



Narrating a (New) Nation? Temporary exhibitions at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm, Sweden between 1990 and 2009

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Abstract

Heritage management and many cultural historical museums in Sweden have had problems adjusting to Sweden becoming a multicultural society in the late 20th century. This is so because such institutions have been and still are a part of the nation-state and its master narratives. However, in the years between 1990 and 2010 the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm, Sweden, tried to address this issue in parts of the museum's temporal exhibitions.

Adjusting to Sweden being a multicultural society would mean that the narratives expressed by the museum should have changed from what I would like to call a "nation-narration" to something that might be expressed as "non-nation-narration". The outcome of this study shows that the museum did for a short period shift focus in its temporal exhibitions from "nation-narration" to other forms of narratives that did not focus on the Swedish nation-state and its history. This was done explicitly to adjust to the shift in the society from what was believed to be a homogenous society to a multicultural society in a global and postcolonial world. But this was a short period in the history of the museum. Today and under pressure in a commercialised and on adventures based society the museum has again turned to the historical master narratives of the Swedish nation-state.

Introduction

This essay analyses the temporary exhibitions at the Museum of National Antiquities¹ in Stockholm, Sweden between 1990 and 2010. The question addressed here is whether the museum during these years changed strategies and perspective compared with its earlier days. My question is motivated by two main concerns: firstly, Sweden started to turn into a multicultural society already in the 1970s, having previously been a very homogenous country. Secondly, since the 1930s the museum has played a significant role in the construction of a society that strived for homogeneity. This being the case would mean that a shift to a more multidimensional society in the 1990s must have affected the museum and its strategies.

Before I move on I need to point out a few things. Even though Ernest Renan did write in a different time context his famous essay “What is a Nation?” can be used today to illustrate how heritage and archaeological remains can be understood. Renan stressed, “The modern nation is therefore a historical result brought about by a series of convergent facts” (Renan 2006). What Renan proposes here is that the nation is the consequence of linking or intersecting historical facts, something I think is important to have in mind. If we take a closer look into this proposition from a hermeneutic point of view it becomes clear that there are no truths nor facts that are independent of an interpretation (e.g. Vattimo 1997). My first point is therefore that the relevance of these intersecting facts is dependent on how we interpret them and deal with them.

One of the most common ways of dealing with and interpreting historical facts has been and still is through a nationalistic approach. Nationalism is, according to my New Oxford American Dictionary, a many-faceted expression including “patriotism, patriotic sentiment, flag-waving, xenophobia, chauvinism, jingoism”.

Benedict Anderson has suggested “that nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that precede it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being” (Anderson 1996). From my point of departure these “large cultural systems” are similar to the “convergent facts” that Renan speaks about, because they must be interpreted to be accessible for the present.

Homi K. Bhabha has underlined Anderson’s statement by stressing that “The nation’s ‘coming into being’ as a system of cultural signification, as the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity, emphasises this instability of knowledge” (Bhabha 2006).

My second point is that a nation is unstable because the interlinked and interpreted historical facts that it is built upon can be reread or redistributed into a system that opens for a new interpretation and a new or different “nation”, which again underlines that it is a question of interpretation and instability. That the nation is unstable is clearly underlined by Appiah: “Still, a world in which communities are neatly hived off from one another seems no longer a serious option, if it ever was. And the way of segregation and seclusion has always been anomalous in our perpetually voyaging species. Cosmopolitanism isn’t hard work; repudiating it is” (Appiah 2007).

Working against cosmopolitanism is hard work according to Appiah and it demands, of course, much effort to glue together a nation on convergent facts, and it takes even more effort to make this unstable construct stable. A national museum such as the Museum of National Antiquities can be viewed as an institution that has been working assiduously with the convergent facts to ensure that the nation keeps its stability. The museum has played an important part, and

does so again today, in displaying the “convergent facts” and thereby piecing together the facts into an interpretation of what the nation is as history.

My last introductory point is therefore that the Museum of National Antiquities works and has worked as a nation-narration institution, hence trying to contribute to the stability of the nation, a nation of a affirmed united people and race, and has therefore worked against cosmopolitanism and diversity (see also Svanberg 2011). However, is this true? In the last part of this essay I will test this hypothesis. But before I do so I think that a short historical background to the Museum of National Antiquities is needed. In this overview I will try to show that the museum has played an important part in the construction of the Swedish nation, nationalism and Swedishness.

My main aim with this essay is thus to analyse the temporal exhibitions between 1990 and 2010 at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm. In this brief introduction I have tried to show that a nation and its cultural institutions are based on interpretations that aim to construct the nation and to uphold its stability. Yet, these interpretations are always unstable due to the nature of interpretations, and therefore the narratives – for example in museums – must work as some sort of excluders/includers. Globalisation, postcolonial perspectives and cosmopolitan movements are forceful unstableisers, if I may use such a word, that challenge the nationalised interpretations of what Renan called convergent facts. Between 1990 and 2010 the museum tried to adjust to this problem through its temporal exhibitions.

