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Franz Boas and the Missionary Exhibit

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Franz Boas and the Missionary Exhibit¹

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In standard histories of anthropology, Franz Boas' time at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) is characterized by his study and installation of Northwest Coast culture. Although his ethnological research and curatorial activities were defined by an American focus, there were other loci of interest to him that are less familiar. His direction of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897–1902) and the little-known East Asiatic Committee (1900–1905) demonstrates that he was eager to expand the museum's geographic representation and production of ethnological knowledge to Asia (cf. Freed, Freed and Williamson 1988; Kendall 2009 [1998]; Kendall and Krupnik 2003). American anthropology at this time is usually described as having been principally concerned with "establishing the relationships between various tribal groups of Indians, in tracing their history and origin and in determining their antiquity in the New World" (Shapiro 1953: 6; and see Berkhofer 1978; Darnell 1998). This short piece explores a further and previously overlooked facet of Boas' work at the museum: his engagement with a haphazard collection of quotidian artifacts, the "Missionary Exhibit" (Cole 2001: 29; Hasinoff 2008). The exhibit gives material form to Boas' awkward rapport with missionaries in extending the scope of anthropology beyond the study of Native North America.

The contents of the Missionary Exhibit were gathered for and displayed at the Ecumenical Conference on Foreign Missions and then transferred to and reinstalled at the AMNH in 1900.² Boas described the disoriented and poorly documented collection that arrived at the museum as "very fragmentary" with "many gaps" and he encouraged missionaries to "gradually elaborate it in a systematic manner" (Boas to Jesup, 10 May 1900, BM, AMNH; Boas to Hall, 23 December 1899, ME, AMNH). The collection gave him the opportunity to establish relationships with missionaries, who, with proper directives, could amass comprehensive collections for the museum from areas like Burma, which were previously peripheral to the thrust of his own research and AMNH sponsored expeditions. The exhibit complicates the history of anthropology in the early twentieth century. Because Boas was a leading advocate for the professionalization of the discipline, he is usually seen to have worked to define anthropology against the practices of missionaries and other amateur ethnologists (Darnell 1970). Tracing Boas' unrecognized, if not hidden role, in the collection's history demonstrates how he realized one aspect of his broad comparativist project by establishing ties to missionaries, which enabled him to place the ethnology of Asia in a comparative framework. The history of the

¹ Laurel Kendall, Ira Jacknis, Lynn Meskell, Nan Rothschild, Rubie Watson, Robert Oppenheim, Gray Tuttle, and Paige West gave invaluable comments on earlier versions of this piece. Ruth Tonkiss Cameron in The Burke Library Archives (Columbia University Libraries), Union Theological Seminary, New York guided me through the holdings of the Missionary Research Library. Paul Beelitz, John Hanson, Kristen Mable, and Belinda Kaye in the Division of Anthropology Collections and Archives; and Barbara Mathé in Special Collections, American Museum of Natural History assisted me in locating the Missionary Exhibit's contents and related accession and correspondence records. This piece is a summary of Hasinoff (2010). For further elaboration see Hasinoff (forthcoming).

²Catalogue 1, the AMNH manuscript catalogue, lists the accession as the "Missionary Exhibit" (AMNH accession 1900-31), taking its name from its installation at the ECFM. Throughout this piece, I refer to it interchangeably as an exhibit, an accession and a collection.

Burmese portion of the Missionary Exhibit serves as a characteristic and early case study for Asian and missionary contexts of collecting.

The Ecumenical Conference on Foreign Missions & the Missionary Exhibit

The Ecumenical Conference on Foreign Missions (21 April to 1 May 1900) brought together 200,000 Protestants to view their collective contributions to the global advancement of Christendom in the twentieth century (Forman 1982: 54). Invitations were sent to all known missionaries, and 2,500 persons from 162 missionary societies served as official representatives, offering vivid testimonials about their labors abroad from the stage of Carnegie Hall and the pulpits of neighboring churches (ECFM 1900). Historians describe the conference as a popular religious event—the largest in American history devoted at once to stimulating curiosity, educating communities about foreign fields, and demonstrating the shared progress of world missions (Askew 2000).

