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What's up? EthnoConference

Conference of Directors of European Ethnographic Museums – European Ethnographic Museums' Search for New Paths in the 21st Century

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1.

The *What's up? EthnoConference – Conference of Directors of European Ethnographic Museums* was organised in the new building of the Néprajzi Múzeum (Museum of Ethnography, Budapest) between the 25th and 27th of May 2022. The aim of the conference was to enable directors of European ethnographic museums to share and discuss how their museums reposition themselves in the 21st century, how they answer contemporary challenges, what their role is for the society in which they operate. The organisation of the sections aimed to bring together speakers who tackle a similar question (infrastructural development or renewal in content or method) but are from various types of museums, therefore giving very different aspects of the same question. The international conference was the first of its kind in the museum's new premises, which brought together international and Hungarian museum professionals.

2.

The 3-day-long bilingual conference was accompanied by the opening and inaugural presentation of the new building and exhibitions of the Néprajzi Múzeum. Therefore, the first programme of the day was the ceremonial opening of the new building and the temporary exhibition *We have arrived* with the opening speech from ethnographer Attila Paládi-Kovács.

3.

The first session of the conference was moderated by Hannah Daisy Foster, curator of the Néprajzi Múzeum. The opening speaker of the first session was Lajos Kemecsi, the director of the Hungarian institution. Kemecsi briefly summarised the 150-year history of the museum, especially focusing on its different homes over that time. After discussing the museum's history, he elaborated on the social role and mission of the museum today. 'What is an ethnographic museum today?' – the question is also the theme of the new permanent exhibition. The director argues that in the discourse of identity policy the museum has the responsibility to reflect on its heritage and its task is to take this forward and discuss the contemporary and popular phenomena of culture as well. Meanwhile its role in the public sphere and its direct social impact are primarily the results of exhibitions, therefore he highlighted the importance of participation, engagement and shared curatorial practice.

4.

Goranka Horjan from the Etnografski muzej Zagreb (Ethnographic Museum Zagreb) presented the problems related to the infrastructure of the museum and an outdated permanent exhibition. Their strategic plan involved renovating the museum building, acquiring new storage facilities, improving the permanent exhibitions and professional standards. Webinars, lectures and workshops were organised in collaboration with ICOM and ICCROM, however, the pandemics and

financial crises brought challenges that threatened the plans for the complete renovation and new display.

5. Barbara Plankensteiner, the director of MARKK (Museum am Rothenbaum. Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Museum at the Rothenbaum – Cultures and Arts of the World) from Hamburg gave a brief overview of the changes in the museum. The transformation process was determined by decolonial efforts: renaming the institution, collaborating with source communities, artists, universities, carrying out provenance research projects and debates about restitution. She highlighted one of their main international and collaborative projects, *Digital Benin*, that creates an online platform compiling data from the diverse national and international museum databases that currently hold Benin works in their collections. She also highlighted the challenge of being inclusive and opening their archives for researchers, heritage societies and engaging with multiple partners.
6. Dr Sanne Houby-Nielsen gave her lecture about the Nordiska Museet from Stockholm. The focus of her presentation was how the museum critically revisited their heritage, going back to the original ideas of the museum's founder, Hazelius, and how they attempted to reinterpret them. The museum was established as a preserver of the cultural heritage of not only Swedish but also of several Nordic peoples, however Swedish material has become dominant throughout the history of the institution. An important part of the repositioning of the museum has been to restore its transnational position and to represent other Nordic ethnic groups as well. The museum considers developing the Sami collections in cooperation with their community. The presentation also covered topics related to improvements of the infrastructure, new methods of collecting and documentation, digital solutions, and the importance of an inclusive and open approach.
7. The presentation by Laura Van Broekhoven from the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford explored questions such as the potential and role of the museum, in the context of colonialism, in reconciliation and the practical implementation of cultural preservation. Broekhoven introduced projects carried out together with communities on the reinterpretation of collection and the question of repatriation. Broekhoven highlighted the importance of developing the praxis of decoloniality as a process, in which undoing and unlearning is essential to activate multiple stories in museums. It means different ways of both knowing and showing – or not showing. The museum, for instance, decided not to exhibit human remains. Her presentation elaborated on the challenge of the museum still being a contested space and the controversies of the decolonisation process in museums.
8. The discussion after the panel included different topics, for instance identifying the communities involved in curatorial practice, the future of collections, and the different answers and strategies behind renaming (or not renaming) the institutions. Broekhoven was concerned to ask an extremely important question: by changing our name, are we really changing our practice? Are we really becoming the open and inclusive space that our name suggests?
9. After the conference session, the opening ceremony of the ZOOM and the Ceramic Space continued, which started with a short concert given by Parno Graszt Hungarian gypsy band. After that, Ralf Čeplak Mencin, the director of the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum held his opening speech.

