

# The Aesthetics of Otherness in Museums of Cultural History

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## Abstract

The article investigates the interaction between discourses of cultural diversity and aesthetics and the manner these are articulated to represent otherness in museums of cultural history in western countries. It argues that exhibitions in museums of cultural history serve as interfaces between Grand Narratives of homogeneous nation-states and the polyphonic stories of their inhabitants. The author examines exhibition strategies that have been resorted to from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present and the shift from situational displays to narrative contextualized settings and to aesthetics and many-voiced installations. She goes on to discuss the pertinence of aesthetics as a practice and means to produce and convey knowledge and cultural literacy in multicultural societies. To conclude she posits that the inclusion of narratives and life stories of immigrants and diasporas will influence exhibition policies and modes of representation of nation-states in novel ways.

## Introduction

The present essay explores the interplay between discourses of cultural diversity and aesthetics and the ways these are negotiated in expressing otherness in museums of cultural history. The generic denomination encompasses universal survey museums, museums of history and archaeology, museums of ethnography and ethnology, that is what in France are called museums of society ('musées de société'), city museums and ecomuseums. I have, elsewhere,

investigated ways of displaying the otherness of antique civilizations, more specifically that of ancient Egypt (Naguib 1990, 1997, 2001, 2004). In the following, I concentrate on representations of more recent cultures in a few museums in the West. Not only the cultures of distant and 'exotic' people, but also the ones of those who are strangers within, namely, ethnic and religious minorities and diasporas. In my use of the term, otherness conveys the idea of difference, of separation, and of foreign-

## Nøkkelord:

*kulturhistoriske museer, flerkulturelle samfunn, annerledeshet, representasjon, estetikk*

ness. It is tied to space and time as well as to other criteria such as gender, age, social class, level of education, ethnicity and religion. All these factors depend on the angles from which one chooses to approach one's field of study, and which, in the limits of this paper, will be too long to elaborate further. As a starting-point I posit that exhibitions in museums of cultural history serve, nowadays, as interfaces between Grand Narratives of homogeneous nation-states and the polyphonic stories of their inhabitants. I begin by reviewing the predominant exhibition strategies that have been resorted to from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. I then explicate that the trend has shifted from situational displays to narrative contextualized settings and to aesthetics and many-voiced installations. Thereafter, I go on to discuss the appropriateness of aesthetics as a practice and means to produce and convey knowledge and cultural literacy in multicultural societies. Finally, I shall present a few reflections on the pertinence of aesthetics in presenting the narratives and life stories of immigrants and diasporas and the ways they are setting their mark on representations of multicultural nation-states. In the context of museums, the term representation signifies the embodiment and visualization of ways of life and worldviews. It involves perception, interpretation, reconstruction, illustration and display. As I see it, in the framework of museums and exhibitions representation entails translation and paraphrasing in order to mediate between various forms of cultural expressions. But, translation is not enough by itself. One has to use paraphrases and rephrase a text by applying the grammatical conventions, idioms and turns of phrases of the language one translates into in order to render the meaning of a message and to

bridge the gap between the different modes of thought and communication. In the process some things are lost and new ones are added. The text or object may be transformed into something else. It may acquire layers of meaning and symbolic values it did not have before being put on display in a museum (Benjamin 1968:73; Utaker 2004:30f.).

### **Witnesses of their time**

The intentions and functions of museums of cultural history are anchored in the historical, cultural, social, political and economical infrastructures of a given country. Moreover, as public institutions they are situated and thereby imprinted with the intellectual traditions of various disciplines and, at the same time, reflect contemporary trends as well as ideological and social changes. The definition of the International Committee of Museums (ICOM) currently under revision states that a museum is an institution

[ ] in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for the purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment. (ICOM Statutes, article 2 § 1).

These views perpetuate those that were prevalent during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, today, most large museums in the different metropolitan cities worldwide still stand as cultural icons of the nation-state. They continue to bear the marks of their conception as symbols of an idealized homogeneous national identity, of progress achieved by the nation-state and as author-

itative educational establishments for the population. Generally speaking, the function of museums has been twofold. On the one hand they are temples of memory where the past is preserved, interpreted and represented. As temples, museums play a timeless all-embracing educative role. On the other hand, they, to quote James Clifford, serve as 'contact zones', places for experimentations, debates and confrontations (Clifford 1997:188f.). Contact entails communication, meeting and juxtaposition. It implies exchange and dialogue as well as it challenges the idea of authenticity and thereby of purity. Further, contact opens for avenues of inquiries that go beyond the binary oppositions and classifications such as Us and the Other, the same and the different. The contact perspective discloses that sameness does not mean identical and that the one encompasses the many.

