



Viola König

Worlds in Motion: The Ethnologisches Museum at the Humboldt-Forum

Introduction

Expectations on the contents of the Humboldt-Forum are high. The reconstructed Berliner Schloss (Berlin Palace) should not simply house a single museum made up of two of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin). In conjunction with events and special exhibitions on the ground floor areas, library holdings from the Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (Central and Regional Library Berlin) as well as from the museums themselves and from the Humboldt-Labor (Humboldt Laboratory) of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Humboldt University of Berlin), the collections of the museums at the Berliner Schloss will enter into an open-minded dialogue with the cultures of the world, thus establishing a forum that is truly novel: the Humboldt-Forum. For the museums this is a challenge that requires them to engage in a delicate balancing act between their traditional self-understanding as an institution committed to collecting, preserving and exhibiting and forum based on exhibits and new media which aims at a blend of dialogue and entertainment. At the Humboldt Lab Dahlem these expectations are tested in practice: the objects present themselves in unusual contexts and convey new and multiple messages. Artists operate not just as creators of artworks, but also as curators of content; media are deployed as agents on equal terms with the exhibits. Old constraints and entrenched thought structures of museum specialists and conservators are questioned. These experiments are intended to provoke, but must be checked at the same time for their compatibility with the development of the master plan for the exhibition spaces.

In the twenty-first century all ethnological museums, indeed, face issues and challenges that profoundly affect their self-understanding and approach to their collections: what to present in what manner to which visitors? Should ethnographic museums emphasise their close links with the colonial legacy, as has been demanded in the post-colonial debate, or rather focus on contemporary relevance in their collecting policies and exhibitions? Who is entitled to possess and display the material remains of "other" cultures? Can new models of curatorial practice and/or demands raised by contemporary ethnological

WORLDS IN MOTION: THE ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM AT THE HUMBOLDT-FORUM



page 83
Arrangement of the sailboats from the Santa Cruz Islands, 1960, at the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin Dahlem, 2012

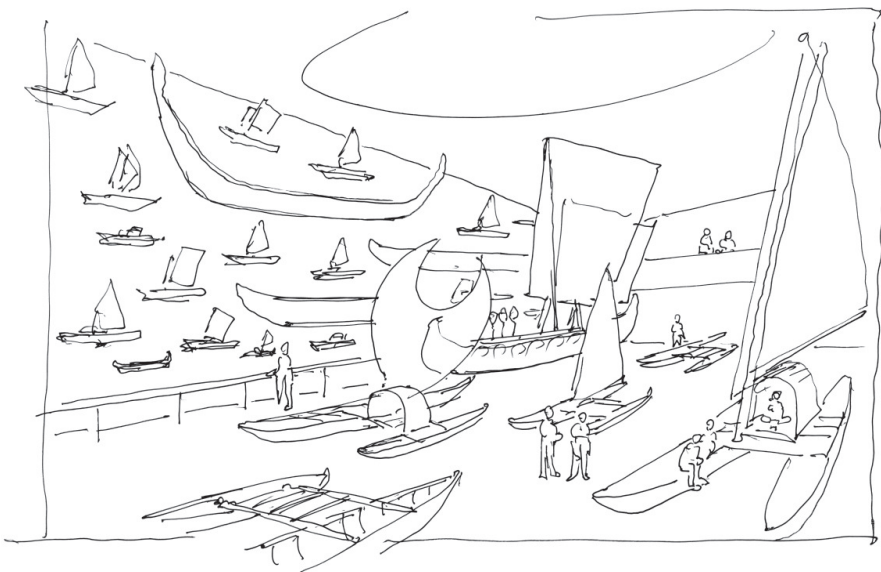
theory break up old power structures and re-adjust the – European-induced – imbalance from earlier periods?

These are by no means just academic dry runs, but rather central ideas when visualising the expected clientèle at the Humboldt-Forum as both national and international visitors with widely varied interests: citizens of Berlin, including a growing number of members of international communities from all continents; tourists from all over the world, increasingly also from the countries of origin of the displayed objects; and, last but not least, specialists and artists participating in programmes of the Humboldt-Forum. In short, visitors will be highly diverse and their expectations regarding the Humboldt-Forum will not necessarily be compatible.

