

# Renaming ethnographic museums. Implications and strategies for the presentation of the collections: the example of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin

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The summer of 2015 was the perfect moment for organizing the Conference *Museum of Cultures, Wereldmuseum, Världskulturmuseet ... What else? – Positioning Ethnological Museums in the 21st Century*, to “discuss the need for a critical appraisal of the past, present, and future of ethnological museums”. Indeed, in planning the new exhibitions for the Humboldt Forum in the centre of Berlin and in a rebuilt Prussian palace, the staff of the Ethnologisches Museum finds itself under close observation, sometimes even attacked at the stage of an as yet empty palace. For almost a decade critics have complained either about the lack of concepts or about the concepts they believe exist. However, the criticism and alternative recommendations did not prevent the building of the palace. The roof-raising ceremony was celebrated in June 2015. On 18 October 2015, another act in the long process of realizing the Humboldt Forum was completed – the laboratory of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem, which will be discussed later. The Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, which will move from the outskirts of Berlin Dahlem into the Palace, will not change the names of their institutions, but will be placed under the joint management of Humboldt Forum. This is a very special case. However, I had to face the debate in 2001, when I took over the position of director of the previously named Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin. Before leaving this job, the ex-director decided to rename the museum. Let us have a quick look at his and other directors’ motivations.

## Renaming ethnographic museums

In the discussions about new concepts for presenting ethnographic collections, we are also managing a number of new terms that have not been used before. Quite a few former Museums für Völkerkunde have changed their names in the last two decades. To begin with, I will briefly con-

sider the implications of these renamings. What are the intended impacts for the public, the visitors, the scholars and ourselves as curators?

I will then introduce some of the guidelines developed for the exhibition concept in the Humboldt Forum and explain how we try to continuously update them on our way through the long construction process.

I was not happy, of course, about the renaming of the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde as a last-minute act by my predecessor, and I was keen to learn more about the reasons. I initiated a discussion not only with the Berlin curators but also with other directors who had just renamed their institutions, such as Basel and Frankfurt. This discussion was published in *Baessler-Archiv* 2001.<sup>1</sup>

Others followed, such as Gothenburg (2004), Vienna (2013) and Munich’s Five Continents Museum (2014). In Britain and France, the ethnographic collections of the Museum of Mankind and the Musée de l’Homme were merged into the traditional British Museum and the brand new Musée du quai Branly. It should also be mentioned that Cologne and Stuttgart were named after their founders from the very start; others with ethnographic collections, such as the Übersee-Museum Bremen and Tropenmuseum Amsterdam, have geographic names.<sup>2</sup>

The motivation for renaming ethnographic museums was explained along the lines of:

*“We took a long time discussing a new name for our museum!”*

*“We were not present in the public, we needed a breath of fresh air!”*

*“We want re-orientation in our traditional institution.”*

*“We need new concepts and strategies. We have new messages and different stories to tell.”*

*“We want to have a reason to include pressing issues and contemporary art into our exhibits”.<sup>3</sup>*

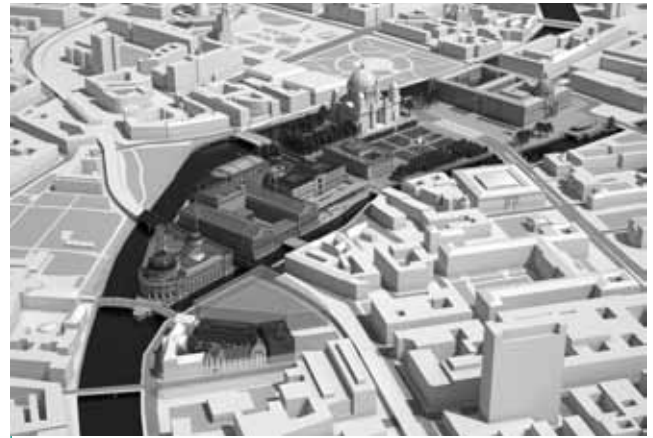


Front side of the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst at Berlin Dahlem. © Martin Franken / Ethnologisches Museum 2008.