Since the 1980s, the discourses on multiculturalism that prevail in the United States, Canada, Australia as well as in a number of Western European countries have prompted museums of cultural history to engage in matters related to multiculturalism and the representation of otherness. It has led them to reconsider their role in society, their relationships with the collections they are responsible for and their exhibition policies. It has made them acknowledge that the idea of a monolithic, undifferentiated national identity is slowly becoming an anachronism. Museums of cultural history are now emerging as sites where the multifarious identities of nation-states are mediated, where otherness is experienced in a *huis-clos*, and where empowerment is understood as equality in difference. Discourses on multiculturalism encompass a great number of complex issues pertaining to ethnicity, religion,

social class, educational and economical problems. So far they have failed to promote a sense of union between the majority of the population and the different minorities within nation-states. Instead, they seem to have exacerbated social cleavages and brought about deeper divides between the various communities. In a country proud of its multicultural agenda like the Netherlands this has lately become an acute dilemma which for many Dutch citizens has been epitomized by the election of the politician Pim Fortyn in 2002 and the murder of the film-maker, Theo van Gogh in November 2004. The latent scepticism about multiculturalism was blatantly expressed during the recent referendum to the European Constitution in France and the Netherlands. Hence, we notice that in a number of European countries discourses on multiculturalism are steadily being replaced by the hazier and less controversial ones about cultural diversity. The latter are more concerned with ways of exploring and sharing similarities and differences within the framework of the nation and to highlight the benefits of cross-cultural contacts and of hybridity (Doytcheva 2005:97f.; Magee 2004:498; Vibert 2005:17). For museums of cultural history it means to investigate the pitfalls of cultural hegemony and to probe into the dialectics between Sameness and Otherness.

Museums of cultural history have often been projected as western inventions expressing linear and irreversible conceptions of time and history. Ancient civilizations and living cultures have been exhibited according to typologies inspired from the natural sciences, Linné's classification in groups and sub-groups and paradigms derived from Darwin's theories on evolution. The taxonomic methods of ordering

cultures have corroborated to hierarchical stratifications of mankind, which have frequently been used to validate eugenics and racist explanations. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, museums took pride in showing off most of their riches in permanent exhibitions. The galleries of major museums in Europe looked very much like today's study-magazines and storerooms. They were lined with showcases overcrowded with objects that were considered as documents about and

witnesses of people from different epochs and places (Désveaux 2002:220f.). Usually, artefacts were categorized according to different criteria taking into account material, type, shape, size and age, and were often set up clustered around a prototype. At the end of the 1920s and during the 1930s, the overstuffed study-magazine types of displays were gradually abandoned and new methods of exhibition less congested with objects were introduced. Permanent exhibitions were arranged thematically. Didactics and authenticity were the main pillars on which they rested. The showcases applied either a diachronic or synchronic approach or, sometimes, a mixture of both. Many museums of cultural history like, for example, the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée des Arts et Traditions populaires in Paris or the Museum of Mankind in London adopted what became known as the nylon thread museography combined with the technique of diorama and situational exhibition methods, especially in the case of living cultures (Gorgus 2003:57f.,167f.). This approach meant that one arranged models dressed up in authentic costumes and genuine paraphernalia in reconstructed 'original' settings against a backdrop representing the natural environment of the scene (photo 1). Otherness was illustrated by using what Karp calls the perspectives of difference and similarity. By underlining difference, which was the favoured approach, exhibitions exoticized the Other by inverting the familiar or similar and showing how habits and customs took an



*Photo 1: African dancer. Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren. Photograph: the author.*

odd form among other people. Considerations of content such as iconography, questions about intention such as religious purposes for which the objects had been made, or examination of contexts of production and use were more often than not omitted from the presentation. Situational exhibitions and the diorama technique strove towards realism and showed another relation to otherness than the accumulation of the same type of object in endless rows. Inasmuch as one cannot reproduce every historical and cultural detail, displays were configurations of spatial and temporal symbols arranged in fictional chronological and thematic settings in order to render where and when - rather than the why and how - certain activities and events took place. The stress was put on authenticity and knowledge, in particular the knowledge of the curators in charge. By applying a holistic approach, they endeavoured to reconstruct, interpret and explicate different cultures and civilizations and to recreate reality. However, as Émmanuel Désveaux pointed out this type of exhibition produced a realm of pure fiction (Désveaux 2002:222). In fact, it was not unusual to put together elements that did not belong together and to see models dressed up in their finest clothes or even ritual costumes going about their daily chores, as planting, cutting wood, cooking or weaving (Karp 1991: 379). The results, especially in the case of living, 'foreign' cultures, were that exhibitions conveyed images of idealised, a-historical societies. Thus, in spite of their initial good intentions nylon thread museography, diorama and situational exhibitions tended to 'freeze time'. They produced representations of motionless cultures and unintentionally upheld stereotypes about 'primitive' cultures untouched by modern times.