According to an article in the *New York Times* that documented the highlights of the conference, “the most complete missionary exhibit ever to be assembled” dramatically depicted the colorful sights of missions (1900a: 7). The Missionary Exhibit was displayed for the duration of the conference just blocks from Carnegie Hall at the Episcopal Parish House of the Church of Zion and St. Timothy. Its objects were arranged geographically, occupying three floors of the church. As a reconstruction of foreign missions, it comprised “two classes” of display: the first included photographs and objects representing the home activities of participating evangelical boards, and the second contained “missionary curios,” photographs, models and scriptures illustrating the subjects, surroundings and work of foreign missions (ECFM 1899).

The “missionary curios”—“lotus shoes,” “idols,” “fetishes,” and “pagan material medica”—were arranged in courts (or alcoves) depicting the life of virtually every Protestant mission field: North America, Latin America, Oceania, Japan and Formosa; Korea, China and dependencies; Siam, Laos and the Malay Archipelago; Burma and Assam; India and Ceylon; Turkey and Persia; Syria, Egypt and Arabia; Africa and Madagascar. Mediating the displays were “heads of courts” (docents or stewards), who masqueraded as native people from these exotic locales (*Missionary Review of the World* 1900: 473). By all accounts, the exhibition rendered “more complete and profitable the sessions of the Ecumenical Conference” (Exhibit Committee 1899). In its pomp and pageantry it belonged to turn of the century visual culture of world’s fairs, industrial exhibitions and museums.

The Circular and the American Baptist Mission Press, Rangoon

A year before the conference, the Exhibit Committee—comprised of retired Protestant missionaries and leaders in the missionary movement—formed to gather a collection that would present the progress of mission work and the foreign places in which it was advancing (*Standard* 1900:10 [1144]; Exhibit Committee 1899). The Missionary Exhibit was to serve as both a sober public assessment of the progress of missions and a vehicle for propaganda. A circular that was sent to 800 participating missionaries and 500 Protestant societies

outlined the proposed scheme of the display, and solicited donated objects, photographs, models of native and mission homes, and religious texts (Exhibit Committee *ibid.*). The committee intended its directives to provide the conference with the most complete missionary collection in North America, imagining that the material efforts and output of evangelism might be presented under a single church roof. The Missionary Exhibit was to be the cornerstone of the exhibition.

The Exhibit Committee's circular arrived at the American Baptist Mission press in Rangoon.³ In September of that year, the principal weekly newspaper for Baptist missionaries in Burma, the *News*, published a brief description of the conference and an urgent appeal for missionaries to contribute to the exhibit in little over one month (see Cushing et al. 1899: 3).⁴ Widely distributed, the newspaper was the most efficient means to put out a call for objects and to encourage cooperation among missionaries. Without time to orchestrate a centralized effort at gathering a collection representative of the Burmese field, the coordinators asked that contributions be sent directly to the press; from there they would be packed and shipped to New York.

While the press in Burma collaborated with the committee, the actual work of collecting and recording the artifacts was not accomplished to the degree that the New York exhibit organizers hoped. Although the press expedited a call for objects, two shipments of poorly documented artifacts arrived after the conference. Nevertheless, Burma still occupied a place in the Burma-Assam Court; missionaries on furlough and those residing in New York loaned personal mementoes from the field, thus filling in some of the exhibit's gaps.

An Incomplete Collection

Although the Exhibit Committee explained in its circular that the purpose of the exhibition was to offer a complete picture of foreign mission life, a jumble of things was hastily gathered. The contributed objects varied with the constraints of each missionary society as well as the missionaries who responded to the committee's collecting instructions (for example, limits of time, expenditure, and transportation). The missionaries who contributed to the exhibition had different commitments to collecting, as well as different ideas about what should be gathered. The geographic location, name (in English and native languages), production, morphology, use and function of each object were, for the most part, left unrecorded (cf. Lawson 1994: 64; Gardner 2006: 130). In the two weeks before the exhibit was mounted, members of the committee struggled with "listing and labeling the heterogeneous mass" (Langdon to Winsor, 7 April 1900, AMNH).

