

## **The Sociomaterial Dynamics of Museum Collections**

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*The Sociomaterial Dynamics of Museum Collections* is an overarching research idea, consisting of three separate projects, with the aim of creating new knowledge about the roles of collections and collecting in the shaping of culture and society. The programme includes three national museums which have been crucial in defining Sweden, Swedishness, and the surrounding world: the Nordiska Museet (Swedish cultural history), the National Historical Museum (history, archaeology), and the Museum of Ethnography (the third/fourth world). In one study each, two ethnologists and one archaeologist focus on objects and issues that in some way have been pointed out as problematic but also seem to have a strong ability to create identity, social relations and both conflict and reconciliation: collections from indigenous peoples, human remains, and repatriation processes. The programme includes three separate and ongoing projects, financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the Swedish Research Council: *The Construction of a Sami Cultural Heritage: Ernst Manker and the Nordiska Museet*; *Headhunters, Museum Anatomicum and the Social Dynamics of Collecting*; and *Rituals of Reconciliation in the Postsecular Museum*.

### **Research questions and aim**

Swedish museums have many millions of objects from different times and places in the world. The collections are the foundation for a wide range of exhibitions and extensive educational activities. In addition, they constitute an infrastructure and a central resource for a great deal of research in the humanities. Having long been regarded as unproblematic parts of a material and national cultural heritage, the collections and the collecting activity have to be understood and studied in new ways, in view of recent years' development of knowledge in the humanities, paying attention to the social roles of the objects and the function of museum collections in shaping society. At the same time, both the national development of a diverse society and the globalization of the cultural heritage demand radically changed ethics for how Swedish museums handle their acquisitions.

Museum collecting is characterized not just by a physical materiality and its stewardship but also by cultural processes that shape and change the collecting. Through the selection process, in the creation of classification systems, and in exhibitions, the collections in their turn create culture and society. Their symbolic charge, the way they are stored and moved around plays a great part in the identity processes of different groups and their mutual relations. It is this interplay between the social and the material that we call "the sociomaterial dynamics of museum collections". We proceed from the premise that political and moral changes in society have their counterpart in breakpoints in museum practices. We have therefore chosen to

focus on objects and collections that the museums, at some time in history, point out as problematic or anomalous.

As empirical objects of study we have chosen collections and collecting practices at three central museums which, individually and collectively, have helped to shape Swedish self-images and world-pictures: the Nordiska Museet, the National Historical Museum, and the Museum of Ethnography. The history, the collections, and the contemporary practices of these museums are of particular societal relevance in today's Sweden, and they are interwoven in a way that provides a rich foundation for our analysis. A methodological link is the comparative perspective that is enabled by the fact that the museums have been brought together in a programme where they can be regarded as related and constructed entities within a larger field of national cultural heritage. Instead of taking the boundaries between history, cultural history, and ethnography for granted, it is part of the research task to see how these boundaries have been created and consolidated with the aid of the collections.

Within the programme, the problems outlined above will be tackled through three separate projects: *The Construction of a Sami Cultural Heritage: Nomadizing Collections*; *Headhunters, Museum Anatomicum and the Social Dynamics of Collecting*; and *Rituals of Reconciliation in the Postsecular Museum*. The first project, *The Construction of a Sami Cultural Heritage: Nomadizing Collections*, is a study of the shaping of the three museums' Sami collections in relation to the changed identity and societal status of this ethnic group. *Headhunters, Museum Anatomicum and the Social Dynamics of Collecting* involves an analysis of a collection of human remains based on its character of a sociomaterial network. *Rituals of Reconciliation in the Postsecular Museum*, finally, examines how national self-images and world-pictures are articulated and handled in repatriation processes that have been or currently are being implemented at these museums. Although the three studies differ in their focus and their emphasis on different aspects, they are part of a shared effort to create knowledge and dialogue about the analytical and theoretical theme of the programme.

### **Research context and theoretical premises**

The programme is linked to several topical problems in the field of cultural history and culture studies. Among other things, there is the possibility to contribute to ongoing discussions of cultural heritage and identity politics, the cultural meanings of materiality, and the expanding field of media history. Impulses come chiefly from the *new museology*, a multidisciplinary approach that has grown up since the early 1990s, generating research, for instance, about the museums' production of meaning and their societal role in different historical, political, and social contexts (Karp & Lavine 1991; Bennett 1995, 2004; Pearce 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Knell 2004; Karp *et al.* 2006; Knell, MacLeod & Watson 2007).