### **The narrative turn**

But cultures are not static. They do not stand still, and they are not impervious. Rather, they are in a perpetual process of transformation and of being shaped by continuous contacts, exchanges and population movements. Preserving them unchanged negates their dynamic character. During the 1990s voices of discontent were heard in a number of western countries. Many were those who protested against the dominant ways of representing other cultures and against what they considered as 'human zoos' exhibitions. The movements were especially vehement among minorities and indigenous peoples who began to establish their own museums and to present their own versions of history. These actions challenged museums of cultural history in these countries and pushed them to apply multiple viewpoints in their exhibition programs and to integrate the Many into the One. The example of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. is revealing. In 1992, after complaints from Afro-American politicians, intellectuals and from African diplomats and immigrants who accused the museum of disseminating a stereotyped vision of Africa, the Smithsonian Institution closed its 'Hall of African cultures'. It began a long process of negotiations with representatives of the different groups: Afro-Americans, specialists at universities and intellectuals and members of the different African immigrant communities. The hall reopened in 1999 under the name *African Voices*. Thus, from a conceptualisation of the diversity of human cultures based on the model of natural species, fauna and flora, the vision had changed into an aesthetic polyphonic installation that included the points of views of the Afro-American population and also of the

diasporas (Arnoldi 1999). Interestingly, pharaonic Egypt and ancient Nubia were incorporated in the exhibition as proofs of the refinement, greatness and longevity of African civilizations.

From diorama and situational exhibitions the shift has now gone over to interactive narrative contextual and art exhibitions, or, more often, a combination of both. Narrative contextual exhibitions acknowledge the constructed nature of the knowledge presented. Thereby, the analytical and interpretative frameworks and the methods applied are made accessible to the public who learn that the results shown are situated in time and that interpretations are not absolute but subject to reconsiderations (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991; Naguib 2004). Further, narrative contextual exhibitions are often combined with storytelling and life story approaches, which open up for the articulation of new avenues connecting research with education and entertainment. In the case of foreign cultures, minorities and diasporas, otherness is expressed not for its own sake as a phenomenon, but for what it reveals about the political, economical, social and religious conditions of a certain culture in a given nation at a certain time in history. Each artefact relates a number of stories within a larger one. Small narratives, which are told from several angles, replace the Grand Narrative of evolutionistic nature. The history of the nation-state is the synthesis of these lesser histories, which together generate its pattern. Historical, cultural and social complexities become more comprehensible through the polyphonic narrative where texts, objects and pictures complement each other. The tangible is transfused into the intangible and concrete objects serve to embody and visualise ways of life, social structures and practices, religious sys-

tems and beliefs, technologies and historical events.

The transition from diorama and situational displays to telling stories by applying narrative and contextual frameworks has been spurred by media such as the television, videos, Internet and theme parks. The trend today is to arrange several small temporary exhibitions with fewer objects and to probe in depth and in breadth thanks to reconstructed interactive scenarios, audiovisual devices, Internet and the use of convergent and intersecting perspectives from different disciplines. Together, these perspectives shed light upon the study of the physical, social, cultural and religious environments of the objects analysed. For example, let us take a bronze head from Benin, a Dogon mask from Mali, a Minjarpi bag from North Australia, a Native American headdress, an embroidered Palestinian dress or an old trunk with Greek or Italian tags and containing curtains made of white lace, an old sewing kit, a book of recipes, old photographs and the picture of a saint. To each artefact one may apply different life stories approaches. In museums of cultural history, the various biographic perspectives are supplemented by the scientific investigation of all of the object's properties and characteristics such as material analysis, provenance, iconography and dating. Thus, each item serves as the nexus where the various parts of the whole meet. The polyphonic narrative mode finds its inspiration in the methods and techniques of filmmaking and motion pictures, with montage, cutting, zooming, flashbacks, and those of the Internet with hypertexts, links and sites. In Britain, the Sainsbury African galleries at the British Museum have followed another narrative path by breaking the usual boundaries between the different African countries and

cultures and, instead, grouping the displayed artefacts according to material. Thus, it is through material, technology and functionality that the visitor perceives different aspects of African history, societies, cultures and worldviews.

