhibition of the art and ethnography of Oceania in Yerevan in 1997 took the opposite, ‘Do Touch’ attitude.¹ This general desire to get to know exhibits up close can be easily satisfied by making copies of the most attractive exhibits, which people are allowed to touch, as is done in some overseas museums. This could become a principle of how ethnographical museums are organised: there could be particular areas for ‘touchable’ exhibits, replicas of the ‘not touchable’ rarities in the glass cases.

2

In connection with the exhibition from Mishutushkin’s collection I remember another interesting approach, which is in tune with the questions under discussion here. The hall where the exhibition took place was divided into two parts: the left, ‘feminine’, part showed everyday and household objects, while the right, ‘masculine’, part showed ritual objects, which in the traditional culture of Oceania were strictly *tabu* for women and the uninitiated.

Levon Abrahamian, the Yerevan curator of the exhibition, suggested the following way of solving, or at least of mitigating, the eternal problem of the profanation of the sacred in museums. Explanatory labels were provided only in the left part, while in the right part, where the most mysterious objects were housed, they were displayed without any explanatory text. Intrigued visitors, as a rule, asked museum staff about the reason for this incomprehensible lack of symmetry. Then the curators and tour guides joined the game. They explained the reason for this approach to sacred objects, and led tours through this ‘forbidden’ world, as if initiating the visitors into the secrets of another culture. I remember my impression from such an initiation, and the reaction of other visitors, which can be expressed in a single word: respect for an alien and incomprehensible culture, something you will not always find even at the most technically equipped exhibition with the maximum of written and visual information.

This example relates, one can say, to the ritual attraction of visitors to museum exhibitions. The problem is most easily solved on the level of the ethnographical holiday. For instance, when I was working at the Museum of Ethnography of Armenia (1980s) I took a direct part in organising the traditional holidays of *Navasard* (the autumn New Year, with theatrical shows, folk games, competitions, music, dance, and ritual food) and *Ambartsum* (Ascension Day, with ritual games, girls’ fortune-telling, songs, and a round-dance). Museum visitors, many of whom had specially travelled from various districts of Armenia to take part in the holiday (the museum

¹ True, the show’s curators, ethnographers and museum employees, did not for professional reasons permit this in the absence of the collection’s owner, Nikolai Mishutushkin, who had allowed visitors to touch the exotic exhibits.

is located in a memorial complex 60 kilometres outside Yerevan), were actively drawn into these events. At the same period, at the Museum of the History of the City in Yerevan, they celebrated *Ambartsum* and also a colourful mulberry festival, reconstructed from the customs of old Yerevan, when the ripe berries were first collected from the trees and offered to neighbours and relatives. The Museum of Ethnography invited folk craftspeople specially to these festivals to show their work, much of it made on site, to the visitors; many of these objects were, in essence, replicas of museum exhibits. Those who attended the holiday all also visited the museum, even if only for a brief look.

Similarly, in the courtyard of the Museum of the History of Yerevan was created an interior display made up of museum objects (not including, of course, unique or particularly fragile items, and all of them of relatively recent date), and the holiday took place in this temporary open-air ethnographical museum. True, today, after the energy crisis, the Leninakan earthquake, and other disasters at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, this kind of work to draw people into museum culture is undertaken less. I just wanted to cite these examples, which inspire certainty that ethnographical museums, at any rate the museums of Armenia, have not yet exhausted their ability to be attractive to visitors of the most varied level, even with their present inadequate funding.

JETTE SANDAHL

The Included Other — the Oxymoron of Contemporary Ethnographic Collections?

Museums as institutions of colonial power

The twentieth century saw a number of real changes in the relationship between museums and their surrounding worlds. Most museums were subject to an intensification of their responsibilities as public service institutions. Few museums remained unaffected by epistemological shifts in what constitutes scientific inquiry and knowledge. Ethnographic museums in particular were drawn into the changes brought about by the collapse of traditional colonialism.

Jette Sandahl

Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Early European collections and museums had a fairly distinct purpose in defining a European

identity as different from and opposed to the cultures of people outside Europe. Museums explored and disseminated a value system of European colonialism and European supremacy. As scientific institutions museums tend to accentuate and take great pride in the traditions of enlightenment and discovery. It is necessary, however, also to recognise formative traditions of violence and oppression as a background for the dilemmas currently faced by museums and as history seems to be catching up with ethnographic collections.

By some people within museums and the scientific communities the political and paradigmatic shifts of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are felt and conceptualised as a professional and scientific crisis. By others in the professional field, however, the same transformations are experienced and embraced as an equally strong revitalisation, and a liberation from relationships of power that have long been felt untenable and indefensible.

Museum records — for instance of the National Museum of Denmark — show how by the mid nineteenth century the ethnographic collection was classified and displayed within an evolutionary framework, placing objects, cultures and peoples into what was to become a paradigmatic three-tiered system of distinct and successive periods and stages. In a succession of twenty-two rooms the development of cultures from ‘wild peoples’, to ‘those of lower cultural stages’ to ‘those in transition to higher cultures’ was documented. These stages were then again identified with various stages of the European past, with the most foreign cultures and continents corresponding to the more ancient periods. These foreign cultures were thus excluded from a historic context, demoted to pre-history, leading up to but not part of civilisation.

Records and publications from the twentieth century show how refurbishment and new displays of the ethnographic galleries at the National Museum of Denmark had as a stated aim to transcend this supremacist perspective. But the dilemmas and frustrations encountered testify to the strength of evolutionary thinking. Even when the raw political power of colonialism and imperialism is in decline, the notions of primitivity and backwardness survive.

Museums in transition

At the present time, the ethnographic museums of Europe, with their global collections and knowledge of cultures across the world, seem particularly qualified to address contemporary issues and conflicts of globalisation and large scale migration. With these new challenges and obligations, however, museums encounter again the confines of their traditions and face an often rather painful reorientation to be able to build up a new credibility.

For some museums this process is set in motion by strong pressure groups outside the museum, for others by committed individuals on staff, and for others again it is initiated by direct government intervention — as was the case for the Ethnographic Museum of Gothenburg in its renewal and transformation into the Museum of World Cultures.

The ethnographic collections in Gothenburg were, as were others, rooted in the particular political, legislative and intellectual gaps that made the collecting and extraction of enormous cultural riches from one side of the earth to the other possible. They were founded upon enormous ethical contradictions that allowed explorers and scientists the romance and yearning for nature and a holistic life style, and the fascination with the spiritual life of the other — while selectively scorning local values and legislation, convinced that research was at no costs to be thwarted, and entitled the explorer to take, by whatever means, what was not his.

The Museum of World Cultures asked artist Fred Wilson, who through many years has interpreted the Unconscious of museums, to facilitate its process of self-reflection on its history and value systems.

In *Site Unseen: Dwellings of the Demons*, an installation of museum objects that weaves throughout the Museum of World Cultures, Fred Wilson lays bare the colonial structures of power, the racist and sexist premises on which museum praxis rests. Gently and humorously, he cautions that demons continue to re-emerge to haunt museums, in spite of the organisational and intellectual renewals, in spite of seemingly radical shifts in scientific and political paradigms.

In the installation, he de-masks the traditional protagonists of power, and shifts peripheral people to centre stage, lending a voice to the unspoken and the muted. Through playful juxtapositions of named and anonymous people, he poses the question of who gets to speak, from which position, and whose voice is recognised and heard?

Museum missions and exhibition strategies

The new political agenda for the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg was helped along by an award-winning new building, and by the provision of sufficient funding to tap into contemporary technology and to supplement existing staff with recognised international experts within both content development and design.

During the two years of physical construction and the five years of intellectual, social and emotional re-construction, the museum worked to transform and translate the visions and directives ex-

pressed by government and governmental committees into concrete museum practices.

There were a number of models to be inspired by internationally. Museums like the Women's Museum of Denmark had broken new epistemological ground; the National Museum of the American Indian, National Museum of Australia, the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, had created radically new practices of self-representation and consultation, and had found new concepts for the meaning of collections and knowledge, and of what collections can do in a bicultural and multi-cultural context.

At the onset of the reconstruction the museum worked intensely with a series of proclamations of core values and mission statements encompassing all levels and dimensions of its activities, drawing on principles embedded in the UNESCO and ICOM documents of cultural diversity and cultural democracy, and in the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

Basic values, as written into the new museum's first business plan, were

- Recognising cultural diversity as a wealth in human heritage and cultural pluralism as a basic condition for peace, harmony and cultural stability in the world;
- Recognising different cultures and their expressions as valuable for cultural democracy and cultural harmony based in integration rather than assimilation;
- Recognising cultural integration as a process of conflicts, contradictions and negotiations rather than easy harmony;
- Recognising public participation in the short— and longtime planning of the museum as the basis on which the museum can take an active role in society.

The overall mission statement for the museum was defined as follows:

- In dialogue with the surrounding world and through emotional and intellectual experiences the Museum of World Culture wants to be a meeting place that encourages people to feel at home across borders, to trust and take responsibility for a shared future in a world in constant change.

This overall mission was expanded though a series of statements that explore the meaning of cultural participation and clarify the responsibilities of servicing culturally diverse communities for different sections of the museum.

A fundamental early decision for the Museum of World Cultures was to structure its galleries as a series of concurrent, temporary thematic exhibitions rather than the traditional permanent displays. A number of museological considerations and deliberations were behind this decision.

Within a rather limited gallery space it would be possible, through changing exhibition, over time to foreground greater parts of the collection than the traditional highlight permanent galleries would allow. Given the strong brief from the government that the museum deal also with contemporary themes, it seemed necessary to create a clear distinction and balance between on the one hand exhibitions rooted in the collections, and on the other, exhibitions taking their themes from burning contemporary issues, where the exhibition theme as such would have to drive and inform new collecting.

But primarily, against the background of the colonial history and interpretative framework of the collections, and within the setting of the complex contemporary context, the museum was reluctant or averse towards the complete, unified world view and the fixed, totalising meta-narrative characteristic of permanent displays. The grand meta-narratives of our time still seem integral elements and underpinnings for the mythology of colonialism and for the nation state, and it was thought wisest to avoid them.

Each gallery space and each exhibition has its own distinct language of form and design, reflecting the character of the content as well as the intended target audiences, and all of them rely strongly on the beauty and the poetry of objects.

