The Mission of the Ethnological Museum.
dr. Steven Engelsman, director Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden, the Netherlands.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Korea is a very ambitious country! You have been building up a fantastic museum infrastructure over the last 50 years. Korean museums are among the leading museums in the world. Few other countries support museums through public and private money as squarely as does Korea. And few other countries have made such good use of museums in nation building and forming their national identity as you have done. That really is impressive! Is it time for a rest or at least a slower pace now? No, not for you! Another big step forward is in the making.

Korea is about to extend the reach and mission of the splendid National Folk Museum of Korea, the NFMK for short, to become a true ethnological museum. This will be a vast paradigm shift. You will have to extend your sphere of interest from your homeland to the world at large and all the peoples of the world. It really is a grand vision, and I consider it a great honor to be invited to share my thoughts with you.

The Korean challenge.
Creating a new museum of ethnology in Korea now is a very appropriate thing to do, I think. It makes sense to me. Over the last 50 years, Korea has developed from an isolated, inward looking country to become one of the most important industrial nations of the world. Korean industry now serves a global market. From the jungle of South America, to the outback of Australia or the historical towns of Europe, everywhere, people use Samsung, Hyundai, Kia or Daewoo phones, flat screens, cars and heavy equipment. Korea and Koreans are present everywhere. So more and more, Koreans have to deal with other people, people with completely different cultural backgrounds, people who are arranging their own lives and societies in ways very different from your traditional Korean way of life. And, in addition, people from all over the world move into Korea, as trade partners, scholars, researchers, diplomats, or through marriage, as workforce and what have you. So through such migration, Korea is ever more becoming a culturally diverse country, and Koreans become ever more global citizens.

In order for Koreans to be well prepared to meet these new circumstances it makes sense to have an institution where they can learn to communicate and engage with these other people effectively. If successful, it will make Korea an even more respected and influential player in the global world of today. Your new museum of ethnology can be exactly that learning place. This is how I understand the targets that you have now set for yourselves.
Given this vision, it is obvious that your mission is about cross cultural understanding and engagement. And that your new museum will not be about objects but about people; so collecting precious objects all over the world and putting those up in showcases will not be the way for you to go about!

**How to go about?**
The interesting question then is how to go about to make this vision come true? It is certainly no easy task! There is no manual for making a new museum of ethnology which you could just follow and get the task done. At least, I haven’t found one and I haven’t had the time yet to write one myself! Instead, you have invited a few colleagues from ethnological or anthropological museums elsewhere to discuss the issues with you. Let me warn you straight away: I don’t think there is any model museum for you to copy.

Why not? Basically, I think, because the existing ethnological museums - be it Minpaku in Japan, the ethnological museums in former colonial possessions like Australia or South Africa, Latin America, the natural history museums of North America or the ethnological and world culture museums in Europe – they all have their own very specific settings, their specific histories and traditions. They have come into existence under conditions very different from those prevailing here in Korea right now. And they have been founded to serve missions that were very different from the mission that I think Korea should set for its own new ethnological museum.

So: your challenge is a unique one. It is to start from scratch, get the mission and vision right and then set out to make it. It is an attractive challenge that few of us have faced before; so I have now put it on the agenda of the European Ethnology Museums Directors Group EEMDG alias CIA that will meet in Munich in September next. We will spend an hour and a half to explore the question: “how to build an ethnological museum from scratch?” We will report back to you in case some interesting ideas pop up.

**Three missions of ethnological museums**
No model for you to copy, but yet it is useful to have a closer look at the development of ethnological museums and see what lessons can be drawn. Let me give you a brief sketch. Many ethnological museums go back at least 100 years, some even 200 years, like the Leiden Museum and the Petersburg Kunstkamera is soon to celebrate its 300th anniversary. Perhaps the youngest ethnological museum is Minpaku in Osaka, only 35 years old now.

1 – Mission of amazement – *Wunderkammer and Kunstkamera*

The first ethnographic museum came into existence 300 years ago. It was the Kunstkamera in St. Petersburg, founded by Czar Peter the Great in his gigantic effort of building a modern town on the banks of the Newa river; also from scratch. The purpose of the museum was to bring display all the wonderful and miraculous objects and things of the world that were brought to the Czars attention. And its aim was to provide ample opportunity for the select
visitors and the Russian elite in Sankt Petersburg to marvel about the miracles of God’s creation, about the diversity of nature and the creational skills of mankind.