Combined with the polyphonic narrative the contextual approach opens up for alternative avenues so as to come to terms with, remember and acknowledge shadier sides of history. In an interview, the French anthropologist, Maurice Godelier maintained that colonial history has to be told from various angles and it is important to relate the struggle of ex-colonies for freedom (Lebovics 2004:155f.). This approach has been tried in the recent exhibition “*La Mémoire du Congo.*” *Le temps colonial*, at the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale in Tervuren in Belgium.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition is conceived as a space of confrontation where conflicting and intersecting narratives about a same story are set against each other. The aim of the exhibition is to show different aspects of the colonial history of Belgium in the Congo until the independence of the latter in 1960. Through artefacts, documents, photographs, films, audio-visual devices and interviews the

exhibition seeks to give voice to protagonists from both sides (photo 2). Other examples of narrative contextual perspectives were provided by the different exhibitions treating the tragedies of Jews during the Second World War that were held in various European countries to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in January 2005.

### Aesthetics and its malaise

All the different museographic strategies have in common their focus on material culture and aesthetics. However, as regards the representations of ‘other’ cultures, whether these are of aliens or of minorities, both indigenous and foreign, there has been during the last ten years or so a clear polarization between the narrative contextual perspective and the aesthetic one. Aesthetics in the sense of principles concerned with artistic taste and the pursuit of beauty and its use as a tool of cognition and knowledge is becoming the favoured method of display in a number of museums of cultural history in Western Europe. The example of France where in the 1990s decisions were taken at the highest political

