

# The most European place in St. Petersburg

## The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography between Past and Future

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**Abstract.** The article presents a short survey of the history of Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (MAE RAS). Today MAE RAS is one of the largest and oldest ethnographic museums in the world. The richest scientific collections of MAE RAS (today more than 1.2 million units of storage) consistently evolved throughout its 300-year history primarily as a result of intensive expeditionary and research activities of the Academy of Sciences. The history of Russia in the last three hundred years is also the history of the Museum. It shared with the country the breakthrough of the Peter the Great and Catherine epochs, the great achievements for Russian science and culture of the 19th century, the achievements of the “great era” of Soviet academic science. The museum remembers the years of Great terror, the horrors of the Siege of Leningrad, and the difficult times after the collapse of the USSR. The priority of science in the system of state values, the study and preservation of national cultures and interethnic dialogue are the key aspects of the Museum's activities. They always coincided and coincide today with the most important tasks of Russian statehood.

**Keywords.** Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (MAE RAS), Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff, Lev Sternberg, *Movie Atlas of the USSR* collection through systematic scientific expeditions.

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The St. Petersburg Kunstkamera is perhaps the most European place in St. Petersburg, the most European city in the country. This is also one of the most Italian places in the city. It is not by chance that the ceremonial hall of the museum, the Baroque Hall, is decorated by the high relief *Celebrating*

*Europe*, created in the mid 18th century by Italian artist D. Gianni. Among the architects who took part in the construction of the museum building – the first museum building in Russia and, apparently, one of the oldest buildings in the world erected specially for the museum purposes – there was also Gaetano Chiaveri (1689—1770), who joined the Russian service in 1718.

The St. Petersburg Kunstkamera is Peter the Great's favorite creation and the monument to most successful modernization in the history of Russia. Today Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (MAE RAS) is one of the largest and oldest ethnographic museums in the world. The transfer of the first Russian museum to the jurisdiction of the Academy of Sciences played a decisive role in its fate. The concentration of the richest collections within its walls, the introduction of scientific processing and systematization, as well as the supervision of the exposition by the leading country scientists, turned the Kunstkamera into a genuinely scientific institution, the equal of which was not available in those years throughout the Europe.

From the very beginning the museum was not only the scientific base of the Academy of Sciences, but also the most important cultural and educational institution. Leading foreign and Russian scientists worked here. Famous Russian and foreign travelers brought their collections to the museum.

Numerous works of Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605), famous Italian naturalist, medical adviser and collector, were actively used to describe museum zoological collections from the first years of its work. References to his works are found to be most often in the Latin catalogue of the Kunstkamera. It is known that Aldrovandi's collection was sketched according to his order, and the drawings became part of his museum. This idea of Aldrovandi was realized in the Kunstkamera too.

In 1745, the famous Russian statesman and diplomat Mikhail Vorontsov showed at the reception in his house the Italian two mosaics: *Crying Apostle Peter* (original by Guido Gini) and portrait of Elizaveta Petrovna, the Empress of Russia (after the original of Louis Caravaque). These works were seen by Mikhail Lomonosov, the first Russian encyclopaedist and natural scientist of world significance, who worked at the Kunstkamera. By that time he was conducting experiments on the production of colored glass, but had not yet studied mosaic art. Inspired by what he saw, Lomonosov decided to start making mosaics himself. In 1752, in this technique he created *The Mother of God*, according to the original by Francesco Solimena. The mosaics created by Lomonosov occupy a worthy place in the monumental mosaic painting of the modern times.

The richest scientific collections of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (today more than 1.2 million units of storage) consistently evolved

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The history of Russia in the last three hundred years is also the history of the Museum. It shared with the country the breakthrough of the Peter the Great and Catherine epochs, the great achievements for Russian science and culture of the 19th century, the achievements of the “great era” of Soviet academic science. The museum remembers the years of Great terror, the horrors of the Siege of Leningrad, and the difficult times after the collapse of the USSR. The priority of science in the system of state values, the study and preservation of national cultures and interethnic dialogue are the key aspects of the Museum's activities. They always coincided and coincide today with the most important tasks of Russian statehood.

