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Loving Charm in the Museum. A Video Script

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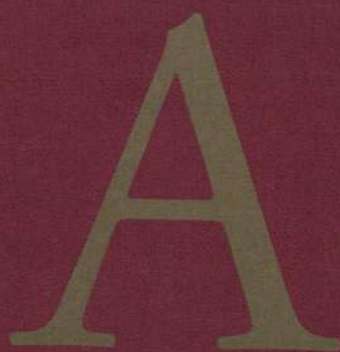
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ACTUALIDAD

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LO VING

CHARM
IN THE MUSEUM.
A VIDEO SCRIPT

Susanne Grieder and Andreas Isler
Völkerkundemuseum
der Universität Zürich

ABSTRACT

One of the main tasks of a museum is to translate results of research to convenient forms for visitors. We tried the same with the mere information about the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich. So we draft a video-script and packed all the interesting information on the museum in a little story. The story tells a farce around the events in connection with a mysterious object that was offered to the museum.

Scene 1

Zoom and pan from a clear sky over to some exotic trees and to bamboo leaves into an office; twitting and leaves of a book turning over as background sound.

A telephone rings. You can see the telephone and a hand taking the receiver.

Zoom to a long shot: The museum's director is sitting at his table close to the open window making a phone call.

Director D:

Hello!

Female Voice on telephone off screen:

Hello? Am I speaking with the Ethnological Museum's Director of the University of Zurich?

Director D:

Speaking. What can I do for you? To whom am I speaking?

Female Voice:

This is about an ethnographical object that could be very interesting for your collection. I'm sorry: my name is Horner, Alexandra Horner, I'm one of the great grandchildren of the famous traveller. You already own some old pieces of his.

Director D (*slightly bored*):

Only rarely we do accept objects from private collections. Aside from that, it is the heads of department themselves who are responsible for their collection. At this time we have a department for Black Africa, for Northern Africa and the Orient, North and South America, South and Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Himalayas. Besides, where is your object from?

Female Voice:

That is the point! You can't assign it to a precise geographical area, apart its speciality laying in its effect.

Director D (*somewhat interested*):

In its effect? What does this effect consist of?

Female Voice:

I've heard your museum specializes on religious objects. There is something undescrivable about my object that I could call, in a wider sense, religious; something incredibly strong, good. You will notice soon if I ever get to show the object. There is some *feu sacré* about it which makes people who see the object fall in love at once.

During the conversation the camera follows the director's look at various paraphernalia on his bookshelf (Nkisi-fetish, Buddha statuettes, a shamane's drum, a clay skull from New Guinea) which all have their own fascination.

Director D:

Fall in love with the object?

Female Voice:

No, with each other.

Director D (*now definitely interested*):

Well, why don't you bring along the object, let's say tomorrow afternoon, ok? Good-bye.

The director puts down the receiver, muttering: Well, what will that be. Birds chirping off screen.

Scene 2

A big table in the middle of which stands an undefinable coloured object mounted with glass pearls. Scattered around, at some distance, the necessities for a meeting: pencils, a teapot, cups, coffe. The camera stays exactly over the object. Shot on the museum's employees sitting around the table. Discussion about the object. Now and then male and female employees exchange glances wittingly.

Director D:

At this point, I'd like to inform the staff about how much the owner asks for the famous object (*Shot around, expecting silence*): a half a million.

Administrador A:

Outrageous. I guess the project falls through.

Ethnologist B:

Let's think about it. No doubt the piece is marvelous. We could revolutionize our exhibitions. No more laborious pedagogical attempts to get people inside! We will have hundreds of completely satisfied visitors in our museum!

Ethnologist C:

Is the effect of this «fetish» proven?

Director D:

No doubt! Since I've seen the object I've become a completely different person, I'm at cloud nine, but I must admit that I'm involved in the matter itself. In other words: I've fallen in love with the owner.

Ethnologist E:

It must be a coincidence, but it had an effect on me too. I feel absolutely happy and yesterday I fell madly in love. It is surely worth making some more research on it.

Administrator A:

At any rate, we now don't have the funds. We cannot expect the government to give two or three times our normal annual budget. And we are not into commercial sponsoring for the acquisition of objects. Our only chance would be to apply for money from the lottery funds.

Good luck!

