From natural wholes to particular universality[1]

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Introduction

The concept of universalism seems to be a very appropriate point of departure for debating contemporary museums – not least ethnographic museums. In the past 10-15 years we have seen a growing number of ethnographic museums changing their names into *World Museums* or *Museums of World Culture*. These museums formerly known as Museum of Ethnography, or *Völkerkunde* museums, have embraced the intensification of global relations and tried to shed the skin of the traditional cultural relativism by applying more universal frameworks for exhibition themes.

But somehow one may wonder why ethnographic museums decide to return to universalism. If anything, ethnography has been the discipline that has focussed on the cultural particular in order to oppose monocentric perspectives on the world.

In this paper, I will follow the development of the ethnographic collections at Moesgård Museum in Århus, Denmark, from the establishment in 1953 to the present concern with how to present ethnography in a future museum. From these present considerations, I will develop the concept of *particular universality* as a possible contemporary approach to universality in ethnographic museums.

Challenges of change

Located at the old manor house of Moesgård about 10 km outside of Århus, Moesgård Museum is primarily an archaeological museum.

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In 1953 an ethnographic collection was established at University of Århus with the objective to offer ethnographic comparatives to Danish pre-history. Since then the collection has developed steadily so that it today numbers around 40.000 objects. While institutionally belonging to the university the collection has been used for exhibitions and educational purposes at what was originally called Museum of Pre-history, Århus, changing its name to Moesgård Museum with the move to the old manor in 1971.

Recently money was raised to construct a completely new museum building just next to the manor. The new museum is designed by Danish architects Henning Larsen Group, and it is expected to open in 2011. It will contain around 6000 m2 exhibition space and an equal amount of space for other facilities.

Up till now the ethnographic collections have been used for special exhibitions only, but in the new museum there will be permanent ethnographic exhibitions.
So – how are we to deal with that?
No matter what we are going to come up with something new. New in terms of exhibition style, new in terms of topics, new in terms of theoretical perspective.
To present something originally new we have to consider the history of our collection, the institutional framework (primarily the fact that we operate as the kid brother to the archaeologists), and – of course – our object holdings. In other words, we have to consider how we can present new perspectives from the particular circumstances we are given.
In this paper I will consider the legacy of collecting strategies and exhibition practices at the ethnographic collections of Moesgård Museum. I will try to do this with an open mind, without simply coining past exhibition practices as obsolete. At the same time I

will try to draw to the front the kind of new perspectives that may lay the ground for future exhibitions at the museum.
In doing this, I will focus on the overarching theme of the present conference, namely the concepts of holism and universality, arguing that the concepts of universalism and holism do not only refer to theoretical ideals, but also to ways of making images in the exhibition.

An ethnographic collection in Århus

In 1947 the town of Århus decided to support to Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia with the aim of receiving ethnographic artefacts in turn to establish the first ethnographic collection in town. The collection was to operate as a study and research collection under University of Aarhus, but it was to be kept at the local Århus Museum of Pre-history. At that time the museum of pre-history held a few objects categorized as 'ethnographic artefacts', but none on which a future collection could be based.
The initiative to establish en ethnographic collection was partly taken by the then professor of prehistoric archaeology, P.V. Glob, who envisioned a future research centre for archaeology and ethnography. Ethnography was to be added mainly to provide comparative material that could shed light on Danish pre-history.

Natural wholes

Since ethnography did not exist as a discipline either at the museum or the university in Århus at that time, the creation of the collection had to be made in co-operation with the National Museum in Copenhagen, where the main character in Danish anthropology at that time, Kaj Birket-Smith, was director of the ethnographic collection.
As a guide-line for the future collection in Århus, Birket-Smith advised that, "to avoid creating a haphazard collection full of gaps and thus without scientific or educational value…we ought…to focus upon individual cultures, from which it is still possible to acquire a broad representation, and which together will make up a firm and natural whole". (Ferdinand 1974: 476)
Birket-Smith's idea of collections that together would make up a firm and natural whole must be related to his strong orientation towards the study of economic cultures[2]. He

