

Rikke Lie Halberg

130 years of colonial and postcolonial exhibitions in Denmark about The Danish West Indies

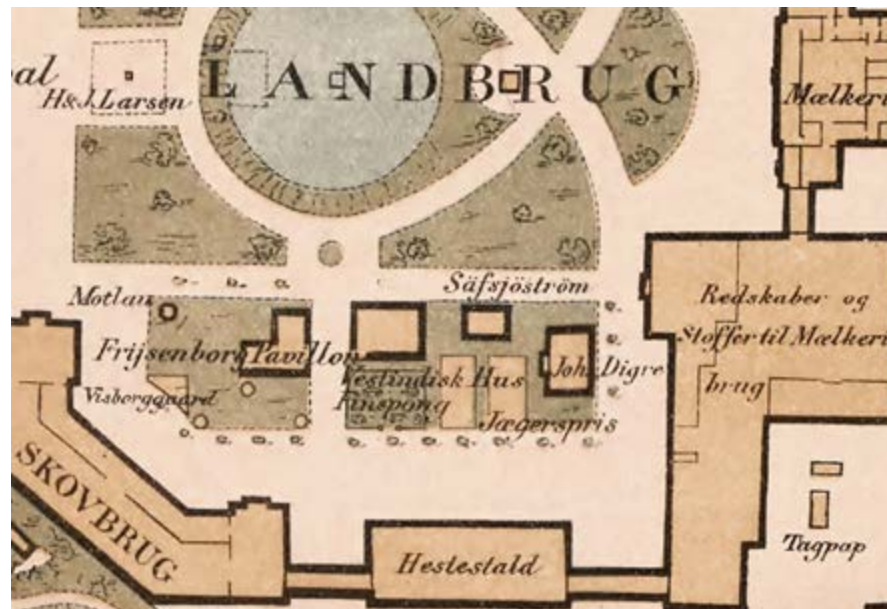
Museums are often understood as a form of collective memory; collecting, preserving and exhibiting objects to make the past available to us and to people in the future. This is a very powerful privilege and since collecting, preservation and curating are not neutral and objective processes, but influenced by many different aspects from concrete matters like politics to much more fluffy aspects like *zeitgeist*, it is crucial for museums and museum professionals to have conscious and continuous discussions about power. The Danish tradition of exhibiting colonial life has, until recently, consisted almost exclusively of the life and experiences of the colonizers. The exhibitions have systematically excluded the horrors of slavery, as well as general and specific perspectives on African-Caribbean culture, from the colonial narrative.

During the last 130 years, a number of exhibitions have interpreted and shown the Danish West Indies. The exhibitions are generally characterized by two tendencies: A rather romantic view on the colonial past with a strong focus on trade, goods and the maritime. 2017 marked the centennial for the sale of the former colony and – more importantly, perhaps – it also marked a new way of exhibiting the Danish colonial past. As the centennial is now over, it is vital to address how the discussions and results from the 2017 centennial will carry on in the years to come, in museums as well as in a broader setting. This article discusses the majority of larger exhibitions that have partly or entirely focused on The Danish West Indies since 1888.

COLONIAL REPRESENTATIONS IN THE AGE OF THE WORLD EXPOSITIONS

The first exhibition to showcase the Danish West Indies was *The Nordic Industrial-, Agricultural, and Art Exposition* in Copenhagen, 1888. The exhibition was an enormous venture and became wildly popular. The exhibition was inspired by the international world expositions of the time, and although it had a few exhibition sections about for example Russia, Germany and France (listed as “Foreign exhibitors”), the main focus was, as the title indicates, on the Nordic countries with sections from Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

The Danish West Indies was represented in the 1888 expo by a building and an exhibition. The building was “completely white plastered with a flat roof, green window shutters and a balcony on the front, carried by white brick pillars. Its exterior differs strongly from the other pavilions [in the rest of the exposition] that are all, although they vary in exterior too, made of wooden materials. The West Indian House is an exact copy of a building from our West Indian colonies and as such a suitable place for the exhibition from there.” The placement of the West Indian House was neither in the category “The Danish section” nor in the category “Foreign exhibitors”. Instead it was placed in the section of agriculture (“Landbruget”), next to sections on forestry, fishing, farming and dairy production. This must have been where it made sense to the work group behind the exhibition to place it as well as in the common understanding of the role of the colony: As a place where goods could be harvested, collected and used/eaten.