Copenhagen in the 1820s and 1830s

In the early 1820s Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865) was appointed secretary of the Commission of Antiquities in Copenhagen. Thomsen came from a wealthy merchant home, but he lacked an academic education. He travelled the Danish landscape as a young man and experienced cultural heritage and the changes in agriculture that were taking shape in the first half of the nineteenth century. He was also a well-respected numismatist and it was because of this that he was appointed secretary of the Commission. In the 1820s the collection of antiquities was stored in the attic of the university church, Trinity Church, in Copenhagen. Thomsen started to organise the collection by chronology, which was something new and modern for the time, opposing an older historical perspective based on written sources (Jensen 1992). It was also important to define what were Danish antiquities and what were not. Early in his work Thomsen also started to organise the archaeological artefacts after a chronological system that he later published in a short essay (Thomsen 1836). This would be the starting point for the organisation of national historical museums throughout Europe and later throughout the world. His chronological system for the prehistory of Denmark was structured in three periods, the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. Thomsen is also well known for his engagement in the public. He showed his exhibition on his own, which was something new and it was also new that the museum was open to the public (Jensen 1992). Being opened to the public also meant that the public had to be guided. Through this Thomsen orally narrated the history of the Danish nation. Thomsen worked with all museums in Copenhagen including the art museums and the ethnographic museum, and he did so until his death. Thomsen’s historical museum was moved from Trinity Church to Christiansborg Palace and in 1855 it was again moved to the Prince’s Palace, where it still is today. The museum was not, however, called a national museum until 1892 (Jensen 1992). The importance of Thomsen’s work is his focus on chronology, his focus on

narration and the nation. From now on nation-narration is connected with the chronological development and progression of the nation, and with academic subjects such as archaeology with its special discourse and master narrative.

The Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm. 1866 to 1925

In the mid 1820s Bror Emil Hildebrand (1806–1884) had finished his numismatic thesis. He sent his work to Thomsen, who immediately invited him to Copenhagen. Hildebrand was impressed by Thomsen's work, and after returning to Lund, a university city in the south of Sweden, Hildebrand started to reorganise the Historical Museum in Lund according to Thomsen's chronology and Three-Age System. Thomsen and Hildebrand became close friends (Gräslund 1974; 1987; Hegardt 1997). In the early 1830s Hildebrand was called to Stockholm to help Johan Gustaf Liljegren (1791–1837) with his work at the Museum of Antiquities. At the time the museum was very small and placed in the Royal Palace. Liljegren was Riksantikvarie (Custodian of National Antiquities) and the museum was governed by the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities. A few years later Liljegren died and Hildebrand was appointed Riksantikvarie. He now began to rework the museum according to the same principles he had used in Lund. He also strongly argued for a new museum. In 1845 the Parliament bought the house of the Ridderstolpe family close to the Royal Palace. The museum was moved to the house and was given three rooms for the exhibitions. More important is that in 1845 the Parliament had also decided to build a new national museum. Bror Emil Hildebrand responded immediately to this decision and wrote a rather long memorandum (Hildebrand 1845) to the Academy where he explained in detail how the museum of antiquities should be organised in the new national museum. On almost every page we find references to Thomsen and his museum in Copenhagen, which of course was the outcome of their close friendship and correspondence. The National Museum was finished in 1866 and the Museum of National Antiquities was placed on the ground floor. The museum follows in detail Thomsen's ideas of how a museum of antiquities should be organised, with the Three-Age System as the central chronological principle. This chronological system or principle of time and space was complicated and advanced and, as I have mentioned, it needed guidance to be understandable to the visitors. Bror Emil Hildebrand and later Oscar Montelius (1843–1921) and Bror Emil Hildebrand's son Hans Hildebrand (1842–1913) never ceased to emphasise the importance of social and cultural development with reference to the museum displays. The different galleries in the museum showed in a proper chronological order the development and progression of society and the nation. The narrative followed the chronology and so did the visitor. The museum galleries illustrated the narrative, like pictures in a book.

“Ten Thousand Years in Sweden” – the nation-narration exhibition

Until the 1920s the museum had worked very much in line with the ideas that Thomsen and Hildebrand had once introduced: with collecting, with chronology and typology, with displaying all the items and so forth. We must also remember that the discourse and the narrative about the evolution of the nation were new, modern and advanced. One important point, albeit not the most important, was to show a united people – one race – through prehistory and history. The major agenda was instead science: archaeology, chronology, typology, care and documentation.

Yet, this whole context of actions contributed to a stable nation with a stable history. Archaeology, chronology, typology, care and documentation are the essential actions when the bits and pieces of a nation's history are glued together. Narration, as text or orally, is crucial in explaining and structuring the historical plot – the nation coming into being.

However, destabilising crises would occur, and in the 1920s the museum was bursting its seams, being overfilled with objects. It is noteworthy that Swedish society had its own political and economical crisis during the 1920s. Nina Witoszek (2002) has shown in an essay that the crisis in Swedish society during the 1920s and 1930s became a kind of proof of temporariness, which removed the idea of a secure and infinite historical process. The bits and pieces of history and social order once glued together were now slowly falling apart. To meet these crises a welfare society was introduced during the 1930s, becoming central for Sweden and the Swedes. Europe was viewed with scepticism as neofeudal, patriarchal and unequal. During these days the “imperative of harmony” was shaped, which meant that conflicts and tensions had to be stopped. Society had instead to be built on rationalism, compromises and consensus. According to Witoszek, Sweden from now defined itself as the nation of goodness, and the museums followed this self-perception.

