

The dark side of Mexico's National museum of Anthropology

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Introduction

This article discusses aspects that are not seen in exhibition halls, perhaps the only thing that is not admired, and what, for some, is unlikely to exist. For the visitor it seems impossible that there could exist more objects than those that are seen while passing through the exhibition rooms, and it is a temerarious task because it deals precisely with what is invisible. We are going to unravel the mystery of the collections.

The National Museum of Anthropology (NMA) is an icon of the museums in Mexico and has characteristic fame and popularity. In this article, we are going to uncover what is less known to the public. Museums are normally evaluated by the attendance to the permanent and temporary exhibitions, for its' installations, for the store and cafeteria. A museum is never judged by its' archive because, in general, it is inaccessible to the public.

In the heart of the National Museum of Anthropology there are two collections: the archeological and the ethnographic collections. This article is developed around the latter. The collection has around 60,000 objects that are investigated ethnographically. Since the founding in 1964, ethnographic researchers concentrated on consolidating the collection, filling many thematic gaps for the permanent exhibition rooms. We actually confront the question of how we manage our collection and information. For this reason, we consider it necessary to study what other ethnographic museums do. The British Museum, that was founded in 1753, has a superior collection of about 8 million objects, and 44 percent of the collection is available online. The *Fünf Kontinente* Museum in Munich, Germany, that was founded in 1862, has about 90 percent of its collection available online. The Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, Canada has around 93,500 in its collection, and 38,000 objects are online, which represents 40 percent of the total collection. The National Museum of Anthropology (NMA) has around 150,000 objects and there are only 491 objects available through the online catalogue, about 0.3% of the total number of objects found in the museum. Each museum prioritizes certain areas and tasks that reflect its' internal politics and goals.

In all the museums of the world there is an evident tendency to make collections available online. These actions change the way in which museums in Mexico operate significantly, especially the Museum of Anthropology. Coming out of the shadows requires us to arduously register each object so that it can be made available to the public. This inertia has caused the museum to make decisions and confront actions.

The National Museum of Anthropology (NMA) is one of the most interesting museums to analyze how to look towards the future despite a past that reverts it to nationalism and closed forms of working. It is necessary to transform the channels in which a museum communicates with the public. The exhibitions are not the only way to reach the community, and, more and more, there is a demand to use

the internet in order to reach larger audiences; although, we cannot forget the reality that not everyone in Mexico has access to internet¹.

Globalization is not a process that only goes in a one-way direction; it is a flow of images, information and influences that goes in - at least - two directions. The countries and cities of the world are profoundly multicultural; the ethnic groups and cultures intertwine living side by side. In effect, museums are a reflection of this global and multicultural reality that is in an unsettled process. All of this has forced a new definition of the intimate aspects of the mission of a museum, especially its interaction with others and its' relationship with the daily work done inside it. We are not witnessing a unified global culture; we are witnessing a fragmentation of cultural forms.¹ The established identities and forms of life rooted in local and cultural communities are giving way to new types of identities made from previous sources of cultural contradictions.²

It is necessary to affirm the way in which global interconnections have been converted to the central issue of museums today. Globalization and the changes in natural communication have created environments in which museums should adapt themselves to and take advantage of. There is a negative side to globalization that generates inequalities and gaps that at least are maintained or, in some cases, worsened. However, the positive side is that in can increase access to archives and the use of new technologies to endorse the preservation and voice of the cultural patrimony of Mexican indigenous communities in order to create a new imagined community seen from the global village.

Our institution should transform itself so that it takes advantage of the benefits of globalization while looking towards building an image of the social and political changes that are in process. The museums should be inspirational bodies of the role that our traditions should

¹In Mexico, only 51% of the population has access to internet according to data from the Mexican Association of Internet (Asociación Mexicana de Internet) <https://www.amipici.org.mx> revised October 2015.

accomplish in the gap between the local and global.³ Maybe it is for this reason that the museum should respond to the demands of Mexican modernity efficiently, especially those of intellectuals that have called for the “*Mexican Moment*” which obligates transparency, accountability, attention to vulnerable populations, and to be, in general terms, on the cutting edge of national society. In conclusion, there is an obligation for the museum to be an open institution on many levels – the national debates, the new interpretations, free access to information, and to ethnic groups so that they can study their heritage.

It is obvious to say that the museum guards the cultural materials of the past. In the broad sense the NMA's collection is what we are, and, only in recent years, has the study of the collections began to convert itself into an object of its own – first, for adequately conserving the collections, and, second, to consult the collection intensely and open it in the amplest way possible.