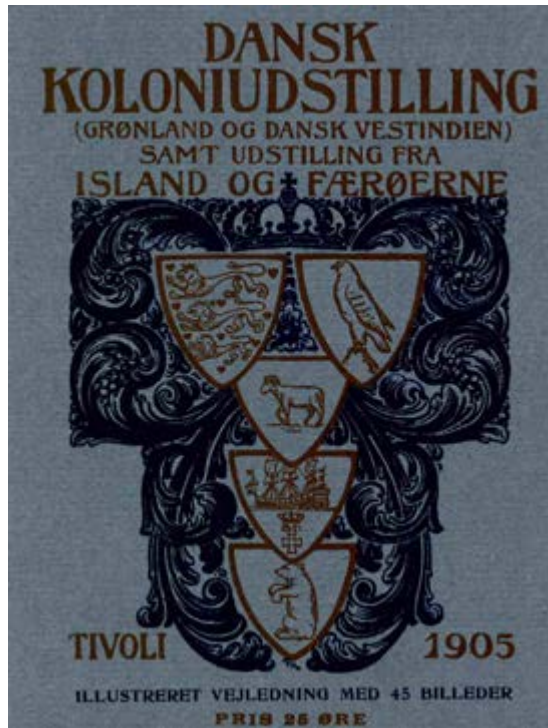
Excerpt from the exposition plan. Illustration: The Royal Library, Copenhagen

The overall narrative of the 1888 exhibition was one of national success and prosperity. Thus, what could be experienced in the West Indian House reflected this narrative. Just like agriculture on Danish soil, The Danish West Indies was narrated as a place where goods came from. Arts and crafts made by local artisans were on display: From “a set of teeth” made by dentist James Gordon to “various West Indian jams” by a miss Sarah Aarstrup.

Present in the exhibition was also an African-Caribbean family, Charles and Marie Louise Bundorph and their daughter. The Bundorphs were wicker workers and had been selected to represent the colony as skilled craftsmen. Other sections in the 1888 exhibition included skilled labourers too, but contemporary newspaper clippings show that the Bundorph family was seen as different and “other” and described as “objects” rather than as facilitators of the exhibition: “The exhibition objects that will probably bring the most joy are a couple of live St. Croix Negroes, a lady and a gentleman, who will be present in



The Bundorph family in front of the West Indian exhibition house. Photo: The Royal Library, Copenhagen



Catalogue from the colonial exhibition, 1905. Illustration: The Royal Library, Copenhagen

the room and represent our black country men on the other side of the Atlantic. They will contribute to the quaint colouring of this little exhibition.” (Morgenbladet, May 1888)

In 1905, only a few years after a round of negotiations with the United States about a sale of the Danish West Indies (from which the United States withdrew), an exhibition with the title *Danish Colonial Exhibition (Greenland and the Danish West Indies) and exhibitions from Iceland and the Faroe Islands* opened. As the title says, it focused on the Danish colonies – Iceland and the Faroe Islands had asked not to be called so, thus the title.

The exhibition was divided into sections using scenography to create environments resembling the colonies and dependencies. The West Indian section consisted of a “Negro hut” with some live pigs and chicken. Vis-à-vis this display was a series of mahogany furniture from a colonial style home as well as a veranda with a backdrop painting of the harbour of St. Thomas. Here, the audience could take a seat and be served ice-cream-sodas “in the shade of palm trees (direct import) by a just as directly imported Negro woman.”

