

## 'America Is Our Field': Anthropological Regionalism at the American Museum of Natural History, 1895–1945

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### Abstract

This article outlines the regional interests and emphases in anthropological collection, research, and display at the American Museum of Natural History, during the first half of the twentieth century. While all parts of the world were eventually represented in the museum's collections, they came from radically different sources at different times, and for different reasons. Despite his identity as an Americanist, Franz Boas demonstrated a much more ambitious interest in world-wide collecting, especially in East Asia. During the post-Boasian years, after 1905, the Anthropology Department largely continued an Americanist emphasis, but increasingly the museum's administration encouraged extensive collecting and exhibition for the Old World cultures. For the most part, these collections and exhibits diverged from anthropological concerns, expressing imperialist messages, biological documentation, or artistic display. In thus constituting the 'stuff' of an anthropology museum, one can trace the transvaluation of objects, the importance of networks, institutional competition, and the role of disciplinary definitions.

**Keywords:** museum, anthropology, collecting, exhibition, culture areas, American Museum of Natural History

Almost by definition, the great metropolitan natural history museums were founded on a problematic relationship to a distant 'field.' Wandering through their halls, the visitor is confronted by cultures that are usually far away in space and time.<sup>1</sup> As they were developed in the nineteenth century, these natural history museums, parallel to the art museums (Duncan and Wallach 1980), adopted Enlightenment schemes of universal survey. That is, they wished to represent in microcosm the entire world. In both America and Europe, this expansive perspective was associated with the example of explorer Alexander von Humboldt. Following the logic of Manifest Destiny, America and its anthropologists proceeded to 'take control' of the American continent (Kohlstedt 2011), but explorations further afield were initially checked by America's lack of an obvious overseas colonial empire.

In 1912, while discussing the place of the Chinese collection at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, anthropology curator Clark Wissler emphatically announced: 'America is our field.'<sup>2</sup> As the twentieth century went on, there was a decided shift in the favored field sites of American anthropology, from an almost exclusive focus on the Native peoples of the North American continent to Latin America and then to the regions of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific (Stocking 1976: 11–12). A universal geographical scope, however, was not at all a given in American anthropology museums, and not all the major museums moved at the same pace in expanding their holdings beyond the Americas.

When Wissler declared that 'America is our field', he was undoubtedly invoking multiple senses of the word 'field'; among them, field as geographical site as well as field as discipline or scholarly subject. It is a truism in the history of anthropology that the discipline is allied to biology, geology, and other sciences founded on professional activity in a 'field' (Kohler 2002; Kuklick 2011). This perspective has been enriched in recent years by the 'spatial turn' in the history of science (Livingstone 2003). Knowledge is created by differential movements through

space(s), subject to pragmatic and political constraints. Inherently, such field-based sciences are relational, ordering part to part and part to whole, whether on the level of continents or regions, or spaces within them.

Natural history museums which traffic in such fields are, in Latour's terms (1987), 'centers of calculation', sites in which knowledge is produced through the circulation and accumulation of resources. Their collections - whether artifacts, photographs, or field notes - are thus sets of 'immutable mobiles', diverse objects brought together by collectors to create knowledge by juxtaposition and generalization.

This article considers the working out of these theoretical concerns, in sometimes surprising ways, by tracing the regional interests and emphases in anthropological collection, research, and display at the American Museum of Natural History (American Museum, or simply, AMNH), during its most important period, the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

### **An Institutional Overview**

The American Museum of Natural History, founded in 1869, included anthropological collections from its beginning, with a formal department established in 1873 (Kennedy 1968; Freed 2012).<sup>4</sup> The period under consideration here covers a critical transition in the Museum's history: from the presidency of Morris K. Jesup (1881–1908) to the administration of his successor, Henry Fairfield Osborn (1908–33).<sup>5</sup> During this period, AMNH anthropology was directed by three successive chairs: Frederic W. Putnam, who, between 1894 and 1903, revitalized the department, putting it on a professional footing for the first time; to Franz Boas, who worked at the Museum from 1895 to 1905, serving as chair during 1904 and 1905; to finally his student Clark Wissler, who was chair from 1905 to 1942. These successive periods arguably represented the most important years of AMNH anthropology, a time when the Museum was central to the discipline. After World War II, there was a period of transition until the department—and its exhibits—were revived in the 1960s and 1970s.

During the Boas and Wissler periods, the anthropological collections expanded enormously, becoming the great world treasure that they are today. During Jesup's presidency, the Museum went from purchasing independently-made collections to acquiring artifacts on museum-organized but privately-funded expeditions. By the early twentieth century the AMNH had established its famed tradition of expeditions and field work (Rexer and Klein 1995). In addition to the obvious research value of the collections, these expeditions had the benefit of generating an enormous amount of publicity and attracting substantial private funding.

### **Putnam Period (1894–1903) Collections**

Even before the arrival of Frederic Putnam, the museum had substantial anthropological collections, and most of them were American. The most significant was probably the Tlingit collection of over 4,000 pieces purchased from naval lieutenant George T. Emmons (1888–93).

