

Racism at the Fair

Examined and Stared At

The founding of European colonies in the 19th century brought unknown cultures into the focus of public attention. The exhibitions of indigenous people were very popular. So-called "Völkerschauen" (ethnological expositions) became a mass amusement.

The European zeitgeist of the 19th century was characterised by a supposed superiority of white people over other population groups. "Indians", Africans and other indigenous people were publicly exhibited. Along with this, an alleged "wildness" and "base instincts" were attributed to them. Citing anthropological research, this was classified as a seemingly primitive way of living.

Small show booths, so-called "human zoos" and cabinets of curiosities at fairs advertised their performances with lurid and sensationalist promises. The performances were considered provocative, but were socially tolerated within the framework of the fairs. The fairground became a place of voyeuristic transgression.

The last ethnological exposition in Europe took place in 1958 at the Brussels World's Fair. The replica of a Congolese village from the Belgian Congo including its inhabitants triggered numerous protests. Even before the end of the World's Fair, the staging was cancelled.