

## Between Exotism and Progress



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### Exhibition hours

Open Tuesday to Friday, 1pm to 7pm;  
Saturday and Sunday, 3pm to 7pm.  
Closed on Mondays.

### Library

Monday to Friday, 2pm to 8pm

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 Museo Etnografico J. B. Ambrosetti

### Moreno 350

### City of Buenos Aires

(two blocks from Plaza de Mayo)



Universidad de Buenos Aires

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

Dean: Graciela Morgade, Ph.D.

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## Museo Etnográfico “Juan B. Ambrosetti”

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Argentine museums of Natural History -also dedicated to the study of Anthropology- attained a well deserved international prestige at the end of the 19th century.

At the time, within Argentina's projects as a young nation, museums played an important political role as far as popular education was concerned, becoming a key factor for the consolidation of its ruling system. They were responsible for projecting abroad the image of a country of infinite natural resources and ruled by highly civilized institutions.

Because of the accurate degree of their taxonomies, museums were noted by the order and method of their work; they symbolized, indeed, a triumph of civilization over adverse moral forces, underscoring at the same time the rule of man upon nature and its economic potentialities. Furthermore, it was believed that science could dissipate the darkness of superstition, conducting men to build a modern nation and, above all, guide it on the path to Progress.

For some people, Darwin's evolutionism legitimated this social ideology, as a necessary fact of life, a logical result of human development. Transformed into a kind of secular religion due to its explanatory capacity, evolutionism was adopted by Argentina's ruling class.

It was amid this intellectual milieu that in 1904 Juan Bautista Ambrosetti promoted the founding of an anthropological museum as part of Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the University of Buenos Aires. The Ethnographic Museum was therefore created by him as a scientific research and academic training institute, as well as an educational centre for the public at large.

As the museum's most important aim, professor Ambrosetti promoted studies of the indigenous societies of Argentina contemporary and prehistoric- and also about native groups from other American areas and from the rest of the non-European world.

Consequently, the museum organized, financed and published anthropological research while incorporating university professors as regular members of the institution. The museum's collections frequently were the

key to trace diffusion or prove independent invention, to understand the relation between culture and nature and to define cultural areas.

The Ethnographic Museum's aim was to illustrate and disseminate a broad view of the so called "primitive" peoples: those exotic communities which, distant from the way of life in modern industrial societies, lived according to archaic standards and surrounded by objects of rare beauty. By exhibiting "other" cultures, with emphasis on exotism, the history of Western societies would be shown and, by contrast, it would help to highlight most vividly the ideas of the modern nation founded at the Río de la Plata countries.

**Cover illustration:** Moko (tattoo) of Maori chief. Drawing by Sydney Parkinson, reproduced in *Moko; or Maori Tattooing* (Major-General Robley, Ed. Chapman and Hall, London, 1896).