



THE FUTURE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL MUSEUMS - VIEWS FROM GERMANY AND ELSEWHERE



Völkerkundemuseen morgen - Aufgaben und Ziele, Wulf Lohse,
Rüdiger Vossen, Herbert Ganslmayr, and Helga Rammow, eds.
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In the volume of 1976, the Zeitschrift für Ethnologie, official organ of the German Ethnological Society, devoted an entire issue (no. 2 of Vol. 101) to the subject of ethnographic museums. The issue is entitled; "Ethnological Museums Tomorrow - Tasks and Goals". Although the journal is carried in most university libraries in the US and Canada, it rarely catches the attention of American anthropologists and is read more rarely still. Because of the interest the topic of that particular issue has for the readership of this newsletter, it was thought worthwhile to summarize and review in response to an invitation which was sent out in 1975 by a small group of young German museum ethnologists to most of their colleagues in German speaking countries as well as to a number of museum ethnologists with whom they were personally acquainted in other European and non-European countries. The invitation apparently posed a number of specific questions to which there are specific reactions in some of the papers. Of a total of 17 contributions, twelve are authored by individuals or groups connected with institutions in West Germany (not all of them being directly or primarily affiliated with museums, however), while the rest originate from Britain, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Tanzania, and Canada. Individuals or institutions from Austria or the German speaking part of Switzerland are not represented. One of the German contributors addresses the situation of regional Lapp museums in the nordic countries. The great majority of the German authors is young, occupying positions roughly equivalent to Assistant Professors and Assistant Curators. The two most notable exceptions are Axel Freiherr von Gagern, who is Director of the Ethnological Seminar at the University of Marburg. Age and status as well as national origin of the contributors correlate quite closely with the views expressed in the papers: most of the younger German writers tend to be strongly political and ideologically engaged and favor radical views, advocating a total reorientation of ethnographic museums, while the views expressed by the rest tend to range from moderate to conservative and are generally quite heterogeneous.

I will try in the following to summarize and review briefly the major points made in the various papers and give a minimal commentary. To avoid tiresome cross-referencing throughout the text, I will start out with a translation of the complete table of the issue.

- R. Vossen, H. Ganslmayer, D. Heintze, W. Lohse, H. Rammow; Present Status and Future of the Ethnological Museum, (in German).
- F. Deltgen: Ethnographic Museums = Media Museums. (in German)
- M. Munzel: Ethnological Museums in the Tradition of Levi-Bruhl? (in German).
- M.D. McLeod (Britain): Future Directions for Ethnographic Museums. (in English).
- A. Frhr. Von Gagern: In the Service of a Science of Humanity. (in German).
- H. van Geluwe (Belgium): Where do Ethnographic Museums Stand? Some Personal Considerations. (in French).
- H. Marzi, E.W. Müller, C. Rothfuchs, U. Staude-Forstreuter: Eskimo, Tikopia, and a Theory. (in German).
- T. Sekelj (Yugoslavia): An Ethnological Museum of the Future. (in English).
- V. Harms: Tolerance or Solidarity as Guiding Ideas in the Educational Work of the Ethnographic Museum of Tomorrow? (in German).
- I.A.R. Wembah-Rashid (Tanzania): Tomorrow's Museum of Ethnology (in English).
- M. Hinz: On the (Political) Function of the Ethnological Museum. (in German).
- H. Nachtigall: Political Problems in Ethnographic Museology, (in German).
- M. Halpin (Canada): A New Kind of Ethnographic Museum in Canada. (in English).
- W. Mey: Ethnology and the Problem of Ethnocentrism of the Public. (in German).

The first paper, by the editors of the volume, provides the most comprehensive programmatic statement and, to some extent, sets the tone. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to devote some more attention to it than to the rest of the articles. The traditional ethnographic museum is described as engaged in three major activities: collecting and preserving, research, and public education, in this order of importance, with public education being widely neglected. The authors advocate a total reversal of this order, whereby the aims of research, collecting, and conservation would be subordinated to the needs and goals of the education program. The traditional museum is criticized for its focus on history and its exclusive attention to pristine preliterate societies who are represented by selected artifacts chosen on the basis of artistic competence. The latter is said to be judged on criteria extraneous to the values of the societies of origin. Exhibits are criticized for their sterile scientism and their orientation toward professional colleagues and a narrow spectrum of educated bourgeoisie. Instead, the authors call for exhibits and a full range of other possible educational activities to be directed at the broadest possible audience and addressed to problems relevant to the modern world. It is part of this relevance that the authors demand that the museological interests and activities encompass all societies and cultures, including those of modern Europe. They feel, in principle, that ethnographic museums of the traditional kind need to be abandoned and that the museum of the future will have to disassociate itself from the field of ethnology in the strict sense and become an interdisciplinary meeting ground. Two models are proposed as successors to the traditional museum; A "Museum of Cultural Anthropology" which would be an extension of the Natural History Museum and deal with basic questions of understanding the interrelationships of man, nature and culture; or a "Museum of the Third World" which would devote itself primarily to the economic, social, and cultural problems of the developing countries. For the Third World itself, three alternative museum types are envisioned: a "National Museum of Ethnography;" a superregional "Museum of Nations;" and a "House of Industrial Nations" which would, analogous to the Museum of the Third World, inform about conditions in the Western World and concentrate on educating the public about the interdependencies between the developed and developing nations.

