

Ethnographic collections at cross roads

Based on a study of the logics and strategies of the re-organization of the Ethnographic collections at the Danish National Museum in the late 1930s, this presentation aims at discussing the interplay between objects, settings and (political) intentions in museum exhibitions. The purpose of the re-organization was to get rid of the problematic representation of cultural differences as manifestations of evolutionary stages, but the prize paid for that change was that geography took centre stage while time and dynamic change as organizing factors disappeared – in stark contrast to the logics behind the European exhibitions at the National Museum, drenched in time as they were.

Today ethnographic museums all over Europe are rethinking their practice in acknowledgement of the problematic history of these museums as well as – at times – problematic logics of display. Which lessons can be learned from past re-organizations – how can the ethnographic museums escape the potential status as ‘dangerous’?

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