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## LOOKING FOR A NEW DIRECTION: THE MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY IN VIENNA

Christian Feest

Museum of Ethnology, Vienna

According to different readings of the evidence, the Museum of Ethnology (Museum für Völkerkunde) in Vienna looks back at a history of 76, 128, or 198 years. Its oldest collections can be traced to the late sixteenth-century *Kunstkammer* of Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol, where rare and curious things from the newly discovered corners of the globe were displayed next to excellent examples of European art and craftsmanship. It was only in 1806, as a result of the purchase by the Austrian Emperor at the sale of the Leverian Museum in London of a large group of artifacts assembled on the three circumnavigations of Captain James Cook, R.N., that a separate Ethnographic Collection (k.k. Ethnographische Sammlung) was established within the Imperial Cabinet of Natural History. The word "ethnography" had been coined in 1770 in Göttingen, and the voyages of the Enlightenment—especially those of Cook—had provided an opportunity for systematic collecting of exotic products as cultural documents within a new paradigm inspired by Linnean principles of taxonomy. The Ethnographic Collection grew rapidly for the next forty years, but the lack of specialized curators as well as of forms of systematic academic discourse on the subject matter led to a general neglect of the material, which was ultimately removed from public view to linger in boxes in the attic of the Natural History Cabinet.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the transformation of the former Imperial collections of art and natural history into national museums during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the ethnographic artifacts (including those transferred from Tyrol to Vienna) became the core of an Anthropological-Ethnographic Department at the Court Museum of Natural History (Naturhistorisches Hofmuseum). Established in 1876 by the first director of the Natural History Museum, a geologist and a veteran of the first Austrian circumnavigation in the 1850s, the new department was modeled after then current French ideas about the unity of the anthropological sciences, and was therefore made up of separate collections of physical anthropology, prehistory, and ethnography. Under the direction of the first head of the department, Franz Heger, who was also a geologist with pronounced ethnographic interests, the three collections gained increasing independence and ultimately became separate departments. The beneficial effects of unity were never achieved because the largely non-European ethnographic material was historically unrelated to the largely Austrian prehistoric and physical anthropological collections. At the same time, an assistant curator, Arthur Haberland, trained as a philologist, who felt uncomfortable in the company of scientists, used the small collection of Austrian ethnographic material as the basis for the establishment of a new Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art (Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde). Practical and personal considerations thus led both to a growing exotification of non-European ethnography and to its gradual removal from the context of natural sciences.

Exhibition space at the Natural History Museum had been planned to fit the needs of the material available in the 1870s (and there were no storage facilities provided). By the time the museum opened to the public in 1889, the ethnographic collection had grown from about 5,000 to 24,000 objects. When the Austro-Hungarian monarchy came to an end in 1918, the count stood at about 90,000, and after some discussion it was decided that the ethnographic collection should be moved from the crowded Natural History Museum to the now deserted Imperial castle, which already housed the huge ethnographic collection

assembled in 1892/3 during a voyage around the world by the late Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. Thus in 1928 the Museum of Ethnology gained independence as a federally funded museum independent of Natural History—one year before the separation of physical anthropology and ethnology at the University of Vienna and the creation of a Department of Ethnology (Institut für Völkerkunde) located in the same building as the museum.

While the culture-historical Vienna School of ethnology had ultimately derived some of its methodological instruments (such as the "criteria of form and of quantity" used for the demonstration of presumed historical relationships among cultures around the world) from museum practice, material culture studies had already begun to lose importance in academic anthropology (see Sturtevant 1969, Fischer 1971). At the time of the opening of the new museum, heated discussions regarding the proper mode of exhibiting objects (especially those produced in Asian civilizations) as either ethnography or art signaled the rise of a discourse on the universality of art in general and on "primitive art" in particular. Although much of the debate was carried out outside the museum community, it began to affect the public perception of the museum's mission. It reappeared with new vigor in the 1960s, when ethnographic museums worldwide suffered the onset of a severe identity crisis.

In German-speaking countries, the culture-historical method was now repudiated, and academic anthropology embraced the teachings of functionalism, structuralism, and other schools for which material culture (or even "culture") carried little significance. Some ethnographic museums, faced with their desertion by the discipline at large and the attendant loss of social status, attempted to reinvent themselves as non-Western art museums—generally with limited success. Others accepted their fate as lowly instruments of public instruction—an equally lost cause, given the overwhelmingly historical nature of their holdings and in view of a rising demand to explain a rapidly changing contemporary world; the choice was between romanticizing about lost worlds and dealing with questions about the Third and Fourth Worlds without appropriate collections, and all too often without appropriate theory.