[2] 'Economic culture' may not be the proper translation. The Danish term 'erhvervskultur' derives from the German 'Berufskultur'. 'Erhvervskultur' stresses the adaptation of human societies to natural environments. Maybe a term like 'forms of subsistence' would be a better translation.

suggested the making of collections that would illustrate the main forms of economic cultures; hunters and gatherers, higher hunters, nomads, semi-agriculturalists, full agriculturalists without the plough, and full agriculturalists with the plough. Each of these forms of economic culture could be illustrated through collections from one or more appropriate cultures. An Indian primitive tribe and Australian aborigines could represent hunters and gatherers; Greenlandic Inuits could represent higher hunters; Lapps, Arabs or Todas could represent nomads; an Indian primitive tribe, Papuans and an East African tribe could represent semi-agriculturalists; people of Mexico or Peru could represent full-agriculturalists without the plough; and people of Afghanistan, India or China could represent full-agriculturalists with the plough.[3]

To sum up, Birket-Smith's approach to ethnographic collecting aimed at holistic representations of classical types of economic cultures. 'Culture' was considered an integrated whole in which human societies were adapted to the environment through their material culture. Therefore, a proper presentation of cultures in object form had to include a broad representation unpolluted by the influences of industrialism.

To a certain degree Birket-Smith reflected the widespread interest of the period after World War 2 in saving traits of disappearing traditional cultures. And, finally, he had a clear conception of collections and exhibitions as primarily educational means.

The clash of traditional and modern

In 1958 Klaus Ferdinand was attached to Museum of Pre-history as the first ethnographer (and later as the first Head of Department, at the university department of ethnography). Initially, his position was shared between the museum and the university, so that he was to take care of the development of the ethnographic collection and teach ethnography at the department of archaeology. As a student of Birket-Smith, Ferdinand was also inspired by the holistic approach, based in detailed field work, and he was also concerned with economic culture.

[3] The selection of cultures to represent each economic type may not have been based in disinterested scientific considerations. Rather, as the centre of the Danish ethnographic universe in those days, Birket-Smith had his own students in mind for these selections. Johannes Nicolaisen had been working among the Tuareg in East Africa, Klaus Ferdinand was working in Afghanistan, Werner Jacobsen had made large collections from India and Nepal, and Niels Fock was working in Latin America (Ole Høiris, personal communication).

But Ferdinand's approach was also framed by his participation in the Henning Haslund-Christensen Memorial Expedition to Afghanistan in 1950[4]. One of the aims of this expedition was to trace the origins of the Kafirs of Nuristan. Physical and material evidence suggested that the Kafirs were related to Caucasians, probably through the original ancestors of the indo-Europeans. But what was more important, this expedition also traced the trade relations between nomads and settled groups in Afghanistan.
Inspired by his work in Afghanistan – and by anthropologists like Bohannan – Ferdinand reframed Birket-Smith's collecting strategies in the early 1970s and adapted them to more modern standards. Ferdinand set up three overarching aims for the collections:

1. Always aim for collections that are 'as complete as possible' from individual societies, including all aspects of the relevant culture.
2. Collections should constitute well balanced wholes, for instance illustrating technical processes with the relevant tools and products at different stages of completion.
3. Single objects could be collected for comparative use with corresponding objects from other cultures. These could be agricultural tools, pots, fire making equipment etc.

One more thing is important to understand Ferdinand's ideas of collecting. Ferdinand described collections as snapshots – that is, a fragmentary freezing of a life in flow. He was very conscious about this historical limitation of ethnographic collecting. A collection did not tell about a culture as such, detached in time and space. The collection documented everyday life somewhere in the world at a given time in history. The collection made up a specific time-space.
Ferdinand also rejected the idea of saving vanishing cultures. The clash between the traditional and the modern, industrial world was a fact and was to be documented. Therefore collections should not only concern traditional artefacts, but also industrial products that were a part of the particular time-space.

[4] Haslund-Christensen died in Kabul in 1948 on the Third Danish Central Asian Expedition in which Ferdinand also took part.

Exhibiting cultural wholes

The considerations Ferdinand laid down for collecting ethnographic artefacts were also followed in ethnographic exhibitions at Moesgård Museum. While the museum's exhibitions earlier on had focussed on specific objects categories (typically different kind of tools) to document economic culture and the relationship between man and environment, the 1970s saw the advent of the milieu exhibition.