At the American Museum, Putnam was essentially an Americanist, as he had been at his original institution, the Harvard Peabody Museum. And, as he had done at Harvard, he pushed much deeper into his own disciplinary field of archaeology. In North America, the principal collection was gathered by the Hyde archaeological expedition to the Southwest (1896–1902). Formed with the personal participation of the patrons, these collections were not especially well-documented, but they did include many important and attractive objects (Snead 2001: 31–64). The Museum's important program in Mesoamerican archaeology also began under Putnam, with the appointment of one of his students, Marshall Saville. Funded by the Duc du Loubat, these Mexican excavations (1896–1903) were initially carried out in collaboration with Harvard.

While Putnam in many ways marked the beginning of professional anthropological collecting at the Museum, several notable collections actually began before his arrival. One was the Museum's other major archaeology collection, from Peru, amassed by pioneer archaeologist Adolph F. Bandelier (funded by railroad financier Henry Villard, 1892–1903). Another pre-Putnam initiative was the Museum's major ethnographic collection of the early 1890s. Between 1890 and 1905, the Norwegian-born naturalist Carl S. Lumholtz made repeated expeditions to northern and western Mexico (1890–91, 1892–93, 1894–97, 1898, 1905). Something of

a polymath, Lumholtz was noted for his immersion in Native life and for his meticulous and comprehensive collections. Finally, one of the few early ethnographic collections from the Old World was gathered in 1894 by museum mammalogist Rudolph Weber in Sumatra, beginning a long AMNH tradition of cultural materials collected by biologists.

### Boas Period (1895–1905): New World Collections

On most fronts, Franz Boas's collecting initiatives extended those begun by Putnam. Like his mentor, Boas's own fieldwork was in the New World, and thus those are the collections that are best-known today.

In fact, the most famous anthropology expedition at the Museum, if not in American anthropology, was the Jesup expedition to the Northwest Coast in Canada, as well as to adjacent areas of Siberia, 1897–1902 (Krupnik and Fitzhugh 2001; Kendall and Krupnik 2003). It was explicitly focused on geographical issues, tracing the diffusion of cultural traits across the Bering Strait, ostensibly undertaken to throw light on the original peopling of the Americas. Given the lack of trained anthropologists at the time, Boas recruited a large and diverse collecting team, instructing them on what and how to collect via a series of detailed letters. Despite its theoretical and methodological innovation on many levels, in other ways the Jesup Expedition was a continuation of the survey and mapping traditions that run so consistently through several generations of Americanist anthropologists (Darnell 1998).



Figure 1. Northwest Coast Indian Hall, 1910, AMNH; neg. no. 33002.

In a similar manner, Boas supervised the collection of Canadian Inuit (Eskimo) material, the subject of his first fieldwork. As he had done earlier, Boas actively solicited collecting agents, principally two whaling captains, George Comer and James S. Mutch (Freed 2012: 413). Later, he edited their research for publication. In Boas's use of non-professional agents we see what was to be an almost eternal conundrum for the American Museum, that of leverage: how to build up large, representative collections in the face of limited resources, when funding could not always be found to support expeditions by professional anthropologists. While the artifacts might find their way into the store rooms and galleries of the Museum, their relation to supporting documentation and disciplinary concerns was another matter.

### **Boas Period (1895–1905): Old World Collections**

In contrast to the Americas, collections from Asia and the Pacific during this period are more obscured. Yet they were rather extensive, especially when one considers how relatively brief Boas's tenure at the Museum was.

During this time, Boas sponsored two large-scale collecting expeditions to East Asia. Siberia was included in the Jesup Expedition, with collections from Vladimir Jochelson, Vladimir Bogoras, and Berthold Laufer. The other principal example was the East Asiatic Expedition to China. Funded by German-American newspaper owner Jacob H. Schiff, it was also executed by Laufer, between 1901 and 1904 (Baick 1998; Haddad 2006; Kendall 2014).

In addition to museum-sponsored expeditions, Boas again resorted to collecting by field surrogates. The curator supported the acquisition of two major Old World collections: in 1898 the well-documented Pacific collection made by Otto Finsch, a German ornithologist; and in 1900, the so-called Missionary Collection, focusing on Asia. Unlike the Finsch collection, because of problems of support as well as documentation, the Missionary Collection never turned out to be as comprehensive or as useful as Boas hoped it would be (Hasinoff 2010). Yet it proved to be an important foundation for the Museum's subsequent Asian collections.

Even with museum-sponsored expeditions problems arose. Laufer's Chinese collection stimulated a number of conflicted issues, both in his time and after. One of the most enduring, which continued to resonate down the decades at the museum, was the disciplinary issue of the proper scope of anthropology. Because of Laufer's training in Sinology, he tended to favor works of fine art and antiquities. In response, Boas continually had to remind him to be sure to collect domestic crafts and industries, items that he felt would be more appropriate in a natural history display (Haddad 2006: 133–34). And as Kendall notes (forthcoming 2015), there was the even greater challenge of a single investigator trying to adequately document an entire civilization. In 1905, just as he was leaving the Museum, Laufer was planning collecting expeditions in India. For a variety of practical reasons, however, Boas was not able to expand the scope of his East Asiatic initiative beyond this one expedition to China and its primary funding beyond a single donor. While the Boas initiative may be viewed as something of a failure (Baick 1998: 82), it was an important beginning for the appreciation of Asian culture in New York City, and for many years it represented the most important collection of Asian ethnology at the museum.

