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# Museums – Collections – Interpretations

Rethinking the Construction of Meanings and Identities

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# *Museums – Collections – Interpretations*

## *Rethinking the Construction of Meanings and Identities*

Tomke LASK

### Introduction

*« Museums are about cannibals and glass boxes, a fate they cannot seem to escape no matter how hard they try. »*

*(Michael M. Ames 1992 : 3)*

The cover of this volume of *Civilisations* shows a very recent museum, built in a small Japanese city called Kanazawa, situated in the western part of Tokyo near the Japanese Sea. It is the *Museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, designed by Kazuyo Sejima, architect and professor at Keio University in Tokyo. At the « French-Japanese Colloquium of the Cities of the Future » held in Kanazawa<sup>1</sup>, she presented the creative process that led her to the conception of this museum. One of her concerns was to permit a universal understanding of the museum. Visitors should feel at ease amidst modern art from all over the world. As a matter of fact, the museum's transparency, as it is built mainly in glass, gives the construction an anodyne quality. This universal architecture produces a feeling of being in a globalised space, linking the visitor to already known contexts by a certain kind of *déjà vu* sensation. The impression is reassuring, as it represents a reference in a completely unfamiliar environment<sup>2</sup>. Not that this museum does not resemble any others,

1. Organised by the Société franco-japonaise des techniques industrielles (SFJTI), Keio University and the Architecture School of Nancy on November 2004 in Kanazawa. I wish to thank here the organisers for the privilege of having been invited to this event as speaker as well as the Japanese Society for the Progress of Science (JSPS) for financing my stay as a visiting professor at Keio University in October and November 2004.
2. This functions in the same way as reference points in one's own neighbourhood. Once you spot them, you begin to feel at home. Cognitive maps, as Kevin Lynch (1992) used them to understand how normal users of a city perceive their living space, refer to the feelings of local inhabitants to the quarter they live in. The feeling that this modern museum's architecture provokes in its visitor is similar, but with a global dimension.

but its design specifically recalls somewhere in one's mind, a worldwide *savoir-faire*, both recognised and to be seen : the pyramid at the Louvre in Paris, or even the Centre Pompidou or the British Museum with its new roof, for example (see picture 1).



Picture 1 : British Museum, January 2004 (© Tomke Lask).

Nothing in the clean design of the *Museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* recalls however either Japan or the local context of Kanazawa<sup>3</sup>. One cannot help but consider this ‘sculpture’ as alien to this city. Its integration into a superbly conceived park cannot surmount a feeling of estrangement. But it is not a question of aesthetics that I wish to discuss here. The building as an object *sui generis* is, without a doubt, truly beautiful. But it seems to have come from outer space<sup>4</sup>, and this is still too large a dimension to feel at home with. In the end, one concludes that it is the Japanese version of universality, materialised in this building through the distinctive Japanese architectural style to be found worldwide, that is represented here. Similarly, one acknowledges in the architectural modernisation of the British Museum (see picture 1) the aspiration of adding a universal touch to the original colonial building. Thus its primary significance, as a collection of the British Empire, is enlarged to a global sharing of the knowledge accumulated in this collection, hence underlining its universal value.

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3. Kanazawa is a city with a long history of Samurai traditions and numerous Samurai houses still remain in the traditional Samurais quarter. Tomohiro Miyashita and Yuichi Shimokawa, assistant professors at the Kanazawa Institute of Technology, presented a detailed paper on the morphology of Kanazawa at the above-mentioned conference.
  4. Curiously, when visiting the museum one sees, at some stage, a series of videos, displayed in parallel, showing the completely round museum flying off into or returning from outer space.

The *Museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is meant to concretely show visitors how Japan exteriorises its integration into the rest of the world. The choice of building a museum with such a design in a heritage city like Kanazawa causes estrangement in a foreign visitor, most probably used to another way of representing universality. Even in our so-called globalised world, museums still deal with the problem of how to represent their universal role as scientific institutions, simultaneously signifying and symbolising both national belonging and perception of their own context. Yet a modern art museum that is not particularly focused on national artists must maintain a balance between the national and the international, between local and universal aspects. In this sense, the picture of the *Museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* chosen here serves as instigation for the subject of this journal.