The leader of the Social Democratic Party, Per Albin Hanson (1885–1946), was behind the welfare society – the *folkhem* (the people's home or folk-home) – and the new Sweden. Sigurd Curman (1879–1966) took over the museum in the mid 1920s, introducing a new museum policy and new heritage politics – a folk-home heritage policy with its museums. In the 1920s it was also decided that a new museum should be built. It was finished at the end of the 1930s. It was time to glue the bits and pieces of history back again, this time on the principles of the society of goodness, rationalism, consensus and compromise.

The new museum was built in the fashionable district of Östermalm, very close to the Nordic Museum. This was intentional, because in the 1920s it had been agreed that the Nordic Museum should work together with the Museum of National Antiquities. Each museum was to be responsible for different parts of Swedish history. The Museum of National Antiquities was responsible for the period between the Stone Age and the Middle Ages until 1523, and the Nordic Museum was to care for the period from 1523 to modern times.²

The first exhibition opened in the new museum was “Folk och Försvar” (People and Defence) in 1941. Already in 1943 the first historical exhibition was finished. It was meant to be temporal but stayed with the museum until 2002, however rebuilt in parts during the decades. The exhibition was named “Ten Thousand Years in Sweden” and covered the history of Sweden from the early Stone Age to the Viking Age. It was built on the same chronological structure as the exhibitions in the old museum, with the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, but it was at the same time based on a new museological perspective with a “survey exhibition” (*skådesamling*) for the public and a more advanced collection behind the walls for the scientists, mostly archaeologists. A modern storeroom was placed in the basement. These new ideas had already been tested in the old museum, but could now be used substantively.

Even though the new museum with its exhibition showed a large difference from the old museum, the narrative was in many ways the same, but even more focused on the ethnic idea of Swedishness and social progression. The modern and functionalistic museum with its discrete and minimalistic displays was a beautiful place for contemplation, compromise and consensus,

but also a place of racialised narratives and discourse. My thoughts concerning the concept 'racialised' are based on K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann's book *Color Consciousness*. The colour consciousness in Sweden is related to the idea of blond and blue-eyed, neglecting the fact that many Swedes are brown-eyed and have dark hair, and to the thought that the Swedish "race" is and has been stable. Implicit racism has always been a part of these perspectives, although it did not become a practical reality (if the Sami are not included) among the public until the late twentieth century due to increasing immigration to Sweden. Swedish politics and authorities have recently been accused of having a profound problem with structural racism (de los Reyes & Kamali 2005; Hegardt 2005; Pred 2000). I think, however, that it would be too problematic for many to agree with the thought that the envied Swedish (social) democratic society has been and is racist in a similar way as South Africa or the US once was. Against this background I prefer the word racialised or structural racism, before racism. If we are to talk about Swedish pre-immigrant racism, this racism was directed towards faraway areas, for example Africa, Southern Europe or Asia. Swedes viewed themselves as superior without having to face the people that they classified as inferior from the standpoint of racist discourse. When these "inferior" people suddenly turned up in Sweden as immigrants, Sweden had to face itself and its history.

In sum. The museum represented and presented the united nation of the folk-home, of the ethnic Swedes. Through the new museum the bits and pieces were again in place and the national narrative strengthened. Since Hildebrand met Thomsen, the Museum of National Antiquities had been working with perspectives based on a complicated chronology, that, in the exhibitions and step by step, like pictures in a book, illustrated a narrative of how the nation had come into being and how the united Swedes and their special race became united (see also Svanberg 2011). The museum had all the ingredients of nationalism mentioned above. It created consensus and compromise on the fundament of a rationalistic epistemology of positivism. Through the museum the "convergent facts" and the "large cultural systems" were interpreted. Ernest Renan's essay on the nation is the classical text of "civic" nationalism, the French counterpoint to the "ethnic" nationalism of German writers like Fichte and Herder. Sweden has one of the world's oldest heritage legislations, dating back to at least 1666, but of course rewritten many times over the centuries. It was not a question of some kind of 'vernacular antiquities', but a legislation with concepts similar to those in use today, which might be important to have in mind. Swedish heritage legislation and organisation have been based on a civic structure rather than on an ethnic or linguistic structure. Nevertheless, the civic society and its capacity to organise a well-working system for heritage management has always been related to the ethnic idea of a united Swedish race. The Swedishness has been inscribed, narrated and interpreted as heritage, or the convergent facts or the large cultural systems that preceded the nation, creating and working for consensus, compromises and rationality, intended to guarantee the stability of the homogenous nation, a nation and a stability with its own myths only disturbed when faced with cosmopolitan diversity and global economies in later decades of the twentieth century (Hegardt & Källén 2011).

Temporary exhibitions between 1990 and 1999

In the 1970s Sweden, like many other Western nation-states, had to deal with new crises. The old nineteenth-century conception of the Nation was challenged in politics, in the academia and by a growing globalisation and postcolonial conflicts, and so were the political systems that had

guaranteed stability in post–World War II Europe. Sweden had gained from the war having its industry intact, but during the 1970s it was facing economic problems and political instability. There are many examples of how the museum tried to adjust to this new situation, but the question or hypothesis addressed at the beginning of this essay concerns the time between 1990 and 2010 rather than the periods before that. As mentioned above, Sweden screened off Europe already in the 1930s. In the 1990s Sweden – on its own – and Europe was again facing crises, in Sweden financial crises similar to those in Southern Europe today, and in Europe the collapse of the Soviet Union. Sweden was also turning into a multicultural society, which was problematic for a museum that had been the symbol of Swedishness and the one-race, one-history, one-people politics, with its consensus, rationality, compromises and idea of goodness, i.e. a nation with a very strong idea of its social and democratic greatness.

