

The Role of the International Exhibitions in the Construction of National Cultures in the 19th Century

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In the latter half of the 19th century, the great international exhibitions, with their millions of visitors, grew into gigantic instruments for education and refinement where contemporary ideas were formulated and imprinted through visual communication, often in symbolic form (e.g. the aesthetic ideals of the bourgeoisie; human progress in evolutionary perspective; the superiority of the white race based on the sovereignty of the people). The article discusses the role played by the international exhibitions in the construction of what Orvar Löfgren has called an “international cultural grammar” of nationhood, choosing among other symbols the elements of folk culture that were later put on exhibition in the folk museums (folk costumes, vernacular buildings, peasant living rooms).

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This article deals with one of the most crucial and fascinating cultural elements of the 19th century: *The great exhibitions*. I will argue that these exhibitions played an important part in the development of what Orvar Löfgren has called “an international cultural grammar of nationhood with a thesaurus of general ideas about the cultural ingredients needed to form a nation” (Löfgren 1989).

The exhibition is an innovation from the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. It is related to phenomena such as the market and the trade fair, but it differs in the fact that exhibitions are not events for buying and selling, but only for presenting the latest products, tools and machines in order to stimulate “enterprise” and “progress”.

In the latter part of the 19th century, this new phenomenon culminated in the institution which the French call *exposition universelle*, the English *international exhibition*, the

Americans world's fair, and the Germans *Weltausstellung*. The idea was English; they arranged the first international exhibition in 1851, the so-called “Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations”, presented in Joseph Paxton’s “Crystal Palace”, a huge building of glass and iron, which heralded the development of a specific style of exhibition architecture. A few years later the French took over with the “exposition universelle” in Paris 1855, and although England arranged the next international exhibition in 1862, France remained on track as the leading exhibition nation for the rest of the century. All the French exhibitions were held in Paris: the second and most important in 1867, another one in 1878 in order to regain the position after the military defeat by Prussia, and again in 1889 in order to celebrate the centennial of the revolution, and finally in 1900 in order to mark the turn of the century. In between these were an Aus-

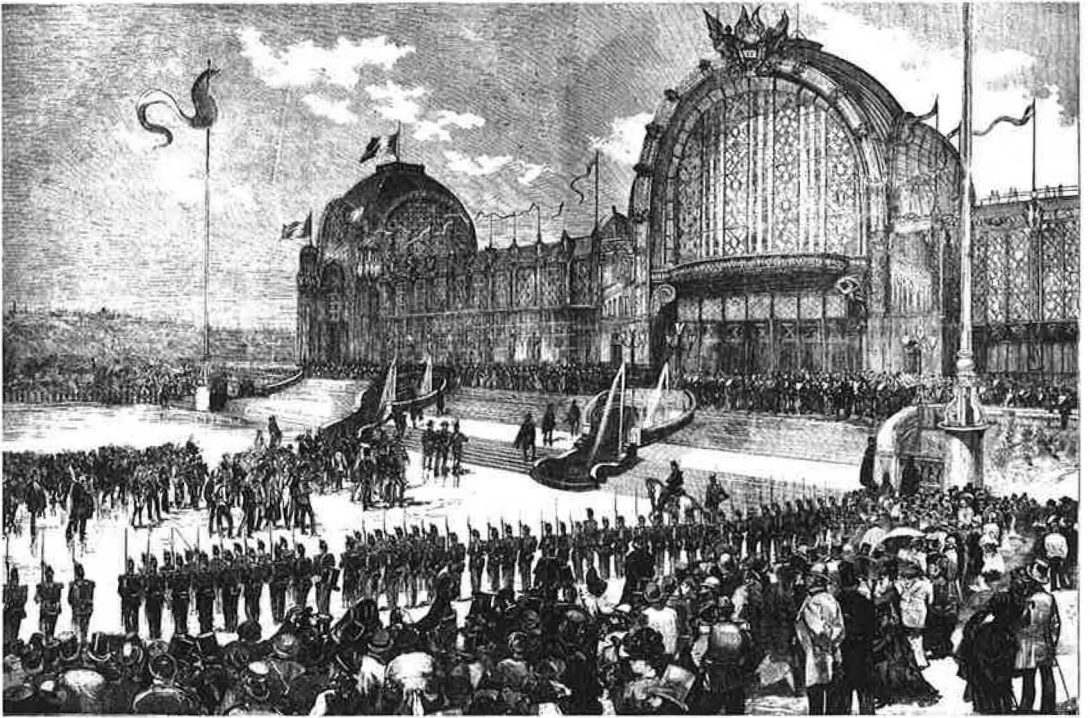


Fig. 1. The great exhibitions offered the organizers plenty of opportunities to stage national rituals. Here, the French president opens the 1878 Paris exhibition. – From *Illustreret Tidende* 1878.

