

# The Creation of a Hall Dedicated to the Sami People at the Museo Nacional de las Culturas del Mundo in Mexico City

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## ABSTRACT

The following is a brief review about the creation process of the *Sala del Pueblo Sami* (*Sami People's Hall*) in the *Museo Nacional de las Culturas* (MNCM, National Museum of World Cultures, Mexico City), of the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH, National Institute of Anthropology and History). The purpose of this work is to reflect on this type of experiences as an essential part of the training of postgraduate students in Museum Studies and Practices of the Escuela Nacional de Restauración, Museografía e Historia (ENCRYM) also part of the INAH.

## KEYWORDS

museum exhibits, museography, collections of indigenous communities

This is a brief review regarding the process of creating the *Sami People's Hall* in the Museo Nacional de las Culturas, of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. It aims to reflect on this type of experiences in museum training and practice. This begins by identifying the actors involved in the exhibition project, then by addressing the methodology and tools implemented during its development, and ends with my reflections on the challenges and significance of carrying out this type of activities.

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The *Sami People's Hall* exhibition<sup>1</sup> was mounted as part of the training and learning of the students from the Postgraduate in Museum Studies and Practices (PEMP) of the *Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museología*, and was the result of inter-institutional collaboration between the ENCRYM and the *Museo Nacional de las Culturas*, two spaces that are part of the INAH. This collaboration was enriched thanks to the support of the embassies of Sweden, Norway, and Finland, consolidating the spirit of cooperation that has characterized the recent life of the Postgraduate in Museum Studies and Practices, created in 2020.

It is worth mentioning that the *Laplanders Hall* (*Sala de los Lapones*) is the precedent of the current exhibition. This was one of the permanent exhibitions with which the MNCM was inaugurated in 1965, and which remained active until the beginning of this century. From a museographic point of view, the *Laplanders Hall* contained a staging composed of a taxidermy reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) sample, which sought to highlight the importance of herding in said culture. In addition, there was a sleigh and a male costume made of reindeer skin (Figure 1). These elements were found next to a tent inhabited by the costume of a Sami woman, a figure surrounded by everyday objects (a reindeer skin bag, two metal pots, a ceremonial drum, among others) and a cradle (Figure 2).



FIGURE 1. Male *gákti*, sleigh and reindeer in the Laplander's Hall, of the Museo Nacional de las Culturas (Source: Photo Library of the MNCM, 2020; courtesy: Secretaría de Cultura- INAH-Museo Nacional de las Culturas del Mundo-MEX; Reproduction Authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).



FIGURE 2. Staging of a tent inhabited by a Sami woman, crib and belongings in the *Laplanders Hall* (Source: Photo Library of the MNCM, 2020; courtesy: Secretaría de Cultura- INAH-Museo Nacional de las Culturas del Mundo-MEX; Reproduction Authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

<sup>1</sup> Nomadic indigenous peoples who inhabit the territory that includes the countries of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia.

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The collection was created in 1964 thanks to an ethical procurement process. It is classified this way because the Sami family of last name Blind was involved; they provided the objects and, in exchange, received financial remuneration from the INAH. Other objects that were purchased in specialized places were added. The ethnographer Barbro Dahlgren participated in this process, in collaboration with the *Nordiska museet* (Nordic Museum) in Stockholm. Through these efforts, the *Museo Nacional de las Culturas* managed to acquire this collection, expressly made to be exhibited in the museum.

Almost five decades after the collection was formed, the challenge of a second museographic approach to Sami culture arose. The director of the museum, Alejandra Gómez Colorado (MA), and the curator, Reynier Valdés Piñeiro (MA), proposed a perspective focused on the decolonization of this people and its culture. Then, and with the curatorial script in hand, made by Valdés Piñeiro, the ENCRYM participated in creating, developing, and assembling the museographic script.

The postgraduate students developed the conceptualization process in the first two semesters of their studies, during the sessions of the modules: *Project management* and *The exhibition as a means of communication*. The curatorial script, provided by the already appointed curator, was used as the starting point. This process continued during the second semester of the Specialization in Museography (Figure 3), where the *museographic design, prototyping, as well as the production of the exhibition* were developed. By the beginning of 2024, between January and February, the assembly was carried out and inaugurated on February 28 of the same year. Below are the most important stages of this process.

The perspective of the new exhibition is framed in the current vindication of the struggle of the Sami peoples, who seek to preserve their culture and their pastoral practices as a people or social group that inhabited the territory before the emergence of current national borders. They also share customs, traditions and economic, cultural, social and political institutions (Cámara de Diputados, 2003). Thus, this new curatorial project leaves behind the name *Laplanders Hall*, since it was imposed on them and, thus, a term with colonial implications, so the members of said culture do not identify with it. Therefore, this name is understood as part of a system of repression “on the ways of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and image

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FIGURE 3.  
Presentation of  
the progress of the  
design by students  
of the Museography  
Specialty with  
the MNCM team. In  
the photograph,  
members of the  
ENCRYM: Énoe  
Mancisidor, Nelly  
César, Celeste  
Jardinez, Mariana  
Alcalá; MNCM  
members: Alejandra  
Gómez, Reynier  
Valdés, Ramiro  
Torres, Fernanda  
Núñez, and Alfonso  
Osorio (Photograph:  
Luis Mosquera,  
2023; courtesy: Luis  
Mosquera).



systems<sup>2</sup> (Quijano, 1992, p. 12). In the ethnography practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the perspectives of this indigenous people were not considered, so it was decided that it would be called the Sami People's Hall, as that is how its members call themselves and perceive themselves.

