

The Mesoamerica exhibitions in the future Humboldt Forum in the center of Berlin

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The Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Germany will move into a new building called Humboldt Forum in the center of Berlin. The opening is scheduled 2019. The concept and planning for the new exhibition of the collections from Mesoamerica will be presented and discussed.

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The new Humboldt Forum in the reconstructed Prussian Palace in the center of Berlin is generally identified as Germany's most ambitious cultural enterprise. Challenges are to be discussed with the example of the collections from Mesoamerica to be moved from the outskirts at Berlin Dahlem to the center of Germany's capital.

In the first part of my presentation I will briefly introduce the Ethnologisches Museum, its move to the center, and the overall project of Humboldt Forum.

In the second part I will introduce the exhibitions concept of the Ethnographic collections, and in the final third part I will discuss the plans for the presentation of the collections from Mesoamerica at Humboldt Forum.

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The Ethnologisches Museum is housing ca. half a million objects, the collections from the Americas constituting the largest quantity with 190 000 objects from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, mainly archaeological objects.

Ca. 17 000 objects from four continents are going to be moved into Humboldt-Forum, including 5000 from the Museum of Asiatic Arts (AKU), among those six very large boats from the South Pacific and two overlong totem poles from the Pacific Northwest Coast.

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Since WW II the collections and the exhibitions are housed in Berlin Dahlem, which was a museums boomtown during the cold war, but following the German unification in 1989, it has become a felt outskirts at the SW edge of Berlin.

4a

The reason for this was the return of the European Art and antique Old World collections to their traditional buildings on the Museums Island in the former and new center of Berlin. Buildings had been emptied during WW II and collections were hidden at secret places in the west.

After the Art and antique collections had left, Dahlem experienced a heavy drop in the number of its visitors, around 350 000 per year before 1989, who now frequented the Museums Island. In consideration of the fact that Berlin's ethnographic collections are among its best worldwide, something had to happen.

4b

As early as in 2000 it had already been decided that the two "non European" collections housed in Dahlem in the EM and AKU were to be removed to the center as well. 'Removed' because the origin of all the Berlin collections is founded in the Ex Kunstkameras of the Prussian kings.

At the very same time, the German federal and Berlin city governments had to decide upon what to do with the big site that once housed the Prussian city palace destroyed in WW II. The East Germans had built a public convention center on the site. The West Germans found this large building to be full of asbestos and demolished it in 2006.

4c

In 2002, German Government decided for a reconstruction of the Prussian Palace with a multicultural utilization concept, the two museums occupying the largest floor areas over two levels.

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In 2015, the new palace had its roof ceremony, opening is scheduled for 2019 +.

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There will be some exhibitions on the city of Berlin and an accessible archeological site on the ground and first floors, as well as special exhibition and convention spaces, shops etc.

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Now I will introduce to you the exhibitions concept of the Ethnographic collections. With the experience that most of our visitors but also the descendants of the former owners and producers of the collections are asking about the "where" or the geographical origin of collections, we have decided to continue with the overall geographical structure by continents. On the 3rd floor the Asiatic collections of both the EM and the AKU will be shown. On the 2nd floor we present the collections from Africa, Oceania and the Americas.

With the experience of 45 years of almost unchangeable permanent exhibitions and the outdated encyclopedic concept, I decided for flexible thematic exhibition modules emphasizing the strongest parts of the museum's collections. This decision strongly influenced the Meosamerica section, as you will see later. There will be 28 exhibition

modules in the 1st round. This sounds many, however, museum curators had a hard time to make decisions and already have in mind what could be presented next.

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Usually, only 2 % of a museum's collections are on display in permanent exhibitions. People are asking us all the time what is happening with the rest. So I want to show more. Therefore we plan 4 visible storage 'islands' one for each continent. Again, these storages are flexible and objects can be changed, but be arranged in a dense presentation.

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Even though not being elaborately staged, the curators can decide for a special topic. For the Americas I decided for "American masterworks of pottery" showing mostly unknown examples i.e. from the Amazon.

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I should mention that just the EM is to be presented on 182.986.5ft², plus 53.819.55ft² of AKU. We do not recommend visitors to make it all in one visit. However, our experience shows that visitors appreciate special spaces for breaks to comfortably sit down, relax, deepen what they saw by modern media, watch a lecture or performance. Thus each continent got its own atmospheric "meeting point". I will explain the special Meeting Point in the Mesoamerica section at the end of my talk.

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There will be special spaces for young visitors, which cannot further be discussed here.

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We decided upon three guidelines to follow up in all the exhibition modules, the archaeological ones included: Different Perspectives, Participation, and Contemporaneity.

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This brings me to the introduction of the new concept for the collections from Mesoamerica in the Humboldt Forum. In the old hall that we are closing end of this year the former architect and curators wanted everything to show at the same time: a chronological timeline as well as geographical, cultural and ethnic diversities.

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They wanted a most aesthetic presentation and they refused any nearby text labels, let alone maps, drawings etc. Visitors would find some information sheets in a box and on

a large wall oversized photographs showing pyramids and building structures contributed some scenic illustration.

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At Humboldt Forum, my colleague Maria Gaida and me have to challenge with a much smaller space, instead of 3.280,84 ft we now will have to deal with less than half left, because we need now to present more collections from the Americas that had never been on show before, such as the Amazon collections.

16a

We do hold ca. 50 000 objects from Mesoamerica. Thus we had to make decisions. We considered the topic of graphical communication systems including writing systems to be a theme covering a great variety of objects because on many we do find single hieroglyphic signs or complete texts.