### **Wissler Period (1905–1945): New World Collections**

The New World, broadly defined, was clearly Clark Wissler's own personal and intellectual emphasis, but it was also practical in the face of limited departmental resources.

Considering the distinct regions within North America, during this period not much was added to the existing Boasian strengths in the Northwest Coast and Inuit. The two main new regional collections were the Plains and the Southwest. The Plains survey (1899–1916) was funded by Mrs. Maria Jesup. Starting under Boas and greatly expanded under Wissler, it was famous for helping develop the concept of the culture area and the diffusion of cultural traits (Wissler 1914). The Southwestern survey, instead, became known for its development of a firmly dated chronology for the region's cultural history. Funded between 1909 and 1921 by Archer M. Huntington, a railroad tycoon with a serious interest in anthropology, this was a major research initiative, going much beyond the existing collections from the Hyde expedition and private donors (Snead 2001: 97–123).

The Museum's home region, the Woodlands of Eastern North America, was not neglected. Again, this initiative began under Putnam. It drew largely from his young associates, "Putnam's boys," young men such as George Pepper and Arthur Parker (Browman and Williams 2013: 245–75). Boas also encouraged collecting in this area with Harlan Smith in 1898 and William Jones in 1903. Resolutely local, much of this material was archaeological remains from within the City borders. Partly because of their lack of training, these agents generally made collections that were rather small, miscellaneous, and not well-documented. On the other hand, because of their immediate source, the collections held immense interest for the Museum's audience, especially its thousands of school children.<sup>6</sup>

These Americanist ethnological surveys were largely completed by the early 1920s; when the department's primary interests shifted to New World archaeology. For archaeology, the museum had three regional foci, all long-established: the American Southwest, Mesoamerica, and Peru. Herbert Spinden surveyed in Central America (while simultaneously spying for the U.S. Government during World War One), followed by field research in South America by trustee Clarence L. Hay and staff curators Ronald Olson, George Vaillant, and Junius Bird.

### **Wissler Period (1905–1945): Old World Collections**

As during the Boasian period, the story of the Museum's Old World collections has been hidden; partly through Wissler's own actions. In fact, Wissler's regional emphases represented a sharp reversal from Boasian trajectories. While there were substantial Old World collections in this period, the stimulus came almost entirely from outside the anthropology department. With the exception of Margaret Mead, almost none of it was collected by professional anthropologists. In fact, with the exception of Mead, the Museum had no curators for the Old World until the appointment in 1959 of Africanist Colin Turnbull; the first Asianist was Laurel Kendall in 1983.<sup>7</sup>

When considering AMNH anthropology during the Wissler period, it is important to note its circumscription within the presidency of Henry Fairfield Osborn. The general antipathy of Osborn and his trustees to anthropology is well-known, as was the racist eugenics of Osborn and his friend and museum trustee Madison Grant.<sup>8</sup> Despite these feelings, Osborn occasionally found anthropology projects that he wished to support. In the 1920s he assigned archaeologist Nels Nelson to accompany the Central Asiatic Expedition to Mongolia, stemming from his belief that Asia was the cradle of humankind.

When one examines the Old World collections during the Wissler period, one finds a clear colonialist thread. This is rather surprising, as we do not think of the museum home of Franz Boas, Robert Lowie, and Margaret Mead as being a locus for racism and imperialism. Upon closer inspection, we find that this emphasis was determined by the museum's administration.

Two of the Old World ethnology collections were made with substantial colonial assistance. The bulk of the Museum's holdings from the Philippines, America's new colonial possession, were gathered for the U.S. Government for display at the 1904 Saint Louis World's Fair. Over 1,000 Filipinos were 'presented' in person, the largest display of living native peoples at an American fair. While technically acquired in late 1904, while Boas was still chair, the Philippines collection was purchased over Boas's objections by director Hermon Bumpus, with funds supplied by president Jesup. In its ethnic representation, however, it expressed the interests of almost every American anthropology museum at the time: focusing on the tribal, so-called Pagan Peoples of the north, and not the Christianized or Islamic peoples of the lowlands and the south. And although gathered by a crew of official anthropologists, it was unsystematic and poorly-documented (Kramer 2006: 229–84; Parezo and Fowler 2007).

