

THE MUSEUM BEYOND THE NATION

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Front: flag images by Fredrik Svanberg based on material from Svensk uppslagsbok (1948), Neues museum in Berlin (for detailed information see article by Karlholm), little figure from the shop of the National Museum of the American Indian (©Herman Lebovics), march on Washington for Jobs and Freedom button (©Kylie Message), part of frontispiece of Neickel's *Museographi* of 1727 (for detailed information see article by Ekman), flower picture for a poster for the exhibition *Mary – The Dream Woman* 2008 (©National Historical Museum). Back: The Edvard Munch Hall of the National gallery in Oslo (©Mattias Ekman).

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WRITING THE MUSEUM

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PETER ARONSSON

This article will argue that a long-standing and productive tension between the cognitive urge to order, explain and understand the world and the need to legitimise certain structures of power through identity politics forms a general context for memory and history to act within. The advance of empirical evidence as the core truth-value and the need for broad popular education places the museum as one central institution for an extended and realistic idea of where 'the writing of history' takes place. Museums are widely visited. They are a part of research organisation, educational efforts, cultural policy and tourism and the marketing of stakeholders, be they aristocrats, monarchs, cities, nations or minorities. As such they are trusted custodians of the material evidence in most fields of knowledge, hence it is worthwhile reflecting on the way they represent ideas of memory and history (Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998; Luke 2002).

Representation of memory links contradictory claims about what traces and artefacts of the past represent in producing visions of coherence in the midst of deep epistemological contradictions. Objective history can thus be reconciled with patriotic feelings. The amazing Venus of Milo and Neolithic stone axes can be made to represent both eternal values and evolutionary ideas of history. Ancient objects can move from one context to another, from art to national history to world heritage, allowing for both material continuity and new meanings to be developed. The trajectory of collections produced through the logic of feudal representation by the closed treasury cabinet shifted to the production of meaning as scientific samples in a universal enlightenment context and in national historic museums. Thus the history of museums came to represent both the power of knowledge and the political nation in a highly hybrid museum culture.

The word museum conjures up images of glass cases, dust, dinosaurs and old things. This would not have been the case, however, in early modern Europe and would never have truly reflected museum culture in its totality. Museums of natural history became historical only with the evolutionary narrative in the nineteenth century but can still have strong taxonomic logic, sorting things by material and categories rather than in chronological order. Museums

of contemporary culture are showrooms of the present rather than the past, and eighteenth-century museums displaying classical antiquity presented past items, not primarily to show their history, but to represent aesthetic ideals of universal value to mankind.

Museums are regarded as material memories of the world. The divisions to be explored here as productive in writing histories of the world are: (a) the power of museums to reflect universal order, first in the sense of investigating the wonders of God's nature and later the objective truth of science. (b) the power of material evidence to represent the trajectory of historical development, decline or evolution. In between these is (c) the ability of museums to represent and naturalise universal values whether they deal with aesthetics, ethics or ideas of community. They might be founded in this world and not in eternity, but still represent trans-historic values of existence in the first place and the good, the true and the beautiful in the second (Aronsson 2011b).

After a brief introduction, some materialised examples of museums representing theories of memory will be presented: the Natural Cabinet and treasury as a model for representing the eternal world order furthered in systematic natural historical collections will be told with the Danish Worm museum as a starting point. When it comes to the tension between the scientific and the emotional character of representing collective national memory, the Danish national museum – heir to the seventeenth-century museum of Worm – the Nordic Museum and the open-air museum of Skansen will illustrate these extremely productive and still viable approaches. As national emotions have today been historicised, the criticism of nationalistic national museums shows new ideas of universalism taking form in both art and cultural museums, here exemplified with some trends in contemporary historical museums.¹

MEMORY AND HISTORY

Memory and history are often contrasted: the first one subjective, elusive and fading, the latter one objective, scientific and explicit. A lot of epistemological reflection and methodological development has been invested to distinguish between the insecure realm of memory and the firm ground of science and objectivity. The writing of history and collecting, ordering and displaying of material evidence, be it in archives or museums, are major components of that endeavour. Tourism, the heritage industry, historic film and novels threaten to take over both the audience and the writing of history, but are also important to popularise and interest a wider population in history in the first place. Museums are located in the mid-terrain, more in need to attract visitors to the

next exhibitions than a Ph.D. student is in need of making a blockbuster out of his or her research (Lowenthal 1998).

Competitors in historical culture tend, however, to overemphasise difference and hide shared basic conditions. All share difficulties in bridging the gap between the present and the past. All have to choose problems, areas and perspectives to work with. In doing so, economy, knowledge, but also existential and cultural framing play important roles, usually not reflected on or presented to the audience yet decisive in their timeliness and topicality. Writing history is dealing with the past – in contemporary conditions – hoping to produce certain futures. No one has put it better than Aurelius Augustinus did in AD 397:

But what now is manifest and clear is, that neither are there future nor past things. Nor is it fitly said, 'There are three times, past, present and future;' but perchance it might be fitly said, 'There are three times: a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.' For these three do somehow exist in the soul, and otherwise I see them not: present of things past, memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation (Augustine 1886).