A different archive, Information System of Ethnographic Collections (ISEC)

Wanting to create new channels of access, in 2014 a new management program for collections was implemented that contemplates a software system developed expressly for ethnographic collections called ISEC (information system of ethnographic collections). On one hand, ISEC provides all the information (ethnographic data, conservation information, location and photographic register) of the objects in digital form so that they are available to researchers from the Ethnography department or from whomever else requests access. The program allows simple and complex searches, as well as allowing to cross information so that more complete research is possible. In addition, the program allows users to access information that influences the decision making in the early stages of the conception of an exhibition. For example, it allows for the evaluation of the objects if they need to be restored or to determine if they are considered necessary for the collection.

Another advantage is that the manipulation of the objects is minimal, helping to lessen the potential for deterioration each time the objects are touched. The ethnographic data is also free from manipulation since the information is in ISEC, which helps to insure the conversation of ethnographic records that have historic importance. The new labels have a conservative role in the sense that they do not have metal or different types of ink. This system guarantees that the collections are always organized.

The biggest problem that we face is the human factor, each employee related to the collection, from operators to researchers have to learn the methodology for the management system. But nevertheless the uses and customs inherited from past working generations continue to be used out of habit and not out of conscious decision-making or discernment. It is to say that daily nature, uses and customs carry a lot of weight in the way that different processes are carried out.⁴

Each object that we have collected in the archive is a result of an investigative process, classification, and of precise conservation. These objects bring with them a narrative about its' materials, use and exchange, and, in storage, they await an exhibition that will offer a history about these indigenous communities. Our museum is a literary box of objects that should continue telling their stories. There are two main reasons why the collections invite us to accomplish having an open archive.

First of all, given that the objects collected were chosen based on a criteria determined in their time, whether it be by a cabinet of curiosities, for ethnic diversity or the simple representation of cultural

diversity in Mexico, these objects can be reinterpreted to tell different stories elaborated by new curators with objectives different from previous interpretative frameworks. Secondly, since these cultural objects belong to different indigenous groups, they should be at their disposition for consultation, study or historical recognition, placing their voice in the interpretation of the objects and, in the exhibition, aim to incorporate the multitude of voices and create new narratives. In Mexico, especially in the museums and collections dedicated to ethnic groups, more and more museums are becoming places where indigenous voices are appearing and demanding the revitalization of their citizenship.

These objectives obligate a system of attention at two levels - on one end, the creation of an accessible information system to access the patrimony (ISEC), and second, for the attention and integration of face-to-face museum processes for interested groups. Our interest has generated a question to which we must respond. In what way can the museum attend to these new challenges efficiently and with the resources that it has? In the ethnographic archive, we find a collection that is assigned a value for its nature or evocations that it provokes. It is notorious that there is fine line that divides the collection from accumulation is difficult to demarcate, but this procedure opens itself up to the two meanings that will permit systematization.⁵

The collection pulls together natural or artificial objects that are stored temporarily or permanently outside the economic market, inside an adequate archive and protected in places with restricted access, as well as in adequate packaging used for preservation. Without exception, the objects from the ethnographic collection act as intermediaries between things that can be touched and those that are invisible but central to sociocultural life, such as myths, rituals and tutelary gods.

The ethnographic collection shows our efforts to construct the indigenous world. Every object contains diverse values for which are chosen, some for their originality, others for their representation, and, for the most part, with comparative objectives.⁵ Most of the objects collected have not been placed in exhibition and never will. Here it is convenient to reflect on the demarcation between collecting and accumulating. In the last few years, it was decided that we would only collect those objects that would be exhibited temporarily or permanently. On the dark side, the collections reflect the people or curators that have been charged with making them; their obsessions and concerns are in the objects. This collection has grown under principles of organization and were characterized by their external reality. They belong to ethnic groups, were made by them and are used habitually. Afterwards, they should be separated for daily or ritual use, or because they are displaced objects from the economic market. There are other objects that are antique or original, and, in other occasions, we find many ways to reuse them because their meaning and value have changed, or they have been made with the leftover pieces of others. Lastly, there are some ceremonies in that the objects were created to be destroyed, and they have been conserved and restored for the museum. Finally, this collection has made an overestimate in the classification. As some curators have frequently pointed out, the object could very well be used in any exhibition. It is our opinion that only objects that will be used in exhibition should be taken.⁵