2 – Colonial Mission of knowledge and control
The next step in the development of ethnological museums came with heyday of colonialism. The Leiden museum is a fine example. Founding date 1816, by King William the first. He wanted to inform his people about the colonies – especially Indonesia – and about Japan, where the Dutch maintained a trading post. The general purpose of those early colonial museums was for the people to learn about business opportunities and to understand how to control the people living in the colonies. Anthropology emerged as a discipline: categorizing people and their objects became the favorite activity, and evolutionary thinking put the white man on top of all. It was all knowledge about and control of other peoples.

3 – Postcolonial mission of museum anthropology and material culture.
World War 2 effectively ended the colonial era, and so there was no use anymore for a colonial museum. Museums changed their mission and stayed in business. They adopted a postcolonial mission of museum anthropology and material culture. Curators started research programs about “continuity and change” in material culture. As a spin off, they would transfer their knowledge through exhibitions to audiences. Perhaps best example here: Minpaku in Osaka. No museum has been more efficiently and more fully behind that mission of scholarship than this grand Japanese research museum. At times the museum has employed more than 100 curator-researchers – nearly all of them professor - who travelled all over the world to collect, ship home loads of objects, put them through the automated accessioning system, store them in order to study and publish and put a tiny fraction up on display.

Model for Korea?
Ladies and gentlemen, is this mission of museum anthropology and material culture the model that Korea should also adopt? The answer, my answer, is No, No, No. The task ahead of you is much more complicated and difficult, much more innovative! Don’t go that way, don’t start collecting straight away and display the treasures. Why not?

“Not about us without us”
From the 1980s, this mission of museum anthropology and material culture ran into some heavy trouble and difficulties! Perhaps the first time this became really obvious was with the exhibition “Into the heart of Africa” at the Royal Ontario Museum in 1989. This was a well and traditionally curated exhibition. But it met with fierce protest of fellow Canadians with roots in black Africa. It was all about them and their roots, but it had been made by a curatorial elite that had not been in contact with them, let alone consulted them. It was all about them but without them. The ROM was forced to close the exhibition, and it had to
develop a completely different strategy and approach to exhibiting other cultures. An approach which I call “not about them without them”.

Let me give another example, from personal experience. The first time that I became aware of this complicated situation was at Minpaku in Osaka mid 1990s. At that museum, Europeans are being ethnologized as well, something you will not find happen anywhere in Europe itself. So there I was, a visitor from Europe looking at the fine and beautifully made display of Europe. In this exhibition about my homeland, what did I see? There was gipsy wagon, wooden tools for farming and a small distillery device. That was a shock! Europeans were represented here as primitive nomads addicted to hard liquor. That was not me! That was a representation of Europe by a curator with a fascination for gypsies and their material culture. That was not a representation of Europe at all, but the display of a curator’s personal fascination. It made me think of such a representation as “an ethnological insult”.

I came across the same observation again a few years later, end 1990s, when Museum Volkenkunde was organizing an international art project. One artist – Rasheed Areen - refused the commission to make a work with the statement “I don’t want to be ethnologized”. Andries Botha, from South Africa also didn’t want to be ethnologized. He took revenge for hundreds of years of ethnologizing Africans by in turn ethnologizing the Dutch. His artwork consists of a small collection of iconic Dutch objects brought together by a South African ethnologist, whose authoritative scholarly texts are both insulting to the Dutch and very very hilarious. It was a perfect mirror of how our museum had been dealing with other people: by an ethnological insult!

My last example is from last week. An important Maori delegation came to Leiden in preparation of a fantastic joint project: the gifting a Maori war canoe, a waka, to the Museum. It is the start of a new and long lasting relationship between Maori and the Dutch; between the people of New Zealand and those of “Old Zealand”. When I asked them why they were willing to cooperate with us, their answer was: “we are no longer interested in yet another anthropological representation of our culture! We want to be present ourselves! That is why we want to work with you, since you provide us with this opportunity”.

**Collapse of mission of museum anthropology and material culture.**

Ladies and gentlemen, time for reflection. I have rushed through the past of ethnological museums and outlined the evolution of their mission in three major steps: from amazement as in Kunstkamera, through knowledge and control, as in Leiden, to museum anthropology and material culture as in Minpaku in Osaka. This last mission, the one of museum anthropology and material culture is in the process of collapsing. Because of the “ethnological insult” it entails. Ethnological museums have run into an existential crisis. This was neatly phrased already back in the 1980s by the famous maverick museologist Kenneth Hudson, who wrote: “It may well be that the heyday of the ethnological museum is long gone!”
What is the lesson for Korea, today?