For the development of this museographic project, the new curatorial proposal included the following thematic axes: *From Stockholm to Veracruz*, where the acquisition and transfer of the collection is addressed; in *The previous museographies in the National Museum of Cultures*, where the museographic strategies of previous years are explained as well as the integration of new technologies; *The Reindeer Herders of the Arctic*, which shows the ways in which Sami culture maintains their herding practice to this day; *The Seasonal Cycle of Reindeer Herding*, a mechanical device that seeks to explain the seasons of reindeer herding among the Sami people; *The Gákti*<sup>3</sup>, a traditional clothing and a key element in the cultural resistance of this people; *The shamanic beliefs of the Sami*, where the beliefs of this people are explained; *The rebirth of the joik*, an ancestral song that is used as a means of communica-

<sup>2</sup> Editorial translation.

<sup>3</sup> *Gákti* is a traditional handmade clothing used for important events. The exhibition features a male *gátki*, which consists of a coat and pants made of deer leather and decorative wool elements of different colors..

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tion with nature; *The harmonious relationship with nature*, in which sustainable grazing and hunting practices are addressed; and *The political organization of the Sami*, where the democratic mechanisms of Sami organization are developed (Valdés, 2023).

As a first step, the students researched the museum institution. They visited the museum and interviewed its staff with aims to prepare a document entitled *Preliminary Approach*, in which they outlined the objectives of the exhibition project, the list of works involved, the organization chart and the institutional context, among other relevant points that help to understand the characteristics that make up the museum fact. This is a proposal from the PEMP, which is under construction and presents a more comprehensive and in-depth look at contemporary museum processes (Pérez, Vázquez, & Mancisidor, personal communication, July 26, 2021). This stage was accompanied by the Postgraduate professor, Raúl del Olmo (MA), who managed the activities with the museum.

Based on the script provided by Reynier Valdés, and after having studied the museum institution, the students carried out an exercise to identify the narrative of the *curatorial script*, and the main concepts that were gathered in it. For this purpose, a *correspondence matrix* was completed, which is an instrument developed by the postgraduate professor Gabriel Vargas Flores, and who received contributions from the teachers of the Program in Museum Studies and Practices (PEMP) Énoe Mancisidor, Raúl del Olmo, Karina Bermejo, Génesis Escobar, and me.

With this matrix, we sought to understand and systematize the conceptualization process that makes up the museographic exhibition. Information was entered into a double-entry table that includes: the title, the objectives of the project, the audiences to which it is directed, and the concepts present in the curatorial cores. At the same time, a conceptual map exercise was carried out to examine the conceptual relationships within the curatorial proposal. Finally, comments and feedback regarding possible museographic resources were integrated.

In the second semester, still working on the *correspondence matrix*, it was decided that the key concept and umbrella of the exhibition was *the cycle*. The implementation of the matrix greatly enriched the script developed by Reynier Valdés, because it functioned as a basis for a narrative path: origin, inheritance, and self-determination (Figure 4), which, in turn, helped to perfect the curatorial proposal and the development of museographic design. This path was also fundamental in the pedagogical process of the students because it contributed to them

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simultaneously understanding and practicing the elementary steps of a museographic project; that is, learning how it is designed and developed.

