

Pinja Haukkavaara

Watch out, Gypsies! — Can a Museum Exhibition Break down Prejudices?

In 2009 "Watch Out, Gypsies!" was brought to the historical Hakasalmi Villa. This exhibition produced by the Luxembourg City History Museum was adapted to Finland by the Helsinki City Museum. It aimed at challenging the stereotypical ways of presenting the Roma.

Traditional ethnographic exhibitions often "freeze" and oversimplify the cultural realities of minority groups. A different approach to presenting "the Other" would be to deal with the history of cultural encounters. "Watch out, Gypsies!", for example, encouraged visitors to study their prejudices and stereotypes concerning the Roma.

The Helsinki City Museum also conducted a study that aimed at finding out, whether the attitudes to the Roma changed because of the exhibition. Nearly half of the visitors studied suggested, that the exhibition improved their understanding of the Roma and had a positive effect on their attitude to the Roma minorities.

However the ways of interpreting the exhibition were surprisingly many. What is a museum? This question affects the way the exhibition is experienced. There were two different museum ideas which affected the interpretations: First the traditional idea of a museum as an "objective", dignified organization that can tell the "truth" about a minority. Secondly the new idea of a museum as a place for many viewpoints and worlds. Clearly this caused the exhibition to open up to multiple interpretations. The aim at breaking down prejudices was not only an important, but also a challenging task in this cultural situation of multiple viewpoints.

CV

Pinja Haukkavaara is a Bachelor of Social Sciences in Social and Cultural Anthropology and Bachelor of Arts in Folklore Studies. She is currently studying museology at the University of Helsinki. She has conducted a study concerning museum visitors' attitudes to Roma in the exhibition "Watch out! Gypsies – The History of a Misunderstanding" in Helsinki City

Museum. Her research interests include the presentation of minorities and non-European cultures in the field of museums, but she is specialized in folk belief of Finnish agrarian societies of the 19th and early 20th centuries. She has written several articles on her study and the themes of multiculturalism.

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