The anthropology department at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) is one of the oldest, largest, and most important such departments in America. The museum itself achieved prominence at a time when the dominant institutional home of American anthropology was in museums, and during its long history, the anthropology department has made many critical contributions to sociocultural theory or ethnology (an older term still used in museums). Its greatest period of national influence came during the years when the department was chaired by Franz Boas and Clark Wissler, ca. 1895-1920. Its centrality to the discipline has declined since then due to factors internal to the museum as well as to the changing institutional context of American anthropology.

The Early Years (1869-1894)

Founded in 1869, the AMNH is one of the several museums in New York City characterized by joint ownership and control. The city owns the land and its building and supplies operating funds, and a private board of trustees owns the collections and is responsible for curators and scientific staff.

Although the department was not formally established until 1873, the museum held anthropological collections from the beginning. However, unlike Harvard's Peabody Museum and the Smithsonian, the anthropology department at AMNH was not a leader in the early years of the field in America. While the accumulation of collections was largely haphazard, some outstanding artifacts were acquired during these years, most especially from the Tlingit and other Northwest Coast peoples, purchased from the naval officer and amateur ethnologist George T. Emmons.

The Franz Boas Years (1894-1905)

The professional importance of the department effectively dates to 1894, with the appointment of Frederic W. Putnam (1839-1915) to lead the department. Serving simultaneously as director and professor of anthropology at Harvard's Peabody Museum, Putnam resigned from the American Museum in 1903. Following an initiative fostered by the museum's president Morris K. Jesup, Putnam based the department's collections and displays on expeditions carried out by museum scientists. In New York, Putnam focused on archaeology, especially in the American Southwest and Mexico.

Franz Boas (1858-1942) was hired by the museum in 1895, first to curate a diorama based on his previous fieldwork in British Columbia, and then as curator of North American ethnology from 1896 to 1905. Boas, a German immigrant, was famed for his reorientation of American anthropology. His theories of cultural relativism supplanted the then dominant theories of social evolutionism. Many of the theoretical innovations associated with Boas—for example, the geographic distribution of culture traits or the separation of race, language, and culture—were first worked out in Boas's own museum practice.

As always, but especially important during these years, private donors were responsible for the funding of field expeditions, most notably the president, Morris K. Jesup (Northwest Coast and Plains), the brothers B. Talbot Hyde and Frederick E. Hyde Jr. (Southwest), Archer M. Huntington (Southwest), and the Duc de Loubat (Mexico).
Boas was director of the influential Jesup expedition to the Northwest Coast and Siberia (1897-1902). While ostensibly predicated on tracing the peopling of the Americas, the expedition is now valued for its fundamental collecting and ethnographies and for exploring the role of the geographical distribution of culture traits. Boas, however, was never able to write a final, summary volume.

During his tenure, Boas made an attempt to extend the scope of the department beyond the Americas by including Siberia on the Jesup expedition and by beginning an Asian initiative with Berthold Laufer, who collected in Siberia for the Jesup—along with Vladimir Jochelson and Vladimir Bogoras—and then in China (1901-1904); but he found little support for this program.

The exhibit halls were arranged principally by subdiscipline (but combined for the Southwest and Mesoamerica, and South America), and then by region, with a focus on North American ethnology, the main interest of Boas and Wissler. Boas derived this geographical schema—which contrasted with the typological displays of the Smithsonian—from both of his museum mentors, Adolf Bastian and Frederic Putnam. In turn, his regional approaches became the norm in American anthropology museums.

Franz Boas also established the department’s close relationship with Columbia University, which, through ups and downs, has remained to the present day. The great shift of the dominant institutional home of American anthropology from museums to universities, which occurred in the early 20th century, was symbolized by Boas’s departure for Columbia in 1905.

The Clark Wissler Years (1905-1945)

Although not as renowned as his predecessor, Clark Wissler (1870-1947) was chair of the anthropology department for a much longer period (retiring in 1942), an important period of accomplishment and transition. Wissler certainly had a greater impact within the museum and a significant, although largely unacknowledged, one on the discipline at large.

As an ethnographer, Wissler is best known for his work among the Blackfoot as well as for the more general ethnographic survey of the Plains that he supervised. Wissler’s greatest theoretical contribution generated by the survey was the salience of environmental factors in the formation of culture areas, but he also formulated the age-area concept as a basis for historical reconstruction. Although he derived his basic methodologies from the Jesup expedition, Wissler, unlike Boas, was able to effectively systematize them.

Robert H. Lowie (1883-1957), another Boas student, was a curator at the museum from 1909 to 1921. Known for his work with the Crow people of Montana and many other groups of western America, he also curated the museum’s first halls for Africa, the Philippines, and Oceania. Lowie made important theoretical contributions to the study of social organization.

The Huntington expedition to the Southwest (1909-1922) innovatively combined archaeology and ethnology. Wissler was able to expand the expedition’s scope beyond collecting to a double theoretical focus: (1) kinship and social organization and (2) the formulation of a regional chronology (based on stratigraphic excavations by Nels Nelson, pottery seriation by Alfred Kroeber, and tree-ring dating).