The Museum's African collections came overwhelmingly from the Belgian Congo (Schildkrout 1989). The Museum's regional collection effectively began with the 1905 purchase from Richard Douglas, a trader who lived in Southern Africa. Another large collection came from Frederick Starr (1905–6), who had been sent to the Congo by the Belgian government in a bid to curry favorable publicity. Starr was an anthropologist, but essentially untrained, evolutionist and racist, and a supporter of the government of Belgium. In 1907, that government - whose King Leopold II was a friend to president Jesup - made its own gift. An even larger collection was acquired on a museum-sponsored field expedition of biologists Herbert Lang and James Chapin (1909–15), greatly expanding the museum tradition of biologists collecting human artifacts. Taken together, these four collections make up a third of the Museum's African holdings.

Starr and Lang each collected about 4,000 objects, but their collections were quite different. While Starr was nominally the anthropologist - he was an early curator at AMNH (1889–91) and the first professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago - and Lang was a biologist, in fact, Starr's collection was marred by poor documentation and an attempt to fit African cultures into an evolutionary scheme (when he was not defending the colonial regime). Precisely because he was *not* part of the contemporary discipline, Lang applied an empirical methodology of precise documentation and tended to treat African cultures in a more neutral fashion (Schildkrout 1998).

It is the Asian, specifically Chinese, collection that most vividly reveals the Museum's biases during the Wissler period. After Laufer left the Museum, his Chinese collections were seen as a problem by many, most especially Clark Wissler (Haddad 2006: 141–42). Methodologically, Wissler questioned whether contemporary American anthropology was suited for a study of literate civilizations; this was the same issue with which Boas had struggled. He raised the related concern that other museums already dealt with these regions and subjects. Moreover, Wissler worried about the limits to an expansive view of disciplinary scope: if the anthropology department were to represent all of Asia, he argued, then why should it not include all the rest of the world. It is clear, however, that his hostility was to a great extent pragmatic; he worried that expenditures to Asia would deduct from the limited resources that he felt he needed for the Americas.

For a while, the administration of Osborn and his directors supported Wissler's position, but gradually the administration found reasons to accept, and even cultivate, Eastern and Central Asian collections, especially when they could be regarded as art. The most fascinating example was the acquisition of the I. Wyman Drummond collection of jade and amber and related decorative arts (Whitlock 1934). This large donation was acquired in 1935 by the department of mineralogy, not anthropology, despite the fact that virtually the entire collection consisted of finely-wrought *objets d'art*. It was also during the 1930s that the Museum managed to amass a substantial Tibetan collection, acquired from a diverse and colorful group of explorers and trustees (the principal one being the William B. Whitney bequest of more than 900 items in 1936), but again not from any anthropologists. Also, extending the Lang/Chapin model, various biologists continued to collect human artifacts while doing fieldwork in India and Burma (Hasinoff 2013).

As noted, the Pacific was the one Old World ethnology collection that derived, at least partially, from professional museum expeditions (cf. Lowie 1911b). The Museum's serious interest in this region began in the early 1920s with Wissler's own consulting work for Honolulu's Bishop Museum. In 1926 he hired Margaret Mead.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Mead did considerable collecting (3,284 items, mostly from New Guinea, 1928–39), but for reasons we will turn to now, she was not given a chance to exhibit much of it (Thomas 1980; Freed 2012: 444).

## Exhibition

Unlike the starts and stops of anthropological collection, the development of exhibition at the Museum was much more conservative and cumulative. During the regimes of Putnam, Boas, and early Wissler, galleries opened at a feverish pace in the beginning (1900–1920). There was some shifting from floor to floor, and thus reinstallation, before about 1930, but after that the anthropology galleries settled in to a fairly static state until all the Museum's anthropological halls began to be revised in the 1960s. The principal reason for this situation was anthropology's internal position within the Museum's administration. President Jesup was eager to build substantial anthropological collections, while his successor, Henry F. Osborn, took a dim view of the discipline, even when money was plentiful. This support declined even further during the straitened times of the Depression and Second World War. And, one might note, such moribund exhibits were common to almost all American anthropology museums of the mid-twentieth century (Fitzhugh 1997; Jacknis 2004).

Boas, of course, had begun his professional career in America in 1887 by critiquing the typological arrangement of the displays at the Smithsonian, arguing instead for a geographical arrangement (Jacknis 1985). Not only did this become the basis for all ethnology displays in New York, it soon became the norm at all American anthropology museums.

Early on, curator Wissler outlined a plan for the permanent anthropology halls, calling for parity between the New and Old World ethnology halls.<sup>10</sup> When the apportionment of halls finally settled down in the early 1920s, although the total number was smaller, the division was not. There were four North American ethnology halls: Northwest Coast and Eskimo, Woodlands, Plains, and Southwest; and four Old World ethnology halls: Africa, Asia (China and Siberia), Philippines, and Pacific (1923: 254–56). While these proportions might seem fairly equitable, it is less so when one considers that the territories and populations of the Old and New World were vastly disproportionate. In fact, according to Freed (2012: 437), the Museum's Asian ethnographic collections, the largest and most comprehensive in the Western Hemisphere, are now the largest of the Museum's regional ethnographic collections.

