

## **Combining capacities. A presentation of the Swedish museum authority National Museums for World Culture**

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What is a Museum for World Culture and why do we need an authority like the National Museums for World Culture? Globalisation is changing our world. The process of internationalisation in recent decades has created a larger world in which people interact across boundaries in rapidly changing environments. At the same time, we have growing communities of immigrants struggling to find their role in new societies. Sweden is no exception; once so culturally and ethnically homogeneous, Sweden is now defined through cultural pluralism and diversity. Therefore, cultural awareness is essential, both when travelling the world and at home. The role of the National Museums of World Culture is to provide this awareness. The aim is to offer perspectives on an ever-changing world in which everything is connected and local life is increasingly varied.

The decision to form this new authority was taken by the Swedish government on January 1, 1988. The three museums in Stockholm were already in place, and the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg was opened to the public in 2004. The National Museums of World Culture is a consortium consisting of these four museums: the Museum of Ethnography; the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities and the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm; and the Museum of World Culture which, along with the central management and administrative offices, are located in Gothenburg.

The rationale behind the government's decision was to encourage research and the development of new exhibits, and to orient four museums with collections primarily of non-European origin toward questions concerning a changing world. As a consequence, the four Swedish museums whose collections included materials resulting from 400 years of contact with the rest of the world were placed under one umbrella and given a new mandate: to contribute to new understandings of cultural change, contact and confrontation in a globalized world. The decision was preceded by lively debates much reported by the media. These debates not only dealt with the incorporation of the individual museums into a new authority, but also with the refocusing of their operations. There were discussions about the advisability of moving some of the collections to Gothenburg, but in the end it was decided that this would create more stress and anger than energy, and discussions were closed.

Museums of our kind are entrusted with the safekeeping of a cultural heritage with a dual character. On the one hand it forms part of the heritage of numerous cultures and societies the world over, whether currently existing or long gone. On the other hand, the collections controlled by these museums form part of a Swedish heritage. Over the centuries they have been acquired in encounters of various kinds and qualities between Swedes and people of other nationalities and cultural backgrounds. They thus reflect these encounters and the impact they have on widening Swedish knowledge of the world, thereby influencing



how Swedes conceive their own history and their own roles. How did different cultures influence each other through history, and how did ideas and institutions interact across borders? What kind of meaning was distributed with the help of these collections and single objects?

The primary task of museums is the expert preservation of their collections in order to make them available to current and future generations through exhibits, programmes and publications. These activities are expected to be on the cutting edge of audiovisual and communications techniques in order to offer high-quality aesthetic/emotional experiences to the public. Since our collections belong to what could be called a "world heritage", an openness to the wider world is also necessarily stressed. Museums of this type must stage exciting and thought-provoking exhibits and programme activities in order to visualize and problematize the variety of life styles and cultures that exist around the world, using their vast collections and other resources to convey knowledge about and offer perspectives on what it means to be a human being. Ideally, the knowledge communicated is built in collaboration with similar museums and organisations, and with academies and universities around the world. By offering interpretations of universal human issues and problems, the museum aims at creating a preparedness to confront the unknown with an open mind.

The operational concepts guiding the National Museums for World Culture may be summarized as follows. We are four museums offering perspectives on a changing world. We do this by managing and mediating objects and documents of culture heritages through dialogue with the surrounding world. We should serve as forums for cross-cultural encounters and participation in cultural interchange by presenting engaging and varied programme activities, always approaching Others from a respectful and compelling perspective. We do not, of course, presume to provide a complete picture of the world, but we share the same basic mission. The four museums have different profiles based on different collections and expertise, and the aim is certainly not to homogenize them but to capitalize on their variety and let them be experts on their own fields. While they may debate, compete and even disagree, they remain committed to a shared mission: *four museums offering perspectives on a changing world.*

To give the reader an idea of the potential of this consortium, I will give a brief presentation each of the museums that together form the Museums of World Culture in Sweden, preceded by a description of the authority.

The National Museums of World Culture is a government authority whose tasks are defined by the Swedish government. This assignment of tasks applies to the entire organisation, and the activities are mainly financed by government grants. As a museum authority, the organisation is responsible for representing the history of cultures originating outside Sweden. The organisation aims to offer perspectives that help people to gain new and deeper insight into an increasingly internationalised world. Taking the contemporary situation as a starting point, a combination of knowledge, artistry and participation aims to provide visitors with experiences that please, unsettle, challenge and inspire. The goal is to contribute to social development, stressing equality, respect and



tolerance, and to represent diversity as a positive force. The authority also aims to work closely with players from other cultural and social sectors.

