

Rudolf Virchow, Report from the Special Meeting in the Zoological Garden on November 7, 1880: “Eskimos from Labrador” (1880)

Abstract

In the nineteenth century, human zoos became increasingly popular among European audiences. In Germany, they were referred to as *Völkerschauen*, which literally means an exhibition of people (usually from a certain ethnic group and almost always non-white). From 1870 to 1940, human beings were exhibited almost everywhere in Europe, even in countries without colonial overseas territories. The people on display were introduced as representatives of their ethnicity or “race”—the same was true of colonial exhibitions and circuses, which were popular in the same time period. In some cases, entire villages were recreated to bring European audiences closer to foreign peoples in their “natural” surroundings.

In this 1880 report published in the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, a scientific journal dedicated to ethnology, German anthropologist Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902) described two Inuit families from Greenland who lived in the Frankfurt Zoo. According to Virchow, the family from the Hebron Mission in Labrador lived a “civilized life,” whereas the family from Nachvak [Nakkwak], located farther north, exemplified primitiveness. Virchow argued that Inuits (he used the term “Eskimos,” which was customary at that time) were generally capable of intellectual development. He then added that Christian Inuits were clearly more intelligent than those Inuits who lived in a primitive state of nature.

In the second part of his report, Virchow referred to an article in the *Mageburger Zeitung* that had criticized the *Völkerschauen* (October 21, 1880). The author of that piece had taken issue not only with the manner in which foreign peoples were exhibited in zoos but also with the sensation-seeking public interest surrounding the exhibitions. Virchow refuted that criticism and defended the *Völkerschauen* on the basis of their support for scientific interest in humankind and its various stages of development.

Source

Special Meeting in the Zoological Garden on November 7, 1880

Chairman Mr. Bastian.

Having introduced the relevant parties, Mr. Virchow spoke about those persons brought to Berlin by Mr. [Carl] Hagenbeck:

Eskimos from Labrador.
(see plate XIV.)

The Eskimos we are concerned with, although all of them come from a region of Labrador that is situated at

almost the same latitude as the southern tip of Greenland, fall into two groups, or it can also be said, families, even though one “Loskaerl” [single guy], as they say in Norwegian, is included. They are two self-contained units that differ not only in their religion but also in many aspects of their external appearance. The one group, namely the Abraham family, consisting of the husband, the wife Ulrike, and two small children, in addition to the single man Tobias, come from the mission at Hebron, which the Herrnhuter established in 1830 at about 59 degrees north latitude and 60 degrees west longitude, south of Cape Chidley. It is one of six stations maintained by the Brethren Church on this coast; the oldest of them, Hopedale, has already been in operation since 1770. According to the report of Mr. [Johan Adrian] Jacobsen, who recruited the people and brought them to Hamburg in one of his own ships, 1,500 of the approximately 2,000 Eskimos living in Labrador had been converted to Christianity. In any case, the missionaries succeeded in promoting instruction for the people to such an extent that their intelligence has actually developed in no small measure and they are able to easily write, draw, and practice all the arts of civilized life. [...]

In contrast, the other family, consisting of the husband Tiggianiak, his wife Paieng (Bairngo), and his daughter Noggasak, is still completely heathen and in fact is endowed with characteristics that are highly suitable for demonstrating the primitive nature of this population.

[...]

This family was employed by Mr. Jacobsen in Nachvak, a station of the Hudson Bay Company located north of Hebron on a fjord. [...]

The hair of our Labrador people corresponds to that of the Greenlanders in every way. The color of their hair is uniformly black. Even the small children have very dark hair on their heads; only their eyebrows are more brownish. The hair of the adult men is relatively long, covering the back of the neck, and in the case of the heathens, even the shoulders. It is very thick, shiny black like ebony, similar to horses' manes, and not at all curly or wavy but completely straight. In women it has the same characteristics, only it is worn relatively shorter and thus gives the impression of a certain sparseness. The woman Ulrike wears it simply parted and in braids. In contrast, the heathen wife and her daughter wear a knot at the back and at each temple; the side knots have long festoons attached that are braided from reindeer hair and richly decorated with multi-colored (European) beads. Their eyebrows are mostly heavy; only the woman Ulrike's are sparser. Even the men have almost no side whiskers; in contrast, their moustaches and chin whiskers are more abundant, except that the latter are limited to the actual chin. The woman Ulrike also has a light moustache. The remaining parts of their bodies, as far as I saw them, i.e., chest, forearms, and lower legs, are almost completely hairless.

[...]

I will limit myself to these comments, and only request that you allow me a few words to refute an aggressive attack that was recently made in the *Magdeburger Zeitung* (no. 493, from October 21). The attack is directed, on the one hand, against all these kinds of ideas about foreign races, and on the other hand, against the use of zoological gardens to display human beings. As a widely read newspaper was used as the vehicle for this attack, and as we live in a time, as you know, when everything considered impossible happens, it therefore seems necessary to decisively confront this first attack by a wild-eyed feuilletonist.

In an article, “Eskimos in the Zoological Garden in Berlin,” the author not only generally objects to exhibiting human beings but also states very explicitly in closing that one can expect that, on closer consideration, there will be retreat from the practice of displaying human beings in zoological gardens. I will briefly read this conclusion

aloud:

“We are completely prepared for our view to be derided and ridiculed as sentimental by various quarters. Nevertheless, we want to have said this here and now. If these ‘interesting’ human specimens were to be put on display, the feelings for ‘racial decency’ would have to prevent us from allowing our peers to be seen in zoos.”

The argumentation on which this view is based essentially assumes—and that is actually what I want to touch on especially—that there is absolutely no scientific interest there, and that for the vast majority of people there is nothing but a very crude interest based on curiosity. The feuilleton writer likes to say from time to time, “but it is indeed very interesting,” as if in reproach. In this regard, the gentleman does not seem to have clearly comprehended that “interest” in itself can be multifaceted. Of course, many things are interesting in the sense of curiosity, but everything else that we explore for the sake of knowledge and to advance our investigation of nature and humans basically only begins to make sense if it interests us. Yes, in fact, these ideas about humans are very interesting to anyone who wants to more or less understand the position of humans in nature and the course of humankind’s development.

Whoever cannot comprehend this, or whose poor preparation prevents him from understanding that by far the most important and greatest questions that humankind can ask are contained therein, whoever believes that such things can be passed over for the business of daily life should be the last to write for feuilletons. At the very least, the editorial staff should think twice before it prints such nonsense in its columns.

I wanted to state, and confirm at the same time, that a positive scientific interest of the highest order is associated with these ideas. For that reason, I do not want to let this occasion pass without publicly extending our special thanks to Mr. [Carl] Hagenbeck and to implore him not allow such attacks to deter him from continuing as he has up to now, to the very great benefit of anthropological science.

[...]

Source: Rudolf Virchow, “Ausserordentliche Zusammenkunft im zoologischen Garten am 7. November 1880: Eskimos von Labrador,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, vol. 12 (1880), pp. 253–54, 261, 270–71.

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