Through time, the objects have different meanings for those subjects from where they come from. The indigenous communities suffered long processes of acculturation and now they are living in a process of renovation. Their artifacts have meanings and new uses that are, on occasion, lost expressions in daily life and are now seen as a reminder of their traditions, but now with new meanings. Sometimes,

these objects represent relevant and inanimate objects for the curators, but, in contrast, for indigenous communities, they are a vital force for their people, or they are animate beings that have power or are live entities that have been passed through generations and belong to the communities as tutelary deities. There are also other objects that only exist for the purpose of a particular ritual and that evidently has an ephemeral existence, but were collected by anthropologists and remain in the collections to the surprise of indigenous groups. This is the case of the cut paper *otomís* and of the *jicaras votivas huicholas* that maybe shouldn't even exist since they have no religious meaning. Their purpose is for their use and destruction in a ritual context. We have proposed, however, that these materials be made available to indigenous groups so that they can be used for education and the development of the indigenous identity.

The NMA not only represents the ethnic groups, but also collaborates and dialogues with these and they carry out an active role in the exhibitions, as well as in the interpretation and conservation of the collections. The museum and the museum's anthropologists have fulfilled a large role in the preservation of cultural material. During this time, a vast collection has been accumulated, and, at present, has full conditions of preservation, research, and consultation. All this lends itself to an extraordinary archive of past cultures. This work leaves traces of the indigenous peoples that represent their cultural treasures, such as those used in ceremonies and rituals. This archive is a source of testimonies and lost and permanent traditions of the indigenous communities. They are the original peoples of Mexico, and their history has been taken from them during the last 400 years. In some form, the archive contains clues to that history, such as the technology, religion, and knowledge regarding health. During all these years that the archives have existed, there has only been one channel of information and acquisition – from the ethnic group to the collector to the archive. Our job is to give it another meaning, starting from the archives and giving back to the ethnic groups that have given us so much in so many ways. First of all, the indigenous groups have been included in the cataloguing process. This has allowed us to correct errors, reinterpret objects, and propose other forms of exhibition. The collections have continued to grow, but not as rapidly as when the museum was founded. The emphasis in the last few years has been on preserving what we already have and revitalizing some of the cultures that are less represented, as well as recognizing forgotten technologies and tools in the collection and that have disappeared as a result to colonialism and acculturation. For centuries, the building of the nation was motivated by eradicating traditional languages so that they would be replaced by Spanish, limiting the practice of separate religions to make room for hegemonic religion, and to abolish artistic techniques because they were considered pagan.

Our collection of materials has preserved objects and documents that provide evidence to the methods and meanings and provide a visual archive of traditional artistic forms, as well as their religious and social meanings. The collections in the museum are visual evidence of this traditional knowledge, and are also documentary evidence for anthropologic research and a source for ethnic recognition. Our archive is not only a receiver of objects and meanings; it is now also a donor of uses, knowledge and historic documentation of indigenous groups.

We try to break the old relationship between the museum and the indigenous communities that is charge heavily with a hierarchy, which is of little help to them. We try to change the balance so that there is a more equal relationship so that they can use the materials and documents from the collection and exchange knowledge with the curators of the exhibitions. In this new role, we have captured

new audiences. Our museum also tries to increase opportunities to access its collections and archives so that indigenous communities can conduct their own research on their cultural heritage.

Opening the archives, a new beginning in the NMA

Fifty years after opening the NMA and once all the collections have been registered, we can start to reflect on the utopia that the collections can be available to everyone. By making the collections available on the internet, it would be possible to see all the objects that are not pieces in the exhibitions, photographs and general information about each object of the collections would be available. But, what happens if indigenous communities don't have access to internet? For this, the employees of the NMA have worked closely with different communities to carry out dialogic exhibitions with the Mixteca community, who proposed an exhibition of converse sneakers painted by community members. The community was invited to the archive of ethnographic collections so that they would see and reflect on the objects associated with their community and the exposition. In addition, we have worked with a community of women weavers from Xochistlahuaca, Guerrero so that the women could rediscover the textile images that there are in the archive of ethnographic collections. See photograph 1. We have also helped ethnic groups from northern Mexico to produce videos and a bilingual exhibition supported by the ethnographic collections.^{6,7}