trian “Weltausstellung” in 1873 and two American: in Philadelphia 1876 to celebrate the centennial of the declaration of independence, and in Chicago 1893, the so-called Columbian Exposition.¹

In the last decades of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th, these international exhibitions were accompanied by a swarm of semi-international and national exhibitions. In the days when the “exhibition fever” culmi-



Fig. 2. The partition surrounding the Swedish section in Paris 1867 had been given a national touch inspired by the folk art, and it had been furnished with niches containing dummies in folk costumes.- From *Illustreret Tidende* 1867.

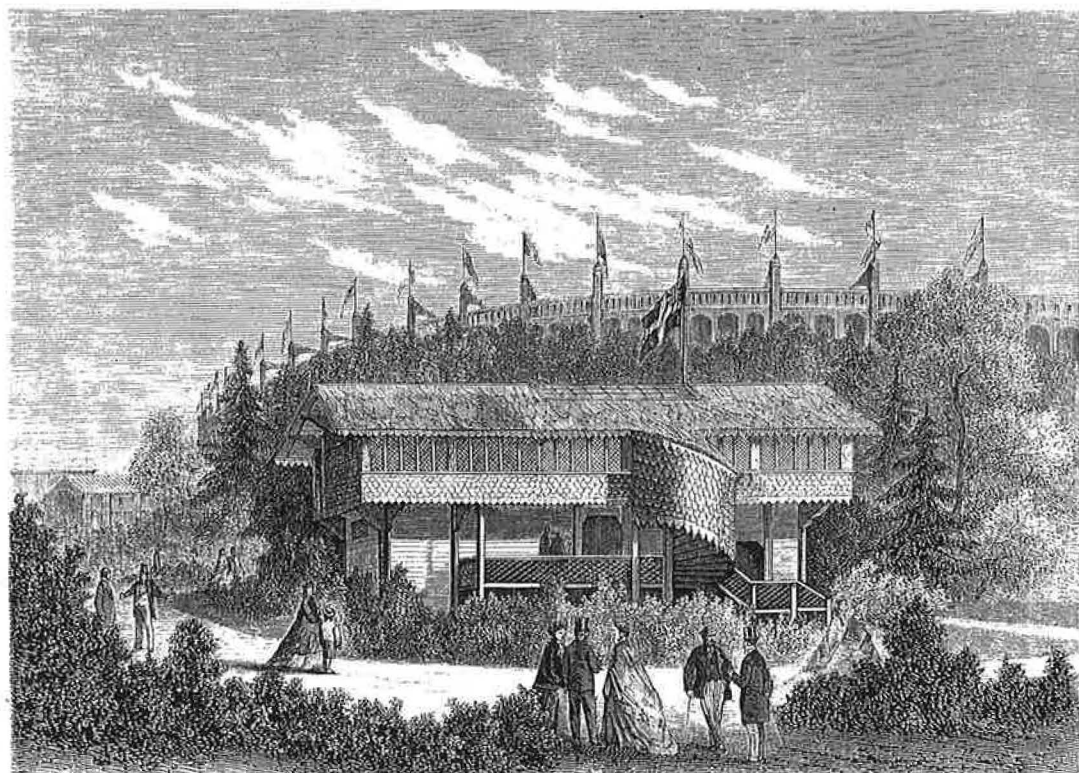


Fig. 3. A copy of the Ornäs-loft from Dalarna, one of the vernacular buildings, which were built in the park surrounding the main exhibition building at the 1867 Paris exhibition. The main exhibition building can be seen in the background. – From *Illustreret Tidende* 1867.

nated there was hardly a year without a major exhibition arrangement taking place in one or more of the larger cities of Europe.

The great exhibitions were by definition international, but from the very beginning they developed into a competition about the leading positions in industrial production between the industrialized nation states in Europe. In the words of Emperor Franz Joseph at the opening of the Vienna exhibition in 1873 it was “a peaceful international battle between all the civilized nations of the earth”.