The woman was in fact Henriette Jensen, who was married to a Danish worker and lived in Copenhagen, and who has since inspired historian Per Jensens title of the anthology “Mrs. Jensen and other West Indians” from 2017, was not the only living addition to



Victor Cornelins and Alberta Roberts, 1905. Photo: The National Museum, Copenhagen

the exhibition. In June, two children arrived from St. Croix: 7-year-old Victor Cornelins (1898-1985) and 5 year old Alberta Roberts (1900-1917). As opposed to the Bundorph family, Cornelins and Roberts did not volunteer to come and be on display. Although the story of Cornelins has become known as an example of successful integration/assimilation, the very violent departure from St. Croix is described in Cornelins’ memoirs, as is his accounts of being exhibited. The two children were not returned to their parents after the exhibition ended, but grew up in various foster families. Cornelins grew up to become somewhat a celebrity in Denmark, whereas Roberts died very young.

THE COLONY REMEMBERED IN THE TIME AROUND THE HALF CENTENNIAL

In the 1960s, an exhibition with a section on the Danish West Indies addressed the slave trade at the Museum of Trade and Naval History (now called the Maritime Museum) in Elsinore. The objects on display were a neck ring used to keep the enslaved from fleeing captivity, a painting of the slave ship “The King of Assanthie” and four documents of which two can be identified as the 1792 Abolition of the Negro Trade and a Free letter (requested to be carried by free-coloured citizens in the Danish West Indies prior to 1848). Next to these objects is a text that reads:

THE SLAVES WERE BOOTY OR CRIMINALS WHOM THE NATIVE CHIEFS SOLD FOR E.G: WEAPONS TO THE EUROPEANS.

BETWEEN 17[??]-86 11.980 SLAVES WERE TRANSPORTED FROM DANISH GUINEA. OF THESE, HOWEVER, APPROX. 13% DIED DURING THE TRANSPORTATION TO THE DANISH WEST INDIES.

AN "UNBLEMISHED" SLAVE IN THE DANISH WEST INDIES WAS PAID WITH APPROX. 300 RIGSDALER (1780).

IN 1755, 13.677 OF THE 16.875 INHABITANTS IN THE DANISH WEST INDIES WERE SLAVES.

IN 1792, DENMARK AS THE FIRST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD FORBADE THE NEGRO TRADE FROM 1803.

IN CONNECTION WITH A NEGRO REVOLT ON JULY 3. 1848 IN ST. CROIX, ALL SLAVES BECAME FREE FROM THIS DAY.

Above the text is a picture of Peter von Scholten, personalizing the abolition of slavery.



Picture from 1965. Photo: The Maritime Museum, Elsinore

The exhibit at the Maritime Museum was on display at the time of the half centennial for the sale of the colony in 1967. That year, the exhibition *Three West Indian Living Rooms* opened at the National Museum in Copenhagen. As an interior exhibition, the focus was on displaying colonial style furniture from the museum's own collection. A collection project had taken place in the 1920s, and the interest had been to collect furniture from the Danish upper class residing in the Danish West Indies prior to 1917.