The role of the museum today is a widely discussed subject in an era when museums seem to go back in time – recalling here that I do not use the verb *regressing* ! But rather *reassuming*, through a witty pedagogy, their former role as places of popular amusement more than institutions of solid production of scientific facts. Already in 1979, Robin Ridington asked himself what a clown was doing in his museum of anthropology, reaching the conclusion that a professional clown, well-trained in anthropology, was a good innovation to teach museum visitors to see the exposition more from a native's point of view (1979 : 84). Today this kind of animation is certainly no longer an exception to promote museum expositions and collections. Sometimes this might recall the sensation of being in a curiosity shop. The economic pressure that weighs on many public as well as privately-run museums, has indeed changed the understanding of how to administrate a museum and how to expose its collections to the public. Management has become as important as the expositions' scientific quality, if in fact not more important. In times of decreasing public financial support, additional resources are needed more than ever to maintain the quality of research in museums (Ames, 1992; Lumley, 2001; Bennett, 1995).

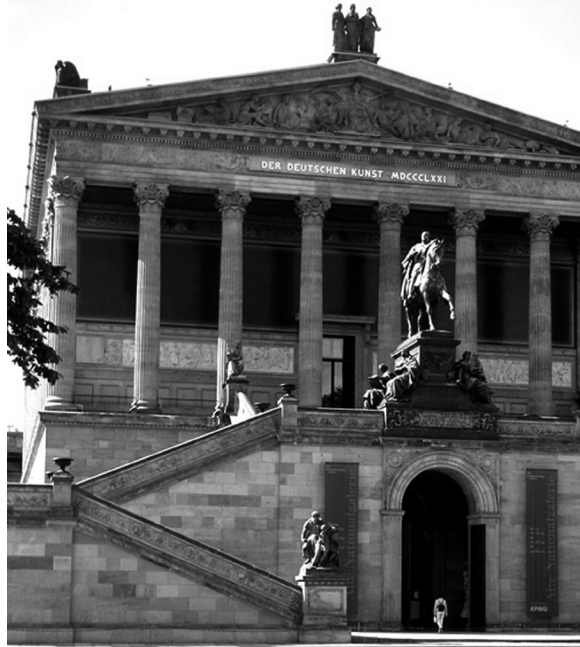
Generally speaking, museums can be defined as places where collections of a specific importance and particular interest are exposed with an educational intention to a wider public. The *Alte Nationalgalerie* in Berlin, built by the German Emperor at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is a fine example of this intention, as its dedication to German art is inscribed on its very walls<sup>5</sup>, defining itself as a place of cultural education for the German population. But at the same time, it exposes paintings of German Realism to an international public, thus signalling its readiness to compete on the international scene with its specific, albeit universal art.

Many museums simultaneously represent their country's self-understanding as a nation, displaying a particular identity through the collections linked to their national context and history. The way that national history is exposed and explained to visitors is, so-to-speak, a conscious reconstruction of the image a country wants to be associated

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5. Here I do not proceed to discuss the universality of art. Rather, I merely wish to underline the difficulties that Germany, like many other nations during the construction period of their national identity, encountered in distinguishing itself from other nations, without falling into such an extreme individualisation that reintegration into the community of universal nations would no longer be possible. (see Elias, 1994, Gellner, 1983, Hobsbawm, 1983, Anderson, 1983) Equilibrium between universality and particularity is a delicate act, especially in arts (Freeland, 2002).

with, both by their own citizens as well as by foreign visitors. Colonial museums, but not only them, thus represent a very explicit expression of an era's mentality, indicating how the colonial past ought to be understood in the present, both in national and international contexts.