The city of Frankfurt's ethnographic collections were re-named the most often: Städtisches Völkermuseum (1904), Museum für Völkerkunde der Stadt Frankfurt am Main (1960s), Museum der Weltkulturen (2001) and Weltkulturen Museum (2010).<sup>4</sup>

Surprisingly enough, after the turn of the twenty-first century, ethnographic museums declared contemporaneity as a new focus, ignoring the fact that from the 1970s onwards, after the 1968 protest movements, contemporaneity had already been an explicit postulation for Western ethnographic museums. However, prejudices still persist today, as we can see in current blogs. To conclude, with the exception of the Berlin Museum, all the renamed museums avoided using terms such as "ethnographic" or "ethnological" as part of their names, deciding instead to share the focus with either the terms of "world" and/or "cultures".<sup>5</sup>

As a consequence, these museums have turned themselves into trans-disciplinary museums that hold collections open to any kind of disciplinary research and presentation. As a matter of fact, ethnographic museums have always been museums of "Pre-Columbian Arts", "Arts from Africa and Oceania", "World Music", "World Religions" and above all "Museums of Global Prehistory and History". The wide range of possibilities for looking at so-called "ethnographic objects" from different perspectives, for instance as artworks and evidence of colonial exploitation, as tools such as ritual paraphernalia, as family keepsakes and so on, has been discovered by artists, historians and art historians.



Simulation of the future Museums Island at Berlin with Humboldt Forum. View from Northwest. Some of the museums are named by geographical terms such as *Museum für Asiatische Kunst*, *Vorderasiatisches Museum*, *Ägyptisches Museum* and *Islamisches Museum*, some are named by disciplines such as *Ethnologisches Museum* and *Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte*. © SPK / ART+COM, 2015.

### Universal museums

The world museums under discussion are not to be mistaken for "universal museums". The concept of the universal museum has become the subject of emotionally charged debates. Nonetheless, ethnographic collections are concerned because some of these are housed in universal museums such as the British Museum in London.

As mentioned above, the name *Ethnologisches Museum* does not really matter anyway in the future, as its exhibitions will be presented under the roof of the new Humboldt Forum together with the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, which was renamed as a result of the unification of two museums of Asian arts in 2006. However, the whole ensemble of the museums on the Berlin Museum Island together with the new Humboldt Forum can be regarded as a typical universal museum.

### On the move from idyllic Dahlem to the centre of Berlin

Since 2007, the director and curators of the Ethnologisches Museum have continued to update and adjust their exhibition concept for the Humboldt Forum in line with the museum's mission statement, which can still be found on the active website.<sup>6</sup>

When we started working on the concept for the Humboldt Forum, we had to discuss the overall structure of the new museum. We were aware that the traditional geographic structure was no longer en vogue. But what were

the alternatives? In the 2000s, thematic structures became highly popular. However, in Berlin we had to face the fact that our neighbour museums on Museum Island are actually named using geographic terms such as the Asiatisches Museum in the Humboldt Forum and the Vorderasiatisches, Ägyptisches and Islamisches Museum on Museum Island.

First and foremost, however, we experienced our visitor's expectations of spatial "orientation" in the truest sense of the word. When concluding our discussions, we finally decided to keep the continental structure over the 17,000 square meters of exhibition space.

In the Humboldt Forum, the collections from the Americas, Africa and Oceania will be presented on the second floor and the Asian collections of the two museums on the third, but there will no longer be a visible borderline between the museums.

