

Elina Kangosjärvi

Let's go under the belt – literally

A comparative review of Icelandic Phallogological museum (Reykjavik) and MEM - Museum of Erotics and Mythology (Brussels). Beware, pictures follow.

Erotics and phallus are considered to be sort of taboo in modern western world, which gives the museums dealing with these issues a certain type of thrill. They portray the culture that can not be seen in broad daylight and has possibly even been frowned upon in certain circles. Both *Icelandic Phallogological museum* and *Museum of Erotics and Mythology* are results of a long research and collecting of certain type of artifacts under the same theme by a private collector. In this short review I will give recount on my experiences on both of the museums and ponder the museums that dare to go 'under the belt'.

Icelandic Phallogological Museum

The story behind a collection of more than 200 penises starts in the year 1974 when the founder, Sigurður Hjartarson, got a pizzle (a whip made out of bull's penis) to help him tend the animals. After he told his friend about the pizzle he began receiving other specimens as gifts, bull's penises changed into whale penises, and as the collection grew, more donations were coming to his way. The current curator is the founder's son, Hjörtur Gísli Sigurðsson, a self-claimed second-generation phallogologist. The museum itself has moved a few times and is currently situated a walking distance away from Reykjavik city center. According to museum's own website their number of visitors was 12 000 in year 2011 and a safe bet would be that the number has grown since.



Pictured here is the type of pizzle that started Sigurður Hjartarson's career as phallogologist.

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Right after one steps inside the museum and pays their visit into a penis shaped cash box, they are greeted with a sight that needs a couple of seconds to sink in: a long collection of shelves and separate containers full of animal penises, is a sight that on the same time raises questions, bothers and stirs a certain sense of wonder. After the initial shock one can start comparing and contrasting the phalluses of different animals and perhaps leave out a giggle or too whilst looking at penises which have been stuffed and framed or even turned into flowerpots.



Interesting flower pot arrangement.

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Stuffed and framed Elephant's penis.

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The actual penises put in see-through boxes are not the only things the collection has to offer. Couple extra rooms are dedicated to phallic artifacts from all around the world. Here you can find penis symbols from wooden phallic totems from Africa to cutlery with plastic penis in the other end. Next to these rooms the museum also has a “Folkloristic department” which intrigued me because of my study subject. Unfortunately this “folkloristic endeavor” was merely a jokingly added part with fairytale creatures' phallus. The museum is not pornographic, rather quite informative outlook on the role of penis in the culture, both in scientific, and in connotational sense. The only hints of “eroticism” were hidden in a vitrine under a blanket in order to avoid unnecessary display.



Couple phalluses of the exhibition, the one on the right belongs to a reindeer.
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The exhibition was built with a little spark in the eye – in the walls they have printed out horrified and jokingly made reviews of the museum amongst many printed and framed penis related jokes. My company was rather overwhelmed at the sight of glass jar rows of phalluses but the museologist in me found the reaction quite interesting. What is the message the museum wishes to tell with its exhibition? Is it to shock? Or perhaps to give an overview of all different sizes and shapes of penises? Maybe phallogology is a science, which has the potential to give us new insights to i.e. evolution or basic reproductive systems? Or maybe it just wants to tell us a joke.

Museum of Erotics and Mythology – What is erotics?

Similarly to the Phallogological museum, Museum of Erotics and Mythology (MEM) is a private collector's own exhibition, situated near by a cluster of museums in Brussels. The collector and curator, Dr. Martens, has been gathering his collection of curiosa of erotic and mythology over the course of 40 years – and it shows. The variety of artifacts is wide and they have been collected from all over the world. Unfortunately, taking pictures was prohibited so you will have to rely on your own imagination and few photos taken at the Phallogological museum.

As one arrives to the museum, they first have to press a doorbell and wait for a guide to open the door. Since the material of the exhibition is erotic, underage visitors are not permitted to enter the

museum. As one prepares to pay for the visit, they are able to 'get in the mood' of the museum's atmosphere by looking at old Chinese paintings of intercourse. The museum is rather small, so only 10 people are allowed in at a time. It is divided into three separate floors filled with erotic curiosities. On the bottom floor the vitrines held a bit older artifacts from ancient cultures to 1930s'. The ground floor is mostly just the Chinese paintings and the reception. On the third floor one was greeted with a lot more useful items of everyday life such as walking sticks, eyeglass holders and chopsticks with erotic decorations. In MEM exhibition the focus is not on the imagery of phallus but more in the female bodies and the act of sex.



Artifacts from Phallogological museum of Iceland pretty similar to the ones in Museum of Erotics and Mythology.
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The theme of the museum seemed to be tilting towards the history of eroticism, but unfortunately the mythological part of it was missing. We were provided with short info on the artifacts and if a mythological entity was the subject pictured in the object, it was stated but not explained. According to the material handed to us the word erotica has its etymological roots on the Greek God Eros. This still does not explain the second half of the name of the museum. As a folklorist I yearned for information on the epic stories of erotic behavior of the heroes pictured in the artifacts. However I found the curiosities of the collection intriguing. What can and can not be shown to the outside world about a taboo subject like sex is an interesting question that apparently has followed the human race since the dawn of time. The secrecy behind it has made people in history and in modern world use their imagination to create their own personal secrets, whether it is a powder box hiding a 'naughty' picture or a walking stick handle with detailed decoration that depicts an orgy with closer inspection. Some of the artifacts were just picturing a nude woman. This made me ask a question: What is erotic? A statue of a nude woman is not a sight I find erotic but rather normal. Maybe eroticism is in the eye of the beholder?

Is there a code?

I am not sure whom the museums specializing in 'under the belt' issues regard as their target audience. Although I think myself a person fairly open to new ideas and ways of living, I found myself turning fidgety within the exhibitions. In the phallogological exhibition I was not sure if I was allowed to laugh at the penises on display while there were men around. Similarly on the MEM-museum I got uneasy after an unknown man started to smile at me when I got drift off from my

friends. These situations not only highlight the taboo surrounding the themes of these two museums, but also the individual's own outlook on the issues presented. Is there a code on a naked body and all its parts?

Albeit The Phallogical Museum of Iceland and Museum of Erotics and Mythology approach the 'under the belt' subjects from rather different point of views, many questions that they sparked had similar themes. Two of the most interesting questions for me were the issue of highlighting the collector's scholarly background in the museum's publications, and the presence of the theme folklore and mythology in both of the museums. The connection to collector's scholarly background could be helpful in making a museum more acceptable regardless of its taboo subject. Museums are there to educate, so the collection becomes more educative if it is known that the person behind it has done some learning to back up their knowledge. Folklore and mythology have many ways to act as a validation of credibility: Folklore is still having an impact on the people of Iceland, fairies may stop construction sites and the stories of magic still live vividly in the people's imagination. In Brussels, folklore has traveled from Germany to the public's head already couple hundred years ago, and formed a long tradition of study which links the people of today to the people of past. Through linking the collector and the subject of interest into already established and accepted societal norms, higher education and cultural studies, these museums validate their existence. They do not want to be regarded as just a fruit of a hobby of a collector, but as independent exhibitions of cultural phenomena.

If you want to challenge yourself and what you think of these tabooish subjects, I recommend the two museums wholeheartedly. Take a friend or go on your own. Giggle, be embarrassed, and get excited. Go and dust those old ideas of everything you think you know about the things under your belt!

The author of the review Majors in Folkloristics in the University of Turku and is the vice president of Museion Ry.