

THE IDEAL MUSEUM

History and Vision

Johannes Wieninger, MAK Vienna

I

THE QUEST FOR THE IDEAL MUSEUM

The ideal museum – isn't this what we are all striving to achieve? Don't we all want to work in the ideal museum, or be part of the ideal museum?

Every museum concept has a specific ideal as its goal. But time and again we have to accept – unfortunately – that it keeps slipping out of our grasp.

This "Ideal Museum" has been the goal of endeavour ever since museums were invented.

The glut, the over-supply of cultural programmes has meant that museums are now engaged in competition with each other – apparently with the prime objective of maximising visitor statistics by offering universally famous works of "art".

Owing to the dictates of profit and economics, many an ideal that ought to have its place in a museum is being forgotten – or even deliberately neglected.

Displaying objects in our exhibition collections in eye-catching designer scenarios and concepts might provide instant gratification for the visitors strolling through the galleries – but this is surely not satisfactory as an idea.

Placing things in a linear arrangement based on historical timelines doesn't do justice to the multifaceted levels of our culture – and cultures – and obstructs the view of the real contents.

II

RETROSPECT: THE EXAMPLE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS

Before I attempt to sketch an ideal museum of the 21st century as I see it, allow me to cast a look back into the 19th century, when a new type of public museum was created. It may well be that the idea I'm presenting here is only one among many.

I'm talking about the ethnographic collections.

During the age of the great scientific discoveries and exploration of foreign countries an enormous quantity of “foreign” objects landed in Europe – by the way, before going on, I hope you’ll excuse me for making this part of my lecture “Eurocentric”! Here the question arises: how do we handle this, and what good does it do us?

Starting point of my considerations is a concept for an ethnographic collection devised by the German expert on Japan Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796-1866), and his correspondence – well-known to specialists – with the French Egyptologist Edme François Jomard (1779-1862).

Jomard took part in Napoleon’s Egyptian campaigns, worked as a geographer in the Imperial Library in Paris and was noted as an authority in his special field. He had been striving to found his own museum ever since 1818. He wanted it to be devoted to non-European cultures (later *Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro* and then *Musée de l’Homme*, parts of which are now in the *Musee du quai Branly*).

Meanwhile, between 1826 and ’29, the German physician Philipp Franz von Siebold was engaged by the East India Company to be part of the trade delegation to the court of the Shogun in Edo – now Tokyo. This expedition took him through the whole of Japan and he collected avidly, at first nature products, then more and more artefacts. These were eventually combined with earlier collections from the East India Company’s sphere of influence and became one of the first ethnographic collections in Europe. It is known today by the name of The National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden in the Netherlands.

A museum concept dated 1835 was submitted by Siebold to the king of Bavaria (see Misc 49f):

*“... By an ethnographic museum we mean a scientifically ordered collection of objects from various countries, preferably non-European ... Contemporary peoples in the conditions as they appear to us ... comprise the **subject of an ethnographic museum’s presentation**. Anything bearing witness to the existence and cultural conditions of lost, extinct peoples no longer belongs in this institution, but is a matter for the **Museum of Antiquity** ...*

*... Likewise, anything to do with the physical constitution of the countries is not the concern of the ethnographic museum, for instance all organic and inorganic natural products. They belong in the **Museum of Natural History**. ...*

... The purpose of an ethnographic museum is the propagation of knowledge about lands and peoples in general. ... This kind of institution for spreading geographical knowledge will be of great benefit to a country that exists through trade and seafaring.

... But an ethnographic museum has advantages as well for every nation that trades with non-European countries. The strange and exotic features of foreign worlds bear much fascination for the public. While satisfying the people’s curiosity, they also teach them something, and people’s knowledge is extended without their being aware of it ... the public finds entertainment and information in an ethnographic museum – (nowadays we would say “infotainment”)

... The ethnographic museum provides an entertaining, informative and thus useful opportunity to observe the inhabitants of faraway lands and study their individual characteristics – and all on one's own native soil; indeed, it may even be seen as a moral, a religious task to take such an interest in one's neighbour; to appreciate their positive characteristics; to become familiar with that "foreign" side, that aspect of "otherness", which, without our knowing why, often blocks our approach to them. We shall become aware of their virtues and so have to respect them all the more. We shall find it easier to communicate with them when we visit their home country; we shall no longer view their mores as exotic, but find their customs more approachable, their religious cult less of a contrast to ours than we at first thought. What we shall certainly have is a more favourable idea of "savages, barbarians and heathens" than the one bequeathed to the majority of us – even educated Europeans – in stories that have been told repeatedly for several centuries. ...

