



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 archaeological 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

non-Western ethnographic and European ethnology collections. Collectors *cum* scholars viewed the groups from which this material derived to be rapidly disappearing. The approach, taken by the early twentieth century Canadian museum anthropologist Marius Barbeau, mentioned above, was “to preserve what was viewed as fast-vanishing traditional aboriginal cultures” (Barbeau). Their methodology was to collect both the tangible and the intangible remnants of the ways of life of the past. Their efforts often took the form of salvage ethnography. Great amounts of traditional knowledge were, in fact, suppressed or lost because of the prevalent forces of assimilation, dislocation, and removals of indigenous people and rural dwellers worldwide. These points are significant to the discussion of intangible heritage in ethnographic museums and will be revisited below.

International expositions

International expositions or so-called world’s fairs which primarily exhibited advances in industrial development as well as the expansion of the Western world are another global movement which contributed to the formation and shaping of ethnographic museums. The great nineteenth century fairs were predated by manufacturing expositions in a number of major European cities in the late eighteenth century. Between 1818 and 1851, “national exhibitions were held in Bavaria, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, Spain, and Sweden to promote industrial development” (Swift, 2006). The 1851 Great Exhibition in London, or the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, however, is considered the start of this great exhibitionary phenomenon. Over 100,000 different exhibits from some fourteen thousand exhibitors were housed in The Crystal Palace; they were on display for over six months and classified in four categories including fine arts. According to Swift, one of the goals of the London fair was to attempt “to summarize, categorize, and evaluate the whole of human experience.”

The involvement of anthropologists who staged living exhibitions was a significant development of the misguided attempts to educate at the industrial expositions. In fact, “exhibits of exotic non-Western peoples by itinerant showmen dated back at least to the sixteenth century and were commonplace throughout Europe by the second half of the nineteenth century” (Swift, 2006 see Shahriari, 2011 and Sturge, 2006). Villages populated with people from the French colonies of Senegal, Tonkin, and Tahiti were featured at the 1878 Universal Exposition in Paris. The precursor of the Musée de l’Homme, the Trocadéro Ethnography Museum (Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro) was housed in the Palais du Trocadéro at the close of the 1878 expo. A little over ten years later, at the 1889 Paris exhibition in the Trocadéro Palace, ethnographic exhibits included African, Oceanic, and pre-Columbian works of art as well as live exhibits displaying peoples and their cultures. Villages from Java were recreated, the Streets of Cairo rebuilt, and a Bazaar from India was replicated. Foreign and mysterious peoples presented in this context amounted to commercialized exoticism. “Native villages” drew audiences because of their emphasis on “commercial sensationalism, pseudoscientific anthropology, and imperial power” (Swift, 2006).

In the United States, the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago celebrated the 400th anniversary of the “discovery” of or landing in America by Christopher Columbus. Frederic Putnam, who was later appointed the first director of the Peabody Museum, was the director of the anthropology department at the Chicago fair. He brought Franz Boas to collect ethnographic material for the displays there (Collier and Tschopik, Jr., 1954). The Columbian Exposition was the first world’s fair with a separate amusement area. The noisy and distracting attractions were concentrated on the Midway Plaisance in order to not to disturb the rest of the exposition. Boas organized displays of the arts of Eskimo and other Native American peoples. According to Rydell, “The [Chicago] Midway provided visitors with ethnological, scientific sanction for the American view of the nonwhite world as barbaric and childlike and gave a scientific basis to the racial blueprint for building a Utopia” (Rydell, p. 40).

In general, displays with living people, in fact, expressed racist ideologies and colonial ambitions in contrast to the superior Europeans who developed the industrial advances displayed elsewhere at the fairs. On the other hand, according to Cole (n.d., p. 12) “The Midway served as both an ‘educational’ [...] and as an amusement.” Visitors to the fairs were afforded the opportunity to experience other cultures of far-away foreign and mysterious races.

Fill in with the weft – Intangible Cultural Heritage

Much has been written about The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), adopted by UNESCO in 2003 with the goals to safeguard, ensure respect, and raise awareness of ICH. Since the adoption of the Convention, an interdisciplinary debate has championed questions related to the actual nature of heritage, itself; issues of society, politics, and economics have also been addressed (Bendix, 2009; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 2004; Nikoćević, 2012). The discussion ranges from the bold statement by Bendix that “Cultural heritage does not exist, it is made” (Bendix, 2009, p. 255). She concludes that the “ethnographic knowledge product” or heritage is a construct of the viewer, the analyst, the ethnographer/anthropologist (Bendix, 2009, p. 255). Nikoćević writes that Intangible Culture is a means of contextualization in the museum, adding insight and intangible meanings to static artifacts. Like Bendix, she recognizes that heritage in the museum, however, is defined by people in the museums, not community members (Nikoćević, 2012, p. 58). I recognize these theoretical discussions, but will not contribute to them here. Rather, I will consider the role of the intangible in today’s ethnography museum to show that it is rooted in the history briefly outlined above which has led to the shape of the twenty-first century ethnographic museum. The Convention and other legal and ethical actions have influenced the patterns woven into these museums as well as the nature of the weavers.