In Vienna, where new trends generally arrive a decade or so later than elsewhere, and then in a diluted and less radical version, the Museum of Ethnology was also affected by these developments, but the problems were partially disguised by better government funding since the 1970s. Academic anthropology still maintained a historical component, represented by a local brand of ethnohistory, although a presentist orientation of the discipline was clearly on the rise. In an unrelated transnational development of the 1990s, federal, state, and local governments all over Europe tried to consolidate their budgets by "privatizing" their money-losing museums through various strategies. In Austria, the Museum Law of 1998 removed federal museums from the bureaucratic control of the government, transformed them into "scientific institutions of public law," and froze federal subsidies at the level of the 1997 budget in the expectation that these now liberated institutions would be able to generate profits through private enterprise, or at least attract corporate sponsors willing to spend some money for the public good in exchange for an improvement of their image. The law thus favored prestigious art museums over less prestigious institutions, such as museums of natural history or ethnology, and it helped to pave the way for what was generally perceived as a "hostile takeover" of the Museum of Ethnology by the Museum of Art History (Kunsthistorisches Museum) in 2001, which thereby acquired a world-class collection of non-Western art and material culture, as well as a significant amount of cheap exhibition space in a central location. The departure of the former director of the Museum

of Ethnology, his deputy, and the chief conservator on a pre-retirement plan was the most visible sign of the deep identity crisis resulting from the loss of its independence.

Having served as a curator at the Museum of Ethnology from 1963 to 1993, I had left the museum to teach North American Indian ethnology at the University of Frankfurt for a number of good reasons. I felt that museums (especially of ethnology) were moving in a wrong direction, that thirty years in one institution seemed to have more or less exhausted the possibilities for my intellectual and professional development there, and that I had no desire whatsoever to become the museum's director and spend the rest of my life as an administrator in the company of other bureaucrats. Although I quickly turned into an outspoken critic of the world of ethnographic museums (see Feest 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999a, 2001), I also found myself developing courses on museum anthropology and attempting to explain to my students what I thought museums should be. With my students I guest-curated two fairly successful exhibitions in and around Frankfurt ("Sitting Bull: The Last Indian?" and "Indian Times: News from Native North America" [Feest 1999b, 2002]), and continued to do research in museums on Native American art and material culture and on the history of ethnographic collecting and representation.

Given these circumstances, no one could have been more surprised than myself when in 2003 I accepted the offer to become director of the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna. Although I still find it easier to explain why I left Vienna than why I returned, a number of new challenges posed by my position were sufficiently powerful to inspire me: (1) The complete renovation of the building, now under way and fully financed, and the subsequent total reinstallation offer an opportunity to literally reinvent the museum, especially if accompanied by structural changes in its organization. (2) The museum's mission statement, which has become part of Austria's museum law of 1998 (Museumsordnung 2001), defines the purposes of the museum as largely those of a scholarly institution with an explicit mandate to pursue and promote research both on its own collections as well as on the cultural contexts necessary for their understanding. (3) If these local developments designed to narrow the gap between museum and academic anthropology were successful, they could have beneficial effects for similar institutions elsewhere. While much will depend upon appropriate funding, a number of important changes may be initiated irrespective of the financial situation.

The complete reinstallation of the museum provides an opportunity to rethink some of the basic principles upon which most permanent displays in museums of ethnology<sup>2</sup> have been based for the last century or so. With minor exceptions representing the Pitt-Rivers tradition of organizing displays by series of artifact types, these museums have always been primarily ethnographic—ideally focusing on specific non-Western cultures, but more commonly organizing displays by regions, countries, or even continents. Especially for the Americas, an inadequately understood version of the theory of culture areas was widely regarded as a satisfactory solution to the problem of collections insufficient for the representation of specific cultures. Irrespective of Kroeber's insight that culture areas were the products of history rather than of environmental adaptations, museums often explicitly stressed the connection between culture and habitat and generally neglected the historicity of the artifacts and of the cultures they were meant to represent. Focusing on the representation and explanation of the specific (in whatever muddled fashion), ethnological museums had largely become "ethnographic" to the near exclusion of comparative approaches stressing the range of variation across cultures or the cultural differences in coping with identical or similar problems. Interestingly enough, special exhibitions devoted to thematically based comparison (such as on drugs or on gender relationships in Cologne or

on death in Frankfurt in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s) had all turned out to be particularly successful with the public. One of the reasons, in my view, why such modes of display were not more often attempted or even included in the permanent galleries is the fact that curators are generally hired for their regional expertise and are therefore less likely to be interested in or qualified to undertake comparative approaches.

