



Faces on display Icelanders and others at the Canary Museum

The exhibition *Faces on display: Icelanders and others at the Canary Museum* in the National and University Library of Iceland deals with part of the subject of the book of the same name by Kristín Loftsdóttir, published by Sögufélag in 2023. In *Faces on display*, the focus is on a small museum with casts of people from different parts of the world, which were made in the 19th century. The book is the result of Kristín's research, which covers the Canary Islands, mainland of Spain and France, and analyses transnational relationships that were created through race science. Anna Lísa Rúnarsdóttir is the editor of the book, but Anna Lísa and Kristín are the curators of this exhibition.

The research on the museum in the Canary Islands is part of the research project *Creating Europe through Racialized Mobilities (CERM)*, which deals with different aspects of (im)mobility in Europe, especially with regard to racism and the relationship between past and present in the legacy of imperialism.

FACES ON DISPLAY

ICELANDERS AND OTHERS AT THE CANARY MUSEUM

In a museum in the Canary Islands, casts made of individuals from different parts of the world can be found. The busts are connected to the history of race science, and their existence raises haunting questions about what it means to be human.

“The history of individual busts is [...] part of the history of science and violence of Europeans, but also evokes the history of individuals from different parts of the world. As such, the busts shed light on how people around the world have long been part of a complex, interconnected world, marked by violence and dehumanization, but also by dissent, curiosity and friendship.”

IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE

There are various ways to create knowledge in different parts of the world, to define and understand the diversity of human beings. In recent centuries, they have been intertwined with imperialism and colonialism. The history of science is based on efforts to create knowledge, which cannot be separated from the struggle for power over distant lands and the intent to exploit and extract their resources.

Cabinets of curiosity are to some extent the precursors of modern museums, some of which were merged into them later on. These cabinets contained a variety of exotic or strange things that had been collected to show the diversity of the world. At times they were meant to represent the world itself. Obviously, it was mostly wealthy people who could collect such things and through them increase their power and esteem. One of the most famous cabinets of curiosity was owned by Ole Worm from Denmark, and included stuffed animals, fossils, Roman jewellery and scientific instruments. Like many other collectors, Ole Worm published an exhibition catalogue, which today gives an insight into what his collection contained.

Rosamond Purcell's installation in the Danish National Museum.

Phrenology was based on the idea that there was a relationship between the shape of a person's head and their personality. In the early 19th century, these theories were supposed to help to understand why some people excelled and others turned to crime. Head casts were seen as important to collect comparative data. As early as the second half of the 19th century, phrenology became largely obsolete as a science, but continued to be significant among the general public. The inhabitants of distant countries were exhibited in Europe and North America. As were other marginalized people who were seen as different in some way. Despite harsh conditions, many found various ways to resist their situation.

The Fuegians (inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego) were among those captured and displayed against their will throughout Europe as a specimen of a society that European scholars often classified as one of the most primitive in the world. Scholars were given access to their bodies for research.

The categorization of people into different groups with different rights and status was predicated on racism. Race science is pseudoscience, but in the 19th century it was seen as true knowledge. Various types of data were used to justify ideas that were based on white supremacy and white male power in particular and European imperialism. Busts were often used to show what were believed to be differences between races. Although these theories have been discredited, they emerge again and again and are recreated within a contemporary context.

In the southern hemisphere

The French explorer and naval commander Jules Dumont d'Urville led an expedition to the South Seas and the South Pole in 1837–1840. The expedition visited many places, including Brazil, the Marquesas Islands, Tonga, Tasmania and New Zealand. Pierre Marie Alexandre Dumoutier had the task of making casts of people's heads. He was under the influence of phrenology and his aim included collection of busts of people who were seen as living in the stage of so-called barbarism.

Often, individuals had little say in whether they would undergo the unpleasant process of the molding process, but in other cases, Dumoutier had to convince people.

As many other places, New Zealand had been drawn into European imperialism and was tightly interwoven with multiple transnational connections. The Maori adapted to this situation and actively bartered with the foreigners. The increased influx of settlers from Britain led King Tāwhiao to travel to Britain with other chiefs in 1884 to get an audience with the Queen, without success.

In the Arctic

Prince Jérôme Napoleon, the nephew of Emperor Napoleon, led an expedition to countries in the north in 1856. “Napoleon's trip to the North Sea draws attention to the Nordic countries and the complex relationship that has existed between these countries historically, but also the relationship of the Nordic countries to colonialism. The history of the Nordic countries in relation to the European colonial project was for a long time erased from the historical memory of both the Nordic people themselves and in terms of their external image.”

“What were these Icelanders to the French nobility and scientists? Where did they belong in a world of nineteenth century elites, where the emphasis was on the classification of humanity into a hierarchy?” From the book *Faces on Display*

The objectives of the exploration were multiple. Prince Jérôme Napoleon Bonaparte led an expedition from France to Iceland and Greenland in 1856. The purpose was scientific, but also to survey natural resources for exploitation. A number of prominent scientists participated, but it was often not possible to separate the military, economic and scientific objectives of such expeditions.