Picture 2 : Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, May 2004 (© Tomke Lask).

It is common sense that history is always written by the victors. Put in an anthropological context, one could say that the culture of the other is usually explained by those who are legitimatised to do so, i.e. those socially recognised as experts. Nevertheless, not all visitors appreciate the inherent signification of the way museums expose their collection. Those in a socially dominated position often feel that the history, of which they are also a part, is explained quite unilaterally. Summing up, we can say that museums don't expose collection objects innocently. There is another logic behind scientific interest that refers to more subjective issues, like social values, power claims and identities. These questions cannot be discussed often enough, if indeed we also want to empower more museum visitors to understand the major interests behind the exposition they visit, thus developing a critical attitude towards museums.

This special issue of the journal *Civilisations* rethinks museums as an essential and pro-active link between past and present. The articles analyse the political role of museums and the constitution of their collections today in terms of identity display, identity maintenance and identity reconstruction, as well as remodelling interpretation methods of exposed objects. Examples from Brazil, Indonesia, Cameroon and New Guinea give an insight into how anthropologists approach these questions today.

## Papers

The first paper, by the Brazilian anthropologist Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte, provides a detailed analysis of how museums, initially dedicated to represent the universal history of nature, have turned into national institutions, also charged with the difficult task of symbolising national identity. The latter happened progressively, by the integration of the national landscape into the exposition of the museum as one specific example of universal nature. Thus museums had to assume the difficult role of being both national and universal at the same time. Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte illustrates this process by the history of the *Museu Nacional* of Rio de Janeiro, founded in 1818 when Brazil was still a colony of the kingdom of Portugal. Four years later Brazil became independent, and with that began both the struggle to build its own nationality, as well as the challenge for the *Museu Nacional* to contribute to Brazil's national identity.

In the process of rationalising knowledge of nature, beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, all phenomena were categorised systematically, from the most simple to the most complex form, a way of thinking that would find its most perfect expression in theories of evolution. This way of analysing nature was also applied to humankind and classification into primitive peoples and culturally high standing societies became the norm. As Dias Duarte underlines, the distinction between the primitive and the civilised did not apply only to exotic populations in the colonies, but also to lower-class people in European societies and to some minorities in remote regions, such as the Scots from the Highlands, for example. In the second chapter, Michael Hitchcock analyses this point in depth in his paper on the Taman Mini Museum in Indonesia. He shows how European national museums relied positively on folk life to construct their identity at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and how their experience later influenced Indonesia's museum policy.

The scientific missions of European naturalists multiplied in Brazil and throughout South America and the technical terms applied to analyse nature shifted to a humanising vocabulary when describing landscapes. The 'physiognomy' of landscape thus bears the first element of individualisation of the new nations to be created in South America. Alexander von Humboldt's publications on his scientific missions in South America highly praised impressive landscapes there (1995). Later, when colonies in this part of the world became independent, they would rely greatly onto this aggrandizement of their national territorial landscapes to generate patriotic feelings (Pratt, 1992 : 111-201). Moreover, national flags would integrate natural elements of the country to distinguish themselves from each other. Even the population's national character would be explained based on natural determinism. Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte evokes the example of Switzerland, where already in 1732 Albrecht Von Haller, a physiologist, wrote a book about the link between Swiss landscape, nature and the national character of the Swiss<sup>6</sup>. Nature becomes an item of preservation and exaltation of national values and power. The creation in 1820 of the London Zoo or New York's Central Park are examples of the new attitude toward nature. Colonial preoccupations with health and hygiene and tropical nature to be exploited are the flip side of the urge to better understand and thus better dominate nature. As a matter of fact, the need to dominate nature also has a religious

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6. Two centuries later a famous Swiss writer, Friedrich Duerrenmatt, used the same argument to explain the limited wits of his compatriots, unable to have any vision because the mountains block their sight.

basis : Judaeo-Christian traditions legitimatise human beings to subjugate nature. The plantation economy and its agricultural style in the colonies is a devastating result of this attitude (Arnold, 1996). Plants can also be nationalised by turning them into symbols represented on objects of daily use. This makes them consumable and facilitates their circulation in the population, thus contributing to their 'natural' re-appropriation<sup>7</sup>.