In total, the National Museums of World Culture employs around 150 people. The head of the organisation is the Director General, appointed by the Swedish government. The Director General appoints the directors of each museum.

Since January 1, 2005, admission to all four museums in the authority has been free.

## The Museum of Ethnography



**ETNOGRAFISKA MUSEET**

MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY

ETNOGRAFISKA MUSEET ÖSTASIATISKA MUSEET MEDELHAVS MUSEET VÄRLDSKULTUR MUSEET  
NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF WORLD CULTURE

Through public programmes and exhibits, the Museum of Ethnography hopes to increase awareness of the world's cultural variety. Using its extensive collections and their rich histories, the museum attempts to offer information and insights for reflection on what it means to be human. By providing interpretations of universal questions, the museum aims to open visitors' minds to the unknown. Therefore, the museum's credo is: Ecce Homo!

The history of the Museum of Ethnography dates back to the founding of the Royal Academy of Science in 1739. Having been displayed in central Stockholm and the Museum of Natural History, the collections were moved to former military buildings on Norra Djurgården, where a new building for the museum was later built on the same spot. The museum opened its doors to the public in 1980.



The museum has collections from all over the world: Asia, Africa, North and South America, Oceania and the Arctic regions – around 220,000 objects in all, many of which were brought to Sweden by returning expeditions. Many of these artefacts are of great international interest, and are almost always on exhibit either in Sweden or abroad. Access to the museum's collections is constantly being improved through digital photography, documentation, and compilation of a computer-based catalogue that includes search functions.

The scholarly focus of the museum is social and cultural anthropology, with emphasis on material culture. "Bringing the World Home" is one of the museum's permanent exhibits, telling the stories of those bold Swedish travellers and explorers who went in search of unknown worlds. Carls Linnaeus' disciples and Sven Hedin are among the most famous. The exhibit shows how our view of the world is not only defined by "reality" but also to a great extent by the imagination and needs of the traveller.

Much of the museum's African material was brought to Sweden by missionaries. The museum has large collections from the Congo and also from pre-colonial Benin. The natives of the North America are presented in detail at the museum. The Native American collection includes ceramics, textiles and weapons, and the exhibit also deals with the way in which popular culture created ideas about North American "Indians" in Swedish culture. An interdisciplinary exhibit, "Creative Man", highlights what we humans have in common, regardless of our cultural background and context: eating, sleeping, loving, working and understanding the world around us. This is an exhibit on personal, cultural and universal ideas, passed from person to person through myths and stories, from one generation to the next.

The museum's reference library is closely associated with the ethnographic collections. The library holds 55,000 titles, many of them unique. The museum restaurant Babajan serves food from all over the world, and the gift shop offers a selection of jewellery, toys, textiles, books and many other items from Africa, South America, Australia and Sápmi (Sami-land).

### **The Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities**

The Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities is Sweden's foremost museum for Mediterranean antiquity, and is located in the heart of Stockholm. The aim of the museum is to bring the historic Mediterranean cultures to life through permanent and temporary exhibits, exciting activities and touring exhibits. The museum aims to be a cultural oasis, a little part of the Mediterranean, offering a wealth of culture, aesthetics, traditions, atmosphere, food and drinks: a cultural meeting place where historic periods, places, religions and cultures come together and combine in ever-changing constellations.





## MEDELHAVSMUSEET

MUSEUM OF MEDITERRANEAN AND NEAR EASTERN ANTIQUITIES

ETNOGRAFISKA MUSEET ÖSTASIATISKA MUSEET MEDELHAVSMUSEET VÄRLDSKULTUR MUSEET  
NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF WORLD CULTURE

The museum was established in its present form in 1954 by combining two existing collections: the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, founded in 1928, and the Cyprus collections. In 1976, the museum was incorporated into the state National Heritage Board and the National Historical Museums, and since 1982 has resided in a former bank building in central Stockholm.

The collections consist of some 40,000 archaeological artefacts from ancient Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Italy and the world of Islam.

The Cyprus collections are the result of the extensive excavations carried out by Swedish Cyprus expeditions between 1927 and 1931. This is the most important collection of Cypriot archaeological finds outside Cyprus. Objects from the classical cultures of Greece and Italy were acquired by the museum through Swedish excavations and donations.