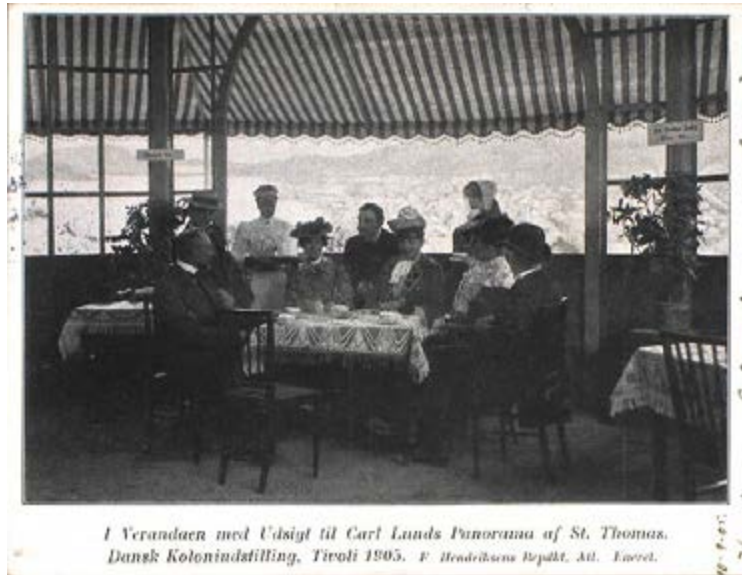


Three West Indian Living Rooms. Illustration: The National Museum, Copenhagen

The exhibition was a reflection of this: A living room, a dining room and a bedroom with colonial style mahogany furniture from the former colony. Like a snapshot of the home of a Danish upper class family, the exhibition avoided any discussion of social or racial issues. Afro-Caribbean servitude was, however indirectly, represented in an appendix to the exhibition called "Kitchenware". In other words, the appendix didn't show a kitchen, the place where a Caribbean cook (enslaved or free, depending on the time and circumstances) would have had resided. By simply showing the kitchen objects in a display case, the incitement to address the people using the kitchen objects was removed. On the cover of the catalogue, an African-Caribbean Nanny is depicted, her body oddly out of proportion compared to her surroundings.

NEW EXHIBITIONS, OLD NARRATIVES

The exhibition from 1967 was on display until the 1990s, and in 2000 the large exhibition *Stories of Denmark (1666-2000)* opened at The National Museum in Copenhagen. In this exhibition the section "World Trade and Colonies" displays Denmark's trade with and colonial involvement in Asia, Africa and America. The section revolves around trade and most display cases show examples of the goods being traded in India, China and Africa. Three display cases show the Danish West Indies, and one is dedicated to the Gold Coast in West Africa. The latter shows a "slave gun" produced in Denmark in the 1700s and traded for enslaved Africans on the Gold Coast. There is also a mouthpiece used to force feed people who would go on hunger strike on board the slave ships, thus hinting at the extreme force used in the process of enslaving people.



Colonies and World Trade. Photo: The National Museum, Copenhagen

The display cases showing the Danish West Indies are divided between “state” and “life form” and are called “The triangular way to riches”, “The plantations” and “Slavery”. The state-case shows documents and objects relating to trade and administration. Two persons have come to represent the state: Ernst Schimmelmänn and Peter von Scholten. The Schimmelmänn family is the personification of the transatlantic slave trade, with their properties and manufacturing of guns in Denmark, traded for people in Africa who worked at their sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Ernst Schimmelmänn is also credited with the 1792 abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, which is also shown in both object and text in the display. Relatively many objects relating to Peter von Scholten: His uniform jacket, his walking stick, and a commemorative plate with his portrait on it. Rational men, a rational administration based on rational law is the bottom line of the display’s narrative. The random and often excessive violence to keep the institution of slavery intact is missing entirely from this display.

The life forms in the Danish West Indies are displayed in two cases. One shows the life of colonial families, the other life as a (enslaved) plantation worker. Children’s mahogany furniture and toys (of which a few were displayed in the 1967-exhibit too) dominate the first case, and a cooking device, a sugar cane knife and an embroidered piece of cloth the other. Here, the violence of the plantations is addressed in the exhibition texts, and the cloth, which has the year 1792 embroidered, also shows scenes from a revolt.

In 2013, The Maritime Museum opened at its new location with a new building and all new exhibitions. One of the exhibitions is called *Tea Time* and shows Denmark’s involvement

in world trade and colonization. There are a number of displays, one for Denmark and one for each foreign possession, as well as an interactive game that connects the displays. Like the “World Trade and Colonies” at the National Museum, this exhibit focuses on trade and the scenography of the displays shows the goods that could be obtained around the world: Fish and wool in the North Atlantic colonies, porcelain in China, cotton cloth in India, barrels of rum in the Caribbean and human beings in West Africa.

In the Gold Coast display, it is brought to the visitor how a captain on a slave ship was also a Christian who wrote poems and letters to his wife and children at home, providing agency and individual voice to a person in power. In the display from the Danish West Indies, a neck ring and a free letter along with two execution axes, a few tobacco tins and a plantation bell from the Schimmelmänn-owned plantation La Grange in St. Croix. Despite the personal account of a slave trader, there is no mentioning of any individual who experienced the trauma of being enslaved. Nor does the exhibition explore the mechanisms of people’s resistance to being traded, sold and bought as trade goods.