Ethnologist C:

In this way we would be obliged to exhibit the object.

Ethnologist B:

But this is what we want to do! This will be the exhibition of the century. Does anybody have an idea where the object is originated from?

Director D:



Foto: Peter Nebel, 1994

Ex africa semper aliquid novi. Honestly: I don't know. I've never seen something like that among the 25.000 objects of our collection.

Ethnologist C:

I've read something about it in Dürr' book «The Scientist and the Irrational»: From the Indians or from Siberia, I don't remember exactly. I'm sure we will find some information about it and its peculiar effect in one of the 18.000 volumes of our library.

Ethnologist E:

The alchemists from China to Spain have studied such effects. They observed changes in the matter.

In the same time frightened and amused, ethnologist E notices that while debating, his croissant has dissolved in his coffee. Everybody laughs.

Ethnologist B:

Brazil is also known for magic. The thing could also be old malaysian. While cataloguin it we should find out. Couldn't the owner give us more details?

Director D:

Sure, she said it would probably stem from Old Horner himself, of whom we have an early collection. I will do some research. But the object doesn't belong to us yet: I suggest that it should be acquired.

Administrator A:

I will prepare the necessary applications. It will take a couple of months until we get the money.

The camera slowly focuses the object and its game of lights. Fade out.

Scene 3

Corridor outside the photo-studio. The restorer goes to the door of the studio. In his hands he has a box with the object inside. The door is open, from inside we can hear the photographer manipulating the spotlights. The camera follows the restorator into the studio in a medium shot.

Long shot: the studio is full of boxes all filled with objects. Tibetan scroll painting are hanging on the wall.

Restorator R:

Here you have the object. Please make a picture of it as soon as you can, so that I can start with the restoration. It is very urgent, it has already started to fall apart. Can you see this? It wasn't like that three days ago!

Photographer Ph:

You too?! What happens to you all? I have to take pictures for the Himalaya department; the students of the museology course have finished cataloguing their objects, and they want to have them photographed. And now you! Besides I have to prepare the pictures for the boss' publication. Tell me when should I do all that in my part-time job?

Restorator R:

Sure, I see that. But without a picture I cannot start with the restoration, and you see, it can't be postponed. Couldn't you...

Cut on the ethnologist running into the studio.

Ethnologist C:

Oh! Here you are! Great, the object is already here. I absolutely need a series of pictures that can document the changes appearing on the object. You know I'm working on the project «Where love falls-Magic objects of love», and this object fits perfectly. I have a theory: An object you use for love-magic loses its power and its substance. I think this object represents the proof of my hypothesis.

You can see that to everybody who has something to do with this object something strange happens, but the object falls apart at the same time.

Restorator R:

But for the series of pictures the object should remain untouched, and I couldn't make it up for preservation. I can tell you that in six months the object will be so weakened that you won't take it in your hands without smashing it completely. Will you take the risk? I can't let you do it.

Ethnologist C:

Don't be such a pessimist: I'm asking myself if we shouldn't take this risk in the name of research. Or maybe we could wait until the last possible moment before we restore it, so that we can at least follow the process during a short period.

Footsteps off screen. A colleague of ethnologist C comes in.

Ethnologist B:

I'm looking for the object. You are my last chance, do you have it?

Photographer Ph:

Yes, it is in this box. I have to take pictures of it, so that your colleague is able to use it for her research. She wants the restoration to be postponed as long as possible and to observe the changes.

Ethnologist B to Ethnologist C:

What? Do you want the object to be destroyed? This can't be true! I think too that it must be photographed, but I'm against the idea of taking it into your research. I would like to integrate this object into my coming exhibition about the history of our collection.

Ethnologist C:

You can't exhibit an object about whose power you don't have precise knowledge. First you have to study it. And you, of all people, are talking about preserving the object from destruction, but you want to exhibit it. It will be the presence of so many visitors to destroy it.

Ethnologist B:

I have a different opinion. Why not showing it, if it beautifully fits in the exhibition? We got so much money to buy it. We owe it to the public, we have to show it as best as we can.

Ethnologist C:

We are a university museum, we are commissioned to do research. It is obvious that we study objects from our own collection.

Ethnologist B:

But we are obliged to the public. We have to make sure that the visitors can see and feel something spectacular. If we have an object like that.