A delicate problem for the *Museu Nacional* in Rio de Janeiro will be the question of under which status the so-called primitive people of Brazil's territory should be integrated in its exposition : natural culture ? João Pacheco de Oliveira Filho offers an important insight to this problematic in the last chapter of this volume with a detailed historic ethnography of one specific piece from the ethnographic collection of the *Museu Nacional*.

Once the collection donated by the Brazilian Emperor was stripped from its curiosity shop aspects through a scientific classification of its pieces, the *Museu Nacional* would begin, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, its proper scientific work with missions to collect natural and ethnographic materials. The *Museu Nacional* progressively took over the organisation of Brazil's participation in international exhibitions, thus fulfilling its role as the institution officially responsible for displaying Brazil's identity abroad. Internally too, the *Museu Nacional* would accomplish its task of nationalising Brazilian nature, including here its territory's indigenous peoples. The representative mandate, one could nearly say, attributes to the *Museu Nacional* a political role that newcomers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, like the Paulista Museum in São Paulo, refuse to assume, claiming to be dedicated only to science. In Dias Duarte's opinion, the future of museums such as the *Museu Nacional* will depend on the survival of nationalistic sentiments and the need to continue to expose one's national identity to other nations. Global interests not in the national nature of Brazil, but in its natural resources, might soon overrule this kind of 'narcissism'. Thus prevention of the transformation of patriotic nature into mere raw material will also depend on how strongly the *Museu Nacional* will be empowered to play its trump card – i.e. its political role.

Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte's paper provides this volume not only with the particular example of a Brazilian case study, but also introduces benchmarks for the whole process of comprehending the meaning of museums of natural history for the construction of national identities in general. Dias Duarte's paper skilfully describes the complex evolution of how the idea of nationhood was turned into a collective attitude towards one's own culture and how philosophy contributed to construction of 'temples' of national memories : museums. These are the reasons why this paper opens this volume.

Let us now turn to the second paper written by Michael Hitchcock. He analyses the role of the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah<sup>8</sup> near Jakarta in the post-colonial process of creating Indonesian identity. The paper strongly underlines the political aspect behind this museum's conception and the importance of the political will to impose a national message through its construction. As the entity called Indonesia is a result of a long period

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7. In the same sense, Getúlio Vargas, president and dictator of Brazil from 1930 to 1946, nationalised the samba as the national music and rhythm in the 1930s, and this with great success. Even today Brazil is associated with this typical Carioca rhythm, even if other music styles are also temporarily acknowledged as Brazilian, for example, the Bossa Nova or the Lambada.

8. It is a kind of theme park that represents Indonesia in miniature, hereafter referred to as Taman Mini.

of Dutch colonialism, it is no wonder that the perspective of a new nation state with the same name provoked a strong aversion among the different populations on Indonesian territory. Therefore a strong political will to construct a real unity out of this multi-ethnic patchwork was needed. The creation of the museum is a symbolic expression of the political determination to maintain Indonesia and build a strong nation state.

The Taman Mini is a perfect example for monumental state supported action to promote Indonesian identity to a domestic and international public. The project began during the Soeharto presidency and was far from being unanimous in the population due to its high cost. In this sense and ironically, the museum already had a unifying effect on the Indonesian population, even before being built, as it united the population through its rejection of the project, though without any success. However, when tourism became one of the major industries in Indonesia in the 1990s, the initial quarrel of the 1970s was forgotten, meaning as Michael Hitchcock remarks, that at least in the long-term, the investment into tourism seemed to have brought the expected results, an affirmation to be rethought however, after the effects on the tourism industry of the Kuta bombing in Bali two years ago.