Tea Time. Photo: The Maritime Museum, Elsinore

The exhibition texts are, for the most part, very short. An extra layer is provided to the visitor in the interactive game, where players gamble of becoming the most successful Danish merchant. It is an advantage for a player to know the mechanisms of the triangular trade system – if not, it will become obvious when playing the game. The player sets out with a ship and a certain amount of money, and must buy and sell goods on his way from one colony to the next. When finishing the game, gains and losses are presented. The conclusion of the game is that more sailors than slaves died on the journey.

THE CENTENNIAL: A TURN TOWARDS A MORE DIVERSE NARRATIVE?

In October 2015, The National Museum of Denmark sent out a press release stating that their upcoming special exhibition about the Danish West Indies was cancelled due to a new Danish policy that required (and still requires) the state-funded museums in Denmark to make a 2 per cent cut back each year. The decision did not have anything to do with the colonial exhibition, even though some media did make that connection. The decision was made by the museum management and can probably be seen as a choice between two evils: To cut back on employees or exhibitions. The exhibit at The National Museum was later converted into a permanent exhibition with a broader take on Denmark's involvement in colonialism, but surely suffered from being shut down in its original form.

However, in the following year, and not directly linked to the decision to cut back on the state-funded museums, the Danish parliament and the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces made funds available and open to apply for by cultural organizations such as museums, libraries, archives, theatres, artists, NGOs etc. The overall result, without being intentionally planned this way, was that the story of the Danish West Indies was covered in a myriad of smaller and larger events, exhibitions and other projects concerning the former Danish colony.

Many of the exhibitions had the explicit objective to show “other sides” of the history, and experimented with new forms of introducing voices and experiences from an African-Caribbean perspective, thus zooming in on themes such as resistance and agency. This objective is often revealed in the titles of the exhibitions. The following list below is not extensive, but mentions the largest temporary exhibitions as well as the two new permanent exhibitions that opened in relation to the 2017 centennial (in chronological order).

- The Workers Museum in Copenhagen: *Stop slavery!* (March 31 2017 – April 2 2018)
- Museum West Zealand/Holbaek Museum: *The West Indies and West Zealand* (opened April 2 2017 as a permanent exhibition).
- The National Gallery of Denmark: *What Lies Unspoken* (May 5 2017 – December 30 2017)
- The Maritime Museum in Elsinore: *US Virgin Islands Revisited* (April 7 2017-October 29 2017)
- The Royal Library in Copenhagen: *Blind Spots* (May 19 2017 – February 3 2018)
- The National Museum in Copenhagen: *Voices from the Colonies* (opened October 13 2017 as a permanent exhibition).



From the exhibition *Stop slavery!* 2017. Photo: Rikke Lie Halberg

A common trait for the exhibitions mentioned above was the objective to avoid reproducing narratives of trade and naval history traditional narratives and to avoid giving agency only to people of the colonial European/Danish descent, and instead widening agency by introducing new voices, pointing at blind spots, revisiting the material and speaking of what was previously unspoken. Different methods were used in the process, from including African-Caribbean consultants, to including contemporary works of art by artists from the Caribbean or the Caribbean diaspora to including narratives of events and heroes well known in the US Virgin Islands, but new to a Danish audience.

STOP SLAVERY!

The starting point in the exhibitions *Stop slavery!* was a section called “the freedom room”. The objects, images, sounds and stories in the room were designed to evoke an experience of freedom being an interpersonal, communal need and wish shared by people across class, gender, ethnicity – and time. From there, the exhibition took the visitor back in time and presented the causes and effects of slavery. The exhibition focused strongly on the resistance and revolts of the enslaved, from the coasts of Africa to the ships to the plantations in the Caribbean.

