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Sushila Manandhar

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Report on Observation of the Museum of Combs and Plastic Materials, Oyonnax, France

Sushila Manandhar
Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies

The Museum of Combs and Plastic Materials, located in the city of Oyonnax in southern France, was inaugurated in 1977. Without a building of its own, it has been temporarily housed on the second floor of the City Hall since its establishment.

As the museum's space in City Hall is limited and its collections are quite large, the museum cannot display everything it has. Most of the collection remains in storage. Fortunately, the museum will be moving to a new location with more space not far from City Hall. The building was constructed in 1905–1906 and was used as the city's first electric factory until 1945, when the factory was nationalized. The building has not been used since 1967 when the Electric Development of France sold it to the city. In 1988, the building was recognised as a historic monument and was granted to the Museum of Combs and Plastic Materials.

The century-old building will require three years of renovations before the museum can move in. Once completed, the refurbished factory will provide a charming location for the museum. The museum will have much more space and will be able to display its entire collection, making it one of the premier museums of southern France.

Observations of visit

My observations of the museum are divided into three phases.

1. The conservator first explained the reproduction of the combs and showed a twenty-minute documentary. I then visited two halls where the machines used to produce the combs are displayed. This exhibit showed the development of the process from the use of the oldest manual machines to vapour machines used in then nineteenth century and later electric machines.

Regardless of the technology used, the decoration and finishing touches on the combs were done by hand. The production of a beautiful comb is an art, a time consuming task completed by a great craftsman. After visiting the museum, one gains a great appreciation of the creative mind and skillful hands of the artists of the city of Oyonnax.

2. According to the conservator, the exhibits represent only a sample of the world's combs. While most of the pieces

are French, the museum has collections from around the world. Because space is limited, it only displays select masterpieces from the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Africa. The rest are preserved in storage.

The collection includes pieces from only a few South Asian countries. There are combs from Nepal, India, and Bangladesh. There are traditional Nepalese hair brushes (*thakuca*), a variety of bamboo combs (*kakica*), a set of silver combs (*wahkakica*), and *natubhatuca*, which is used by the Newars of Nepal during the marriage ceremony as a ritual make-up tool of the newly married bride.

The combs in the collection are among the world's oldest. One from China is believed to have been made in third century, BC (France, *Peigne du Monde au Musee d'Oyonnax*, 1996: 69). The president and technical staff of the museum have skillfully and patiently reproduced other older pieces, as well: Syria (8,400 B.C.), Switzerland (4,300 B.C.), and France (2,640 B.C.).

In addition to the combs, the display includes beautiful hairpins and other head decorations. These objects are made of a variety of materials, including ivory, animal's bone, wood, bronze, gold, silver, bamboo, plastic, sea shell, and tortoise's shell. Precious metals and gemstones are also used to decorate these objects with different motifs.

The Museum of Combs and Plastic Materials is unique because its focus is a simple object used in daily life—both its practical use in the society and its role as art and craft of human beings.

The museum also explains the legends, traditional beliefs, and significance of the combs. In Africa some combs—usually gifts from a husband or in-laws—are symbolic of a woman's prestige. They are not used in daily life but rather signify the admiration of her husband or family. Africans believe that the combs have divine power or magic of evil spirits. Certain American tribal groups similarly believe in good will and evil spirits. They have the comb protected by nine spirits. The Japanese also have superstitions about the magical power of combs that brings fortune or destruction. In the Japanese language, a comb is called *kushi*, the sound *ku* signifying pain and *shi* meaning death. To find or receive a used comb as a gift is a very bad omen.

3. On the behalf of Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies at Tribhuvan University in Kirtipur Kathmandu, Nepal, I submitted a copy of the CNAS journal *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* to the museum. This volume includes an article I wrote entitled "Meaning and Function of Combs in the Newar Culture (Nepal)." I gave a briefing on the article and presented some bamboo combs and a traditional hair-brush to the museum.

In exchange, the president of the museum gave two copies of the catalogue of the museum *Peignes Du Monde Au Musee D'oyonmax*, one copy for myself and another one for CNAS.

Comments on the collection of the combs from South Asian region

The museum does not have collections from all countries of South Asia. These are multiethnic nations where each culture and group has its own way of life. They use different types of combs. While the function of a comb may be same, its cultural values may differ from nation to nation. Even in the same country, the cultural value of the comb may differ from one ethnic group to another or one caste to another.

It is my hope that the museum will collect information from all countries in South Asia. A mission to the region to collect traditional combs or photography will help improve and promote the museum's collection. Describing and displaying these objects will help reveal the cultural significance of the combs.

I also encourage the museum to display its entire collection, including those from Nepal, when it moves to its new building.

Placement of the article on combs of Nepal

In 1996, at the request of the president of the museum of combs, I submitted an article entitled *Peignes chez les Newar du Nepal* or *Combs among the Newar of Nepal*. This article focused on the production of combs, the materials used, and the artisans who made the combs. It also contains a brief description of the importance of the comb in the ritual and social life of the Newars.

In 2001, the museum prepared to publish an encyclopaedia of combs entitled *Peignes dans le Monde* or *Combs in the World*. Prof. C. Jest and I will contribute a form of this article to the South Asian section of the book.

Concluding remarks

It is a new experience for me to work on a of project of this nature. I appreciate the patience and dedication of those people who place great value on the cultural significance of humankind's simple tools.

Only five staff members of the museum are paid. The rest are volunteers who are dedicated to the establishment and promotion of the museum. My visit revealed an overlooked opportunity for research in the social and cultural significance of combs in Nepal. I was able to collect some valuable information about their ritual function and production in the Newar society.

Continued cooperation between CNAS and Musée de Peignes will benefit both institutions. Further programmes should be held to exchange ideas and share publications. It will be my great pleasure to secure a place for Nepalese combs in the museum.