Curiously, since the beginning, the Taman Mini project focused on an international tourist public to serve as the other who would learn and appreciate Indonesian identity, and thus help to create it by the exterior look on this country. At the same time, the museum is conceived as a place for the promotion of regional handicrafts. The Taman Mini thus develops political and economic aspects to display the Indonesian identity both to tourists and to Indonesians themselves.

Following Michael Hitchcock, the conception of the so-called Bali Museum certainly inspired the structure of the Taman Mini museum. The former shows the different regions of Bali and its typical handicraft equipment, reconstituting in one place all of Bali for visitors. This museum was conceived during the Dutch colonisation and constructed for the colonial exposition in Bali in 1914. So the idea of representing Indonesia by the provinces that constitute it might well have been set off by the Bali experience. As it relied on European expertise, there is also some European insight in the conception of Taman Mini. A movement to save the rural roots of the emerging European nation states had developed since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Museums therefore tried to recuperate the peasant lifestyle as a model for the nation and preserve its memory in a romanticised way, which obviously left out the less heroic parts of rural life. However, the project led by Mrs Soeharto did not seek authenticity of the different traditional housings of Indonesia in Taman Mini. She had everything built new for her museum<sup>9</sup>. The act of constructing new traditional houses representing the different regions of Indonesia and their lifestyle might be considered as a symbolic act of constructing something new, respecting the past in the form, but not in essence : ethnicity should be replaced by a national feeling.

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9. A country like Vietnam that has tried more recently to represent its national image to the world, has, however, opted in its Museum of the Ethnography of Vietnam, for the reconstruction of authentic houses of the main ethnic groups of Vietnam in the museum park. Though the order of presentation of the different 54 ethnic groups inside the museum follows political reasons imposed on the museum's scientific direction by the Popular Committee of Hanoi, and not the history of importance of the influence of the different groups. That's why you will find the Cham as the last group, and in a space inverted proportionally to its importance to the development of Vietnam, on the second floor. The Cham are of Chinese origin and dominated what is considered Vietnam for a long time. This makes their role for Vietnam politically delicate.



Thus Mrs Sueharto's clever answer<sup>10</sup> to the question, if the Taman Mini really could be considered a museum without any antique collections or houses, could be reinterpreted : Once Indonesia becomes a stable nation state, Taman Mini will automatically represent a museum, as it will represent a long lasting reality.

Taman Mini presents the country in such a way that most visitors will leave with a good understanding of Indonesia's political structure, as the provinces are announced more clearly than the different people who live there. Michael Hitchcock makes this plain when describing the house representing the province of Nusa Tenggara Barat. There is one house representing the whole province, but as there are several ethnic groups in the province, those considered as culturally higher are better represented. The other ethnic groups contribute to the decoration (with correct captions !), but are mixed up in the context. So it is difficult for a visitor to make any distinctions. Decisions on which objects are to be displayed rest with the provinces, which keep the selection criteria for the objects secret. We will come back later to the topic of how to interpret objects displayed in a museum exhibition with João Pacheco de Oliveira Filho's paper.

Nathalie Nyst's paper, the third chapter, is a kind of 'road movie', because it describes the long and difficult process of trying to create a museum in the Bafut province in the North-West of Cameroon, from 1993 until today. The basic questions taken up before in historic terms by Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte are reintroduced in the specific context of the collection, or better the 'treasure' of a province chief who wants to value even more his possessions by creating a museum with his 'collection'. The latter represents the identity of his people and his own personal power. The paper shows the whole range of practical problems a museum curator has to deal with when confronted with a treasure without any systematic classification, with some pieces still in use in community ritual life and where scientific considerations confront local law and power structures. This is the case here, as local objectives do not meet the logic of scientific museology.