10. The three sections of the second day were moderated by the curators of the Néprajzi Múzeum, Tamás Régi and Gábor Kőszegi.
11. The first speaker, Robert Zydel, the director of the Państwowe Muzeum Etnograficzne w Warszawie (National Museum of Ethnography in Warsaw), based his presentation on the idea that social challenges (pandemics, ecological crisis, war) have been always present throughout history. Zydel pointed out that the cultural heritage that the Polish museum preserves, can actually represent the predecessors' struggles and answers to the historical crisis. His presentation asked the question whether it is possible for museums to deal with these challenges through their collections and activities.
12. After the introductory speech from Branislav Panis, the director of Slovenské Národné múzeum, Radovan Sykora, the director of the Múzeá v Martine (Ethnographic Museum in Martin) discussed the reconstruction projects of the institution, including reconstruction, new expositions and exhibition spaces, depositories, conservation, and educational workshops. The aim of reconstruction was to preserve the original architecture of the unique building, create a modern cultural space and improve the quality of services. He also elaborated on the challenges imposed by limited financial support.
13. Dr Lars-Christian Koch's original plan was to present the moving process of the collection of the Ethnologisches Museum and of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst to the Humboldt Forum housed in the Berlin Palace. After listening to the presentations of the first day, the plan changed: he discussed the complete reconstruction of the Berlin Palace and the construction of the new exhibitions and other museum content. The modernisation of the palace has made it possible to create new exhibition spaces and project areas. In creating the exhibitions, he emphasised not only the close relationship with source communities, but also the critical reflection on the perspective of the collector.
14. The questions raised in the discussion at the end of the session concerned the extent to which the ethnographic material of the museum in Martin can speak to contemporary society and what possibilities they have in the representation of contemporary culture. The Slovakian institution wishes to present contemporary phenomena, but financial factors are also decisive in their implementation. This topic also generated a broader discussion on the different issues that the relationship between ethnography and national identity raises for museums in Western and Central Europe.
15. The section introduced three very different aspects to the questions of renewal. This topic also implies the common experience that renewal of the building is often necessary to make improvements in services, contents and methods in communication with the public. Nevertheless, even if infrastructural development takes place in a museum, it does not necessarily mean that conceptual and critical renewal happen in practice.
16. The first speaker of the second session was Elina Anttila, the director of the Kansallismuseo (National Museum of Finland). Anttila highlighted the inclusion of voices of refugees and immigrants in Finland into the museum's discourse of

national identity. The museum expanded its focus from object-centred to photographic and art exhibitions, despite some complaints from the public. One of the museum's main missions was to further develop the cooperation with the Sami community and the repatriation of more than 2,000 Sami objects in 2021.

17.

This lecture was followed by a presentation by Kertu Saks, Director of the Eesti Rahva Muuseum (Estonian National Museum). She presented the conceptual renewal of the museum in its new building. As she pointed out, the museum's main mission is to represent the ethnography of stateless Finno-Ugric people. She drew attention to the special situation that, while ethically questionable collections rightly raise the question of repatriation, ethnic groups living under Russian oppression or especially groups whose language and culture is already disappearing, have a vested interest in having their culture represented in the Estonian National Museum.

18.

The last speaker of the session was André Delpeuch, former director of the Musée du Quai Branly (Quai Branly Museum), who described the processes of development and change in French social and art museums. He pointed out the problem that, despite the efforts to rename institutions and infrastructural improvements, the division between 'us' and 'others' is unfortunately still strongly present in French museums. As he pointed out, many of the French institutions are 'prisoners of their collections', which is reflected in exhibitions as well as in the institutional structure.