Region was inevitably invoked in the museum gallery as it attempted to mimetically represent space, field site, and region. The American Museum resorted to a wide range of impressionistic devices to paint a distant scene: life group dioramas, photos, and murals (Jacknis, forthcoming 2015). Carrying this experience to a literal level, most of the museum's cultural halls - including those for Africa and the Pacific - were arranged in geographical sequence: from east to west, and/or north to south. (In fact, as one walked west from the entrance, one moved consecutively west across the American continent) (Figures 2-5). This was no accident, as both Boas and Wissler had used the collections to work out a theory of culture areas. Geography was thus an analytic concept, and not just a convenient display device.



Figure 2. Floor plan: First Floor, AMNH (Miner 1943: 16).





Figure 3. Floor plan: Second Floor, AMNH (Miner 1943: 17).

Places and sites were not just in distant lands. The Museum itself possessed a spatial order, with its architecture reflecting, or perhaps refracting, regions of the world (Jacknis 1985: 90–92; Stocking 1999). As we have seen, galleries were often arranged from west to east or north to south, but there was also an implied hierarchy as one ascended the floors. Moving from west to east, or from the New World to the Old, one traveled from the Americas on the first floor, Asia and Africa on the second and third floors, finally to the Philippines and the Pacific on the fourth floor. One could argue that the favored locale was at the bottom, near the entrance.

One theme one might not expect in these displays was the strong emphasis on the benefits of colonialism in the exhibits for the Philippines and Africa. Upon acquiring the Philippines collection, the American Museum had agreed with the Federal Government to mount a display of the collection at the subsequent international expositions of 1905 (in Portland) and 1909 (Seattle). The collection was first displayed at the Museum in early 1909, shortly before being packed for Seattle. Its ample historical documentation reveals quite clearly that much of the exhibit was arranged to explain and justify the American colonial regime. For example, one section was devoted to: 'The Political and Educational Development Under American Influence' (Figure 6). According to the Museum, the display

shows not only what the Filipinos were, and what Philippine agriculture and commerce were, under Spanish rule, but also what they are under American influence. It proclaims emphatically that progress has been the keynote of life in the Philippines in these ten years, despite calamities, and it suggests that in the future the prosperity of the Philippine people is to be limited only by the great productive capacity of the islands (Anonymous 1909: 129).





Figure 4. Floor plan: Third Floor, AMNH (Miner 1943: 18).



Figure 5. Floor plan: Fourth Floor, AMNH (Miner 1943: 19).

Along with its promise to display the collection at succeeding expositions, the Museum evidently had also committed itself to instrumental propaganda (Kramer 2006: 279–81).

The colonialism in the African hall was less blatant in the gallery, but it had played a much stronger role in forming the collections, facilitated directly and indirectly by the Belgian government (Lowie 1911a).<sup>11</sup> In another example of blurred disciplinary boundaries, however, in 1919 a Pygmy family diorama was installed in the Primate Hall, supervised by director Lucas and mammalogist Herbert Lang (Lang 1919). Here it was intended to complement the monkeys and apes as ‘a “low,” or primitive race of man’ (Lucas 1919: 66). Biology also played a much more literal role than one might expect. The first installation of the African Hall combined mounted animal heads with human artifacts (Figure 7), while the early Philippines gallery came complete with potted plants, in sharp contrast to the ‘cultural purity’ of the American halls.



Figure 6. Philippines Hall, 1909, AMNH; neg. no. 32883.

Between 1920 and 1930, the museum revised both of these colonialist displays, reasserting the primacy of the anthropologists. The Philippines was re-curated by Alfred Kroeber in 1918, generally adopting an arrangement by ethnic group and cultural domains (weaving, pottery, weapons, etc.). When the African Hall was moved in 1931, it was only slightly revised, due to a lack of a suitable curator, but the logic of culture areas was strengthened and the natural history elements were removed.

Another somewhat surprising display was the Drummond Gallery of Asian jades, ambers, and other decorative arts (Figure 8). The Museum always seemed somewhat ambivalent about this gallery, not sure whether it was part of anthropology or mineralogy (in fact, archival documentation indicates that anthropology played no role in this display, as it also had not in its acquisition).<sup>12</sup> It was distinguished by a general fine arts décor, installed in cases either owned by Drummond or modeled directly on them, and the recently-deceased donor was memorialized by both a marble and a bronze bust. This personal glorification was appropriate, considering how and why the collection got to the Museum.

Outside of a few small cases and renovations to the Pacific Hall, however, the Museum would not get around to displaying most of Mead’s collections until 1971, after she had retired (Losche 2006; Wagelie 2007: 143–63). Again the culprit seems to have been the general

financial and institutional inertia. As Mead began to plan for a revised Pacific Hall in 1945, she structured it according to culture areas, extending her scope to Asia, which was to have been a revision of the adjacent Philippines Hall (Losche 2005). Rather than abandoning culture areas, she intended to expand their scope, demonstrating the diffusion of cultural elements into the Pacific.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 7. African Hall, 1909, AMNH; neg. no. 32925.