After Boas, Margaret Mead (1901-1978) was the most famous anthropologist ever associated with the museum. Serving as curator of Pacific ethnology from 1926 until 1969, she did important ethnographic research in the South Pacific (especially Samoa, the Admiralty Islands, New Guinea, and Bali). Mead, however, spent relatively little time with museums and material culture. Instead, she used her position...
as an independent base for her extensive research, writing, and lecturing. Mead was noted for her work on culture and personality, culture change, visual anthropology, and the general role of anthropology in American society.

During the 1920s, the importance of the department declined, at least in sociocultural anthropology, as curators left and were not replaced. By 1930, Mead and Wissler were the only ethnologists, and Wissler spent much of his time with administration. These personnel shifts coincided with a general stasis of the department’s exhibits, which lasted until the early 1960s. Anthropology during the Wissler years was circumscribed by the museum’s administration. The museum’s president, Henry Fairfield Osborn, had little use for anthropology. A vertebrate paleontologist as well as a member of New York’s social elite, Osborn collaborated with the museum’s trustee Madison Grant, a leading eugenicist, to minimize the anthropological focus of the museum. Following Wissler as departmental chair, the physical anthropologist Harry L. Shapiro served for nearly 3 decades (1942-1970). During his tenure, he continued to emphasize archaeology as well as his own subdiscipline. Although he developed several innovative plans for comparative exhibits, Shapiro was unable to realize these due to the museum’s continuing financial problems.

A Period of Transition (1945-1970)

After the challenge of the Depression and World War II, it took a while for the department to recover. Wissler’s curatorial successor, Harry Tschopik, responsible for both North and South American ethnology, died prematurely, serving only from 1947 to 1956. However, paralleling the national trends, the Department of Anthropology underwent a revival in the 1960s. With an expanding economy and the Cold War support for science education, the museum was able to hire several new curators and began to renovate most of its exhibitions in advance of its centennial in 1969.

Stanley A. Freed (b. 1927) served as curator of North American ethnology from 1960 until 1999. While he curated new exhibits for the Eastern Indians, the Plains, and the Eskimos, most of his research has been done in India; Freed is noted for his empiricism and wide-ranging ethnography. As one of the founders of the Council for Museum Anthropology, he was also active in the revival of museum anthropology in America.

Robert L. Carneiro (b. 1927) was the curator for South American ethnology from 1957 to 2010. Having trained with Leslie White at the University of Michigan, Carneiro is known for his contributions to materialist anthropology, especially cultural ecology, cultural neo-evolutionism, and the processes of state formation.

A much more humanistic kind of anthropology was represented by Colin Turnbull (1924-1994), an Oxford-trained African curator who served the museum from 1959 through 1969. Like Mead, Turnbull was a popular writer. His fieldwork with the Mbuti pygmies of the Congo resulted in *The Forest People* (1961), and his experiences with the Ik of Uganda are described in *The Mountain People* (1972).

Recent Years (1970-Present)

The role of sociocultural theory in the department has been revived since the 1970s, accompanied by a gradual diminution of the traditional museum functions of collection and exhibition. In this period, the department revived its program in Old World ethnology by appointing a long-term curator for Africa, Enid Schildkrout (curator, 1973-2005), and its first full-time curator in Asian ethnology, Laurel Kendall (curator, 1983-present). Schildkrout focused on the art of Central Africa, ethnicity and Islam in Ghana,
and women and children in Nigeria. Kendall has worked mainly in Korea and more recently in Vietnam, contributing to the study of shamanism and culture change.

Since 2001, Peter M. Whitely has been the curator of North American ethnology, noted for his work on Hopi social structure and history. During the 1990s and the early 20th century, the curatorial positions in Africa and Oceania have changed frequently.

Since the passing of the national repatriation legislation in 1990, the museum has developed better relations with the Native American community. The museum organized a series of innovative exhibits focusing on the historicity of the museum collections: Carolyn Gilman and Mary Jane Schneider on Gilbert Wilson's Hidatsa collections (1987), Schildkrout on the Congo (1990), and Aldona Jonaitis, an art historian and former museum vice president, on the potlatch of the Kwakwoko'wakw of British Columbia (1991).

Following the lengthy tenures of Franz Boas, Clark Wissler, and Harry Shapiro as departmental chairs, the museum has introduced a system of revolving and limited chairmanships. Anthropology has not been as favored as some other departments, such as paleontology and astronomy, with the notable exception of the repeated renewal of the Human Evolution Hall. The department has expanded its ties to local universities, with a joint graduate program in museum anthropology at Columbia University and relations with the departments of anthropology and museum studies at New York University and, more recently, at the Bard Graduate Center.

Legacy
As in many museums, there has been a great deal of curatorial stability at AMNH. The curators, who often serve for several decades, are treated like academic faculty. With the freedom to choose their own topics of research, their research often has no clear relation to museums or material culture. Nevertheless, curators at the AMNH are among the leaders in their field. Coupled with its great historical legacy, the anthropology department of the AMNH remains important to the discipline in America.

See also Boas, Franz; Carneiro, Robert L.; Columbia University; Lowie, Robert; Mead, Margaret; Smithsonian Institution

Further Readings


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