19.

After the session, the presenters discussed the questions of nationalism and ethnicity. Although national museums strive for multi-perspectivity, museums still tend to interpret the concept of 'nation' normatively. It was highlighted that the political context in which the museum operates, strongly determines the freedom of representation, but art and artistic reinterpretation of the collection could challenge these norms.

20.

The last session was opened by the presentation of Ralf Čeplak Mencin from Slovenia, the director of ICOM-ICME. As he was not affiliated with one specific museum, he gave a brief overview about the historical processes determining the creation of ethnographic museums, how the colonisation and decolonisation and contemporary social challenges formulated the self-definition of ethnography and ethnographic museums. In his presentation, he highlighted the responsibility of researchers, the importance of applied methods, and the application of critical approaches.

21.

His presentation was followed by Ann Follin, the director of Världskulturmuseerna (National Museums of World Culture) from Stockholm, who introduced the challenges implied by the structural changes of the museum due to the merging of four institutions. Her presentation focused on their new strategic plan and introduced the museum's participatory and dialogic projects with multiple communities. Follin stated that one of the most essential responsibilities of a museum professional is to create a safe environment that enables the sharing of personal stories through objects.

22.

Leen Beyers, the director of MAS (Museum aan de Stroom) from Antwerp gave a presentation about the institution, focusing on its decolonial transition. From

2011 onward, its primary objective has been to showcase the interconnectedness of the port city and other parts of the world, and the entanglements between people and objects, through personal stories. She pointed out that it was only two years ago that colonial legacy started to be critically addressed, mainly through the institution's Congolese collection. Then she introduced some lessons learned from the project 100 Congo, which was the first time that they initiated intensive dialogue with artists and academics from Congo and people of Congolese origin in Belgium.

23.

The discussion that closed the last session reflected on the specific organisational structure of museums in Sweden and Belgium: how can the diverse collections belonging to sub-institutions tell the story of togetherness? For museum staff it was challenging to consider local and global culture together and organisational change has provoked both internal and external resistance. Nevertheless, perhaps it is this diversity that allows different ways of experiencing and interpreting belonging and breaks down the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'.

24.

The first session on the last day was moderated by Gábor Wilhelm, curator of the Néprajzi Múzeum. As for the first speaker, Guido Gryseel was invited from the Royal Museum for Central Africa (communicating under the name of Africa-Museum) in Belgium, but he was unable to attend, therefore Bambi Ceuppens gave the director's presentation about the renewal of the institution. The new permanent exhibition concentrates on contemporary Africa, and critically reflects on the colonial history of Belgium. In the development of the exhibitions, the curators placed high importance on involving professionals and locals with Congolese ancestry living in Belgium. The presentation elaborated on the recent debates about restitution, in which the museum has played a central role, as it has one of the largest collections of African cultural and natural heritage.

25.

The second speaker, Léontine Meijer-van-Mensch, the director of GRASSI (State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony) described the institution, consisting of 15 smaller museums located in Leipzig, Dresden and Herrnhut. Using the example of Leipzig, she described the process of transformation of the institution and its projects. The presentation discussed how an important element of their institutional stance is that they no longer think in terms of static, permanent exhibitions, but rather in terms of creating open-ended exhibitions, that involve more actors and provide space for further reflection.

26.

Then, Carolina Orsini, the director of MUDEC (Museum of Cultures) from Milan discussed the renewal of their permanent exhibition of 2021. The exhibition presents the history of Milan in the context of globalisation but through personal stories. Orsini provided insight into how they carried out projects with the involvement of people from Eritrea and Ethiopia in the development of the exhibition. They organised workshops with the source communities, in which to discuss topics like racism, or colonial language. Deconstruction of colonial language has been central issue in the museum, because Italian rhetoric of victory and nostalgic language still depict colonial power relations.

27.