The critics keep complaining about the missing continent No. 5, Europe, but this complaint is shortsighted, as Europe and the Europeans will be present everywhere inside the Humboldt Forum and in the museums around it – not only on Museum Island, but also within eyeshot, such as the Deutsches Historisches Museum. Some Berlin history, from the prehistoric era through the Middle Ages up to the demolition of the Prussian palace in the twentieth century, will be presented in different spaces on the ground and first floors of the Humboldt Forum. Ethnographic collections can never be explained without discussing how and under what circumstances (economic and colonial, political and historical, religious and scholarly) they were collected by European collectors and how they made it to Berlin. Last but not least, it will be an important task for all the curators involved in the Humboldt Forum to take care of ongoing developments and the interdependencies in the world, locally and globally. This will also mean close coordination and fine-tuning between the responsible CEOs of the Humboldt Forum and Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW, House of World Cultures).<sup>7</sup>

From the very beginning, politicians, journalists, scholars and the public expected the two museums to constitute a brand new museum in the Humboldt Forum. However, the term "brand new" is tricky. Even at the fastest pace for building something as immense as the reconstructed palace, more than a decade will have elapsed between the initial concept devised in 2007 and when the Humboldt Forum opens after 2017. How did we react to the given dilemma? What was our path? Influenced by the basic ideas that our colleague, Jette Sandahl, the founding director of

the Museum of World cultures at Gothenburg, had raised, we did away with permanent exhibitions.

*"I had not seen a permanent display in a museum that was not based on an evolutionary perspective or colonial value system. I didn't think I could get away from that. Permanent exhibitions are permeated by a false sense of timeless, unquestionable truth. The stories they have to tell, to stay relevant for the 20 years they are expected to last, use ideas and categories for describing and organizing material that are rife with Western-centric assumptions."*<sup>8</sup>

She was able to form a team of young, innovative international advisers and curators who travelled out into the world and came back with ideas, concepts and strategies. They brought in more people and their input resulted in five brilliant opening exhibitions.<sup>9</sup>

### The exhibition concepts for Humboldt Forum

The concept for the Ethnologisches Museum in the Humboldt Forum aims to be flexible, even though there have always been forces undermining this strategy. Some individuals warned that future generations might not be able to raise the necessary funds for changes, while curators, architects and designers seek to leave their mark for eternity. Just before Ralph Appelbaum Associates was hired for the exhibition design in 2012, the Ethnologisches Museum managed to develop the concepts for 28 different thematic exhibition modules, all based on the museum's collections. With the exception of the final placement of a few oversized objects, each module can be changed whenever a new one is developed.<sup>10</sup>

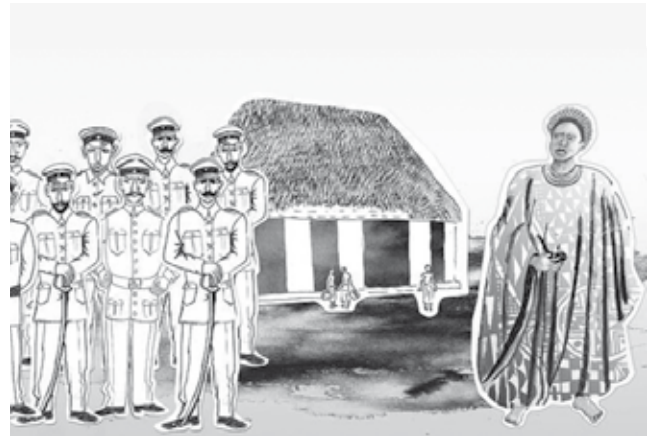
As a director I had to take care of

1. themes to focus on the collections
2. ensuring that stories being told showed some relationship to the present
3. making sure that the same topics were not repeated again and again

In addition to the exhibition modules, four visible storage ensembles provide a dense presentation of objects in order to give visitors and scholars broader insights into the immense collections. Objects or whole showcases are flexible as well. Each ensemble is organized around a subordinate concept, such as the "History of collections" from Africa or "Ceramic production" in the Americas. Visitors will have access to the museum's database and supporting digital information.