... Dealings and traffic of Europeans in foreign countries will become more civilised if Europeans get to know the indigenous population from their good side beforehand. This will foster a respect which will keep their human passions in check.

Europeans have always thought the arts and sciences to be the monopoly and heritage of the lands of Classical Antiquity ... but even these fields of human endeavour are not foreign to peoples who seem to us most distant. It is just that their intellectual development has taken a different course from ours. Since we also show samples of non-European literature, painting and other visual arts in the ethnographic museum, this, too, may shine a positive light upon it."

Siebold jots down these thoughts again in a letter to Jomard dated 1843:

"... since we nowadays accept into the domains of archaeology all monuments and whatever objects which remain of peoples past and vanished, either civilized or barbarious, whereas on the other hand the study of ethnography comprises all knowledge concerning the intellectual, moral and industrial state of the peoples living on our globe. it then follows that the ethnographic museums are an indispensable continuation of their archaeological ones. The monuments of these two orders of collections enlighten each other mutually and reveal the history of the cults, costumes, habits, and the arts among the nations, both dead and alive. ..."

These are humanist, indeed, educational tasks that an ethnographic museum has to fulfil. No less a task, in fact, than that of breaking down centuries of prejudice. For Siebold, the ideal museum doesn't exist, only ideal museums that complement each other. He thinks in a two-dimensional system of co-ordinates: vertical-historical and horizontal-geographical. These ideas were certainly revolutionary for his time.

However, if we observe the many new foundations of museums in the 19th century and especially those with an ethnographic orientation, we get the impression that no one was listening to him and Jomard. Museums were mostly content to amass foreign objects in a more or less systematic way. The important historical and archaeological component was generally neglected.

It must be said however that this interest gave rise to “Museum Islands”, with themes designed to complement each other. As time went by, this aspect was repeatedly modified according to different situations and conditions.

Probably the most negative re-ordering of historic collections in this era took place in Vienna: the remodelling and extension of the imperial palace, the Hofburg, included the foundation of two museums: the Kunsthistorisches Museum and the **Museum of Natural History** (the new building was opened in 1889). The rich ethnographic collections of the Imperial House remained integrated into the latter building! So what happened was the complete opposite of what Siebold and others were calling for. It took until 1928 for the ethnographic collection to be separated and re-founded as the **Museum of Ethnology**.

This was also the case in the **British Museum** (like the Viennese collections, it dates from the eighteenth century; the present building is from 1850). The ethnographic collections were kept at first in the “**Department of Natural History and Curiosities**”, but by 1845 they were already being presented in their own, newly opened “**Ethnological Gallery**”!

So here, in the mid-nineteenth century, the humanist approach was already evident. The momentous “World cultures” section of the British Museum is a modern and admirable attempt to re-interpret ethnographic collections.

Around the same time another type of museum was evolving in the wake of the “World Fairs”, the museums of decorative and applied arts.

First and foremost was the **Victoria and Albert Museum** founded in 1852 with the name of “**South Kensington Museum**”; the second European museum of this type, the **Austrian Museum of Applied Arts (MAK)**, opened in 1864 with the name of “**Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie**” (**Austrian Museum of Art and Industry**). Both museums and the subsequent foundations throughout Europe were devoted to the presentation of superlative applied arts in the spirit of the historical revival. Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) who was responsible for the first concept of the Viennese museum, had the vision of presenting the history of techniques and materials – and here, of course, Asia had an indispensable role to play, with its porcelain, bronzes, sculpture and lacquerwork.

The **Metropolitan Museum in New York** was founded in 1870. Not unlike the British Museum in structure, it is the largest US American museum of culture and has remained unabatedly committed to its (inter)cultural task: *“to bring art and art education to the American people”!*

We see, therefore, that very little has changed in the western museum landscape since the nineteenth century, apart from the fact that some ethnographic collections have changed their names. Such tags as “World Cultures” have been added to the names – more likely out of embarrassment or political correctness – but usually the western component of the world cultures is missing.

In **Paris** there are two museums whose concepts and objectives must be evaluated within this context as different from one another, even though the same personalities are behind both projects: Jacques Kerchache (1942-2001), collector and connoisseur of non-European art – he created the term “art premier” – and Jacques Chirac (1932), politician and President of France. Chirac supported Kerchache in achieving the breakthrough for his ideas: in 2000, the Louvre installed the new department “**Arts Premiers: Afrique - Océanie – Amériques**”. Works from these regions are presented here as “works of art in the western sense”. Having wandered through the miles of galleries, visitors recognise an equivalence of quality. These works have nothing to do with the word “primitive”, but are works of artistic creation to be set alongside the other media that are familiar in Europe.

The **Musée du quai Branly**, also known as the *Musée des Arts premiers* or *Musée des arts et civilisations d'Afrique, d'Asie, d'Océanie et des Amériques*, was opened in 2006 in a spectacular new building and was so to speak the second stage in propagating “art premier”. The museum defines itself on its homepage as “**un musée pour les arts non occidentaux**” and launches its visitors on an odyssey of worldwide minorities. Forgive me being irreverent, but as a visitor you feel as if you're in a zoo...

I must also mention the **National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka**; here Europe is presented on a level with other countries and cultures – its motto reads thus:

"Introducing the Europe that the Japanese haven't seen, in other words, the non-touristy, basic aspects of European culture, is our aim. What may seem ordinary to Europeans might be unique and fascinating in the eyes of Japanese. We also probe into the depths of Europe as an ethnological object, in search of something in common with Asia."

The centre of the European exhibition collection is taken over by a Romany caravan – the very moment when this European phenomenon is yet again a red-hot topic!

Although the various cultures are presented here in all the examples mentioned, they are always placed next to each other; if you wanted to find a suitable diagram for this, a pie-chart or circle diagram comes to mind.

III

MUSEUMS ARE LAGGING BEHIND SOCIAL REALITY

Our museums have got stuck at the level of social development of the period after the Second World War. Borders have fallen, people and their ideas, for whatever reason, have become more mobile. Cultures exist – not alongside each other but integrating with each other. However, all this is nowhere to be seen in the everyday business of the museum.

The holdings and presentation of our collections reflect a world as it existed around a hundred years ago.

As an example, I'd like to talk to you about the collection of the museum where I work, the MAK Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna, which I mentioned previously.

First of all, most of the objects originate from the region of present-day Austria, concentrated around Vienna. The neighbouring countries of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary are represented by artefacts which were made when they were still part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. There are hardly any holdings from the period after 1918.

Western Europe is broadly represented, the Balkan countries hardly at all.

If we look further east, the next major collection group stems from Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, further from Iran/Persia and then China, Japan and India.

But what we do have, we have in profusion: far more than 90 % of our moveable cultural assets – in some museums even more – is stored in depots, far from the eyes of the public. An economic and cultural deficit for our institutions!

All the theme-oriented exhibitions and research on Japonisme, Orientalism and Chinoiserie do little to improve matters:

The countries whose arts are not represented in our collections and exhibitions are not registered in our awareness. The transitions and interfaces between Europe and Asia are not visible. This makes the job of defining borderlines all too easy for us.

So the question naturally arises: can an ideal museum be generated at all out of our collections?

IV

THE IDEAL MUSEUM OF THE 21st CENTURY

My plea for the ideal museum of the 21st century is actually very simple: Let us open up our buildings as well to the principles that guide every democratically minded society: museums ought to reflect the complexity, diversity and interrelations of our society!

For our work, this means the introduction and support of dialogue as a characteristic of operations.

A prophetic basic principle was put forward by the US American philosopher Ken Wilber: there are no natural borders or boundaries – borders are set up artificially. Borders are acted out above all in our minds, in our mindset. Therefore borders exist wherever I want to see them.

In reality there are transitions, fascinating interfaces, seen both geographically and historically.

In politics we have experienced – particularly in the last twenty years – how borders and barriers have fallen that in retrospect were totally absurd. And especially in Europe we are experiencing this new freedom from borders as an overwhelmingly positive phenomenon. To have an “Iron Curtain” twenty miles or so from Vienna now seems inconceivable.

This is true as well of art and culture. Or, better said – ought to be true.

Museums have to catch up with this development, and this will produce a win-win situation, because the character of dialogue will help us to understand our own tradition better.

Intercultural relations – buzz word chinoiserie – have long been themes of our work and are also well received by the public, but this always involves interrelating countries that are far removed from each other. This doesn't hurt and has a whiff of the exotic about it!

But the countries lying between are never touched upon, so we distort reality. A huge stretch of land exists between China and Europe which plays a major role in the transfer. Particularly as regards porcelain, we have take account of the complex interrelations and connections – for instance to Iran/Persia, or the Ottoman Empire.

And if we take the idea of “The Middle Kingdom” literally for once, we see that in the field of ceramics this country really does radiate in the form of a star: Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand and on towards the West, Persia/Iran, the Ottoman Empire – all these countries had the closest possible contacts to China and absorbed its influences. In becoming aware of this, we see that the importance of Europe as the “porcelain partner” of China being relativised.

Only if we take this situation as a whole do we realise just how exciting the scenario is. It shows that cultures are parts of a great network. New aspects emerge out of this which we can neither recognise nor express if we only see borderlines.

Artefacts and objects from foreign countries have in the main lost their function as models for European crafts; intellectual content and aesthetics once more dominate our perception. Museums have to hold up the mirror to a universally and multi-culturally networked humanity.

The logical consequence would be not to speak of “cultures” but of a “world culture”, in which we all take part – though certainly to a varying extent and intensity.

We owe to reality the setting up of such a “World Culture Museum”, because questions of history and culture have a great deal to do with identity. But these questions must be put and answered correctly. And that's our job! We need the dialogue and then we need to address it in multiple ways.

The ideal museum is not a museum of the spectacular and spectacle, but one for the curious mind, a house with the motto “Know Thyself”.

If I have used two diagrams until now to characterise presentations of culture, I would like to suggest a three-dimensional grid for the concept of “World Culture” in the 21st century. In my view this best symbolises the boundless dynamism of “World Culture”.

V

A MUSEUM OF WORLD CULTURE

Formulated in sound bites, a “Museum of World Culture” should fulfil the following conditions:

- The ideal museum must reflect the diversity of the world at its gates.
- All artistic and creative expressions of humanity are equal in value and have to be respected as equals, even if the various materialisations do not immediately convey this impression.
- Historical and contemporary developments and relations must be expressed in dialogue.
- Therefore the ideal museum is to be administered as an institute of education!

We can now legitimately argue that this can in fact be put into practice in the international exhibition scene – yes, indeed: there have been a whole number of successful and exemplary projects.

Let me describe a few of these projects.

For the 20th Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, the international character of sport was taken quasi as a model – and this produced the sensational exhibition “**World Cultures and Modern Art**”. It showed a power-packed juxtaposition of artistic creations from Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania and Afro- and Indo-America and their contexts.

The exhibition “**Encounters: the Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800**” in 2004 in the Victoria & Albert Museum showed Europe and Asia as inter-reacting continents and cultures; in 2009 in the Vienna MAK, we put on the exhibition “**global:lab - Asia and Europe 1500-1700 - Art is the Message**” as an attempt to present the three great cultural blocks – Europe – the Islamic countries – East Asia – not as a confrontation of one another, but as diversity in unity.

The centre of the exhibition was taken up by one of the most important Mogul paintings, the Hamzanama, 60 pictures of which we have in our collection. These pictures were shown in combination with European tapestries, also with Chinese and Japanese painting. Blue-and-white ceramics were arranged deliberately in such a way that it was impossible to guess an item’s origin.

This and many similar exhibitions are just as attractive and educational for the museum employees as they are for visitors. After a few months we are always very sorry to have to pull apart what took such effort and aspirations to put together.