The last speaker was Boris Wastiau, the director of the Alimentarium in Switzerland, and former director of the MEG (Ethnographic Museum of Geneva). First, the presentation gave a brief introduction on the process of decolonisation at the

MEG. The major part of his presentation discussed the ambitions of Alimentarium (owned by a Nestlé foundation) to become an inclusive community space where topics about nourishment can be discussed: food processing, health, and its consequences on communities and sustainability.

28.

In the discussion the question was raised, whether it is a contradiction to talk about sustainability and to have a critical approach, while Nestlé is responsible for maintaining social inequalities. Regarding this issue, Wastiau stated that the museum has intellectual freedom. Then the speakers asked the question: Can we measure success with the number of visitors and communities involved? Léontine Meijer-van-Mensch pointed out that we should not fall into the 'neoliberal trap' of measuring success in numbers, and it is more important to understand 'success' in terms of the quality of the relationship between visitors and museums.

29.

The last session of the conference was dedicated to the Néprajzi Múzeum and was moderated by Gábor Kószegi. The speakers elaborated upon various aspects of the museum's search for new paths and self-definitions, questions and problems related to the planning processes of the exhibitions, new spaces, and functions.

30.

The first speaker, Museum Deputy Director General Gábor Veres, gave a lecture about how the institution has prepared for the changes in its visitor experience and educational programmes. Besides, he introduced the new, open community space for multifunctional, educative purposes – MÉTA – in the new building, as well as the planned children and youth exhibition.

31.

Péter Granasztói, the Deputy Director General for Collections gave his presentation on the changes the paradigm shift to collection-centred approach has brought, exemplified by the ongoing research programme of contemporary culture started in 2003 (MaDok). He highlighted the most important roles of the museum: it has become the leader and organiser of the stock protection programme and has become a centre of competence for the digitisation of ethnographic collections in Hungary.

32.

As for the third speaker, Zsuzsa Szarvas, curator and project manager of the new permanent exhibition, was unable to attend the conference, therefore Tímea Bata, museologist, presented the words of Zsuzsa Szarvas. She introduced the journey the museum has taken over the past 20 years with its exhibitions. She talked about how the temporary exhibitions reflecting the transformation of ethnography affected the formulation of the new exhibitions. Then the presentation outlined the concepts of the new exhibitions, Ceramic Space and ZOOM, and the Permanent exhibition which is still in progress. The Permanent exhibition will not represent a great narrative but rather interprets the collection as historical heritage and focuses on personal stories told through objects. (1)

33.

The closing speaker of the conference, Veronika Schleicher, Head of the Department of Collections, outlined the dilemmas arising from the fact that the museum currently has no collection strategy. She argued that this is not necessarily a problem: the absence of vulnerable and restrictive plans could mean flexibility, a 'tradition of contingency.' The greatest challenge is the sustainability of collection growth, finding the balance between the increase of objects, knowledge, interpretation and research. An important point she made was the rigidity of the collec-

tion's structure with sub-collections, but the desire to treat it as a single collection. In order to handle the different layers and dynamics of the collection, the development of collection management software is essential, which is one of the main goals of the museum.

34. During the conversation the practical problems of the conservation of plastic objects and the goals and plans for the implementation of the collection management software were discussed.
35. The three-day conference was closed by a vote of thanks speech from Veronika Schleicher, followed by an informal discussion and a visit to the Conservation and Storage Centre of the Museum of Ethnography.
36. In conclusion, the international conference was successful in many terms. It provided different perspectives of common problems of the museums: facility improvements, developments, decolonisation and repatriation. Discussion of the museums' different collaborative projects proved to be useful, because participants had the possibility to gain insights into experiences and challenges of working with multiple partners and communities.
37. However, the conference was dominated by Western and Northern European museums, and institutions from the Southern Slavic countries were not represented, despite the efforts of the organisers. These museums might be in a different position to change and might have widened the question of the conference to the issue why ethnographic museums are not changing or not able to change. Nevertheless, this topic could be an interesting starting point for a next conference.
38. The presentations will be published by the Néprajzi Múzeum by the end of 2022. (2)

NOTES

1 You can read more about the concepts of the new exhibitions in the journal *MúzeumCafé* 15(86).

2 Néprajzi Értesítő 102. 2022.