Narrative theory moves down one step from these epistemological heights to map the way in which space and time are structured in a plot where heroes and villains interact from a starting scene, via dramatic moments to some kind of resolving finale. Much if not all historical writing takes on this narrative form. I would argue, though, that this is not the only way memory and museums have structured historical writing. We can pick up some of these modes from cognitive science where other distinctions are made. Semantic, episodic and procedural memory denotes three different ways to remember, to structure experience. Episodic memory resembles narrative history. A sequence of events is tightly related in time and space. In semantic memory more abstract and less situational relations are stored. The meaning becomes more analytical and less narrative. Here are less explicit levels that can add to understanding. Structural relationships and generalised similarities are more easily represented as structural than episodic. A good example is the strong national framing of historic writing and museal representation. The very existence of a national museum and the maps presenting the frame is reified semantic memory. Lastly, the procedural memory is more materialised, related to tacit and embodied knowledge. The disciplined act of visiting a museum, respecting its presentation and the other audience as fellow citizens, visited of free will, and the authority of the experts gives an everyday corporeal experience to be enhanced by other commemorative acts in public or at home. All these are at play in most memory work.

The cognitive category is made to work on an individual level. History, on the other hand, is also a shared property, it is communicated knowledge about the past which is produced with the intent to convince the audience of certain properties, destinies and subjects that enact the communicative community to shared commitments. The concept of a social memory and narrative rhetoric connects the idea of individual memory to the more collective forms. For most of the theorists in the field, history is the more structured and collective version of individual or collective memory. For many professional historians it has become a critical task to correct false ideas of the past carried on in memory processes, legitimising its privileged position at the university. The fact that the content of memory is closer to the experience actually guiding action than history is, has recently also drawn a broad field of researchers to the realms of memory, as being in need of closer scrutiny to understand its dynamic rather than dismissing it as false (Nora & Kritzman 1996; Melman 2006).

The history of materialised memory is part of the struggle to fixate and disseminate versions of the past in the present to fulfil hopes or avoid fears of future expectations. Museums and monuments are in this sense commemorations with as much energy directed to the future as into the past. They are vehicles for negotiating the relationship between experience and expectations. Since the rise of enlightenment and science as primary vehicles of change, knowledge has been ever more central to rhetoric. But the general rules of rhetoric are not overturned, just adjusted. It is still important who says what to whom (ethos, logos, pathos), and the staging is still reliant on *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocution*, *memoria*, *actio* – an idea, ordered, presented and conveyed to the memory (Holmgren Caicedo 2009).

The actual performance of this rhetoric is renewed by the invention and expansion of the museum as an institution of materialised memory with strong public function since the mid eighteenth century. Its development invents and demonstrates theories of memory that change the way histories are told. Sensibilities change and are in constant need of refinement, even if the general dialectics they are caught in are more timeless.

These changing sensibilities fluctuate between positions that have formatted the museum debate and been rather stable as a contested field in the last two centuries. The scene was set long ago for many of our contemporary battles, if not all of them.

One long-standing debate concerns whether the essential character and hence priority of the museum is to produce facts and knowledge or experiences and entertainment. Connected to that is whether the collection or the audience is the ultimate goal and *raison d'être* of the museum. The discussion

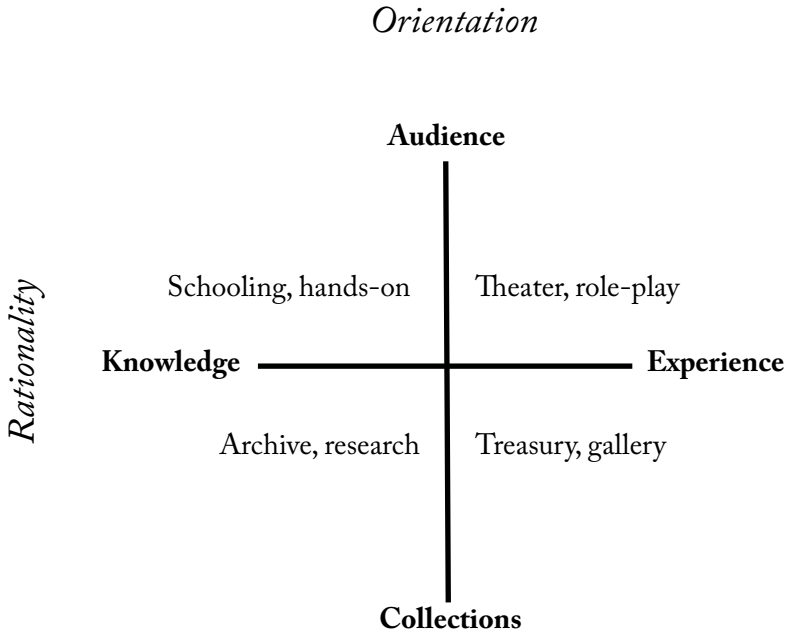


Fig. 1. Public/Collection. Based on Beckman & Hillström 2002.

was heated one hundred years ago along similar lines to today. A chronological narrative of museum history will here show a tendency to first fulfil ideals of the lower right corner in the seventeenth century (fig. 1) moving clockwise to the upper right corner in contemporary museology. But it is important to notice that museums are by their very constitution working in all four sectors since they collect and display (otherwise they are archives) and they rely on knowledge but also on the ability to entice an audience (otherwise they are void of visitors).

There are long-standing tensions in sorting knowledge into categories along the axis of universal–situational and cultural–natural in Western thought (fig. 2). It is not simple to put museums as memory institutions into one of the straightforward boxes made by crossing the categories. Logics of tension and organisation are somewhat different for natural-history, art and cultural museums, but prevail all over. Art in the eighteenth century was very much seen as a carrier of universal values, while the nineteenth century saw the gradual addition of values such as art being a vehicle for historic national schools and didactics. In the twentieth century, with modernism, it again

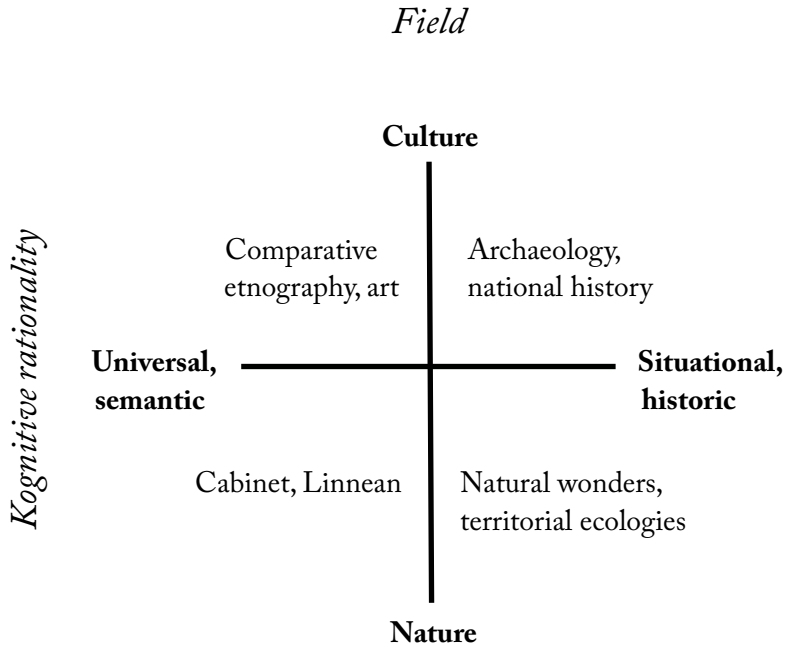


Fig. 2. Culture/Nature. Based on Beckman & Hillström 2002.

became a universal exploration of aesthetic dimensions and hosting the capacity for rejuvenation of vision, and in twenty-first-century contemporary art often has a more conceptual, situational, if not historic approach to communication. Ethnographic exhibits, as remnants of prehistory, can be part of natural-history exhibitions, framed by strong narratives of national historic roots or made into material for comparative anthropologies about mankind. Natural history, in its Linnaean version, has a strictly a-historic attempt to create universal unchanging order in nature, but becomes with Darwinism a part of historic enquiry. These dynamics testify to the negotiations going on in the museum both over time and between the different principles at play. Dealing with contradictions to keep order and peace is an overarching function of culture and cultural policy (Aronsson 2008b).

The tension between knowledge of history and memory as an experiential category runs through the debates about the proper way to utilise museums as vehicles for truth: the materiality is suited both for systematising concrete evidence and for the overwhelming strong experience of using all the senses and meeting unique objects.

AUTHORS AND INTERPRETERS

History is written in the museum, by the museum and about the museum. The specific position of museums in the system of knowledge consists of their insistence on objects, systematic collections and the Enlightenment idea of a public sphere, a public to communicate with. There is always present both a universalising element, in the attempt to explore valid knowledge for the benefit of public enlightenment, and a more particularistic aspect by glorifying the patrons, be it the founder and/or the nation supporting the institution.

History is written *by* museums, in the planning and implementation of collecting and exhibiting. The most reflected and self-conscious part of that is the narration *within* museums by the artefacts, order and signs, stories about nature, art, archaeology, technology and popular culture. But there is also a wider frame in which to read museums as cultural processes. On this level discourse is produced both by museums themselves and by other interlocutors. The meaning of the museum is also negotiated by stakeholders and citizens who might be using them as vehicles for political goals or as family entertainment, regardless of the ambitious plans of the museum professionals.

Museums produce their own histories *about* themselves. The term *museion* itself alludes to Greek culture as the foundation of Western culture. Stories of long descent, struggles and heroic advances, a heritage to save and fulfil, are part and parcel of the self-understanding and positioning of many institutions in the struggle for legitimacy and high ranking in the knowledge system relating to universities, the evolving museum profession and other forms of cultural representation.

The evolving discipline of museology has its own layers of meta-reflection on museums, historiographies, arguing in turn for systematic collections, efficient management, visitor orientation to critical post-colonial and Foucaultian perspectives.

Since memory acts on experience, there is a relationship to a subjective and empiricist view of knowledge. To remember implies fitting together pieces of evidence of the past. The driving force of this, however, is more seldom scientific knowledge but a wider range of existential or theological pursuits. Epistemologies and especially the understanding of materiality, evidence and categorisation on one hand and the role of display and didactics on the other determine the roles assigned to the museum.

Hence we have a set of positions where explicit narrations interplay with both memory and implicit discourse in the actual production of the complex writing of the past installed by and around museums. To put it simply, most

professionals narrate a strong history of themselves as in a state of progress and successful reform. Many academics are more sceptical and make living out of a critical scrutiny of museums as being more ideological than they care to admit. The argument here is rather that museum exhibits, historiography and museology are all caught in the same productive tension where *similarities* have been under-communicated. We are parts of similar and productive epistemological problems and negotiating change and contradictions in similar historical cultures. Our professional drive to emphasise difference to legitimise our respective precedence on the scene is really less interesting than the similarities in the negotiations and compound effects of our contributions to *Wirkungshistorie*, through our compound cultural production (Aronsson 2011b).

THE FACTICITY AND FLEXIBILITY OF MATTER

For Plato the material world was the shadow on the wall, representing vaguely the true knowledge of ideas. In the western world the dichotomy of spirit and matter is imbued with moral virtue. The spiritual is eternal, the road to truth, and the material is ephemeral and leads the weak flesh to Hell, if not properly disciplined. In this line of thinking, material artefacts are not evidence of anything but the vain strivings of worldly people.

Artefacts from the crucifixion, the mantle of Jesus, bones of martyrs and so on pile up to a substantial reservoir where churches and shrines act as early museums of divine artefacts. Later on this mode of display and visitation had a mildly secularised version in the devotion to unique pieces of art reflecting eternal values of beauty and virtue, wonders of nature, worldly endeavours of skilful crafting or pieces of material enshrined by their connection to outstanding royals and later other celebrities. Auction houses bear witness to the value of this magic authenticity, as a chair rises tenfold or more in value for the memory having once hosted a famous person. This magic mode of collecting and display has not ceased to exist but has been complemented by others.

With the idea of empirical evidence a third contribution to collection logics was introduced. The idea of matter itself as the carrier of truth-value made collecting and describing the highest form of knowledge. Museum hybridity also shows itself in the ideas about the value of the objects.

The actual value of museum objects is impossible to assess since they are removed from the logic of the market. Nevertheless, they do come from donations, auctions and plunder, having distinct trade value before entering the sacred realm of eternal seclusion as museum objects. Paradigmatic changes in

science and taste can move objects not only from the display area to the artefact stores, but even to the market or the rubbish heap – although this has to remain a rare exception.

Many of the old rarities of the old cabinets of curiosities, which had been paid dearly for, became obsolete in a scientific museum regime: what scientific collection needed miniature crafts or strange natural formations where the playfulness of nature formed matter as if it were representing an animal or an artefact?

But many objects do survive, though not for the same reason they were collected (fig. 3). The trajectory of things shows a remarkable flexibility to represent different phenomena when asked to. The medical doctor Ole Worm created a famous Museum Wormianum in Denmark, bought by King Frederik III in 1655 to be incorporated into the royal collection. Many of the objects have survived the subsequent specialisation and professionalisation of the museum. The main interest was in the diversities of nature: minerals, plants and animals, and only few artefacts were collected. Two decorated jugs were part of the display as examples of materials made by earth/clay from Bohemia, with healing properties. In the royal collection they were moved to the shelves of East Indian objects, later moving to ethnographica as Indian pots. With the interest in medieval and Nordic culture in the early nineteenth century they came to represent Old Norse drinking utensils. Today they are on display at the National Museum in Copenhagen as pieces of Renaissance craft. So in sequence the jugs moved from being items of medical treatment to overseas craft, ethnographic items of other civilisation to represent the roots of the Nordic culture and finally showing fine craft and everyday life in Renaissance Europe (Mordhorst 2009:10ff). This example is told to demonstrate how the seemingly solid factuality of objects is extremely vulnerable to changing interpretative contexts and changing needs for overarching narratives to be performed through them.

MEMORY ARCHIVE – TREASURY AND OTHER LOGICS OF COLLECTION

The cabinet of curiosities and its virtually unrestricted ambition of collecting, evolving in the Renaissance, is sometimes described as the first phase of the development of the universal enlightenment museum. The preference for exotic rarities might seem contradictory to the scientific endeavour of systematic collecting. Rarities valued highly by many collectors were birds of paradise, horn of unicorn, hybrid objects such as stones resembling animals, mishaps – materials caught between ‘God’s grace and Nature’s play’. Classical sculptures had a room

as signs of learned identification and eternal virtues more than historical evidence. Impressive craft skills were embedded in miniatures or mechanical works (MacGregor 2007:46).

Anyone who has ever read a description of a Wunderkammer, or a cabinet of curiosities, would recognise the folly of locating the origin of the museum there, the utter incompatibility of the Wunderkammer's selection of objects, its system of classification, with our own (Crimp 1993:225).

The systematic and scientific collection of the universal museum was restricted and caught by both a magic worldview entranced by wonders, personal whims and the political and aristocratic will to status and power (MacGregor 2007).

The shifting verdicts cast over the early treasuries depends on the epistemological position of the judge: does he or she only acknowledge one type of modern systematic empiricism, or are other logics of knowledge recognised with a historicist appreciation. The semantics of collection shifted from searching for items as rear peeholes that reflected the fantastic order of nature and power of God, to exploring empiric evidence in great abundance to find logics of the ordinary rather than evidence of the exceptional. Similar long-standing diverging strategies are also to be found in written history, between proponents of the priority to explore formative moments and individuals or to acknowledge the power of everyday life and culture.



Fig. 3. The cabinet of curiosities of Rembrandt. Preserved in the *Rembrandthuis* in Amsterdam. Photo by Remi Mathis, Wikimedia commons, license CC BY-SA 3.0.



The classification of what a museum essentially *is*, is further complicated by the fact that the intention or at least the explicit motives of the founder of a museum could be driven by virtues of scientific enlightenment, but the fascination of the audience by deeply rooted fears of magic and the unknown, superstition. This possible division works for both early modern and contemporary examples, depending on what level the museum is analysed at: intention, expressions in collections, exhibitions, proclamation and lastly in the various receptions of these actions. Look at some of the samples from the *Kunstkamera* displayed in one of the earliest open museums in the world in St Petersburg (figs. 4–5). It is said to have been justified by Peter the Great as a vaccine against superstition: monsters are only part of natural variation. Was that the first reflection or the power that attracted and still attracts the audience? I doubt that this ever was the case.

The narrative trope connected to the modes of memory which emphasise the unique and exceptional can do so for quite different reasons, and it need not be ridiculed. After all, it is a living scientific ideal to produce unique cognitive conclusions, not to repeat what is already known. In a world where empiricism is strong, and hence material facts carry the truth-values themselves, unique objects carry new knowledge, and the method for reaching this would be to describe them in the greatest detail possible. In a world where truth-value to a higher degree is located in the application of scientific methods and arguments, a more constructivist theory of knowledge has evolved. The originality is then produced by being able to repeat observations, to argue on the basis of evidence, and hence unique observations are of no use, but unique conclusions are highly valued.

These changes in epistemology had a hard effect on Ole Worm, his colleagues and patrons in the high nobility. Objects showing the fantastic capacity of nature to transform and resemble objects from other realms became useless for scientific purposes. The capacity of an oak branch to encompass the jaw of a horse, or a natural marble sphere to replicate a world map was useful for demonstrating the capacity of God to do wonders in the world, expanding the limits of natural and purposeful variation, and possibly to inform medicine and industry about the usefulness of materials. But when a modern scientific method stressed the need for repetition and systematic collection, these objects became embarrassing, representing oddities of the world and not the intrinsic truth of the universe. The highest-valued rarities became curiosities in a marginalising sense of the world, at best as amusement for the simple-minded (Mordhorst 2009).

In the eighteenth century, empiricism located knowledge in the material observation itself – the major force for the enormous investments made in mu-



Figs. 4–5. Above: The *Kunstkamera* of Peter the Great in St Petersburg. Photo by Vitold Muratov, Wikimedia commons, License CC BY-SA 3.0. Right: *Sirenomelia*, a deformed child exhibited as monster of nature at the *Kunstkamera*. Photo by Stanislav Kozlovskiy, Wikimedia commons. License CC BY-SA 3.0.



seum institutions for all kind of knowledge. The first to be transformed was the natural-history collection, moving from the world of wonder to the world of Linnaean ambitions of systematic categorisation. The Parisian *Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle* became a more ideal collection than the more diverse collection of the British Museum. The Natural History Museum of Sweden and many other countries was the first to develop at the centre of academies and universities, necessary to be credible at all as knowledge institutions.

These 'memories of the world' are hardly recognised by us as such since they do not play the

episodic or narrative memory. The material is instead part of a semantic system, be it God's or Nature's, but in these days often labelled natural history, demonstrating a wider scope of the term history before the rather successful (for a period) professionalisation by the academic discipline of history as more or less equal to the history of nations. The methods created and taught to read the material evidence were first more conceptual, using for example binary names to show how all plants in the world are placed in a sexually ordered structure of species and families. The explicit advantage of this system was that it was without history, mapping an eternal order.

Add the idea of evolution and progress and the chronological arrangement of typologies become a central intellectual tool for representing the world, whether species, art or history. Also, the natural museum was transformed into a place for natural *history*. Geology and mankind were made into parts of the history of the world (Aronsson 2011a).

LOCALISING MEMORY AS GENERIC – NATIONALISMS IN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

For several hundred years the state was mildly interested in the attitudes of its common citizens. In most countries the relationship was mediated through the nobility in a feudal system. Orderly distribution of taxes was the main concern and point of contact. Museums such as the Uffizi, the Louvre and other royal collections were used from the late sixteenth century to impress other monarchs and aristocrats with the ruler's power and taste. Official history was used for similar reasons to legitimise power, enhance glory and promote the grandeur of the ruling regime.

With the strong emphasis on the logic of evolution in the nineteenth century the narrative of progress became the strongest organising principal in many museums for a period. The exploration of geology, glacial theories and evolution historicised nature and changed the division of labour at the museum. The placement of an object as art or ethnography, of a culture as civilised or uncivilised, testified to changing historical theories. The universal classical culture was contested by historicised national narratives supported by archaeology, ethnology and art looked at from a new angle (Bennett 2004; Aronsson 2011a).

Early national museum initiatives were responses to the challenges of the Napoleonic wars, French museum acquisition and exhibition, and the institutional re-invention of nation-states after the war. New ideas of systematic empirical knowledge merged with the ideals and aspirations of an expanding

middle class. Different anatomies of nationalisms can explain various differences of the content and mode of museum displays. Old empires, occupied nations, newly established states all need to represent themselves within the semantics of nationalism, science and politics, but their needs differ. The old empires have the collections and the position to manifest their centrality with a universalist collection, while new states need to elaborate extensively on their ancient (dubious) roots. This is why England does not have a national historical museum but Hungary, Poland and Finland had them even before they became states. Wales and Scotland have aspirations to independence, as do some metropolitan cities like Barcelona and Istanbul, which is also reflected in museum policies and narratives (Aronsson & Elgenius 2011).

Nationalism has played a profound part in developing theories of memory and museum narratives. The idea that cultures and civilisations have long trajectories that are reflected in both material and immaterial heritage has been a formatting tool for archaeology as well as art history. A type of grave mounds are related to a culture and civilisation and displayed in chronological order from the beginning and moving to the end of that culture or to contemporary society.

The construction of national cultures always has to deal with past and contemporary difference, and this can be done differently. A strong historical, ethnical lineage is one way to connect. A weaker diachronic emphasis and stronger synchronic obligation (to constitution, human rights, universal values) constitutes another strategy (Brubaker 1992). In the UK the first is utilised more frequently in the setting up of new national museums in Wales and Scotland, while in England the universalist mode is paradigmatically represented by the British Museum. This can be readily explained by the difference in power and state-making trajectories. An old empire versus nations in the making have different resources to utilise for their goal.

An interesting example of the tension and a vital division of labour in negotiating historic exhibition and re-enactment can be cited for Sweden. The early establishment of cultural heritage authorities in the seventeenth century and an official national museum in the first half of the nineteenth century was challenged by civic initiatives. The tedious scholarly work of archaeologists like Bror Emil Hildebrandt and Oscar Montelius was questioned by competing collections and exhibitions answering to new modes of national sensibilities. Engaging with the public, Artur Hazelius managed to open a rather haphazard collection of Scandinavian Ethnographica in 1873, the open-air museum of Skansen in 1891 and the Nordic Museum in 1907. He channelled what could be called an ethnographic engagement and anxiety, successfully negotiating various contradictions in a contemporary society marked by very rapid mo-

dernisation. Sweden was urbanised and industrialised late but extremely fast in the decades from 1870, and at the same time left one of the last remnants of its old conglomerate empire. The union with Norway was dissolved in 1905. The need to lay a firm foundation for the existence of the state was perhaps not as urgent as the need to negotiate rapid social change, regional and class differences. One million of a population of four went to America for a better future. The responsible political establishment did not have the tools or means to intervene as did later the welfare state. But within cultural policy, especially formulated in the civic sector, energy coalesced to produce new dimensions of museum experiences which included recreation and re-enactment of pastoral historical memory (Hillström 2006; Aronsson, 2008b; Bäckström 2011).