The history of the formation of our collections is fascinatingly interesting, but for various reasons it has been studied fully and has been described only fragmentarily until now. Formation of museum funds in the 18th - early 19th century is associated with a galaxy of great researchers and travelers who stood at the origins of European ethnology. The development of collections in the 19th century is connected with Russian round-the-world travels and the activities of such outstanding researchers as Nikolay Miklukho-Maklai, as well as with the transfer of the collection of the Russian Geographical Society .

History of the Museum of late 19th - early 20th century is closely intertwined with the diverse activities of Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff, whose role in the history of the MAE is no less important than the role of Peter the Great in the foundation of the *Kunstkamera*. It was the Golden Age of the Museum, associated with the name of Radloff (Vasilii Vasil'evich Radlov in Russian) and his associates, that was able to ensure the progressive development of the MAE in the post-revolutionary era.

«It was difficult to imagine anything more clogged and deplorable than our ethnographic museum», it «does not deserve this name and can rightly be called only a temporary warehouse or storehouse for storing the ethnographic collections»<sup>1</sup>, noted in the *Report*<sup>2</sup> of 1887 prepared by special academic committee. Museum items «piled into piles, piled up in basements without inventories, numbering, and scientific attribution» in this case became an «equation with many unknowns» [Sternberg et. al. 1907, 35]. «Such a sad sight was recently shown by the brilliant Imperial Museum, literally rising from the ashes after a devastating fire» [Stanyukovich 1964, 5-151]. A significant part of the most important collections, and together with

<sup>1</sup> Saint-Petersburg Branch of the Archives of the Russian Academy of Science. Fund. 2, directory 1, arch. unit 14. Fol 41-41 r.

<sup>2</sup> The full title of the document: *Report of the commission appointed to discuss the issue of the most favorable location of the Academic library and museums open to the public.*

them the status and financial possibilities left the well-shaped house on the embankment of the River Neva.

Lev Sternberg (1861–1927), one of the leaders of the Russian school of ethnography, noted that in the last third of the 19th century the modern Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography rather resembled «a store or storehouse of ethnographic supplies» [Sternberg 1912, 31]. In many respects this was due to a lack of funding, and as a consequence, the limitations of museum areas. The complex of issues related to the re-creation of the MAE on the new grounds had to be solved by Radloff, who headed the Museum for a quarter of a century (1894–1918) and played a decisive role in establishing it as a truly world-class scientific institution.

Radloff decided not only to revive the oldest museum in Russia, but also to create a scientific and museum center capable of competing with the leading scientific centers of Europe – The Museum of universal culture, or a joint museum of anthropology, ethnography and archeology. Thanks to Radloff, the principle «of collecting through systematic scientific expeditions» became the basis of the museum's activities. Such broad tasks required immediate implementation of a serious program for the renovation of the museum. And the first task was recruitment. It was simply impossible to realize the new tasks Without a full-fledged scientific team.

In the situation of the acute shortage of scientific personnel, he found a solution to the problem. In fact, Radloff extremely skillfully took advantage of the situation that had developed in Russia at that time: the rise of the revolutionary movement, the serious danger of changes in the political situation, caused the most stringent governmental measures. The “unreliable” persons were sent to remote places in Siberia. Not having a special education, but for many years adjoining the culture and way of life of the local population, they gradually became first-class experts in the field of ethnography.

Radloff had broad scientific connections in Europe, enjoyed deep respect in the government and business circles, but at the same time, being a man of genuinely broad views, was ready for unusual personnel decisions. He not only closed his eyes to the political past and the views of his colleagues, but also undertook to achieve the same from representatives of the state and the academic administration. He not only solved the problem of scientific personnel, but did it in such a way that MAE of his period became one of the “fashion legislators” not only in domestic but also in world ethnography.

