

ICME 97:

Museums of ethnography/ethnology and the public - exhibitions and visitor-oriented programmes.

Amsterdam November 29 - December 2, 1997

Saturday November 29

- 10.00 - 11.00 Arrival Amsterdam, registration of participants at Tulip Inn Tropen
Coffee/tea (Possibility to visit Tropenmuseum, unguided)
- 11.00 - 12.30 ICME Board meeting at the Royal Tropical Institute
- 12.30 - 13.30 Lunch at Tulip Inn Tropen for board members and participants
- 13.30 - 16.15 Tropenmuseum (visit to new exhibition about shamanism and the new semi-permanent department West Asia and North Africa), guided by Carel van Leeuwen, curator for the Islamic Culture Area.
- 16.30 - 18.00 Discussion at ~~Tulip Inn Tropen~~, Coffee/tea (with C. van Leeuwen and R. Smith, Communication/Educational Department).
- 19.00 - 20.00 Drinks Tulip Inn Tropen provided by Royal Tropical Institute
- 20.00 - Dinner Tulip Inn Tropen

Sunday November 30

- 09.00 - 10.00 Bus to Museon, The Hague
- 10.00 - 12.30 Visit Museon
- 12.30 - 13.30 Lunch at Museon
- 13.30 - 14.30 Bus to Museum voor Volkenkunde, Rotterdam
- 14.30 - 17.00 Visit Museum voor Volkenkunde and Reispalais (the Children's Museum) Coffee/tea.
- 17.00 - 18.00 Drinks and informal discussion at the Museum voor Volkenkunde
- 18.00 - 19.00 Bus to Amsterdam
- 20.00 - Dinner Tulip Inn Tropen

Monday December 1

- 09.00 - 09.30 By local bus (22) to New Metropolis
- 09.30 - 12.30 Visit New Metropolis
- 12.30 - 13.30 Lunch and discussion at New Metropolis
- 13.30 - 14.00 Walk to the Jewish Historical Museum
- 14.00 - 17.00 Visit the Jewish Historical Museum, coffee and tea
- 17.00 - 18.00 Drinks and discussion
- 19.00 - Dinner wherever you want at your own cost

Tuesday December 2

- 10.00 - 12.30 Amsterdam Historical Museum
- 12.30 - 13.00 Back to Tulip Inn
- 13.00 - 14.00 Lunch at Tulip Inn
- 14.00 - 16.00 Final discussion (with members of the Communication department, Childrens museum of the Tropenmuseum) (coffee/tea)
ICME 98 in Melbourne, Australia - an orientation

Meals at the Tulip Inn Tropen

Since many of our meetings will be at this hotel, some of our meals will also take place here. Each lunch costs f. 20 (some drinks included) and each dinner f. 35 (drinks not included).

*Ruben Smith
museum educator*

The Tropen museum

ICOM-ICME '97

Saturday 29 November 1997, from 13.30 - 18.45.

Programme at the Tropenmuseum (Royal Tropical Institute) in Amsterdam
(Especially for your benefit the museum will be open until 18.45.)

- 13.30 Word of welcome and mutual fine tuning of today's programme.
- 13.45 - 14.05 Introduction on the recently opened temporary exhibition on
(muziektheater 1st floor) Shamanism "*From Siberia to Cyberspace; the journey of the shaman and the quest of the soul*"
By: Alexandra Rozenbohm; guest curator, Tropenmuseum.
- 14.05 - 15.00 Visit this exhibition under guidance of Alexandra Rosenbohm and
Carel van Leeuwen.
- 15.00 - 15.20 Introduction on the - not yet ready - permanent exhibition:
(muziektheater 1st floor) "*West Asia & North Africa*" (Ideas, concept and outline)
By: Carel van Leeuwen; curator Islamic Cultures, Tropenmuseum
- 15.20 - 16.00 Preview on this exhibition under guidance of Carel van Leeuwen en
Ruben Smit
- 16.00 - 16.30 Tea or Coffee in the museum restaurant EKEKO
- 16.30 - 17.15 Extra talk and exchange of ideas. "*Library or Theatre? The public
(muziektheater 1st floor) dimension of the museum.*"
By: Ruben Smit; educator, Tropenmuseum
- 17.15 - ?? Discussion and conclusions
- 18.45 **MUSEUM CLOSES.**
Please do not forget your coats, umbrella's or other personal belongings

The Interactive Museum Experience - John Falk & Lynn Dierking

International Committee of Museums of Ethnography Annual meeting - Netherlands, November 1997

A small yet diverse group of museum anthropologists, members of the International Committee of Museums of Ethnography (ICME), met in Amsterdam over the American Thanksgiving weekend. The annual meeting, rather than being organized as a set of papers, was organized around informed excursions to a number of museums in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Discussions with curators, educators and planners gave rise to interesting conversations about museum approaches in many areas of the world. Our group included museum anthropologists from England, Croatia, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands, France, Poland, Zimbabwe and the U.S.A.

The Itinerary. Included in our itinerary of a very busy three days were two exhibits at the TropenMuseum in Amsterdam; Museon and the Museum voor Volkenkunde, both in Rotterdam; and the newly opened New Metropolis, the Jewish Historical Society and the Amsterdam Historical Museum, all in Amsterdam. Many more institutions could have been included on the itinerary - in fact several colleagues broke away to see the exhibits at the Ethnographic Museum in Leiden. I took the opportunity to visit a friend (one of the side benefits of involvement with ICOM) and see the relatively new Groninger Museum in the north of the country.