The American anthropologist Burton Benedict has compared the world’s fairs to *potlaches*, the festivals of the Indian tribes of North West America, during which tribal chiefs established their position by ritual consumption and destruction of wealth (Benedict 1983). At the international exhibitions the competitors are not tribal chiefs, but nation

states. However, in both cases there is a massive display of prestige in goods presented in a ritual manner. “Both potlaches and world’s fairs tend to escalate,” says Burton Benedict, “Each requires a bigger return prestation. To return an equal display would not increase the prestige of the giver. On the contrary, it would diminish it by showing that the giver was not able to exceed his rival. Every world’s fair is trumpeted as being the biggest ever.”

The 19th century exhibition organizers tried to exceed each other in the amount of exhibited goods, in the size of the exhibition area, in the amount of exhibition buildings, and, last but not least, in the number of visitors, which, by the way, reached impressive heights. The first international exhibition in 1851 was visited by almost 6 million; by 1900 the Paris exhibition reached a figure above 50 million visitors!

However, the competition was not just be-



Fig. 4. Siberian folk costumes at the Russian stand at the 1867 great exhibition. — From Ducuing 1867.

tween the organizers of the international exhibitions, but also between the exhibiting countries, who could read their relative placing in international evaluations, and in the amount of medals brought home as trophies from the exhibitions. It is a well-known fact that a feeling of decline in the aesthetic quality of Britain's technically superior industrial production, as it was presented at the Great Exhibition of 1851, gave the impetus to the founding of schools of arts and crafts, and to a museum of applied art in London, later to become the Victoria and Albert Museum. In a similar way, reports of the inferiority of Austrian industrial products at the London exhibition in 1862 paved the way for a founding of similar institutions in Vienna. And after the Paris exhibition in 1867, the history repeated itself, this time with Prussia, in the role of the defeated, deciding to improve the national products before the next international exhibition (Mundt 1974).

However, the international exhibitions do not merely try to exceed each other; to a large degree they also build on what the previous exhibitions have created. The rapid succession of international exhibitions in the latter half of the 19th century can be seen as a sort of relay race, in which the ideas and innovations introduced at one exhibition, are resumed and elaborated upon at the next one. In this way a

set of rules of staging and a system of rituals are developed, which become regulars in the great exhibitions, not only the international, but also the geographically more delimited ones. In a similar way an exhibition language is gradually formed, in which ideas and norms can be passed on symbolically at the huge fora of visual communication, into which the international exhibition developed.

Due to the central position of the nation state in the overall exhibition landscape, it was important that a common non-verbal language was mastered, a visual code, in which the qualities of each nation, its specific style and its historic roots, could be expressed. Hereby the international exhibitions very actively came to bring about the selection of, and the elaboration of, the symbolic representations of the nations meeting at the great exhibitions.

From the very first international exhibitions, the different nations had their own sections in the large exhibition hall which held the whole exhibition. The sections were clearly marked with some of the standard symbols "through which an independent country proclaims its identity and sovereignty", as an oft quoted Indian pamphlet puts it (Löfgren 1989: 7–8): Name, coat of armour, and flag, the last two normally used to form a decorative whole.

From early on, the partitions between the national sections and the entrances to the sec-



Fig. 5. Thoroughbreds are paraded in front of the Russian building in Paris 1867. The roof ridge of the building is heavily decorated with symbolic details from vernacular architecture. – From *Illustreret Tidende* 1867.

tions were formed so that they not only were aesthetically pleasing, but also became the carriers of a national symbolism. There were two important sources to be drawn upon: Folk art and vernacular architecture or historic styles of specific national importance, for instance the “German renaissance” (cf. fig. 2).

However, the possibilities for a representation of the national culture were vastly extended, when the large central exhibition hall was complemented by national “pavilions”, placed in the surrounding park. The first time it happened was in Paris 1867, and since then parks and pavilions have been a regular characteristic of the international exhibitions right up until the Expo 1992 in Seville. The pavilions were just one of the many important innovations of the 1867 exhibition whose chief organizer and man of ideas was the mining engineer and social scientist, Frederic Le Play. It was due to his initiative that general cultural and social themes became regular features at the world exhibitions. It can with some justification be said that from then on the international exhibitions were not only a competition in goods, but also in cultures.