Cooperation with societies and communities of origin. Professor Paul Ongtooguk, member of the Iñupiat of northwest Arctic Alaska, visiting the building site of Humboldt Forum with architects and curators, October 2015. © Viola König 2015.



Presenting the topic of colonialism in museums and especially to children and teenagers is particularly challenging: The Humboldt Lab project (*No*) *Place in the Sun* tested polyphonic solutions from a variety of perspectives. Illustration: Salom Beury; Montage: Charlotte Kaiser, IT'S ABOUT exhibitions 2015.

In addition to exhibition modules and visible storage, special spaces for young visitors and families will be another important element. No longer presented as a separate *Juniormuseum* as in Dahlem, four major junior spaces and additional scattered single spots for junior tracks will be spread over the exhibition space on the second and third floors in the Humboldt Forum.

Last but not least, there will be a very special sound module. Based on the large audio collections housed in the Ethnologisches Museum, music, speech, sound recording media and, of course, instruments will have a very special space of their own.

### Cooperation with the societies and communities of origin

*"If imported art and ethnography collections were to stay in Europe, museums would have to involve potential stakeholders in decisions about how they were displayed"*, Jette Sandahl said.<sup>11</sup>

We had to learn that this is a challenge that is not so easy to put into practice. Cooperation with "source communities" or societies of origin can only work when partners in the collaboration are willing to cooperate. The people there are not waiting for us to discuss with them how to present collections in Germany. They are concerned with their own issues and challenges back home. Berlin is not within their territory; they live too far away to supervise what is going on in Berlin. Patience is needed to build up long-term relationships. Reliability is the basis for sustainable and

effective collaboration and in many cases it is only accepted if objects can travel "back" and be presented in the community, even if only for a limited time. Several options have to be considered in the future. Transporting objects back and forth is just one option, and from a conservative perspective it is not recommended for vulnerable objects. However, in the age of perfect 3D reproductions, many more options for sharing objects will have to be discussed in the future.

### Exhibition guidelines

All of the curators involved are following three principal guidelines in the conceptual design of their exhibition modules: 1. Multiperspectivity; 2. Present; 3. Participation and Contemporaneity. This means:

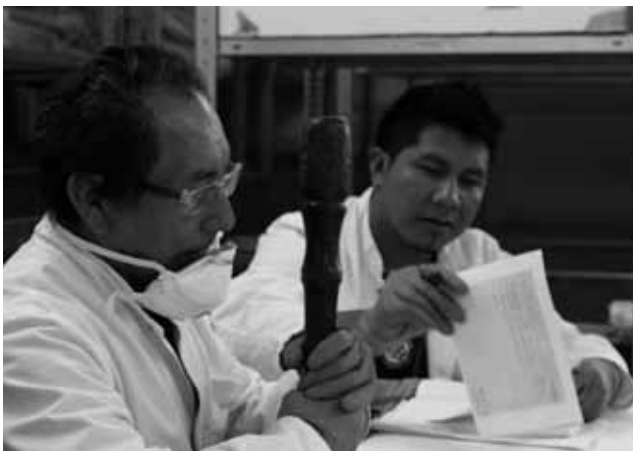
1. multiple curatorial and advisory approaches for presentations
2. relationship between past and present
3. inclusion of the descendants of societies of origin as well as museum visitors.

### Colonial background of collections

In the beginning of the development process, there was a political expectation that only objects with a clear provenance and non-colonial background could be presented in the Humboldt Forum. However, with the recent finding of war booty from the Maji Maji rebellion against German colonizers in Tanzania in the museum's store rooms, it became clear that research on provenance will take a very



Fieldwork in the Coixtlahuaca Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico. Researcher Monica Pacheco Silva discussing a photograph of the Lienzo Seler II with community elders, July 2013. TOPOI Project *Representation of Space and Place in Mesoamerica* directed by Viola König. Photo: Juan Pablo Calderon Urbina 2013.