Of particular significance are studies that have discussed the political, ideological, and aesthetic dimensions of collecting and the roles of objects in different meaning systems (Pearce 1989, 2004; Stewart 1993; Bourdieu 1984). An international discussion about museum collections in relation to minority groups and indigenous peoples has also derived nourishment from the new museology, often as a starting point for new working methods and forms of cooperation (e.g. Smith 1999; Fforde 2004; Brown & Peers 2006; Smith 2006; Robson, Treadwell & Gosden 2006; Gabriel & Dahl 2008). The political

dimension also includes studies of how museums help to constitute nations and nationalities (Kaplan 1994; Boswell & Evans 1999; Knell *et al.* 2011).

A recent survey (Svanberg 2009) has found that the new museology has had a noticeable influence in Sweden, but hitherto chiefly on the theoretical level. However, there are works that include the three museums' collections or share some of the questions posed by the programme (e.g. Beckman 1999; Östberg 2002, 2010; Houltz 2003; Mordhorst 2003; Ljungström 2004; Hillström 2006; Nilsson Stutz 2009; Hallgren 2010; Baglo 2011; Muñoz 2011).

The programme uses a previously untried approach, embracing several museums with the ambition to inject theoretical and methodological development into the field of museology. As mentioned above, one starting point is that the three museums' collecting activities can be regarded as an interwoven process. The collections form a sociomaterial network where objects, people, media, and institutions cooperate in maintaining (or changing) collective identities, categories, and memories. For this overall framework we will combine perspectives from actor-network theory (Latour 1987, 1998, 2005; Law & Hassard 1999; Law & Mol 2002) with Foucault's classical ideas about genealogical breakpoints, technologies of knowledge, and micro-power analysis (1970, 1972, 1980). For the discussion of the roles of museum objects, inspiration also comes from current anthropological discussions of the materiality of the social (Miller 2005; Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2006). The sensuous and affective meanings of objects in museum practices will also be discussed, with inspiration from the phenomenological perspectives that have emerged in the anthropology of the senses (Howes 2005; Edwards, Gosden & Phillips 2006). For the analysis of mobility in collecting work, we shall use, among other things, Cresswell's (2006) problematization of mobility and stasis in modernity.

### **Eva Silvén: The Construction of a Sami Cultural Heritage: Nomadizing Collections**

The question of the sociomaterial dynamics of museum collections includes movements both of individual items and of whole categories of objects inside, outside, and between museums. One hypothesis is that these kinds of movements are fruitful entries to the study of identity creation and cultural change. In accordance with the programme, the three museums' Sami collections have been selected for an analysis of this kind; most of them are objects of cultural history, but there are also human remains. The Sami are and were a part of Swedish culture and history but simultaneously something different, as represented in the choice of objects for acquisition, the way they were named and classified, and the museums to which they were brought. In that process, as in the continued movements between the museums, the artefact stores, and the exhibitions, the physical objects are significant actors in the social networks constituted by the museums, the universities, and the Sami community.

The Nordiska Museet started acquiring objects of Sami origin from its opening in the 1870s. In 1919, when a dividing line was drawn between a number of museums, it was decided that "the culture of the Lapps" would be the province of the Nordiska Museet, and for several decades objects were redistributed between the Historical Museum and the Nordiska Museet to ensure this specialization in their collections. In his time, a driving force behind this was Ernst Manker, well-known curator at the Nordiska Museet (Silvén 2010, 2011). The Museum of Ethnography also had a collection of Sami

artefacts, which is clear testimony to the fact that the Sami were not automatically regarded as a part of the Swedish population. In 1989, when *Ájtte*, the Swedish Mountain and Sami Museum, was founded in Jokkmokk, the Sami collections of the Museum of Ethnography were deposited there – as an act of repatriation and an expression of a new power order.