Self-representation, partnerships and multiple voices

Collections are multi-layered in terms of times, contexts and interpretations. The display of collections is a specific form of presentation of a museum's or of a period's knowledge and the principles for this knowledge. The meta-language of museum displays show the categories through which a museum or a society or a period perceives its knowledge, which analytical tools it uses.

In epistemological terms, mobile positioning, a plurality of points of view, and a continuous shifting of perspectives are shared features across all the exhibitions at the Museum of World Cultures. It is a unequivocal point that both the knower and knowledge are situated and positioned. Educational programs have this situated perspective as their prime focus and use methods developed to raise the participants' awareness of the points of view of others, and of what and who is included or excluded in a given statement and setting.

The exhibition *Horizons — Voices from a Global Africa* relates stories about Africa — as a continent, an idea or a cultural identity.

In a Scandinavian context, it seemed highly relevant to begin to deal with our painfully interrelated histories and our interdependence with the African continent. Interestingly, the excellent African collections of the Museum of World Cultures were significantly under-researched and under-displayed, overshadowed by the higher-status Latin-American collections. The enormous global influence of African cultures, which has never been derived from military or economic power, but rests solely on their inherent qualities, had never been addressed.

Taking care not to think of the African continent as a homogeneous unity, *Horizons* is thematic, with each sub-theme signified by a geographic case and with its own distinct design language. The exhibition allows audiences to follow the forced and voluntary movements between the African continent and other continents.

For a museum holding historic, ethnographic collections from around the world, the key issue of self-representation is immensely difficult and complex. The credibility of the museum depends on the voices and perspectives of people who, in various ways, reflect and represent an original or a primary ownership to the relevant themes and collections. Behind the creation of *Horizons* lies a wide variety of collaborations and partnerships with institutions as well as individuals, locally and internationally. Some examples:

- The National Museums of Kenya collected, on behalf of the Museum of World Culture, material objects from present day urban street cultures and organised for groups of young people to portray their everyday lives in a contemporary major African metropolis through photographs and video documentation.
- The National Museum of Mali provided objects and content for a theme of gender, including the sensitive issue of the tradition of female genital mutilation, shown through costumes — areas in which the museum's collections and knowledge were insufficient and lacking in authority.

Another type of collaboration and self-representation was with local Gothenburg citizens who have their cultures of origin in the Horn of Africa area in a project designed to create a contemporary contextualisation of the museum's collections from the Horn, and to facilitate the participants access to the 'closed shop' on ethnic principles obtaining in the local labour market. Despite the often discordant character of this project, where both discrimination and institutional and personal racism were played out, it created for the *Horizons* exhibition some very personal and very popular contributions, centered on the themes of the Diaspora and diasporic identities.

Throughout *Horizons*, contemporary artworks, borrowed from artists and other museums, supplement the collections and raise an

underlying question of the existence of a pan-African artistic language and culture.

The integration of material and non-material culture is a key element in the museum's strategies for outreach towards new user groups, not least younger audiences. In *Horizons* the exhibition medium is stretched to the breaking point through the powerful presence of dance, theatre, and music.

Diversity and the meaning of difference

In contrast to *Horizons*, the exhibition *No Name Fever: HIV-Aids in the Time of Globalisation* had at the outset no collections base at all, but was chosen for its urgency and for its symbolic status for all the unsolved economic and social conflicts and contradictions of globalisation.

The Museum of World Cultures is interested in areas where different cultures meet, merge, overlap, hybridise, and in contemporary global cultures and communities defined through shared lifestyles or political positions, shared hopes and interests, shared enemies, shared diseases, as much as it is interested in cultures defined through the traditional parameters of geography, nationality and ethnicity.

In a Scandinavian cultural context, where the term diversity is mostly understood as synonymous with multi-ethnicity, the Museum of World Cultures diverged by viewing ethnicity as one among many other dimensions of diversity, and insisting that these dimensions are and should always be treated as a whole, in a richly intertwined, interdependent and interrelated totality.

Finding appropriate concepts and a shared language around HIV-Aids, which impacts so asymmetrically on the poor and the rich world, was a major challenge for *No Name Fever*. The emotions around HIV-Aids — the anger, the hope, the denial, the fear, the grief, the desire — proved, interestingly, despite cultural variations and specificities, to be immediately and precisely recognisable across cultures, and they become the basic structuring principle for the exhibition layout and design.

Identification and empathy are mechanisms without which an exhibition could not be understood, deciphered or decoded by an audience. In the case of *No Name Fever* a very conscious methodological use was made of these psychological mechanisms.

The Museum of World Cultures is interdisciplinary and tends to ignore or deny the boundaries of traditional museum typologies and division. In *No Name Fever* all media and types of objects are mixed. Historic and ethnographic collections coexist with contemporary art; art gets challenged by its continuum into documentaries and into works orig-

inally intended as personal, therapeutic or political. It has no ‘museum voice’, but thousands of voices speak — voices of the dead, the ill or those surprised at surviving; angry voices, suffering voices, forgiving voices. Experts, politicians, housewives, doctors, religious leaders — all voices speak with equal weight and authority.

As the first changeover of galleries *No Name Fever* was followed by *Trafficking*, relating to human trafficking, another increasingly pressing global issue.

Sister of Dreams — People and Myths of the Orinoco is, on the face of it, the most traditional ethnographic exhibition at the Museum of World Cultures. In some ways it was also the most difficult to organise.

With increased global dependency, increased global communication and migration it is crucial to learn to respect what one does not immediately recognise and understand. For the process of cultural democracy it is vital that both individuals and societies at large become comfortable with difference and heterogeneity, and develop concepts of equality that do not call for sameness, uniformity or simple assimilation. Initial front-end audience research done with children by the Museum of World Cultures had indicated just how difficult this way of thinking is.

Sister of Dreams portrays a world and a world view where the spiritual and material cultures are at one, and where each object of everyday life is permeated with powerful spiritual meaning. The exhibition is created primarily with children and their families in mind.

In its evocative visual language *Sister of Dreams* seems suspended, outside time — and sometimes even out of place. It explores content through the implicit, the ambiguous, through the experiential. The exhibition does read rather like a dream. The focus is on allowing an immersion in the systems of meanings of the peoples of the Orinoco River, and on creating reflections on the creation of life and the borderlines of life and death. On another level — which is realised also through programmes — it encourages discussions of ownership to nature, of sustainable development and the present threat to the ways of life of people around the Orinoco River.

The intention of *Sister of Dreams* is to implode the stereotypes of primitivity and backwardness and to facilitate an understanding — not least for children — that different ways of life carry their own qualities that are sometimes beyond simple comparisons and hierarchies.

In its fundamental differences from the discourses of Western rationalism, and its non-amenability to a Christian framework, *Sister*

of Dreams poses an enormous challenge to museum audiences and not least to museum staff. It requires both good faith and self discipline for people trained in Western scientific thinking to not reduce what is outside Western rationality to irrationality. The Museum of World Cultures does not belittle, disparage or denigrate, censure or distance itself from the stories of creation, the world views, and systems of beliefs held by the people in a given setting.

Letting go of ownership and the monopoly of knowledge

There are no easy ways for ethnographic museums to deal with the new challenges posed by globalisation and increased migration, by the disenfranchisement, segregation, and exclusion experienced by and within an increasingly diverse population. And while there is no one right strategy, it seems impossible to not take on the responsibilities of cultural democracy and cultural participation.

An initial and not so simple prerequisite is to give up the idea of exclusive ownership to collections and to let go of the monopoly of knowledge and interpretation. To let go of control without shunning the obligations of expertise and stewardship of collections. To expand museum missions from the role of expert to include the role of facilitator and explore the museological meaning of terms like platform, meeting places and centres of communication. To experiment with the discipline of dialogue and learn the practices of negotiation. To discover the pleasures and rewards of mutuality and the sharing of knowledge and authority between equal partners. To open recruiting processes so that both governance and staff reflect the diversity of global migration.

In diverse, pluralistic societies agreement and inclusion entail a continuous process of conciliation of conflicting views and interests, of dissent and opposition.

Given their diverse global collections ethnographic museums could become sites for dialogue, mediation and reconciliation, where difference and disagreement are accepted — even celebrated — and not a priori coded into hierarchies of supremacy and inferiority, dominance and backwardness.

The colonial expansion from the European continent and the transition into the modern period depended, as is now richly documented within museums and scientific disciplines, on the figure of ‘the excluded Other’. The greater the diversity in society, the greater the range of cultural ‘differences’, the more difficult and the more acute are the responsibilities and accountability of public institutions like museums towards the inclusion and the rights of ‘the Other’.

The risk for contemporary ethnographic museums is, of course, slipping into the neo-colonial oxymoron of ‘the included Other’ — ostensibly addressing and including the Other, but on terms that firmly maintain the power of the institution, uphold the dichotomies and hierarchies of Western scientific thought and perpetuate the rules of Western metaphysics.

ANNA SCHMID

The ethnological museum: another crisis and possible consequences

The most significant problem afflicting the institution called the ethnological museum lies — in my view — in its having missed the chance to re-think its meaning and purpose and to adapt to new realities. In a first instance, the ethnological museum has been understood as a conservatorium of non-European cultural artefacts, without, however, anyone ever defining precisely what kind of objects should be conserved. The beginnings of a rudimentary canonisation happened late and then only as a reflex of similar definitions of purpose in other museums, mostly art museums. Thus we now seem to know which ethnographical objects can be categorised as art objects; still unclear, however, is what signifies comprehensiveness of a collection, or what ‘quality’ of a collection means. The separation between the European or Western world and the non-European world — as well as the subsequent perception of static societal structures on the one hand and developing societies on the other hand — has long prevented our own understanding as involved participants in the museal processes. It has further prevented us from realising the connectedness between our own and other people’s worlds.

Therefore I do not see the problem primarily as a problem of *‘looking at new ways of displaying collections so as to make these more attractive to visitors’* as was stated in the call to participate in this written round table, meaning as a tech-

nical, formal problem — an assumption implicitly contained in the quote. I, however, see it as a problem of content — on the basis of what essential questions or premises should ethnographical objects and collections be displayed? Linked to the argument to incite more visitors into the museum, — an argument mostly and especially brought forth by financing institutions and sponsors — the fundamental crisis of the ethnological museum has shifted to the economic level. In this way, however, the problem has intensified, not been solved. To find ways into the future, an analysis of the current situation has to lay bare historical weaknesses as well as innovative possibilities.