The question I address here in this second part of my essay is how the museum has interpreted the bits and pieces and how it has worked in temporary displays with the (new) Swedish multicultural society of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. My sources on each exhibition studied are for the period 1990–1999 media articles and for the period 2000–2009 the museums website, where the museum has placed short notes on each temporary exhibition.

I have studied a major part of the temporary exhibitions between 1990 and 2010 – n all 91 exhibitions. I have roughly classified the exhibitions in two major categories and four sub-categories. The two major categories are “Nation-narration” exhibitions and “Non-nation-narration” exhibitions. The four sub-categories are “Master narrative” exhibitions or “art”, “post-colonial” or “gender”-related exhibitions. The purpose of my categories is to find out whether the museum in any way tried to adjust to the new situation with multicultural diversity, cosmopolitan movements, interpretation and negotiation and, of course, the destabilisation of older structures.

By nation-narration displays I mean a narrative that works positively in line with Renan’s definition of the nation. Such a narration helps to build the nation and is mostly connected with the master narrative. It is this narration that we find in the museum from 1866 onwards, discussed in the first part of this essay. A master narrative is a narrative to which all other narratives must relate. A master narrative does not have to be a real story. It can also be an idea or an umbrella category under which the narratives must work.

The “non-nation-narration” exhibitions are to some degree exhibitions that destabilise the master narrative and the nation-narration narratives or work outside the umbrella category of the master narrative. Such narratives can be described as “surprise narratives” that, according to the master narrative, should not be at a museum such as the Museum of National Antiquities at all.

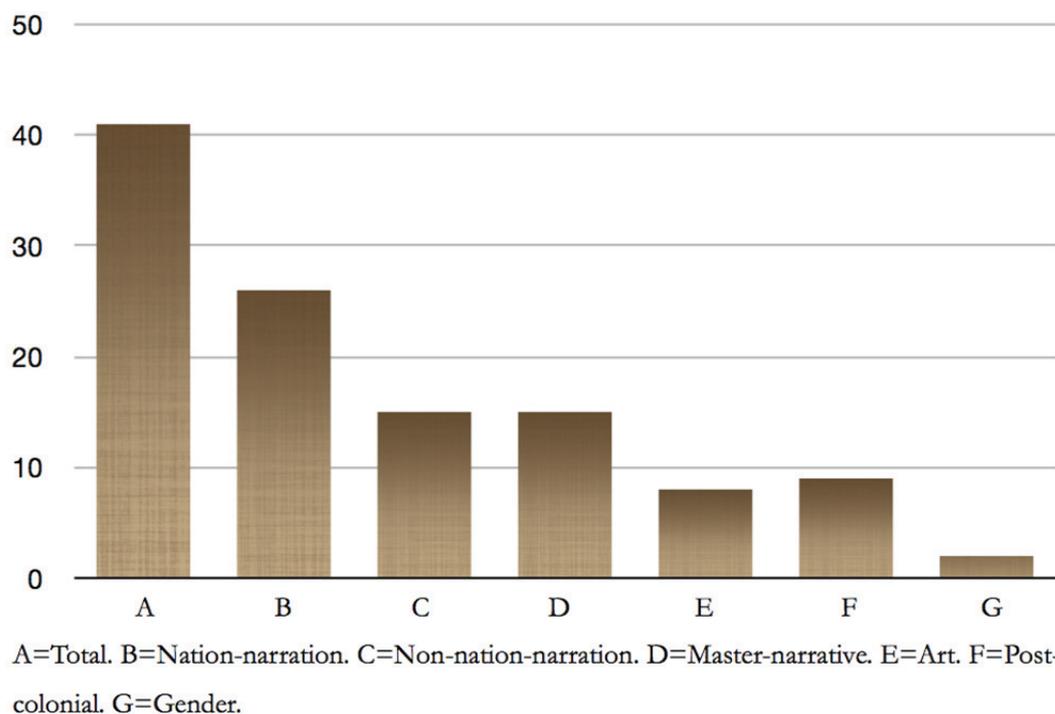


Figure 1: Temporary exhibitions between 1990 and 1999. Nation-narration exhibitions dominate over non-nation-narration exhibitions. The relationship between nation-narration and the master narrative is also strong

By post-colonial exhibitions, I mostly mean non-nation-narration exhibitions, but more precisely exhibitions that, to some degree at least, work inside post-colonial theory. For example gender exhibitions are mostly nation-narration exhibitions, but not always master narrative exhibitions. My very rough categories can be described as follows: 1990–1999: 26 nation-narration exhibitions and 15 non-nation-narration exhibitions. Out of the 26 nation-narration exhibitions, 13 were clearly related to the master narrative. They were stable exhibitions related to the idea of the nation according to Renan’s definition. Five of the nation-narration exhibitions were art exhibitions of different kinds. Two exhibitions were only nation-narration exhibitions. Two were about gender. One was post-colonial. Of the 15 non-nation-narration exhibitions two were related to the master narrative. Two were related to art. Eight concerned the post-colonial situation, and six of these were connected to post-Soviet times and one also related to art. Three of the exhibition fell outside of my categories.