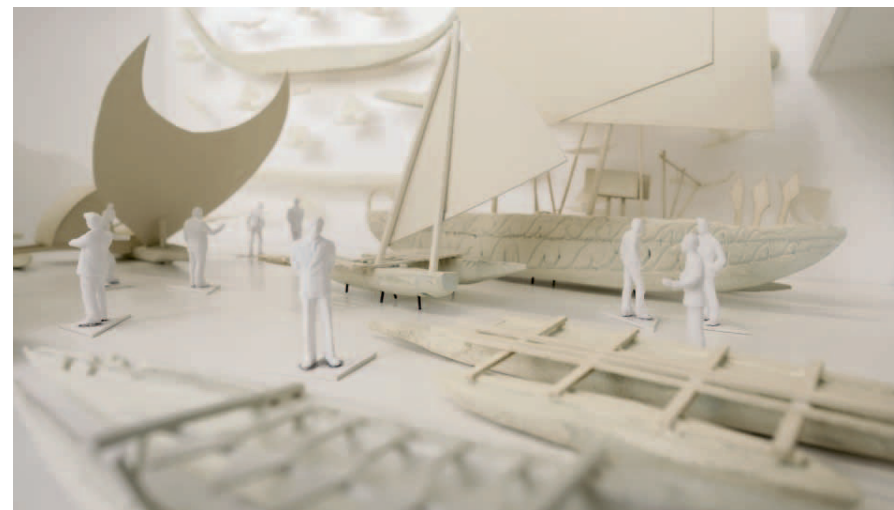
The way it sees itself, the Humboldt-Forum is not an institution focusing on a single theme, a single issue. It concerns itself with culture and history (or histories) from all continents, but its approach starts inevitably from a European perspective. The concept of multi-perspective presentation and shifts in narrative point of view are intended to ensure not just a single perspective, but rather varying views of subjects and exhibits. What does this mean specifically for the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) at the Humboldt-Forum?

1. For the first time in its history, the Ethnologisches Museum will present itself as a unified whole with coherent concepts regarding its regional collection segments. In 1881, the museum's original building at Stresemannstrasse was erected without such concepts

Sketch of the new Boat Hall arrangement including a visible storage case, Ralph Appelbaum Associates/malsyteufel, 2013



WORLDS IN MOTION: THE ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM AT THE HUMBOLDT-FORUM



Model of the new Boat Hall arrangement, Ralph Appelbaum Associates/malsyteufel, 2013

and even in Dahlem post-war history led to additive exhibitions that, from 1956 on, opened in different decades. For the first time, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) are now being planned jointly and old reservations are being overcome.

2. The focus areas of the collections are presented and commented on from different and sometimes provocative perspectives. These shifts in focus zero in on artistic expressions and historical developments as well as on the classic ethnological questions, wherever possible in consultation with representatives of the cultures presented. This by itself implies a shift in narrative viewpoints. Authorship is no longer assumed just by the museum's permanent staff, but by other actors and narrators as well.

3. The collections will be scrutinised in chronological depth, both with regard to the understanding of their own and extrinsic roots and as possible keys to an awareness of current global developments and processes. The modes of communicating socio-political debates are subject to shifting questions, expectations and media-related developments. The challenge in realising the Humboldt-Forum is to do justice to these aspirations of a "museum in motion."

The multiple human being: vision, statements and messages

In the nineteenth century, the vision of the Ethnologisches Museum's founding father, Adolf Bastian, focused on saving the material remains of "vanishing cultures". Likewise his famous student, Franz Boas, the father of American cultural anthropology, aspired to record and archive entire cultures. With this in mind, German collectors in particular amassed



Design of the "Mesoamerica" exhibition segment with Lienzo Seler II, Ralph Appelbaum Associates/ malsyteufel, 2013

extensive bodies of artefacts from America, Africa, Asia and Oceania for the Museum für Völkerkunde (Museum of Ethnology) in Berlin. As a result, the present-day Ethnologisches Museum possesses over half a million objects, complemented by 140,000 audio records, 285,000 historical photographs and 50,000 metres of film footage. Arising from this wealth of material are not just presentation options for the curators, but also duties with regard to the objects concerned. The Ethnologisches Museum is in a unique position to illustrate cultural diversity, the ways of human existence in dealing with the environment and man as a social being and as an artist, as well as many other topics on the basis of specific examples. It can challenge visitors and confront them with issues. It is traditionally

strong in addressing, in special ways, children, young people and families; it arouses and satisfies curiosity and contributes to the cultural education of open-minded, tolerant citizens of the world. This endeavour is, indeed, reflective of both the spirit of the Humboldt-Forum and the typical mission of an ethnological museum in the twenty-first century.