Beyond these permanent exhibits, there were some temporary exhibits that critically engaged the museum's regional representations. In 1919, the Museum sponsored a so-called Industrial Exposition (Spinden 1919), devoted to costumes and textiles. Arranged in response to the war-time closure of the American fashion industry from its usual design sources in Paris, museum curators worked to directly involve the Museum as an aid to industry. Using museum artifacts, the exhibit represented a collaboration among Clark Wissler, journalist and textile scholar M.D.C. Crawford, and curator Herbert J. Spinden. Crawford, who had started with Peruvian textiles and curator Charles Mead, resolutely advocated for the importance of distinctly American sources. On the other hand, despite his status as an Americanist archaeologist Spinden supported a more international approach (Tartsinis 2013: 29–31). Still, this invocation of the relevance of Native American arts as the basis for a distinctly American art was to become a dominant theme in the American culture of the 1930s (Trask 2012).<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusions

By addressing regionalism, this essay has explored one prominent museum as a site for the production and organization of knowledge. Invoking Clifford and Marcus (1986), one may consider these according to concerns of poetics and politics. For the American Museum, the poetical would deal with the public exhibition galleries as a form of ethnographic or ethnological representation, with a formal structure and manipulation of media (artifacts, photographs, labels, mannequins, murals, etc.). The political would concern itself with matters of authority and power, of how these representations came to be. Yet these aspects are not as separate as they may appear, as each works to constitute the other.

In trying to comprehend regionalism at the Museum, we are forced to place the 'field'

within larger institutional and disciplinary contexts. To what extent were these human artifacts uniquely cultural, as Boas and Wissler argued, and to what extent were they just like any other natural history specimens, as many of the biological curators argued? And to what extent were they works of fine art?

The theme of regionalism in an institution with world-wide pretensions to some extent acts as a heuristic; by tracing differential treatments of regions in the Museum it allows us to clarify its fundamental operations. Interesting in its own right, it can tell us much about nationalism and the place of the Museum and anthropology in the world. We see that different museum actors had different relationships with different places, and this emphasis tended to shift over time; from the New to the Old World.



*Figure 8. Drummond Gallery of Jades, 1933, AMNH; neg. no. 314238.*

Viewing these regional issues from a perspective of authority reveals much about the power of the purse at the American Museum of Natural History. As we have seen, the colonial involvement of the United States and Belgium governments in forming these collections and their display was direct. Much more significant was the strong role of patronage and funding. So often, what happens occurred not so much because of the professional concerns of the Museum's anthropologists, as one might initially surmise, but because of available funding, controlled by non-professionals.<sup>15</sup>

As we know, issues of museum control and funding tend to flow along the channels created by articulated networks (Gosden et al. 2007). It is impressive how limited these networks were in this period. As Rainger notes (1991: 47), not only were the primary patrons of the Museum drawn from a small group of interlocked families, but they were also the same élite who controlled other New York cultural institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Bronx Zoo.<sup>16</sup>

These anthropology collections were largely the result of available funding and resources, placed within administrative and authority structures. Anthropology was not completely its own master. During this period, we see a change from an earlier style of Jesup or Schiff or Huntington, in which patrons merely supplied the funds and left the conduct of the expedition to the scientists. During the 1920s and 30s, more of the expeditions were sponsored by specific trustees and less by the Museum's general funds. And these trustees did more than just supply the money, they often organized the expedition, went on the trip, and made the collections in the field (Cain 2011). In many cases, these were combined natural history surveys, with multi-disciplinary teams. Mostly, however, because anthropologists did not participate, the cultural materials that were collected along with the biological specimens were acquired by anthropological amateurs. In his comprehensive survey of the institution, prepared for the Trustees, Wissler was defensive, feeling that he needed to justify why anthropology, especially ethnology, belonged in a natural history museum at all (1943: 294–95).

In considering these regional trends, one cannot help but notice the salience of curatorial personalities and backgrounds in expressing geographical preferences. Franz Boas differed from Wissler in many ways: European-born, he was raised in a country with an active empire. This, plus his Jewish upbringing, certainly made him a more cosmopolitan person. These experiences led him to sponsor two important non-American initiatives (the Jesup to Siberia and the Schiff to China), while also acquiring significant Asian and Pacific collections. Clark Wissler, on the other hand, had been raised in the American Midwest of WASP (White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant) stock; and until the 1920s, when he developed an interest in the Pacific, he was resolutely focused on the Americas, especially Native North America.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Boas and Wissler were confronted with many of the same challenges, Boas chose to resign his museum position after a relatively short time. Wissler, on the other hand, chose to remain, serving as chair during a time of severe challenge to the anthropology department. As a consequence of his perceived opposition and lack of funding, in his survey he defends the supremacy of the New World as a type collection, claiming that the Museum's Old World collections were somewhat secondary or supplementary (1943: 419–20).