The new installation in Vienna (to be opened beginning in 2007) will depart from past precedent by devoting more than a third of the floor space of the "permanent" exhibition to non-regional, thematic displays. These will include halls devoted to the history of ethnographic collecting and representation from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, to a broadly-based discussion of alterity and identity, to a comparative view of architectural forms, to forms of exchange, or (especially relevant in the context of the museum's position with the Art History Corporation) to anthropological perspectives on art. These exhibitions should lessen the exotification inherent in stressing cultural otherness, and should be more consistent with the explanatory demands of cultural difference within an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. While the partial redirection in the choice of the subject matter will have to be put into effect with the present curatorial staff, the long-term goal associated with it is the creation of a separate curatorial "department of theory" for the planning and coordination of comparative and other thematic exhibitions, which still need to be based on the available regional collections.

Because of the nature of the existing collections, regional modes of representation will continue to dominate in the foreseeable future, but they will need to avoid some of their past shortcomings, including those indicated by indigenous critics of museums of anthropology. First of all, museums will have to withstand the temptation to follow the universalist or encyclopedic tradition of both the old Wunderkammer and the nation-state museum, simply because no museum in the world has the collections to be truly encyclopedic. Because museums can only show what they have in their collections, the regional experts will be encouraged to combine the historical perspective required for an understanding of historically constituted collections with an eye for collectable material that will help to visualize for future generations the local and global cultural phenomena observable today.

By virtue of their archival function of preserving cultural documents, the material museums are able to use in exhibitions is primarily historical in nature, but the new installation in Vienna will attempt to give some space to the present in all of its exhibitions. This appears to be a necessity in order to offer a vantage point from which it may be easier for viewers to understand the historicity of those cultural documents which formerly have all too often been presented in a manner inviting perceptions of "archaic" cultures as existing in a state of a perpetual, "traditional" past, justly criticized by spokespersons for contemporary indigenous communities (see West 2000, Feest 2001).<sup>3</sup> Given the selective nature of the collection, it will be more difficult to do justice to the embeddedness of local cultures in regional and global settings, whose representation is necessary for a better understanding of the agencies underlying cultural change. The notion that it is possible to represent Native American cultures as isolated from the rest of the world rather than in connection with their relationships to the dominant society is, of course, preposterous, but is maintained by the absence of collections illustrating non-Native American cultures and by the past practice of preserving only materials that reflected "traditional" aspects of Native cultures. Even so, it will be possible on the basis of the material available at the museum to illustrate the pervasive past and present importance of globalization and hybridity, and the increasing role of pluralism in "traditional" societies.

Bringing the larger world into the picture of cultures heretofore represented as remote and isolated may also help to overcome the practice of exotification. In the case of Vienna, it may be helpful that, largely due to political pressures, the Museum of Ethnology is now actively involved in discussions that may lead to some kind of strategic alliance or even fusion with the Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, with its extensive European collections.

The most important challenge for museums willing to play an active role in the anthropological community, however, may lie in the need to clarify the epistemological status of material cultural documents (alone and in conjunction with other historical verbal and visual records) in anthropological research. Here, as well as in the problem of cultural representation in museums, the historical nature of the artifacts presents a problem in the face of the presentist orientation of a cultural anthropology that defines itself primarily through the method of participant observation. Museum anthropology thus shares some of the problems inherent in other historical approaches to the subject, and should find it useful to position itself within existing "ethnohistorical" discourses in the broadest sense. Since such an effort cannot be effectively made by one museum in isolation, the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna will actively seek cooperation with other museums beyond the exchange of exhibitions to promote research based on their specific resources.

The function of museums as "anthropological data banks" (Sturtevant 1973, Osgood 1979) clearly goes beyond their preservation of material documents of cultures. A special emphasis will be given in Vienna to other historical material, such as its collection of historical ethnographic photographs. The museum will also actively advertise its willingness to preserve and make available to other researchers fieldwork records and other papers by anthropologists for which, at least in German-speaking countries, there has so far been no widely recognized archive.