The considerations that led to the museum project in Bafut are a mixture of different interests. It was first of all a decision by the chief (*mfor*) and his prominent advisers, one even being a professor of archaeology at Yaoundé University. They felt the urge to save the heritage that had been already piled indistinctly inside the palace for years, without any security or preservation measures. Their stated aim was to first promote Bafut, then to incite other provinces to follow and finally to push for a regional or even national cultural policy in Cameroon. Another crucial element was the presence of a community development project financed with European funds since 1982. This project focuses on the development of tourism and trains local people to become guides. A visit of the palace, including a museum showing its treasures, would have been a bonus for this project. Last but not least, such a development would contribute to the recognition of the *mfor*'s power in the province. So, once again, we are confronted here with the eminent political function of museums, as well as the economic dimension they represent for the local economy.

The project had three steps : inventory, conservation and museum maintenance. The museum had to stay inside the palace, as the pieces are intimately linked to court life and power display of the *mfor*. So, contrary to the *Museu Nacional* in Rio de Janeiro, where the palace became a museum only after the political destitution of the Emperor, and when

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10. 'We may call it a museum now because someday everything in it will be antique' cited by Michael Hitchcock (Pemberton, 1994 : 256).

he was removed from the palace, in Bafut a clear cut between the place of power and the museum would not be realised. The transformation of the treasure into a scientific collection would also be more difficult than in the Brazilian case, since private and public spheres would not be separated, in particular because some pieces would continue in official use for public ceremonies.

The difficulties for the first step of the project (and the paper does not refer to a perspective for the concretisation of either of the two other steps) are substantial. Reconstruction of the context for many pieces, an important element to correctly interpret a piece and a collection, as João Pacheco de Oliveira Filho demonstrates in his paper, is nearly impossible, greatly diminishing the scientific value of such pieces for a collection. The balancing act of saving the traditional meaning of some pieces, while simultaneously giving them the status of museum objects, becoming profane and less powerful as they are on display, is a very difficult one. Nathalie Nyst's paper offers very interesting insight on a curator's concrete problems in such circumstances.

Actually, the wish to have a museum in the European perception of the term as a symbol of local identity seems in conflict with the maintenance of traditional power structures. But turning this relation the other way around, we can say that the fact that the *mfor* manages to get an international project to study the conception of a modern museum is a great achievement in his own context, once again demonstrating his power and the importance of his province, meaning his people. In this sense, we can say that the museum project widely contributes to the display of local identity and power. The instrumentalisation of western knowledge for local purposes is well done, even if for the curator results remain below expectations. The meaning of museums might have different interpretations culturally and this paper gives us a very precise demonstration of this.

Going back to Indonesia, more precisely to New Guinea, Astrid de Hontheim's contribution analyses the transformation of ethnographic objects into pieces of art. Her paper is based on fieldwork between the Asmat and the missionaries of the Order of the Saint Cruz, the first and main protectors of this tribe. The missionaries' initiative to protect the material culture that seemed doomed to disappear is a curious process of contradictions :

1. Under the supposition that the Asmat culture will vanish, the collection of the material culture is undertaken to put the pieces in a museum where Asmat youth in the future can admire the great sculptures carved by their ancestors and learn about their identity.
2. The interdiction of the traditional Asmat ceremonies<sup>11</sup> for which the sculptures were originally made, turns the still existing ritual objects into valuable pieces of art, because the sculptures are traditionally used only once and then become useless.

From religion to art with a little help from the Church... This was also the case in Europe where the Church promoted the artists it needed for church construction and decoration, as well as aristocrats for their palaces. There was surely no organised system behind the missionaries' attitude, but analysed with a distance, a certain pattern can be distinguished. Firstly, they drained Asmat traditions from their meaning, only to

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11. The well-intentioned motivation behind the interdiction is to prevent the Asmat from their war practice, meaning hunting and cannibalising the enemy as well as preserving enemy heads.

fill this emptiness with a sense alien to the Asmat. Nine years after the creation of the ethnographic museum in Agats, an annual competition for newly-made Asmat art pieces was initiated. The selected pieces were sold in a public sale, going mostly to American collectors. This time the alleged reason to promote Asmat sculptures as pure art is to preserve the traditional carving techniques and reanimate its use among the youth. The rules are clear :

1. No contemporary subjects are to be represented, only subjects linked to Asmat life.
2. Only traditional techniques can be used.
3. In no case is the Christian religion to be incorporated in the sculptures.

