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Bastian's Vision: Franz Boas and German Museum Politics

This paper argues that Franz Boas's anthropology was a continuation of the project that guided nineteenth-century German ethnographic museums.  That project was based, to a large degree, on Adolf Bastian's vision of the fundamental unity of humanity and his commitment to a rigorous empiricism.  Yet, just as Boas began to gain success with his methods in the United States, a younger generation of German ethnologists, many of them Boas's contemporaries, abandoned Bastian's vision. They began championing diffusionist theories and creating easily-digestible, pedagogical museum displays. At Columbia University, however, Franz Boas developed and extended Bastian's vision beyond material culture. He freed it from the limitations of the museum, extending Bastian's salvage mentality beyond peoples' "things" and placing as much, if not more, emphasis on "recording" their cultures. Through that effort, Boas realized much of Bastian's legacy.