Representatives from the Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca at Work in the Ethnologisches Museum's depot, August 2014. Photo: Natalia Pavia Camargo 2014.

long time and might never be finished, as new insights are expected to be gleaned. But it is extremely important that such objects be shown in the Humboldt Forum and that the background and related research be introduced to visitors. After all, the public critique of the presentation of ethnographic objects in a reconstructed Prussian palace has helped to stimulate the public discussion of German colonial history outside the academy.

### Research

It is a relatively unknown fact that archaeological objects comprise the Ethnologisches Museum's largest collections. 100,000 pre-Columbian objects are supplemented by major reference samples from the early colonial period. One such object is the large-sized Lienzo Seler II from Mexico measuring some 16 square meters. The study on this map-like cotton sheet is part of a research project in the Excellence Cluster Topoi.<sup>12</sup> From the beginning it was decided that the results of the study should be incorporated into the media part of the presentation in the Humboldt Forum to allow visitors to take part actively and explore the different perceptions of space in Mesoamerica before and after the arrival of the Spaniards.

### Collaboration

The collections from the Amazon have never before been presented in Dahlem's permanent exhibitions. In the Humboldt Forum, the historical objects will be explained with the assistance of students from the Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca in the Venezuelan Amazon region. In 2014, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem project *Sharing Knowledge* initiated a unique cooperation allowing students from the university and staff of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin to work together and establish a joint interactive web platform.<sup>13</sup> Knowledge about ethnographic objects from the region is available on the platform and opens up further virtual discussions. The data and information are all negotiable. Knowledge production is part of a continuous process.<sup>14</sup>

### Controversy

Double standards are applied to contemporary art museum displays in comparison with ethnographic museum exhibitions. What is unproblematic there will not be accepted here. The critic's wagging finger is omnipresent when it comes to ethnographic museums. This was one of the many "lessons" of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem. In their cooperation with cura-



*Man from Another Star* – Puppet Show Video by the puppet theater *Das Helmi* known for its highly individualistic homemade foam puppets, rambling improvisations and politically incorrect anarcho-aesthetics. For the film production, *Man from Another Star*, it used these elements of live performance. © Filmstill *Das Helmi* 2014.



Humboldt Lab project *Travelogue*. The puppet theater *Das Helmi* produced a film with their foam puppets that sheds light on the figure of collector Adrian Jacobsen and translates the travelogue into the anarchical, improvising *Helmi* aesthetics. The project was directed by Viola König, Monika Zessnik, and Andrea Rostásy. © Filmstill *Das Helmi* 2014.

tors, artists, performance specialists, and native consultants, the museum staff experienced different perceptions and ways of dealing with the collections. The Lab made clear what it really means to give up autonomy, provide open access and allow external curating. It also showed that responsibilities remain unclear in some cases. Thus, the Berlin puppet theatre group *Das Helmi*, which was engaged to interpret Captain Adrian Jacobsen's travelogue, felt free to show Jacobsen's *Scramble for Northwest Coast artefacts* in their own "anarchical" way.<sup>15</sup> There was no problem with that regarding the way in which Jacobsen and other white people were portrayed, but what about the natives? Any restrictions? "No restrictions!"<sup>16</sup> exclaimed Western art historians. "We feel extremely uncomfortable"<sup>17</sup>, commented curators from the Northwest Coast, both natives and whites.

My final example shows how ethnographic museums, whatever they name themselves, are undergoing a highly dramatic phase in their history. Subject to critical surveillance, exhibitions in ethnographic museums are evaluated according to political, ethical and other criteria. But above all, the location of collections from America, Africa, Oceania and Asia in European museums is under debate. With its exposure in a reconstructed palace in the political centre of Berlin, the Humboldt Forum is ideally qualified as a representative for ongoing disputes. However, such a process is not to be regarded as a "crisis", but as a welcome challenge.