Many of the points made in the first paper are picked up by other contributors but are often developed by them far more forcefully and pursued to a more extreme degree. Throughout the German contributions it is clear that the perceived crisis of ethnographic museums is only part of a much larger crisis affecting the whole field of anthropology in Germany. Indeed, in the late 1960's students and young professionals attempted a revolution of sorts, declaring anthropology a Marxist discipline and demanding the demolition of traditional social, academic, and theoretical structures of

the discipline. The revolution has not been entirely successful but, as Nachtigall points out, has led to an uneasy stalemate and stagnation of the field (although many would say that German anthropology had been intellectually stagnant long before and that the attempted revolution brought a much-needed breadth of fresh air). In any event, it is significant to note with Nachtigall that none of the considerable number of German universities founded during the last two decades have accepted anthropology into their curricula. This must be at least in part a reflection of the general perception of the field as being concerned with abstruse problems which are irrelevant to the operation of society and largely sterile in a wider scientific context.

Given the young Turks' ideological commitment and their demand for social relevance, the ethnographic museums became natural targets of particular interest since they, unlike the academic departments, provided an opportunity for developing issues of social relevance in direct communication with the masses. From this follow quite naturally both the criticisms of the traditional institution and the prescriptions for its re-creation. Across the board, most contributions, including those from outside of Germany, comment on the linkage between colonialism and ethnographic museums and decry that museums have remained wedded to an interest in exotic, subjugated, and often annihilated cultures. It is pointed out in several papers that artifacts are widely treated as art objects and many ethnographic museums conceive of themselves as temples of "primitive art." As such, they provide their clientele with an opportunity to take flight from everyday reality into a mystical world that bears no relationship to the realities of the societies from where the artifacts were taken. It is stated that this alienation of cultural materials (into exotica, art objects, tangible paraphernalia of mysticism, etc.) is part and parcel of the mechanism by which Western societies sublimate the tension between their own ethnocentrism and a minimal acceptance of the legitimate existence of other groups.

Indeed, the very core of the controversy surrounding ethnographic museums lies in the fact that they are seen as focal points for the confrontation and meeting of different social groups, and it is with regard to this aspect that the most radical propositions are made. Foremost among them is one by Harms who proposes that the principle of social and cultural tolerance is inadequate as a guiding idea for the educational work of ethnographic museums. It involves, he feels, insoluble conflicts between different value systems, and total tolerance would include the tolerance of intolerance which, in fact, he sees as the principle through which the bourgeoisie has maintained itself in power. Harms promotes instead the concept of "solidarity;" solidarity between and among the oppressed classes in the industrialized world and the oppressed nations in the Third World. It would be the primary task of the museum to make explicit, and teach about the fact of political, economic, and social dependence and to promote solidarity in thought and action among the dependent classes and nations. In such a context, of course, traditional museum activities and the collections around which they revolved become at best peripheral and it is known that some of the most radical proponents have on occasion proposed that most of the collections be returned to the countries and peoples from where they were acquired, although no such radical act is formally called for in the publication on hand.

Not all of the contributors conceive of the museum of tomorrow in quite such a narrow framework, however. Several of the German as well as most of the foreign authors occupy a spectrum of more moderate positions. Taking into account the widely diverging ideological premises from which the various writers start, it should not surprise that there is a strong tendency for the more radical and more conservative writers to talk past each other, although several papers do contain the seeds of genuine dialogue. Even the most conservative of the discussants would not deny that ethnographic museums need to be revitalized and made more responsive to problems of the real world. On the other hand, several of them point out that the various proposals are made without regard to the wishes of the general public which ultimately is responsible for the continued maintenance of the museums, and that the radicals seem determined to force their own political convictions down everybody else's throat. In this connection it is interesting to note that some of the ideas growing out of the ethnology revolution have already been tested in some major exhibitons, most famous (or infamous) among them one entitled "Rulers and Subjects - Indians of Peru, 1000 B.C.

to Present," prepared by a collective at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Frankfurt in 1973-74. The exhibit was apparently technically very well done and was, among others, notable for three things; it put little emphasis on the use of pretty artifacts; it was strongly didactic; and in its thematic treatment, it stressed the social and economic relations in the Inca class society. The commentary, generally acknowledged by critics as accurate from the point of view of archaeology and ethnography, was spiced with sidelights into the modern political situation inside and outside of Latin America. The exhibit caused considerable comment, much of it negative, but judging from the numbers of visitors it was a public success.

