

Displaying a man's quest for human rights

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A Kansas State University anthropologist who's known for using books, lectures and films to fight for human rights has now turned museum curator.

Harald Prins, distinguished professor of anthropology, is co-curator of an upcoming Smithsonian exhibit, "Alfred Metraux: From Field Work to Human Rights." He says the exhibit will not only honor the man who was once the United Nations' leading anthropologist but also show how anthropology can be applied to world-wide struggles for peace, human dignity and civil rights.

He's co-curating the exhibit, which will open early next year, with colleagues from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

"He was both a great scholar and a great humanist," Prins said of Metraux. "By using his life story, I together with my colleagues felt we can get an important component of our profession...out to the public."

Anthropology can "try to improve our understanding of other cultures on their terms...to understand what

makes people tick," Prins said. That understanding may help prevent "well-intentioned" intrusions into foreign cultures — whether those intrusions are political, military, economic or religious — that may have the opposite effect than what was intended.

That's why he's pleased that the Metraux exhibit will be at the National Museum of Natural History, "precisely half way between the White House and the Capitol," which is visited by thousands of people each day. It's the perfect venue "to remind the public that when you live in a global village, you have to be knowledgeable and respectful of all people in the village," he said.

The knowledge is out there, Prins said, but it's been ignored in recent years.

"My students (who are) seniors have known nothing but war (in their collegiate years) and they've seen justifications for war that are based on errors, misunderstandings, and false information," he said. While the the objective of capturing Saddam Hussein "may not be ignoble," Prins said, the lack of official knowledge of Iraq and Afghanistan "is mind blowing.

"Today we have so much knowledge about thousands of cultures all over the world and the question is, why were these books not opened and these experts not consulted?" he asked.

Prins said Metraux's studies on the effects of Allied firebombings of German and Japanese cities in World War II are echoed in the resistance to the coalition in Iraq. "It fortified people's decision to fight back," Prins said of the World War II bombings. "The lessons we should have learned aren't being learned and errors that could have been avoided are being repeated, and that's a tragedy."

Metraux was born in Switzerland in 1902 but spent most of his childhood in Argentina, where his family had emigrated. He became well-known for his studies of South American Indians and cultures of the Caribbean, Brazil and Benin.

The turning point in his life, however, came in 1945 with his post-WWII work for the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey. Appalled at the destruction he witnessed, Metraux wrote to his wife that he could never return to museum work. Rather, Prins said, Metraux realized that his

life's mission mirrored that of the United Nations, "which is basically that war is not the answer."

The Smithsonian exhibit, which will open early next year, will trace Metraux's field career and his work with UNESCO, where he persuaded leading anthropologists to turn their sights on social issues like race, poverty, and human rights. He led the effort that produced the 1951 U.N. Statement on Race, which debunked scientific justifications for racism. Metraux worked for UNESCO from 1947 until his death in 1963.

Prins heads to Washington next week to continue with the Smithsonian project. "This work on the museum exhibit has relevance," Prins said. "It's history with a lesson, like all history that's meaningful."

Prins, who specializes in studies of indigenous people, has served as an expert witness on behalf of native tribes in both the United States and Canada. He has published more than 100 scholarly articles, encyclopedia entries, and book chapters in five languages. He wrote the book "The Mi kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival."