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Archaeological and Ethnographical Collections from the Americas in the National Museum of Denmark: From the Royal Kunstkammer in the 17th century to the Present Day – An Overview

The purpose of this paper is to present the background of the Danish archaeological and ethnographical collections in the National Museum of Denmark. The Renaissance's interest in antiquity boosted geographic discoveries and an increased understanding of different societies and cultures around the world, which surprised explorers. As a result, an intense trade in exotic objects began. In Europe, princes, nobles, and scholars installed collections of antiquities and works of art in their mansions, comprising objects of all kinds, including samples of nature (zoological, botanical and geological) and ethnographic pieces. In this way, European museums have become part of the identity of multiple nations.

Museum Wormianum

Ole Worm (1588–1654) was a professor of medicine whose research interests led him to establish a collection primarily intended for use in teaching. Some of these objects were collected during his frequent travels to Italy, the Netherlands and Germany with visits to researchers and collectors and provided the basis for his collection, which became the Museum Wormianum. He was the first to create order by dividing the objects into groups. The collection comprises mainly natural specimens, which were duly classified into mineral, botanical, and zoological kingdoms. Among these specimens are fossils of very well-preserved plants,

bones, turtle shells, as well as all kinds of curiosities (Fig. 1). The collection also includes works of art and ethnographic artefacts, which supplemented his teaching and demonstrated his interest in antiques.

A contemporary source from 1654 reports on the contents and popularity of this particular Kunstkammer: "…in which is found and can be examined with wonder, odd and curiosities and things among which a large part has not been seen before, and many royal persons and envoys visiting Copenhagen ask to see the museum on account of its great fame and what relates from foreign lands, and they wonder and marvel at what they see. As evidence of their having seen it they testify with their own hand in a book remaining with him" (Dam-Mikkelsen, Lundbæk 1980: XI).

Ole Worm's greatest achievement was the publication of Memoirs about the Wormianum Museum, which was edited one year after his death in 1655. An important work in early European museum literature, it was written in Latin and printed in Leiden and Amsterdam (Worm 1655). The text is divided into four books: the first three deal with minerals, plants, and animals, while the fourth deals with manufactured objects, including archaeological and ethnographic artifacts, ancient coins, and original works of art. According to Ole Worm's own words, the work includes only the objects and samples that were part of the collection at that time. It is not simply a catalogue, but a scholarly work containing references and quotations from other writers. After Ole Worm's death, the collection was purchased by Frederik III and, in 1655, it was transferred to Copenhagen Castle, where it stood out in the Royal Kunstkammer (Lundbæk, Dehn Nielsen 1979).

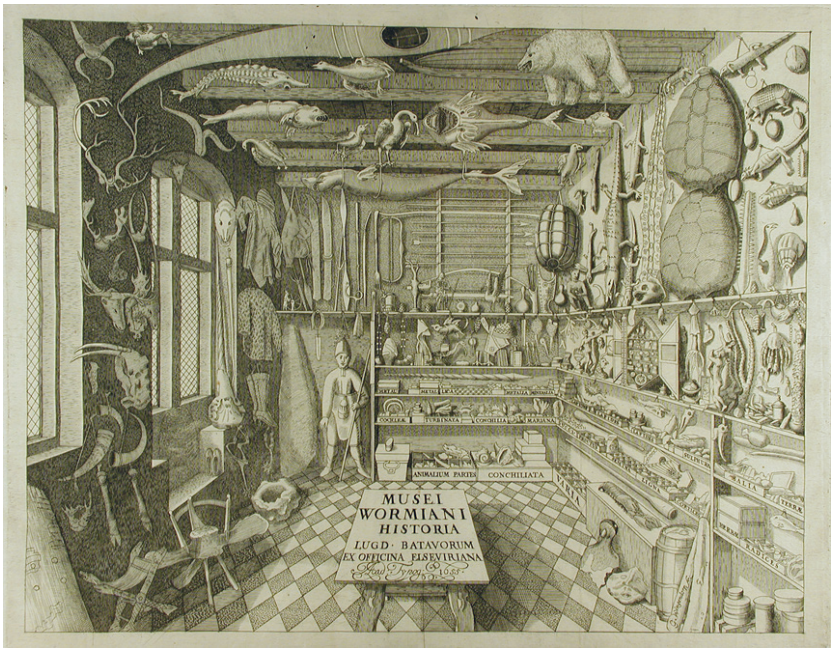


Fig. 1. Museum Wormianum. Title cover of the Folio edition

The Royal Kunstkammer ca. 1680–1825

Shortly after his appointment as Danish king, around 1650, King Frederik III established the Royal Danish Kunstkammer, a substantial collection housed in Copenhagen Castle and later transferred to „Kunstkammerbygningen" (Fig. 2). The Royal Kunstkammer displayed stuffed animals in simulated natural environments, historical specimens, as well as precious items made of gold, silver, and ivory. It also contained works of art from the classical civilizations of the Mediterranean and Nordic antiquity, and artifacts brought from the eastern and overseas colonies (Serampore and Tranquebar in India), as well as from the Catholic period of the Danish Church (Dam-Mikkelsen, Lundbæk 1980: XV).

A major acquisition of the Kunstkammer in the 17th Century, was a collection donated by Prince Johann Moritz von Nassau-Siegen, The Netherlands. In 1638, Prince Johann Moritz von Nassau became governor of the Dutch West India Company on the eastern side of the northern Brazil, a position he held until 1644. He took scientists and painters with him, whose work made the first major contribution to scientific knowledge of Brazil. Upon his return to the Netherlands, he brought with him a large collection of Amerindian artifacts, as well as numerous specimens of mammals, fish, and birds, carved ivory furniture and statues. An English author once described him as a "humanist Prince in the New World" (Boogaart 1979).

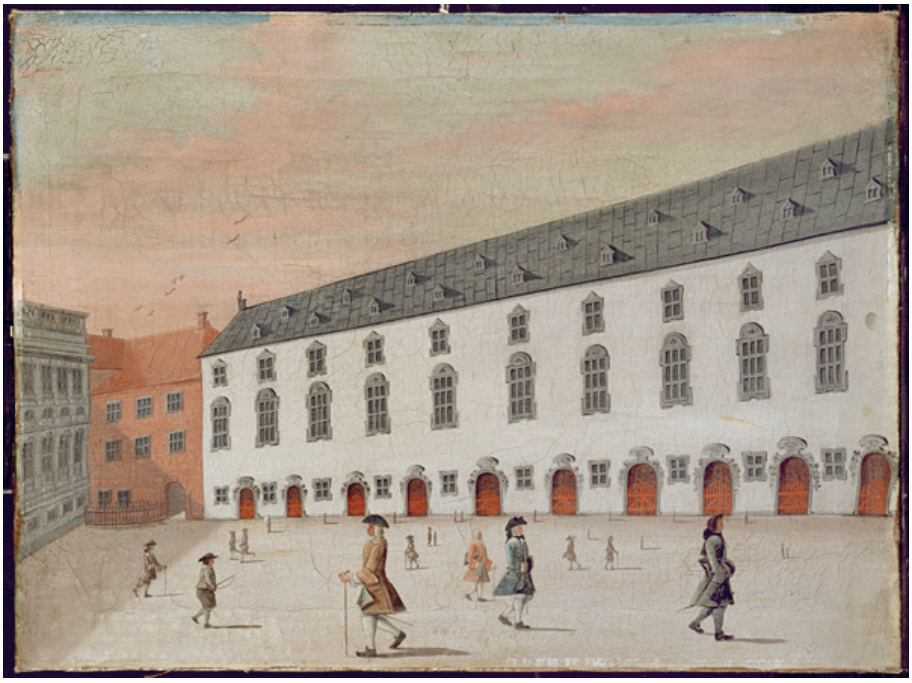
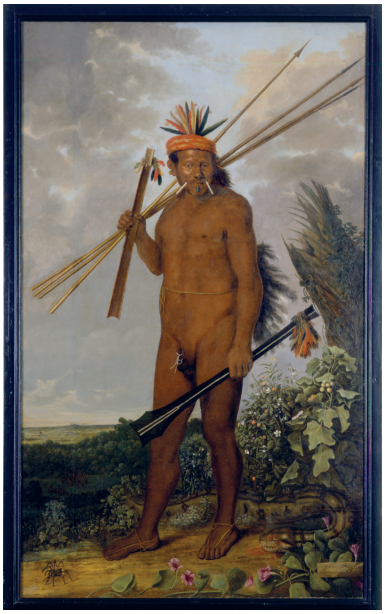


Fig. 2. Kunstkammer building, c. mid-18th century. Painting by Johannes Rach and Heinrich Eegberg, c. 1748–1750

King Frederick III heard about Brazil through the tales of Jakob Jensen Nordmand, who had spent five years serving as a soldier and working as a talented ivory carver in Dutch Brazil (Bering-Lissberg 1893). As a cousin of Prince Johann Moritz von Nassau, the King expressed his wish to expand his collection with Braziliana. In his 1654 letter of bequest, Johann Moritz donated 26 oil paintings, most of which were by Albert Eckhout, to his cousin. In return, the King bestowed him the Order of the White Elephant (Boogaart 1979).

Albert Eckhout was the first artist to paint life-size portraits of the indigenous people, and these paintings have been admired ever since they were created in the Netherlands based on many sketches made in Recife. The main paintings are the eight life-sized human representations of the inhabitants of Dutch Brazil and twelve still-lifes of tropical fruits. They are all currently housed in the Ethnography Department of the National Museum of Denmark. The eight individuals are four pairs representing the four "exotic" ethnic groups encountered by the Dutch in Brazil: two Indian tribes (a Tarairiu/Tapuya man and woman, and a Tupi man and woman); two individuals of mixed origin (a mameluco woman and a mulatto); and an African man and woman. It is said that Johann Moritz wished to tell his contemporaries not only about the society he was in charge of, but also about the contrast between the wilderness and savagery of the interior and the cultivated, civilized coastal areas. Boogaart argues that Eckhout's series conveys the following message: "These are our Tupi, blacks, mulattos and mestizos, recruits to civilization who show some promise; and those are the Tarairiu, our irredeemable, infernal allies" (Boogaart 1979: 303).



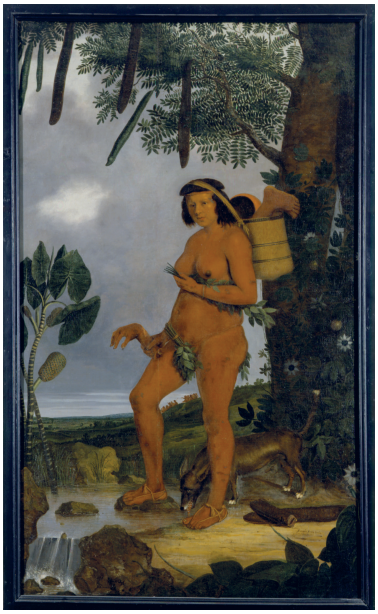


Fig. 3–4. Tarairiu pair. Albert Eckhout, ca. 1641–1644

The Tarairiu were seasonal slash-and-burn farmers who spent part of the year hunting and gathering in the Rio Grande hinterland. They practiced cannibalism within certain religious rites. Although Eckhout usually depicted reality accurately, it is unlikely that the Tarairiu woman would have carried severed limbs around in this way. The pair is painted in an uncultivated landscape, with a group of warriors in the background. The vegetation includes a Cassia grandis tree, a Lantana camara, white *Himatanthus bracteate* flowers and red *Ipomoea-pes-caprae* flowers. Behind the man's feet lies a killed boa constrictor, one of the world's largest and most dangerous snakes, and a bird spider struts around at the front. Another Eckhout's painting shows dancing Tarariu men with spears and feather ornaments and two women standing on the right side blowing sounds with their noses (Fig. 5).

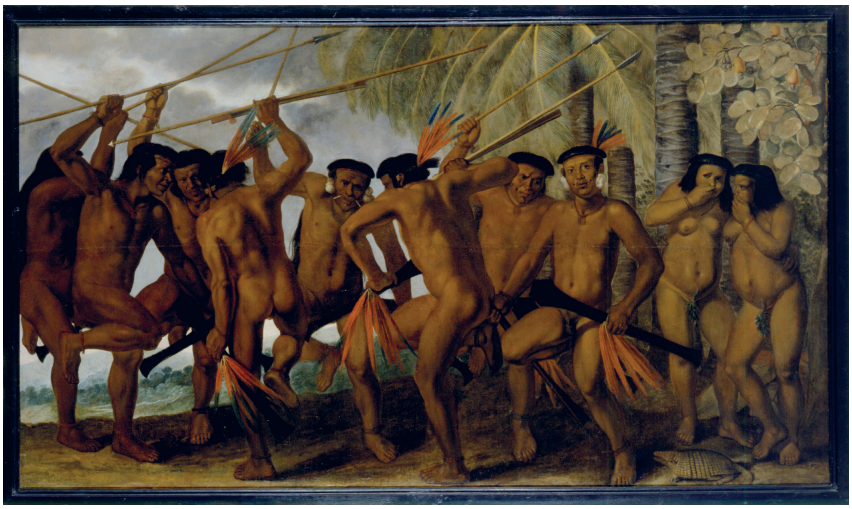
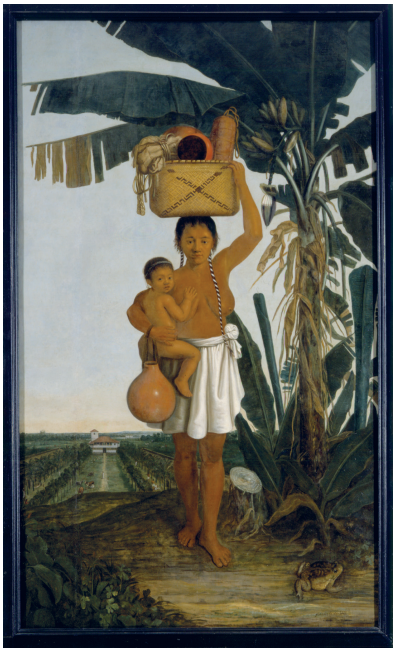


Fig. 5. Tarairiu men dancing. Albert Eckhout, ca. 1641–1644

The Tupi-Tupinamba were slash-and-burn farmers who grew manioc and maize as their most important crops. Their religious practices also involved cannibalism. At that time, many Tupi worked on European plantations and many of them converted to Christianity. The Tupi woman wears her hair short at the front, with long plaits extending below the waist and tied with a white cord. This hairstyle was similar in pre-European times. She wears a short skirt made of European cotton cloth and stands beside a banana tree, while a toad jumps out of the picture. The poisonous skin of the toad was used by the indigenous groups and African slaves alike. On the left corner, there is a typical European colonial house surrounded by fruit trees, palms, and grazing cows. The Tupi man wears European shorts and carries a European metal knife. Knives and pearls were favoured items of trade with the indigenous groups, as were mirrors. He holds a long bow and different kinds of arrows for hunting birds and mammals. To the right is manioc, the most important native crop.



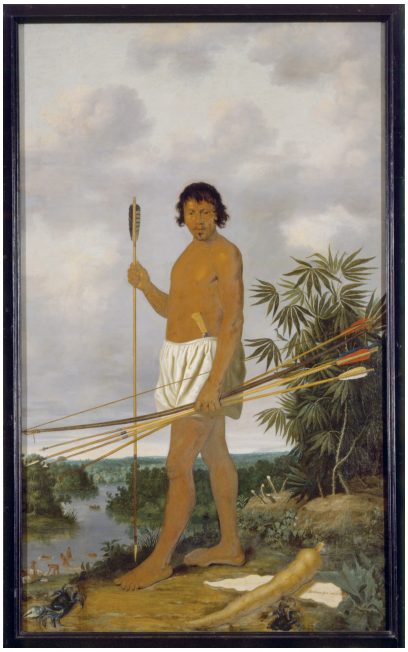
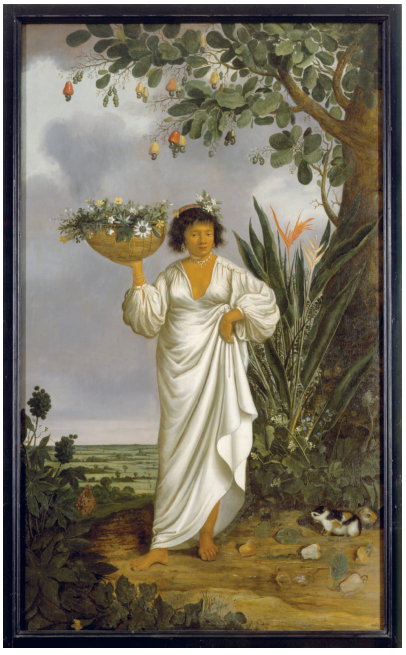


Fig. 6–7. Tupi woman and man. Albert Eckhout, ca. 1641–1644



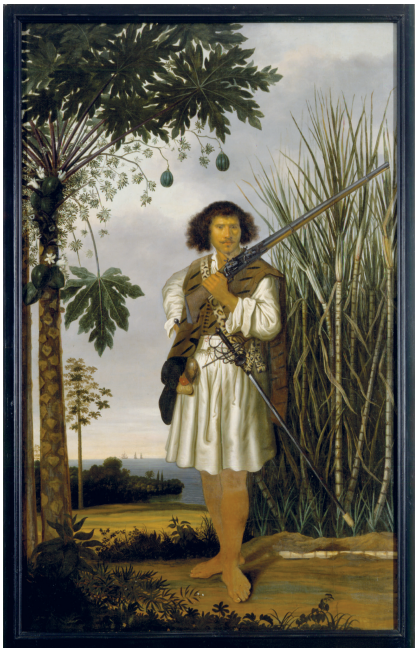
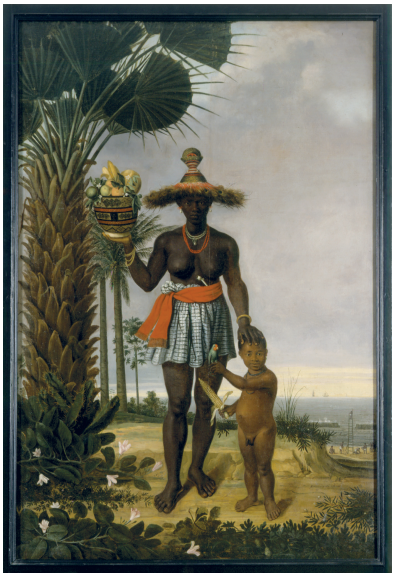


Fig. 8–9. Mameluco woman and Mulatto man. Albert Eckhout, ca. 1641–1644

Both the woman and the man are of mixed origin and wear European clothing but are barefoot. The woman is a so-called mameluco, a term used to describe the offspring of a Dutch or Portuguese man and an indigenous woman. They were highly regarded, and many rose to higher social levels through marriage. The mameluco wears a fine-quality, long white European dress and a pearl necklace. Two guinea pigs play around at the foot of a cashew tree. The ripening of the dibble cashew nut was used by the indigenous people to measure time. It was once thought that the domesticated guinea pig originated in Brazil because the first description of the animal was provided by one of the scientists employed by Johann Moritz. However, it actually comes from Peru. The Dutch were the first to bring guinea pigs to Europe.

The mulatto man is the offspring of a Portuguese man and an African slave woman. He is wearing a European uniform, and a band of jaguar skin holds a rapier with a maize cob protecting the tip. This weapon was issued to lower-rank soldiers. On the soldier's left side, at the rear, is sugar cane, which was Brazil's most important cash crop to be traded and shipped to Europe.



