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MUSEUM

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CENTRAAL MUSEUM
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AGNIETENSTRAAT 1

THE POLY-HISTORICAL EXHIBITION

BY TORSTEN ALTHIN *

In 1932 the Gustavus Adolphus Tercentenary Memorial Exhibition was held in some of the large halls of Nordiska Museet, Stockholm. In more than one respect it proved a most remarkable event. As a museum expert of long standing, I was struck in the first place by its comprehensiveness. With the aid of original objects from The Royal Armoury, private collections and archives the life story of the Swedish King, champion of European Protestantism, could be traced from birth to heroic death on the battlefield at Lützen. The military operations in Central Europe and the King's activities as supreme commander had been charted by contemporary maps, engravings, documents, arms and uniforms. The King as a statesman and Swedish society in those days were illustrated very clearly. Art and craftsmanship of the first half of the 17th Century were represented by many imposing achievements. Besides, cultural conditions and the Swedish way of living at the time were revived by numerous

* Dit artikel werd geschreven naar aanleiding van de slotopmerking in de bespreking van de tentoonstelling Paus Adrianus VI in afl. 1 van dit Nieuws-Bulletin. Schrijver was voorzitter van het 5de ICOM-congres te Stockholm, 1959.

objects such as furniture, costumes, tools, appliances used in industry, agriculture and in the home and devices for time measurement.

All these objects had been assembled in a setting which formed an architectural whole and their display was impeccable from a museological point of view.

A presentation so all-inclusive of a brief epoch made the visitor realize the opportunity for arresting displays offered when treasures which are hidden in museums and private collections are assembled to a poly-historical demonstration of a given epoch with one central theme. The 17th Century emerged out of the dusk to become more comprehensible than it had ever been before.

From then on all systematic collections of conventional museums struck me as wrong and utterly lacking in interest. Paintings and sculpture in art galleries, rustic furniture in folklore museums, tomes and documents in libraries and archives seemed mere details torn from their wider cultural contexts.

I have visited many museums and exhibitions before and after 1932, yet none of them is to be compared with that memorial exhibition dedicated to Sweden's Gustavus Adolphus.

Occasionally I have discussed with my Swedish colleagues the prospects for a permanent poly-historical museum of Swedish history, culture, art, science, handicraft, technique, industry, peasant culture, etc. A project of this kind, however, can hardly be achieved — it would clash too violently with traditional thinking in museum circles, at least at the moment.

Hence, on the occasion of a visit last October to the Pope Hadrian VI Exhibition in the Central Museum, Utrecht, I realized even more keenly how an exhibition of a cross-section of a given epoch may prove an unforgettable experience. The epoch in question dated back centuries before Gustavus Adolphus and concerned a period and an area both unfamiliar to me — the 15th and 16th Centuries in Central and Southern Europe and, in addition, the life work of a prominent Roman Catholic personage. In a few hours I learnt more from this exhibition than I did during my previous 40 years as a museum man while visiting all sorts of museums in Europe and the United States.

The profusion of exhibits relating to Pope Hadrian's life and person brought home his powerful personality to me, until then unacquainted with that period and country. This impression surely would have proved less strong but for the material from museums and treasure troves in Belgium, France, Spain, Italy and other countries which illustrated both Pope Hadrian's age and environment. Here rarities were on display which are not on view normally: magnificent gobelin tapestries, bits of paper, the pomp of Roman Catholic feast days side by side with trifling everyday objects. All objects, documents, and books had something to tell about the man, the age and the circumstances in which he and his contemporaries lived, thought and worked. No exhibition can do more than that — can neither a museologist in his efforts to resurrect the many aspects of the past.

The theme of the 5th General Conference of the International Council of Museums in Stockholm 1959 was "Museums as Mirrors — Their Potentialities and Limitations". The Utrecht exhibition, an outstanding achievement by Dr. Maria Elisabeth Houtzager, furnished convincing proof that an exhibition can serve as a "mirror", that gratifying results may be obtained by developing the possibilities of each relevant object. The "limitations" are fewer than is usually realised, at least by a person who is aware that the primary task of the museum is to evoke a "Theatrum

Mundi", by which I mean that it should give the man in the street an emotional experience of an era, a personage, a development of which the effect is felt throughout the centuries.

Reconstruction of the past cannot be accomplished more effectively than by letting the authentic objects speak for themselves. Pictures, books, lectures and television are only substitutes for, and at best complements to, such historic original objects as have been handed down the ages and, thanks to a merciful Providence, have found a haven in museums and private collections throughout the world.

As head of a special museum — Tekniska Museet in Stockholm — I never felt my limitations so keenly as when facing the Gustavus Adolphus Exhibition in Stockholm 1932 and the Pope Hadrian VI Exhibition in Utrecht 1959.

As lasting mementos to these two events I treasure the exemplary catalogues. In content they are as different as Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. What they have in common is an explanatory text which reflects — as did the exhibits themselves — two strong personalities who, each in his own way, exerted a strong influence on his age and thereby affected events in the past, thus proving that what is essential in history is after all the personal element. Exhibitions of this kind, that bridge the span of time and space should, in my opinion, help men to realize the community of interest reaching beyond differences of creed, population groups, nations and eras. In this respect museums have to shoulder a task of responsibility. Many initiatives have been taken with a view to building such bridges, but their level is generally dictated and determined by branch experts. According to the latter, museum showcases show as a rule only what appeals to the eye. It is true that the works of artists and writers of all nations reflect their age and its everyday thinking and doing, ordinary details, vital decisions, individual or collective, material conditions on weekdays or holidays, in peace or in wartime, — yet faith and insight form the real cultural foundation rather than great achievements of art or poetry.

This superb exhibition resulted in these reflections relating not so much to the Utrecht exhibition as such as to the general question whether the museums with their strict divisions are rational or not. I am inclined to answer in the negative. I am aware of the fact that all the world's museums have been established more by chance than by planning. In the latter case the museum

program was invariably limited and adjusted to the initiator's wishes. It stands to reason, however, that but for the work in the special museums — by which I mean all existing museums — far less would have been preserved from the past for detailed study. All special studies would indeed have proved impossible.

What I have in mind is a national poly-historical museum in every country, typical of each

culture, where modern man finds firm ground in the transitory present, understanding of the past and a stimulus for future efforts. Is this asking too much? After my visit to the Pope Hadrian VI Exhibition, I should say not. I certainly believe that it is not beyond our scope but realization of such a program will require a great deal of re-consideration and readjustment on the part of museum people.