Of a museum with such heterogeneous, cultural-historical and global aspirations one also expects topical debates that go beyond appealing displays. Are there cross-cultural topics that are as important to us today as to our ancestors or to the members of "foreign" cultures and periods? What is still relevant today, what is not, or no longer, and why? The exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum at the Humboldt-Forum always touch on

"grand themes" as well – *Der mobile Mensch* (Mobile Man), for example, on the issues of people in motion, migration and trade; *Der gläubige Mensch* (Religious Man) on belief systems, world views and ideologies; *Der Mensch und seine Umwelt* (Man and His Environment) on environmental practices and cognition; *Der Mensch als Erfinder und Nachahmer* (Man as an Inventor and Imitator) on genius, cultural transfer, devising and copying; *Der Mensch als Ästhet* (Man as an Aesthete) on artisans' and artists' expressions; *Mensch und Macht* (Man and Power) on leadership, system preservation and conflicts; *Der Mensch und sein Lebensweg* (Man and His Life's Journey) on the complexes of rites of passage and rituals; and *Mensch und Körper* (Man and Body) on health and disease, medicine and body images.

Within the framework of these general topics and with aesthetically appealing presentations, the museums at the Humboldt-Forum will present themselves as both a cultural-historical archive and a global network – open to a topical scholarly, artistic and media-based discourse.

Multiperspectivity, diversity of voices and perspective shifts

Multiperspectivity means basic thematic positioning: within a dynamic conception and choice of subjects and objects, various actors emerge. Multiperspectivity implies an awareness and consideration of the fact that objects are viewed in ways that are subject to historical shifts and a continuous process of (re-)appropriation and (re-)interpretation. Multiperspectivity at the Humboldt-Forum therefore involves both a synchronous and a diachronous approach, resulting in "a plurality of truth." In its consistent further development, this approach leads to a diversity of voices, as there is a demand not just for the perspectives of external consultants, but for their curatorial input as well. They will have their "say" at the Humboldt-Forum. Old classification systems and prerogatives of interpretation are scrutinised. For example, ethnologists in the past liked to take the alleged position of the authors or descendants of the donor culture, while art historians tended to consider the artworks in isolation. Such contradictory positions are being dismantled today and the voices of present-day descendants of the donor cultures play an increasingly important role. The concept for the Ethnologisches Museum at the Humboldt-Forum allows for all those approaches and views them not as conflicting, but rather as a potential.

The narrative presentation from various viewpoints also traces the movement of objects through space and time around the globe, with constantly changing interpretations being reflected even in conservatorial treatment. For instance, where necessary, the presentation at the Humboldt-Forum will have to take into account directives and taboos linked to clearly identified objects, while extreme conservatorial approaches that are sometimes completely at odds with destruction practices in the countries of origin need to be relaxed.

The interpretative dominance of European museum experts has been questioned by 1990s post-colonial critique – down to the point of view that only members of the particular culture are able to decipher and assess "their" objects. Yet they do not take into account the re-appropriation of cultural techniques and contents as part of the twentieth-century cultural revival strategies of indigenous groups, which are based specifically on the



Lienzo Seler II, Mexico, Oaxaca, before 1556 (details)

scholarly works of Western experts and documents of European collectors. Re-interpretations lead to new meanings. Others, by contrast, tend to go mostly unnoticed: most of the collections in European museums were created from a male perspective; women were a minority among collectors. Hence museums are veritable weapons stockpiles, whereas the world of women was usually inaccessible to male Europeans. Present-day indigenous representatives are quite pragmatic and, occasionally, positive about the preservation of objects in a European museum, provided they are guaranteed access to them. Visible storage cases at the Humboldt-Forum offer access without curatorial interference. Irrespective of this, the goal of multiperspectivity and multidisciplinary is vividness. Involving artists in a dialogue with researchers may serve to create new experiences, to be able to convey those experiences to visitors and promote the comfort factor in exhibition practice.

"Non-Europe"? – colonialism and global history

The political division of the world into "The West and the Rest" is rooted in the colonial era, which resulted in the construction of a non-European world: over here a developed



WORLDS IN MOTION: THE ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM AT THE HUMBOLDT-FORUM

Europe that was politically, culturally and economically superior, and over there the backward, foundering world of the unsuccessful who had no choice but to bow to the political and economic interests of Europe. Ethnographic collections, which developed analogously, carry this politically and ideologically motivated division forward to this day. Since colonial times their province has been the separate history and culture of the non-European world. In 1884-85, the Berlin-Congo Conference, at which the European powers negotiated the colonial division of Africa, was held not far from the Humboldt-Forum, in the Reichskanzlei (Reich Chancellery) at Wilhelmstrasse 77. At the Humboldt-Forum there is a need to address the fragmentation of the world, a need to open up new perspectives on history and the present, in order to provide – as a forum in the true sense of the word – the setting for a discursive process.

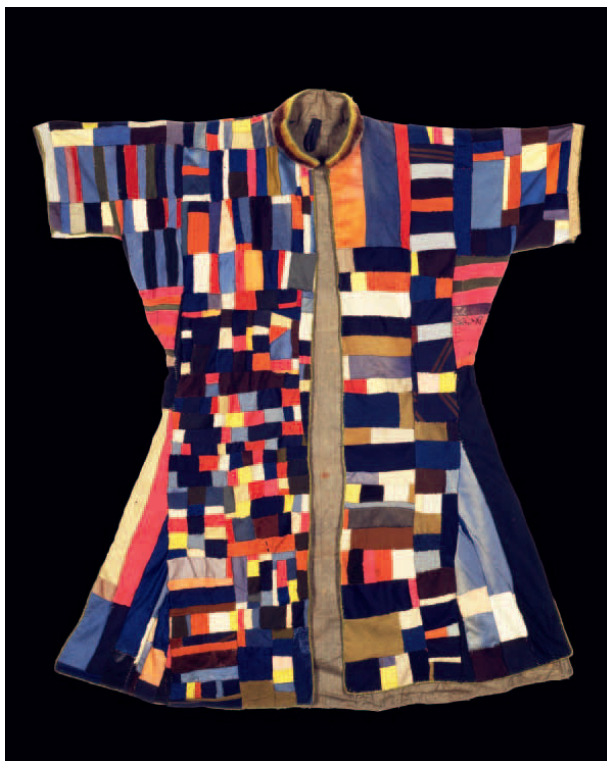
The Berlin collections in the heart of Berlin – both at Museum Island and at the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum) – are the result of historical processes that are directly related to the emergence of trade capitalism in Europe, the development of shipping and the concomitant opening up of the world for Europe. It is impossible to understand – or to tell – the history of the individual continents without taking into account this process. At the Humboldt-Forum the separation between Europe and “non-Europe” is lifted. Rather than being directed from Berlin at exotic foreign worlds, the perspective of the exhibitions incorporates Europe. The challenge is to overcome one-sided post-colonial perceptions that place the European museums squarely in the tradition of colonialism and construe the non-European world as a victim of colonialism, thereby perpetuating the fragmentation of the world.

There is invariably a socio-political dimension to multiperspectivity. Berlin is home to people with an “immigrant background” which, in the vast majority of cases, does not correspond to the overseas cultures addressed by the museums at the Humboldt-Forum. This is yet another reason why a multiperspectival approach ensures the perception and discussion of social and cultural change – of “motion” in the world, in our times and especially in Berlin.

Modernity and contemporary art

Forms of expression of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art from Asia, Latin and North America, Africa, Australia and the South Pacific are an important component of the Humboldt-Forum, not just in the spaces for special exhibitions on the ground floor, but also in the exhibition areas of the two museums on the second and third floors. Many contemporary artists from overseas still demur at being exhibited in an ethnological museum and thereby becoming “ethnicised.” However, at the Humboldt-Forum in the centre of Berlin this may change. Ideally, the art exhibited at the Humboldt-Forum both addresses current global developments and reflects on the pre-European and colonial periods. The Humboldt-Forum lends itself as a venue for artists in residence or for artist’s talks, while the visible storage cases in the exhibition spaces are a great resource for studying the material art and culture. Allegedly historical objects and historical artworks play a role in the present and can be queried for issues that are relevant today. This requires an acquisition policy on the part of the museums that is open to contem-

Throne, Cameroon, Bamun, 19th century



Patchwork coat of a Dervish, Iran, mid-19th century

porary art and that naturally incorporates "immaterial culture," be it film, video, audio or the internet.