“Reykjavík has no past. Does she have a future? We will find out. Sixty years ago this name was given to a cluster of fishermen's huts. The need for trade has turned the hamlet into the country's capital. In the future, perhaps there will be a city here, but today we have seen a church, the only stone building, the national school, the house of the local authorities and two rows of very small dwellings, which are spread over a lawn. [...] we see no gardens, trees or anything that looks like vegetation. It's sad, gloomy and desolate.” From the expedition book.

Cultural activities in the Canary Islands

Gregorio Chil y Naranjo was one of the main instigators of the creation of the Canary Museum, El Museo Canario, in 1879. The aim was to create a platform for safeguarding of the island's heritage and stimulate its cultural life. The Canary Museum has a collection of 80 busts, all of which were bought from France at the end of the 19th century and were supposed to show different races of mankind. The individuals who were the subjects of casting were from different places around the world.

Many of the busts in the Canary Museum are from d'Urville's expedition to the Southern Seas and the South Pole in the years 1837–1840. Another group of busts, including those of people in Iceland and Greenland comes from Prince Jérôme Napoleon's expedition to the North Sea. Today the busts of Osifekunde, Horace and Asnath can be found in the gallery along with others. The busts of Man-Gua-Daus, Se-Nou-Ty-Jah and seven Icelanders are among those that have been carefully packed and placed in storage.

Both Iceland and Greenland were ruled by Denmark and were a part of its empire.

When Jérôme Napoléon's expedition arrived in Iceland and Greenland, a large number of foreign ships could be seen in the ports, which reflected the transnational relations of which these two countries were a part. The expedition saw Icelandic people as primitive, the conditions in the country difficult and compared it to Europe four or five hundred years earlier. There was also a lot of prejudice against Greenlanders in the 19th century, and Europeans in general looked down on their way of life and culture.

Icelander on display

Who was Ragnheiður?

Ragnheiður Ólafsdóttir lived in Álftanes and was in her twenties when Jean-Benjamin Stahl from Napoleon's expedition took a mold of her head. Little information about her has been found, although she is mentioned, for example, in the 1850 census.

“This was the third Ragnheiður I had seen. I had also seen the other busts [of Icelanders] before, except for the one of Skapti Skaptason, but it was broken in one place and wrapped in plastic in another. Here they were standing in front of me more than a hundred years after being bought as part of a cabinet of curiosities, a collection of objects that were considered interesting or foreign but were nevertheless believed to say something about what it means to be a human.” from the book *Faces on Display*

Greenlander on display

Who was Asnath?

Asnath Eleonora Elisabeth was almost thirty years old, from Narsaq on the west coast of Greenland. She was one of six Greenlanders whose bust was made during Napoleon's expedition. Her graceful hairstyle has been retained, unlike many of the other busts. The color of the ribbon around the knot would have been red, which signified that she was unmarried.

“Indian” on display

Who was Maungwudaus?

Groups of Ojibway and Ioway from North America toured Europe, England, and France, with artist George Catlin, who exhibited paintings and material culture of indigenous North American people. Maungwudaus, who also used the name George Henry, was one of the participants in the show, but he also travelled on his own. The bust of him and several others in the exhibition group was made in France in 1845 during a visit there.

Buffalos, which were an important source of food, were slaughtered on a large scale. Here, buffalo skulls have been piled up in North America.

The colonialization of North and South America had a huge impact on people's lives across the world. Exploitation of resources and extensive local depopulation followed. Racism and white supremacy shaped the attitude of the settlers towards both the indigenous people and workers who had the status of slaves in the society.

A West African on display

Who was Osifekunde?

Osifekunde was a Ijebu Yoruba, from an area northeast of what is now the city of Lagos, Nigeria. He is believed to have been born in 1798, enslaved at the age of 20 and taken to Brazil. He was thus one of the more than 12 million Africans who were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean and sold into slavery. Later, he went to France with his owner, where he became free, but it was hard for him to be away from his family. The bust was made in Paris, probably in 1845.

A reflection on contemporary influences?

Colonialism and violence in the past continues to shape the lives of many marginalized people today. As it says in the book *Faces on Display*:

“The past is catching up with us and at even a greater speed than previously. The fight of many marginalized groups has resulted in increased visibility of their demands for basic rights and justice. Inequality created in the past that had continued to be reproduced in the present has been extremely important there.” It “also pursues us in the form of an environmental threat, and there the speed has increased considerably in terms of impact on people's daily lives”.

The collection of busts thus reflect: “an interconnected world for a long time, where the past is not just something that has passed, but a part of our present and future”.

How do you think the past discussed in the exhibition is relevant to the present?

What does the exhibition reveal about Iceland's relationship with the rest of the world in the past? What does the exhibition tell us about Europe's relationship with the rest of the world?

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