Dear colleagues, if ethnological museums indeed are in a crisis and Kenneth Hudson is right, why would you want to have a new ethnological museum in Korea? Isn’t that madness? No of course not. It would only be madness if you were to copy existing institutions and make the same mistakes.

What then, are the important lessons for Korea? I think it is this: knowledge and control is no longer relevant, but amazement is still important for the museum’s public, museum anthropology and material culture is also still important as a generator of reliable knowledge. But the focus of the museum must be on cross cultural understanding and engagement. At the end of my speech I will provide some reflections and thoughts on how to make that happen.

But first I want to briefly outline some strategies that ethnological museums have applied to disentangle themselves from the crisis, and the new missions that are coming up.

Two strategies, the exclusive and the inclusive museum.

The crisis is also this: museums suffering from very large collections and very little public interest. Many objects, many costs; few visitors, little money.

Over those 100, 200 or 300 years of their existence, museums have built up enormous collections. The best, the oldest, the most important material from all over the world has already been absorbed by ethnological museums. Yet, altogether they don’t put more than 5% of those collections up on display. 95% is hidden away in storage. More often than not, museums do only have poor control over those collections. They don’t know what they have, where objects are, and what the history of the object is. But the collections are fantastic and very comprehensive. I dare say that to really make discoveries in material, don’t go into the field. Go into the storage of ethnological museums. They have long picked the best and taken it home for you to dig up.

You might find that a very discouraging observation, but it really doesn’t make sense for you to build collections and aim at being as comprehensive as museums that have been collecting over the last 35 or 300 years. Consider the bright side! By not collecting you won’t be burdening yourself with the gigantic task of managing those collections. Instead, I suggest your best option is to form partnerships and alliances with all those museums that have collections stored away that you might want to use. I do offer you free access to the collections of the Leiden Museum. You can have whatever masterpieces you want for display in Korea. For limited periods of time, but with guaranteed renewal of the loan contract ever so often. And I am sure that many of my colleagues in the EEMDG group will be of exactly the same opinion: rather put up collections in a Korean showcase that store them in a European attic! Here is your chance, I think, to intensify museum cooperation in a very innovative and inspiring way.
Ladies and gentlemen, let me turn back to the strategies adopted by European museums to disentangle themselves from their existential crisis.

One strategy has been to focus on collections, and bring collection management to new and high standards. Most impressive example is musee du quai Branly in Paris. Museum Volkenkunde has also been working in this line. President Chirac was a real connoisseur and enthusiast of world culture, and under his presidential orders the musee du quai Branly took all collections out of the dusty storage of the famous Musee de l’Homme and the musee des Arts d’Afrique et Oceanie. Now those collections are kept in sterling storage and they are very well documented. Once done, the museum put the best of the best of their collections on display. Their primary target group consists of those who share president Chirac’s fascination for world class art from outside Europe. And they primarily cater for the Parisian cultural elite, and thus for the cultural elite of the whole world. The museum shows – both in permanent and temporary displays – those treasures that the elite knows about, but has never seen in real. In the museum, they can have the real experience of authenticity. It is an exquisite experience for exclusive elite of literati. This is an important role to play – please don’t misunderstand me - and it is the more successful I think, the larger the metropolis and the more fashionable it is to be a connoisseur like the president. In Korea, the National Museum has taken up this task with its international exhibitions like the one about Uzbekistan that is up now. Present world culture to those who already know, who want to know more, and who take great joy in seeing the real masterpieces with their own eyes.

Another strategy adopted by museums is to create opportunities for audiences to come into the museum that have never done so before. It is an inclusive strategy rather than an exclusive one. One of the very first museums to go this way was the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde. Already early 1990s, the museum opened its doors to the immigrant population in Hamburg. And you can imagine, in this largest port of Germany there are many immigrant groups. They were happy to accept the invitation, and ever since immigrant groups flock to the museum to have their ceremonies, parties, and celebrate their auspicious days. The museum as a meeting and gathering place.