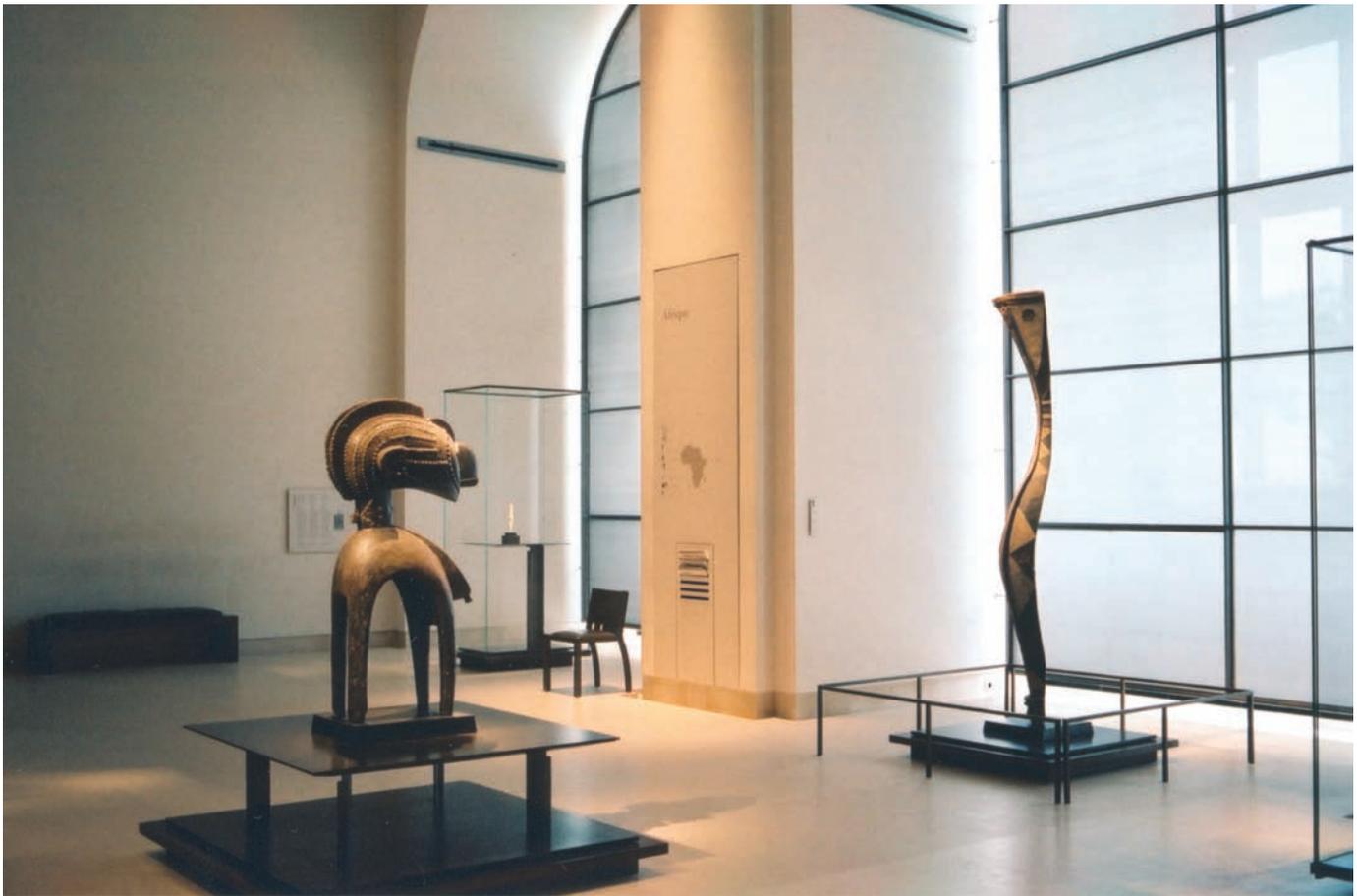


Photo 2: “*La colonie belge 1885–1960*”. Oil painting by E. Nkulu – [no date – MRAC Histoire A, 3913]. Exhibition in: “*La mémoire du Congo.*” *Le temps colonial*. Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, Tervuren. Photograph: the author.

level to create two new national museums exemplifies the situation. One museum is the Musée national des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée at the Fort Saint-Jean in Marseille. It will concentrate on European and Mediterranean societies and cultures and will make use of aesthetics in the renovation schemes of the building and the design of the exhibition space. I shall come back to this point later. The other one is the future Musée national des arts et civilisations d'Afrique, d'Asie, d'Océanie et des Amériques, better known as musée du quai Branly in Paris. As its name indicates, it will host non-European arts and cultures. This is not the place to go into the details of the museological agendas of these museums. Suffice to say that, as for

the exhibition *Afrique, Asie, Océanie et les Amériques* at the pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, in the case of the projected museum of quai Branly the accent is decidedly put on aesthetics (photo 3). Interestingly, the discourse is no more on 'primitive art' (art primitif) but has been elevated to the concept of 'First Arts' (arts premiers).<sup>2</sup> The difference between art and document-witness is stressed and it is through art and beauty that the visitors will acquire knowledge. Aesthetics is also the strategy followed by the curators of the exhibition *Signes du corps* at the Musée Dapper in Paris.<sup>3</sup> The signs of the body that are the theme of the exhibition consist of different kinds of tattoos and scarification from various cultures worldwide. The

*Photo 3: Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre. Photograph: the author.*



bulk of the exhibits are, however, from sub-Saharan Africa. These signs are presented as writings on the skin, corporeal transformations, ornaments of the body, and as marks of personal, social and ethnic identities. Little is said about the historical, social and cultural contexts of the objects or about the risks that such interventions may incur on a person. Instead, one is offered beauty from which suffering is absent.

Discussing the case of African masks, Annie Dupuis (2001) explicates that the individualisation of an artefact from a non-western culture and its transformation into an art object reflects an attitude of the West towards non-western cultures which could be seen as part of a process of decontextualization and defunctionalization. But, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer so aptly remarks, this happened already at the moment the objects were taken out of the society that produced and used them. He reminds us that the common fate of all artefacts is to eventually become outdated and old, namely, decontextualized and defunctionalized, in their original society. In museums of cultural history in Western Europe, especially those of former colonial powers, the problem resides in the fact that in the cases of faraway cultures and ex-colonies, these processes happened rather abruptly and were usually imposed by foreign powers (Schaeffer 2004:33). Further, it has to be kept in mind that until recently African masks were either exhibited as trophies from the colonial past or as fetishes, that is, as things that were considered strange and at the same time awesome to those who saw them for the first time. According to Johannes Fabian, fetishes are “one of the most powerful and enduring categories ever to be invented in the encounter between Europe and Africa” (Fabian 2004:50). The category of ‘fetish’ made it possible to clas-

sify people and cultures and to situate them beyond the demarcation line separating the civilized from the primitive. The objects displayed were not deemed to deserve the label: art. Their function was not understood and, if it was sensed, it was generally frowned upon. The contexts of production were ignored. The craftsmen who created the objects remained anonymous to the western public although they were not unknown to their own societies. Yet, when an African mask is individualized and promoted to the rank of sculpture it is included in the western discourses on culture and conceptions of modern art. The craftsman is endowed with the status of artist.

