



REPORT

Ethnographic collections at the National Museum of Mongolia

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Because museum artifacts are historically and temporally situated, their scientific study and integration into academic research are fundamental to museum scholarship. This report presents a summary overview the ethnographic collections at the National Museum of Mongolia. Currently, these collections comprise 5,748 lots and 8,934 individual items across 13 distinct categories, representing 28% of the museum's total catalogue. Collections research at this national institution sheds light on the unique historical and cultural characteristics of the Mongolian people. Furthermore, it reinforces national identity, educates younger generations about their traditional heritage, and instills a profound sense of national pride.

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Under Mongolia's Law on Museums (State Great Khural of Mongolia, 2021), a museum is designated as a non-profit cultural and scientific institution. Its core responsibilities encompass the registration, collection, preservation, protection, research, promotion, and dissemination of valuable cultural property. Within this broad mandate, the National Museum of Mongolia has systematically built and expanded collections aiming to reflect the unique historical and cultural heritage of the Mongolian people.

Scientific and Research Activities of the Museum

The National Museum's core functions span a broad range of activities, with duties including identifying, discovering, and acquiring valuable cultural property; documenting objects and collections; and maintaining comprehensive museum records and databases. Additionally, the museum is tasked with curating collections for public access, organizing and participating in domestic and international exhibitions, and implementing educational outreach programs. Conducting scientific research and subsequently publishing and disseminating those findings is also a vital component of the museum's mandate.

The study, interpretation, and integration into academic discourse of historical, archeological, and ethnographic artifacts has always been central to the National Museum's mission. The "Guidelines for Registration and Documentation of Museum Collections" (Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism of Mongolia, 2012) mandate the maintenance of rigorous scientific records (Section 1.4.3). These guidelines stipulate that research staff must meticulously document each artifact, detailing its origin, history, interrelations, and broader historical significance. Staff must also produce comprehensive scholarly descriptions complete with citations and references, thereby ensuring the legal protection of all associated information (Section 2.3). Furthermore, the Guidelines require that museum research findings be introduced into academic circulation through the publication of scientific articles and monographs (Section 2.3.4).

When acquiring ethnographic exhibits, researchers employ methods such as field surveys and interviews to document primary data – including an artifact's origin, ownership history, unique physical features, and regional terminology – directly from the original owners. This primary data serves as an essential source for subsequent academic research. In addition to preparing detailed scientific descriptions, research staff at the National Museum of Mongolia publish scholarly

articles, catalogues, and books categorized by research themes and historical periods, ensuring their findings are widely accessible to the public.

Ethnographic Collections

At the national level, 307 institutions currently house inventoried movable historical and cultural heritage items. These include 19 state-owned facilities, 285 local government-owned entities, and three religious institutions. Together, they preserve 276,077 artifacts organized into 126,810 lots. The movable heritage preserved in these national and local museums, universities, and monasteries is divided into six primary categories: historical artifacts, religious and spiritual objects, natural history specimens, works of fine art and crafts, ethnographic collections, and archaeological artifacts. These categories and their statistical representations are derived from the 2018–2019 national inventory survey of movable historical and cultural heritage (Ministry of Culture of Mongolia, 2019).

Category	National level	Local level	Total
Natural History	12,576	6,639	19,215
Archaeological	22,785	4,476	27,261
Historical	43,767	52,160	95,927
Ethnographic	10,395	13,529	23,924
Religious	31,265	27,147	58,412
Fine Arts & Crafts	11,337	5,561	16,898

307 institutions are included in the National Inventory. National-level institutions include state museums (10), branch museums (2), libraries (1), universities (3), and national temples (2). Local-level institutions include aimag, local, and municipal museums (284) and local temples (3).

Nationally, ethnographic collections account for 16% of all movable cultural heritage, totaling 16,691 lots and 23,924 individual items. The National Museum of Mongolia preserves a total of 60,172 items across six categories, amounting to 81,273 individual objects. Ethnographic collections represent 28.1% of this movable cultural heritage, encompassing 5,748 lots and 8,934 objects.