It was Lev Sternberg who became the closest associate of Radloff in the creation of a new museum. While still a student, Sternberg took part in the work of revolutionary circles and of the *Narodnaya Volya* revolutionary party. He was arrested and exiled to Sakhalin, where he stayed from 1889 to 1897. During his exile, he managed to investigate the social order and religious

views of Nivkhs (Gilyaks), of Ainu people of Sakhalin and Amur region, as well as of various Tungus-Manchu tribes, and described in detail the system of kinship of Gilyaks and Orochs. It was the legacy of Sternberg that laid the foundation for the post-revolutionary development of the MAE. The famous *Ethnographer's Commandments* belong to him:

1. Ethnography is the crown of all the humanities, for it studies comprehensively all peoples, all humanity in its past and present.
2. Do not make an idol of your own people, of your own religion, of your own culture. Know that all people are potentially equal: there are no Hellenes, no Jews, no white and non-white. Who knows one nation, does not know a single one, who knows one religion, does not know any.
3. Do not profane your science; do not desecrate ethnography with careerism: a true ethnographer can only be one who fosters enthusiasm for science, a love for humanity and for human.
4. Six days of work, and the seventh – sum up. Remember your duty to the public and science.
5. Honor the great predecessors, teachers in the scientific and social life, so that you will be yourself honored by your merits.
6. Do not kill science by falsification of facts, by superficial and inaccurate observations, by hasty conclusions.
7. Do not change once the chosen specialty – ethnography. Who has once embarked on the path of ethnography, should not get away from it.
8. Do not practice plagiarism
9. Do not take false testimony against your neighbor, other peoples, their character, rites, customs, etc. Love your neighbor more than yourself.
10. Do not forcibly impose your culture on the people under investigation: approach them carefully with love and attention at whatever level of culture they stand, and they will aspire to rise to the level of higher cultures.

«All the humanity is one whole» – such words are crowned the tombstone of Sternberg. It was this maxim that became the motto for several generations of Russian ethnographers.

The museum makes the science, and science makes the museum. Scientific expeditions have become an important tool for the creation of new scientific departments, as well as for new museum expositions, the area of which has increased several times over this period. MAE conducted independent training of expedition participants, which turned the museum into an educational center. The appearance of extensive expedition gatherings at the MAE's disposal gave the museum the opportunity to conduct exchanges with foreign museums. It was active field work, description and processing of the

collections in a short period of time that turned MAE employees into true professionals, whose scientific reputation in the world was unquestionable in those years. At the same time, a photographic laboratory, one of the most equipped in Europe, also appeared in the MAE.

After the death of Radloff, which happened in 1918 in the famine of Petrograd, Sternberg succeeded in carrying out in many ways a revolutionary re-exposure of the museum, based on Marxist approaches. In the part of the museum the regional principle was replaced by the display of the development of objects and means of production. In this respect it is very interesting that in 1930s, Musée de l'Homme in Paris focused primarily on the Leningrad Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in the creation of its display.

The creation of the USSR was marked by an explosion of ethnicity. The implementation of the Soviet project went hand in hand with the creation of “monoethnic proto-states” for the non-Russian nations that did not exist then. They were to become a counterbalance to the Russian “great-power chauvinism”. National construction was carried out in accordance with the doctrine developed within the framework of the traditions of European Social Democracy, but, in many cases, it was influenced by revolutionary maximalism:

It is necessary to distinguish between the nationalism of an oppressing nation and the nationalism of an oppressed nation, the nationalism of a large nation and the nationalism of a small nation. In relation to the second nationalism, almost always in historical practice, we, the nationals of a large nation, are guilty of an endless number of [committed] violence [Lenin 1975-1977, 359].

It was a time when reality constantly confirmed Sternberg's thesis that «ethnography is the crown of all the humanities». For young Soviet ethnographers those years were the epoch of heroism and romanticism. Young people, in the vast majority of cases students of specialists who once linked their fate with the MAE, went, often for life, to the most remote corners of the country: they studied local languages and created alphabets for them, recorded folklore, witnessed fantastically interesting rituals.

Since the mid-1920's a tremendous project of the *Movie Atlas of the USSR* began to be realized. The origins of the project should also be found in the activities of the MAE photographic laboratory at the very beginning of the 20th century. The MAE created documentary films on ethnographic topics, trained researchers who went to an expedition and supplied them with cinematographic equipment.