Critics of the aesthetic approach contest the validity of knowledge imparted by art. They argue that art cannot be scientifically tested and question what it tells us about a society, its history and cultural contexts. On their side, supporters of aesthetics as a method of cognition profess that art leads the viewers to resort to their accumulated knowledge, both learned and tacit. Moreover, highlighting the beauty of objects from non-western countries, their properties, their forms and the technical precision of craftsmanship is, in their opinion, a way of undermining prejudices and degrading stereotypes. To them the use of aesthetics in museums of cultural history goes beyond a Kantian meditation on the transcendental universality of beauty and the non-utilitarian pleasure objects give by the mere contemplation of their forms and materiality. They maintain that the aesthetics applied in these museums is of a more pragmatic and phenomenological kind. It relies on experience and the individual’s relation to the world. It pertains to a new epistemological movement that puts on stage questions that are common for all societies together with their specific ways of

resolving them. One learns about social structures and practices, ways of life, beliefs and rituals. One examines the technological details, the relation to material, the processes tied to apprenticeship and craftsmanship, and the different types of knowledge involved in the making of the artefacts. By putting the object exhibited in a cultural historical context one may explore the articulations of continuity and change instead of lingering upon the abandonment and disappearance of idealized old traditions. The adoption and reinterpretation of foreign models would then be seen to express creativity and innovation and not as signs of cultural weakness or loss of authenticity. Further, some universal features of art such as the appraisal of skills and talent and the assessment of style may serve as telling frames of reference in exhibitions. Style, for instance, is embedded in history and culture. It obeys rules of form and conventional structures used by a particular culture or sub-culture to encode some of the values that construct its identity. Style may belong to a school, a family or be individual. Thus, recognizing a style involves among other things to look for borrowings and sudden alterations, as well as slow changes. Thereby, knowledge of the historical, cultural and technological contexts of an artefact becomes part of the aesthetic evaluation. Visual literacy gives way to cultural literacy and offers an insight into the relationship between aspects of material culture and the historical and cultural contexts in which they developed.

It is my contention that aesthetics combined with narrative contextual perspectives not only promotes knowledge in novel ways, but most importantly it confers dignity upon cultures and communities that have been – and often still are – demeaned and marginalized. An increasing number of

museums of cultural history conceptualise their exhibitions as a combination of aesthetics, narrative contextual methods and by enhancing what Stephen Greenblatt calls an object's *resonance*, a term by which he describes an object's power to reach the beholder's feelings and, concurrently, to bring forth the historical and cultural context to which it belongs (Greenblatt 1991:42). In Britain, for example, the dismantling of the African rooms from the Museum of Mankind, their return after thirty years to the British Museum and the opening of the Sainsbury African Galleries in March 2001 marked a change in scope and intent at that institution (Spring 2001). Africa is presented in novel ways by including the works of known contemporary African artists into the exhibition and by placing them at the main staircase. This central emplacement makes them the pivot around which the exhibition evolves. Africa appears as a dynamic continent where traditions are "constantly invented and reinvented"; a continent with a diversified nature and geography, a plurality of histories, manifold cultures, worldviews and art forms. While aesthetics is emphasized by the installation or design of the exhibition, the information conveyed, the explanatory texts and the videos are based on cross-disciplinary research and knowledge. Thus, the interplay between aesthetics and narrative contextual perspectives contributes in producing a polyphonic picture of that continent. Another example is the exhibition *Inuit. Quand la parole prend forme*, at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, which presents the works of contemporary, well known Inuit artists by making use of a multiple approach. Here too the highly aesthetic design of the installation and of the pieces displayed interacts with the narrative contextual approach. And, it is through

artistic creations and excerpts of the artists' life stories that we penetrate into the Inuits' world and discover aspects of their history, their social configurations, their culture, and their beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

### Testing cultural diversity

Transformed into art that speaks for itself 'objects of ethnography' are shown isolated; the beauty of their forms is highlighted and each item becomes unique. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin we may infer that instead of losing their aura, artefacts are bestowed with one (Benjamin 1968). In the course of their metamorphosis they acquire the quality of ubiquity, of belonging to several times and places simultaneously that is characteristic of masterpieces. They become transnational and by that pertain to a global heritage. François Hartog rightly noted that we are in an era where the heritage wave has taken such proportions that it has reached what he calls 'le tout-patrimoine' (the all heritage). This inflation of heritage, the museification of daily life, and the freezing of intangible heritage signifies that we are no longer in the logic of the monument or unique chef-d'œuvre, or, when it comes to immaterial legacies, in that of continuity and change of local ancient traditions. Rather, we are now in the rationale of the polyvalent, decentralized and globalized cultural heritage where the cultural heritage of the Other, both tangible and intangible, is part of ours (Hartog 2003:196f.).