A Junior Museum in the heart of Berlin

Young visitors, schoolchildren and young people, in a group, with the family or alone, should feel at ease at the Humboldt-Forum and sense that they are particularly welcome as one of the major target groups. At the Humboldt-Forum, the sites focused on their particular interests will not be found at marginal locations, separate from the main exhibition area, but are interspersed throughout the area as exhibition and activity spaces of equal status. Adjacent exhibition themes and object groups are playfully incorporated and subjected to media-based treatment. Though clearly delimited, their particular configuration renders these discovery centres and activity labs permeable to the main exhibitions.

WORLDS IN MOTION: THE ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM AT THE HUMBOLDT-FORUM



Neck pendant, Brazil, Urubu-Ka'apor, 20th century

The basic structure: exhibition modules, meeting points and visible storage cases

Clear guidance within the dramatic composition of an exhibition space of over 16,000 square metres is a pre-requisite for visitors to feel at ease, to stay for an extended period of time and to want to return, again and again, to the Humboldt-Forum. The basic geographic breakdown by continents traditionally applied at ethnological museums has proved itself, since it satisfies the first query of a typical visitor of this type of museum regarding the "where." However, transcontinental transitions will demonstrate that cultures do not conform to an artificial division of the world into continents. Deliberate disruptions and overarching "grand themes" not tied to a particular region provide the concept's framework. In addition to the junior museums mentioned above, each of the four "continent areas" will include meeting points, visible storage cases and thematic modules.



Discovery Centre at the Te Papa National Museum, New Zealand, Wellington

Meeting points: Large objects which have been integrated into the master plan for the museum's collection will be used to help create an atmospheric layout of such ensembles of spaces. These objects will range from house models and boats from Oceania and totem poles from the Northwest coast of North America to stelae from Cotzumalhuapa in Mesoamerica and a tea house in the spaces of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Such meeting points allow various kinds of uses: seating accommodations invite visitors to relax and examine the topics that interest them in greater depth through the media; and at the same time these areas can be used as spaces for smaller events, concerts or performances.

Visible storage cases: each of the four "continent areas" will incorporate visible storage cases as an independent module offering curious visitors access to previously hidden holdings, which they can explore at their own discretion or by means of media stations. They also provide specialists such as expert scholars, students, artists and designers with a wealth of illustrative material beyond the edited exhibitions. The organisation of the visible storage cases and the selection of exhibits will be based on varying criteria and topics and may, for instance, take the form of entire collections packed into a few square metres: jewellery, paintings, shadow puppets or textiles in pull-out drawers or hanging file folders, accompanied by digital documentation. Important topics include the history of the collections and collecting strategies, including problematic modes of appropriation during the colonial era. When not on display within the exhibition modules, major highlights from the holdings of the museums will thus be ever-present at the Humboldt-Forum; a continuous exchange with the stocks will be made possible.

Thematic modules: subjects and narratives of the exhibition modules will alternate, while avoiding content overlap. Sufficient space is devoted to each topic in order to present the focal areas of the collections appropriately and to steer clear of detailed, encyclopaedic accounts of the kind one would traditionally find in ethnographic museums. Modules and topics will change every eight years at the latest to ensure that all core collections of the Ethnologisches Museum and all possible topics will continue to be presented in an up-to-date manner.

Tours of the museum

Alternative points of access direct visitors to the exhibits. The Oceania section on the second floor leads to the Boat Hall and the clubhouses on the first floor. Through the music ethnology section one reaches Africa where one can leave the exhibits or, alternatively, move on to America. The Africa and America exhibits can each be accessed directly as well. The third floor is devoted to Asia and includes exhibits by the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, which can be explored by way of a tour of the entire floor or in individual stages.