One of his ideas was that the display of modern industrial production should be preceded by a historical thematic exhibition of “L’his-

toire du travail”, showing human progress from the stone age to around 1800, thus giving an evolutionary perspective to the exhibition. However, this arrangement and similar ones at later exhibitions, also gave the young national museums of Europe an opportunity to display some of their archaeological treasures and thus to underline the deep historical roots of their national culture.

Not only archaeological but also ethnographical elements were added to the international exhibitions by the organizers of the 1867 Paris exhibition. In the classification system, drawn up by the imperial committee, there was a special class devoted to “costumes populaires des diverses contrées”. At the exhibition there were costumes from most regions of France, and fifteen other countries had responded to the request of sending costumed figures to Paris (Collet 1987: 73). Dummies with folk costumes became a popular element at most of the subsequent international exhibitions; especially the Swedish groups, which were arranged in romantic folk life scenes, based on popular genre paintings, aroused the interest of the visitors (Berg 1980).

However, folk culture also made its entry into the park that surrounded the exhibition building in the 1867 exhibition. In this park it



Fig. 6. At the modern international exhibitions, it is predominantly “third world” countries who use “ethnographic” or vernacular buildings as pavilions. Here is a part of the Arabian sector of the 1992 Seville exhibition. – Photo by B. Stoklund 1992.

was possible for the individual invited states to acquire a piece of land, where they could “display such objects as could serve to give a clear idea of the characteristics of the different peoples, such as their houses and their cuisines”, to quote a Danish introduction to the exhibition. Not all states interpreted the request in the same way; the English, for instance, showed up with an electric lighthouse. But a large number of states, especially from Northern and Eastern Europe did display samples of national vernacular architecture. Rumania was represented by a small orthodox church, Norway displayed a splendid example of a loft-store from the Telemark landscape, and Russian craftsmen had built an *izba* with a stable. Austria was represented by a group of seven pavilions, each of them showing the local folk architecture of one of the provinces (cf. Stoklund 1993).

Several of these park pavilions were designed to accommodate an exhibition of national culture, and of national products. This idea was followed up at all of the subsequent international exhibitions: Here most countries designed their own national pavilions, more or less copying a national building – or, which is

even more common today: A building designed by an architect symbolizing the country in question in a more sophisticated way.

But the idea of representations of vernacular architecture from all over Europe or the world, also caught on as a independent feature in the growing cultural or entertainment exhibition sector. This was typically buildings which not only had a local style, but which were also manned with representatives of the “local population”. When, six years after the important Paris exposition, the Habsburg Monarchy was able to arrange its first international exhibition, the organizers had an ambi-

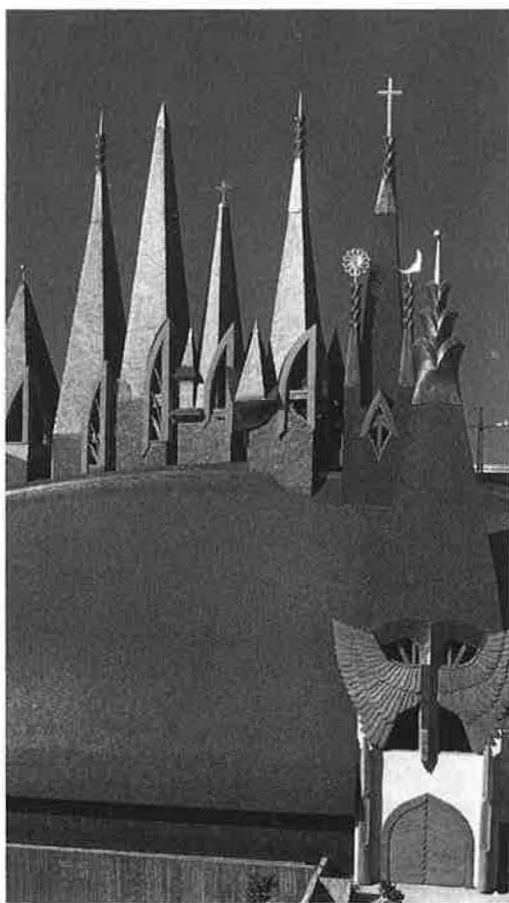
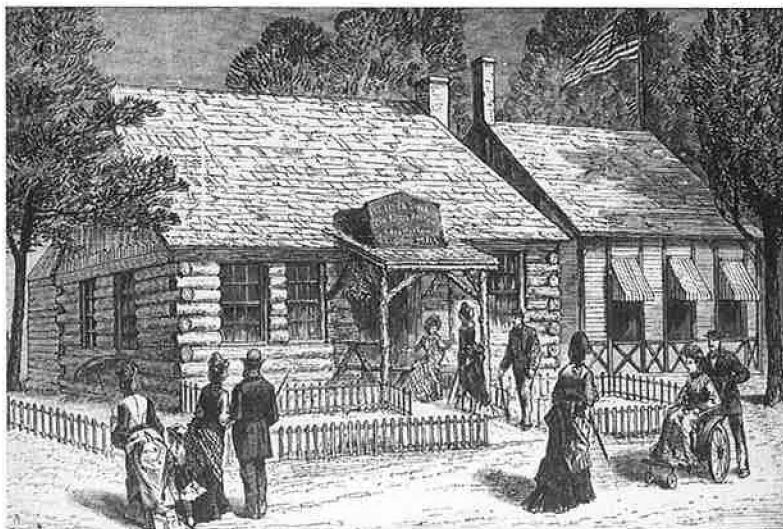


