



The Sun, detail. Paul Miuron (1896-1970) painted around 1917.
Ochre painting on slate (see p. 59)

PREFACE

This is the very first catalogue to offer a general overview of the Ethnological Museum of the Vatican Museums. The Museum is characterised by its complex historical stratification, the vastness of its collections, and their diversification in numerous typologies of objects reflecting cultural variegated worlds, from the pre-Colombian to the Oriental, from the prehistoric to indigenous civilisations. These factors have posed a great challenge and precise methodological questions, such as: how can this extraordinary patrimony be presented to the widest public possible, and not exclusively to specialists within the field? What criteria may be used to present such a complex Museum, whose collections are still in the phase of study? After long and careful reflection it was decided to structure the catalogue on the basis of the original layout of the Ethnological Museum in the Lateran Palace, before it was transferred to its current home within the Vatican Museums. In the former, an historic Roman building, the 'oriental collections' were located on the first floor, and the 'indigenous collections' on the second.

The subdivision of the catalogue into two parts, entrusting the 'indigenous collections' to Katherine Aigner and the 'oriental collections' to Nadia Fiussello, reflects this structure. This choice seemed to be the best approach to enable a broad, historically justifiable overview of the works held in the Ethnological Museum. While on the one hand, this choice has permitted the presentation of the founding philosophy of the fathers of the Museum – as explained by Katherine Aigner in her essay – on the other, it has entailed often difficult decisions. For instance, it has necessitated the inclusion within the 'indigenous collections' of a vast, diverse range of collections, such as those representing the great pre-Colombian civilisations and prehistoric objects, and the artificial division of the Asian world into cultures considered expressions of 'indigenous civilisations' and those which express world views such as Buddhism or Hinduism.

It is not my intention to dwell on these aspects of the catalogue, as the key issue I would like to make clear from these first pages onwards is that the real protagonists of the Museum are not the objects themselves, but rather the people and cultures of whom they are an expression and whose works of



Water is Life. Clean water is essential for all life and indigenous communities around the world continue to fight to protect water supplies against threats from mining and industry

art are, to adopt the apt expression used by Katherine Aigner in her essay, 'cultural ambassadors'. This catalogue is therefore dedicated to these peoples, especially those who experience difficult situations due to natural disasters or the tyranny perpetrated by man. Throughout my experience in the Philippines and in many other parts of the world I have directly witnessed how much violence these peoples suffer at the hands of those who would plunder their territory in order to take control of the land and its wealth – be it for the purposes of mining or nuclear experiments, unchecked deforestation and so on – and the extent to which the impact with the Western world, while external to their own, may give rise to no less than cultural genocide, even if at times it is masked with noble ideals.

The struggle of these populations to preserve their own cultural identity and environment is also our struggle. As an elderly Australian Aboriginal woman once said to me, beyond solidarity lies action. My wish, shared by Katherine Aigner and Nadia Fiussello, is that this catalogue might contribute to the worldwide battle to preserve not only the natural environment and the gifts of Mother Earth, but also and above all the beauty and variety of the cultures of the world, against all attempts to destroy them or reduce them to a standard unitary model of thought and lifestyle.

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