The so-called crisis of ethnological museums can be summarised as follows:

- 1** Cultures cannot be fixed and chained up in a museum. The claim to mirror, or to adequately represent, the forms of life of other cultures — especially in permanent exhibitions — cannot be maintained. Everyday life as well as non-daily events resists a simple depiction. Analogous to the reflections made about written presentations of fieldwork research — as they were presented already in 1982 by Marcus and Cushman, who with this work started the debate about the crisis of representation in academic anthropology — comparable criteria have to be established for the ethnological museum. In this way a first step would be taken to redefine substantive goals.
- 2** The institution ‘museum’ — and thus evidently also the ethnological museum — is a spatial and ideological vessel. As the spatial manifestation of our own culture with a long tradition, it still has the connotation of a place of education as part of our high culture. As ideological vessel, especially the ethnological museum is suspected of wanting to speak for the Other or even patronise the Other. If we understand the ethnological museum as the interface of different forms of understanding of the world, then the problem has to be solved that the representation of the Other is still unilaterally reflected and visualised from our own perspective. This dilemma has forced museums in for example North America and Australia to react, since in these states those who represent and those who are represented allude to an identical frame of reference. What, however, has hardly or not at all been taken into account is the fact that the locus ‘museum’ contains an abstraction of everyday life. This has to be reflected when displaying ethnographical objects and when dealing with anthropological topics in exhibitions.
- 3** These considerations have so far not been taken into account when conceptualising and designing exhibitions. This has led to the fact

that under the slogan of ‘contextualisation’, exhibitions — regionally as well as thematically organised ones — have attempted, consciously or unconsciously, an imitation of real life outside the museum. This attempted contextualisation is especially notable and visible when photographic material is used to show how people live in other regions, how they use objects that now have been transferred to museums, or how these objects were once in motion. Another feature is that little attention has been given to the dimension of chronology: objects have traditionally been exhibited next to each other despite their originating from different time periods.

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Placing visitors to the museum in the centre of new concepts of permanent exhibitions or even when designing new museum buildings means that we react and do not act — often without knowing what actual or potential visitors want. The tool of visitor evaluations can only partially contribute to a solution. It is of paramount importance that the institution ‘museum’ actively singles out burning topics in our own society. For many of these topics anthropology suggests possible solutions that, however, when transferred to other societies need adaptation. Examples might include: the processes of democratic decision making in other cultures, be it in Latin America or South Asia; the possibilities of dealing with conflicts; individualisation as an economic imperative in western societies in contrast to e.g. China; the concept of work in different cultures.

5

A new visual rhetoric and a new language of objects can only be developed once substantial goals have been defined. As part of this rethinking it is necessary to re-determine the relation between us — the quantitatively largest group of museum visitors — and others, which means no longer thinking or acting in static totalities, but thinking in relationships. It is not the way of life of group X that is the main focus, but the relationship between our own way of life and theirs. To realise a new visual rhetoric is a challenge in any case, but particularly in permanent exhibitions. If we accept this challenge we cannot any longer retain a bird’s eye perspective or continue to add one regional example after the other. Faced with this dilemma, the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, for example, has currently waived permanent exhibitions altogether.

If we take approaches and premises from ‘Anthropology at Home’ into museum work, our own world and life become the point of departure for the presentation and also for anthropological knowledge production. Only in this way can the ethnological museum advance to an institution of cultural criticism, meaning the museum follows contemporary societal processes from a critical perspective.

The focus would be on creating new visions for visitors, taking different perspectives on the seemingly familiar, and thus being able to reflect on a changed but common world.

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ANNA SIIM

The Declassification of Holdings. Remarks of an Africanist

One can say without exaggeration that the opening at the Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences of the only permanent Africa exhibition in the Russian Federation (15 January 2007) was an event of international significance in the field of cultural politics, both domestic and external. There are, of course, unquestioned standards that determine the prestige of a country on the international level. Thus, the presence of a full-scale exhibition on African cultures in the oldest Russian museum (!) is in many ways no less important an achievement than the more than forty Rembrandt canvases, the thirty-seven Matisses, or the thirty-one Picassos in the Hermitage. The ethnographical content is also a key point: it will be sufficient to recall that six months earlier, in Paris, a vast new museum of the traditional art of the peoples of the world had been opened on the quai Branly as a result of an initiative from President Chirac, and that this had been greeted with a mass of excitement and of argument. Whatever the name, such museums are set up not as 'art for art's sake' but as a political gesture: and this is as it must be, although the element of contingency often deforms the motivation for such public institutions. Museums and exhibitions of such a type bear the character of a diplomatic gambit, one meant to demonstrate publicly a serious attitude to the peoples rep-

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Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography /Kunstkamera/, Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg

resented and to their countries. So the appearance of the *Africa* exhibition in St Petersburg is an achievement by the mere fact of its taking place. But, unlike a masterpiece of painting or a collection of masterpieces, a rare ethnographical object is an independent unit in the larger world of cultural politics. As such, besides the museum's holdings themselves, prestige inheres in the way objects are represented: exhibition projects become the foundation for the cultural ambitions of the museum and the country. The richness of the collections must be demonstrated, and the quality of the display must equal or even exceed the quality of the things themselves. There is no museum, whatever the riches of its permanent collections, that does not put on shows and temporary exhibitions.

Over the period of colonial and post-colonial history an abundance of things has built up in the world's museum stores, enough to supply many more museums than actually exist. And museums on the European model have been set up in the countries that have acquired independence, which try to serve as a control or a restriction on any continuing mass export of national valuables. The problems of the classification of holdings and the preservation of objects of material culture have, comparatively, been solved. Cataloguing systems are convenient and logical; any item is accessible and is described in detail. Subject to good funding, items have been restored: this relates even to those objects which in their natural environment would long ago have passed through all the stages of decomposition. Undertaking a large-scale exhibition project raises the problem of declassification. A healthy perfectionism suggests that it is not enough to put together, linked thematically, just a few boxes, shelf units, and glass cases; one has to assemble the whole five hundred, thousand, two and more thousand items planned to be shown. It is here that the feeling arises that classical ethnographical museum-keeping, and the discipline of ethnography itself, and the potential of our civilisation to understand other cultures, are all at a profound dead end.

Beauty and humanism cannot save the world, in the sense that an ethnographical museum is always a purely aesthetic project and it probably cannot actually counter wars and xenophobia. Nonetheless, the population's attitude to other cultures and peoples depends directly on the quality of ethnographical material in the museum and on the way in which this material is conveyed. There is a certain share of truth in the harsh and, now, proverbial words of one of the lecturers at the Oriental Studies faculty of St Petersburg State University concerning the negligence of compilers of Arabic textbooks and grammars who begin, symptomatically, from the example verbal root *qtl* (to kill). This, the lecturer argues, is a deliberate emphasis on the negative in relation to Arab culture as a whole. The same position (in a milder form, of course) can justly be ap-

plied to ethnographical museums. The engine of progress in museum policy must be the rejection of 'exotic' stereotypes, to say nothing of xenophobic ones (which, as a rule, coincide involuntarily, but which can also occur unconsciously).

The absence of a museum on ethnographical themes would be, by Western standards, an enormous lacuna in the cultural policy of a State. An ethnographical exhibition is the result of a figurative understanding of the relations between countries and peoples; it is a dialogue of cultures. However these relations might have taken shape historically, they must be represented. In a certain way such an exhibition can correct them and, in a symbolic sense, compensate for the errors of the past. This might even be a virtual step in the development of relations, if actual interaction has not had the necessary intensity and historical importance. The joint task of the administration and the scientific staff is to reflect the positive values of cultures by means of things and texts, to try to understand the worldview of the peoples represented. Ideally the symbolic status of each regional department of an ethnographical museum would approach the concept of 'a State within the State'. Objects are entrusted to the museum, and museum ethnographers are responsible in how they dispose and combine them for the formation of an image of other cultures among the masses. In such a situation, even cases of the erroneous attribution of objects are not as dangerous as a general absence or falsity of conception. In creating and renewing an ethnographical exhibition, we show our own level of sympathy with a given people and the depth of our knowledge about them; we declare our attitude to them from an objective position.

The mass tourist industry, hand in hand with the development of photographic and video technology, leads to an undermining of the values declared by an ethnographical museum. The ease with which technology can be used deprives the attempt to comprehend a culture of its value. The 'wilds' of the past have become thoroughly accessible: practically anyone can see them and record them. Mass consumption of what were once rare images is far from always expanding these 'empiricists'' horizons of understanding, just as it does not serve to educate the tastes of the general public. At the same time it is a touristic colonisation of the world, extracting image resources on an industrial scale. The museum must be sensitive to conditions: yesterday's rarity, even antiquarian, is no longer such for many people. Today a businessman who enjoys collecting can, thanks to his mobility and credit-worthiness, have better access than museums do to old ethnographical material, and with his interest and his elementary taste he can command all the skills of the experts. Private collectors are within their rights in competing with the State; but the employment policy of the museum must handle relations with them in a competent way, drawing their materials as much as possible into its

own orbit. A private collection might consist of ethnographical masterpieces and might make brilliant decisions about exhibitions, but in the final analysis its existence is tied to its owner; in future it will either be left to the museum itself, or broken up at auction by the heirs. But the ethnographical museum belongs in principle to a different order, sacrificing private interests for the sake of common ones. The museum does not only control the 'intellectual property of the country', it also uses it with the monumental range of the State.

The new Musée du quai Branly in Paris attempts to 'divide and rule' thus. It shows masterpieces in its permanent exhibition and it affirms in the name of the State a recognition of the role of Africa itself in world history and of its contribution to European art, which corresponds to the conception of the museum. The same is done on the opposite bank of the Seine in a wing of the Louvre, where glazed masks and sculptures are understood as a kind of allegorical portrait. The museum demonstrates the dynamic of modern cultures, but it also shows an interest in traditional cultures and a readiness to make contact with them; most importantly, modern traditional cultures speak for themselves, without interfering Eurocentric interpretations.