The Egyptian exhibitions highlight various aspects of life in ancient Egypt. Mummies, coffins and other burial finds reveal Egyptian beliefs about life after death. In the museum's central hall, the Greek, Roman and Etruscan antiquities collections are displayed along with sculptures, painted vases and marble portraits. An exhibit of Near Eastern and Islamic art illustrates the interaction between the early cultures of the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean region.

The museum also features a gold room, with a collection of silver and gold jewellery from ancient times. A study room focuses on the Swedish



archaeological expedition to Cyprus. Here, over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, visitors may learn about the materials brought back from the expeditions.

Of course, many of the exhibits and programs concern the ancient world, but the museum also focuses on contemporary Mediterranean culture. One challenge is to focus more on continuities and discontinuities between contemporary European cultures and societies and the ancient Mediterranean world in order to question the idea of antiquity as the cradle of Europe. A major reorganisation of the museum's exhibitions is planned over the next few years. This will take place in several stages, with an estimated completion date of 2009. The museum runs an extensive public programme including guided tours, children's crafts, lectures, concerts and cultural days.

The museum library contains literature focusing on archaeology and the history of the classical cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East, and on Islam, with an emphasis on the museum's collection areas. The gift shop has a range of exclusive bronze sculptures, Turkish tea glasses, Egyptian perfume bottles and copies of objects from the museum's collections. Baghdad Café presents a slice of Mediterranean culture where visitors may enjoy Arabian pastries, spiced coffee and Mediterranean dishes. The oriental café also features regular literary nights with literature, poetry and music.

### **The Museum of World Culture**

December 29, 2004 saw the arrival of a brand-new Swedish museum with the opening of the Museum of World Culture located in Gothenburg (some 500 kilometres from Stockholm). The Museum of World Culture seeks to serve as a meeting place where emotional and intellectual experiences allow people to feel comfortable both at home and abroad, and to take responsibility for a shared global future in a constantly changing world. The museum's activities have an interdisciplinary perspective, striving to offer a forum for discussion and reflection where many voices can be heard and controversial topics can be raised in an arena where people feel at home wherever they come from. With the new museum building, the Museum of World Culture features world-class exhibition facilities. Changing thematic exhibits are displayed in five different galleries, together aiming to express the dynamics of world culture today. The exhibits are created in association with teams of national and international researchers, experts and relevant organisations. Since the research behind the exhibits is interdisciplinary, different types of objects are included in the exhibits. Historic and traditional ethnographic objects, contemporary art, films or documentary materials, and personal narratives are intertwined within the exhibits.





## MUSEUM OF WORLD CULTURE

ETHNOGRAFISKA MUSEET ÖSTASIATISKA MUSEET MEDELHAVS MUSEET VÄRLDSKULTUR MUSEET  
NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF WORLD CULTURE

Many researchers and travellers have played a part in laying the foundation of what is today the Museum of World Culture. The museum is based on the ethnographic collections that have been a part of Gothenburg's museums in one form or another since the 1800s. The museum has a large collection of objects, primarily from Latin America, Africa and Asia, and a rich archive. Among other objects, the collection holds one of the most important collections in Europe of Paracas textiles from Peru. In all, the collections comprise around 100,000 objects. The museum library has a collection of over 30,000 titles and around 900 journals and reviews in the fields of ethnography, social and cultural anthropology, history and sociology. The most extensive parts of the library are those that cover South and Central America and Indonesia.

A restaurant and an informal café are located by the main stairs, providing a complement to the museum visit. For visitors who wish to linger a little longer, there is also a bar. The selection in the gift shop reflects the variety of museum activities, which range from the historical to the contemporary, from the global to the local. The standard selection is based on the collections, but also connected to the themes of current exhibits.

### The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities

The history of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities can be traced back to 1926, when the East Asian collections were formed in Stockholm, based on the archaeological collections of painted ceramics from China's agricultural stone age. In 1959, these collections were combined with the National Art Museum's collections of East Asian and Indian arts and crafts. The result is the present-



day Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, which opened in 1963 on Skeppsholmen in the centre of Stockholm.

The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities aims to be a living museum for the cultures of Asia, a constantly changing scene where visitors can encounter, explore and discuss Asia within the world, its cultures and traditions, its present realities and future possibilities.



