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## COLLECTIONS

## SWISS CURATORS INAUGURATE NETWORK FOR ARCTIC MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

By Florian Gredig, Igor Krupnik, and Martin Schultz

A land-locked nation in the heart of Europe, without a Navy or any colonial ambitions during its long history, Switzerland is an unlikely candidate for being a hub of Arctic ethnographic collecting. Yet, thanks to a long-established tradition of academic learning and because of many devoted private citizens, Swiss museums were able to amass impressive ethnographic and archaeological collections from various parts of the Arctic. Only recently did the Swiss “Arctic riches” receive some attention; this short paper tells the story of an attempt to summarize ethnographic and, partly, archaeological, collections from the North housed at Swiss museums.

Altogether, Switzerland has several hundred museums, large and small—over 500, according to the Swiss “Museum Pass” network, more than 750 if one counts all of the institutional members of the Swiss Museums Association (including Liechtenstein), and 150+ museums with individual entries on Wikipedia. The earliest museums originated in the 1500s and 1600s, primarily from the private and university-based collections of antique books, manuscripts, and curiosities.

Only about a dozen Swiss museums have ethnographic (or archaeological) objects from the Arctic and Subarctic, often of only a few dozen objects. Yet certain institutions house substantial collections of several hundred objects, such as the Basel Historical Museum, the Historical Museum Bern and the Cerny Inuit Museum in Bern, the Nordamerika Native Museum (NONAM), and the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich (Ethnographic Museum at the University) in Zürich, the Musée d’ethnographie de Genève, and others.

The first documented objects from the North at Swiss museums date back to the 1700s, though most were collected during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, even in the last decades of the latter. As our survey indicates, Swiss museum institutions continue to

collect objects from the polar regions, in both Eurasia and North America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are also increasingly taking stock of their possessions by featuring their collections online, in electronic databases, printed materials, and, partly, on exhibits. Only few museums feature any northern objects on their permanent displays, so that the Swiss public, visiting tourists, and foreign professionals are mostly unaware of the riches stored behind the scene.

The first and so far, the only specialized exhibit in recent times displaying northern objects from several Swiss museums called Aiguuq! (“Look here!” in Canadian Inuktitut) was organized in 2008 by the North American Native Museum (NONAM). It was on display for five months and included about 110 objects (according to its printed catalog). NONAM, as well as other museums, also staged several temporary exhibits featuring objects from the North.

## Swiss Arctic Collections Network



“Arctic” section of NONAM permanent exhibit.

Photo by Florian Gredig

In November 2017, some 20 museum specialists representing five institutions met at the Historical and Ethnographic Museum (Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum) in St. Gallen to establish the Swiss Arctic Collections Network (Netzwerk Arktis-Sammlungen Schweiz, NASS), with the aim to facilitate “a comprehensive exchange for people involved in Arctic collections in Switzerland.” They

also held a two-day session with presentations of Arctic collections at individual Swiss museums (St. Gallen, Cerny Inuit Collection, NONAM, Bern Historical Museum) that advanced the collaboration started during the NONAM exhibit of 2008.

On November 9, 2018, the NASS team renamed the group to Network Arctic Collections Switzerland (NACS) and held its second annual meeting at the Völkerkundemuseum in Zürich (followed by an evening visit and reception at NONAM). This time, the spectrum of participating institutions (13) and attendees, including museum workers, agency representatives, and private collectors, was far more diverse. The list of speakers also featured two foreign curators, **Igor Krupnik** (NMNH, Smithsonian Institution) and **Martin Schultz** (Statens museer för världskultur, Stockholm, Sweden), who gave

overviews of the Arctic collections at their respective museums. Schultz also pointed to important historical links between the collections held in Switzerland and Sweden. Two additional Swiss museums also presented session papers—the Völkerkundemuseum in Zürich (by **Maïke Powroznik**) and the Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel (by **Yann Laville**), both with substantial northern holdings. The participants agreed that the 3<sup>rd</sup> NACS meeting would be hosted at the Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel in 2019.

A new issue raised following Krupnik's presentation was the online accessibility of ethnographic objects at Swiss museums. Whereas today each modern museum has an internal electronic collection database, Swiss institutions differ greatly in the ways they open their collections online. There is neither a shared policy nor a common online database (like those in Iceland or in Sweden) that allows to search collections via the Internet—by fellow museum



*Martha and Peter Cerny in the Cerny Inuit Museum. Photo by Igor Krupnik*

researchers, online visitors, and, specifically, by Indigenous people from the object's "home areas." The issue of accessibility is becoming ever more urgent with the growing demand by Arctic indigenous people for cultural resources from their areas often held in distant countries.