Following in the footsteps of the early collections housed first in cabinets of curiosity, then located in the great early museums, and on the pathways paved with mixed messages of the industrial expositions, the twentieth century saw the establishment of many public ethnographic collections. The material, tangible evidence of other peoples, was brought into

the museums, whether *the other* from non-Western societies or *the other* of neighboring rural communities. One major thread omitted from this loosely woven outline of influences on the twenty-first century ethnographic museum, is the intangible. In fact, as already stated, records of the intangible were collected as part of the collecting process. Field collections, an intrinsic element of anthropological research, provided mute artifacts no longer in their original context with outstanding background resources. As Stanton (2011) points out, “As in the past, field collections are an intrinsic element of anthropological fieldwork, and museum collections provide an outstanding resource through which to understand a society and explain it to others.” The intangible, both knowledge and performance, has been archived in the form of photographs, films, and sound recordings throughout the twentieth century if not earlier. Supporting data informed curators who both documented the collections and created the stories that were presented to the public in the form of exhibitions. Watson writes about the Peabody Museum, established in 1877, that “During the nineteenth century, museums were places where knowledge was created and revealed to an interested public” (Watson, 2001). She does not, however, report who was responsible for interpreting and the dispensing the knowledge.

Until the late twentieth century, the knowledge base associated with the collections in ethnographic museums was shaped by curators, the weavers. Anthropological practices, such as participant observation, taught them much about the cultures with which they were entrusted. Cultural relativism provided them with the even-mindedness to leave aside prejudices, hopefully. Museum anthropologists have the skills to work with material culture and with Intangible Cultural Heritage. What is presented in ethnographic museums, however, is from the point of view of the anthropologist.

Because of their solid history as well-established places of science and art, museums carry with them the public's trust and the illusion of authority; their staff is the expert of what is found within. Following the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, earlier legislation such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) in the United States, and other international efforts toward repatriation, interpretive strategies in the museum have taken new orientations. This involves “working closely and cooperatively with the relevant communities” (Kurin, 2004, p. 7). Sometimes change was incorporated reluctantly; in other instances, it has been embraced wholeheartedly.

The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, thus, calls for a participatory approach to heritage management which recognizes culture bearers as experts. Good museum ethnographers, although wearing the cloak of expert, have always taken the position of expert/culture broker while trying to foreground the knowledge of the community in which they have worked. Now, however, in the finest use of jargon which has totally infiltrated today's museum practice, the participatory museum is also the inclusive museum. The steadily increasing engagement with members of communities of origin involves a redefinition of roles and responsibilities in the museum along with the establishment of new commitments. Curators are learning to trust the knowledge and the authority possessed by community members. With regards to tangible heritage, the nature of interpretation is changing simultaneously along with how collections are obtained,

managed, and used (Stanton, 2011). A major shift has taken place in the mere length of a century as the agency imbued in the institution has been transferred to a shared authority with community members in what Stanton calls an “enduring collaboration” (Stanton, 2011).

Straighten out the selva – safeguarding

Embedded in the convention of Intangible Cultural Heritage is the notion of safeguarding, indeed one of the original impetuses for the founding of collections relating to people and society. After all, if the makers and users of the objects found in today's ethnographic museums were, in fact, part of a world vanishing in the face of industrial change, was not this concept part of the work of the nineteenth century museum? Collectors and scholars worked under the presumption that the societies from which the tangible and intangible material derived were disappearing. “Safeguarding,” as prescribed, by the Convention, also considers these societies to be dying. It has long been recognized, however, that cultural practices and traditions are part of living identity of groups and communities worldwide.

Moreover, we read about the fragility and vulnerability of Intangible Cultural Heritage, but not its fluidity. The fallacy in this approach is that traditional culture, alongside popular and high culture continuously responds to a myriad of influences in the respective contemporary society within which it exists. Kurin convincingly points out that “[...] ICH is not something fixed in form that remains constant forever [...] If a form of ICH is living it will, by definition, change overtime” (Kurin, 2007, pp. 12–13). The so-called act of safeguarding has been characterized in a number of ways. Fromm (1983) refers to it as “pickling.” “Freezing” is another term used to categorize inventories, film, documents. Nikocecic asks if the drive to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage has ended with what she calls the “petrification and alienation from living [...] origins [...]” (Nikocecic, 2012, p. 62).