Globalization has changed the notion of frontiers. In Western Europe territorial borders seem to be fading away and to be replaced by mental ones that do not always correspond to geographic areas. According to Olivier Roy "European identities are in a process of recasting and new terms such as

'Englishness', 'Dutchness', 'Frenchness' are emerging" (Roy 2005:7). The fluctuation of frontiers has had its repercussions on museums of cultural history and their representations of otherness. It brought them to contest ideas of uniform national identities and of boundaries that function as defenses of cultural integrity and authenticity. For the director of the Musée d'Ethnologie in Neuchâtel, Jacques Hainard, museums of cultural history in Western Europe should bring matters into question and apply what he calls a cultural deconstruction by exhibiting the changing understandings of other cultures (Lebovics 2004:159f., 214, note 26). He argues that it is imperative for these institutions to free themselves from outdated modes of exhibition and to stop hiding behind the lures of aesthetics as a token of respect of the Other. In his opinion, the latter is just a way of avoiding controversies that may arise in today's western European multicultural societies. Museums of cultural history should instead show the manner in which academic disciplines, in his case ethnography, have constructed and represented other cultures through their displays. He states on the web pages of the museum he leads that to exhibit is to disturb harmony.

[T]he objects are not exposed for their own sake, but because they are inserted in a discourse, because they are becoming arguments of a history that is putting into perspective one or another of their characteristics, be they esthetic, functional or symbolic. Occasionally qualified as criticizing or destabilizing, such a process aims at allowing the visitors to put into perspective their perceptions, to deconstruct their knowledge and to question their certainties in order to bring them to think over their reality.<sup>5</sup>

One thing is to revisit outdated exhibition schemes about foreign and faraway cultures and about autochthonous minorities like the Native Americans, the Inuits, the Maoris or the Same. It is, however, quite another to find ways of incorporating immigrants and diasporas in order to exemplify the different pasts of the larger social tapestry of the nation state. Unlike the United States, Canada and Australia, European states are not founded upon myths of migration and displacement. On the contrary, the history of both local and foreign minorities has usually been occulted in Europe. But times are changing, and as mentioned earlier museums of cultural history are increasingly committed to address questions related to international migration and diasporas. In their endeavour to correct stereotypes and find answers to the meaning of citizenship in a post-modern globalized world, museums of cultural history try to establish themselves as arenas where other histories are inserted in the Grand Narrative of the nation and where the voices of the various ethnic and religious minorities are heard. Accordingly, cultural diversity is presented through a variety of cultural lenses and disciplinary perspectives that question the boundaries between the different groups. At the same time they underline the ways various types of knowledge are interrelated in constructing novel understandings of the different communities.

All immigration, whether voluntary or forced, is tied to narratives of journeys, departures, arrivals and processes of settling down. In museums, concrete objects that are considered as records and witnesses of historical, cultural, political, sociological, economic and religious realities mediate these stories. Although, in most cases, the documents exhibited are modest things

that are easy to move and to carry along while travelling from one place to another, they have an archival value that is strongly laden with emotions. Mainly, they consist of personal belongings, mementoes and souvenirs of all sorts that could be transported in trunks and suitcases. These may be textiles, clothes and pieces of jewellery, carpets, religious books such as Bibles and Qur'ans, pictures, letters, birth, confirmation or marriage certificates, diplomas and travel documents. Because of the character and heterogeneity of the objects, exhibitions dealing with immigration and diasporas are prone to rely on the aesthetics of polyphonic narratives and life story perspectives supplemented with pictures, personal documents, interactive media and audio-visual devices. It is the beauty of the stories they tell that gives the artefacts displayed an added significance and conveys many layered meanings to the notion of belongingness, as well as they disclose various strategies of integration and exclusion. The policy of several museums concerned with questions of immigration, diasporas such as the different community-based museums in the United States and Canada, has been to underscore the sense of otherness by playing the nostalgic tunes about remembered homelands. They displayed movable possessions that were brought over from 'home' and put the accent on traditional knowledge and skills from the countries of origin such as the delicacy of embroidered table cloths or lace curtains, the dexterity in manufacturing pieces of furniture, and also performances of traditional dances, music and songs. During the 1990s there was a noticeable change, and museums of cultural history began finding alternative ways of representation where the stress was not merely on reminders of the 'way it was before leaving'. Nowadays,

exhibitions are more concerned with cultural diversity and issues tied to international migration. They are more inclined

to explore patterns of immigration and the motivations for settling abroad, whether these were caused by economical factors,