Fig. 7. The Hungarian pavilion was one of the most symbolically charged at the 1992 Seville exhibition. Seven towers, which rose above the arched roof ridge, must be seen as a symbol of Transylvania (Siebenbürgen), today a part of Rumania. – From a leaflet about the Hungarian pavilion.

Fig. 8. The so-called “New England loghouse” at the exhibition in Philadelphia 1876, was inspired by “the ethnographical village” at the Vienna exhibition three years earlier. – From Leslie 1876.



tious plan for an “ethnographical village” which was supposed to include peasant houses from all over the world. Later on the plans were reduced to cover only the European countries, but even that proved to be impossible. The final result was a village at the Prater consisting of seven houses representing different provinces in Austria and Hungary, and two from the outside; one from Alsace and one from Russia (Pemsel 1989). At the later French and American international exhibitions, ethnographical elements like this were to play an even greater role. In Paris in 1889 one could visit a number of “native villages” peopled by some five hundred natives from Africa, Asia, and America, and at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893 one could visit a Bedouin camp, a Red Indian Village, a Lapp camp, a Persian palace, a Chinese market, a Japanese bazaar, and villages from Samoa, Java, and Dahomey. European folk culture was represented by villages from Germany, Austria, Ireland, and other countries (Bancroft 1893).

Costumes and buildings were two folk cultural features of the international exhibitions. Living rooms were a third element; they could easily be fitted into an exhibition hall and they could, when richly equipped with furniture and “peopled” with dummies in local costumes, present a full image of a folk culture. At the

same time, they emphasized the homely cosiness and the cheerful contentment which always lies as an undercurrent in the presentation of folk culture at the international exhibitions.

The living room from Hindelopen in West Friesland, presented by the Dutch organizers at the 1878 Paris exhibition, became especially popular. It had an exceptionally strong effect because it was arranged in such a way that it not only was possible to look into the living room, but also to step into it, which gave a strong personal feeling of visiting a past world. The Hindelopen living room inspired the Danish museum founder Bernhard Olsen to try something similar, at a Danish exhibition the following year, with a living room from the island of Amager near Copenhagen (de Jong & Skougaard 1993).

Neither the Friesian living room from Hindelopen nor the Amager living room, which, in fact, represented the culture of former immigrants from the Netherlands, can be said to be typical representatives of respectively the Dutch and the Danish national culture. Nonetheless they both came to function as national symbols. This example touches upon a characteristic feature of the selection process, which takes place at the international exhibitions in this field. It is not the most characteristic national cultural elements which find the favour