Both professors and their students were closely associated with the museum. Considering the undoubted creative urge, the scope of ethnographic work, the volume of expedition materials, one could expect a new heyday of the MAE. Fate, however, ordered differently.

In 1929, a conference of ethnographers from Moscow and Leningrad was held at the State Academy of the History of Material Culture at the Marble Palace in Leningrad. This meeting was the most important stage in the process of the formation of the Soviet ethnography. Among the topics discussed at the meeting were, first of all, those that are still provoking active discussions (the very object of ethnography, “field”, ethnographic education and museum activities). The materials of the meeting recently published by the MAE RAS in the series *Kunstkamera-Archives* [Arzutov et. al. 2014] allow us to understand a lot in the fate and fortunes both of our museum, from which many a collection were transferred to the State Hermitage in 1930—1934 [Rezvan 2010, 80-83] and of the concept of the *Museum of Universal Human Culture*, which was the basis for the development of the MAE under Radloff and Sternberg.

Here is a quote from an address by Valerian Aptekar', who played a key role at the conference and who appealed for “cancellation” of ethnography as being a colonial and racist science. According to him «race is an element indivisible from the Indo-European world view»<sup>3</sup>. Is it not the same idea that is expressed by adherents of “inclusive” and “neutral language”[S.a. 2009, Smith 1999] in contemporary “politically correct anthropology”?

Here is the portrait of Valerian Aptekar given by Boris Pasternak's cousin, an eminent philologist and culturologist Olga Freidenberg, who organized the department of classical philology in the Leningrad University, first ever to be created in the Soviet Union:

In Moscow I ran into Mr. Aptekar. This one turned out to be a bold-as-brass pert and stout scallywag in a leather overcoat worn exclusively by “men in charge”. He walked in a portly sway as if being intolerant of obstructions. In a rollicking and self-confident manner he would admit of his lack of education. Such cads as Aptekar, the ignorami, arriving from wood-end farmsteads and boroughs, would pick up scraps of party slogans, Marxist schemes, penny-sheet phraseology and view themselves as strong men and supremoes. Without so much as a by-your-leave they would come the old soldier over true scholars, entirely convinced that one required no actual knowledge to be a successful systematizer (‘methodologist’) of that same knowledge [Pasternak E.V., Pasternak E.B. 1990, 121].

The material of the conference of 1929 makes it possible for us to get in touch with that brief interregnum in the history of Russian ethnography when much was seen as possible and the boldest experiments looked unfantastic. It was soon, however, that the real “watershed mark” ensued, dealing Russian ethnographic scholarship a real “formatting” blow. The Academy staff was subjected to a purge, as a result of which over a hundred people were arrested, and hundreds dismissed. Ethnography itself instead of the “queen of sciences” gradually became an auxiliary historical discipline.

<sup>3</sup> Archives of the Russian Academy of Science, file 377, directory 2, arch. unit 110, folio 63.

Against this background and together with the departure from the life of a galaxy of outstanding ethnographers associated with the MAE, the museum started to lose its significance gradually. This does not mean that life in the museum stopped at all. Scientists went to the most interesting expeditions, brought and processed collections, but their work did not have the same significance. This is clearly seen in the fate of the *Ethnography* journal, which from 1926 to 1929 was published in Leningrad and Moscow. At the same time, a series of monographs prepared at the MAE “fell on the shelf”. Now these manuscripts are processed and published in the series *Kunstkamera-Archives*<sup>4</sup>.

In 1933 the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR took the decision to establish the Research Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology named after Nikolay Miklouho-Maclay. In 1943, in connection with the acute need to obtain analytical material on the peoples who were involved in the zone of strategic interests and military operations of the Soviet Army, a head unit of the Institute was established in Moscow, and the museum became the Leningrad part of this Institute.