It may well be that the missionaries had in mind preserving traditional carving techniques. But in fact they provoked the beginning of an international rush for Asmat art, getting very high prices on the art market – nothing compared to the prices that the craftsmen got from the missionaries. Carving activity returned nevertheless to the villages. One can say that, so far, traditional knowledge has been preserved.

It is interesting that the Shoreview museum in the USA has established, through the Order of Saint Cruz, an agreement stating that all objects in the museum are only leased from the Asmat, and must be returned. This is important, because the original owners apparently keep some kind of control over their heritage. This is rare, as we shall see in the last paper. For the Asmat, every sculpture represents a living being, and must be treated as such. So the Shoreview Museum had better take care of the sculptures. They might revenge themselves otherwise. This recalls the *hau* that Marcel Mauss (1985) describes : part of the donor goes with the gift. The *hau* must also return with a surplus to the initial donor by a counter-gift from the receiver. Seen this way, museum pieces take on another meaning, much more obliging for those who exhibit them to discover their real signification and context.

The Asmat sculptures transformed into art worth being presented in museums and art galleries conferred the status of artists to Asmat craftsmen. They do not recognise themselves in this role. But many of the collectors, like the German couple Konrad, propel them into an apprentice role by exposing them to foreign art and artists with a view to making their art progress. Indeed, the urge to educate the savages does not belong to the past.

Astrid de Hontheim's detailed analysis of the development of the Asmat's material culture in the last 25 years is a splendid illustration of what Bourdieu (1984) would have called the genesis of the Asmat art field : different actors try to dominate the scene and impose a particular vision on Asmat objects. The missionaries, first preservers, then promoters and collectors, become overruled by international collectors. In the end, Asmat pieces circulate as abstractions of their origin on the international market, out of the control and of the context in which they find their specific social signification. The symbolic fight for domination in this field is yet not over, if we consider the slow manifestations of resistance and criticism from inside the Order on the attitudes of the last twenty years and as to how to change the situation. There might be more to come to understand an Asmat sculpture in a museum in the future. The new generation is questioning the established scientific knowledge of classification of the Asmat tribes, disqualifying it as cultural genocide, which has been the case until now. So let us wait and see who will get the legitimacy to classify and categorise in future, meaning the political power to define what

is worth being in a museum and what is not. Hopefully, the already legitimised Asmat will directly take part in this discussion this time.

João Pacheco de Oliveira Filho illustrates in his paper how meaning is constructed and how one can deconstruct the so-established signification by the re-contextualisation of the object's history. His alternative approach to understand the meaning of displayed ethnic objects is both comprehensive and hermeneutic, while integrating the time of existence before the object became a museum piece. In putting an object in relation to a maximum of actors who possessed or dealt with it, hidden emotions can be understood and the object's significance enlarged. This permits what Oliveira Filho calls a polyphone comprehension, instead of the monolithic imposition of meaning by museums.

The piece Oliveira Filho proposes for his analysis is an oil painting of a Bororo boy, adopted at 7 years of age by a childless upper-class Brazilian woman that would name him Guido. Starting from this initial information, Oliveira Filho reconstructs step-by-step the family history, the social and political context of Brazil and the region where the boy was adopted. Dona Maria do Carmo, the stepmother, was the wife of the governor of Mato Grosso, and as such developed an interest in collecting material culture of indigenous people that would later become collections for the *Museu Nacional*. The most complete collection concerns the Bororó and is named Guido, after the will of Dona Maria do Carmo. Guido's portrait joined the collection only after his death.