The study aims to shed light on the museums' shared role for conceptions of Sami identity. Methodologically it will involve asking how the Sami collections were built up and changed, categorized and classified, and displayed in exhibitions, with the focus on movements and shifts within and between the museums (Silvén 2008, 2011, 2013). The museum is not a stagnant terminus for objects that have been taken out of circulation. The objects there continue to have a history – in stores, in exhibitions, with conservators, researchers, and other users. The above-mentioned theories about materiality and actor networks, along with concepts such as “the cultural biographies of things” (Kopytoff 1986) and “following the object” (Czarniawska 2007) will be used in order to analyse value hierarchies, changing aesthetic preferences, and power relations.

One aspect of the society-shaping function of museum objects is to study how the image of the Sami has been formed by means of the categories and headings of the collections (Stewart 1993; Svanberg 2009; Rogan 2010; Muñoz 2012). Through the power that conceptual categories exert over thoughts and ideas (Foucault 1972), the place in which the Sami were fixed in the museums' taxonomies has probably steered expectations. What can one expect to find, or not, in a collection of “Sami” objects? How did the things and the people become “Sami”? From a more general perspective, these questions will be linked to the changed societal position of the Sami and of the three museums over time.

### **Fredrik Svanberg: Headhunters, Museum Anatomicum and the Social Dynamics of Collecting**

This study focuses on Uppsala University's old anatomical collection of human remains as an example of a cultural heritage, represented in the history of all three museums, that has become problematic today. In 1996 a large collection of skeleton parts was found packed in boxes in the stores of Uppsala University. The collection consists of a large number of human skulls, other human bones, plaster casts of human heads, and a number of plaster death masks. The collection belonged to the Department of Anatomy in Uppsala, where it was built up around the last turn of the century and put into storage in the 1950s. Just over a thousand skulls and plaster casts from the collection were donated in 1997 to the National Historical Museum, but in 2011 they were returned to the university's Museum Gustavianum in Uppsala.

Incomplete information about the collection has been identified in the catalogue “Museum Anatomicum Upsaliense”. The data show that the remains in the collection mostly come from archaeological excavations, but also many from dissected bodies. In addition, there are remains from Lapland (Sami), Egypt, Greece, Greenland, Indonesia, Italy, Micronesia, Hawaii, Norway, Peru, Poland, the Kola Peninsula, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and possibly other countries.

Supplementary facts show that the material was brought together for a number of reasons, one of them being a purposeful scientific headhunt to amass source material for racial research, first pursued at the Department of Anatomy, later at the State Institute

for Racial Biology in Uppsala. This research is well known in the history of ideas through works that have analysed the written source material (Broberg 1995; Broberg & Tydén 2005), but the details, various specific contexts, and relations to different institutions and persons (cf. Ljungström 2004) still remain to be examined.

Here we have a body of research material, once collected actively and legitimately, which was hidden away and silenced for a long time, but which today has regained its status as source material, although now for museological research. To begin with, the creation and use of the collection over time will be studied, that is to say, the character, motives, and context of the collecting, and how the material was used in research and education. The project approaches the collection from the premise that it can be regarded as a network of relations between objects, institutions, and people. The intention is to analyse what the collection represents in different contexts and how the network can be understood in terms of actor-network theory (Law & Hassard 1999; Law & Mol 2002; Latour 2005). What kind of relations are embedded in the creation and management of this collection? What changing social dynamic characterizes it? What are the consequences for society of this kind of collecting?

Studies of this collection will be linked to other similar material at the National Historical Museum (including depositions from the Nordiska Museet) and the Museum of Ethnography (see e.g. Svanberg in press) in order to expand the network study and discuss how the material cultural heritage of racial research is handled in a contemporary context at and between the three museums.

#### **Lotten Gustafsson Reinius: Rituals of Reconciliation in the Postsecular Museum**

Many museums are used today by different actors as public and ritual arenas to resolve moral, political, and social problems. The ceremonial return of the totem pole by the Museum of Ethnography in spring 2006 is just one example of this current international phenomenon. These acts of “repatriation” can be understood as a growing genre of postcolonial rituals of reconciliation: well-directed, publicly staged events with good media coverage, where political and religious leaders, by temporarily and ritually making themselves the bearers of historical guilt, claim to find ways to atonement for crimes and conflicts in the past.