Another factor is the ongoing effort to produce an international "guide" for Arctic ethnographic collections at the world's major museums that may be accessed online (see *ASC Newsletter* 24). Following the NACS meeting in Zürich, the three co-authors agreed on the need of a comprehensive summary of Swiss museum holdings from the polar regions and their online accessibility. This work is still ongoing; below we provide short entries on three individual Swiss museums that may be viewed as contributions to the future international online guide. Using the criteria established earlier, the "Arctic"

(or rather "North") is defined broadly, to include the Arctic and Subarctic culture areas in North America, the northernmost (Alaskan) portion of the Northwest Coast, the northernmost regions of the Nordic countries, and the areas populated by Indigenous people across the Russian Arctic and Siberia.

### **Museum Cerny Inuit Collection, Bern**

This unique and privately owned museum started in the early 1990s when **Martha** and **Peter Cerny** acquired some 120 stone and ivory sculptures, lithographs and rare batiks produced by the contemporary Inuit artists from Arctic Canada. As the collection grew via more acquisitions in the Canadian Inuit communities and at art auctions, new objects made of stone, antler, whalebone, musk ox horn, sealskin, mammoth, and walrus ivory were purchased. They depict animals, people, human-animal metamorphoses, hunting and shamanistic scenes, as well as Inuit daily life. Since the 1990s, pieces from Greenland, Alaska, and, later, from Russia were added, so that the collection now offers a circumpolar coverage of Indigenous artworks.

The museum currently occupies a two-story building in downtown Bern, with two large exhibit halls displaying over 500 objects and a



*Permanent exhibit of modern Inuit art at the Cerny Inuit Museum. Photo by Igor Krupnik*

storage with roughly the same number of works. At ~1,000 object-strong, it represents the largest public display of Northern objects in Switzerland. In addition, the Cerny Museum (formerly, "Cerny Inuit Collection") organized dozens of off-stage exhibits and displays, making it the most active institution in publically presenting Arctic artworks in Switzerland, and, perhaps across Europe.

The museum public website ([www.cernyinitcollection.com](http://www.cernyinitcollection.com)) does not provide online access to collections. An internal electronic database (in progress) cites over 900 objects from Arctic Canada alone; they are organized by the home communities (Cape Dorset, Iqaluit, Pangnirtung, Kimmirut, etc.) of their creators. The second largest group (over 80 objects) comes from Siberia, primarily from the ivory craftshop in Uelen, Chukotka and Yamal, West Siberia. The collection also includes a handful of objects from Greenland and Alaska, with no artwork from the Sami areas. The museum is expanding its coverage and is the only Swiss institution actively acquiring modern art and ethnographic objects (clothing, jewelry, ornamentation) from across the circumpolar regions.

### Nordamerika Native Museum (NONAM), Zürich

The Nordamerika Native Museum was founded in 1963 under the name Indianermuseum der Stadt Zürich and is owned by the city of Zürich. It is based on a private collection originally assembled by **Gottfried Hotz** (1901–1977), a Zürich high school teacher who took interest in Native American cultures early in his life. He eventually succeeded in acquiring about 1,000 objects via purchases from private owners and at antique shows, mainly from the Plains/Prairies, Eastern Woodlands and Southwest, before selling his collection to the City of Zurich.

It was only after 1993 that collecting Arctic objects was also actively pursued (particularly after the museum moved to a new building in 2003), so that NONAM now officially presents itself as the museum of “Native American and Inuit cultures.” Notably, the museum acquired many Inuit stone sculptures and art prints from Canada, as well as the private collection of anthropologist **Jean-Loup Rousselot** (former curator at the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich), containing 309 objects from Alaska and Canada. The NONAM currently houses about 400 objects from the Arctic and 300 from the Subarctic, of which a considerable part is on permanent exhibit, making NONAM northern displays the second largest in Switzerland. Indigenous cultures represented are the Inuit/Eskimo of Alaska and Canada, the Gwich’in,

Koyukon, Innu (Montagnais-Naskapi), Slavey, Subarctic Ojibway and the Inland Tlingit (with just a few objects from the Old World polar regions).

NONAM’s permanent exhibits are arranged by the North American culture areas. It has a small catalog (in German) listing more than 760 objects on display. The museum also features a small “soundscape” installation offering sound recordings from the Inuit, Hopi, Navajo, and other Native cultures. A hunting coat of the Innu (Montagnais-Naskapi), made around 1700, is considered to be one of the oldest and finest known pieces of its kind. The museum regularly publishes catalogs of its temporary exhibits, of which many represent polar art and cultures. No online access to the collections is currently provided.

### Bern Historical Museum (Bernisches Historisches Museum), Bern



*Bern Historical Museum. Photo by Igor Krupnik*

Museum collecting in Bern started with the foundation of the Hohe Schule, a predecessor of the University of Bern, in 1528 and of its University museum established in 1894. Today, the museum houses 500,000 objects divided into four main categories: the archaeological collection, the historical collection, the numismatic collection, and the ethnographical collection of roughly 60,000 objects. Though all museum holdings are

computerized, there is no online access and no option for online search besides a handful of featured objects.