An important role in the structure of the Musée du quai Branly is played by the theatre of traditional art, which stages performances by theatre, music, dance, etc. groups from around the world. For all the guaranteed vividness of the impressions left by these performances, it is important here to note one aesthetic point. These manifestations of living cultures are uprooted from the environment in which they naturally develop, which is pregnant with mutations that can lead these traditional cultures to loss of identity and to self-destruction. The danger is not in the concerts and happenings themselves, but in the fact that this process is organised on a commercial basis. The result is that representatives of a living culture are willingly transforming themselves into museum pieces. Even the transfer of the performances into their natural environment is no defence against desacralisation and profanation. Such an event, for instance, as the *Sigi* ceremony, held once every 60 years among the Dogon people of Mali and linked to an important phenomenon of the cosmodynamic cycle, takes place on a strictly determined day, at a strictly determined time, in a sacred place, but it still has every chance of turning into a 'world party' attended not so much by ethnographers as by tourists. Given the fact that the esoteric Dogon surroundings and mythology have been 'worked up' a lot by European ethnographers and are secondary in character, the ethnographical value of this festival becomes equivocal.

If a similar and generally attractive coating of European surrealism is present in the museum space and in the pages of monographs,

then for all its inadequacy there is nonetheless a conception realised here: it can link the exhibits, present them in a single key, sometimes complicating and sometimes simplifying the essence. This conception, grounded in rhetoric, will be a private manifestation of ideology, at times so powerful that it leads to attempts to turn even the environment where things originate into a museum piece. There is a conviction that this is the only way of preserving fragile traditional cultures against the onslaught of globalisation etc., but whole layers of traditional culture are thereby squeezed out, and the consciousness of the bearers of traditional culture is narrowed to the scope of a souvenir cliché. The space within the walls of an ethnographical museum is a formally limited world, although it can have an unending multitude of contacts with the outside world and with traditional cultures.

Not only Russian, but also overseas museum publications and albums dealing with African ethnographical themes err in the direction of abstraction in the descriptions, commentaries, and notes on the illustrations. There is a clear tendency to ascribe a magical function to everyday objects and to equip them with a symbolic interpretation. This, in fact, is a universal feature: after the failure of attempts to explain a phenomenon by other means, we resort to a basis in religion. The same can be said of the corresponding exhibitions. Unlike, for instance, Japan or India, where the reconstruction of a world picture and the creation of some kind of monument to 'epic' archaic culture receive much assistance from the long tradition of study and from authentic written sources, we have no such canonical guides for Africa (many cultures of this continent are still effectively illiterate, despite attempts to inculcate writing). It is therefore all the easier to take the path of least resistance and subordinate an exhibition dealing with such cultures to the dictates of modern design. But such a decision and attitude inevitably turn the whole composition into an experiment in the field of interior design, where things play the role of exotic accessories: even the largest museum exhibition comes to resemble a private collection. In such a violated system of coordinates, objects belonging to traditional cultures cannot be adequately understood. If the attempt is made to restore the original system of coordinates, the reconstructed culture becomes both more open and also, as a complex independent world, more mysterious (a successful experiment in this spirit was made in the temporary exhibition of Australian aboriginal art at the Hermitage). This feeling of mystery is far from the incomprehension we feel when we see the 'idols' of exotic pagan cults hanging on the walls. The mass visitor will be satisfied with any show that displays a pleasing abundance of the 'exotic'. The more refined viewer, or the professional, will also assess the scientific work and creative efforts that have gone into it.

VALENTINA UZUNOVA

1

The word *mission* is a puzzling one. It would clearly be a mistake to apply its literal sense — responsible duty, role, task — to the Museum¹ (I am speaking only of the Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences). Coordinates of a higher order of understanding than simply the analysis of the social functions of an institution have been proposed. If the keyword is to be taken to be *crisis*, then the duty of the Museum may be understood as its own intention to transform social depression into cognitive energy. Then the mission of the Museum would be its attempt to become a cause and organiser of the cultural development of a large number of people. To do this it must see itself as a storehouse of nobility and strength, albeit to any significant extent only within the limits, say, of a city. And if we are to consider the mission of the Museum within the city, then we must discover its capability to impart a universal significance to such fundamental feelings as respect, trust, pride, and adoration — all those social emotions whose significance is specialised and without which the city as a community of people cannot exist. Without which it does not exist.

Residents of St Petersburg admire their history and the living survivors of the Siege of Leningrad; they trusted Academician Likhachev² and they trust his books; they are proud (even uncritically so) of the title of ‘cultural capital’, and they adore the time of the White Nights and when the fountains of Peterhof are switched on. Peter the Great’s Kunstkamera, the first public museum in Russia, fits rather uneasily into the context of the assertions set out in this Forum. What must be discussed is therefore the

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¹ Capitalisation of ‘the Museum’, ‘the State’, etc. (to signify elevated abstractions), follows the author’s practice in Russian. [Editor].

² Dmitry Sergeevich Likhachev (1906 St Petersburg–1999 St Petersburg), outstanding scholar and champion of Russian heritage (particularly from the 1960s), much admired for his work in defending pre-revolutionary Russian architecture from interference by city planners and also for his part in advocating social and moral responsibility, the growth of civil society, etc. [Editor].

social context into which the Museum is inscribed by its existence 'here and now'.

1.1. Can the Museum guide residents' consciousness and become on that basis a centre for pilgrimage? The Museum does not hear confession, as the priests, preachers, and reformers did: it does not behave it to claim a 'spiritual' leadership. But poetry, music, architecture, painting, sculpture, and ceremonies are also 'means of revelation'. And the *Kunstkamera* has seemed a worthy part of this context ever since its establishment — because the Museum has maintained a zone where scholars speak in the name of reason and has attracted those for whom the dignity of reason consists in submitting to the difficulties of the search. The Museum defines its tasks as rationalist inquiries that bring salvation to human reason not on the strength of the results they produce, but in and for themselves. It can inform people that the truth is that which demands efforts on our part for it to exist. This I would call the literary context of the museum's existence. The museum exists within it, extending its limits in its scholarly publications, expressing its negative attitude to many authorial myths and to modern pseudo-science. In this context Mikhail Piotrovsky, the Director of the Hermitage, is achieving a good deal in the city with his cycle of TV programmes about the Hermitage; Vladimir Gusev, Director of the Russian Museum, appears regularly on a local channel with his *The Russian Museum*; the museums of the Moscow Kremlin are practically never absent from the radio stations. And viewers of *Kultura* television channel and listeners to *Ekho Moskvy* radio station follow the leaders of public consciousness with passion and vehemence.

1.2. The profound poverty of intellectual life in modern Russia makes people think of the Museum in an unusual perspective, as a place where sacred knowledge is preserved. The space of the social, where thinking individuals are concerned, has gone far beyond a joke; it is so all-embracing that visions of certain past leaders come to mind. The visitor enters the Museum from this space, where the slightest gap or loophole is exploited by conflicting, virtually chthonic forces seeping in from beyond the miserable everyday. The results of the actions of pragmatic people in power appear in the eyes of the person in the street as 'miracles', the descent of riches straight from fairyland. Consciousness is suffering monstrous losses: it is losing the ability to explain reality at the level of rational meanings. Languages that attempt to describe reality have to create an improvised unity from the disparate fragments of chance assimilations. As a result, the primordial collective consciousness with its sacred sociological dimensions is reawakening. In this context the Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography is superbly

oriented, and can respond with greater professional skill than can other museums. The visitor comes to the Museum for methods of getting to know the unknowable. And the Museum can speak of the possibility of adequately expressing the contradictory nature of the most sacred phenomena: '*at once lofty and base, pure and repellent, forbidden and perverted, holy and damned*'¹ [Le collège de sociologie 1995: 207]. The Museum can elide the crudity of today's parodies of cult.

1.3. One aspect of the social link between people and the Museum today turns on recognition of the fact that the individual person has to abase himself before a State that evokes the strongest horror in his heart. In this context the Museum has the advantage at least that it is itself an institution of power and that its relation to the State cannot therefore be reduced to the pure form of an agreement. In the space of power relations it is impossible, without radical consequences, to reverse something that has once been accomplished. Take, for instance, Peter the Great's establishment of the *Kunstkamera* in 1714. The authoritative intention of the Museum is shown by the unprecedented strength of its influence, exercised from the private to the public level of explanation. In this context the Museum's language is the socially meaningful interpretation of historical and cultural values, and therefore it stands as a consoling witness to the temporary nature of the universal barbarisation. By the very fact of its prolonged presence on the city's cultural landscape, the Museum evokes the idea that it is a construction that preserves, that possesses an inner source of benign energy. Orderly calm is the museum's duty, its didactic conclusion that a phase of depression is inevitable and necessary in any intensive action. And the Museum itself conserves and even nourishes its skill at reorganising the multi-directional impulsive motives of a reactive trait. The Museum demonstrates its orderly readiness to withstand mutinous activity born of idleness and to calm the heightened social anxiety that is born of excessive experiences of significance, or else born of the fact that a concrete social existence is not in demand. The Museum conserves itself as a fixed point, because it does not permit the breaks and convulsions of the present day to take centre stage.

1.4. The humanism of scholars is rooted in their professional role. Habits of thinking have been established in the Museum so firmly that its staff have far-reaching intentions and the corresponding ability to pose new fundamental problems. For their part, residents of St Petersburg comprehend this situation on the basis of the mass

¹ In the original: '*à la fois élevés ainsi que misérables, propres comme répugnants, défendus et pervers, saints et maudits*'.

media as being one that is directly oriented towards their ideas about the future of the country, the city, and the community of residents. So they address their silent social experiences no longer through political rallies, but directly to the Museum. Take, for instance, the concept of freedom, which has been compromised in public opinion. For visitors it is very important to know whether the Museum, as one of the cultural leaders, has an answer to questions about this topic based on principle and on history. In the exhibitions they find plenty of opportunities to contemplate this topic: slave trading routes, sources of different forms of cult, devices for obtaining one's 'daily bread', themes of gender relations, techniques of education, and upbringing in various cultures. The context of moral values can be related to the space of individual variations in understanding the level of one's own existence. The Museum itself is not inclined to dramatise the situation of the change of values in society, since it holds *a priori* that freedom is a process of the search for a responsible intellectual choice, which cannot be tied to any orthodoxy. So its answer sounds encouragingly permissive: every mind has a cognitive function it needs to fulfil, and so access to scientific information is open to all who desire it. It is used by the actively curious, by groups undertaking further study in some branch of the humanities, and also by loners with intellectual hobbies. The Museum would experience negative emotions when stuck in the uncongenial position of simply managing flows of visitors. But the same position would be uncongenial to the visitors to the Museum themselves, since they don't just want to be a means of providing the Museum with the wherewithal for its existence. So we return to the assertion that residents of the city need to feel themselves fully a community, and that it is in this relation that the Museum interests them. It follows that the Museum must be a zone for the productive transformation of inchoate phenomena in the people's social psychology, subordinating them to the directive structures of social organisation. The Museum in this context is the equivalent of a community, in the universal form of knowledge.