No.	Collection Type	Number of Items (Units)	Number of Specimens
1	Archaeological artifacts	2,564 (12.5%)	12,262 (20.4%)
2	Historical collections	9,043 (44.3%)	33,230 (55.2%)
3	Ethnographic collections	5,748 (28.1%)	8,934 (14.8%)
4	Religious artifacts	1,556 (7.6%)	3,472 (5.8%)
5	Artistic / Aesthetic collections	1,491 (7.3%)	2,236 (3.7%)
6	Natural history collections	30 (0.1%)	33 (0.1%)
Total		60,172	81,273

The ethnographic collections housed within the museum's holdings are further categorized as follows:

No.	Collection Type	Number of Items (Units)	Number of Specimens
1	Livestock husbandry and tools	638 (3.1%)	988 (1.6%)
2	Sleds, carts, yurts, packing items	52 (0.3%)	82 (0.1%)
3	Yurts and dwellings	70 (0.3%)	357 (0.6%)
4	Household furniture and furnishings	411 (2.0%)	476 (0.8%)
5	Utensils and domestic items	1,679 (8.2%)	1,987 (3.3%)
6	Traditional clothing and textiles	778 (3.8%)	956 (1.6%)
7	Ornaments, jewelry, and personal adornments	872 (4.3%)	1,179 (2.0%)
8	Home-based crafts, tools, and weapons	644 (3.2%)	1,605 (2.7%)
9	Agriculture	77 (0.4%)	100 (0.2%)
10	Hunting	115 (0.6%)	216 (0.4%)
11	Traditional medicine	78 (0.4%)	105 (0.2%)
12	Folk musical instruments	71 (0.3%)	86 (0.1%)
13	Toys and games	152 (0.7%)	585 (1.0%)
Total		5,748 (28.1%)	8,934 (14.8%)

Under Article 4.2 of the Law on Cultural Heritage (State Great Khural of Mongolia, 2014), ethnographic items representing traditional Mongolian culture are formally designated as cultural heritage. This protected status encompasses ethnic clothing and ornaments, subsistence-related tools, implements of labour, weaponry, musical instruments, household items, recreational objects, religious and ritual artifacts, textual artifacts, traditional medical equipment, and dwellings along with their associated possessions.

Preservation and Protection of Ethnographic Collections

The ethnographic collections in the National Museum of Mongolia includes 8,934 ethnographic objects in 5,748 lots, corresponding to 28.1% of the museum's total holdings. These collections are normally kept in two ethnographic vaults and one jewelry vault, and are displayed in Exhibition Halls 2, 4, and 5. These collections are organized and stored according to their material characteristics and specific conservation requirements. A collections manager oversees their overall preservation, integrity, safety, care, and cleaning. The collections manager's duties also include conducting regular inspections and maintaining specialized accounts, location indices, catalogues, reference materials, and archival records.

The ethnographic storage facilities are situated in the building's basement, effectively shielding the artifacts from direct sunlight. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, a significant portion of the museum's ethnographic collection has been relocated to the basement of the National Centre for Cultural Heritage. This displacement poses ongoing risks to the long-term safety and conservation of the artifacts.

Historical Overview of the Ethnographic Collections

The National Museum's ethnographic collection has historically been an essential resource for comprehensive research into the origins, traditional livelihoods, and cultural heritage – both tangible and intangible – of the Mongolian people. In 1921, striving to promote modern scientific knowledge, the People's Government of Mongolia established the Institute of Script and Scholarship, with its founding regulations mandating the collection of “all interesting items from libraries and museums worldwide to facilitate public access and scholarly understanding” (Institute of Script and Scholarship, 1921). This directive laid the groundwork for the

development of both libraries and museums nationwide. Preparations for the establishment of the first museum took place between 1921 and 1924. During this foundational period, early curators catalogued and collected samples of Mongolia's natural resources, local flora and fauna, and rare historical artifacts related to the daily lives and religious beliefs of the populace. Favourable government policies also facilitated the formal registration of many historically significant items as official museum collections.