The exhibition also explored what happened after slavery was abolished in 1848 and the stories as well as the design of the exhibition pointed to a continuity of structures rather than a clear break – a choice that needed to be carefully balanced. The historical, retrospective part of *Stop slavery!* ended with the sale in 1917, but the exhibition did not

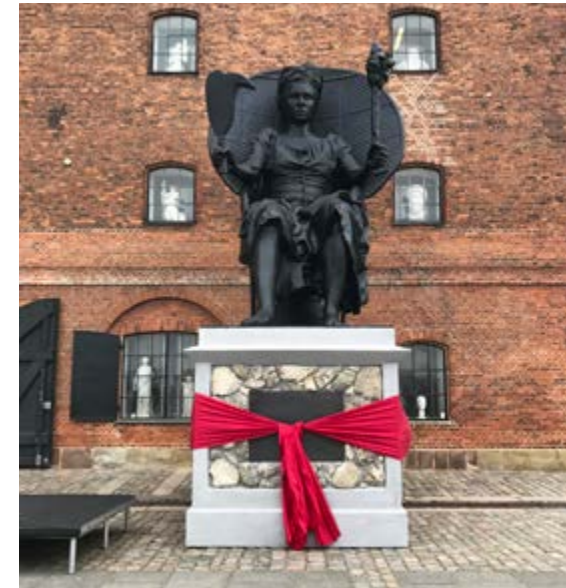


A 3D printed versions in gesso of the statue "I Am Queen Mary". Photo: Rikke Lie Halberg

end with that. The final section of the exhibition was dedicated to stories of modern day slavery, and the content of the room was developed in partnership with The International Labour Organisation/ILO. A corner of the room was dedicated to four changing pop up-exhibitions zooming in on different aspects of modern day slavery. The idea was to present both the problem – that more than 40 million people today are still enslaved – and to present a number of options of what is being done, and what can and should be done to change this both by policy makers and individual citizens.

Stop slavery! was both an exhibition project as well as an education project, and there was an extensive effort to reach students in grades 7-12. The first group of visitors in the exhibition happened to be a group of high school students from St. Croix, US Virgin Islands, who visited Denmark as part of the UNESCO Transatlantic Slave Trade-network for schools and the Transfer Day events in late March and early April 2017. The group came on the second day of the exhibition, and the educational team was still testing the facilitated session programme that wouldn't open for schools until a week later. Most of the exercises were ready by then, and were tested with the Cruzan group. One exercise was to reflect on the word slavery before, during and after the facilitated session at the museum. The answers we got from the Cruzan students became an important foundation for all other learning activities in *Stop slavery!*.

Since that first visit in early April 2017, more than 4.000 students have received education in *Stop slavery!* In addition to the 4.000 students in the exhibition, 225 students and educators from different schools have been involved in larger projects connected to the



The statue "I am Queen Mary" by La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers. Photo: Rikke Lie Halberg

exhibition; an educational event for classes from 4 different schools with presentations by experts in modern day slavery and workshops on slavery in the past and in the present. A Copenhagen-based UNICEF rights-respecting school teamed up with the Workers Museum and offered an elective school subject that used the exhibition and its themes as a point of departure for discussions and processes dealing with rights. A 13-year-old student developed, and gave, a guided tour for teenagers in the exhibition. A seminar for educators involved in teaching colonial history or the history of slavery made room for discussions about "where to go from here". And finally, 75 students from three different schools co-created colourful collages, posters, a film and installations for the final pop up-exhibition called *FREEDOM! EQUALITY! & CHILD SLAVERY?*.

2017 AND BEYOND

The centennial is over and most of the 2017 exhibitions are closed by now. Two are permanent exhibitions and as such they provide a physical space for continued meetings with and discussions about a shared culture and past. Ideally, 2017 will serve as a common ground for museums to continue the discussions about the responsibilities that comes with the power and privilege to produce "truth" and what it means to include or exclude certain perspectives and narratives in museums and exhibitions.

This article is based on my master thesis (Division of ALM, Department of Art and Cultural Sciences, Lund University), as well as on a paper given at the 2017 MUSUND conference in Helsingborg.

LITERATURE

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Photography on page 73 is a detail from the photography on page 83. Photo: Rikke Lie Halberg.