Our review has raised the question, to what extent were the anthropology collections made by anthropologists as part of a principled research agenda, and to what extent were they accepted because of patron or administrative connections? All AMNH anthropology collections were made by at least five professional types: (1) anthropologists; for example, Boas or Wissler for the New World, and Laufer and Mead for the Old World; (2) biologists, such as Finsch or Lang; (3) private patrons; mostly trustee collectors, who were especially significant for the Tibetan collection; (4) governmental entities, often mediated, such as Albert B. Jenks for the Philippines collection or Frederick Starr for the Congo; (5) commercial companies or dealers, such as Richard Douglas for Africa or the Fred Harvey company in the Southwest.

It is not obvious that a collection made by an anthropologist is superior to one made by an 'amateur'. Some biologists, such as Lumholtz or Lang, made much more useful collections than those made by some anthropologists, such as Starr. On the other hand, as Hasinoff (2013: 65–66) demonstrates for the Naga, much of that collection was mislabeled with incorrect ethnic attributions and object types due to its acquisition by trustees and naturalists, who spent relatively little time in the field site. What is clear is that while anthropologists may have supplied the bulk of the New World ethnology collections, this was definitely not the case for the Old World.

Disciplinary affiliations were also contested. Given its place in a natural history museum, AMNH anthropology was impelled to focus on tribal, non-literate peoples, whose preindustrial technologies were thought to adapt them closely to their natural environments. Historical civilizations, such as China, were thus a problem, seeming to belong in an art museum (Conn 2009: 86–137). Yet such arrangements were never inherent or necessary; other museums found other ways of configuring the world. The three major anthropology museums at the universities

of Harvard, Pennsylvania, and Berkeley - which were not part of a larger institution of natural history - were much more likely to include substantial collections from literate civilizations such as Egypt, Greece, or China, and even historic Europe and America.

Despite its great size and importance, the American Museum was not alone in building its anthropology collections. As is well-known, there was a good deal of competition among American anthropology museums for American Indian collections. Each strove to build representative and comprehensive Americanist collections, but, in the end, there was some de facto specialization. The AMNH competed most generally with the other two large natural history museums: Chicago's Field Museum (primarily on the Northwest Coast and Plains) and Washington's Smithsonian (primarily in the Southwest), largely ceding California to UC Berkeley. More generally, after 1916 the American Museum also had to contend with another local institution: George G. Heye's well-endowed Museum of the American Indian, whose regional interests included all of the Americas (Jacknis 2008).

Another source of local competition, somewhat surprisingly, was New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In his travels to the Southwest Wissler discovered that many of the art museum's patrons were purchasing American Indian, especially Navajo textiles, for donation to the art museum.<sup>18</sup> And although the American Museum had initially ceded Asia to the art museum, which had established a Department of East Asian art in 1915, some of the later collections, like the Drummond jades, could have gone there (Baick 1998: 281–345).

As might be surmised from this account, the American Museum had something of an important precedence in the Old World under Boas, with the Jesup and Schiff expeditions, but it largely yielded these regions to others during the Wissler period. Its principal competitor here was the Field Museum, which was a pioneer in non-American collecting (Nash and Feinman 2003). Before 1910, the Chicago museum had sent out major expeditions to New Guinea (Albert B. Lewis), the Philippines (Fay-Cooper Cole and his colleagues), and China and Tibet (Berthold Laufer).<sup>19</sup> The major university museums (Harvard, Penn, Berkeley) were less of a competitive threat for the American Museum. Largely dependent on less well-funded university faculty, students, and alumni, they collected on a smaller scale.<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the Wissler period, in the early 1940s, younger anthropologists at the Museum began to realize the inadequacies of a strictly regional approach to fully capture contemporary anthropological knowledge. Several cross-cultural and comparative exhibits were planned, but for various reasons - most notably funding, but also institutional and disciplinary inertia - they were never implemented in any of the permanent galleries.<sup>21</sup> Over the years, these approaches have found expression only in temporary exhibitions. And whereas the American Museum's sister institutions in Washington and Chicago have established topical curatorships, which cross regional lines, the American Museum still organizes its anthropological collections, research, and display by subdiscipline and by continent.

The power of a universal survey museum like the American Museum of Natural History is compelling and seductive. Within a relatively contained space, it seems to give us the entire world, often with a gallery for each region. Yet, as in all museums, these displays elide and obscure the diverse sources of their collections (Harrison et al. 2013; Bennett et al. 2014). Each object is made to stand for the 'Hopi' or 'Samoa,' even though its selection in the field or its accompanying documentation may be quite partial and idiosyncratic. Even a superficial historical analysis reveals that not all of these specimens share the same ontological status or bear the same kind of relationship to their generating culture. Ultimately, the 'field' remains unknown.

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## Notes

- 1 Within the various, and changing space of cultures, there is also a corresponding time-depth: ancient paleontological time (i.e., the evolution of humankind, an interest of President H. F. Osborn) vs. the relatively more recent archaeological time (at the AMNH, most especially for ancient Peru, Mesoamerica, and the American Southwest). In contrast, the time depth for most of the ethnographic collections considered here was the so-called ethnographic

present, from ca. 1850 to the time of collection, most by ca. 1930. On the other hand, a longer period of history was an issue for Asia.