Figure 1. Ethnographic Hall, 1930s.

When Mongolia's first museum officially opened in 1924, its exhibitions featured taxidermied animals from the Bogd Palace and antique military weapons from the Uliastai garrison. The displays also included iconic paintings like Sharav's "*Calf Herds*" and "*A Day in Mongolia*", alongside mineral and salt collections from various regions, crystals and gemstones from Gorkhi, coal from Nalaikh, household implements from Delgerkhantai, Buryat shamanic tools and clothing, and an array of musical instruments (Institute of Script and Scholarship, 1924). This initial collection served as the foundation for many of the museum repositories currently operating throughout Mongolia.

The core of this early ethnographic collection included musical instruments, household items, Buryat shamanic attire, and traditional clothing and ornaments. The Institute of Script and Scholarship subsequently intensified its collection efforts to better study the origins, administrative structures, and religious practices of the Mongols. Field expeditions successfully gathered ritual objects, agricultural tools, clothing, and adornments directly from local communities. Furthermore, following the confiscation of feudal properties in 1925, historically significant items were catalogued and integrated into the museum's holdings; these treasures included noble robes, ceremonial coats, royal shawls, aristocratic ornaments, monastic saddles and bridles, and rare manuscripts (Institute of Script and Scholarship, 1925).

These collecting efforts continued unabated in the following decades. Beginning in the 1950s, the Central Museum adopted systematic and comprehensive collection strategies that paired rigorous field research with targeted acquisitions. Regional ethnographic collection campaigns saw a marked intensification in the decade from 1959 to 1969. Notably, during field expeditions to the Khentii and Dornod aimags in 1967–1968, museum staff acquired over 200 items from 124 households, vastly enriching the museum's holdings. This active community engagement during field research yielded substantial collections of culturally significant artifacts.



Figure 2. Museum researchers, early 1950s.

Between 1970 and 1980, systematic collecting activities were undertaken across multiple aimags, including Arkhangai, Övörkhangai, Bulgan, Dundgovi, Khentii, Sükhbaatar, Töv, and Dornogovi. These expeditions successfully gathered 1,009 items in 609 lots representing more than 10 collections categories. The subsequent decade, from 1981 to 1990, saw the National Museum conducting successive field expeditions across multiple aimags, ultimately acquiring 1,925 items in 1,208 lots. These acquisitions included traditional clothing, ornaments, kitchenware, tools for leatherworking and blacksmithing, hunting implements, games, and livestock equipment. The success of these efforts was largely due to the dedication of numerous museum professionals and ethnographers such as S. Badamkhatun, Kh. Nyambuu, N. Baarai, Ch. Sodnom, J. Odgerel, J. Tsendjav, G. Jamyan, J. Dorjochoo, and G. Battögs.

Following the political and social upheavals of the 1990s, active ethnographic collecting efforts largely stalled. During this time, new acquisitions were predominantly limited to individual purchases or the transfer of items confiscated at international border controls.



Figure 3. Traditional clothing and jewelry hall, 2026.

In this era of rapid globalization, the need for comprehensive, scientific research into Mongolian history, ethnicity, and culture has never been more urgent. State cultural policy prioritizes the preservation and promotion of the national language, script, history, customs, and heritage. This policy aims to foster respect for cultural expressions, safeguard cultural values, and support the development of a resilient Mongolian identity.

Ultimately, the ethnographic collections of the National Museum of Mongolia represent the unique historical and cultural heritage of the Mongolian people. The collections play a critical role in shaping national identity and consciousness, educating future generations about their traditional heritage, and instilling a deep, enduring pride in their homeland.

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