Exhibition examples – 1990–1999

In 1990 the museum organised five temporary exhibitions. They were all nation-narration and master narrative exhibitions. Here I will discuss two: “Birka i vikingarnas värld” (Birka in the World of the Vikings) and “Alla tiders landskap” (Landscapes through Time), mentioned in the media.³ Only a few of the museum’s temporal exhibitions were mentioned in media.

The article on “Alla tiders landskap” was introduced with a question: “Is your summerhouse, your family home, your villa or your apartment situated in an area of national importance (*riksintresse*) where one must show special consideration to heritage?” What this question stressed

was that if your home was in such an area you were lucky, because your home was deeply rooted in Swedish history. The background to the exhibition was a survey conducted by the National Heritage Board where 1700 heritage sites of national importance had been defined. The survey had been done because a new legislation called the Natural Resources Act (*Naturresurslagen*) had been passed in 1987. The connection that we see here between different public authorities was and is typical for Sweden, something I think should be emphasised. Compared with many other European countries, the Swedish society is extremely controlled by the authorities. The collaboration between the museum, the Heritage Board, the legislative authorities, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and so on was thus not a coincidence but an ordinary example of how heritage is managed in the Swedish society. The authorities worked together to define the fundamentals for a nation-narration identity and a master narrative, which again is an example of creating and working for consensus, compromises and rationality, intended to guarantee the stability of the homogenous nation. The exhibition showed a large-scale map of Sweden and through enormous wheeled magnifying glasses the visitor could move over the map and study in detail each of the 1,700 important heritage sites.

The media article on the Birka⁴ exhibition described Birka as a place where wealthy merchants received precarious objects from far away. It was important that the merchants were described as native. The exhibition also introduced a large project on Birka, financed by Gad Rausing, docent (associate professor) in archaeology and the owner of Tetra Pak. The National Heritage Board managed the project and a publishing company that had the contract on the book publications coming out of the Birka project sponsored the exhibition. Here I want to underline the relationship between one of the world's most famous and leading packing companies, the authorities, the museum and a private publishing company. Together, in consensus and of course in power, they constructed a national narrative. These two exhibitions are, according to my rough categories, typical of nation-narration and master narrative exhibitions, and it is also because of this that the media mentioned them. The other three temporal exhibitions were too small to be mentioned by the media, but they were also nation-narration exhibitions.

The following year – 1991 – the Soviet Union had collapsed and old nations once swallowed by the Soviets were taking shape again. Even though Sweden had done almost nothing for the Baltic countries during the Cold War, the museum now took a more active part.

That year the museum showed “Latvija – Sagan om Lettland” (Latvija – the Story of Latvia). The exhibition was a clear political statement from a Swedish point of view for a free and independent Latvia, and the media responded.⁵ The exhibit was opened by the Swedish prime minister at the time, Carl Bildt, together with the first vice prime minister of Latvia Ilmars Bisers. The exhibition focused on the prehistory of Latvia and the time of independence between 1918 and 1940, but also on folk art and nationalism during the nineteenth century.

From my point of view this is a clear case of post-colonial narration. It helps to construct and stabilise a new nation on the fundamentals of nation-narration principles.

The same year the museum showed an exhibition that was described in the media as: “Not everything has to be history at the Museum of National Antiquities. Apart from outgoing activities, temporary exhibitions other things sometimes happen outside the regular programme, as now when art by the Czech artist and modernist Jiri Kolár is shown at the museum.”

Kolár was a rather complicated artist with connections to futurists and dadaists and worked with collage in his art, hardly an artist that you would find at a museum such as the Museum of National Antiquities in the 1990s. This is a good example of what I previously called a "surprise narrative", an exhibition that hardly anyone would connect with a museum such as the Museum of National Antiquities. Why then was he there? I am not absolutely sure, but he was probably there because Kolár had been a dissident during Soviet times and because someone at the museum had some sort of relation to him, and probably because the museum wanted to take part in the post-Soviet experience.

No criticism was ever expressed against the museum showing art during the 1990s, contrary to what happened later when the museum director Kristian Berg used art to problematise history, something I will return to. The use of art in the museum in the 1990s was apparently no problem. However, it was artwork that would create the first big scandal at the museum during the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, which will be my last example from the 1990s.

In 1998 Stockholm was appointed the European cultural capital of the year, and this was celebrated through many different events. The museum did not participate but its space was used in one of the events. The provocative Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard had been engaged as a curator for an art exhibition. Without really knowing what was happening, the museum had accepted pictures of naked young men taken by the artist Donald Mader and called "Soft Core". The pictures were destroyed by a group of neo-Nazis, and when the debate started, the museum director Jane Cederqvist responded by stating that the exhibition was not produced by the museum. She underlined that she did not want the pictures in her museum and that she had thought that it would be an art exhibition, but this was not art, but child abuse, she concluded. She was also upset because the organisers of the European cultural capital of the year would not remove the pictures. She was even supported by Ecpat, who argued that this was not art, but images of innocent naked children.⁶ The neo-Nazis who destroyed the images distributed leaflets for the defence of culture and against destructive and degenerate art. In the debate that followed, sensible art critics such as Ingela Lind criticised Cederqvist for failing to stand by the artist against the neo-Nazi attack and for not following the law of freedom of expression.⁷ Others, not as sensible, argued that artist had to show some sort of responsibility and even argued that they had thought – for the first and last time – that the neo-Nazis had done something good.⁸

The art exhibition "Soft Core" was, of course, very provocative, going far beyond many norms, guidelines, morals and the master narrative, something that the neo-Nazis made a point of. But this was the artist's intention and he did not only start a debate but also a trap for us all, not only the pedophiles that came to the museum, to fall into. He made people that otherwise would never accept neo-Nazi arguments cherish the actions of the neo-Nazis, and he even showed that an important organisation such as Ecpat could express itself in a dangerous and unacceptable way. However, was an old cultural-historical institution such as the museum the right place for a problematic debate? Most people did not think so, and because of this they looked the other way when the neo-Nazis attacked the art at the museum. The "Soft Core" exhibition showed that the Museum of National Antiquities was standing on a very unstable foundation. Nevertheless, provocative art would again return to the museum only a few years later.