It follows that the theme of a museum crisis is not only permanent, but also secondary. It is *permanent* if only because, even in the period of the so-called museum boom of the 1960s and 1970s, when metropolitan and even local museums in Europe and in the Soviet Union could barely cope with the numbers and enthusiasm of their visitors, museum professionals felt an acute irritation at the invasion by crowds of 'barbarians' and dreamt of an élite visitor. The fact that these crises are *secondary* does not need proof: changes in the paradigms of museum activity are always dictated 'from without', whether by the inadequacy of the general education system, or by the crudest dictates of political will, or by a 'sudden' manifestation of public interest in the human as a thinking being. And at any

2

period in time museums have searched for, and have found, many ways out of the latest crisis, because a museum is its staff — a voluntary, impromptu gathering of fanatical ‘soul-formers’.

The assertion that people visiting an exhibition talk about the things they see is equalled by the reverse: people inevitably only see the things they talk about. So our visitor is important to us: we are passionately interested in the content of the gap between what is seen and what is said. In fact, the Museum is interested here in precisely those things that it itself studies — the totality of phenomena of gesture and sound, unfolding in behaviour and language. The social human in the process and the result of the limitless diversity of communicative links is in fact this phenomenon of totality, where totality is culture. This is the grounding for all the academic work that is done at the Museum. But can the Museum, in this position, be the embodied expectation of a response? I doubt it, but I am prepared to examine the idea. The question of the languages in which the Museum itself can speak has been examined in the preceding section. Now we must clarify what language the visitor speaks. I suggest that the visitor (1) is silent about the Museum in the language of *readiness to perceive*, (2) thinks about the Museum in the language of *identification and identity*, (3) replies about the Museum within the Museum in the language of *values*, (4) talks about the Museum outside the Museum in the language of *narrative*.

2.1. Many ‘personalists’ in any field of the humanities work with the concept of willingness or readiness to perceive. I refer to V.A. Yadov because the project on *The dispositional regulation of the social behaviour of the individual*, which he headed in 1968 [Yadov 1976], checked the working of this theoretical concept against empirical findings in various fields of activity, including leisure. I like John Gumperz’s theory of verbal communication [Gumperz 1982] because, although belated by comparison with Russian work on this subject, it could benefit from its delayed appearance by taking in insights from the sociology of language. In the study of museums, concepts of this kind are indispensable because they explain, above all, the specifics of how the visitor perceives the exhibition display when this gives rise to utterly unexpected judgments and assessments. The analysis of the action of the value and orientation mechanism on all levels of regulation of the personality provides knowledge of the foundation uniting the interested gaze with the word. Readiness to perceive the Museum is established by the individual’s system of value orientations. This is clearly visible both in the study of the formation of professional consciousness among ethnography students at the Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography, and in the analysis of demands made of the Museum by

a particular group of visitors who were oriented exclusively towards acquiring the values of St Petersburg's urban culture [Uzunova 1999; 2006].

2.2. In analysing the language of identification in the sense of *copying another person's behaviour*, theoreticians of museums can make productive use of the social psychology concept of real and/or imagined '*referent groups*' (Muzafer Sherif's term) and the concepts of '*anticipatory socialisation*' and '*relative deprivation*'. The process of anticipatory socialisation describes a person's efforts to restructure his social behaviour. In the hope of being recognised in a narrow circle or in the name of raising this status in a new interaction group, a person strives to achieve chances at social mobility. He will certainly find the way to the Museum for himself, but museum staff can quite successfully use the strategy he has chosen in order to duplicate it. This is convincingly shown on the basis not only of visitors of senior school age, but also of adult museum visitors whose behaviour is determined by changes in their biographies [Uzunova 2003]. In studying this question, one might concentrate on the various 'groups' (I use inverted commas here, because we meet them in the Museum as individual visitors) that exist in a large city: collectors, teachers pursuing further study, people planning to visit 'exotic' countries, people who work with immigrants, 'weekend dads', etc. Visiting the Museum for pragmatic purposes strikes many people as the natural behaviour of 'cultural consumers'. The Museum can use this widespread perception of it in the city for its own benefit, for instance by using the Internet to send out advertising messages from the Museum's tour-guiding department.

Relative deprivation is something each of us experiences when we hear it asserted that those people among whom we are accustomed to count ourselves — the intelligentsia — are helpless or are not wanted in modern society. I will note only that relative deprivation, paradoxically, is felt more frequently and much more severely in comparison with the share one imagines others are receiving. We can observe this effect within the halls of our Museum, when we meet elderly ladies who are no longer admitted to the Philharmonic on a free pass. They have wandered into museums. And this is not only because it is warm, clean, and quiet here, and one can divert oneself looking at the people and the glass cases. The work of the museum staff strikes them as a visible sign of prosperity — they feel they are enjoying the good fortune of being in permanent contact with clever and enthusiastic people who live in a world of lofty experiences and quests. The Museum is preparing to open an exhibition entitled *Collectors for the Kunstkamera*, which will only strengthen both our real and our imagined contribution to their judgments about the benefit of intellectual labour and the nobility of scholars. All the pensioners in the city constitute a 'deprived

group'. The Museum of the History of St Petersburg, for instance, has a programme for work with this contingent of residents.

The division of visitors into various groups by age, sex, interests, etc. (according to the positivist understanding of sociology as a measuring instrument) might correspond to the administration's desire to establish a Club of Friends of the *Kunstkamera*, or to open a Lecture Centre, or to fill statistical tables with information about the quantity of tickets sold. But if many tickets have been sold it means nothing, and if few have been sold it means nothing. Meaning is found in a different approach to the study of our visitors: in productively studying the phenomenal nature of the Museum in the social space of the city, in order to preserve it. This means that an actively working Museum must be soldered into the space of the city, the same space as its residents. The study of the specifics of perception and the specifics of demand among visitors to the Museum requires an initial knowledge of the situational rearrangements in the public environment of the city.

The following aspect of thought about museum visitors rests on a literal definition of the concept of identity: *'the meaning and continuity of the ego, which develops as the child is separated from the parents and family and takes his place in society'* [Bolshoi *tolkovyi sotsiologicheskii slovar* 2001: 226]. The adjacent concept of *'social identity'* is familiar to every ethnographer, since ethnographers study those aspects of individual self-consciousness that arise from the fact of belonging to groups defined by values: gender, religion, status, biography. These social contexts acquire significance for people in the struggle to create *'positive distinctiveness'* (Henri Tajfel's term). And the Museum can help in this effort. To do this, we must invite as 'our visitors' representatives of those groups of minorities who encounter in our society a situation where their social identity is determined largely or wholly as negative in the opinion of the Russian ethnic majority of the city's population. The Museum could invite representatives of those groups and their children through the national cultural associations of the city to come for special tours. The Museum has all the resources needed to cooperate with the city in developing strategies to realise the programme *The Harmonisation of Inter-Ethnic and Inter-Cultural Relations, Preventive Treatment against Xenophobia, and Strengthening Tolerance in St Petersburg (2006–2010)*.

2.3. There is no need to address the so-called compulsory question of people's motives in attending a museum. The answers come down to the various meanings of the concept of *interest*. Of course, the depth of this interest can be grasped and correlated against age, sex, education, origin, profession, etc. But the expense in labour would not pay off, because the circle is limited to asserting the values of

education. It is well known that in copying others' behaviour there is a particular significance attached to the authority and sex of the person copied. The strength or degree of imitation is a product of the quality of the ideal type ('model'). So the more men (fathers and teachers) we can attract to our Museum, the more surely will we be able to rely on 'quality' visitors. In society now it is not so much a 'museum crisis' that is in evidence as a crisis of the family and the school. In theory the Museum could help society in this problematic situation, by using its authority to influence the city, by spreading its cultural power over minds — if not in the family, then in the school, and through that in the family. Such things have happened — but at a different period in time. Then the State was on the Museum's side; now it has estranged itself. In fact, does the city need the Museum? One should ask the city, concretely: what help does it need?

2.4. I began studying our visitors in 1997 by collecting schoolchildren's recollections about visiting the *Kunstkamera* [Uzunova 1999]. I was helped by the circumstance that a sociologist friend of mine worked in one of the schools, so we were able to conduct the experiment. The method of oral history always demands careful evaluation as to reliability and representativeness, as I was able to see for myself. A specific point in the pupils' stories called attention to itself. The crucial question in ethnographical understanding turned out to relate to movement. What is the objective of such movement: curiosity, self-interest, dreams, needs? Ethnographical museums conserve evidence of movement, of humanity's activity in searching. The stasis of a museum is deadly for modern perception. It contradicts the initial dynamism of discoveries, their adventurous and hazardous logic. The pupils discussed the routes and paths by which humanity has travelled and combined. In describing them they listed every possible means of travel. They produced fantastic descriptions: from roads and caravan trails on maps to models of aeroplanes and of communications satellites or spy satellites, alongside ships, boats, rafts, carriages, and wanderers on foot. The main thing in perceiving the modern world — dynamism of travel — was expressed in the way they perceived history. Only movement transformed the alien and unknown into a distinct and knowable other, with whom one can and must establish contact, exchange, and then cooperation and partnership. And the Hegelian image of time as '*continuous duration capable of swallowing all processes*' had vanished.