*Photo 4: Ceux-ci ne sont pas des étrangers by Firuz Katal. Poster for the exhibition "Jeg er her." Innvandringshistorie fra 1945 til i dag at the Internasjonalt kultursenter og museum, Oslo. © Firuz Katal.*



employment and job opportunities, persecutions, discriminations, the quest for adventure and the unknown or 'simply' for love and marriage. They portray immigrants and their descendants as assets to the receiving country and emphasize the innovative contributions brought by immigrants to their new countries and how their presence played a decisive role in building up a dynamic multicultural society. These were the lines followed by the project 'The Peopling of London' held at the London Museum in 1993 and by the Museum of Immigration in Melbourne. In the first case, the aim of the exhibition was to show that cultural diversity was no new phenomenon in London and that it could be traced back to prehistoric times. To exemplify the cosmopolitan city, the exhibition applied a chronological framework. It focused on eighteen different nationalities and gave a holistic view of the history of the different communities by probing into different life stories. The success of the exhibition was greatly due to the fact that members of the different communities took part in its elaboration. The Immigration Museum of Melbourne, which is housed in the Old Customs House, opened its doors in 1998.<sup>6</sup> At the time, the exhibition pursued a thematic perspective that illustrated the headings of *Leavings, Journeys, Arrivals, Settlements, Impacts*. In Oslo, the Internasjonalt kultursenter og museum has chosen another approach for its recent exhibition "Jeg er her." *Innvandringshistorie fra 1945 til i dag* (photo 4).<sup>7</sup> Issues related to immigration and implicitly to cultural diversity are conveyed through the life stories of twenty persons from different backgrounds. Each story is visualized by personal objects, pictures and texts that are put together in one of the cells of the converted prison that houses the museum. As for

France, the future National Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations intends to investigate discourses of cultural diversity thematically. The permanent exhibition will apply a comparative and synthetic approach in order to represent five major themes which are paradise, water, cities, roads and masculine and feminine. The special exhibitions will address cultural diversity by treating topics such as ways of loving, totalitarianism, European and Mediterranean cuisines, God and cafés.

Commenting on the exhibition *Mali Kow* that was arranged in 2003 at the Parc de la Villette in Paris, Benoit de L'Estoile (2004) argues that museums of cultural history need to adopt a reflexive, critical approach to their displays of other cultures by inverting the direction of their gaze and inviting representatives of the various immigrant communities to take part and share their knowledge in the conceptualisation of an exhibition. While this policy is hardly being tried in France and is looked upon with much scepticism, it has already been applied with success in a number of museums in the United States, Canada, Australia, Great Britain and Norway. The new Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, which opened its doors to the public in December 2004, is hoping to further develop this strategy.<sup>8</sup> To be effective and meaningful for all parties this kind of extensive dialogue between museums of cultural history and immigrants and their descendants has to be based on mutual respect and trust. Such reciprocity implies empathy and an endeavour to explore the other's worldview. It signifies recognition of the other's identity, of alternative ways of being and acceptance of different tastes. It also denotes a willingness to adapt to changing environments and to bridge the gap between the authenticity of origins and hybridity and by that to

acknowledge the fact that roots are transient. In addition, by engaging with representatives of the different immigrant communities and encouraging them to participate in self-representation and to contribute with their expertise, museums of cultural history acquiesce that knowledge exists also outside their realm of specialists. Still, the question remains to establish the limits of external involvement and censorship and to decide who has the authority of deciding the final set up of an exhibition.

Discourses of cultural diversity are double-edged, and their messages may be used with opposite results than those intended. In the processes of translating material culture into different forms of cognition museums may convey ambiguous representations of otherness. Cultural diversity may be perceived with notions of self-enclosed 'authentic' communities that are entrenched in their 'own' traditions and build high, resistant walls between themselves and others (Magee 2004: 508). It is important that exhibitions show the breaches in the walls and the many intermediate spaces where contacts between cultures take place ((Naguib 2003:124f.). As I explicated elsewhere, museums are major information centres with an important pedagogical mission to carry out (Naguib 2004). Like schools and other educational institutions, they may provide homogenizing spaces where different cultures are seen as equal and where the many are incorporated in a wider unifying national space. But for this to take place, there have to be firm grounds, common frames of reference and shared sets of rules and values to accommodate all. From a museological vantage point, aesthetics may prove to be such a unifying factor.

## Notes

1. <http://www.africamuseum.be>. Exhibition held from February – October, 2005.
2. For details see: Lebovics, 2004: 143f.; <http://www.quaibrantly.fr>; <http://www.musee-europemediterranee.org>
3. Exhibition held from September 2004 – April 2005; <http://www.dapper.com.fr>
4. Exhibition held from January 2005 – mars 2005
5. Jacques Hainard et Marc-Olivier Gonseth, "Exhibit", <http://www.men.ch/expositions.asp>. Read 15.02.2005.
6. That was when I visited the museum. From the web pages of the museum, the exhibition scheme today follows the same pattern as then, see: <http://www.immigration.museum.vic.gov.au>
7. "I am here." The history of immigration from 1945 to today. Exhibition from January 11th – June 26th, 2005; <http://www.ikm.museum.no> ; see also: Einarsen, Hans Philip, 2005.
8. Statens museer för världskultur, Göteborg; <http://www.smvk.se>

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