- <sup>2</sup> Clark Wissler to Frederic A. Lucas, 27 May 1912. File 499, folder, 1906–1912, AMNH Central Archives. Wissler was seconding the opinions of both Jesup and Osborn, cf. Haddad (2006: 141).
- <sup>3</sup> It is necessary to distinguish between these several activities, as they did not all proceed at a parallel pace. Additionally, this essay focuses on the ethnological collections and displays, as opposed to those for archaeology and physical anthropology.
- <sup>4</sup> Given the circumscribed length of this paper relative to its huge subject, unless otherwise noted, the following descriptions of the museum's regional collections are based on Freed (2012), which should be consulted for further details. Other sources are listed only if they contain special details.
- <sup>5</sup> Presidents Jesup and Osborn relied heavily upon their two respective directors: Hermon C. Bumpus (1862–1943), who served from 1902 to 1911, and Frederic A. Lucas (1852–1929), following from 1911 to 1923.
- <sup>6</sup> These efforts culminated in 1909 with Alanson Skinner's curation of an exhibit and publication to mark the historical commemorations of explorer Henry Hudson and steamboat inventor Robert Fulton (Skinner 1909).
- <sup>7</sup> In effect, Robert Lowie filled the gap, serving as the de facto curator of Old World ethnology during his tenure (1909–21). He showed no personal inclination for the work, but, as his superiors noted, he largely inherited this domain due to his European background and language skills.
- <sup>8</sup> Writing to a friend, Osborn noted: 'Between ourselves, much anthropology is merely opinion, or gossip of the natives. It is many years away from being a science. Jesup and the Museum spent far too much money on anthropology' (H. F. Osborn to William Berryman Scott, 22 May 1908, quoted in Kennedy 1968: 163). Along with President Osborn's expressed disdain for the subject, Wissler noted that one unnamed trustee 'actively opposed the keeping of any ethnological collections or exhibits,' with the result being an 'emphasis on archaeology as a museum subject' (1943: 209).
- <sup>9</sup> At the same time, Wissler hired physical anthropologist Harry Shapiro, whose dissertation and most of his field research were also in the Pacific.
- <sup>10</sup> Of the twenty-four halls Wissler envisaged in 1910, sixteen halls were to be devoted to ethnology (divided equally between North America and the rest of the world), with the remainder for archaeology. Clark Wissler to Henry F. Osborn, 30 July 1910, AMNH Central Archives.
- <sup>11</sup> Still, the original African gallery included substantial animal collections, before the construction of the Akeley Hall of African Mammals and the movement of the ethnology hall to another floor.
- <sup>12</sup> Wyman Drummond collection. Accession no. 1961-73. Department of Mineralogy transfer, Department of Anthropology, AMNH.
- <sup>13</sup> Mead's completed Pacific Hall did include both the Philippines and Indonesia, usually considered to be Insular Southeast Asia.
- <sup>14</sup> This Americanist relation between the museum and the art community continued with archaeologist Junius Bird, who collaborated with weaver Anni Albers in the exploration of ancient Peruvian textiles (Troy 2002).



- <sup>15</sup> For a related study of anthropological museum patronage in this period, see Thoresen (1975) on the role of Phoebe A. Hearst at the University of California.
- <sup>16</sup> The families of Morgan, Roosevelt, Whitney, and Dodge appear frequently; in fact, president Henry F. Osborn was the nephew of J. P. Morgan, who in addition to serving as a trustee at both museums was the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1904–13). One of the most fascinating of such linkages was the independently wealthy Bashford Dean, who served as a curator at both the American Museum (fossil fishes) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (arms and armor), where he made an important collection of Japanese armor.
- <sup>17</sup> Although it is not widely acknowledged in the ethnological literature (e.g., Freed 2012), Wissler was also a fairly vehement supporter of Osborn and Grant's racism and eugenicist theories.
- <sup>18</sup> The competition between art and anthropology museums for collections of Navajo textiles is the subject of my on-going research, as presented in two conferences: 'The First Art of the First Americans at the Metropolitan Museum of Art', Native American Art Studies Association, Denver, 2013; 'Art or Anthropology: Collecting Navajo Textiles in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, 1900–45', Textile Society of America, Los Angeles, 2014.
- <sup>19</sup> It is ironic, of course, that Chicago hired the very person for whom New York no longer found a need.
- <sup>20</sup> Although this brief essay is only a case study of a single institution, the story tells us that the geographical reorientation of American anthropology, identified by Stocking (1976) as occurring in the 1920s, had to a great extent started earlier, in museums, around 1905.
- <sup>21</sup> Starting around 1939, curators of the anthropology department began to plan comparative displays. One of the first of these was an important temporary exhibit on Primitive Art, one of the first in New York. Around 1949, encouraged by new director Albert E. Parr, one particularly ambitious gallery was meant to comprehensively treat 'The Nature of Culture', but it was never implemented. See: 'Museum Exhibits: Files in Process'. Department of Anthropology archives, AMNH.

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