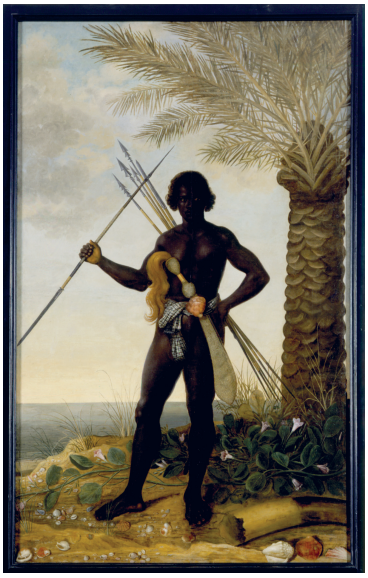


Fig. 10–11. African woman and man. Albert Eckhout, ca. 1641–1644

The last two paintings in the set depict the African population. Around 1640, at the time of Johann Moritz' governorship, the Dutch West India Company had conquered the most important Portuguese strongholds on the west coast of Africa. Consequently, there was no shortage of African slaves in the plantations, and the sugar mills could not have operated without them. Sugar formed part of the triangular trade route with manufactured goods flowing from Europe to Africa, slaves from Africa to South America and the West Indies, and sugar from the West Indies and South America back to Europe.

The African woman was probably a slave who was brought from Angola. Her woven blue and white skirt match the loin cloth worn by the African man, and a typical Dutch clay pipe from the period is tucked into her red sash. The jewellery is the kind that any European woman might have put on. The woman's left-hand rests on the head of a small, naked boy of about five years old. He is holding a toasted corncob in his right hand, and a lovebird is perched on his left. The lovebird is an African species and may also have come from Angola.

A watchman stands at the top, looking out for fish. Meanwhile, the fishermen on the beach are arranging their nets. Four sailing ships can be seen at sea four sailing ships, and a small canoe is inside the reef, away from the heavy surf. The African man wears a loincloth matching the African woman's skirt. Stuck into his waistband are a sword with a horsetail tassel at the end and a bundle of spears with iron heads. This type of sword was used in the Fetu Kingdom on the Gold Coast and was a symbol of the unity of the state and the authority of the King. However, it looks out of place on this almost naked man, who was probably an imported slave. However, instead of portraying Africans as slaves, Eckhout depicted them with prestigious objects, which had likely been borrowed from Johann Moritz's ethnographic collections. Similar, if not the same, objects can be found in the National Museum of Denmark.

The African man is standing under a date palm that was introduced from Africa. The elephant tusk at the bottom right refers to the large quantities of ivory shipped from West Africa to Brazil, where it was carved into furniture and subsequently exported to the Netherlands. Ivory was the second most valuable traded item after slaves from West Africa to Brazil. Jakob Jensen Nordman was an expert ivory carver.

Alongside the paintings, several feather ornaments, headdresses, and feather cloaks were perhaps among the Brazilian curiosities that Prince Johann Moritz von Nassau-Siegen gave to his cousin. These items probably belonged to the same shipment as the paintings. The Danish National Museum has several cloaks made from ibis feathers. Recently, one of these was donated to the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, as the Tupi descendants claim that it is one of the most important symbols of their identity (Fig. 12–13).

In the 17th century, the Tupinamba were extremely fond of ibises and organized yearly expeditions to hunt them and collect their feathers, which they then used to make these beautiful ornaments. However, the birds later began to die out, so the Tupinamba started breeding them in their chicken yards. Nevertheless, the number of ibis feathers that the Indians could collect probably could not meet their needs, which is why they began to replace them with feathers from various other birds, as well as from white chickens that the Europeans brought them. They painted the latter red (Métraux 1948).

In this way, Denmark acquired a share of the Dutch-Brazilian 17th century colonization, which still represents the most valuable part of the South American collection in the Ethnographic Department of the National Museum of Denmark (Schjellerup 1991; 2002).

Fig. 12. Cloak made of ibis feathers. European explorers described feathered ornaments as early as the time of their "discovery" of Brazil in 1500

Fig. 13. Feather crown made from the tail feathers of an ara parrot

The earliest inventory of the Royal Kunstkammer

The earliest inventory of the Royal Kunstkammer dates from 1674 and is the only one known record of the collection from when it was kept in the Copenhagen Castle. It is a short list demonstrating that the collection was displayed according to the following principles: the first room was dedicated to "Heroes", the second to "Antiques", the third was the "Indian Chamber" with collections mainly from China and East India, the fourth, "Artificial room", contained a collection of man-made objects in all materials, and finally the "Natural chamber" displayed natural objects.

The first printed edition of the inventory, entitled "Museum Regium", was published in 1696, and this edition included a large number of illustrations (Jacobæus 1696). The purpose of the publications was to demonstrate the intellectual vocation of the Danish monarch to European princes and scholars, thereby justifying Denmark's reputation as a European cultural centre. In 1737 the Danish Kunstkammer had a collection of almost 4,000 specimens (Gundestrup 1981).

