

Abstract, Sune Christian Pedersen, Head of Research and Collections, Modern History and World Cultures, National Museum of Denmark, 30.1.14.

The National Museum and the (post-)colonial challenge

Like other Western museums containing ethnographic collections formed during the period of global Western hegemony and colonialism, The National Museum of Denmark has for many years found itself faced with a challenge in dealing with these. The challenge concerns the legitimacy of both ownership and use of the collections. What kind of voice is legitimate in dealing with global heritage? The responses to this "crisis of representation" have been many, ranging from active repatriation of museum objects through highly politicized exhibitions to more post-modern, "voiceless" exhibitions.

The presentation will discuss implications of some of these responses. Today the permanent ethnographic exhibitions of the National Museum reflect an emphasis on aesthetic and functional aspects of objects from clearly delineated "cultures". This is increasingly dissatisfying to both a Danish and an international, globalizing public that would be looking for the dynamics, conflicts and dialogue of cultures rather than static and potentially essentialist versions of peoples and cultures.

In the last years, curators from the department of Modern History and World Cultures have experimented with various kinds of outreach, international collaborations and self-reflecting exhibition formats. The ethnographic collections of the National Museum, whilst collected according to different strategies, clearly still have the potential to put contemporary developments in a critical perspective. These projects have seemingly placed the National Museum at the centre of discussions of "dangerous museum practice", have led to debate in the Danish parliament as well as in the press and university corridors. Is this dangerous? To whom? In what possible ways?

The presentation will argue that rather than to shy away from "dangers", museums should embrace debates in an open curatorial process, thinking and working in several spaces at simultaneously - both looking towards the local scene and towards the peoples at the faraway places at which the objects were once collected.