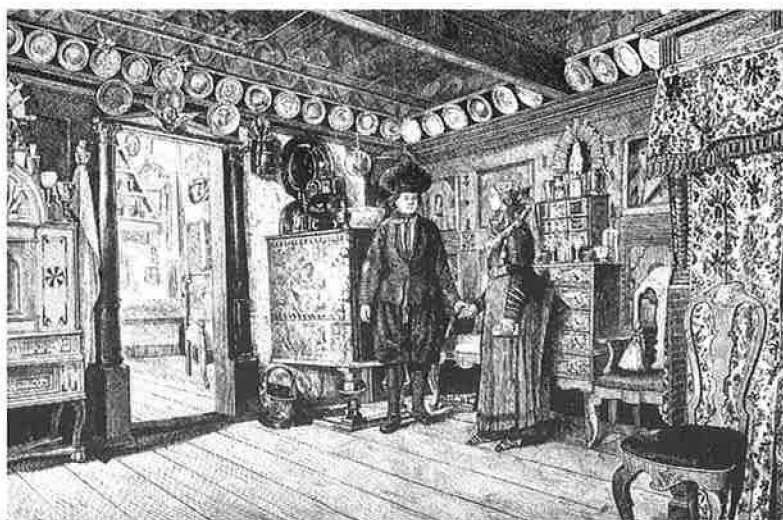


Fig. 9. Living room from Amager near Copenhagen with dummies in folk costumes, arranged by Bernhard Olsen at an exhibition in Copenhagen 1879. – From Nyrop 1879.

of the eyes of the organizers, but rather the peculiar, the picturesque, the exotic. Here, as in other fields, the *potlach* effect makes itself manifest, it is a competition in culture: What is important is to exceed each other. And in this way the great exhibitions also contribute to single out “the specifically national areas”, which certainly are not always too apparent: Dalarna in Sweden, Telemarken in Norway, Tirol in Austria, or the Pusztas of the great Hungarian Plain.

The Friesians, situated by the North Sea on Dutch and German territories and bordering up to Denmark, suffered the fate of having their ethnic culture turned into something “Old-Dutch” in the Netherlands, something seen as particularly and genuinely Germanic in Germany, and something used as an inspiration for the recreation of a “Danish Classicism” in the countryside of Denmark (cf. Stoklund 1990). The Hindelopen living rooms became a coveted collector’s item in Germany, where at least Rudolph Virchow’s museum in Berlin and the “Germanisches Museum” in Nürnberg acquired examples of this “Proto-Germanic” room (de Jong & Skougaard 1993).

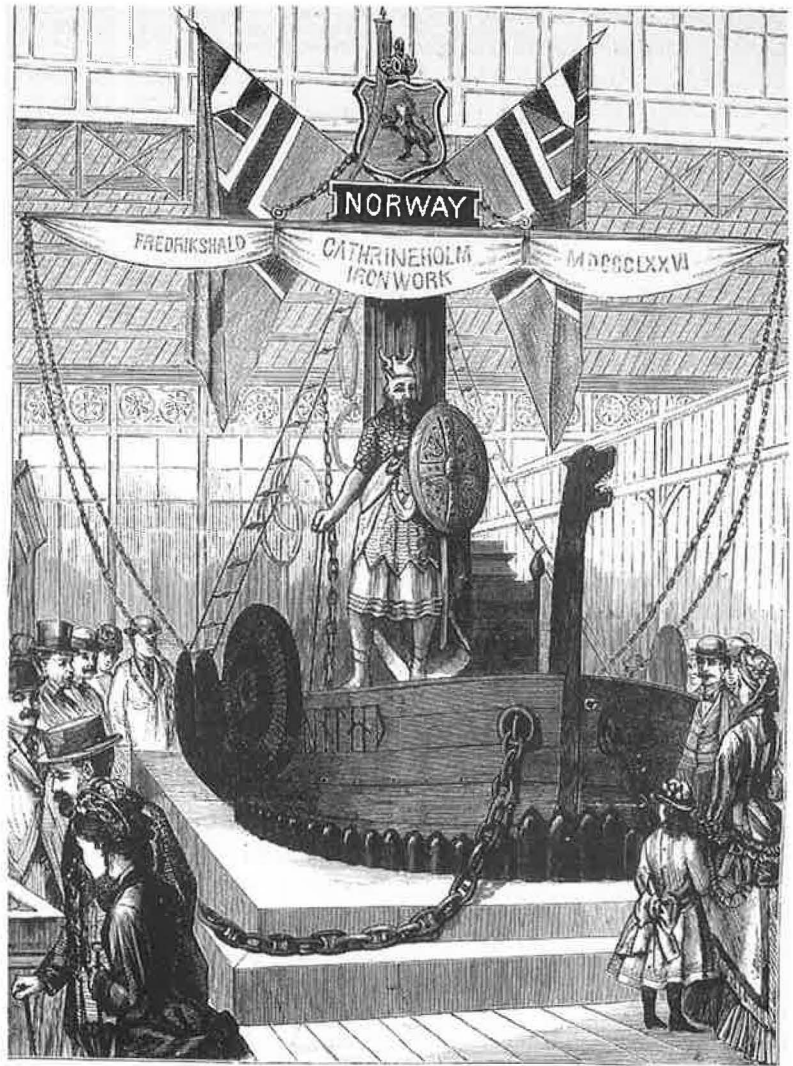
In this context it may be justified to mention another of the great founders of museums: Heinrich Saueremann in Flensburg, who created the northernmost German museum of applied art and folk culture (Redlefsen 1976).