Another landmark event in the history of the ethnographic collection of the Museum was the incorporation of the Gottorp Kunstkammer into the Royal Kunstkammer (Fig. 14). The Kunstkammer of the Duke of Gottorp was a large

collection containing ethnographica. The reason was the defeat of Gottorp under the Northern War (1700–1721), but the actual transfer did not take place until 1750–1751 (Dam-Mikkelsen, Lundbæk 1980: XXXIII).

From antiquity up until the 18th century, Europeans believed that if you traveled far enough into the vast, mysterious continents, you might encounter the strangest creatures. One such being, according to widespread belief, was the Akephal — a headless figure with eyes, a nose, and a mouth on its chest (from the Greek *aképhalos*, meaning "headless"). In the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities in Copenhagen, a small figure of an Akephal was on display (Fig. 15). A 1737 inventory describes it as an "Indian idol", though it is unclear whether this refers to origins in East India or South America. It was mentioned as "Atabaliba" associated with Atahualpa, the latest Inca ruler. Once it was realized that it was an early example of European misconceptions, it was almost discarded as "unworthy of the museum"!

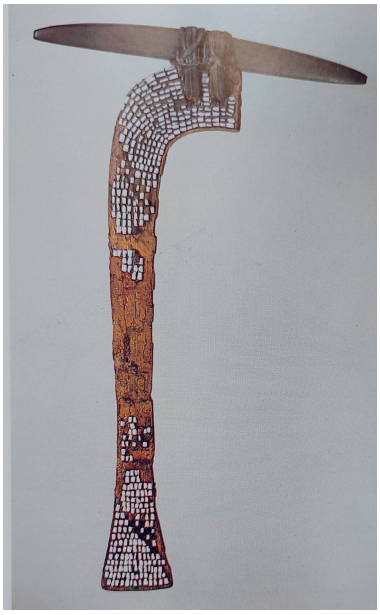


Fig. 14. Iroquois tomahawk adorned with shells and glass beads. First half of the 17th century. From the Gottorp Castle Collection

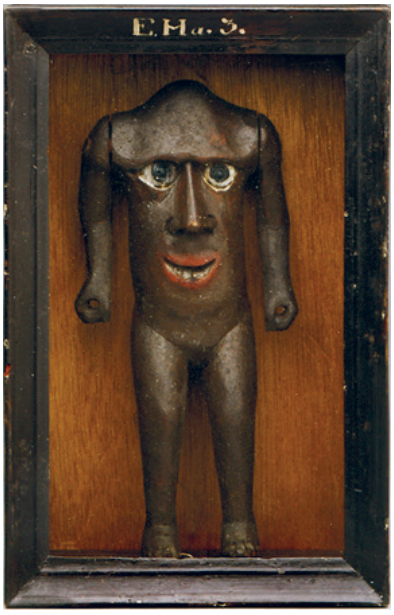


Fig. 15. The Akephal described as an "Indian Idol"

From Kunstkammer to Kunstmuseum to Department of Ethnography

However, interest changed with the ideas of the Enlightenment era, and the concept of the variety and disciplinary heterogeneity of Kunstkammer samples became unfashionable. Society as a whole, not just princes and scholars, had a growing interest in and curiosity about the world, which allowed research in archaeology and cultural history to develop. This led to a growing demand for new museums with specialized and varied exhibitions. Consequently, a whole new approach to collections making emerged in the 19th century.

In the 1820s a reorganization of the entire Kunstkammer took place and a newly opened collection was named Kunstmuseet which included ethnographical artifacts. The collection was now divided into regions, each represented by a capital letter, for example, H stood for America. It is this division from the 1820s and the principles behind it that still form part of the basis for museum objects in the Department of Ethnography to this day. In 1839, Christian Thomsen became Director of Kunstmuseet, where he worked alongside the art historian N.L. Høyen, who headed the Royal Picture Gallery. Using collections from the former Royal Kunstkammer, Thomsen created the world's first general ethnographic museum Etnografisk Musæum (in 1841), and the Antik-Cabinett (Antique Collection) (in 1851). He was also the first scholar to divide antiquity into the Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages (Fig. 16). When the Galathea Expedition was planned, he ordered that collections be made wherever possible. In this way, the Ethnographic Department acquired a significant collection of Peruvian pottery, mainly from the Chimú civilization (800–1470 CE) (Schjellerup 1986).

Other expeditions took place over the following centuries. Most of the archaeological collections from the West Indies were excavated by the Dano-Dutch Expedition of 1922–1923, led by Danish archaeologists Gudmund Hatt and Mrs. Emilie Demant Hatt and the Dutch anthropologist Professor J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong. During the nine months of the expedition, they excavated no fewer than 30 different locations, including the indigenous settlement at Salt River Bay on St. Croix. This was the place that Columbus visited on his second voyage in 1493.

