

“Non-European ethnographical collections in Central and Eastern Europe”  
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**The Czech National Museum (Náprstek Museum ) and its American Ethnographical and Archaeological Collections**

The Náprstek Museum was founded as a private museum by Vojta Naprstek in the second half of the 19th century. In 1862 Vojta Naprstek, a prominent, progressive, cultured and wealthy Prague burgher wanted to provide extensive documentation of industrial production and promote technological progress. He intended to build a Czech Industrial Museum. The Museum's first exhibits (the first exhibition was opened in 1874 in the family house U Halánk\_) presented modern machines (e.g. a sewing machine) purchased by Naprstek in England at the World exhibition in London. In 1880 Naprstek erected a new three storey building adjoining his family residence. This new exhibit building has been in permanent use up to the present day. With the remarkable support of his wife Josefa Vojta Náprstek, who enthusiastically promoted new progressive ideas gaining currency in the world at the time (among them for instance women's equality and a new approach to education), he systematically built up a library which he then opened to the general public.

Naprstek developed an intellectual center in the museum around which the Czech elite started to congregate. The museum held regular meetings of Czech writers and scholars. Frequent visitors included Czech explorers who shared impressions of their voyages and expeditions with Náprstek and brought along their own collections. Among them here were Emil Holub, E.St.Vráz, Josef Ko\_ensk\_, Otokar Feistmantel and Pavel Durdík. Náprstek provided information as well as understanding and material support to these travellers. Their collections of non-European objects are the foundation of the present-day collections.

After Náprstek's death in 1894 his widow Josefa was assisted in the museum administration by a board of Náprstek's friends which ran the museum using a fund that had been set up by Vojta Náprstek for the purpose. After Josefa Náprstkova's death the board promptly changed the museum acquisition programme and focused on completing the most important section – the ethnographic collection. Some collections were to be moved to the Náprstek Museum from the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia. In exchange, the board signed a contract in 1928, under whose terms the museum was handed over, effective from

1932, to the administration of the Land of Bohemia. By then it had assumed a new name, becoming the Nápřstek Museum of General Ethnography.

In 1943 the Nápřstek Museum was incorporated by the then German administration into the National Museum of Prague. The Nápřstek collection of art and applied art objects was handed over to the National Museum's Historical and Archaeological departments and to the Museum of Applied Art, while its collection of industrial items and technological equipment was transferred to the National Technical Museum. Ethnographical items of Bohemian provenance were moved to the National Museum's Ethnography Department. After World War II the Nápřstek Museum enjoyed a special autonomous status. Finally, in 1962, on the occasion of the centenary of its foundation, the museum's accent on ethnographic approaches was extended to embrace the fine arts, applied art, archaeology and numismatics. This change of concept was reflected in its new name: The Nápřstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures. In structural terms, the museum was then divided into separate Ethnographic and Asian Departments which were in 1962 joined by the Numismatic Department, and finally, in 1969, by the Department of the Ancient Near East and Ancient Egypt.

After World War II came a new period of collection expansion and measures to create adequate storage for the collections. To make them widely accessible to the general public the museum completely reconstructed Lib\_chov Chateau near the town M\_iník between 1963 and 1977 as the place for its permanent exhibition of Asian cultures. Unfortunately, the floods in 2002 flooded the ground floor of the Chateau. The collections were saved in time and moved away to the temporary storage of National Museum in Prague. After the renovation of Chateau the collections will be moved back.

Nápřstek museum is today one of the National Museum's five principal components, on an equal footing with the Museum of Natural History, the History Museum, The National Library and the Museum of Czech Music.

The Nápřstek Museum displays only a fraction of its huge collections to the public in two permanent exhibitions : Indian Cultures of North, and South America and Cultures of Australia and Oceania. Asian and African collections are displayed during temporary exhibitions only.

In their sum, the collections of Nápřstek museum comprise over 150 000 objects of which:

The Asia Department contains circa 50 000 items;

The Ethnographical Department holds circa 46 000 items of African, American and Oceanian provenance and preserves the Photography Archive of circa 30 000 pieces of photographic material (glass and celluloid negatives, positives, glass and celluloid diapositives);

The Department of the Ancient Near East and Ancient Egypt stores about 16 000 objects;

The Numismatic Department holds circa 11 000 items.

In addition, the library of the Náprstek Museum keeps circa 300 000 books.

The Ethnography Department is mostly concerned with native cultural objects from Africa, Oceania and America. The American collections of the Ethnographic Department are both ethnographical and archaeological in origin. Due to the efforts of generations of scholars, explorers, missionaries and collectors, the American collections were assembled in several different ways. The first group consists of individual items which were acquired as so called 'curiosities' torn out of their original context. These were obtained by the collectors in the earliest days of interest in exotic lands. Another group was acquired through diplomatic, business, technical and other travellers as souvenirs from exotic voyages. The most important group is constituted by systematically structured collections acquired chiefly through scholars and explorers.

The scientist Tadeas Haenke (1761-1817) represents those whose gathering activities were connected with the foundation of the collections. His early collection of approximately 30 ethnographic pieces was gathered along with botanical specimens in the 1790s in western America during an expedition of Admiral Malaspina. This collection is one of the earliest of the National Museum. This collection is an important and valued scientific source of a number of international exhibitions (selected items were on display in Madrid in 1992 and later in Vancouver Maritime museum).

