
The Problematic Exotic

Koivunen, Leila 2015. Eksotisoidut esineet ja avartuva maailma. Euroopan ulkopuoliset kulttuurit näytteillä Suomessa 1870–1920-luvuilla. (English abstract: Exoticised Objects and the Widening World: Non-European Cultures on Display in Finland between the 1870s and the 1910s.) Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 325 pp. ISBN 978-952-222-625-9. ISSN 0073-2559.

There is always a tendency to write history from the point of view of the winner. How do the events unfold from a more marginalised perspective? Professor of General History Leila Koivunen's book on exotic (non-European) collections and exhibitions 1870–1920 fills a gap that more conventional Finnish museum histories have left unexplored. Until now, the emphasis has been on how the Finnish National Museum

became what it is and how the Finnish museum institution grew to what it is now. Especially for us ethnologists, this new perspective gives a lot of food for thought: in the wake of the advancement of Finno-Ugrian ethnology, anything not Finnish or Finno-Ugrian became marginal to the science. The development was not, however, unilinear. There were periods of history when true effort was given to fostering scientific, non-European material ethnography. For the most part though, it was actors outside the strictly academic circles that brought the material culture of non-European people to the consciousness of wider audiences, most notably the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, the Geographical Association and the arts and crafts movement, spearheaded by the Finnish Society of Crafts and Design. Because Professor Koivunen sets out to write history from the perspective of exotic collections and exotic objects in general, she is not bound only to the case of the Finnish National Museum and its predecessors. Even the commercial exhibiting of exotic objects finds its place in the story. Exotic objects have always been subject to multiple interpretations: not only are they targets of ethnographic interest, they can also be viewed as objects of art or examples of craftsmanship.

It seems that the author has not left any stones unturned, or rather, any public or personal archives unread for this project. The array of historical sources is spectacular: they range from private correspondence, personal journals, architectural blueprints and newspaper articles to annual reports, collection inventories, advertisements, photographs and many more. It is obvious that Professor Koivunen has a profound command of the theory of the field. But not once does she let the theory override her evidence: she merely points out instances when events did not unfold similarly as in the international cases that she derives her theory from.

The book is divided into three time periods. The first part of the book deals with the first part of the 1870s and the development that had led up to it. At that point, the university was the most prominent owner of exotic collections. The collection was on display at the Historical-Ethnographic Museum in the new Arppeanum building

in Helsinki. It is, however, just at this point when the exotic collection starts to appear unscientific in comparison to the new and emerging Finnish collection. The former did not grow and all effort was put into the latter. This period also witnessed two emerging actors in the field of collecting and displaying the exotic: the new Design Museum and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission. This paved the road for new and different ways to interpret exotic objects.

The second part of the book deals with the time period 1875–1914. This is when, in the field of ethnology, the exotic became marginalised; despite that, it still found new and not strictly scientific forums for expression. Interestingly enough, this is also a period when part of the non-European collections – the Finno-Ugrians of Asia – were no longer considered ‘exotic’. The plans for the National Museum of Finland were underway at this point and it is interesting to see how the economic resources – in other words, the money deeded by H. F. Antell in 1894 – made the museum professionals more interested again in setting up an exotic department in the museum. The Antell Commission funded many important acquisitions to the collections of both the future National Museum and the Design Museum. As the plans for the National Museum took many years to execute, this was also the time when other actors mentioned above took the stage. The attention was in particular on East Asia, China and Japan, but also on Africa. These exhibitions for a general audience were temporary but attracted a lot of attention. This was also the time when commercial exhibitions for people interested in interior decoration by a firm called Liberty started. This activity was a direct influence from England.

The last, and rather short, part of the book deals with the situation in the 1910s when the National Museum was finally opened. The exotic collection was going to be displayed in the attic. A. O. Heikel and U.T. Sirelius had put a lot of effort into arranging the collection, some of which had been stored away at that point for almost 30 years, since 1887. U.T. Sirelius also used the collection for his teaching of general ethnology in 1913 and 1916. When the museum opened for the public in 1916, the doors to the exotic de-

partment remained closed. And they remained closed until the Museum of Cultures was founded in 1998. It opened a permanent exhibition at Tennispalatsi building in Helsinki in 2004 and the collections were on display until the museum stopped its operation there in 2013 and is currently without permanent exhibition space.

Leila Koivunen writes that the acquisitions for Finnish museums and other collections bear testimony to how closely knit Finland was to the European museum and exhibition field. The influences came in particular from Germany, Great Britain and Scandinavia, but also from Russia, which Finland was still a part of at the time. Even though Finland did not have its own colonial project, the exhibitions were a way to stand out from

the colonies and to identify with the greater European powers.

Professor Koivunen writes with great clarity. One only has to marvel at how so much detail can be presented without the general outlines becoming blurred. It is a breath of fresh air to read a book of such academic calibre written in good Finnish, clean of loan words or academic jargon. This book is a much needed and solid contribution to our knowledge of the history of Finnish ethnology, collections, exhibitions, and even the general consciousness about global cultures, during an important time period.

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