Despite its incompleteness, all accounts reported that the Missionary Exhibit enchanted New Yorkers. From the beginning, the committee realized the potential of the exhibit for educating a domestic audience about missions, and

³Adoniram Judson was the first American missionary to labor abroad, establishing Burma as a foundational mission field in 1813. Throughout the nineteenth century Burma was seen as the inaugural field of foreign missionization, and at the center of the geography of American missions (Brackney 1998: 126).

⁴Beginning in 1888, the *News* kept American Baptist missionaries in Burma updated on the lives of their coadjutors, providing information about the opening of mission stations, as well as the arrivals, departures, births and deaths of missionaries and their family members.

sought a lasting venue for the collection: "It is intended that the present exhibit shall not vanish, but that it shall find a permanent place here" (*New York Times* 1900b: 1).⁵ And Boas noticed the enchantment and scholarly potential of the exhibit. Five months prior to the conference, in January, the committee incorporated itself as the Christian Missions Museum and Library (CMML); it cooperated with the AMNH in displaying and enlarging the collection, in receiving missionary collections, and in maintaining a library of domestic and foreign publications illustrating mission work (Christian Missions Museum and Library 1900–1914).

An Exhibit of Curios from Asia

A week and a half after the conference, Boas accessioned the 1,657 objects⁶ and set to work sifting through, making sense of, and arranging them in the eastern building of the museum.⁷ Recognizing the Missionary Exhibit's strengths, and optimistic that the exhibit could be a stimulus for future missionary collecting efforts in the East, he reinstated it as "chiefly an exhibit of curios from Asia."⁸ Museum visitors encountered Asia—Japan, Korea, China, India and so on—around the circumference of the gallery; in the gallery's center were displayed objects from Africa, the Malay Archipelago and Java (*New York Times* 1900c: 2). He arranged the collection first according to cultures and then categorically to cover the "dominant features" of the represented peoples (*ibid.*). Boas strove to stimulate wonder, just as the Missionary Exhibit had, while doing so for a different audience and with a different purpose. His articulated organizing principle was the "anthropology and ethnology" of foreign geographies. References to the "mission field" were quietly erased. The organization of the temporary exhibition, which was displayed for nearly a year, conformed to the museum's style, emphasizing geographical sequence.⁹

The East Asiatic Committee

The Missionary Exhibit arrived when the Jesup Expedition, and its ethnological mapping of the people of the Americas from Siberia down the Northwest Coast, gave the museum "its first foothold outside of our continent". As Laurel Kendall (2009 [1998]) has shown, the museum's newly formed East Asiatic Committee (EAC, 1900–1905) actively discussed the institution's "successive steps" in Asia (Boas 1974 [1901]: 287; Boas to Schiff, 31 January 1901, EAC, AMNH; see also Cole 1985: 214; 2001; Stocking 1992: 98–99). The museum's correspondence files indicate that the East Asia Committee gave Boas the opportunity to extend

⁵As with industrial expositions and world's fairs, there was a tension between the striking short-term impact of the Missionary Exhibit, and finding a long-term home for it (cf. Breckenridge 1989: 195; Greenhalgh 1988: 1). For example, the artifacts displayed in Putnam's anthropological exhibition (Department M) at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 became the founding collection of the Field Museum.

⁶This number is derived from the AMNH Advanced Research Database (ARD) (<http://anthro.amnh.org>) and does not include artifacts that were lost or deaccessioned.

⁷Due to issues of space, the Missionary Exhibit was temporarily accommodated in a gallery allocated to the museum's Department of Zoology (AMNH 1901: 19).

⁸Prior to 1900 the AMNH amassed artifacts from Asia from museum-sponsored expeditions: 54 artifacts from Sumatra from Rudolph Weber (AMNH acc. 1895–50), 80 objects from Arthur Curtiss James from Japan and 1,312 objects from Berthold Laufer from Japan (1898–36, 1898–51, 1900–12) and Siberia (1900–12). These totals are derived from the AMNH Advanced Research Database (ARD).

