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Ethnos Spring Seminar 'Keepers of Culture: The Power of Partnership Between Museums and Ethnology' in Helsinki, 28th of March 2025

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The biennial Spring Seminar of the Association of Finnish Ethnologists Ethnos ry highlights topical issues and debates in ethnology. This time, the theme of the seminar was "Keepers of Culture: The Power of Partnership between Museums and Ethnology" (in Finnish, Kulttuurin vaalijat: Museoiden ja etnologian kumppanuuden voima). The theme was well chosen, as ethnology is one of the traditional disciplines responsible for educating future museum professionals. During the seminar, we heard inspiring presentations on the relationship between museums and ethnology, which were followed by a panel discussion focused on enhancing the partnership between the two. The event brought together more than 40 participants from the fields of research and museums at the House of Science and Letters. The seminar was opened by the chair of Ethnos ry, Eino Heikkilä, who introduced the theme of the seminar and the first speaker. Before the first presentation, however, a moment of silence was held to commemorate ethnologist Jenni Rinne, who passed away in February.

The first presentation, "Engaging the Community: The Co-creation of Kalamaja Museum", by Kristi Paatsi, head of Kalamaja Museum, focused on including communities in museum planning and creation. Kalamaja is a neighbourhood near the old town of Tallinn, and the area has been described as communal, a village within a city. Kalamaja Museum was organised as a co-creation project with the local community. The project was started in 2018 and included surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, brainstorming sessions, creative research methods and field work. Some of the methods of co-creation are quite familiar to ethnologists as well. After the first survey, the community members engaged in brainstorming activities by visiting local schools, libraries, theatres and even the local public sauna, where people were asked what kind of museum they wanted in the area. The community also got to vote on the museum's corporate visual identity (CVI) and logo. The project faced some challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of funding and the fact that, at times, the city of Tallinn questioned the community perspective of the project. This changed as the project progressed and gained the support of city officials.

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ETHNOLOGIA FENNICA Vol. 52 (2025, issue 1), 129–132. https://doi.org/10.23991/ef.161686
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Kalamaja Museum opened in 2021, and the museum has continued the participatory approach initiated in the co-creation phase. The museum, for example, has an exhibition space where local community members curate exhibitions on themes relevant to the community. The example of Kalamaja Museum was truly inspiring and a great example of the power of community. It has been awarded the EMYA Stiletto Prize for Community Participation and Engagement. The example of Kalamaja Museum made me reflect on what ethnology can give to museums and what museums can gain from ethnology. One answer to this question might be found in participatory approaches in ethnology, which can support museums in developing their exhibitions and operations to better serve museum visitors. They might offer an insightful option for gathering feedback instead of more traditional visitor surveys.

The next presentation, "National Museum Comes to Visit — Tour 2024–2025: Experiences from the People and Collections Meeting" (in Finnish, Kansallismuseo saapuu kylään -kiertue 2024–2025. Kokemuksia ihmisten ja kokoelmien kohtaamisesta), focused on museum collections and was given by Hanna Forssell from the Finnish National Museum and postdoc-researcher Johanna Pohtinen from the University of Helsinki. The "National Museum Comes to Visit" project was started out of a need to maintain relations with audiences while the museum was being renovated. The museum's main exhibitions in Helsinki are closed from 2024–2026, but during this time the National Museum will visit six places around Finland for a weekend and exhibit some of the most fascinating objects in the national collection. The objects include, for example, Eetu Isto's painting *The Attack* (Hyökkäys), the Treasure of Halikko from the 11th–12th centuries, the pen used when Finland signed the NATO treaty and President Kekkonen's eyeglasses. In 2024, museum staff visited four different museums, and in 2025 it will two more. The visits have been quite popular, and so far, the five conducted visits have reached an audience of 10,500 people. The visitors have been of different ages and backgrounds, many of whom visited the local museum for the first time and had not visited the National Museum of Finland before. The size of the audience demonstrates the ongoing interest in museums and especially in museum objects. In the presentation, Forssell explained that this interest enhances the meaning of museum work and underlines why the work is conducted. If you lose connection with the audiences, there is a risk that the meaning of the work itself will be lost. One of the museum's core tasks is thus to present the nation's cultural heritage to the public.