Another aspect of the inclusive strategy is to reestablish contacts with the source communities of the collections. In Leiden we are deeply involved in such programs now, which we call “Sharing Knowledge and Cultural Heritage”. Perhaps the most impressive example is a project with the National Museum of the Philippines. In Manila, virtually all 19th century collections have been destroyed during WW2. In Leiden, we have a few thousand. So curators from Manila come, they select objects and take them to their National Museum for exhibition. And return them to us together with all the knowledge that they have generated about them. Actually, this grand idea was also suggested by Professor Köpke from Hamburg. The novel element here is to engage source communities in identifying and documenting collections. It is very rewarding, in that it brings their intangible heritage also into the museum and we have many voices now to speak about the collections.
New mission of cross cultural understanding and engagement.

Ladies and gentlemen, having provided you with some examples of museum innovation in Europe let me now address the issue of the mission again. What ideas can replace the scholarly mission of museum anthropology and material culture? For me, for Museum Volkenkunde, the main source of inspiration has been the Unesco Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which was adopted in 2001. It was an eye-opener! In article one of the Declaration it says: “As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.”

Comparing cultural diversity with biodiversity opens up the panorama of ethnological museums as the caretaker of the world’s cultural heritage in the same way natural history museums safeguard the world’s biodiversity. And that is exactly what we have been doing: caring for collections that embody the cultural diversity of the world, making them accessible to man and engaging audiences to build and foster an appreciation for and understanding of cultural diversity. The UNESCO Declaration provides a very noble and honorable vision of global importance and acceptance for any ethnological museums mission today, I believe.

What is in it for Korea?

Ladies and gentlemen, I will now draw this speech to a close. What then are the main lessons for Korea from all that? There are a few, I think, and I have already hinted at some of them.

Your most appropriate mission – I claim – is one of cross cultural communication and engagement. Help and teach Koreans to appreciate other people with very different habits and ways of life and other cultures with very different mindsets and values.

You can do so for the cultural elite in your country and for the immigrant elite in your country by staging large exhibitions of world culture. You can do so by bringing blockbuster exhibitions to Korea or by making them in partnership with others. Blockbusters are very expensive, but at the same time draw large crowds of visitors. Do the best of the best with the best partner institutions that you can find. It is the format that the National Museum of Korea seems to have already adopted.

A more difficult, but perhaps also more rewarding and certainly more challenging way of going about is to focus on Korea’s school curriculum and the school kids. They are your future generations, they are the ones to further develop Korea’s leadership role in the world. Provide unforgettable cross cultural experiences for them, provide them with stunning interactive displays that catch their fascination, show them that there are very interesting people elsewhere in the world, who are not Korean, who organize their lives in completely different ways, but are nevertheless great to meet and to engage with.
Examples of how this might be done can only be found in a few ethnological museums. The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, with their Tropenmuseum Junior is the best example I know of. But you may learn a lot from science centers: they have experiments, games, computer animations and all sorts of interactives that demonstrate the phenomena and laws of nature. Kids like to play with them and in doing so they develop a taste and fascination for science. They don’t become scientists, but they get a feeling for the beauty and fascination of science. This is the real challenge for ethnological museums today, to also provide a top class interactive environment, where children – and adults – can develop a taste and fascination and some understanding of other cultures and cultural diversity.

This is a very ambitious and challenging task, and I am not the one to tell you how to go about. You will need a clear brief, and a battalion of your best educators, digital nerds, game developers and what have you to make this dream come true. Actually, in Leiden we are pondering exactly the same challenge right now. Laura van Broekhoven is leading this thinking at our museum right now. That’s why she is here as well. She has developed the concept of “ethnospheres”: virtual reality environments that will provide cultural experiences the same way flight simulators provide pilots with flying experiences. You better talk to her when you need more ideas of how to go about. It is too difficult for me.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, I am now really at the end of my talk. I know that I have been blunt, that I have given a sketch of the development of ethnological museums that some colleagues may find too much of a caricature. And rightly so, many nuances have just been skipped. I rather wanted to be clear than correct in my talk. Because I wanted to warn you not to rush into the trap of becoming scholarly collectors. No I rather wanted to challenge you to become very ambitious in attracting new and young audiences to this fantastic and important arena of the world cultural diversity. I really hope to see you master this challenge, and take the lead in setting up a completely new and relevant type of ethnological museum. Become the Kunstkamera of the future! Do it from scratch!

I wish Korea good luck in this endeavor and thank you very much for having listened to my remarks.