The most interesting among the non-German contributions to the museum issue is the one by Wembah-Rashid from the National Museum of Tanzania, although many of the points he makes are not new to most of us who have worked with museum anthropologists from the Third World. Wembah-Rashid is motivated by some very concrete problems confronting museums in a developing country. He sees two principal goals for the institution: to foster inter-ethnic tolerance and promote a sense of national identity; and to nurture understanding of, and pride in the nation's own culture and history. In consonance with this, he thinks that the museum must and can play a central role in social and economic development through its public education efforts as well as its research work. With regard to European (and American) museums, he feels that the traditional type of ethnographic museum is a thing of the past because of its emphasis on primitive cultures and societies which today are either extinct or have become transformed. In dealing with extra-European cultures and societies, they should be portrayed as they are now, and this portrayal should not be carried out by European anthropologists who, for this purpose, carry away from these countries large amounts of valuable cultural properties. Rather, the opportunity should be given to Third World nations to portray themselves through loan or travelling exhibits, Wembah-Rashid stresses also that most Third World museums are short on resources and appeals for help and cooperation from Western museums particularly in the area of manpower and expertise.

There is little doubt that German anthropology has fallen onto hard times and I hazard to say that few German colleagues would deny that. The once grand culture-historical "school" has withered away to a mere shadow of itself and its practitioners engage largely in sterile descriptive exercises or limit themselves to ethno-historical work in the strict sense. Yet, no alternative paradigm has found wide currency in German anthropology. The discipline has become an almost purely academic enterprise with little relevance to living societies anywhere or even other academic fields. The ethnographic museums, most of them existing independently and outside a university context nor being part of more encompassing natural history museums, are hardest hit by the dilapidation of the discipline, since many of them cannot even claim the limited academic significance which is still attached to university institutes.

Nobody would deny that changes are necessary and urgent. It would seem, however, that the would-be reformers are embarking on a drastically one-sided treatment that will surely kill the patient. As noted, most of the more radical reformers are Marxists, but the interesting thing is that their commitment to Marxism stays essentially on a political level. Thus, many of them are long on political conviction but short on theoretical insight. It is a curious fact that even some of the most devoted Marxists among the young German anthropologists do not apply the basic principles of Marxian social thought in their own anthropological analysis and remain old-fashioned culture-historians when it comes to the nitty-gritty of their professional work. If one wants to find true Marxist anthropology (that is, an anthropology in which Marxist social philosophy provides the basis for the conceptual and explanatory framework of social and cultural analysis), one has to go to France, England, or the United States.

Many of the problems and proposals debated particularly in the German contributions are not immediately applicable to American museums. The development of the anthropological discipline as a whole as well as the evolution of ethnographic museums have been very different in this part of the world. This does not mean, however, that we have reason to be smug. Many of the ideas expressed in the museum issue could very profitably serve as a stimulus for rethinking the role our museums ought to play in public

life and our responsibilities vis-à-vis our own society as well as those societies whose artifacts we curate and manipulate in our exhibits and research projects. In this respect, I would like to direct attention toward the paper by Halpin who reports on the experimental design of the new anthropological museum of the University of British Columbia. One of the guiding ideas of that museum is to stimulate and make possible a much greater public use of the museum's resources than has traditionally been the case. The experiment is still too young to allow definitive conclusions with regard to the soundness of the basic idea or its execution, but I think it bears careful watching.



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What happens after this is anyone's guess. One thing is certain, tax-assisted California museums must find a solution now for the continued support of anthropological research programs and the conservation and general needs of their collections.

It may also be apparent, that this problem will not be restricted to California due to increased national dissatisfaction of tax programs imposed by federal and other local governments. Soon, a tax-reform movement may sweep the entire nation.

What then does such a movement hold for an institution which will or has suffered severe and sudden budget reductions?

Usually the focal point to such budget recovery programs will be fund-raising drives and grants, but beyond that, museums may have to turn more and more to the large corporations for financial support.

I am not taking an advocates position on this matter, but it must be a consideration if our fiscal budgets are going to continue to be cut due to tax reforms.

Obviously most museums have had their budget problems throughout the years, but a sudden 50% decrease in funding and staff may prove fatal for some and for the collections they house. We need to find new support programs, and we need to find them soon.

DIRECTOR QUILTS

Giles Mead, director of the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History has resigned effective October 1, 1978.

The museum was among county institutions affected by a fund cutback in the wake of Proposition 13.

After a June press conference called by Ed N. Harrison, president of the museum's board of governors and Supervisor Kenneth Hahn to announce that a private support would take over financial responsibility for the institution, Mead, unaware of the move, bitterly objected. In a Los Angeles newspaper report Mead stated, "Its a damned dangerous thing to do," adding, "Needless to say, I am included out of most of these things (decisions), but I intend to be vocal!"

Mead, an ichthyologist, was appointed to the director's position in 1970. A committee is being formed to launch a nationwide search for a successor.

Thank You

A special thank you to the many members and subscribers who have extended their support and well-wishes to me as the new editor of the CMA Newsletter. The format will remain basically the same and will continue to extend the ideals and goals that Dick Ford put forth during his tenure as editor. I welcome your comments, ideas and any articles you wish to submit for publication.

Kathy Whitaker