The archaeological exhibition in the National Museum provided a firm basis for the existence of a population in Scandinavia. But the somewhat hesitant conclusion shows the restrictions of the scholarly ambition. ‘The people that lived here during the Neolithic were most probably our forefathers, progenitors of the Svions and Goths [Svear och Göter] within historical times’ (Montelius 1872:3). This was not enough for the need of a solid continuity and firm national loyalty between classes and regions. The role of the peasantry was seminal in Herderian nationalism and romantic thought all over Europe, but especially important to assess in a country where they still were a majority but the future was mortgaged by the bourgeoisie. In the capital of Sweden it was then an act of genius to recruit the rich new and old classes to collect, pay for and re-enact bygone peasant life. The traditional lifeways carried the values of continuity, hard work, industry and stable prehistoric patriarchal social formats to be hailed, while at the same time removed from their social constriction to present conditions. The outdoor part of the exhibition and living stage for this re-enactment was a popular success which was easily exported to nations with similar conditions and needs (Rentzhog 2007; Aronsson 2008a).

The sister institution was the Scandinavian collection moved to a new cathedral-like building to show historical Nordic culture. The tensions between scientific and experience-oriented logic, as well as national and trans-national, were heightened at the turn of the century. The building is truly pre-scientific and the planned *tableaux vivants* associated with easy access and not so scientific and systematic production of knowledge was challenged by the break of the union and the scientific community. It did however survive, and peace between the two was struck by leaving cultural history after 1520 to the Nordic Museum as a state-supported foundation, where the museum was to represent the scientific side and Skansen the popular face. The archaeological museum had to keep to its narrow premises and chronology until our time. With the

move to new premises in 1943 the somewhat hesitant national framing was left behind:

In unbroken lineage since the Stone Age, freeholders have cultivated the Swedish soil. In Europe only Danes and Norwegians have dwelled on the land of their forefathers for such a long time... The Kingdom is of ancient origin in Sweden. Elected at *Mora sten*, the King undertook his royal tour of the country... (Regner 1995:31).

The historical culture of Sweden has been significantly altered today by the experience of two hundred years of peace and by the establishment of a widely affirmed and, for a period, successful welfare state. A civic idea of citizenship, where historical dimensions are more of threat than an asset and are left to local and regional policy makers to explore, is reinforced by a strong multicultural rhetoric.

For museum exhibits the combined effect is that there is no museum where visitors can access Swedish history and culture, but an ensemble needs to be visited. For the Museum of National Antiquities (now renamed the National Historical Museum), for example, this means that the new exhibits try to relate to all the postmodern challenges observed – and reorient narratives in the specific political culture of Sweden. This means telling a reflexive, gendered, multicultural, class-conscious story of the territory of contemporary Sweden, explicitly stating that Sweden of course did not exist at this time. The visitor is addressed as an individual meeting equal but distant strangers in a universal conversation about death, power, family life etc.

But again, national heritage is also here. Most of the exhibited finds are from Scania – and none from the Baltic countries or Pomerania. The national master narrative is there but in a very Freudian way, which must confuse the visitor. It means, however, that technological advances are toned down and a will to bring forward individuals is emphasised, but still within the same chronological and epochal approach (Insulander 2010; Aronsson 2012).

The Swedish example has resulted in a sharp alteration of public historical rhetoric and museum display. But seemingly similar countries show differences as well. In Denmark the national museum displays the ethnic narrative strongly, finding the first Danish girl without hesitation in a Stone Age grave – while at the same time displaying the declaration of nation-making by the runic stone from Jelling. In Sweden the idea of continuity is contradicted explicitly in the parallel exhibition. A multicultural political discourse interplays differently with museums than a national ethnic one. In Sweden the memory is oriented to seeing others, putting ethnic Swedes in a similar position to new Swedes. We are not related but curious about the others that lived here before

us. Hence memory is instead universalised and thought to be able to talk to all visitors on an alleged existential level without ethnic qualification.

The tension between the ethnic and civic mode of constructing a national context for display is overlaid by the epistemological tension between cold disinterested objectivity and engaged modes of participating in historical culture. The latter has an even longer trajectory of arguments going back in history.

MUSEALISED WORLD ORDER

The museum with its institutionalised collection creates a basis for collective narration based on the exceptional. The shrine of the church was complemented with the armoury, gallery and cabinets of the royal or aristocratic endeavour to legitimise a line of decent, a godly blessing and heroic action. The anecdotic heroic modes suited for this narrative are appropriate for popular circulation. The horse of the lion of the North, Gustavus Adolphus, which carried him in the Battle of Lützen in 1632, was stuffed and kept as one of the early artefacts to weave the heroic histories of Sweden as a great power. Sometimes the narrative became so strong in this mode that the artefacts had to be invented. The Oak of Robin Hood, the Castle of Dracula and the graves of royal Swedish predecessors in Vreta Kloster have been fabricated to fit the powerful narrative of unique personas. Narrative produces objects for the museum to be remembered. Memory is not always the starting point for reconstructions, but nevertheless the end product for residing historical consciousness.