Another example are the offerings to the dead. Each year, as a tradition, the vice president's office of ethnography, with the help of an indigenous community, plans and implements an offering to the dead. It is a showing of how different communities celebrate those who have died and forms part of an intangible patrimony of humanity.⁸ The community works dialectically with the ethnography department, planning the space, the materials, the objects that will be placed in the altar, the dances that will be performed and the music that will be heard during the event. This event takes place during the first days of November and is called the "day of the dead," and has allowed us to invite the indigenous community to the museum in order to celebrate their loved ones who have died just as they celebrate in their own communities. In addition to collaborating in the planning and installation of the exhibition, they are invited to study the collections of their culture and they are able to represent the ritual of offering to the dead in one day. During this live exhibition, they invite their dead family members to visit the house where they lived, and they visit the cemetery where their remains are kept. For the exhibition, they use objects from the ethnographic collection of the museum that they choose themselves, and they use candelabra, incense, pots, plates, tables, chairs and a traditional house is constructed using their indications with the materials from the collection. In this sense, we are a museum for all Mexicans and we serve Mexicans in order to maintain the offerings as a permanent ritual practice. The collections are central to the museum since the objects represent the people and the relationship between people, the past and the present. See photograph 2.

The major problem is being able to reach more communities to generate more activities with more indigenous groups. Unfortunately, these types of initiatives only happen if those in charge are interested in doing them and approve them. To date, these are more personal processes than institutional.

For NMA these actions have led to the appearance of new audiences and different demands for the collections. Now, not only does one attend to and enjoy the permanent exhibition rooms and occasional exhibitions, or see their cultural antecedents, or recognize

their ancestral traditions, there are those who ask to be displayed in the exhibition rooms. Together, new social actors and their demands in conjunction with internal efforts have promoted the opening up of the archives of ethnographic collections.

Mexico is a multiethnic and pluricultural country, where around 57 different ethnic groups live in national territory and all of them are represented in the ethnographic collections. The act of being inclusive has been taken more seriously in order to generate communities of knowledge that respect differences.

Historically, the ethnographic museums of the world have been institutions that reflect the service to the cultural elite, because in this cabinet of curiosities their opinions and attitudes are reflected in relationship to other subaltern or dominated groups. Actually, that perspective in our museum has been radically transformed, not only in the way things are exhibited, but also in the ways that the collections are catalogued. In a series of strategies, we are now transforming the essence of the museum towards inclusive and collaborative actions. Central questions such as property and representation are now the pillars of discussion in the new ways to work. Our country is formed by a multiethnic and pluricultural society that has placed the museum precisely in a situation where the values of collecting, interpreting, and exhibiting are being submitted to the self-representation and self-expression as new paths that will define the museum and the nation.

The daily work of the museum employees such as cataloguers, museographers, and curators now receive more information and are more reflexive with these alternative values and viewpoints. All these actions cause us to reconsider the past and suggest proactive roles in social and cultural subjects that allow the inclusion of the indigenous communities. This work includes the planning and presentation of expositions, the review of exhibitions that are being carried out, as well as a review of the collections and related documentation. Now, we have given the voice to indigenous actors who were previously subjects of anthropological research, and who previously didn't have an important role in the self-representation in the heart of national museums.

The access of the information and the collections are new issues for NMA and have generated varied reactions. On one hand, it has been very efficient the responsibility that it has with indigenous peoples, and, in contrast, the workers of the museum have been obligated to increase connections with indigenous groups, and, on occasions, there have been reservations to allowing the free flow of information. For now, the road is long and winding but will, undoubtedly, end with magnificent results.

One of the countless ways of dividing the great museums would be to divide them in between those who are boastful and those who are arrogant. With the absolute certainty that there are no famous museums in the world that do not belong to one of these categories. At first sight, it would seem that both belong to the same gamut, that they are hardly distinguishable. However, we see great difference, above all, in the character or personality and labor of its professionals. The museum's arrogance is due to its' unique character in the exhibition

rooms, there are no collections similar to them in any museum, they are marvelous for a reason and for the combination. But, they are lazy museums, also more enigmatic, more reserved, more aloof. They cannot live without praise. They like to appear untouchable in their collections, they never do anything for the visitor, they only tolerate him. However, the boastful are insecure, in a hurry to captivate and receive praise. They try to incorporate the public and be influenced by it. They support the public, they look for the public and they include the public. For fifty years the NMA has been presumptuous and has many reasons to be so. Now, we intend to be boastful, and make an effort to create another challenge for ourselves.⁹⁻¹²

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