Even though the museum had exhibitions that in one way or another destabilised its history as an institution for narrating the nation, the nation-narration exhibitions dominated during the decade. It is noteworthy that there was no special theme that the museum followed. We could maybe argue that the post-Soviet exhibitions were based on such a theme, but there were only six exhibition of that kind. The temporal exhibitions during the 1990s show instead a museum that was very insecure in a time of rapid change.

So far it can be argued that my hypothesis concerning the museum as a nation-narration institution is correct even though, and as we have seen, the nation-narration perspectives are not totally dominating. One important thing is that the museum could show art in different exhibitions without any critical remarks that art was irrelevant for an archaeological museum, except, of course, the “Soft Core” exhibition (but that was, according to the majority – and the neo-Nazis – not art).

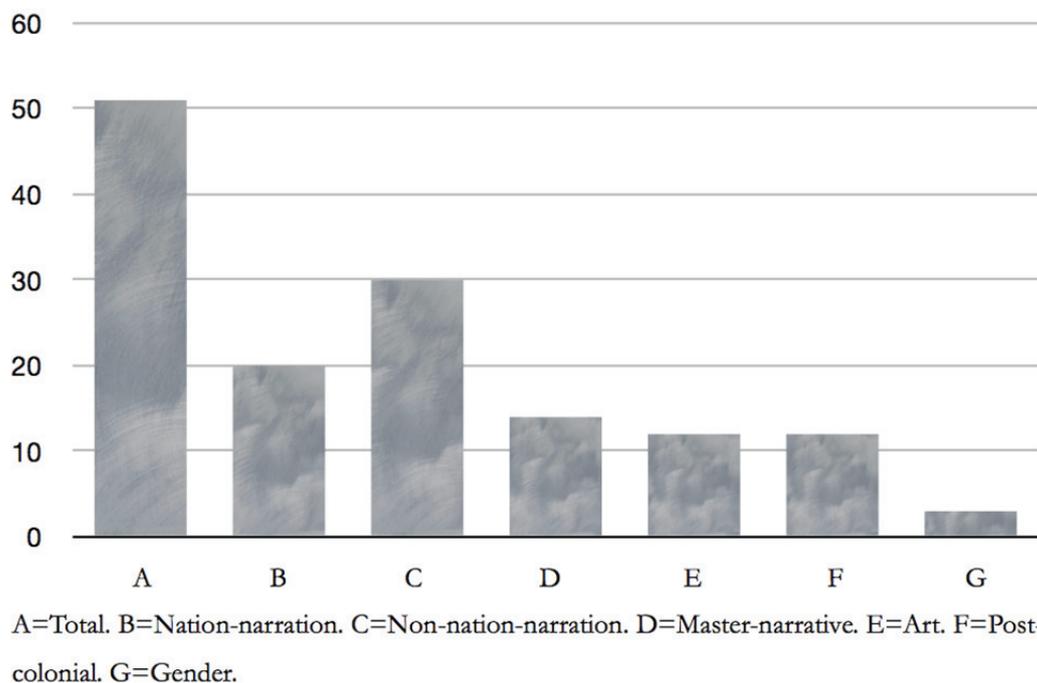


Figure 2: Temporary exhibitions between 2000 and 2009. Non-nation-narration exhibitions dominate over nation-narration exhibitions. The relationship between nation-narration and the master narrative is still rather strong, but not as strong if compared with Figure 1.

Temporary exhibitions between 2000 and 2009

In 1997, the museum was turned into a public authority of its own, having since the 1930s been a part of the National Heritage Board. In 1999, Kristian Berg took over as head of the museum. Berg was a creative personality with a bureaucratic background in the Social Democratic party and government, something his critics would emphasises.

The public authorities are every year given political instructions by the government. It was underlined in the instructions given to the museum during Kristian Berg’s first years that the museum should work with democracy-related questions, human rights, and diversity. Berg published an internal policy document in 2003 where it was stressed that the museum should strengthen democracy in society through a deeper understanding of history and heritage.⁹ In 2002

the exhibition “Ten Thousand Years in Sweden”, which had been standing since 1943, was taken down to give way to a new permanent exhibition on prehistory, an exhibition that focused on the similarities and differences between us today and people that lived in the past, through questions such as what it means to be human and what it means to be in the world.

