

Franz Boas: Successes and Failures at the Museum of Natural History

America in the early twentieth century carried with it an idealism that was deeply rooted in religion. The Christian white male was the dominant decisive force with an army of Negro slaves that were scientifically of a lesser intelligence and much inferior race. In contrast to this, Boas's study was inspired by the previously tolerant and broad-minded German science. "Franz Boas had come of age in a far more liberal scientific tradition" (p50). While his American counterparts measured skulls to determine racial intelligence, Boas's mentor Rudolf Virchow "prevented racial prejudice from gaining 'scientific' support..." (p50) Although by 1887 Boas was an acknowledged expert in various fields such as Indian linguistics, mythology, and art, he was not the first choice for the department of anthropology at the Museum. He was a young anthropologist with radical and liberal attitudes towards science and what he considered scientific experience. The president of the Museum of Natural History, Morris K Jesup, agreed to bring Boas on board only after an anonymous donation was made towards his salary by Boas's uncle (Jacobi). (p54)

In 1896, when Boas began work at the museum he brought with him an alarming desire for change. By the end of the first year he had pioneered a new project researching the origin of the culture group we now refer to as American Indians. Jesup has known to call this "the greatest thing ever undertaken by any museum." (p54) The project was titled the Jesup Expedition and included anthropologists, archeologists, linguists, etc. After five long years of collecting data and variety of artifacts from various cultures the

expedition ultimately resulted in failure. Boas published one volume out of an intended series that would provide reports and statistical insight into the details of the expedition. Thus, Boas's work, although insightful, remained incomplete. As the article states, "Like some anthropological Leonardo, he was obsessed with learning and entirely uninterested in setting his knowledge into finished form." (p55)

Nonetheless Boas's success lies in the museum's Hall of Northwest Coast Indians. The hall, after opening in 1899, was inspired by a German sense of romanticism and religiosity (p55). He overrode the traditional method of display for a stimulating new look at history as contextual evidence. Artifacts were neither placed in evolutionary displays that ranged from the primitive to the modern nor exhibited by type – baskets, utensils, etc. Instead, they were placed in an area with other artifacts from a tribe to experience the culture as a whole. Like the article points out, Boas's argument was "against seeing human culture in evolutionary terms, rising from the primitive to a summit on which the inventors of the evolutionary scheme inevitably perched. Boas liked to point out how recent most civilizations were and how time had revealed 'innate' abilities" (p55).

In 1902, when the Jesup Expedition was finally complete, Boas's interest moved to yet another study. He proposed to research the 'vanishing tribes in the American west.' The museum authorities denied funds and Boas was left feeling largely unsatisfied with his work at the museum. His anthropological goals to study cultures were founded in an empirical desire to bring about a change in perception. "He made an appeal to Jesup, arguing that the museum's greatest duty was to demonstrate 'that our people are not the only carriers of civilization'" (p55). Realizing that his vision was lost with Jesup, Boas

found solace in his work at Columbia and with his students. In 1911, six years after resigning from the museum, Boas proposed to study heads to refute the then popular American system of measuring craniums to identify ethnicity. The results were shocking to most. The American born child of every group of ethnicity's cephalic index differed in width or length from their parents by a millimeter or two. The longer the parents lived in America the greater the difference. Their European equivalent showed no measurable change (p56). This was the beginning of Boas's long, arduous journey that led him to writing volumes defending his research and study. The Museum of Natural History, on the other hand, propelled by the intensity of Boas's scholarship remained a dais for debates between scientists.

It is no surprise to me that Boas's stay at the Museum, although short lived, was an ideal force for erudition. This was the time when the American and European sense of revolution was striving at a ridiculous pace towards knowledge and extensive study; a time during which the ideals of freedom, liberty and democracy were challenged and re-defined. At the same time the presence of slavery and the idea of a subhuman race were accepted by the common man. Books like Grants "The Passing of the Great Race" were bestsellers and the Ku Klux Klan had over 4 million members. A scientist with radical and idyllic views was much needed. Boas entered the scientific discussion with a command on anthropological study. His successes far outnumber his failures both as a scientist and an anthropologist. During the course of his lifetime, he provided challenging theories based on factual information. The same cannot be said of other so-called scientists present during the same time.