16 b

We do not intend to discuss periods that are not well represented in our collection. For this reason we have to focus on the Classic and Post Classic periods ending with the Colonial time.

17

You can see here an exhibition model with the large installation of the Lienzo Seler II from the Coixtlahuaca Valley on the front and smaller colonial native document on the back.

18

However, we will not begin to show our Cozumalhuapa Stela and objects in this room like at Dahlem, because these artifacts are to be arranged as a Meeting Point in the adjacent next room, the so called Swiss Hall to be discussed later.

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As you know the hieroglyphic communication system from Teotihuacan is not yet well understood, but it is considered to be a writing system. Visitors can learn basic topics such as the naming of people and places in a non-textual based system.

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Teotihuacan held relationships to the other Classic cities in Mesoamerica, each of which used a special graphic communication system developed to serve the needs of the user societies. I will not discuss single objects, but as you can see, the EM is holding examples of different kinds of media to explain the May Writing System developed to perfection, which will be curated by my colleague Maria Gaida.

21

We also hold some fine examples from Oaxaca, such as the classic Zapotec culture. At this point I should mention that we were able to apply for and receive funds to organize workshops and invite specialists to study and discuss our collection and the selected exhibits, such as Javier Urcid, John Pohl, Albert Davletshin, Marc Zender, Bas van Doesburg among others. Mary Miller just recently came visiting.

22

Eduard Seler who collected 19.000 objects for the EM also contributed a collection from the Huasteca that enables us to explain more variations of graphic communication systems in Mesoamerica to our future visitors. Here we not only present another interesting geographical area, but we turn into the Post Classic period.

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Of course the EM is holding a fine Mexica collection with objects showing various kinds of glyphs. Scholars such as Elizabeth Boone, Leonardo Lopez Lujan and others have studied the collection.

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Going back again to Oaxaca and the Southern part of today's Puebla I show some polychrome pottery including the Mixteca-Puebla writing system. However, at this point I want to focus on a relationship between Mesoamerican and our own new graphic communication systems. The Mixtec logographic example basing on pictographs allows some comparison to new developments we are dealing with in our daily lives.

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The Old World has a long tradition in text-based communication. Only recently with the necessity of communication in a multilingual well interconnected world are we ever more relying on a parallel 2nd system basing on pictographs each containing a very profound degree of complexity which can well be compared to the symbolism of Mixtec signs as shown in the codices. Neither our great grandfathers were nor our great grand children might be able to understand the symbolism on the tablets we are using.

26 a / b

For the purpose of pictorial comparison we will work with facsimiles of the Mixtec codices in the exhibition.

When I am back to Berlin, conservators will open the large glass frame protecting the Lienzo Seler II for the first time after more than 45 years in order to prepare its transfer to Humboldt Forum in 2018 latest.

27 a – d

This means physical investigation, restoration and and a new showcase of almost 14 square feet.

I published a book length study on this early colonial document years ago. A lot of research ever since has been done.

28

Excellence cluster TOPOI provided the chance to revise Lienzo Seler. My PH D student Monica Pacheco is writing her dissertation including fieldwork in the Coixtlahuaca Valley. She is inspecting the landscape comparing it with the landscape shown on the lienzo and in old maps and she is conducting interviews with local informants.

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However, the museum does hold even more pictorial native documents from the colonial period. These documents come from the Central Valleys and were collected in the 1820ies by German Merchant Carl Adolf Uhde.

I have been discussing the hall dedicated to the Mesoamerican Graphic Communications systems.

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Let us now move to the adjacent “Swiss Hall”. It is one of the palace’s portal halls that had been used by the Swiss guardians. It provides a challenge to any exhibition designer, as its sidewalls are 12 yards high.

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The eight each 4 meters high Stela from Cozumalhuapa will have a hard time to stand their grounds in this hall, which we dedicated to communication in a more general sense, with a special focus on the Mesoamerican ballgame.

33a

RAM designers presented an unsatisfactory first solution with a tablet of digital signs to be projected on the wall.

33b

At the same time, in 2013, Mexican artist Mariana Castillo Deball was awarded the National Gallery Prize for Young Artists in the Berlin Museum for Contemporary Arts with a wooden floor piece based on what is known as the Nurnberg Tenochtitlan map.

A year later, in 2014, Mariana created another work for the Berlin Biennale at the Ethnologisches Museum experimenting with techniques used to capture the archaeological remnants such as plaster molds, facsimiles, and prints. The artist presented an installation that included sculptures, drawings, prints, and display structures, together with a series of plaster copies of museum items.

Thus I thought Mariana would be the one to find a solution for the Swiss hall. I presented her different ideas to consider-

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Among those was Humboldt Fragment 1, one part of an originally 52 pages nahuatl screen fold tribute list from Guerrero, hold in the Berlin States Library, collected by Alexander von Humboldt in 1803.

Gerardo Gutierrez, Balthazar Brito and me had published a facsimile and commentary collocating it with the other fragment Codex Azoyou 1 reverse hold in the BNAH Mexico City. In our reproduction, we reconstructed the missing folios. Unfortunately the States Library did not give permission for a permanent display of the fragile fragment in Humboldt Forum.

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Mariana studied the document carefully and decided for a transformation into a “ceramic mural reference” of the whole document including its missing parts.

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Mariana also created petate weaved relief benches for the Meeting Point and suggested a tezontle volcanic stone floor.

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I introduced this example to you in order to show how we follow our 3 guidelines.

In the next two or more years, we will be busy with removal of objects, packing, relocation, installation. If you want to see the old Dahlem presentation, you should plan and make your trip in the next 7 months.

However, we hope to provide access to the stored collections at any time.