During the period between 2000 and 2009 the museum had 51 temporary exhibitions. According to the same very rough categories used for the period between 1990 and 1999 the exhibitions can be classified as follows: 20 nation-narration and 30 non-nation-narration exhibitions. Twelve of the nation-narration exhibitions were related to the master narrative, three to art and one to gender. The other four were on their own. Of the 30 non-nation-narration exhibitions nine were related to art, eleven to post-colonial perspectives and two to gender. Art and post-colonial perspectives dominate inside the non-nation-narration exhibitions, and non-nation-narration exhibitions dominate over the nation-narration exhibitions. Eight of the exhibitions fall outside of my categories.

Exhibition examples – 2000–2009

In the year 2000 the museum produced seven temporary exhibitions with a rather wide variation according to my categories. Only two had a nation-narration angle and one only one had a master narrative connection. Two of the exhibitions were post-colonial and two were art exhibitions. One of the art exhibitions was a nation-narration exhibition and the other one a non-nation-narration exhibition. The seven exhibitions were: “Källan – om Sveriges kristnande” (The Source – on the Christianisation of Sweden); “Dokument: Holocaust” (Document: Holocaust); “Portugal – när världsbilden vidgades” (Portugal – when the World Picture was Expanded); “Vaxkabinettet, en studie i förakt” (The Wax Cabinet – a Study in Contempt); “Glas – dagens konstnärer möter Historiska” (Glass – Today’s Artists Meet History); “Noll Koll” (No Control); “Lenke Rothman – Inskrifter” (Lenke Rothman – Inscriptions).

Note that two out of seven temporary exhibitions dealt with the Holocaust. The reason is that in 2000 the Swedish government arranged an international conference on the Holocaust because it had become clear that young people in Sweden were starting to forget or neglect the Holocaust. This could be expanded, since relates to common European trend of dealing with 20th century conflict history.

I will have a closer look at “Källan – om Sveriges kristnande”, “Portugal – när världsbilden vidgades” and “Lenke Rothman – Inskrifter”. I classify “Källan – om Sveriges kristnande” as a nation-narration and master narrative exhibition because the exhibition emphasised historical places in Sweden that were decisive for the change to Christianity.

The exhibition “Portugal – när världsbilden vidgades” dealt with Portugal during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the discovery of new parts of the world and cultures, and Portugal’s relationship to other civilisations. The exhibition was mounted in cooperation with Portugal’s National committee for the ceremony of Portuguese’ Discoveries and the Portuguese Trade and Tourist Office. I classify the exhibition as post-colonial, which might be a bit strange given that the Trade Office and the National Committee were involved, but the exhibition did deal with colonial mapping and some of the problematic aspects of Portuguese colonialism. It had nothing to do with Swedish nation-narration, nor with the other categories that I use.

“Lenke Rothman – Inskrifter” is a good example of my category non-nation-narration/art. Lenke Rothman was a Hungarian-Swedish artist with Jewish roots. In the exhibition she showed works that related to various nameless experiences she had of loss, suffering, and vulnerability.

In 2002 the museum decided, as I mentioned earlier, to close the permanent exhibition “Ten Thousand Years in Sweden”, which had been in place since 1943, albeit partly rebuilt during the years. The plan was to make place for a new permanent exhibition on Swedish prehistory. This made it possible for the museum to use the premises for other exhibitions for some time, which would also be the case

Prime Minister Göran Persson had arranged three different world conferences during the first years of the twenty-first century. The conferences in the series were: 2000: “The Holocaust – Education, Remembrance and Research” (mentioned above); 2001: “Combating Intolerance”; 2002: “Truth, Justice and Reconciliation”; and in 2004 the last conference in the series was called “Preventing Genocide – Threats and Responsibilities”.¹⁰



Figure 3: Kristian Berg together with museum staff in connection with the closing of “Ten Thousand Years in Sweden”. Photo: Digital image, © The National Historical Museum, Stockholm.

Having worked with the first conference in 2000, the museum was again asked to participate in this last conference. The government wanted to have a series of cultural and art events that related to the conference and many institutions were involved, such as museums, cultural centres and theatres. In 2004 the museum opened not only an art exhibition related to issues discussed at the conference, but also five other temporary exhibitions: “Medeltid – dead or lajv” (Middle Ages – Dead or Live), “Olga & Ingegerd – vikingafurstinnor i öst” (Olga & Ingegerd – Viking Princesses in the East), “Textil konst för själen” (Textile Art for the Soul), “Tokyo Style in Stockholm”, “Ögonblick och synvillor” (Moments and Illusions). Out of these five exhibitions

two were nation-narration exhibitions and one of these two was also related to the master narrative. The other three were non-nation-narration exhibitions.

The art exhibition that was connected with the conference had nothing to do with the nation-narration perspectives or with the master narrative. Instead it showed the works of six different artists and photographers: “The Weeping Wall”; “God Made Me Do It”; “The Hmong – Secret War in Laos Continues”; “Dawn of a Genocide”; Installation with Poems”; and “Snow White and the Madness of Truth”. The installation “Snow White” would create international media hype when the Israeli ambassador destroyed the installation by throwing the lights that surrounded the installation into the pool where it was placed, claiming that the installation honoured Palestinian suicide bombers. This became the second big scandal at the museum after the scandal with the Mader pictures. The complicated story about the “Snow White” installation cannot be dealt with here, but I must emphasise one point. The installation did not honour suicide bombers. On the contrary, it called suicide bombers murderers, but the question was so infected that people, depending on political, ideological or religious perspectives, interpreted it in any suitable way regardless of whether they had seen it or not.