Saueremann was a cabinet maker by profession, and he took part in the development of a specific German national renaissance style within the area of interior design. He took his inspiration from living rooms in the North Friesian islands which he exhibited in his museum. With magnificent renaissance rooms designed with Friesian inspiration, he visited several of the great exhibitions, amongst others the international exhibitions in Chicago 1893 and in Paris 1900. In the beginning he called the room on display “Nordfriesisches Zimmer”, but characteristically he later renamed it “Niederdeutsches Zimmer”, in that way changing ethnic style into national culture.

The development of folk and open-air museums in several European countries at the end of the 19th century can be seen as a sort of permanent-making of sectors of the great exhibitions: The essential parts of the new museum concept had been shaped by the exhibition organizers, who also had selected what was to become the most important features of these museums: Folk costumes, representatives of vernacular architecture, peasant living rooms, and the decorated domestic utensils, which came to be known as “folk art” at the turn of the century (cf. Stoklund 1993).

But the role of the great exhibitions may have had an even further reaching influence in

Fig. 10. Viking motives became popular among Scandinavian participants in the great exhibitions in the 1870s, used e.g. on silver ware. Here a viking ship advertises a Norwegian ironworks, an early example of a still well-known phenomenon. – From Leslie 1876.



this field. It is a well known fact that the emphasis of the scientific exploration of the folk culture, in the first half of the 19th century, lay on the spiritual or folkloristic elements: folk ballads, fairy tales, popular beliefs, etc. But in the last half of the century an essential part of the scholarly interest turned towards “material” culture, with costumes and buildings as the preferred subjects of study. It is hardly possible to imagine that this shift of emphasis could have taken place without the international exhibitions and their demand for material cultural elements for a visual communication of the national cultures of Europe.

It is easy to give several concrete examples, which show that the exhibitions not only have inspired the establishment of museums, but also triggered research projects within this field.

Let me try to summarize. In the latter half of the 19th century, the development of an industrial culture and the establishment of nation states were closely connected processes. The technological and social development was pushed forward by the competition among the nation states, who pitted themselves against each other and sized each other up at the great

exhibitions. Their common project was progress and modernization; their object was to learn the most from each other in the quickest possible way through the communication of news, which, amongst others, the exhibitions represented. For the individual nation state the object was to be in the front line of the modernization. But at the same time as the states proved their modernity and competitive power, it was important to stress what separated the individual state from the others: the national culture. Two aspects of the material culture came to play a special part: Prehistoric finds, demonstrating the deep historical origins of the nation state, and the so-called "folk culture", representing the genuine, national character. Historical venerableness and distinctive national characteristics were values which easily let themselves be mediated through the visual communication, within the framework of the exhibition.

But, hereby, the role of these features of the exhibition are not exhausted. In the national project, modernity and conservatism walk hand in hand, they are complementary traits in a quite paradoxical manner. Confronted with continually new examples of the Titanesque technical advance, the visitors needed to be reassured that something was permanent, that the country and the people possessed an unyielding constancy, and that the bourgeois values, mostly tied to the home and the family, would be continued in spite of the upheavals. That was the message which the peasant living rooms and the folk costumes, amongst others, passed on to the exhibition visitors.

Note

1. Of the extensive recent literature on the international exhibitions in the 19th century we may mention Luckhurst 1951, Allwood 1977, Findling 1990 and Benedict 1983. Rydell 1985 deals with the American exhibitions 1876–1916 and Pemsel 1989 with the Austrian exhibition 1873. Mogensen 1993 surveys the Danish participation in the international expositions 1851–1900. In a recent publication (Ehn et al. 1993) Orvar Löfgren has given examples of how Scandinavian national culture was presented at the great exhibitions.

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