Perhaps frequent changes of temporary exhibitions are also an attempt to draw visitors into the movement of scientific understanding. But they are a straightforward requirement for any museum, a demonstration of its regular work. I do not think that this is the

most fruitful way of attracting visitors, considering our concrete possibilities and the limited resource of free time that residents have. But broad and frequent announcement of the very fact of the opening of new exhibitions has a direct effect on residents. When someone hears an interesting title of a newly opened exhibition, then this interaction with the Museum has begun. He is already intrigued; two weeks later he realises that he wanted to go but he's missed it; he promises himself he won't miss the next exhibition;... and, finally, one day, he's in the Museum. The regular creation (every two weeks) of 'information occasions' to witness to one's activity in the city and for the city is an effective tactic in museum work.

3

There can be a multitude of variations in how ethnographical collections are shown, but I know of only one principle in showing them. Capabilities of perception are correlated with capabilities of thought, and the purposefulness of perception is subordinated to interest. The modern person's need of ethnographical knowledge is an independent topic. But when we are discussing visitors to ethnographical museums, we can assert firmly that what attracts them to the Museum is what in the language of the thirst for new productive impressions is called the 'exotic'. This is the universal principle of interest in ethnographical museums. For brevity, and in order to confirm that the visitor is absolutely correct, I shall take a few assertions from Jean Baudrillard's *'theory of the radically exotic'* [théorie de l'exotique radicale] [Baudrillard 1990].

3.1. What is alien and outlandish in subjective perception is invested with unusual and fantastical properties. It follows from this simple statement that an encounter with the exotic (alien mores, people, languages, objects) arouses an intensity of perception and an exaltation of feelings. But the understanding of everything (the accessible and the inaccessible) comes from other people. In this case too, the explanation comes from the Museum. The productivity of impressions is the extent to which they are prolonged outside the Museum, their creative ability to enter as a tenacious constituent element into the structure of the individual's consciousness.

3.2. The perception of the exotic is an acute and unfathomable renewal of the feeling of eternal incomprehension and of the energy of knowing. *'In play with it there is discovered an improbable chance of exchanging worlds of values, breaking the boundaries of the existing order of things in order to restore these boundaries in the future'* [Baudrillard 1990: 223].¹ But the intensiveness of perception does not arise simply from the confrontation with what is new and unfamiliar in our experience. The main thing the alien conveys to

¹ *'dans le jeu avec celle-ci s'ouvre une potentialité inestimable d'échanger les mondes de valeurs, percer les limites de l'ordre de choses existant pour rester ses limites dans la suite'.*

us is contained in us ourselves. ‘*The confrontation with the exotic strips bare the fundamental assertion of the incomprehension of ourselves*’ [Baudrillard 1990: 197].¹ Knowledge of oneself breaks out of the attempt to penetrate and grasp the alien. The perception of the exotic even has a particular rule of its own, which consists in know submitting to the illusion of nearness or the illusion of understanding. It is striking that Museum visitors are capable of recognising and of quite precisely describing this subtle effect of self-experience when they are interviewed. Varieties of expression are, of course, very subjectively coloured, but the actualisation of a ‘*sense of one’s own*’ in encountering the alien does take place, triggering a wide spectrum of experiences [Uzunova 2003].

3.3. The universal hypothesis that humanity is one (on the principles of communications and reconciliation) is withstood by the universal hypothesis of eternal isolation (on the principles of the break in communications and of irreconcilability). One cannot say that visitors to our Museum would not themselves respond to the new dimensions of reality whose coordinates are ‘globalisation/anti-globalisation’ or ‘openness/non-openness’. Unfortunately, the use of this very language of understanding quickly pushes them back out of the Museum space and into the space of the streets and of politics. The adult visitor would like to stay among cultured ideas of different worlds, but the Museum does not enter into dialogue, least of all in differing social dialects.

4

The question of the future of ethnographical museums makes one think about the rationalisation of human relations. The question can be posed in another, even more expansive form. What is it that does not bore people? I think people are not bored by everything positive, connected with their everyday interests and ideas. An Ethnographical Museum is capable of answering these interests of residents, since it possesses means that can be used to achieve a sociological psychotherapeutic effect on visitors. The Museum compensates for the defective values and small significance of the individual, private person who is far from the symbolic centres of society and above all from power, with all its hypertrophied signifying attributes: heroism, greatness, fullness of collective solidarity, etc. In a situation where public life is becoming increasingly primitive, the Museum can give a refined idea of the human being, of his social multidimensionality and cultural diversity. A visit to the Museum smoothes out, albeit only temporarily, the traumatic circumstances of crisis that are linked to the absence of the idea of solidarity and responsibility to the human being and for the human being. The impulses towards personal achievement that inspired

¹ ‘*L’impact de l’exotique dénuée une affirmation fondamentale de la non-compréhension de soi-même*’.

many people fifteen years ago have now been suppressed in society; people are living today with values that have been lowered in tone. In addition, everyone is working in a system with an inverted motivational structure, where the bearers of knowledge, culture, and enlightenment are not authorities for low-status groups. Even our achievements do not guarantee prestige in a society whose values have become disoriented. But it is not our invention that the renewal of activity to intensify the social environment is impossible without appealing to those layers of culture that are accessible only to an educated person. So today's breakdown in the most important institutional relationships will be overcome on the road to re-uniting education with the rationalisation of values in society.

The Museum stands in a zone of responsibility for values, and at the same time it has the difficult experience of understanding itself as an educational institution. So it succeeds in preserving the authority and prestige of intellectual work among young people. It is also true that tendencies towards an opposite assessment are quite firm among other groups of the population, since the experience of decades shows the success of types of activity connected with the possession of power. But the prosperous and comfortable existence enjoyed by 'restricted' groups in society rests on a condition that is very hazardous in its realisation: the maintenance by the majority of its traditionally patriarchal and inert attitudes and its mechanical solidarity. The Museum of Ethnography understands perfectly that the socio-anthropological Soviet project rested on the idea of the 'functional person' and on the exploitation of this perverted idea. It is capable of guaranteeing the reproduction of the social system within its minimal parameters, and no more. So in defining its future the Museum must say (to itself above all) what socio-anthropological project for society it intends to work for. If the foundation of its activity is the ideology of the priority of the value of the person over society, then it has quite enough resources to prove and to realise this postulate.

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GERMAIN VIATTE

Ethnographical Museums Under Fire

I think there can be no doubt of the fact that ethnographical museums are in crisis: indeed, the crisis began when they were first set up, or at any rate, no later than the early twentieth century, but it began to accelerate dramatically in the 1960s. The first reason at the root of all this is that the collections in such museums, acquired as they have been in very diverse ways, have long been considered devalued or marginalised, and more recently suspect as well. What is more, museums of this type have often not undergone the very important process of evolution that overtook other museums, such as art galleries and science museums, during the last decades — an evolution that embraced how the public was treated, their new demands in terms of access to the collections, the presentation of these and the corresponding provision of information, and the exploitation of the museum’s holdings and scholarly activities, and

which would have been unimaginable without the creation of all kinds of services and facilities of a kind aimed at tourists (cafés, restaurants, shops, etc.) as well as those appealing to a narrower public that welcomes the chance to benefit from cultural events that are functionally diverse, lively, and sophisticated.

In effect, no museum is solely the showcase or the intellectual property just of one discipline: it must take on wider responsibilities, such as integrate it into the general 'cultural market' at the level of a given town, country, or social network. These days, museums are the site of interdisciplinarity, since this alone is adequate to the intellectual realities of the modern world. Therefore, museums have to reconcile all the different demands of the polyvalent institution (the management, conservation, and restoration of the artefacts in its care, administration, public relations and relations with the visiting public, services to business and commerce, publication, documentation and dissemination of information, and so on).

This crisis of ethnographical museums was felt especially keenly in the post-colonial world, the new nations that had known independence since the 1950s and 1960s. In its Anglo-Saxon form, it was represented by the 'political correctness' of US and Canadian museums and the cultural confusion that resulted from that. A moral crisis became a crisis of knowledge and museology, and the result was that collections acquired in past years often seemed to bear embarrassing witness to an era of domination that lay in the past and now seemed inimical. The result was that ethnographical research often shifted away from the material heritage and took flight in different directions, such as the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, or communitarian and pro-third-world politics.

But in turn, this era of uncertainty with regard to ethnographical collections now strikes me as having had its day; it needs to give way to a clear sense of our responsibilities with regard to the material heritage that we have been bequeathed by history, a heritage that is extremely important for everyone as the ravages of globalisation take hold. What we need to know these days is how to conserve in the best possible way our common patrimony while ensuring that knowledge of this is diffused as widely as possible. Now that the world is in a phase of rapid social acceleration, these responsibilities cannot be fulfilled without collaboration with those people in the countries where the museum's objects were collected, whose own efforts to preserve their heritage are often faced with significant obstacles.

The question of what museums should be called is extremely significant because it serves to place their activities within a new perspective: that of the modern world, its interests and its aims. As

was the case with the Musée du quai Branly, it is sometimes best simply to use a toponym, rather than a name that will trap the museum's activities in some narrow concept, in some exclusive intellectual discipline, or confine it to strict geographical, historical, or intellectual limits. Open and transparent institutional practices are an essential here, and they should not be in any way constrained by bureaucratic or political demands.

We should vehemently assert the importance of the collections, the treasures acquired in previous eras: their historical and cultural importance for our own countries and for those nations that are the direct heirs to them, the places from which they came; their artistic importance, their ingenuity in a technical and technological respect. We should articulate a sense of how styles and concepts evolved, and of their resonances in terms of the natural environment and of social practices. At the same time, we should of course do all we can to exorcise survivals of neo-colonial myth, the references to an atemporal, overarching 'prehistoric primitivism' which still bear witness to the devalued schemas of evolutionism. We must encourage healthy curiosity about the mutation, in the contemporary world, of artistic and social practices, of the roots of creativity in a modern world of cultural diversity.

Let us avoid tempting simplifications about other people and cultures; let us not hesitate to acknowledge complexity, ignorance, doubts, questions. Our public is growing more and more demanding, and we should respond to this and run ahead of their demands. Fair enough, museums have a public made up of children as well, but that should not make them simplistic and puerile. The rapid development of media resources, the accessibility of information, the abolition of distance should not push us in the direction of a 'society of spectacle', but should rather make us affirm the singularity of the museum as an institution, as the only institution configured around a unique and irreplaceable corpus of artefacts, archives, and photographic, phonographic, and film collections; an indissoluble whole that imparts to the visitor an exhilarating sense of freedom.