I have gone through available photos of old exhibitions at the museum, and it seems obvious that the 1970s and 80s were totally dominated by these recreations of social milieus in the style that Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam became particularly known for. If we take a look at these exhibitions it is clear that the exhibition style itself was based in holistic perspectives. Not only did they depict a specific society. While interested in change and exchange the focus was still on particular ethnic groups, their material culture, and how both of these were undergoing change. The focus was on a place and the way society was integrated in that particular place.

But the exhibition also consisted of a stylistic holism. One could say that these exhibitions were very democratic in the sense that all objects were equal. No objects (or only a very few) are highlighted in special show cases or by being spotlighted. Quite contrary, while you may stumble over particular objects on your way through these environments, what is important is the *totality*, the way these objects as an ensemble creates an image of life somewhere on this planet at a given time in history.

I have focussed on the way collecting and exhibition principles at the Moesgård Museum hitherto may be considered holistic, but in some sense they also embodied some universalistic perspectives. The ambition was to cover the *whole world*, not by

states or cultures, but by *types of societies*. Furthermore, the universal was traced, first by a sort of diffusionistic search for the spread of cultural traits and the apparent common origin of people producing the same kind of material cultural traits, and later by a concern for the world market and the ways the market distributes wealth and agency.

I do not intend to go through all changes in perspective on the use of objects at Moesgård Museum, but the two mentioned are important. Birket-Smith's because it framed the arguments for establishing the collection, Ferdinand's because he largely motivated the visions and the work in the collection from his employment in 1957 until his retirement in 1993 – actually, he was intimately involved in the development of the department until his death in 2005.

At this point it is worth noticing how the ethnographic collections at Moesgård were actually developed in a period of decline of museum anthropology. For the same reason Ferdinand consciously sought to keep an arm's length distance to the university department. While the close relation to the university was imperative in that collections were made by students and lecturers on fieldwork, in a more ideological perspective it was necessary to separate the two.

In the university in the 1970s and 80s collecting was considered highly problematic, and some lecturers openly considered the possibility of getting rid of the existing obsolete collections.

Therefore the close relationship between university and museum did only exist to a certain point – and I guess Ferdinand felt some kind of relief when, in 1998 the collection was overdrawn to the museum, and the first full time curator post was established.

While we may all recognise the separate paths taken by academic anthropology and museum anthropology from the 1960's and onwards[5] we also find some idiosyncratic reasons for the way this break took place at Moesgård.

In 1971 the museum moved to Moesgård. Of course this demanded quite some attention from Klaus Ferdinand, who assembled a handful of his old contacts to help develop the ethnographic displays. These contacts all represented what we may call 'the old

[5] See for instance Sturtevant 1969, Bouquet 2001, and Shelton 2001.

ethnography' focussing on material culture (in the old sense of the concept), natural environment and cultural holism.

At the same time more and more students enrolled at the university department of ethnography with aspirations for the subject that lay far away from the kind of ethnography developed at the museum (Strandgaard 1999). Therefore, while the museum ethnography and the academic ethnography may not have taken different or opposite paths, they went along their paths in different paces. At the university students embarked on Marxism and structuralism, while at the museum Ferdinand's collecting principles remained relatively uncontested, as they actually have done until today. They probably did so because they were actually quite reasonable, and Ferdinand was also open to ideas from students and external collectors such as missionaries, local development activists, and crafts connoisseurs of different kinds. But these principles also remained uncontested because the museum ethnography kept to itself and academic anthropology did no longer concern itself with questions of objects, collections and exhibitions.

Changes at Moesgård Museum

So, if this is the legacy of the collections, what kind of considerations are we left with now, on the verge of establishing new presentations of the material?

First of all we have to pose a critical question. Why do we think we have to come up with something new? What was bad about the old ways of collecting and exhibiting? Of course we have to deal with the same kind of problems most ethnographic museums have had to deal with. The old way of describing cultures as isolated and integrated wholes does no longer make sense. Processes of globalisation have intensified, which has to be reflected in exhibitions and collections etc.

