
Windows to the past and the future

Tuukka Talvio 2016. *Ikkuna menneeseen ja tulevaan. Suomen kansallismuseo.* (Windows to the past and the future. The National Museum of Finland.) Museoviraston julkaisuja 7. Helsinki: Museovirasto. 374 pp. III. ISBN 978-951-616-279-2. ISSN 2243-1357.

The meaning and the activities of the National Museum of Finland are an important subject in contemporary cultural studies. The National Museum of Finland opened the first historical and ethnographical exhibition in 1916, and from the perspective of a hundred years, it is time for an evaluation. Tuukka Talvio, director of the Coin Cabinet of the National Museum of Finland, has studied the history of the cabinet and also the collectors and donors of the museum for twenty years. This book focuses on the key functions of the museum, the collecting and the exhibitions, and it belongs to a series of the history of the National Board of Antiquities of Finland. The first book of the series was published in 2016 by Visa Immonen, assistant professor at the University of Helsinki, concerning the period of the Archaeological Commission (*Tutkimuksen ja hallinnon ristiaallokossa: 2/ 1917–1972 Muinaistieteellinen toimikunta.* Museoviraston julkaisuja 3.).

Talvio points out that the history of exhibitions and collecting began before the founding of national museums in Europe, in the beginning of the 19th century. In my opinion, the book has two levels. The first is a global historical level presenting a collective view, which follows the historical events in Finland, and the second is a private level, which is included in the references, presenting the opinions of the museum workers and decision-makers (directors). *Ikkuna menneeseen ja tulevaan* serves as a reader of Finnish museology from the beginning to the future. The view of the author represents one of an “insider”, who worked in the Coin Cabinet of the National Museum since 1971, and knew both the everyday life of the museum and its history. The approach is personal, but based on a large archival material completed with the experiences of the author.

The book is divided into eleven chapters which represent eleven historical periods, an extensive bibliography and an index of persons. The first sections explain the sources of the collections, offering an opportunity to the interpretation of the Ethnographic Museum founded by the Imperial Alexander University in Helsinki. In the beginning, it meant a collection of curiosities, the donations of admiral Adolf Arvid Etholén from the aborigines of Russian Alaska in 1829, 1834 and 1846. Nonetheless, there was only one item from Finland, a Sámi cradle. The problematical meaning of the ethnographical collections has been discussed by Leila Koivunen (2015) in her book *Eksoisoidut esineet ja avartuva maailma. Euroopan ulkopuoliset kulttuurit näytteillä Suomessa 1870–1920-luvuilla.* (*Exoticised Objects and the Widening World: Non-European Cultures on Display in Finland between the 1870s and the 1910s.*) Talvio emphasizes how the focus of the ethnographical collections changed as a result of the growing Finnish material. At the background, the financial conditions played an important role. The first exhibition, opened in 1872, had to present Finnish history and way of life from the prehistorical times to the ethnographical present.

In the 1850s, national museums were founded in different parts of Europe as cultural institutions in a range of contrasting national contexts. In the Swedish example, the Finnish student’s nations began to collect traditional objects, principally folk dresses, for the first Finnish exhibition in 1876. At the same time, the meaning of the future national museum was discussed. Johan Reinhold Aspelin, Professor of Archaeology and director of the museum, emphasized that the National Museum of Finland would present Finnish history, culture and life, which would include the traditional culture of kindred people, the Finno-Ugrian peoples living in Russia, too. After the legislation for the protection of cultural heritage was passed in 1884, the process of founding the National Museum was speeded up and took place in 1893.

The building of the National Museum of Finland represents national architecture and refers to the Finnish past, which is suggested by the

frescoes by Akseli Gallen-Kallela on themes of the Kalevala epic. From a spatial point of view, the National Museum is problematic. The museum building itself was and still is an artefact, but at the same time the National Museum has included many spaces. From the beginning, it has included the Seurasaari Open-Air Museum and many others, such as the Museum of Cultures, the Maritime Museum of Finland, the Häme Castle etc. As a multispace, the museum has also meant a workplace without borders. Talvio remarks the gendered role of the keepers and curators; in the beginning, the female workers were collaborators and worked as assistants and drawers.

The permanent exhibition opened in 1916 presented the history of Finland and the traditional culture of Finnish and Swedish people, reflecting the influence of exhibitions from Germany, Scandinavia, Russia and Central Europe. From an ethnological point of view, the book offers many detailed instances of interpretation of the meaning of national culture. By a citizen's initiative, U.T. Sirelius, head of ethnography, realized a Kalevala room, including busts of Kalevala singers, national musical instruments and magic items, to represent the heroic Finnish past, the time of Kalevala. The Kalevala room existed until the 1960s.

During the Second World War, the museum evacuated the most valuable collections in 1939, but it stayed open, and even organized exhibitions. After the war, the museum opened immediately in March 1946. The permanent exhibition was renewed, but without any discussion about the contents. The idea emphasized by U.T. Sirelius in 1916, "to present the collections reflecting the history and the culture of the country and its habitants", became an "official" principle of the National Museum. The curators of the museum joined the key activities of the museum, the research and the exhibitions. The protection of cultural heritage became more and more actual in the 1970s, and in 1972 the National Board of Antiquities, the center of Finnish museums, was established, and the National Museum became

one of its departments, the task of which was the exhibition activity. It was time to treat the history of independent Finland from the point of view of political movements, wellbeing and equality. Talvio lists the different exhibitions, and at the same time he notes the changes in the organization. His personal opinion seems to remain only at the background. After the Second World War, the task of the museum was clear: to represent the Finnish past and traditional way of life. Since the 1990s, the museum has been reorganized and has moved away from the traditional model. Now, the museum offers exhibitions, information, a sphere of experiences and some kinds of performances, too.

The book offers many detailed points about the museum's exhibitions and the organisation. When discussing the permanent ethnographical exhibition, Talvio uses the concept of "way of life" where material culture is dominant. In my view, the author himself does not problematize the discourse of national or traditional culture. Talvio describes the facts, but the interpretation and analytic perspective remains the task of the reader. The image of the unchanging character of national or traditional culture has been reflected in the changing exhibitions, too, in which there was a possibility to present more current perspectives. Talvio calls attention to the other key function of the museum, the collecting. The book exposes the many meanings of collections, the different perspectives taken by different cultures and the institutional responses to the collecting problem.

The book is very richly illustrated, containing 80 pictures from the National Board of Antiquities' picture collections. It includes a large collection of personnel, curators, keepers and directors, and some glimpses of the exhibitions. The book is very useful for finding many current sources about the museum sphere in Finland, values regarding the national self-image, collecting and administration models.

Ildikó Lehtinen