

From Curiosa to World Culture. The History of the Latin American Collections at the Museum of World Culture in Sweden

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the history of the Latin American collections stored today at the Museum of World Culture in Sweden, emphasizing the relationship between the political ideological context of society and the significance that the objects have been given over time.

When the first collections started to come to Sweden they meant a cosmopolitan touch to the upcoming bourgeoisie of the city of Gothenburg. Those objects became part of a natural cabinet and with time they were the basis for the formation of a new museum in the city.

The formation of a museum, especially ethnographical museums around the world is a well-known phenomenon associated with the formation of national states and the consolidation of a new category of people –citizens over those who became excluded from the formation of those states. The excluded people became objects of ethnography. In the same period, archaeology was a strong instrument in the narrative of the new states.

Today, in Gothenburg, there are around 75000 objects with origins in Latin America. Those are today part of the Museum of World Culture. In this new political ideological context what those objects mean is in transition. For politicians, these objects could be instruments for integration of the multicultural society's problems that Sweden confronts today, for others they represent the shame of a colonial past, however they also represent the possibility of re-connecting to the present societies in the Americas and to be instruments of recognition.

These archaeological/ethnographical collections have never been neutral; they have always reflected the tensions between different groups and interests in society. However, these objects also reveal the internal relationships inside an institution. Objects and collections can be considered in different ways according to who collected them or who has been showing interest in them.

Objects get a history at the museum, and this history is not only about the culture, people or individuals that produced them, but also about the people who cared for them at the museum. In this thesis, three collections are presented to show how games of power between curators can impact in the ranking and meaning of the collections. More interesting is to observe how this game of power becomes part of the biography of the object and is inherited in the practices among museum staff.

Concluding, this thesis is about the link between objects and people; collectors, dealers, curators, scholars, public, politicians and original owners. There is also the history between the institution and its political context and how the objects in the end are reflections of relationships.

Keywords: Archaeology, Ethnography, Collections, Museums, Practices, National-States, World Culture, Latin America, Gothenburg, Sweden.