The oldest ethnographic objects from the Arctic date back to the third voyage of Capt. **James Cook** and were donated in 1791 by Swiss-born naturalist **John Webber** (anglicised from **Johann Wäber**), who accompanied Cook on his voyage as an artist. A bow, arrows, and throwing darts were collected in Alaska during that trip.

Today’s Arctic collections at BHM are about 1,200 objects strong. The largest portion of about 800 archaeological and 120 ethnographic objects comes from St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, collected in the late 1960s and early 1970s by a team led by archaeologist **Hans-Georg Bandi** (1920–2016). Various Swiss expeditions to Greenland led to a set of about 120 ethnographic objects received also partly from Danish

officials. A small collection of 20 contemporary Greenlandic carvings in stone, ivory, antler and bone, were acquired during the 1970s and 1980s.

From Siberia, around 20 ethnographic objects entered the collections, a Nivkh “chief’s dress” was bought in 1886, and a set of 18 Nanai objects in 1924. Northern Scandinavia is represented by a more substantial number of 120+ Sami objects, mostly from Finland acquired in 1937–1939. The ethnographic objects are accompanied by several hundred photographs, mostly from Bandi’s expeditions to St. Lawrence Island, and a few historic photos from Greenland. None of them are currently displayed in the museum’s permanent exhibits. They are divided between the departments of archaeology and ethnography, with different curators responsible.

### Future Steps

Overall, the Arctic/Northern museum “scape” in Switzerland contains at least 6,000 ethnological and archaeological objects plus several thousand photographs; it is also remarkably diverse. At least seven museums have more than 500–600 objects each, and four museums have over 1,000 objects, including photographs or even more. It is an unexpectedly high number for a small nation, with no history of colonial or imperial ambitions.

Though individual museums differ substantially by regional/ethnic strength of their collections, cumulatively the Swiss museums offer fairly solid coverage of indigenous cultures across the Arctic/Northern regions: over 3,000 objects from Alaska (counting also photos and archaeological specimens); 1,500 objects from Canada (with a good coverage of specific regions), about 500 (500+ in archaeology) from Greenland, and some 650+ objects from Siberia and Arctic Russia. Only the Sami culture of the Northern Europe is relatively underrepresented and hardly any objects come from Iceland.

Whereas Swiss Arctic/Northern collections have some obvious gaps, they also have several “gems” of world significance and excellent quality. These include but are not limited to: over 900 pieces of modern Inuit art from several communities in Canada at the Cerny Inuit Museum; several hundred Central Alaskan Yup’ik photographs and graphic art samples by German anthropologist **Hans Himmelheber** at Museum Rietberg in Zürich; Jean-Loup Rousselot’s collection from the North American Arctic at NONAM (more than 300 objects); a remarkable collection of objects and photographs by **Jean Gabus** from the Hudson Bay Inuit (split between museums in Basel, Neuchatel, and Fribourg); over 50 early-19<sup>th</sup> century

objects from Siberia and Alaska from **Johann Horner** (in Zürich), and others. These and other collection “stars” are poorly known outside Switzerland and even among the Swiss Arctic professionals. It is an urgent task to publicize its significance in international publications and in other languages, including to local audiences across the Arctic regions.

Generally, the Swiss Arctic/Northern ethnological collections remain poorly researched. They have been published but scantily and, by far, lack accessible summaries and printed catalogs. Yet, the Arctic themes are generally very popular with the Swiss audience, as revealed by several temporary exhibits produced by NONAM and the Cerny Museum since 2000.

The online accessibility of Swiss northern collections is still in its infancy and many valuable museum holdings may be accessed through staff curators only. We should, therefore, encourage every effort to make these collections available and better known to museum professionals, the general public, Arctic specialists, indigenous people, students, and interested visitors around the world.

Lastly, our work could not have been completed without the generous assistance of many colleagues at individual Swiss museums, specifically by **Sabine Bolliger-Schreyer** (Bern), **Alexander Brust** (Basel), **Yvon Csonka** (Neuchatel), **Martha Cerny** (Bern), **Yann Laville** (Neuchatel), and **Maïke Powroznik** (Zürich). The summary of Swiss Arctic/northern holdings remains a work in progress; so, please stay tuned for future updates.

### **ERSERSAANEQ—CREATING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH IMAGES**

*By Malu Rohmann Fleisher, Randi Sørensen Johansen, and Michael Nielsen*

In Greenlandic, the word “ersersaaeq” (pronounced: ER-ser-SAA-neck) means creating knowledge through visual images. Many ethnographic objects made by the Greenlandic Inuit are found around the world today in foreign institutions and museums outside of Greenland. This phenomenon is a result of a common practice among major museums during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Institutions would frequently exchange items from various ethnographic collections as both permanent loans and for temporary exhibitions. Over the years, many Greenlandic collections have been loaned and traded or been split apart. In some cases objects have become part of orphaned collections and important provenience information was lost. The Greenland National Museum and Archives is presented with the great