To invent another museum?

Our meditations and plans for the new era of institutional life should be focused on respect for the specific character of what we have inherited from the past (collections, scientific traditions, urban location, and so on), but also on evolving new kinds of contact with the public and social partnerships. A policy of public accessibility is essential here, but it should not be unilinear: it should be sensitive to the huge variety of possibilities that exist and be capable of directing specific responses to these. This does not, however, mean

that everything in the modern museum should be spelled out. Museums should not imitate books or television programmes: they should become part of a range of complementary cultural forces, conserving the power and the charm that lie in their specific and unique identity, in the mysterious, strange nature of much of what is in their collections, and the necessarily fragmentary character of these. The museum should be refracted, that is, through the prism of our modern world.

When we seek to evoke life, whether in the past or in the present, we should, I firmly believe, avoid at all costs presenting this in 'reconstituted' form. The life of the museum is not the life of everyday realities, which always have been and always will be far more powerful. When it comes to the past, we should employ visual, literary, scientific records, and also have recourse to the memory of those who are heirs to a given culture, without fearing the contradictions that may come about when we put these materials together. So far as the present is concerned, we should bear in mind the cultural information that the visitors are already likely to have at their disposal (particularly through access to TV programmes and tourist trips), and should try to deepen this, to respond to questions, to address the shocks thrown up by contemporary life. Sometimes an artist's eye, his or her sculptural or audio-visual response (as in the installation, *La bouche du Roi* [The King's Mouth] by the Benin artist Romuald Hazoum), can be more helpful than having recourse to very specialised and complex interpretations, such as require much time and trouble to present and therefore risk boredom, if they are not to be presented in over-simplified form.

It is essential to evolve a strategy for associating temporary and permanent, broad appeal and specialism. There must be a strategy of direct contact with 'witnesses' that allows different approaches to emerge and gradually shapes a rhythm of usage, a rhythm of visits to the museum as a particular cultural space. If a 'spectacle' is to exist beyond what is put on view for the public, then it must lie in an awareness of how the public uses the different vistas and spaces of the museum. The issue of the architectural realisation of the museum is clearly crucial here. For a long time, the primary realisation of the museum was as something opulent, spectacular, and symbolically dominant. In the twentieth century, two responses to this heritage emerged: the first was to set up huge cases associating different components together to produce a global and integrated representation, as in Berlin, the risk of which was that the whole ensemble would rapidly look dated; the second, to adopt the 'white cube' approach so beloved of art museums, which meant setting out a small number of objects chosen for their sculptural beauty and rarity — but in this case the danger was that any 'contextualisation' at all became impossible.

The Musée du quai Branly has attempted a novel and complex resolution of this old dilemma, which in the past tended to bring about a sterile confrontation of amateurs and specialists.

To begin with, from the very beginning the museum had at its disposal a large space created by the reorganisation of the Musée du Louvre. Within the modernised premises of the former palace, a few key objects were selected for permanent display, the presentation of these being used to establish subtle relationships playing on a single register, that of sculpture, which formed the focus of a plain, yet also opulent, realisation on 'art museum' lines by the architect Jean Michel Wilmotte. This space worked as an introduction to the style of presentation characterising the museum generally. It acted as a double manifesto, underlining the place of non-Western cultures, formerly marginalised in art history, at the centre of that history, and at the same time emphasising the place of all contemporary cultures, even minority ones, in the grand totality of cultural diversity. Today this hall still plays its role in fostering a link between the largest Paris museum of an encyclopaedic kind and this new museum of non-Western cultures.

The Musée du quai Branly, which is heir both to the traditions of the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (the former Musée des Colonies) and the Musée de l'Homme (formerly the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro) had as its task emphasising the importance of cultural heritage in the perception of the world we live in, and integrating itself into the extraordinary ensemble of museums comprising the Musée Guimet, the musée d'Orsay, the Louvre and the Centre Pompidou. In the event, the choice was made to create a new entity that would answer the needs and the demands of our era.

The architectural ensemble put forward by Jean Nouvel at the international competition to choose the design for the new museum is, we believe, a subtle and absolutely original response to the cultural debate currently in progress. It represents both a discreet intervention into the extant urban landscape and a unique realisation of natural and built spaces that eschews the ordinary resolutions of museum architecture in favour of diversity, landscape, a specific irrationality like that of something from the natural world, of an eruption of colour, of sensuality in terms of the materials used, and of a stunning presentation of the internal spaces. This solution is sensitive to the needs of museum staff in terms of the sight-lines for viewing objects and the variety of exhibition spaces required for the many different events to be organised, which need to reflect both large areas and the individual character of certain unique objects, or alternatively collections of objects. The spaces link the museum as such with the areas for research and cultural activities,

and also with those meant for administration and service facilities. The visitor has the sense of entering a whole city which becomes, one might say, somewhere where initiation into difference can take place.

The collections themselves — their manifold appeal, the diversity of their provenance and of their political and scientific history — are not in any sense belittled by this handling of space: on the contrary, this treatment brings about an insistence on the prodigious capacity for interpretation of resources that exists in a world that is constantly in motion. The public is invited here to enter a process of discovery, awe, interrogation, confrontation, and is free to shift at will from the lecture halls, shows, study courses to the permanent and temporary exhibitions. From the exhibition of musical instruments at the museum entrance onwards, members of the public are immediately confronted with the significance of the collections and the responsibilities that are implied by them. The ubiquitous presence of multi-media is not at all intended to substitute contemplation for information, but to provide aids to interpretation that may range from the simple identification of objects up to the creation of an entire aural and visual environment; they also enable complex interaction with documents. Temporary exhibitions allow diverse exploration of the museum collections on the one hand, and of global anthropological and thematic questions on the other (as for example in the exhibition *Qu'est-ce que un corps?* [What is a Body?]).

The contemporary world is an essential presence here. Right from the entrance to the museum, it is stressed by the participation of creative artists (Australian 'Aborigines', New Zealand Maori, Japanese, French...) in the decoration of the buildings, and it continues even more strikingly in the policy of cultural interaction that informs the exhibitions, shows, and concerts, in the process of verbal engagement every day renewed.

Is there a 'model' for the handling of traditions in the ethnographical museum?

We do not see things like this. The joy of life for museums, as for societies generally, without doubt lies in diversity. Their history, their geographical and cultural location, their inscription into institutional strategies, their styles of architecture past and present, their dimensions, the size of their collections, their perspectives in and on the here and now, are irredeemably different and this fosters their complementary roles vis-à-vis each other, their interest, and their appeal. Yet at the same time they do need to hold some concepts and principles in common: respect for the cultures that they place on view, and for the collections and their significance; atten-

tion to the parameters of selection (historical, artistic, anthropological, technological); observation and participation in the different dimensions of modern life; support for creativity, responsiveness to the demands of the public; sensitivity to our living history; refusal of the dominance of any one intellectual discipline; openness to the wider world; professionalism and respect for ethical principles. And for the future, these museums should, so far as their research activities are concerned, be still more open than others to collaborations and international exchanges; they should become places where international understanding is actively encouraged and fostered.

EDITOR'S AFTERWORD

Efforts to rethink the role of the ethnographical museum (EM) began back in the second half of the twentieth century and were closely connected to the civil rights movements in countries that had formerly been the subject of ethnographical investigations. All the major ethnographical museums in the world have one thing in common: their collections were laid down under colonial rule. This is not to say, of course, that those putting them together were necessarily colonial administrators, traders, and missionaries. They also included people who have gone down in the history of ethnography as travellers, scholars, and explorers. Yet, as Eija-Maija Kotilainen writes, '*If the collecting activity of these people were assessed in accordance with the ethical norms of the present day, the picture in most cases would be decidedly unattractive.*' The point is not so much that ethnographical collections were assembled in the colonial era and sometimes in a way that would now be considered ethically questionable, but that these museums have preserved a colonial perspective on unfamiliar cultures. Here one has to agree with Jette Sandahl's sentiments: '*They were founded upon enormous ethical contradictions that allowed explorers and scientists the romance and yearning for nature and a holistic life style, and the fascination with the spiritual life of the other — while selectively scorning local values and*

legislation, convinced that research was at no costs to be thwarted, and entitled the explorer to take, by whatever means, what was not his.'

Yet the recognition that the whole idea of the EM required a fresh look did not come about everywhere; in particular, the entire conceptual and ethical crisis simply passed Russian museums by, in a way that frankly seems astonishing. The view seems to be: yes, we know all about this, but what's it got to do with us? Yet, while it's certainly the case that the Russian Empire had no 'colonies' in the sense of territories overseas, an internal process of colonisation took place — and one that was every bit as morally questionable as British, French, German, etc., colonial expansion. Here too, explorers, missionaries, traders, and scholars went about their business in complete confidence, convinced that their activities were illuminated by the bright lights of science and scholarship and above and beyond all criticism.

Of course, the Russian situation has, as always, its peculiarities. Even now it's hard to imagine protests being mounted on the part of the societies represented in the ethnographical museums of the Russian Federation. The weak development of civil society, the age-old traditions of conformity and subordination, the standing of science and scholarship — which continue to be very high, buttressed by the tight links between the state and academia — all this (and more, in particular the existence of pressing social and political problems that make protests about symbolic issues seem pointless) mean that Russian museums can continue to carry out their curatorial experiments practically without giving heed to those from within the cultures being 'museumised'.