⁹Although the Missionary Exhibit was installed there for almost a year, neither the Division of Anthropology nor Special Collections, AMNH hold any photographs of it.

his ethnological research and collecting activities beyond the Jesup Expedition,¹⁰ as well as to draw the museum closer to Columbia University, where he had held a joint appointment since 1896. With American commerce and political interaction expanding in Asia, Boas had an "Oriental School," or an "East Asiatic Department," in mind for Columbia, which would be the first in the country. In its initial work, the committee gave him the means to establish an East Asian study collection at the museum and a library at the University that would form the basis for instruction of cultures of East Asia (Boas 1974 [1903]: 295). Boas anticipated that the "museum collections and a library on the subject would serve as an object-lesson illustrating the product and mode of life of people of Eastern Asia" (Boas to Jesup, 7 January 1901, EAC, AMNH).¹¹ He expected that specialists at Columbia, who had conducted ethnological research for the museum, could train students in anthropology, diplomacy and business for work in Asia (Boas 1974 [1903]: 295). Thus, the committee would join Columbia and the AMNH, placing the programs under Boas' direct control and producing close cooperation between the two institutions.¹²

Donors and Surrogate Collectors

The museum's documentation of the Missionary Exhibit specifically demonstrates how Boas capitalized on the success of the Ecumenical Conference on Foreign Missions to extend the AMNH's nascent East Asian ethnological research and collecting interests.¹³ During the conference, he met eagerly with missionaries about donating and collecting objects for the museum (Boas to Jesup, 5–6 October 1900, BM, AMNH). He also became acquainted with donors like Sarah Doremus, who had inherited a large collection of "curios" from Burma, China, India and Japan from her mother (also Sarah Doremus [1802–1877]). In 1861, the senior Doremus was the founding president of the first women's missionary sending board, the non-denominational Woman's Union Missionary Society (Hardesty 2003: 107; Tucker 1988: 100).¹⁴ That Doremus was persuaded to donate forty objects to the museum between 1900 and 1901 demonstrates how

¹⁰Boas' interest in broadening the AMNH's scope can be traced to his work at the Field Museum, Chicago. While overseeing the installation of the anthropological displays at the Field in 1894, following the close of the Columbian Exposition, he remarked that the Indian materials predominated to an undesirable degree, with four fifths of the collection belonging to America, and the remainder to all other continents (Conn 1998: 80-81). His observation reflects an emergent tension in American anthropology, where by the end of the century, anthropologists began to see the whole world as a field study (ibid.; see also Boas 1907: 925-926).

¹¹As George W. Stocking, Jr. has observed, Boas' practical goals of strengthening the position of anthropology at Columbia were wed to an "ethical purpose" of understanding the subjects of an expansive American imperialism in their own terms (1992: 99).

¹²The EAC fit neatly with his vision for anthropology in New York, which involved a very close cooperation between Columbia and the American Museum. Boas did not have the resources or the personnel to carry out the systematic research and teaching program he envisioned. Many of his efforts to build an harmonized institutional framework for the university and the museum fell through (Darnell 1998: 245).

¹³This resonates with his experiences of world's fairs, such as the Columbian Exposition of 1893, which were not only sites for procuring collections but also for establishing alliances to make collections (Penny 2002: 59). Missionary exhibitions have yet to be considered as valuable sites for amassing collections but are not less critical to understanding the variety of ways in which anthropology museums gathered collections at the turn of the century.

¹⁴After hearing Ellen Mason, a charismatic Baptist missionary from Burma, speak of the needs of Burmese women, Doremus founded the society and Burma became the initial field where the WUMS sent its missionaries (Daggett 1879: 194). She assisted missionaries by providing hospitality, outfits, money, correspondence and psychological support (Kraft 2000: 1022; Robert 1998: 183-184).

Boas cobbled together an Asian collection from areas peripheral to museum sponsored collecting activities (AMNH acc. 1900–41, 1901–49). For him, the potential of such fragmentary donations must have been clear: the possibility of “keeping alive the interest of missionaries and missionary societies in further developing the collections” (Boas to Jesup, 5 October 1900, BM, AMNH).