Restorator R:

How about this: As soon as the object is been photographed I start with the analysis of the material and do the necessary with the textile restorator.

Restorator R to Ethnologist C:

I will give you the results as soon as I have them.

Restorator R to Photographer Ph:

You will take pictures of it at regular intervals.

Restorator R to Ethnologist B:

And you think about how to exhibit it. Is this all right for everybody? (*everybody nodding*).

Ethnologist B:

I already have a concept in my mind for its exhibition. Something self-reflexive can be done: the history of our museum is going to be mirrored in this object.

Photographer Ph:

Exactly, we will make an exhibition that will surpass every other done until now, because of the visual characteristics that will be combined with the powers given off by the object.

Scene 4

Long shot on the entrance of the exhibition. A crowd of visitors invited to the opening party. Everybody stares at the little podium. B stands on the podium looking happily in the crowd.

Ethnologist B:

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm happy to welcome the many of you to the opening of our new exhibition «Extraordinary objects from yesterday till today». This exhibition wants to show to our visitors our perseverance and engagement in «making museum».

Cut on some employees nodding. Cut back to the previous shot.

Our house has a long tradition and we see that the number of our visitors gradually increases. We are particularly happy about that, because we are in Zurich, among many other well known museums, like the Swiss National Museum, the Museum of Art and the Rietberg Museum. By «a long tradition». I mean that our museum was created in 1889 by the Ethnographic Society in Zurich. The purpose was to foster the ethnological research. At that time, the museum didn't have a collection for the public yet, it was rather a collection for study purposes, used during the courses at the university and at various schools.

The objects that were used at that time came from Madagascar, Guatamala, Southwest Africa, Northwest coast of America, India and Japan.

In 1913 the University of Zurich gave her collection to the museum for research and studies; under few conditions: that the objects must be exhibited and that the professor of ethnology must be at the same time the director of the collection. And so it has been, ladies and gentlemen, until today.

Cut on the director, which is sighing deeply. Cut back.

In the following fifty years the collection was enlarged, among others, with objects from China, Central and West Africa, Ethiopia and also some from the Polar regions. They were all added to the permanent exhibition.

In the seventies the museum decided to change the philosophy of its exhibitions, becoming more and more open to the outside world and going out of the

university walls. The recipe was: Changing exhibitions and the most possible themes; the objects shown in their socio-cultural functions. Moreover, the museum wanted to show not only different cultures, but also their relationship to our own culture. As the place became too limited for all the objects it had, the museum looked for another place to stay and found an ideal one: It is here, where you all are, in the park 'Zur Katz', the former botanical garden, located in the heart of Zurich.

Cut on the listening audience. Cut back.

During all the years we have had the opportunity to make many exhibitions. The visitors were introduced to the life of different peoples, like the Eskimos, the Kurds and also the Tuareg. They could touch unknown worlds, like those of the Hindukush, of Mexico, Nepal and many others. Moreover they could learn something about religious art of Ethiopia, Lion carpets from Iran, jewellery, children games Mandalas and so on.

These exhibitions consisted of many of our objects and were completed by objects we borrowed from other museums. But not in the exhibition we are opening today. We will show you objects from our own collection only; this exhibition is in fact the history of our museum. You will see our highlights, collected during the last century. The object with which we close the exhibition is our newest acquisition. I won't tell you by now what it is, you'll be surprised. We hope that this exhibition will have on you the same joyful effect it had on us.

Concluding, I would like to thank my two colleagues to whom I have felt a great attachment and who have helped me preparing the exhibition. Now, I declare the exhibition open.

Cut on the opening door in the back of the audience. Cut back on Ethnologist B's face. He stares terrified in the exhibition room. Cut through the entrance directly to the show case with the sensational object. Thus the show

case is empty. Ethnologist B clears a way through the crowd to the show case and stares into it. He calls the Director. Director D arrives.

Ethnologist B:

Where is it? It's gone! I can't believe it. Look, the show case is intact and still locked! But look at that mysterious glance in the eyes of the visitors. Do you think they already have consumed our precious object completely?

Sharp cut to a black screen. In the middle of the screen appears the following text:

Thus the future of the museum may begin. Everybody is invited to see in this empty show case what the museum is supposed to show but not always succeeds.



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