During the initial excavations, Gudmund Hatt collected almost every object he found. However, transporting such large quantities of finds to Denmark became prohibitively expensive, so he only kept the most interesting pieces. He often broke off the handles and ornaments of the pots, discarding the rest. As a result, Gudmund Hatt's collection contains hundreds of severed handles, but few intact bowls and pots from the Virgin Islands. Was this a respectful way to treat the cultural heritage of others? While we might not think so today, it was not unusual during Gudmund Hatt's time.

By the end of the expedition, Gudmund Hatt had sent approximately 22 m^3 of archaeological material back to the National Museum in Denmark, comprising around 4,600 registration numbers covering over 20,000 objects. The collection includes items ranging from axes and bowls to large carved rocks. It also includes human skeletal material (National Museum of Denmark *s.d.*).

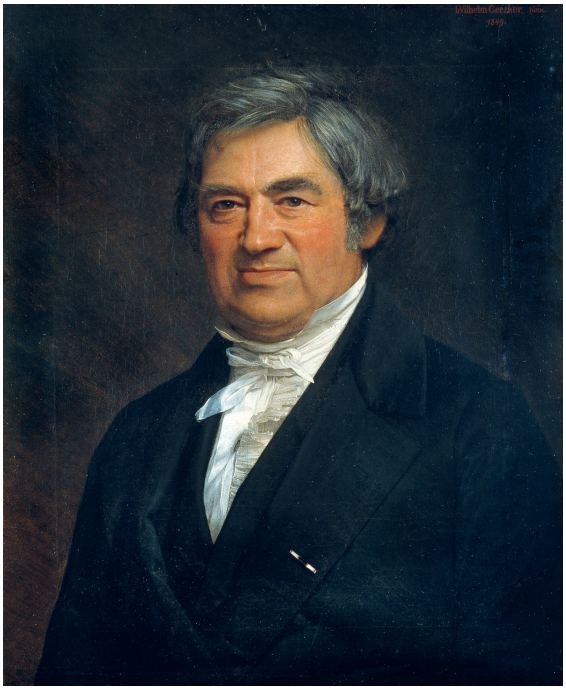


Fig. 16. Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865). One of Denmark's most famous museum organizers

Frans Blom

During the winter of 1922–1923, Frans Blom worked in Palenque with the aim of preserving the ruins. The following summer, he visited Denmark and donated some of his finds to the National Museum. He then received formal training in archaeology, studying at Harvard University under Alfred Tozzer for two semesters. His big breakthrough came after the Department of Middle American Research was established at Tulane University in New Orleans in 1924 (Fig. 17).

Accompanied by the ethnologist Oliver La Farge, he carried out a landmark expedition that touched on La Venta and Villa Hermosa (sites of the Olmec culture), Palenque again and several other ruins in Chiapas, and finally Guatemala. His archaeologically and ethnologically rich account was published in "Tribes and Temples" Vol. I and II (New Orleans 1926–1927). Gertrude "Trudi" Duby, his second wife, was his unfailing support and travelling companion for the rest of his life. In 1950, the couple acquired a very large house on the outer edge of San Christóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, which they converted into a research centre for interested visitors, mainly archaeologists, ethnologists, and students from the United States. From here, from "Na Bolom"—meaning "House of Flowers or the Jaguar"—the couple undertook countless large and small expeditions, especially

in eastern Chiapas. The most important published result of these was "La Selva Lacandona" (Mexico City 1955–1957). More importantly, over the years, the two selflessly helped the Lacandons in their fight against hunger, disease, and abuse in a completely unique way (Leifer, Nielsen, Reunert 2002).

Fig. 17. Frans Blom leaning on Stela 2 at Uaxactún, 1924

Artifacts from Mexico

In the Nationalmuseum, we have two extremely rare Mexican wooden masks adorned with turquoise and shell mosaics. One represents Tlaloc, the Rain God, who is recognizable by his large fangs. The other is in the form of a snake's head with a human head in its jaws, representing Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, and many other objects (Fig. 18) (Nielsen, Domenici 2019).

Another important Mexican artefact is a manuscript written on agave paper, around 1600. It recounts the history of the city of Xochitepec, also known as "Flower Mountain", and its rulers (Fig. 19) (Nielsen, Helmke 2016). Contributors to these collections from Central America included C.G.G. Anderberg, former Swedish consul general in Mexico; Nellie Busch; Bodil Christensen of Mexico City; Harald Holsten; and Frans Blom.