Oceania and Australia: To date, painting from Oceania has received scant attention in museums, which tend to focus instead on the carvings. It is intended that this will change at the Humboldt-Forum. Paintings on bark cloths, palm leaf sheaths and shields offer a unique survey of styles and painting techniques used in Oceania. Among the exhibits are gable walls of Maprik houses, large palm leaf paintings from New Guinea, bark

paintings from Australia and tapa from Polynesia. "Palau and Colonial Encounters" is the topic of the meeting point: a Palau house and beam as well as the House of the Spirits, displayed for the first time at the Humboldt-Forum, will be presented with Abelam houses and a newly acquired initiation chamber. The large boats and a faithful reproduction that may be accessed can be admired within the thematic module titled "Ships, Environment, Cognitive Systems and Navigation." The topics of this module include cognitive systems, adaptation to the environment, intensive use of resources and settlement history. Quintessentially associated with motion, the boats are an important identifying feature for many Pacific Islanders.

Africa: The focus is on an exemplary account of the history of Africa that does not ignore connections and context. African societies were – and are – actors in common historical processes that link this continent to Asia, America and Europe. The "Indian Ocean" module presents pre-European contacts with Asia and, later on, with Europe, the "History of the Benin Empire" module the interwovenness through triangular trade with

Meeting point Palau Islands clubhouse, 1900





Europe, Africa and America. Africa's contact with Europe during the German colonial period is addressed within the module "Art and History of the Cameroon Grasslands." Contemporary representatives of, say, the Benin Empire and the kingdoms of the Cameroon grasslands will present their own views of history within the exhibition. "Contemporary Art/Present" reflects on Africa's current relations to America and Europe, for instance by using the example of African communities in Berlin.

Nontsikelelo Veleko, *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder: Nonkululeko*, 2003



WORLDS IN MOTION: THE ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM AT THE HUMBOLDT-FORUM

America: In the New World prior to the arrival of the Europeans, sophisticated writing and calendar systems existed only in Mesoamerica. In addition to the "complete" writing system of the Maya, non-linguistic communication systems based on pictographs were developed, with obvious connections to present-day simultaneous text- and image-based communication. The 18-square-metre cotton cloth of the Lienzo Seler II offers connections to the present with genealogies of local rulers, accounts of war-like conflicts, Spanish evangelisation as well as cartographical elements; media-facilitated interconnectedness with the original region in Oaxaca and current archaeological digs help transform this dead piece of cloth into a living landscape. In the immediately adjacent pre-Columbian golden chamber the search for "El Dorado" is explained by Alexander von Humboldt himself. An assembly space from the Pacific Northwest is directly linked, as a meeting point, to the totem poles and the thematic module called "One Collection – Two Perspectives – The Voyage of Captain Jacobsen to the Northwest coast and Alaska." Here indigenous history and European expansion are considered from various viewpoints. The second floor tour ends with the transcontinental thematic module "The Circum-Pacific Modernism."

Asia: On the third floor, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst are showcasing focal areas of their collections, with a particular emphasis on representing the religions of Islam, Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and folk religions. One of the thematic modules is devoted to the encounter of the Orient and Occident. The collection focusing on Qajar Persia (1779–1925), with additional examples from the Ottoman Empire and historic photographs, illustrates the political opening and rapprochement of Iran and the Ottoman Empire toward the West. The meeting point presents "The World of Asian Theatre," with performances in front of the screen, on the stage, and with original musical instruments. Shadow, mask and puppet theatre from Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, India and China comes alive with various rod puppets, masks and marionettes. The tour of the Asia floor ends with an installation that immerses visitors in an abundance of colourful textiles from all over the world.

Conclusion

The above outline reflects content-related plans as of 2013. It is based on the detailed concept of the Ethnologisches Museum from 2008 (see Viola König and Andrea Scholz, in *Humboldt-Forum: Der lange Weg 1999–2012* [Berlin, 2012]), which has been continuously updated over the past five years by the editors Peter Junge, Markus Schindlbeck, Andrea Scholz and Monika Zessnik, as well as by the curators of the Ethnologisches Museum. The master plan for the design of the Humboldt-Forum presented by Ralph Appelbaum Associates/malsyteufel in November of 2012 now necessitates commitments regarding the inaugural installation that can only marginally be further modified. The major challenge for the coming years of the construction phase will be to integrate new impulses, ideas and insights generated particularly by the Humboldt Lab Dahlem and by current academic debates into the conception.



Mixtec municipal representatives of Santa Maria Cuquila in Oaxaca, Mexico, studying the facsimile edition of a pre-Hispanic codex thought to originate from their community, 2008

