

MUSEUMS AND ETHNOLOGICAL RESEARCH, 1961

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At present anthropology museums in the United States tend to be isolated from the main streams of teaching and research in anthropology. There is a growing gap between the traditional interests and activities of museums and the center of gravity in anthropology. This gap has resulted partly from the conservatism of museums and partly from the lessening interest of anthropologists in historical problems and the currently unfashionable status of research on material culture and technology. This situation is bad for the museums and bad for anthropology.

These views and others I shall present cover all types of museums. I am aware of the exceptions to my generalizations and the differences between university and nonuniversity museums, but I am interested in some general trends that significantly affect all museums. I am concerned here with ethnology rather than with archaeology and physical anthropology, which still stand in close relationships with museums and their collections.

The peripheral position of our anthropology museums is quite recent. During the great period of museum growth in this country, from 1890 to about 1930, museums occupied a central position in the development of anthropology. They marshalled a major share of funds for field research; their curators carried out or influenced most of the field work and played a major role in the teaching of anthropology in the universities (Collier and Tschopik, 1954). Beginning in about 1930 two trends set in that led to the present position of museums in anthropology. One was the accelerating increase in the number of nonmuseum anthropologists attached to universities, government agencies, hospitals, research institutes, and interdisciplinary programs. In contrast, the number of museum anthropologists was increasing relatively little. The other trend was the tremendous growth of social anthropology and the various behavioral specialties in directions away from the traditional museum interests, which tended to remain unchanged.

Museum curators have been not unmindful of their changed position in the anthropological world, and many of them have responded by carrying on research in the latest and most fashionable fields of anthropology. In so doing they make contributions to knowledge but there is apt to be a tenuous relationship between their theoretical interests and their jobs as curators. On the other hand, there has been little creative work in devising new research lines that relate to the newer fields of anthropology and are particularly appropriate for museums.

Today many anthropologists feel that anthropology museums are nice to have, especially for children and beginning students, but that they are of no great consequence for the important concerns of anthropology. Museum collections are little used in advanced teaching and students are seldom urged to utilize them for research papers and theses. The reverse aspect of this is that

museums are not fully exploiting their research potential in anthropology. Many museum administrators are ignorant of or unsympathetic to the newer developments in anthropology with the result that administrative policy is isolated from these developments. As a consequence curators tend to develop split professional personalities. There is some tendency for museums to concentrate on exhibits and neglect the care of their study collections, and there is a widespread lag in developing adequate research facilities and tools for staff and visiting scholars (Fenton, 1960, pp. 348-49).

One solution to the problem of the anthropology curator's dilemma is for museums to have separate curatorial and research staffs (Fenton, 1960, pp. 334-38). This is an administratively elegant solution, is undoubtedly efficient, and appears to be conducive to contented curators and contented researchers. But I wonder if it does not evade the basic intellectual problem of anthropology museums, and whether it might not tend to widen the gap between the theoretical interests of the research staff and the proper function of the museum as an institution.

The greatest need of anthropology museums today, beyond the necessity of securing greater private and public financial support, is to develop new lines of research that both are peculiarly appropriate to them as institutions and relate to the central problems and interests of anthropology. This means going beyond the traditional problems of museum research--distributional, historical, technological--to broader problems of culture change, evolution, ecology, values, symbolism, and patterning as they are reflected in material culture. A good example is in the area of acculturation or culture change, which has been an important interest of anthropology during the past twenty-five years. We know a great deal about cultural and social change among Indians on reservations, tribal peoples becoming peasants, and peasants becoming industrialized and urbanized. Yet there has been little careful collecting of the total range of the material culture of these peoples in transition, and systematic studies of the sequence, differential rates, processes, and causes of change in the total range of material culture are even rarer. Some fruitful leads in these directions have been suggested by Quimby and Spoehr (1951). This kind of collecting and these kinds of studies are greatly needed and should be supported by museums.

I shall discuss below under five general headings some significant research areas in anthropology that museums could appropriately and profitably cultivate.

1. Ethnography. Although interest in ethnography has waned, there remain many gaps in the ethnographic coverage of the world. In recent years concentration in field work on specialized interests and problems has tended to prevent comprehensive studies of cultures, even by museum men. There are many unstudied or inadequately studied human groups that are on the verge of biological or cultural extinction (Heine-Geldern, 1958-60). The salvage of disappearing languages and cultures was a preoccupation of American anthropologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but as most North American Indian tribes became extinct or highly acculturated this feeling of urgency and obligation waned among American anthropologists in and out of museums. Yet the salvage of ethnographic information for the present and the future is still an obligation of anthropology, and it would be efficient and appropriate for museums to take the lead in organizing the needed field work. Ideally, the work might be done by a team consisting

of a museum ethnologist, a social anthropologist, and, where necessary, a linguist. In certain cases a physical anthropologist would be appropriate also.

There is some question whether there are sufficient general ethnologists left in this country, in museums and elsewhere, to man such imagined teams on any large scale (Sturtevant, 1960, p. 12). Certainly if present trends continue there will soon be few anthropologists interested in descriptive, historical, and comparative ethnology. It may well be that in the next generation these aspects of ethnology will be cultivated only by archaeologists, whose interests and problems are closest to traditional ethnology and who will find it an essential aid in archaeological interpretation. In any event, museums can perform a vital service to anthropology by developing systematic programs aimed at completing the ethnographic coverage of the world's peoples. It would probably still be most congenial and efficient, as in the past, for each museum to concentrate in these programs on one or two major culture areas.