## ÖSTASIATISKA MUSEET

MUSEUM OF FAR EASTERN ANTIQUITIES

ETHNOGRAFISKA MUSEET ÖSTASIATISKA MUSEET MEDELHÄNS MUSEET VÄRLDSKULTUR MUSEET  
NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF WORLD CULTURE

The museum's permanent exhibits present different aspects of Asian life, past and present. For example, the exhibit "China before China" reveals the region before it became China, how people lived and expressed themselves in East Asia over the course of thousands of years before the rise of the Middle Kingdom Empire. Many of the objects in the museum's collections are several thousand years old, especially the world-famous painted ceramics of different traditions and styles. Buddhist sculpture, Indian sculpture and Chinese painting are three of the museum's other permanent exhibits. The museum is also opening additional permanent exhibits. "The Middle Kingdom", presenting China in the time of the emperors, opened in the spring of 2007. There will also be exhibits on Korea and Japan. A number of the museum's temporary exhibits received great acclaim when the museum reopened in the fall of 2004. In three months, the museum received 100,000 visitors to the first of the temporary exhibits, on Manga. Today, the museum's collections consist of almost 100,000 objects. The emphasis is on archaeology and art from China, but acquisitions and generous donations have also allowed the museum to expand its collections from Korea, Japan, India and southeast Asia.



A major challenge is, of course, the enormous changes that have taken place in many parts of East and Southeast Asia during the past 30 years, changes which have quickly made Pacific Asia the world's third political, economic and cultural centre of gravity after Europe and North America. As a result, the museum has in recent years exhibited the artistic creativity of the region.

The museum's Asian library is the leading library of its kind in the Nordic countries, featuring over 100,000 titles. It focuses on Asian art, culture and archaeology. The collections contain a large number of books in Chinese, Japanese and Korean. The gift shop includes an exciting selection from Asia: books, porcelain, calligraphy tools, tea and much more.

The museum's programme of activities includes regular workshops and classes such as Chinese vegetable sculpture, ink painting, calligraphy, meditation, ikebana and cinema. The museum also offers a number of educational programmes for all ages. The educational staff helps to teach students and other visitors interested in subjects such as religion, history, geography, archaeology and languages.

### **Combining capacities, building networks**

Taken together, the four museums have close to 500,000 objects from all over the world – Africa, Asia, North and South America and Oceania – and complement one another with regard to spatial focus. They also complement one another with regard to disciplinary foundations, primarily in anthropology, archaeology, art history and social history. This means that each of the museums focuses on different facets of culture. Pooling these resources and areas of expertise creates new possibilities for a more holistic and integrated perspective on human cultures across the world. This constitutes the intellectual foundation for the National Museums of World Culture. It is an intellectual challenge, but it is also a professional challenge to try to bring together these different types of museums with distinctive traditions into joint efforts. It is also a challenge because they are located in two cities, Stockholm and Gothenburg, and attending staff and directors' meetings involves travelling about 500 kilometres.

Since December 29, 2004, Sweden has had four fine museums in full operation, open year round and with free admission for everyone. The aim is to interpret the world, to address the ways in which different cultures have influenced each other through history, how societies have interacted, and how ideas and institutions have moved across borders. We emphasise thematic as well as geographic working methods, underlining issues that are universal to all human beings and cultures.

A basic aim for the new museum authority is also to build equal and sustainable cooperation with museums and institutions in the countries/cultures from which substantial parts of the collections originate. The perspective applied is what may be called the 'duality' of the collections; that is, apart from being examples of the material culture of different groups around the world, the fact that the collections were brought to Sweden at a certain historical moment (1880-1930s)



provides important information about Swedish history as well. On this basis, new questions can be asked, joint projects can be developed, and new perspectives presented. Working methods will differ from case to case, but a main goal is to build and coordinate international museum networks.

In recent years the National Museums of World Culture has been one of the driving forces behind the creation of such a multilateral institutional network, namely the Asia-Europe Museum Network, ASEMUS, which today involves about 60 museums all over the world in a first joint project, an exhibit of Asian paintings of Europe and Europeans, and vice versa.

Another network – MEDMUS – is led by the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities. The intention is to form a group of museums with Mediterranean archaeological as well as contemporary collections. The Museum of Ethnography has been deeply involved in another kind of network building concerning questions of repatriation, specifically of human remains from Australia as well as an old totem pole belonging to the Haida people in British Columbia, Canada. The networks built during these processes are not formalised or systematically constructed as was the case with MEDMUS or ASEMUS, but are more the result of practical efforts and ordinary museum work. My own belief is that both formal, carefully planned and built structures as well as informal networks comprised of ad hoc actions and coalition building, are needed to achieve success.