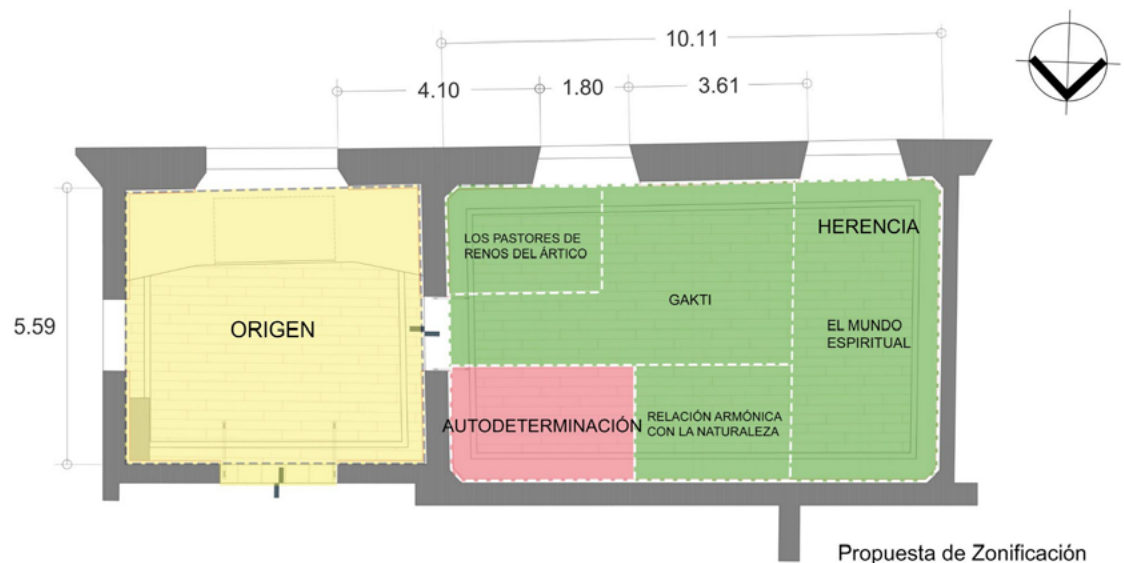


FIGURE 4. Exhibition zoning. Image taken from the presentation of the students of the Specialty in Museography for the *Innovations and Reflections Colloquium*, organized by the PEMP students, class of 2022 (layout: Mariana Alcalá, Nelly César, Gloria Galván, Jaime Hernández, and Celeste Jardinez, 2023; courtesy: ENCRYM-INAH).

In a subsequent step, the resources used in the exhibition were defined in relation to the space. Let us explain: a museographic script was developed, which is the instrument whose purpose is to organize and structure the collection based on the narrative and the different resources used. A plan was also included, in which each of the proposed museographic resources was planted. This step was also important in the training process not only because, once in the space, it materialized the proposal to work on, generating more grounded ideas about museographic work (Figure 5), but because it helped them to take into account and monitor all the resources used in an exhibition, and, finally, further conscious and coherent decision-making around the design of the museum space.

However, the work did not stop there. Since organic materials predominate, it also involved thinking about preventive conservation criteria: to reduce wear, a system to rotate the pieces was proposed. In addition, ergonomic criteria for different audiences were taken into consideration for the design of the exhibition; this is, the heights of the furniture and the spaces of the route were intended

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FIGURE 5. Students reviewing the museographic script of the *Sami People's Hall*. In the photo: Jaime Hernández, Mariana Alcalá, Celeste Jardinez, and Gloria Galván (Photograph: Luis Mosquera, 2023).



to consider the circulation of a diverse group of people; the development of haptic devices for people with visual disabilities and the use of audiovisual devices with videos in Mexican sign language and with subtitles to support visitors with hearing disabilities (Figure 6).

I believe that this exhibition project resulted in a great experience, where students of the program forged what they learned in the classroom through the practical implementation of tools and instruments that are useful for their professional life. Moreover, through concrete and real situations, it included both the process that this type of project entails, and the procedures and decisions involved in its preparation.

All these elements supported the communication process of the exhibition and made it possible to maintain consistency between the pedagogical objectives set by the Postgraduate Program, the resources used, the script, the collection, and the training of the students. For this reason, I consider it a very useful and positive experience as part of student training at the PEMP because the students could familiarize with valuable spaces for exploration and learning, as well as reflecting on museum work.

Furthermore, this case invites those who will make museography their profession to put into practice a solid and functional methodology in their professional lives, as well as to use instruments that coherently promote the development of the museographic process and help different audiences come closer to the themes presented.

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FIGURE 6. View of the completed *Sami People's Hall* (Photograph: Celeste Jardinez, 2023; courtesy: Celeste Jardinez).

### CONCLUSIONS

This review of the *Sami People's Hall* was written days after that space was inaugurated, so it leaves some questions to be resolved: how will the public respond to the exhibition? Will the devices achieve their communication objectives? Will those who visit the exhibition be empathetic with the struggle of the Sami people and the problems they face in their daily lives? Will visitors with disabilities find in these devices a possibility of accessing new narratives? All of the questions above are good enough reasons to design audience studies that will have to be carried out during the life of the exhibition. With this, we hope to be one step closer to generating exhibition projects that consider the diversity of those who live in Mexico City, as well as reflecting on the ways in which our professional practice is updated and enriched.



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Master in Plastic Arts from the *Instituto Departamental de Bellas Artes de Cali (Departmental Institute of Fine Arts)*, Colombia, he studied the master's degree in Art History at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (FFYL-UNAM)* and the Diploma in Cultural Management (distance studies) from the *Ábaco Foundation* and the *Universidad Católica de Córdoba (UCC)*, Argentina. He has served as exhibition coordinator at the Lugar a Dudas Foundation (2010); in the Siqueiros Public Art Room (2013-2014); Parque Galería (2016); Ex Teresa Arte Actual Museum (2017); museographic coordinator of the exhibition *Olfactory Sinesthesia* (2019), held at the Perfume Museum; Museographer of the exhibition *TentaOcular: Desiertos de lo Real* (2023), held at the Ex Teresa Arte Actual Museum. Since 2019 he has been a full-time teacher in the Museography Specialty at the ENCRYM-INAH.