But Boas went further than acquiring collections already in New York. At the Ecumenical Conference, he also interviewed missionaries on furlough who would return to Asia. He solicited their help, and directed their collection of ethnological materials for the museum.¹⁵ From his experience working on the Northwest Coast, he was well aware of the contributions that “surrogate collectors”—such as merchants, missionaries and native informants who had not been trained in the rigors of anthropology—could make to the museum when they acceded to collecting according to anthropological directions (Jacknis, personal communication, 2007; 1991). He wrote to Morris K. Jesup, the President of the AMNH, explaining his desires: “I beg to suggest that an effort be made to supplement the collections now obtained from Corea, Burmah, and from India... I think it is very desirable to take up this matter before the interest of the missionaries begins to flag” (Boas to Jesup, 10 May 1900, BM, AMNH). As a result of Boas’ meetings, Rev. C.C. Vinton, a missionary affiliated with the Presbyterian Missionary Board, went on to furnish the museum with its founding Korean holdings (Boas to Jesup, 10 May 1900, BM, AMNH; Kendall n.d.).¹⁶ Boas gave Vinton clear instructions about how to gather “a complete collection covering the whole life of the people of Korea” (Kendall n.d.), which he anticipated would be an important addition to the museum and complement Berthold Laufer’s collections from Japan and Siberia (cf. Boas to Jesup, 10 May 1900, BM, AMNH; Boas 1974 [1903]: 294).

A Study Collection for Missionaries

Roughly a year after the AMNH accessioned the Missionary Exhibit, Boas articulated that he had something greater in mind for the objects’ future installation than the germinal exhibition of Asian ethnology he previously arranged in space assigned to the zoological department. Concerned with developing good anthropology, he also cared about cultivating a public and recognized that the exhibit proved to be of “great interest” in attracting “the attention of thousands to the self-sacrificing work of Christians” (Boas to Jesup, 22 December 1900, ME, AMNH). In a letter to the Christian Missions Museum and Library, he wrote that the best use of the Missionary Exhibit would be in a “special room to be set apart from collections illustrating the activities of missions” (Boas to Maitland, 28 October 1901, BM, AMNH).¹⁷ Boas planned to

¹⁵A survey of the AMNH accession records reveals the names of several missionaries who made substantial contributions in the years following the ECFM: Albert G. Lea from Liberia (AMNH acc. 1901-34), John W. Chapman from Alaska (1902-31, 1903-35, 1905-36), William A. Raff from the Congo (1902-35) and C.C. Vinton from Korea (1901-78, 1904-16, 1906-20, 1907-6, 1908-32).

¹⁶Between 1900 and 1901 the museum appointed 1000 dollars to acquire collections from missionaries C.C. Vinton in Korea (AMNH acc. 1901-78) and from William Rath in the Lower Congo (1902-35).

¹⁷From the beginning of his relationship with the CMML, Boas suggested that missionaries collect duplicates. His particular interest in acquiring duplicates lay in amassing a parallel collection of objects that could be loaned to parties who wished to use them for educational purposes (illustrated lectures, Sunday school talks or missionary exhibitions) (Boas to Beach 11 April 1901, BM, AMNH; 13 April 1901, ME, AMNH). Here duplicates functioned not to ensure the representation of the range of variation of a single artifact type, or with the view of

reinstall the eclectic exhibit as a study series. Elsewhere, he emphasized that the use of such study collections would appeal to audiences with more "special questions" such as "high-school students, teachers, artists, *missionaries*, those interested in special trades, in general historical questions, etc." (Boas 1974 [1905]: 298; my emphasis).¹⁸ Directed specifically at missionaries, the reinstalled Missionary Exhibit was to serve an educational purpose in the tripartite scheme of "entertainment," "education" and "research" that Boas envisioned for public anthropology museums (Boas 1907).