Fig 18. Mexican mask

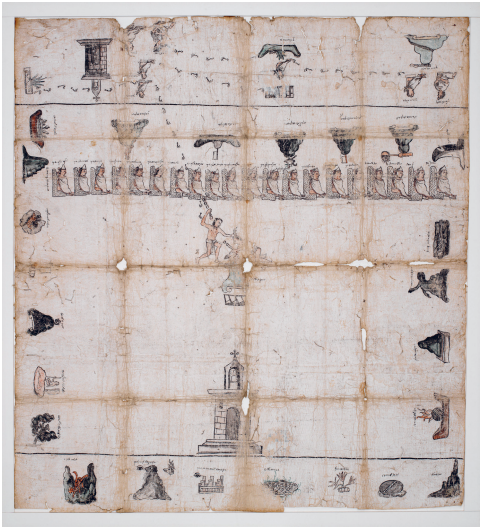


Fig. 19. Mexican manuscript

Artifacts from Ecuador

The pottery collections were mainly donated by H.F. Vorbeck of Quito and A. Zeuthen of Manta. Paul Bergsøe donated most of the gold and copper objects, which formed the basis of his fundamental pioneering research of indigenous metallurgy. Among other things, he proved that the pre-Columbian peoples of Ecuador and Colombia were the first to use native platinum (Fig. 20).

Jens Yde (1906–1976) and Niels Fock (1927–2020), who were curators in the Ethnographic department, undertook several expeditions to British Guiana (1954–1955) and Brazil (1958–1959). Thanks to their efforts, the National Museum has large ethnographic collections, particularly from the Waiwai people.

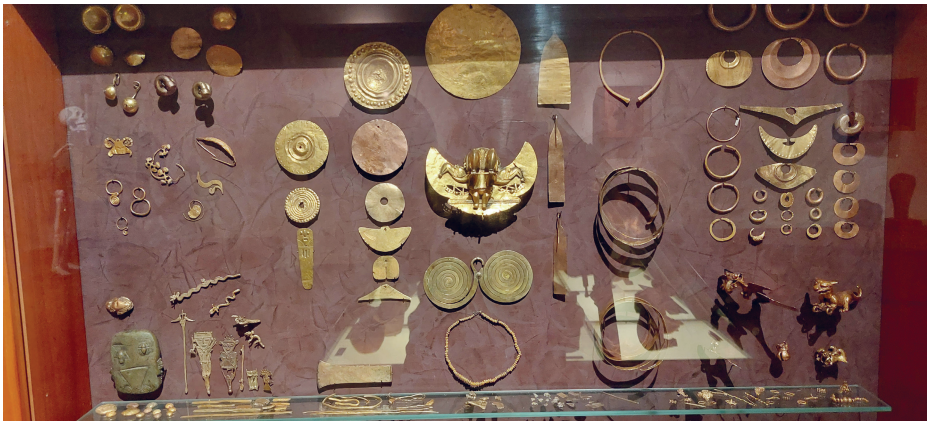


Fig. 20. The gold and platinum artefacts analysed by Paul Bergsøe

Artifacts from Peru

Finally, I would like to mention our Museum's Peruvian collections. The very first Peruvian artefacts to reach Denmark were brought to Copenhagen on board the Danish frigate Bellona, which was commissioned in 1840 to navigate the southern and western shores of South America. The Bellona's expedition to South America is largely forgotten now, but it was a major event at that time. The poet H.C. Andersen was himself on board the ship from Copenhagen to Elsinore and wrote a poem for the occasion. He praises the Danes' new heroic efforts: "bring the land of Columbus the proud Danish flag" (Lorch 1980). Before departure, the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries had asked the ship's chaplain, Dines Pontoppidan, to try to acquire archaeological objects during the journey. His success was reported in the learned society's annual report: "the chaplain Mr Pontoppidan was so lucky to obtain and bring back five ancient Peruvian vessels together with a bird figure in clay; all of the objects have been found in burial mounds near Lima" (Pontoppidan 1841). The vessels mentioned are from the Chancay culture, but, funny enough, two small monkey figures—also acquired by Pontoppidan—are fake.

Most of the Peruvian archaeological and ethnographic collections were acquired from sailors and Danish visitors or bought at auctions, many of them do not have a proper record of provenance.

Many of the textiles originate from the Grezer and Gafrons collections, which were acquired by the National Museum in 1922 (Bjerregaard, Schjellerup 2002).

Conclusion

Today, the National Museum of Denmark possesses one of the world's largest collections of artefacts, with 200,000 ethnographic objects and 260,000 archaeological artefacts from around the globe. Unfortunately, the current focus seems to be too much on our own past, with the Vikings being the main topic. Just recently the directors of the museum have decided to close the Ethnographic exhibitions in the museum, which seems to be the end of more than several hundreds of years of global interest in other civilizations.

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SUMMARY

Archaeological and Ethnographical Collections from the Americas in the National Museum of Denmark, from the Royal Kunstkammer in the 17th Century to the Present Day – An Overview

This article provides an overview of the history of the American collections from the Copenhagen Kunstkammer (1650–1820). Owing to the foresight of court officials, the collection's valuable materials were preserved rather than dispersed after the Kunstkammer's dissolution. Once regarded merely as curiosities, these objects were later systematically classified by type and place of origin, forming the foundation of what would become the Ethnographical Department of the National Museum of Denmark.

Keywords: The National Museum of Denmark, Museum Worminanum, Kunstkammer, Collectors and collections from the Americas