The second section of the presentation by Johanna Pohtinen focused on the ethnological research project "Touching Collections" (in Finnish, Kokoelmien kosketus). This perspective aligned well with the theme of collections and their

relation to museum audiences. The research project gathered data during two of the National Museum's visits. It was done by collecting feedback from the visitors on a poster and on cards, and they were also given the opportunity to participate in an interview. The questions for the poster focused on how the visitors felt during the event and which object was the most memorable one. For the cards, the focus was museum memories and feelings during a museum visit. The collected data is being analysed as part of the "Touching Collections" research project. The question of how to gain knowledge about what feelings museum objects evoke is an interesting one. Affective research and ethnology could provide important answers to such a question. The information obtained on what kinds of feelings museum objects evoke can be useful for museums in the future, for example when choosing objects for new exhibitions. In the presentation, Pohtinen also addressed some of the challenges that they faced during the data collection process. They included encouraging visitors to participate, giving clear enough instructions, the role of the researchers and the usability of the data gathered. The challenges also included research ethics. The researchers considered making observations, but the method proved impossible due to the inability to obtain the informed consent of the participants. This problem highlights the central role of research ethics in ethnology, but also the creativity of ethnologists as researchers. If one method for gathering data is found to be unsuitable, others can still be used.

The presentation was an interesting example of bringing the museum and its objects to the visitors. The number of visitors shows that the museum and the treasures of the national collection do attract vast audiences. The fact that many of them had never visited the National Museum raises questions about the accessibility of museums. The National Museum's main exhibitions are in Helsinki, and for many people living in northern or eastern Finland the amount of travel needed to visit the museum may be overly long and expensive. Therefore, I find taking the National Museum on a visit an important practice that should be continued even after the renovation of the National Museum has been completed.

During the seminar, we also heard a panel discussion that focused on the collaboration work between ethnology as a discipline and different museums. The chair of the panel discussion was Johanna Enqvist from The Finnish Science Centre Association (Suomen Tiedekeskukset ry), and the participants were museology lecturer Maija Mäki from the University of Turku, research fellow Maria Vanha-Similä from the University of Jyväskylä, development manager Henna Ylänen from the Turku City Museum and student representative Karoliina Valalehto from the University of Helsinki. During the panel discussion, we heard about good practices for collaboration between museums and researchers. They included, for example, making clear agreements

about responsibilities during the collaboration phase and including the museum partner early in the planning stage of the project. Such inclusion is important because museums have sometimes faced situations where researchers contact them with ready-made plans that do not consider the needs of the museum. However, the speaker emphasised that ethnologists are often highly communicative and quite good at interacting with their collaborative partners, thus ensuring that both parties feel heard in collaboration projects and that the project serves the needs of both organisations. Museum workers are professionals at popularising science, and researchers collaborating with museums could benefit from, for example, learning how to better popularise their research results. However, it is important to note that research results should be published in collaboration with museums.

Towards the end of the seminar, the Ethnos Master's Thesis Prize was handed out by Päivi Roivainen from Lahti City Museums. The prize was given to Sari Kantinkoski for her master's thesis examining the parliamentary discussions on wolves between 1971 and 2021. The thesis has contributed to the ongoing debate about the role of wolves, with attention being paid to the influence of emotions in shaping the discussion. The Ethnos Spring Seminar was a motivating afternoon that spurred many thoughts on the possibilities of collaboration between ethnology and museums. Museums, for example, could offer opportunities for researchers to conduct research on the institutions' own collections, which would benefit both the museum and ethnology researchers. The seminar also emphasised the significance of ethnology as a discipline that educates future museum professionals. Overall, you could say that ethnology has much to offer museums, but museums also have much to offer ethnology and ethnologists.

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