

## Expeditions to the children's wear islands and museum collections

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Dressing, childhood and children's clothing are not unknown fields in Finnish ethnology. Neither are museum collections or interviews strange sources in ethnological research. On the contrary: museums and ethnology have a long shared history in Finland, and we ethnologists have always learned to ask people about their daily life. Nonetheless, Päivi Roivainen's dissertation *Dressed Childhood: Journeys to the Children's Wear Islands* manages to open new views and to utilize both museum collections and interviews as sources of her research in an innovative way. Roivainen's dissertation can be considered as a fresh new start both in ethnology and in museology or the museum field in Finland.

Päivi Roivainen's topic is the clothing of Finnish children below school age, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In her research, she asks how children's wear is discussed, which features have been considered important in clothing, and what this tells us about the meanings of childhood. Roivainen makes children themselves

central actors of her research by interviewing them about their own experiences of clothing in general and children's wear in museum collections. How do children themselves experience and interpret both historical and contemporary clothes? As a by-product of this research, much wider questions are answered as well: How well can the museum collections explain children's clothing or even childhood? How can we study and interpret museum objects?

The research benefits from a combination of various sources, nearly 750 museum objects in the collections of the Helsinki City Museum, interviews of 5- to 7-year-old children, inquiries and child-care literature, and from multistrategy, i.e. combining various methods. She approaches her topic concurrently from the past and the present, emphasizing that different time levels are always present when we collect, discuss and study the past. Interpreting and giving meanings to the children's wear of the past century tells us just as much about the present day. Roivainen points out that for this reason she does not want to tie her study strictly to any exact time or place, and not even social dimensions emerge clearly in her research. This is, however, one of the problematic sides of the study, as cultural objects are always also anchored to their own time, place and social context. To what extent does this choice reduce our view of the real nature of children's clothing and to what extent does it really serve the research problem, understanding the cultural meanings given to childhood in Finland during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, without generalization?

The research is divided into three main parts, *On the Pier* (introduction), *Children's Wear Islands* and *Souvenirs from the Children's Wear Islands* (epilogue). The metaphor of “children’s wear islands” is based on the way many childhood researchers have seen the worlds of children; there are spaces, opinions and ideals – culture – defined and limited especially for children. The idea and concept of childhood becomes visible, for example, in children’s clothing. As such “islands” Päivi Roivainen points out ways of understanding cleanliness, practicality, fashion and beauty, colours and prints, and the multisensory materiality of children’s wear. As two of her islands she additionally names the age periods of childhood, and museum collections which also define the way we see Finnish childhood of the past century.

The research is not only ethnology, or material culture studies, but opens up museological viewpoints as well. For this reason, defining an (*ordinary*) *object*, which is here thoroughly done, is not, in my opinion, quite enough for the conceptual needs of this research. When using museum collections as sources, the definition(s) of a *museum object* would have given more assertiveness to the research. What is the exact distinction between an object and a museum object? Understanding and defining also the musealization process more clearly would have helped in interpreting the objects and explaining the cultural networks of the (museum) objects and their meanings. A museum object is always not only evidence of the real past, but also of the museum history, choices made by museum professionals. Without this context, it is impossible to describe and understand the human culture documented in the museum collections.

Taking this museum history and museum processes more clearly into account would have been extremely important especially when considering children’s clothing through museum collections. Besides her qualitative methods in the research, Roivainen introduces a quantitative way to take over and study large research materials in the museum collection database. This is seen even as a methodological experiment in a museum context. She uses data mining and draws diagrams and figures of the museum-documented children’s wear

to be able to answer the question: how is the material history of childhood seen through museum collections? Even though the museum history and historical collection management policies are not sufficiently shown here to explain these figures, Päivi Roivainen gives Finnish museums and their collection management professionals a lot to think about. Digital humanities can greatly help in handling museum collections as research materials, and museums’ collection databases should probably serve much better in data mining processes in future, if we want to increase the research use of our museum collections.

The other central method of this dissertation, ethnographical analysis based on ethnographical writing and interviewing children under school age, is, in my opinion, the most inspiring part of Päivi Roivainen’s research. Taking children as co-researchers of the study is an innovative and creative way of interpreting cultural expressions, children’s wear in the museum collections. Roivainen showed pictures of historical children’s wear to her young interviewees and asked them to comment on the clothes. The children’s comments and interpretations tell a lot about opinions and meanings connected to today’s childhood. This method combines, in an interesting way, modern ethnology and processes of assessing the significance of museum collections. The latter has been introduced in the international museum field during the past decade (for example *Significance 2.0* in Australia, *Assessing Museum Collections* in the Netherlands, *Reviewing Significance* in Great Britain and *Merkitysanalyysimenetelmä* in Finland). Essential to these methods is the way individuals and societies are taken in the processes where museum objects and collections are interpreted and given meanings. Päivi Roivainen’s research becomes even more exciting as these individuals are 5- to 7-year-old children with great creativity and imagination. It also shows that in ethnological research mostly traditional methods like interviewing and examining museum collections are still relevant and can even be used in a fresh and fruitful ways.

What do we learn, then, during these expeditions to the children’s wear islands, about children’s clothing and meanings given to childhood?

Children's clothes indicate meanings given to childhood but they also shape the ways of being a child. Clothes may have allowed as well as restricted children's doing: in Finland practicality and technical features of children's wear, for example, have long been important as outdoor activities in any weather are seen as part of good childhood. The idea of innocent, clean and tidy children has been strongly emphasized in clothing. Children themselves appreciate happy colours, imaginative prints and magic feeling, as well as similar clothing on other children. The multi-sensory materiality is emphasized when children themselves talk about clothing: they judge the

clothes on the grounds of comfort. They want to feel comfortable, experience a pleasant touch and be able to move easily.

What then are the lessons of the expedition for the museum collections? Museum collections in Finland seem to describe, as Päivi Roivainen points out, mostly a wealthy, ideal, desirable childhood and adults' attitudes toward childhood. However, museum collections still have great potential; they are dynamic sources that should be used, interpreted and further developed both in museums and in ethnological research.

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