Dona Maria do Carmo stimulated her adoptive son's natural gift for drawing, taking a pedagogical attitude towards him, hoping to later facilitate his complete integration into Brazilian society. Adoption as an institutional act of tutorship is here a metaphor for the concrete Brazilian indigenous policy of the time : the relation between mother and son represents *pars pro toto* the relation between the state and indigenous people. Unconsciously, she takes the same disciplinary posture towards her son as the state does towards its native populations. Her wish for her son's full integration stands however in clear opposition to the scientific position on the subject, previewing the distinction of the Natives, considered as inferior. Tragically, Guido's premature death confirms these scientific expectations.

The portrait is the result of a mixture of information that the anonymous Parisian painter gleaned from two pictures plus his own fertile imagination on what an adopted Native American should represent. As a museum piece on Bororó life, this portrait is therefore unsuitable unless the necessary explications concerning Guido's life and his stepmother's are provided. Even so, it has more heuristic value for understanding the dominant society of that period than the Natives' life. What Oliveira Filho demonstrates with the help of this piece is also true for any other museum piece. Only if the visitor – and this includes representatives of ethnic groups that want to reconstruct their identity or better understand their history by visiting an ethnographic museum – disposes of an object's whole story, can a given piece exercise its didactic role.

Oliveira Filho's proposition to re-contextualise museums and their collections recalls Fernand Braudel's (1979) effort to integrate into so-called official history, the history of unknown people's everyday life in order to achieve an integrated understanding of the whole historic process. In so doing, the dignity of the story told by a museum can be re-established. Simple functional explanations of ethnic objects are insufficient to understand their real meanings and can lead to misinterpretations that might have weighty political consequences. The political responsibility of museum curators must be taken

more seriously, as their legitimisation in categorising ethnic groups is a political act<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, the conception of who the public is should be reviewed, incorporating broader categories than the usual white urban visitor : to broadly inform on ethnic identities and their history produces better advised visitors, meaning more responsible citizens.

## Conclusion

The present volume offers an insight into how identities and meanings are constructed by museums. However, the problem of how to deal with the duplicity of the museum as both a scientific entity and an originator of political facts through the legitimised messages displayed to the public is difficult to solve. Oliveira Filho's proposition – a whole program to be applied – to offer more and diverse information on displayed pieces seems logical, as this empowers the public to participate in the dialogue to be established in the analysis of our past, and therefore our future. Museums run the risk of becoming instruments for telling a particular story, creating facts by abusing their legitimising function, as in the case of the *mfor*, Taman Mini and the *Museu Nacional's* ethnographic collection. Whose story do we want to tell and who has the right to contribute to the construction of knowledge ? These are questions we must ask ourselves. It cannot be that even today outsiders determine what an Asmat sculpture should represent to reach the criteria of authenticity. Should provincial authorities decide which ethnic group is higher developed than the others, by giving them preference to be exposed in more detail ? Social change must be admitted and permitted as a normal process of intercultural exchange. Authenticity and tradition mean not condemning to eternally remaining in the past. Museums must find a more dignifying way to take care of the aspect of change, giving back some of their legitimisation to the ethnic objects' original producers. Otherwise, museums will be doomed to be « places of cannibals and glass boxes », as Michael Ames has indicated.

In the beginning of this introduction I analysed the picture on the front cover of this journal. It now seems necessary to close this introduction with a few words on the choice of the picture on the back cover. It is the same location as in the cover picture, but this time seen from inside the museum. What do we see ? We see Kanazawa and its beautiful park. And that is the message of all museums. They intend to be universal, and this is sometimes shown as explicitly as by the design of the *Museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. But finally they return the public's view of itself : the ego- or ethnocentric-referred look on places, identities and meanings. The city of the Samurais and the long and glorious history of Japan as a nation becomes clearer through a universal outfit than it would have been in a style reverting to past Samurai traditions. The *Museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is thus no exception to the case studies presented here. The architect made a choice that positioned Japan, and not universality, in the centre of her message.

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12. Concerning the political aspect of being anthropologist, see also Barth, 1990, 2000.

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