### Annotations

- <sup>1</sup> Viola KÖNIG, "Wer sind wir? Was machen wir? Wie heißen wir? Zur Frage der Umbenennung von Völkerkundemuseen – eine Debatte", in: Maria GAIDA, Viola KÖNIG, Ingrid SCHINDLBECK (Hrsg.), *Baessler-Archiv. Beiträge zur Völkerkunde*, Vol. 49, Berlin 2001, pp. 7–10.
- <sup>2</sup> In 2013, the Landesmuseum Hanover, which houses ethnographic collections as well as European Arts, Natural history et cetera, added a second name *Das Weltenmuseum*, which means *The Museum of worlds* (see [www.landesmuseum-hannover.niedersachsen.de/portal/live.php?navigation\\_id=33212&article\\_id=116308&psmand=183](http://www.landesmuseum-hannover.niedersachsen.de/portal/live.php?navigation_id=33212&article_id=116308&psmand=183), last access 29 March 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> Excerpts and English translation of information from museum websites by the author.
- <sup>4</sup> See [www.weltkulturenmuseum.de/de/museum/geschichte](http://www.weltkulturenmuseum.de/de/museum/geschichte) (last access 29 March 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion, see Christian MÜLLER-STRATEN, "Wie sinnvoll sind Umbenennungen von Museen?", in: *MUSEUM AKTUELL*, August 2014, Munich, p. 36 (online [www.museum-aktuell.de/download/d\\_82.pdf](http://www.museum-aktuell.de/download/d_82.pdf), last access 29 March 2015).
- <sup>6</sup> [www.smb.museum/en/museums-and-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/home.html](http://www.smb.museum/en/museums-and-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/home.html) (last access 29 March 2015).
- <sup>7</sup> For the expectations of Bernd SCHERER, the director of the HKW, see [www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/humboldt-forum-wunderkammer-und-labor/11905912.html](http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/humboldt-forum-wunderkammer-und-labor/11905912.html) (last access 29 March 2015).
- <sup>8</sup> Peggy LEVITT, *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the*

*Nation and the World on Display*, Oklahoma 2015, p. 18.

- <sup>9</sup> However, after she had left the Gothenburg museum, the spirit and dynamics were gone as well.
- <sup>10</sup> Boats and houses from Oceania, stone sculptures from Mesoamerica, totem poles from Northwest America.
- <sup>11</sup> LEVITT 2015 (as endnote 8).
- <sup>12</sup> *Representation of Space and Place in Mesoamerica*: [www.topoi.org/project/c-5-10/](http://www.topoi.org/project/c-5-10/) (last access 29 March 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> The Humboldt Lab Dahlem (2012–2015) was a programme of the *Kulturstiftung des Bundes* and the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*. It completed 30 projects including exhibitions, symposia, workshops, and interventions. The experiments on seven “rehearsal stages” open to Dahlem visitors was aimed at supporting the planning process of the exhibitions for the Humboldt Forum: [www.humboldt-forum.de/en/humboldt-lab-dahlem/projektarchiv/](http://www.humboldt-forum.de/en/humboldt-lab-dahlem/projektarchiv/) (last access 29 March 2015).
- <sup>14</sup> [www.humboldt-forum.de/en/humboldt-lab-dahlem/project-archive/probebuehne-7/sharing-knowledge/project-description/#c6003](http://www.humboldt-forum.de/en/humboldt-lab-dahlem/project-archive/probebuehne-7/sharing-knowledge/project-description/#c6003) (last access 29 March 2015).
- <sup>15</sup> [www.humboldt-forum.de/en/humboldt-lab-dahlem/projects-probebuehnen/travelogue/](http://www.humboldt-forum.de/en/humboldt-lab-dahlem/projects-probebuehnen/travelogue/) (last access 29 March 2015).
- <sup>16</sup> Personal communication, Advisory Board Humboldt Forum Meeting at Berlin, 23 September 2015.
- <sup>17</sup> Personal communication, Workshop in Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, 11 September 2015.

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