But actually, one particular thing about the Moesgård collections is that they are not bad in this sense at all. As mentioned, by far the most of the objects have been collected from the 1960s and onwards, most of them by trained anthropologists, which means that the collections reflect what Ferdinand called 'the clashes between industrialisation and tradition' very well. Furthermore, some areas, like Afghanistan and to a certain extend Indian folk drama is represented through continued collecting, documenting not only one time-space, but a series of time-spaces, which means that we are able to cover processes of change in quite some detail.

What may be our most important problem is the fact that we have a long list of collections of everyday life from what was then called Third World countries from the same time period. While this may enhance the way we are capable of documenting the rapid globalisation that has taken place during the last 30-40 years, it also means that we literally have heaps of cooking utensils, rubber wheel sandals, plastic kitchen ware, girls' hair bands etc. – which all are much alike. The question of how to display objects like these pose a major problem - particularly given the fact that we also have to change our way of making exhibitions. While the milieu exhibition was once very popular and still holds some attraction it seems obvious that we need to break from this and create new constellations of our objects. This also means that we need to change our ways of collecting.

To prepare for these changes a series of three workshops were arranged between last summer and January this year to formulate a new ground for the collections. The workshops were kept under the heading of 'Grundstof' hinting to the need to think things over from the ground. The workshops gathered Danish anthropologists and museum professionals to discuss how recent anthropological theory may offer new perspectives on the relations between human beings and things; what is the use of collections today, how can we make them speak to a contemporary museum audience; and, finally, how can we develop the exhibition as media?

Particular universality

As a heading that might encompass the many strings of thoughts that have been presented at these workshops, I have come up with the concept of 'particular universalism'. Maybe this is not quite the right concept, but it will have to suffice for now. Let me try to explain.

First of all, particular universality points to the break of grand narratives. We can no longer inscribe the objects of our collections in the grand narratives of evolution, the development of economic cultures – or to the primary role of culture.

Still, we are very interested in positioning ourselves as a museum that deals with universality, the common conditions of being human, the diverse strategies for coping with these conditions, and – not the least – the diverse and spectacular artefactual products of human kind.

But, not having a singular theoretical framework for presenting human kind as such, and not having objects from every corner of the world, we have to decide on the kind of universality, we may be able to present.
I will briefly sketch out four kinds of particular universalism that may lay the ground for the future exhibitions and collections at Moesgård: an institutional particularity, a geographical particularity, a collection based particularity, and a renewed focus on object particularity.

Institutionally particular universality
As mentioned earlier, the original motivation for establishing an ethnographic collection in Århus was to use it to make ethnographic comparisons with Danish pre-history. With the strengthening of ethnography at the university in the 1960s and 70s such considerations were no longer *comment faire* and for many years the physical proximity of ethnography and archaeology at the museum and university was simply a practical fact that did not have any effects in research or exhibition co-operations.
Only within recent years the two disciplines have approached each other again. Common research projects on warfare, canoe production in Papua New Guinea, and common debates on new theoretical concepts of materiality have paved the way for a much more collaborative relation between the two university departments.
And, at the museum, the prospects of moving into a new building has fostered new ideas of how to use the presences of both archaeology and ethnography at the museum to make exhibitions that take their departure in universal, existential themes. Right now we are considering the production of an exhibition on human adaptation to climatic changes (for the Climate top meeting in Copenhagen in 2009) that will both include the dramatic changes in Denmark where water levels have been changing considerably throughout history, combining this with contemporary problems in some of the places represented in our ethnographic collections – as for instance the Maldive Islands or Bangladesh. Another future project may be an exhibition on burial rituals that may include both of the museum's main attractions the bog man from Grauballe and the war sacrifices from Illerup.
In this sense the particularity of the institutional co-presence of ethnography and archaeology may be used for a universal approach that touches upon the endeavours of mankind in time and space.

Geographically particular universality

What I have called geographical might also be termed sociological or historical particular universality. The point is that Moesgård Museum is placed at a particular place on this planet, where particular groups of people have moved to and from. We have a great number of immigrants staying in Århus, who have come here in several movements of migrations, especially since the Second World War, and people from Århus have travelled the world for a range of different purposes - some of them collecting for the museums.

