

Special Issue Forum for Anthropology: and Culture about ethnographic collections in modern museums

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forwarded from Inge Daniels, ISCA, University of Oxford:

The editors of the Russian journal: The Forum for Anthropology and Culture have contacted me concerning a special issue about ethnographic museums which will be published in English and in Russian in the autumn of 2007. They are looking for contributions, who would need to send short essays by the start of May to get them translated in time for the Russian edition. Those interested please contact, Catriona Kelly (Professor of Russian, University of Oxford) at catriona.kelly@new.ox.ac.uk

Ethnographical Collections in the Modern Museum

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. The editorial board of Forum for Anthropology and Culture invites your thoughts, which you may choose to phrase as answers to the following questions, or as an independent short essay. In whichever case, please limit your text to a maximum of 10 pp. (1.5 spaced), or about 2000-3000 words.

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 in Göteborg, 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?