



Ethnographic museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage return to our roots[☆]



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Abstract Ethnographic museums in the Western world are rooted in the 16th and 17th century history of cabinets of curiosity as well as the 18th and 19th century industrial fairs. As the tangible collections were transformed from displays of the exotic to different types of didactic exhibits, they were reunited with aspects of intangible heritage to tell more complete stories. In this paper, the history and impetus of European ethnographic museums is traced and several components which have influenced their relationship with intangible heritage are discussed.

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Ethnographic museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage can be viewed as two perpendicular and inseparable threads. This ornate and complex fabric unraveled somewhere along the way and is now in the midst of being rewoven. Museum professionals and anthropologists are now poised to learn how to weave a stronger and more representative cloth composed of some of the same and some different original interlocking elements. I wish to show how their very beginnings were interwoven and twined together. I will close with some

thoughts of different components which influence the relationship between ethnographic museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Start with the Loom – prologue

What is a museum? What are the functions of museums? The museum is a collecting institution, as has been universally written by many; a primary purpose of the museum has been to assemble, preserve, and interpret/research the material of cultural, religious, artistic, or scientific significance determined by the mandate/mission of each particular institution with the intention of providing education and enjoyment of the public. *Collecting* refers to the assemblage of tangible material, though with today's expression of contemporary art, some if it

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is not very tangible! *Preservation* concerns the general responsibility to maintain that tangible material as close to the condition in which it was received for the edification and enjoyment of future generations. *Interpretation/research* is the most broadly understood of the museum definition triad. Simply placing material on display with identification information is a form of interpretation. Additional storytelling takes the form of grouping material together into cohesive exhibitions complemented and supplemented with substantive informational labels, audio guides, docent tours, publications, and more. Visitors take away more *knowledge* about those items and, in the case of the ethnographic museum, the people who made and used them.

Add the warp – ethnographic museums: in the beginning

Within this vast realm of collecting institutions what distinguishes the ethnographic museum? What, indeed, is ethnography? This term has been interpreted in many various ways and has taken other or alternative names in different parts of the world. In the United States, ethnography/ethnology was subsumed under the academic rubric anthropology.

The roots of the ethnographic museum are buried deep both in the history of global expansion and the emergence of nationalism. Global expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries opened Europe to new and often strange flora and fauna, previously unknown fossils and minerals, and indigenous peoples and cultures. The human drive to collect to attain status, for economic superiority, and other reasons took hold and private cabinets of curiosities (*wunderkammern*) filled with representative examples of new materials brought to Europe from afar were established. The cabinets of curiosities speak more of earlier collectors' preoccupations and preconceptions about the world, and their place in it, than they do about the items they contain (Stanton, 2011). Objects derived from newly found cultural groups, which were seen as another, came primarily from so-called primitive societies no matter how sophisticated their social structure. According to Silva and Gordon (2013), these early collections were "places of conservation, investigation, and exhibition of objects." Many of the private cabinets of curiosity, in fact, formed the backbones of the venerable European national ethnographic museums founded in the nineteenth century, or earlier. For example the oldest holdings of the Ethnographic Collection of the National Museum of Denmark date to the Danish Royal Kunstkammer which was established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It includes ethnographic and archeological materials from non-European people. In the early eighteenth century, Russia's great ruler, Peter the Great, assembled a number of private collections to build the first state museum in St. Petersburg, the Kunstkammer (*History of the First Russian Museum*). Initially, it comprised of primarily natural history specimens. In the mid-nineteenth century, the separate ethnographic collection was established with material from peoples all over the world. Exhibits were organized by geographic area.

Until the twentieth century, many of the major national ethnographic museums perpetuated the model established by the cabinets of curiosity; they lacked interpretive exhibits with much in-depth information. The great collections of fascinating objects, prior to the mid-twentieth century, were generally

organized by country of origin and/or by object type or functions. In essence, the displays amounted to densely presented open storage. Knowledge was derived simply from the museum's curators.

The great ethnographic collections of the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries were accumulated by anthropologists sent on scientific expeditions often sponsored by royalty; by military incursions returning with spoils of war or gifts; by missionaries, colonial officials, and travelers whose personal collecting activities included gifts and purchases; and by the great international expositions. At that time, academically trained ethnographers and anthropologists took the helm; they led systematic collecting expeditions and mounted exhibitions. Each comprised invaluable groups of material culture which still remain the tangible record primarily of non-Western societies, enriched with archival materials such as photographs and recordings which were collected during extensive field research. Aspects of intangible heritage were also gathered to document and support much of the original context of the material culture by early museum anthropologists (see Bauman, 2009).

For example, Barbeau (1883–1969) was a pioneer Canadian anthropologist and folklorist. In 1911, Barbeau joined the National Museum, (now the Canadian Museum of History); he worked there until his retirement in 1949. His research focused on the social organization of First Peoples in Canada as well as French Canadians. In the course of his career, Barbeau collected a great number of objects from First Nations including iconic totem poles and medicine men's equipment. He also "collected thousands of pages of notes on a great variety of subjects, including the popular arts, traditional trades, architecture, language, recipes, folk tales, legends and songs, of which more than 3800 were recorded on wax cylinders" (Barbeau).

From an academic point of view, and that of the museum, two strands – the other and the self – have contributed to the understanding of the term "ethnography" and to the shaping of ethnographic museums. The German terms, *volkskunde* and *völkerkunde*, best represent this dichotomy. *Völkerkunde* refers to the study of non-Western peoples in the Americas, Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and elsewhere, e.g., the other. Collections of items in this category often formed the foundation of the early cabinets of curiosity; they represented the new and exotic which was being discovered as part of imperialistic, economic, and colonial expansion. The former was used to describe European ethnology, studies of late eighteenth-early nineteenth century local rural societies and their traditional culture. *Volkskunde* was generally applied to expressions of different aspects of folk culture associated with the awakening of nationalism which were used to develop and justify national identity, in central, eastern, and northern Europe, e.g., the self.

Historically, museums holding material culture from groups represented by these two terms generally have been distinct. Collections of rural European material was brought together to create a supportive and strong warp of historical, genealogical continuity while new nations and their unique identity were being created. They were usually found in local or national folklore museums. The latter originally found its way into natural history museums as aspects of human development in the larger scheme of the history of the earth were illustrated by these tangible cultural elements.

Yet another significant thread holds together the collecting philosophy behind amassing and documenting the

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