What Anna Schmid argues — *'The most significant problem afflicting the institution called the ethnological museum lies — in my view — in its having missed the chance to re-think its meaning and purpose and to adapt to new realities'* is far more characteristic of museums in Russia than of those in Western Europe and North America. But this should not be the cause of self-congratulation ('thank God we don't have to deal with all that' — so far), or of smug silence about the colonial attitudes that are enshrined in the ways that Russian museums represent foreign cultures. Instead, we need to make these attitudes explicit and to try and change what has become standard practice (i.e. the failure to involve informants from a given culture in the displays related to it).¹ It is still not too late to submit the nature and role of the ethnographical museum in Russia to funda-

¹ I have in mind here the kind of work with representatives of ethnic groups (e.g. Aborigines, Native Americans) that has been carried out in numerous Western museums, for example the Australian National Gallery of Art in Melbourne, the Dahlem Museum in Berlin. To put it another way: we need to take the first steps in the direction of participant ethnography, with its emphasis on collaboration.

mental review. Here one is struck by the forcefully-expressed views of Jette Sandahl: *'By some people within museums and the scientific communities the political and paradigmatic shifts of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are felt and conceptualised as a professional and scientific crisis. By others in the professional field, however, the same transformations are experienced and embraced as an equally strong revitalisation, and a liberation from relationships of power that have long been felt untenable and indefensible.'*

Whichever way, the world has undergone radical changes, and the nature of these has been to place ethnographical museums in a particularly exposed position. As Steven Engelsman points out, we can all turn on the television *'and see much more interesting presentations there than museums can ever produce'*, while travel and migrancy have done away with the concept of 'faraway peoples'. *'So the only things remaining from the past are the large collections that were formed at the heyday of the ethnological and colonial museum'*.

The specificity of museum collections generally, and ethnographical collections in particular, lies, as everyone knows, in the fact that they are traditionally comprised entirely of artefacts manufactured in previous eras, and collected for the most part with an eye to two governing criteria: exoticism (rarity) and authenticity, with the understanding that the older an object, the more authentic it will be. This suggests an obvious question: do the objects housed in museums allow one to form a real idea of everyday life in a given cultural tradition? The only honest answer has to be no. Even if one posits that a given museum has an outstandingly full and complete collection of objects, then they will represent a distant era and only one aspect of life at that era, and an aspect that is necessarily remote from the experiences of those who originally used the objects on show, at that.

Any ethnographic expedition thus represents an act of reconstruction, and ethnography (in contrast to, say, linguistics) offers us no generally accepted methods for reconstructing the state of real life in a given community. The result is that criticism of the fictional or misleading character of ethnographic displays is becoming increasingly fierce. The paradox is striking: the objects themselves may be real, but the picture created is decidedly artificial, derived as it is, by and large, from the notions of curators, designers, and other museum staff, rather than from information provided by the original owners of the objects (cf. in particular Steven Engelsman's remarks here). We have arrogated to ourselves the right to pronounce on the past of other people's cultures and we often simply ignore the fact that our ideas might be controversial. Yet the question of who ought to control the information that museums put out is in

fact extremely problematic, and is related to the whole issue of the monopolisation by scholarly institutions of knowledge and the interpretation of knowledge, an issue that increasingly provokes heated debate among scholars themselves.

What is the way out of this situation? There are no simple solutions, given that fundamentally changing the character of established collections is scarcely possible, but the work done by museum specialists in the West indicates that the situation is by no means hopeless (cf. the comments of Steven Engelsman, Eija-Maija Kotilainen, and others). In order to right things, it is essential to forgo what Jette Sandahl has termed *'the fixed, totalising meta-narrative characteristic of permanent displays'*. In other words, we have to move away from a perception of the world as frozen in time and unchanging. We have to organise temporary exhibitions alongside the permanent collections that are capable of making creative use of the personal experience of visitors to museums, which, as Eija-Maija Kotilainen writes, facilitates a deeper response to the information provided and stimulates the formation of new opinions not just of what people see in the museum itself, but of reality in a broad sense as well.

Those working in Russian museums who have given serious thought to these issues reason along similar lines. Dmitry Baranov, for example, argues *'A way out of the current situation might be the enactment of a policy of transparency, whether that means transparency with regard to the holdings (showing things as they are 'in fact') or the rejection of exhibitions aimed at an integral description of a culture, which present not so much ethnographic reality as the image of it that has taken shape in the minds of scholars. The context of display must not silence or hide from the visitor the arbitrary, symbolic, and equivocal character of the representation.'* Anna Siim comments along analogous lines.

Certainly, one should not expect too much from the mere application of new information technologies to old collections. Novelty of this kind rapidly wears off, and if new content is not evolved, the application of computer-based strategies simply fosters the transformation of ethnographical museums into yet another type of leisure facility. It is indicative that while some museums are enthusiastically adopting such technologies to adapt their exhibition spaces, others are retaining the old displays and sometimes even reviving these, at least in some of the museum halls. Yuri Chistov mentions this process with reference to the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford, and it has considerable value in terms of allying museum work with the history of science and with museology.

The various discussions relating to the 'crisis of museum representation' give rise to one particularly important question: what is or

should be the mission of the ethnographical museum in today's world? Any museum has, broadly speaking, two functions: display or 'outreach', visitor-oriented work, and the conservation, expansion, and interpretation of its collections as such. Is it better for EMs to retain their educational brief and to continue popularising ethnography among non-specialists, or should they concede defeat and turn themselves into archives of material culture, accessible to and needed by academics alone? The answers given here would suggest that in practice the decisions to be made are not quite so dramatic: the majority of participants in the discussion in fact concentrate on the issue of museum visitors, and this in turn suggests that there will not be significant pressure from professional museum workers in the near future to alter the status quo (i.e. the balance between the museum's educational and curatorial roles). Indeed, Yuri Chistov goes further and speculates that '*The process of globalisation, which leads in theory to ethnic traditions' being minimised and to cultural and ethnic identity's being erased, will only strengthen the nostalgic interest humanity feels in its past.*'

Relations with visitors in different countries and in different museums can vary. In some museums, visitor numbers are a significant factor in survival, in others the presence of visitors is understood as representing one side of a cultural dialogue, and quite often the dominant side as well. For instance, as Francis Conte points out, '*This [new type of] museum replaces the old hierarchy, with curators at the top, by a hierarchy that gives first place to the public and to the messages that are to be transmitted to that public, while at the first time refusing to turn the museum into mere son et lumière.*' Yuliya Kupina goes even further: '*One should remember that it is not collectors and designers who make museums, but members of the public. The visitors are the main authors of exhibitions, and without them any museum project is doomed*'

It is fair to say that there is no single unified opinion with regard to visitors in the museum community. And certainly, one might wonder whether museums ought always to adopt a policy of 'pleasing the public' first and foremost. Where does the boundary between accessibility and fatuous populism lie? Anton Astapovich, for example, expresses anxiety that orientation towards visitors' tastes ('*or to speak more frankly, crowd-pulling*') may mean '*a loss of elite standing, a descent into the domain of mass culture, the very place where globalisation of mass culture is now dragging us [...]* And so let us preserve this elite standing in museums, and above all those as conservative by their very nature as ethnographical museums'.

Indeed, should museums be elite institutions (and 'culture' in the narrow sense inevitably has an elite status, or else it loses its identity altogether), or turn into what Vladimir Arsenyev calls '*just one*

more structural unit in the consumer system and service sector? Most of the participants in our discussion favour compromise (museums should both ‘preserve’ and ‘act as a draw’). A potentially destructive conflict might be resolved if one were to clearly distinguish the two functions and draw a clear line between the scholarly and consumerist roles of the museum. Such a division is suggested anyway by the nature of museum organisation, where the external life (oriented at the public) and the internal life (where conservation and study are crucial) logically diverge, and has long existed in embryonic form within such major museums as the *Kunstkamera* in St Petersburg, which has separate sections for ‘scholarship’ and for ‘museum work’. But one could go further in this direction as well, as Vladimir Dmitriev writes: *‘The function of the museum is the preservation of original cultural artefacts, and the development of informational and consultational services that are focused on reconstructive and interpretational models. The museum is faced with the task of conserving culture and with putting paid to technological strategies that desacralise the heritage that it preserves. Every kind of game-based technology and informational model that is partly or wholly removed from the museum holdings themselves belongs to the domain of what one might term “the cultural centre” existing alongside the museum itself. One can think of ways to try and bring about co-operation between the museum and the “cultural centre”, but attempts to unify them end up by being a strategy of institutional compartmentalisation’.*

Another scheme for the interaction of the museum and its visitors requires more extensive reflection. Eija-Maija Kotilainen recalls John Bradburne’s suggestion that we adopt the well-known model of the library as an orientation point. In other words, we should try and turn the EM into a space for study and education that people would visit and revisit in order to benefit from the unique resources and knowledge that lie at its heart. In this case, *‘success would not be reflected in visitor numbers in a crude sense, but by repeat visits over a continuous stretch of time. The job of a museum must be to equip these visitors/users with tools to understand the world in which we live, to understand and to grasp reality.’*

On the whole, the answers given here present museum visitors as a kind of formless and homogeneous mass — but museum workers themselves know from personal experience that this understanding is misleading. The people who visit museums are different, and their aims in doing so are different as well. Some visit on guided tours, as part of ‘doing the city’, some come along independently, still others may bring along some family object they want identified (*‘could this pipe have belonged to Peter the First, do you think?’ ‘Is this a Ming horse?’*), others again may come along because they

have a bit of coursework to write, and others simply to buy cards and presents in the museum shop. The view that all visitors are somehow 'the same' is yet one more expression of the traditional attitude of condescension (as expressed in the generalising label 'the public'). But we have to move towards a position of co-operation with our visitors, because one of the primary purposes of museum life is to get them involved with what we are doing. If ideas like this go beyond empty words, they demand that museum staffs change their attitudes to themselves as well as to visitors — a task that is not at all easy.

Probably every museum has its own attitudes to the best ways of dealing with these problems, as is only natural — after all, every museum is individual as well. Besides, the situation is very different in Armenia and Karelia, say, or in Bulgaria and Belorussia. Thus, Yuliya Kunina is surely right to argue along the following lines: *'The more varied, daring and unexpected are the paths that are chosen for the development of ethnographical exhibitions, the richer will be our collective experience in understanding cultures of the past and present and the more valuable this will be for every individual museum. Presently, the search for such paths is going on quite intensively and so, when you look at the situation from that point of view maybe the word 'crisis' might come to mind. But the very fact that the solutions found so far haven't been too successful provokes further searches, and so ever attempt can be seen as valuable and necessary. Indeed, one could talk about a crisis if this search were not being carried out'*.

Albert Baiburin

The contributions by Germain Viatte and Francis Conte, and the afterword by Albert Baiburin, were translated by Catriona Kelly.

The remaining contributions not originally written in English were translated by Edmund Griffiths.