While the initial agreement between the AMNH and the Christian Missions Museum and Library stipulated that the former would maintain a permanent exhibition, and that the latter would provide the necessary funds and the missionaries to augment the collection, little progress was made. To Boas' dismay, he had become responsible for cataloging, labeling, sorting, lending and developing the collection by 1901. From then until 1905, the AMNH accession records show that he persistently wrote to the Christian Missions Museum and Library (renamed the Bureau of Missions in 1902), explaining that an instructive exhibit could not be made out of the extant missionary collection without subsidization and missionary involvement (Boas to Maitland, 28 September 1901, BM; 13 April 1903, ME, AMNH). Tensions grew as he came to realize that his own interests in expanding the museum's comparative, and specifically, Asian, ethnological collections would never be met. Boas' frustrations with coordinating collecting activities and requesting funding eventually brought cooperative work to a standstill.

Although Boas' long-term plans for the study collection did not come to fruition during his time at the AMNH, he raised the issue again with the Bureau of Missions shortly before his resignation in 1905. The museum's correspondence files show that in 1904, the Methodist Episcopal Church contacted him about the possibility of showcasing the complete Missionary Exhibit at its annual meeting in Los Angeles. As a result of this renewed interest in the collection, Boas raised the issue of the exhibit's fate. When he replaced Boas as curator of ethnology in 1905, Clark Wissler undertook a thorough revision of the haphazard collection; he also entered into dialogue with the bureau about the exhibit, intent on making the museum's study collections serve a didactic purpose in public education (Wissler to Bumpus, 26 October 1905, ME, AMNH; see also Jacknis 2004: 228). As a result, the bureau transferred funds to the museum to expand it. While Wissler defined the anthropology department as an "exclusively American department" (Kendall 1998), his correspondence reveals that he appealed to Vinton to round out the museum's Korean holdings. Taking up Boas' dedication to amassing materials from regions marginally represented by the museum, he also acquired artifacts from a missionary, purchasing a collection of Burmese

exchanging surplus with museums eager to fill in collections gaps (Boas 1974 [1887]: 63; O'Hanlon 2000: 27), but so that materials might be loaned to the public with less concern about their proper handling than objects that formed the museum's core collections.

¹⁸During Jesup's tenure, ample study collections were added to the museum to accommodate visitors interested in more specific questions (Brown 1910: 178).

objects from American Baptist Rev. George Geis (AMNH acc. 1908-34).¹⁹ Nevertheless, Boas' initial dream of a comprehensive East Asian teaching collection was left largely unfulfilled.

Conclusion

Considered alongside the work of the Jesup Expedition and the East Asiatic Committee, the fragmentary Missionary Exhibit shows that pre-World War One American anthropology was not a regional pursuit confined to the ethnology of Native Americans. Its collection history underscores Boas' concern that "in American museums the mass of material consists almost everywhere of collections from North America," and where there is "material from other continents [it] is very inadequately represented" (Boas 1907: 925-926). The exhibit further demonstrates the sustained importance of missionaries, as donors and surrogate collectors, in augmenting the AMNH's geographical reach at a time when the discipline is thought to have set itself apart from amateur ethnology. By advancing his own extraterritorial interests, and through his cooperative plan for developing an East Asian study collection, Boas expanded the museum's research and holdings. In so doing, he aligned the museum with Columbia and established resources for what would later become a thriving Asian studies program. Although Boas' ambitions for the Missionary Exhibit were not met, his reliance on missionary collecting set the tone for post-World War One ethnological research, which further diversified the subject matter of American anthropology and the AMNH's holdings.²⁰ This engagement also points us toward several questions that remain unanswered: Was Boas' reliance on missionaries in expanding the museum's Asian holdings merely opportunistic? How did his ties to missionaries influence the trajectory of the professionalization of the discipline, and the practices of museum anthropology? What impact did the false starts of the East Asiatic Committee and the museum's relationship with the Christian Missions Museum and Library have on Asian studies? Alas, this chapter of Boasian anthropology remains overshadowed by the alluring totem poles and the signature life-groups of the museum's landmark Northwest Coast Hall.

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¹⁹Between 1900 and 1908, Vinton acquired approximately 400 objects, which included articles of clothing, containers (baskets and pottery) and antique metal type.

²⁰Major collecting expeditions funded by the Carnegie Institution and museums, including the AMNH, shifted attention to areas outside the United States: Asia, Central America, Africa and the South Pacific (Thompson and Parezo 1981: 41).

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