The history told by any profession is basically one of unilinear progress, and successful defeat of comen and threats of degeneration. Theories of objectivity and power influence the modes of writing about and critique of museums. History has often been set up in opposition to Memory, meaning facts versus subjectivity. Material evidence is supposed to be experienced as strong facts. We have demonstrated their extreme plasticity. In the last few decades a strong staging of a conflict has been that between realism and post-modernity and a parallel move from the self-evident relevance of a national framing to a post-national rhetoric and multicultural endeavour to engage new audiences and communities. Recently in western countries, but even more in Eastern Europe and Asia, strong national logics again seem to feed into a post-Soviet and/or strong economic growth to be nationally represented. The tension between universal arguments and particular political contexts is there to stay (Message 2006; Aronsson & Nyblom 2008).

The theory of a move from an industrial material economy to an experience economy is the third shift challenging the national/ethnic interpretation with

an economic logic and individual desires as the prime mover of museum strategies (Pine & Gilmour 1999).

Together these developments have placed museums in the centre of cultural policy. Under siege for decades, aesthetic, existential, political and economic values once again also become more open rationales for museums to work within. Nostalgia for pasts and dreams of utopian futures present crossroads where the cognitive component of materiality becomes useful in new ways.

Narratives of historiography of such a complex phenomenon as museums exist in contradictory variants. Put side by side, they show a more interesting spectrum of ideals for the cultural form than either of them would admit on its own. Ideal-typical museums can be classified in various ways. By object and logic of collection as art, cultural, natural museums, or by the ambition to contribute to knowledge as universal museums or creators of community. Here we have pursued by another line of argument taken from cognitive science to explain how memory and narrative interact with the representation of the museum. This is justified by the claim of museums to be defined as custodians of materialised memory. They interact with academic disciplines that are visual (art history) oral (ethnology) and text-based (history), but all narrate their knowledge basically in text as compared to the multimodal repertoire of museums.

Taking episodic memory as a starting point, it shows a strong resemblance to the way narrative theory predicts history to be assembled and communicated. This mode is naturally present in archaeological and historical museums, but also present in visual collections in so far as art is organised in chronological developments of historical schools from Flemish painting to progress made by modernist creators and contemporary art defined as more conceptual. Even natural-history exhibits adhere to this type of sign-making as long as they are interpreted as part of an evolutionary plot, whether decided by the fittest for survival, genetic mutations or the travels of mitochondrial DNA.

Semantic memory works differently. It is closer to ideas of discourse, models and structures. Here the synchronic or timeless relationship between phenomenon and meaning is related instead to the diachronic logic in the episodic memory. To a historian's imagination, museums are synonymous with the preservation of historic material. But material need not be looked upon as unique historic evidence. The first museums in Renaissance Europe were in fact more universal than ever, collecting evidence of the order – or play – of nature and God, with no organising historic plot. This semantic gaze on material evidence survives in a pure form in Linnaean types of museum: categorisation and description of minerals, flora and fauna, but it inspires all empirical sciences. It becomes an aspect of most museums, for example in the

archaeological categorisation of material as bound to a certain era: Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age.

The discursive framing of national museums as national lies on a semantic level for most visitors. The claim to universal aesthetics at contemporary art museums also relates to colour, forms and ethics as part of a cultural discourse not necessarily framed by historical logic.

Both of these are also aspects of textual historiography, but the third mode, procedural memory, is a more central aspect for museums since it is a more spatial and material experience – including the central procedure of ‘do not touch’! The museum’s being open to the public is one of its defining features. Professionals complain that visitors do not behave properly, do not have the necessary background knowledge or the right attitude, do not proceed in the house in accordance with prescribed ideas, do not engage in the right manner with the objects and the message they present. Researchers do not engage and value the archives and collections enough. All users, be they researchers, schoolchildren, citizens or tourists, have roles to play, procedures to adhere to in relation to the objects, the experts and to each other.

The hopes for a combined effect of the motions of episodic, semantic and procedural memory on the audiences have always been very high: to produce well-educated active citizens framed by a peaceful but still creative and integrative policy. This is the bright hopes of Enlightenment history written into the museum. Critics claim museums might be at best places to meet good friends, with decent toilets and a museum shop, at worst places to dominate and discipline the masses in ever more intricate modes. They might even pay for it and think they are there willingly (Bennett 1995, 2004).

In my perspective museums are contradictory spaces for negotiating difficult relations between knowledge and politics, ethics and aesthetics, power and participation. The hybridity of memory actions that are set in motion are part of that complexity. Both the fear and hopes that digital media would devalue the attraction of the material and situated character of the museum fall short. By laws of economy and desire it rather raises the value of real reality when virtual reality becomes cheap and accessible. The threats to the usefulness of history told at museums, and history at large, are not their complexity, but rather the possible lack of urgency if issues raised are out of contact with conflicts dealt with in the broader historical culture.

NOTES

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