Issues - The Public Dimension and Multiculturalism. The central premise of the meeting was to look at ethnographic exhibits from the perspective of visitor-oriented programs. Multiculturalism was the major concerns reiterated at most of the Museums. The face of the Netherlands has literally changed over the past decade with increased emigration from southern Europe and the Middle East. Cultural differences are creating strife in many cities. Museum staff are grappling with this demographic change as they want to educate about cultural differences and capture the interest of these new populations. In fact, several participants in the conference from Scandinavian museums were also struggling with issues of rising prejudice and the role of museums in educating about others.

At the TropenMuseum we were led through the still incomplete Middle Eastern installation. When completed, this immersion exhibit will take visitors from the streets of Izmir to shops in Morocco, with many stops in between. The educator provided us with information of how they are working with immigrants to develop educational programs to compliment these exhibits.

Both institutions which we visited in Rotterdam on our second day, Museon and The Museum voor Volkenkunde, also take an active educational position in terms of the cultures of new residents of the Netherlands. Since its founding Museon's main mission has been expressly to function as a teaching museum.

It is a general museum with exhibits of history, geology, natural history and ethnography all arrayed in a large open space on the second floor of the museum. Additional exhibits on the periphery of this space allow greater emphasis and depth to be devoted to certain subjects such as Moroccan or Turkish culture. School groups can be seated in these exhibit areas, films or slides shown and activities carried out by the students.

The Museum voor Volkenkunde has pursued a more active program of temporary exhibits. Among the exhibits we saw was "Baths," which explored hamams, or "Turkish" steam baths in the Middle East and the Netherlands. Relatively inexpensive technology transformed a turn of the century space into an airy, light reminder of steam rooms, from black and white linoleum flooring to graceful white archways constructed with thin ethafoam stapled to wooden frameworks. Also included were several installations of components of the standard western bathroom.

Their "Children's Museum" is a permanent installation used to educate about multiculturalism. A small town square is created. Actors playing the roles of the habitués, including the museum director whose coat of pockets includes many, many treasures, interact with the visitors. Children are invited into the Well-loved Things Museum where they see Things and answer many questions. From there, they magically disappear into the other world - mini exhibits of living environments in the Netherlands, Surinam, Indonesia, Morocco, and Turkey. Moving room-to-room in each separate section they see and handle child-sized settings of homes, town squares, shops and other places. The exhibits are created in such a way that questions are posed for the children to answer.

Our discussion following this visit centered on public use of the museum. One colleague from Denmark was shocked to learn that the museum was a site for birthday parties. He felt this role was too commercialized, taking away from educational goals.

The educators of the Amsterdam Historical Museum provided background information to several exhibits the Museum had undertaken with the goal of crossing the bridge of multiculturalism. Their exhibits on Moroccan and Turkish culture were developed with input from community members. Women from each respective community were recruited to serve as docents. Until their roles were understood by community leaders, their involvement was questioned. Their public side was initially viewed as counter to their traditional roles. Final evaluations of the exhibits and their educational programs were all positive from all sides.

Other exhibits, other foci. We also viewed other ethnographic and nonethnographic exhibits in these and other museums. Museum staff introduced the premises which led to the development of these exhibits, most of them from the view point of the public dimension. The "From Shaman to

Cyberspace" exhibit at the TropenMuseum tried to relate the world of the Siberian shaman to present-day popular culture relating to witches in Northern Europe.

Before we viewed the exhibit, the guest curator told us that it was divided into the three conceptual areas. Because the exhibit was quite busy - with artifacts, texts, and multimedia presentations - many in our group questioned if the public picked up these concepts. I could infer them by looking at elements of design. Siberian materials were displayed on large pale yellow multilevel platforms surrounded by aluminum label rails. Artifacts from other cultural areas including Mexico and Korea were displayed in shallow drum-like blond wood and plexi-glass display cases. Present-day Northern European popular culture connections were shown in towering raspberry pink display cases with a video production presented in a tent in a wooded area. It is an attractive exhibit, with many artifacts rarely seen; we felt the intended messages were not received.

In discussions after visiting the exhibit, one of our members questioned why the focus on the final section was only on modern-day witches and new agers. Could not Pentecostalism be looked upon as a relative or spin-off of shamanism? This was not an intellectual direction considered by the curator who was reluctant to approach it afterwards.

The "Soaps" exhibit at the Museum voor Volkenkunde grew out of targeting a new audience. The Museum staff worked together to find a theme which would attract participants in an international conference of young people in Rotterdam. The central artifact on display was the soap opera. Banks of televisions, playing soaps from six different countries were arranged to address different issues common to all soaps. Installations invited from a number of artists were scattered throughout the display. The standouts were the plaster living room with the television immersed in an aquarium and the life-size plaster figures of individuals emulating soap characters.

Our itinerary included the Jewish Museum because it is a community-supported single ethnic museum. However, like many other Jewish museums, their approach is historical and artistic rather than ethnographic. Emphasis is not upon the culture of Jews in the Netherlands, but on their ritual places and objects. The wonderful collection of artifacts are displayed as works of art separated from the cultural context in which they are still used. One member of the group commented on the lack of present-day exhibits.

We also visited the brand-new New Metropolis, affectionately nicknamed "The Titanic" because of its resemblance to a sinking hulk. Although not an ethnographic museum, this institution was included in the itinerary because of its public-centered approach. It is a hands-on high-tech science center in a European context. The Canadian museum planner provided wonderful introductions relating all of the educational concepts young people will absorb

while playing on computers and other simulations. The majority of the members of our group seemed to revisit their youth at the section devoted to driving North Sea oil tankers.

No great conclusions were made at the end of the annual meeting. I believe each participant took home their observations with ideas which they could adapt or dismiss. The next meeting of the International Committee of Museums of Ethnography will be in October, 1998, in conjunction with ICOM's 18th General Conference in Melbourne, Australia. The general theme of the conference is Museum and Cultural Diversity, ancient cultures - new worlds. More information on dates, registration, and costs can be obtained from the American Association of Museums.

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