The war and the Siege of Leningrad cost the museum very serious losses and only by the mid-1950s losses in the scientific team were restored to a certain extent. In the post-war period, museum staff participated in a series of serious research, expeditionary and encyclopedic projects. In 1948–1953 five-volume and 1990–1999 six-volume collection of works by Nikolay Miklouho-Maclay were prepared. Leningrad scholars took an active part in the creation of the encyclopedic series *Peoples of the World. Ethnographic essays*. In 1955 Yuri Knorozov presented his Ph.D. thesis on the topic ‘*Report on the affairs in the Yucatan*’ by *Diego de Landa as a historical and ethnographic source*. The Scientific Council, understanding the significance of the author's works on the successful decipherment of the Maya writing, awarded him the degree of doctor of historical sciences. In 1971, a scientific expedition to Oceania took place on the ship *Dmitry Mendeleev*. It should be noted however that, to great regret, the international project on the ethnography of the Slavic peoples, whose headquarters was a museum (head – Prof Kirill Chistov), did not manage to see the light before the collapse of the USSR and was never completed.

In 1992, immediately after the collapse of the USSR, the Museum again became an independent institution within the Russian Academy of Sciences. By the Decrees of the President of the Russian Federation of December 18, 1991 and of November 30, 1992, the MAE RAS is classified as particularly valuable object of the cultural heritage of the peoples of the Russian Federation. As before, the museum scholars took an active part in the life of the country. Two of them, Nikolai Girenko (1940–2004), human rights activist

<sup>4</sup> For details, please, visit: [http://www.kunstkamera.ru/science/books/kunstkamera\\_arhiv/](http://www.kunstkamera.ru/science/books/kunstkamera_arhiv/).

and one of the creators of the St. Petersburg Union of Scientists, and Galina Starovoitova (1946–1998), the deputy of the State Duma (lower chamber of the Russian Parliament) and expert in interethnic relations, closely related to MAE, were despicably killed by their political opponents.

Every day, while coming to my office in the historical building of the Peter the Great Kunstkamera, it is impossible not to feel the influence of the scientific traditions formed here. Today the MAE team is doing everything possible to adequately follow the museum traditions. This, of course, applies to the principle of collection through systematic scientific expeditions, as discussed above.

Today the geography of the MAE expeditions is really wide. In Russia in recent years our expedition teams and individual researchers were working in the republics of Altai, Buryatia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Karelia, North Ossetia-Alania, Tyva, Udmurtia, Khakassia; in Bryansk, Vologda, Leningrad, Novgorod and Rostov oblasts (regions), the Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty-Mansi Autonomous districts... Regular expeditions were carried out in neighboring countries: Abkhazia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine. Overseas expeditionary studies were conducted in Africa (Gabon, Guinea, Cameroon, Kenya, Congo, Ivory Coast, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, Ethiopia); in Asia (India, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Oman, Yemen, China, Malaysia, Mongolia), Europe (Albania, Germany, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro); South America (Brazil, Peru, Ecuador) and the countries of Oceania (Malaysia, Micronesia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea).

Thanks to the expeditionary work, the MAE RAS funds are annually being enriched with valuable ethnographic, archeological and anthropological collections. As before the MAE expedition projects are directly connected with the exhibition activities of the museum. An example of this is the exhibitions of the cycle *The Expeditions are not over*, which started in 2004. The exhibitions of the cycle not only remind of remarkable scientific traditions and museum expedition projects of the 18th – 20th centuries, thanks to which the MAE compiled one of the most significant ethnographic collections in the world. The aim of the exhibition cycle is to present to the visitors the current expeditionary and scientific research work of the museum.

Within the framework of the basic directions of the fundamental research the museum staff has in many ways a unique opportunity to realize the results obtained not only in the form of monographs and articles, but also in the form of exhibition projects accompanied by detailed catalogs. New information technologies allow solving the problems of preservation and publication of huge volumes of audiovisual information, which in many ways is revolutionizing the methods of field ethnographic work. All this provides

the widest opportunities for realizing the results of fundamental research in the popular science and educational fields.

An ethnographic museum of the same scale as the St. Petersburg Kunstkamera is the home album of all mankind. The museum is not a cemetery of culture. The cultural wealth accumulated in it, is living, telling their stories first to the researcher, and then to the visitor, the spectator, the reader. And this story is endless. Generation after generation of scientists will open here their special world.

A new page in the history of the museum opens right now.

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