2. Technology. Although there has been a steady decline of interest among anthropologists during the past thirty years in problems of technology, much remains to be done in this area both descriptively and analytically. We still need more studies like Blackwood's (1950) excellent description of the technology of a New Guinea tribe, as well as analytical studies in a broader cultural and structural context. Examples of the rich yield of historical and functional understanding afforded by the detailed analysis of a single aspect of technology are the studies of modern Mexican pottery-making by Foster (1948, 1955) and Thompson (1958) and of Aymara pottery by Tschopik (1950). The cultural and psychological insights that may come from a really intimate understanding of a whole technology are beautifully demonstrated by Mrs. Kroeber's (1961) biography of Ishi. It would be well for museums to renew and intensify their interest in technology and to promote those field studies of technology in culture and as part of human behavior that are essential if studies are to go beyond the traditional historical and evolutionary problems.

3. Culture change. I have already alluded to fruitful opportunities for the study of change as reflected in material culture. This will require planned collecting and field studies among groups whose cultures are changing. Preferably these should be groups for which previous studies furnish a base line from which to measure change, as well as groups in culture-contact situations of varying types. A follow-up study of Blackwood's Watut Valley people in New Guinea would be an example. There are many good acculturation studies of such groups, but they are not based on systematic collections of the changing material culture and they treat material changes incidentally or use them as simple indices of change. A great deal more could be done with material objects and associated practices and beliefs in such situations.

An area of research that overlaps this and the previously discussed category is economic development and technological change. Problems in this sphere are of national and international concern in connection with programs of aid in the underdeveloped areas, and they are being investigated by a large number of economists and anthropologists. One of the lacks in most of the current studies is a sufficiently detailed and integrative investigation of the total technology that is changing or that it is hoped to change. Collecting of machines and tools, as well as field studies of their use, their functional relations, etc., would be extremely useful. Again, I suggest a team comprised of a museum

ethnologist interested in technology and a social anthropologist (or economist) as most effective here.

4. Primitive art. Anthropologists in this country have been interested in art since the early studies of Boas, but they have rarely come to grips with many of the special problems of studying art in culture, and anthropological analysis of art has developed very slowly. Some of the problems of primitive art can be successfully investigated by the methods of the art historians, who undoubtedly will pay more and more systematic attention to the subject. But a large part of the significance and meaning of primitive art can be studied only by anthropological methods, and anthropologists are only beginning to see the possibilities. The museum anthropologist is in the most advantageous position to carry out such research.

Since World War II there has been a tremendous increase of interest in primitive art among art museums and private collectors. The resulting activity has inflated prices and has made some anthropologists uneasy about the way the art objects are treated (e.g., Shapiro, 1958). They are uneasy because the art museums and new collectors apply western standards of aesthetics to these works of art and tend to be disinterested in or hostile toward knowledge about their meaning and function in the cultures of their creators (Gerbrands, 1957, p. 2). Since most of the objects came through dealers, little information is available about them, and this lack of information is perpetuated by the dealers' field collectors, who usually will bother with little more than the most general provenience data. Rather than decrying this new interest in primitive art, as some anthropologists have done, it would be useful for anthropology curators to develop new programs for the study of art, especially in the field, and to try to divert some of the public interest to the support of these programs.

It is still possible to collect primitive art from its creators in South America, Africa, Melanesia, Australia, and Borneo. This anthropology museums should do systematically. But more important are the field studies of the artist and the meaning and function of the art. These will be possible only for another ten to twenty years in the areas mentioned. One of the greatest contributions of these studies will be to the understanding of ideology and of the function of art in society (Gerbrands, 1957, pp. 123-139; Hasselberger, 1961, pp. 351-353).

5. Techniques of data collecting and documentation. Another potential area of activity that museums might go much further in developing is the documentation of culture by means of recording and photography. It has been demonstrated by Mead (Bateson and Mead, 1942; Mead and MacGregor, 1951), Collier (Collier and Buitrón, 1949; Collier, 1957), Fejos, and others that still and motion photography are effective means of documenting various aspects of culture, even including social relations and attitudes expressed in behavior, and can be used as precise and subtle research tools. These potentialities are far from fully exploited by anthropologists. Sound recordings have long been standard in studies of language and music, but much more could be done with recordings of interviews and free discourse for the purpose of analysis of cultural, social, and ideological as well as linguistic content. It would be appropriate for museums to become centers for the perfecting of these techniques, the promotion of their use in the field, and the processing and preservation of the

resulting records. Specialized techniques are required to preserve films and tape recordings. With a few exceptions university departments of anthropology have neither the experience nor facilities to carry out this task properly, and much valuable material collected by anthropologists has been and will continue to be lost or destroyed. Museums should take the lead in establishing the needed archives. There is no center in the United States comparable to the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film in Göttingen, which collects and processes ethnographic films made by anthropologists in the field and makes copies available at reasonable cost for research and teaching. One of our great museums or several in cooperation might start such a center. Although an initial financial grant would be needed, such a center should become self-supporting.

Summary

These five areas of anthropological research activities, which I have sketched so briefly, are particularly appropriate ones for museums to cultivate. Undoubtedly there are others. These areas contain not only the old traditional problems but also new problems that can lead museum research outward toward the wider interests of anthropology. But in pursuing these new lines museums should not abandon the older research interests, which are still vital to the science of man. If, with the help of all anthropologists, museums can follow more intensively and imaginatively the old research approaches and also tackle new problems through new research programs, then the present isolation of anthropology museums will be ended.

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