Through comparative case studies of repatriation as managed by the three museums, this project analyses the roles of the collections in the search for a renewed and globalized ethic for cultural heritage as well as communicative forms for it. The ambition is to select examples with which to discuss the meanings ascribed to objects, places, and people in ritual acts performed when objects are handed over and returned. As far as possible, this will be studied through participant observation. A couple of field studies have already been done when the Museum of Ethnography ceremonially restored aboriginal skulls (2004) and the totem pole (2006). For a deeper knowledge of the administrative and ritual handling, the research material will also include interviews, internal documentation, and press material.

The type of repatriation that has attracted most attention hitherto involves ethnographic museums and indigenous peoples. Because the field of vision takes in three museums, it is possible to compare cases that reflect other problems as well, such as how the Nordiska Museet has dealt with requests from other Nordic countries and how the Historical Museum has received requests from regional museums and the Church of

Sweden. On what values is moral consensus established, and where is resistance and negotiation mobilized instead? Is there a hierarchy between different claims, spiritualities, and ethnicities? What ritual roles can be adopted, and by whom? The claims and the way they are handled seem to sketch the outlines of an emerging moral landscape where cultural negotiations about responsibility, guilt, identity, sanctity, ownership, and place are given a ritual form.

The choice of methodological approach is based on a view of rituals as densely symbolic and communicative arenas, with special potential to provide space for polyphonic negotiations about existential and social conflicts (e.g. Turner 1969; Connerton 1989). By paying attention to the interplay between material and social, the study is also part of the growing scholarly interest in the agency of things (Latour 1998; Law 1994) and the materiality of the social (Miller 2005; Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2006). If one envisages, with Latour (1998:19–21), that the museum artefacts have been part of a network where their materiality has contributed to the durability of power relations and cultural boundaries (cf. Gustafsson Reinius 2008:40), one can also wonder what is disturbed here when the artefacts become mobile again and are broken out of the earlier whole. Do the museums' new rituals open any "black boxes", or do we in fact witness a new, and equally efficient, sealing of other orders and roles (cf. Gustafsson Reinius 2010, 2012)?

### **The significance of the programme for the research field**

The programme's most significant scholarly contribution is the methodology, comprising several museums and the sociomaterial perspective on museum collections. The study of the three museums' interaction will capture general tendencies while simultaneously exposing patterns in the form of an interesting Swedish distinctiveness. For example, Sweden as a nation did not take part in the major colonization processes of the nineteenth century. Yet there has been increasing focus in recent years on how Swedish society within the national boundaries can be said to have inherited a colonial mentality and behaviour in relation to the Sami, while the non-European museum collections testify to the participation of individuals and groups in the colonial project. The Swedish racial science that was prominent in its time also tends to be mentioned in these contexts.

We, the three researchers, will work on the programme 2010–2014, with varying degrees of participation over time. Apart from the publications and presentations that each separate project will result in, the dialogue and cooperation on the programme will also give shared opportunities for developing method and theory which can be spread internationally and nationally in speech and writing.

The research programme occupies a position in the growing international and national multidisciplinary research into cultural heritage. The research group has established cooperation with Eunamus (European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen), a major European programme for research on nationalism and museums, under the leadership of Peter Aronsson at Linköping University ([www.eunamus.eu](http://www.eunamus.eu); Aronsson 2011). At the international conference held by Acsis (Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Sweden, Linköping University) in June 2011 the programme and Eunamus together arranged a major session on current museology (Fredriksson 2011). In January 2012 the three projects and the shared approaches were presented in Brussels at the Eunamus conference *National Museums*

*and the Negotiation of Difficult Pasts*. In the future we also count on different forms of research collaboration, theoretical and methodological development, and debate.

The programme will also enable reflection on the specific potential, approaches, and problems entailed by doing *museology from within*. What special opportunities are opened for research when it emerges in dialogue with the museum's internal work and public practice? What are the difficulties? Because the programme asks questions concerning an ongoing public discussion where a global ethic of diversity is in focus, we will also be able to contribute angles and perspectives of relevance to society at large.

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**Key words:** mobility, networks, ritualization, collections, repatriation, minorities, indigenous peoples, human remains, identity politics, materiality.

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