As stated at the onset, preservation is one of the key functions of all museums. As best as can possibly be done, the condition of objects in collections are stabilized and maintained for generations in a distant future. Documentation of intangible support material in the form of photographs and recordings also preserves aspects of the making and use of the material culture at a fixed period of time. Some argue that safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage should remain in the hands of families and communities from which it came. Museums, thus, which according to Kurin “value cultural heritage” (Kurin, 2004, p. 8) are now working with community members to encourage the continuity of tradition, and ongoing cultural creativity (Kurin, 2004). Like past concepts that ethnographic material was being salvaged or rescued from dying societies, the concept of safeguarding is incorrect. If “items” of Intangible Cultural Heritage hold value in a community, they will be retained, safeguarded if you will, even as their form might change in response to the current environment.

Conclusion

So, all this said, what does this discussion of the evolution of the ethnographic museum mean in terms of intangible heritage, an intrinsic aspect of human cultural behavior that has actually always been on the radar of the museum

ethnographers? Several factors are twined together to make this a complete, rich, and meaningful fabric. Though it might seem otherwise, the primary focus of the ethnographic museum is not the object. The cultures of the peoples who made the objects are also collected, interpreted, and preserved in the hallowed walls of the museum. The documentation which supplemented early ethnographic collections and continues to accompany on-going collections reinforces relevancy for the members of communities of origin as well as the other viewers.

Perhaps Boylan identifies the most significant element of this discussion of ethnographic museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage when he writes that “Intangible heritage is by definition people-orientated rather than object-centred. At its core, implementation of the new initiative (the UNESCO Convention, 2003) will transform the relationships between museums and their audiences and stakeholders” (Boylan, 2006). Community members revitalize cultural knowledge that was “forgotten” and more importantly keep alive other knowledge which brings life to those collections that were taken away long ago. Furthermore, “In some indigenous communities, working with historic artifacts and photographs becomes part of a strategy to preserve the emotional, psychological, cultural and physical health of members through dissemination of knowledge about identity and history” (Peers and Brown, 2003, p. 6).

So we come to the question at the heart of this discussion of what ethnographic museums are about? What is the role of the ethnographic museum? Who are they for? And what is their relationship with Intangible Cultural Heritage? The general consensus seems to be that the work of the museum remains staunchly to collect objects. While some feel that it is not within the responsibility of the museum to document living traditions, especially in relationship to objects removed from the community in which they were made, used, or refined, others disagree. Kurin (2007) writes, “Perhaps the most appropriate type of organization to take the lead role in the realization of the Convention is the museum [...] Content-wise, they often cover the areas included in the Convention – they are cultural, preservation institutions by their very definition.” Stanton (2011) expands upon Kurin’s conclusion: “Museums are not just about objects; they are about the cultures that produce them [...] documentation remains a key achievement for ethnographically-based museums, as this documentation ensures a continued relevance in research, teaching, and in the minds of members of the communities of origin.” Indeed, the tangible and intangible are closely related. “The intangible heritage must be seen as a broader framework within which tangible heritage takes on its shape and significance” (Bouchenaki, 2004).

Today’s ethnographic museums attempt to transform themselves into lively, engaging spaces. They continue to house rich collections of tangible material which tell about the practices, cultures, skills, and values of societies near and far; they remain a nexus of living culture in their communities. Intangible Cultural Heritage, too, continues to accompany and enliven the tangible. Furthermore, as the need to involve members of communities from which this rich material culture came, several goals have been achieved. The voice of authority has shifted from the knowledgeable curator/scholar to the community member who carries first-hand knowledge of the milieu from which the tangible derived. Often this shift takes the form of learned conversations in which community and

Western points of view are expressed. Secondly, a new, usually previously unrecognized, generation of stakeholders has been created. Community members for whom the museum in the past was irrelevant have become part of the entire procedural textile. Thus, they hold a stake in the museum which plays a role in preserving their past culture and also keeps it pertinent in the present and future. With the incorporation of intangible expressions such as oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, and social practices, rituals, and festive events, previously disenfranchised audiences are drawn to their grounds and walls.

Today’s ethnographic museums can be characterized in two ways, both relate directly to the new-found attention to Intangible Cultural Heritage which, in fact, remains part of the history of early collections. Ethnographic museums are dialogic museums. No longer is the voice of the curator the voice of authority. It is articulated in dialogue with those from whom the collections came, regardless of how they found their home within the museums’ walls. Thus, today’s ethnographic museums are also sites of community collaboration in all aspects of their work, not just the work in collections. Many have attained this dual level of achievement. Others continue to strive to reach these goals.

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