In other words the locality of the museum opens for a range of different perspectives on migration and settlement, travelling – that is, approaches to universality that looks at the way local events are made global through migration, and how different perspectives on the outside world is used to paint a picture on ourselves.

Collection particular universality

A question that arises when an institution is facing change is what to do with the past, which is entrenched in social practices and also in material artefacts. It is obvious, that in a museum you can not simply discard old collections, even if you disagree with the perspectives they are collected through. While you may change future collecting practices, some of these are given from old practices. It only makes sense to engage economically in new collection projects if they in some way or the other add to the existing collections. And as mentioned we are not at all dissatisfied with the existing collections, it's just that they pose some problems to us today.

So, if we wish to engage in questions of universality, as we do, we have to do this on the shoulders of the existing collection. While this theme has not really been discussed through yet, I think there are basically two ways of doing this, which can be pursued at the same time.

First, we can focus on the existing regional strongholds of the collections. Rather than trying to fill gaps, we may expand on our collections particularly from Afghanistan, but also from India, Bolivia and West Africa. The question is, though, if it makes sense to make new holistic collections from these places. Rather, I think, it will be a question of tracing important themes in the existing collections, for instance nomadism, trade and music from Afghanistan in new acquisitions. In this the detailed documentation of particular themes from particular regions can be used to open for questions of a more universal kind. At the same time the historical depth can add a much needed historical

perspective to the way globalisation is covered in news media, where it is generally presented as a recent phenomenon spreading from the West.

A second way of using the existing collections as departure for new approaches to universality could be to somehow go back to a focus on objects types. We are strong in textiles, agricultural tools, and to a certain extend in objects used for ceremonial performances. These clusters of object types may be expanded in new collections so that we may be able to make comparative exhibitions that focus on techniques, and different ways of coping with the same kind of basic needs. Such kind of exhibitions may even be expanded conceptually so that drums, cones and other means of communication can be put together with mobile phones etc.

Object particular universality

The last kind of particular universality I will mention here is object particularity. It is well known among museum professionals that 'every object tells a story', but these stories are not all the same. As we saw in the milieu exhibitions of the 1970s and 80s at Moesgård all objects were exhibited as equal. Or, to put it the other way round, no object was given particular attention apart from its role in the totality of the established milieu. This was of course related to collection practices where, while some objects obviously were of a particular fine quality or had a particular interesting history, each object was to fill a role in making up a complete representation or as a sequence in the balanced whole of a technical process.

In practice these kinds of holistic collections resulted in the acquisition of very large collections, sometimes numbering more than a thousand objects, to cover everyday life. If we reject the holistic representation in the museum, and to some extend the existence of cultural wholes at all, I think future collections may have to focus more on the particularity of the single object. How does the object add to the theme of the single collection, how does it add to the themes and regions covered by the collections at large – and how does it add to the way we may show and tell stories of human existence at the museum.

I admit that this point is very tricky. Of course a collection need to focus on some kind of totality and document series of relations – both relations between object, people, and objects *and* people. Furthermore, if the collection does not rest on any grand narrative of universal humanity, one may question what the parameters for selecting a single object as particularly revealing of universality could possibly be based on.

But perhaps this problem will solve itself in practice. If museum displays were formerly made on the basis of objects at hand, I think future collecting practices, at least at our museum, for practical and economical reasons will have to be based in exhibitions or other kinds of disseminations. In other words, collections will already be framed by a perspective resting in the exhibition proposal that will frame why some objects will be particularly interesting.

While this may, regrettably, mark the end of the continuous monographic collections, it also marks that we are now developing new ways of making images of the world.

This argument for particular universality rests on a certain economic and intellectual pragmatism. It says that rather than start chasing ways to deal with universality through new media, new collections, and new co-operations, we better start thinking through thoroughly how the collections and institutions we are working in and through in themselves reflect universal themes – and then open up for all kinds of novel ways to make this interesting to our audiences.

Particular universality does not aim at assembling the world under one roof. Rather, it stands on top of the roof, and looks at the world from that particular perspective.

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