The museum and Kristian Berg stood behind the artists and their work at the museum, contrary to what Jane Cederqvist did during the Mader crisis. Berg also moved on with his will to use art to problematise history or the concept of history, which, against the background of the “Snow White” scandal, resulted in even more criticism against the museum for not working in line with its tradition, a tradition that for many was more a myth than a reality. Yet, the tradition that many wanted the museum to return to was the tradition of the master narrative of the nation, and being a museum that is stable and safe and tells the history of Sweden based on archaeological and historical facts. Kristian Berg left the museum in spring 2005, but his exhibition ideas were implemented until at least 2007, with exhibitions such as “The Maya Game”; the video installation ”Deliverance”; the photo exhibition “Nepal – State of Emergency”; the art and video installations “Approach” and “Shine” and others.

During the period between 2000 and 2009 the museum tried to adjust to contemporary Swedish society. Non-nation-narration exhibitions dominated during the time, and the museum was constantly criticised for this. However, Sweden was changing rapidly during these years partly because of a growing immigration, global financial systems, a change from an industrial country to a country where the service sector is employing more and more people and so forth. Heritage, the old symbol for Swedishness, was for many the only safe harbour to hold on to in a world of change, but instead of strengthening this connection Kristian Berg did nothing or very little of that. On the contrary, his work at the museum was instead a very creative and important response to a new society, however regarded by many as some kind of post-modern nonsense that was not only provocative but also a part of a political strategy to destabilise the country even more. But, it might be able to argue that Berg only opened the lid and let the uncanny out of the bottle.

Conclusion

Thomsen and his colleagues changed the museum policy during the early nineteenth century from universal and curiosity cabinets to national museums with special interests, for example historical museums, art museums and so forth. Chronology became most important, instead of written historical sources. In Sweden Bror Emil Hildebrand used the work of Thomsen to organise the Museum of National Antiquities. These new perspectives demanded a new narrative

that not only told the story of how the nation had come into being, but also explained how time and space was structured and how cultural progression worked. These new ideas and perspectives were advanced and complicated for the visitors to the museums and had to be explained orally or in written text. Guiding in the museums became important, and both Thomsen and Hildebrand and later Oscar Montelius and Hans Hildebrand did what they could to explain these new perspectives. The galleries, structured chronologically, worked like pictures in a book when the story was told. The museums played an important part as nation stabilisers in a time of rapid change.

In this essay I have tried to find out whether the nation-narration perspective dominated temporary exhibitions between 1990 and 2009. Through my rather rough categories, we have seen that this was the case between 1990 and 1999, but not in the period between 2000 and 2009. It is important to remember that the museum has always had exhibitions that have been criticised for not being good enough or not telling the right things, but in the period between 2000 and 2009 Kristian Berg's position and work with the museum was increasingly questioned. By working as he did, with art, on concepts such as democracy, diversity and so forth he destabilised not only the museum but also Swedish society; at least this is what those who criticised him claimed. We could argue that Berg not only opened the bottle and let the uncanny out of the jar, but he also deconstructed the construct, and the bits and pieces so neatly glued together through the nation-narration perspective fell apart.

In 2010 the Museum of National Antiquities not only changed its name to the National Historical Museum, it also opened a new permanent exhibition – The History of Sweden. Through this exhibition the museum has returned to its history and we again find the nation-narration perspective. The idea was that people were tired of art and scandals. It was time to give the public what they wanted, a neatly and chronologically structured exhibition – however in a contemporary style – that told the story of how the nation came into being and how the Swedes became what they are. Whether good or bad, the bits and pieces of the nation as history are again in place at the museum.

Notes

- ¹ The museum changed its name to the National Historical Museum in 2010.
- ² The date 1523 was chosen because that was the year when Sweden became an independent state.
- ³ "Sverige under förstoringsglas". *Dagens Nyheter*, Thursday 29 March 1990. Cecilia Steen-Johnsson. National Library of Sweden Archive. "Birkas sopor undersöks". *Dagens Nyheter* "På Stan" 9–15 June 1990. Bengt Henryson. National Library of Sweden Archive.
- ⁴ Birka is an late Iron Age site situated on an island in the Lake Mälaren west of Stockholm. It is not only known as an early urban dwelling but also as a symbol for Swedish national identity.
- ⁵ "Lettiska skatter från forntid till nutid". *Svenska Dagbladet*, Friday 15 November 1991. Peo Österholm. National Library of Sweden Archive.
- ⁶ "Vem får styra din blick?" *Svenska Dagbladet* http://www.svd.se/opinion/ledarsidan/vem-ska-fa-styra-din-blick_5069161.svd. Accessed 4 April 2011.
- ⁷ *Dagens Nyheter*. "Kommentar: Konsten som spottkopp." <http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/kommentar-konsten-som-spottkopp-1.236475>. Accessed 22 July 2011.
- ⁸ "Provocerade konstmöte." *Svenska Dagbladet* http://www.svd.se/kultur/konst/provocerade-konstmote_4777617.svd. Accessed 4 April 2011. "Konstnärer har ansvar." *Göteborgs-posten*, Monday 19 October 1998. Karin Storm. National Library of Sweden Archive.
- ⁹ Policy för Statens Historiska Museer (Enligt styrelsebeslut den 13 augusti 2003)
- ¹⁰ http://www.humanrights.gov.se/stockholmforum/forum/conference_overview.html. Accessed 23 July 2011.

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