VI

A MUSEUM OF WORLD CULTURE CAN BE BUILT UP ON THE DEPOTS OF EXISTING COLLECTIONS AND MUSEUMS!

Of course it can be rightly objected that such concepts can hardly be put into practice from a museum's own holdings. Since this is true, we can only say: Clear the depots - get art out of the basements!

This idea breeds scepticism in many colleagues, but I was delighted to find out that apparently I'm not alone: in the **Art Newspaper** of July-August 2010 there is a report of a lecture given by the collector Eli Broad for the American Association of Museums (AAM):

*"... Philanthropist and art collector **Eli Broad** lectured the assembled professionals at the annual meeting of the American Association of Museums (AAM) about their responsibilities to their visitors and colleagues, and expressed his dismay that so many works in museum collections are rarely or never displayed. "If 90% of your work is in storage you need to begin lending it to other institutions. Get art out of the basements," he said at the conference, which took place in ... Los Angeles at the end of May. He then told *The Art Newspaper*: "With all the money being spent to store and conserve work, it doesn't make sense economically or morally not to share it with the largest possible audience." (The Art Newspaper, issue 215, July-August 2010)*

If we take out only 5% from our depots and place it at the disposal of such World Culture Museums, we can almost double the public collections that exist today. This is naturally far too much!

But I want to demonstrate that with relatively little effort and expense it's possible to create such "ideal Museums of World Culture", or transform existing institutions into such museums, because there are sufficient artefacts in the capital cities of this world to fill the bill!

Moreover, national and international partnerships can be negotiated, enabling such World Culture museums to be set up on the basis of generously loaned works! What has been tried and tested in expensive, short-term exhibitions must surely be possible for the installation of permanent presentations. Let us kick the hoarding habit!

And because we are gathered together here in China, I would like to take the idea of China as it is presented in western museums as an example and show how we can help each other in achieving open-minded, cosmopolitan presentations.

Our image of China is still stamped by the era of the seafarers and the Jesuits. Likewise, vice-versa: China always saw itself as the "Middle Kingdom", strong and autarkic.

Europe was and still is far away; the centuries of the West (19th-century Europe, 20th-century US-America) are being supplanted by the century of China, the 21st century. But this view draws boundaries and obscures the truth.

The industrial Great Power China is not sufficiently represented in its culture in western museums. Likewise, the population in China is hardly aware of the art and culture of other countries in East and West. Not only this: the status of Chinese culture in the global context cannot be demonstrated in its own country, or only selectively.

Let us imagine the following options:

In 1974 the so-called “Terracotta Army” was discovered in Xian. For many this was an archaeological sensation, but it was far more of a sensation for the cultural history of China: the realism of the figures proved that China had its own autonomous art of portraiture, like other great civilisations.

Visitors to these gigantic excavations are greatly impressed – but how about setting up a so-called “Museum of World Culture” in this very place, in Xian, which could be devoted to the worldwide history of portraiture and of course include permanent loans from all over the world! And how about being able, in this “World Culture Museum”, to tell the story of how great nations and cities evolved!

I can't say whether the **Urban Footprints Pavilion at the Expo here in Shanghai** has a future, with its concept of “the *growth of cities as central factor of progress in history*”; I'm thinking more of a museum of originals. But it might be a start.

I have more hopes in the new concept of the **National Museum in Beijing**, which as of next year is putting on the exhibition “**The Art of the Enlightenment**” in partnership with German museums – and it will be on show for a period of 18 months (!).

According to the Internet, “the remodelling of the building responds to the call to establish the museum as a centre of world cultures, which will host superlative exhibition projects from all over the world.”

Not only the long term policy in loaning works is gratifying; perhaps interesting comparisons can emerge in the confrontation with certain periods of Chinese art history.

And now, conversely, our request to China:

Don't just send us your panda bears! Send us your art as well! Add to our history and let us have a part in your history!

Why shouldn't some of your Terracotta Army find their places (their place?) in national and international archaeological museums in America, Asia and Europe, so that global contexts can be better understood?

"Not a single country in the world, no matter what its political system, has ever modernized with a closed-door policy".

We should take this statement by Deng Xiaoping (1982) to heart as a beacon for looking ahead – and this also applies to the museum of the future.