It may be recalled that with a renewed systematic interest in material culture during the last decades of the twentieth century, not only by prehistoric anthropologists but also by social and economic historians, art historians, and folklorists, it has become apparent that cultural anthropology (including museum anthropology) had moved so far away from its early preoccupation with artifacts that it was unable to suggest answers to the questions raised by artifacts or even to point in a direction where answers might be found. Without abandoning its educational obligations to the public, museum anthropology will thus have to make decisive efforts to re-establish its expertise in a theory-based study of material culture. It may, after all, be the best and perhaps last chance to avoid the threat of "Disneyfication" of museum of anthropology (e.g. Terrell 1991, Haas 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> The following summary of the history of the museum is largely based on Feest 1980; see also Plankensteiner 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Although many European museums, especially those originating within the context of natural history museums, had originally followed the idea of the unity of the anthropological disciplines, representing mankind in its biological, prehistoric, and recent cultural expressions, nearly all of them became museums of ethnology with no reference to physical anthropology and an attention to prehistory limited only to selected non-European populations, generally including the Americas, but excluding not only Europe, but often also Near Eastern civilizations, which are usually represented in art (and fall within the separate province of classical archaeology).

<sup>3</sup> The solution offered by the new National Museum of the American Indian in Washington to represent Native American cultures as existing in a state of perpetual present is convincing and has

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led to the near exclusion of its important collection of historical artifacts from the displays. This strategy clearly privileges a view of the continuity of "tradition" and identity over the often erratic changes and discontinuities revealed by the historical record.

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## **ANTHROPOLOGY IN ISRAEL: PROFESSIONALS IN STORMY DAYS**

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This overview seeks to draw the history of anthropology in Israel in broad strokes and with a contextual perspective from the mid-1920s to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Studies of the characteristics of national anthropologies have assumed that the state—a social/political/bureaucratic/cultural/national body—is a legitimate unit of analysis. National anthropologies deal with the sociopolitical and historical context of producing anthropological knowledge. The linkage between processes of nation building and anthropology in 50-year-old Israel makes the literature on anthropologies in the new independent states and the developed world relevant to the Israeli case (Ben Ari and Van-Bremen, forthcoming; Alatas, 2001). Some works that deal with the complex center-periphery relations in anthropology, such as Gerholm and Hannerz (1982) and Gupta and Ferguson (1997), shed light on the discipline in Israel. As a national anthropology, anthropology in Israel should be viewed in the light of wider social processes in Israeli society, the changing agenda of world anthropology, and the human nature of its carriers, the anthropologists. My investigation of Israeli anthropology has been inspired by studies in the history of anthropology which show the complexity and multifaceted situations within which anthropology was done, such as those by Kuklick on British anthropology (1991) or Schumaker (2001) on the Rhodes-Livingston Institute in Central Africa.

Anthropology as an idea entered the domain of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem from the mid-1920s, as that institution was being established, but only in the mid-1960s did it begin to be institutionalized in Israeli universities. Why was it neglected, even rejected, while its importance and relevance to the new society was recognized? The discipline's rejection by academe for many years is testimony to the intellectual and ideological preferences of the Jewish community of pre-state Palestine and of the state itself during its first decade. The reversal in attitudes towards the discipline which took place after that was based on utilitarian reasons, reflecting changes in Israeli society's objectives, as well as the availability of manpower and resources for attaining those objectives. The gradually increasing strength of the discipline becomes clear against the backdrop of the expectations placed upon it on the one hand, and the personal, social, political and global agenda of its members, on the other.

Anthropological research in Israel had its beginnings in the early 1920s, when the country was governed under the British Mandate established by the League of Nations. During this period, ethnographic field studies of small communities of Palestinian Arabs were conducted, which were soon followed by sociological and ethnographic studies of the Jews of Palestine. Hilma Granquist, (1891-1942) a Finnish anthropologist, came to the village of Artas near Bethlehem anticipating that the life patterns of the Palestinian villagers could serve as a source for the understanding of everyday life in Biblical times (Granquist, 1935). She shared her interest in their daily life, folklore and material culture with Tewafiq Canaan (1882-1964), a local physician (Canaan, 1927, 1932).