The very founder of the Museum, Vojta Náprstek (1826 – 1894), collected about 100 ethnographic objects from native people in Wisconsin and Minnesota while he stayed there. (After the revolution in 1848 he spent 10 years in exile in America). He thus created an important collection that has a remarkable position in the study of native American culture in the first half of the 19th Century and the cultural history of Czech lands and Czech nationals.

The explorer E.St.Vráz (1860–1932) donated a collection gathered during his expedition across equatorial America in 1893–94 to the museum. The every day items he concentrated on include those from the Orinoco basin, coming notably from Venezuelan Guahibo and Baniva tribes. In his collection there are house tools – manioc presses, gourd vessels, pottery, baskets, hammocks and hunting implements, blowpipes and spears. Objects of ritual character include flutes and drums, painted dance paddles and ornaments made from

tropical bird feathers. Vráz obtained among other items a set of baskets and dance ornaments from the Venezuelan Maquiritare tribe.

Other major ethnographic South American Collections were assembled by Alberto Vojtěch Friš (1882–1944) who conducted four long-term expeditions to Brazil and Aragua Gran Chaco in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Of Friš's collections, which are now scattered in museums around the world, the Náprstek Museum acquired only a part (about 400 items). Apart from that, several dozen items were purchased in the late 1940's after Friš's death. This collection of objects comes from members of Toba, Pilagá, Sanapaná, Angaité, Lengua and Chamacoco tribes. A remarkable contribution is represented by Friš's collection built during his expedition to Bororo in southern Brazil.

The American archaeological material of the Ethnographical department is based on collections from ancient Mexico and Bolivia. The majority of the Mexican part is the work of August Genin who sent the collection straight from Mexico. There are altogether around three thousand artifacts that include ceramic vessels, figures, small objects such as spindles, weights and ceramic fragments. Most of them originate from central Mexico and are of the Teotihuacan and Aztec period, and from Oaxaca of the Zapotec period.

Jakub Beer, a missionary, represents the beginnings of archaeological research and collecting activity. Beer, a grand master of the Crusaders' Order with a red star, excavated and collected several pieces of stone industrial items and ceramic statues in the region of Yucatan before 1865. These pieces are especially of Jaina culture (Campeche date back to the classic Maya period (6-9 c.).

Profesor Julius Nestler, a secondary school teacher of Romance languages spent two years in Bolivia (1910-1911) and created the Bolivian collection when he engaged in archaeological excavations focused on the Tiahuanaco site on the Bolivia-Peru border. It contains ceramic vessels, fragments, metal objects, and stone sculptures. His collection consists of several thousand items including typical kero cups, ceramic bowls and jugs and polychrome ceramic fragments. There are two bronze bolts used in the construction of stone walls, bronze needles and pins, scrapers etc.

The collector of the south-west collections, František Pospíšil, represents a modern scientific approach to collecting. He was a Moravian ethnographer who during his field work among the Pueblo Indians and Navaho in the south-west United States in 1930s collected a sizeable ethnographic collection. This collection is divided between the Náprstek museum, the Land Moravian Museum in Brno and private collections.

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed an expansion of the Náprstek Museum ethnographic and archaeological collections, thanks to the efforts of the director, Václav Šolc (1919–1995). He led his first American expedition to Bolivia and subsequently embarked on several others to Chile and Peru. From Bolivia he brought a collection of ceramics, both contemporary and pre-Columbian (Tiahuanaco, Mollo Culture 12th–15th century), as well as hand-made woollen textiles, and parts of native dress. In Chile he took part in the archaeological research of a burial site near the city of Arica (dating from A.D. 1100 – 1450). Of particular interest among the finds excavated there are vessels decorated with geometric polychrome designs, and fragments of cotton textiles with woven coloured decoration. The ethnographic collections brought by Šolc from Chile document the culture of Aymara, from the Chilean Peruvian borderland and the Mapuche of central Chile. The Aymara collection consists of a variety of specimens of home-woven textiles. The Mapuche culture is represented by a set of silver ornaments, as well as objects made from other materials (wood, leather, ceramic).

During his stay in Mexico in the 1970's Václav Šolc gathered for the Museum's collections an extensive typological series documenting the production of contemporary Mexican pottery and masks carvings. This Mexican collection was further enlarged in the 80's thanks to the reciprocal gifts from the Mexican government which provided, in exchange for Czech ethnographic collections, almost 2000 items amounting to a cross section of Mexican contemporary folk art production.

Socio-anthropologist Milan Suchlík (1932–1980) carried out his systematic field work (1968–1973) of Mapuche at the Coipuco Indian reservation, close to the provincial town of Temuco in central Chile. During his research he had collected an outstanding collection of Mapuche household items, silver jewellery and rare ceremonial objects. He sent part of this Mapuche collection (circa 70 pieces, among them two shamanistic 'rehue' pots to the Náprstek Museum where they are included in the permanent exhibition.

The Náprstek museum American collections represent a cultural and historical source demonstrating the process of cultural changes in native societies that were transformed by the exchange of cultural influence and trends as well as reflect a centuries-old Czech interest in non-European nations and cultures. Some of these collections are significant and unique not only in Europe but also within the worldwide museum context.