

## **Opportunities and Obstacles – Conversations with Curators and Provenance Researchers**

The call for a paradigm shift in dealing with non-European objects from colonial contexts is getting louder and louder. **Paola Ivanov**, curator for Africa at the Ethnological Museum of the National Museums in Berlin, talks about what has already changed, what still needs to change, and how ethnological provenance research works. **Christine Howald and Andrea Scholz** are also part of the large team behind the Humboldt Forum. In an interview, the two scientists talk about the opportunities and hurdles the mammoth project offers before and after the opening. **Julia Binter**, provenance researcher at the Central Archive of the National Museums in Berlin and head of the cooperation project on the Namibian collections at the Ethnological Museum, explains how the exhibition at the Humboldt Forum was shaped by the cooperation with partners from Namibia.

### **Online via:**

<https://blog.smb.museum/wir-duerfen-keine-angst-haben-endspurt-beim-humboldt-forum/>

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<https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/newsroom/dossiers-und-nachrichten/dossiers/dossier-humboldt-forum/wir-zeigen-keine-originalobjekte.html>

**Christine Howald and Andrea Scholz:**

**“We Mustn't Be Afraid”: Entering the Final Stretch at the Humboldt Forum**

Interviewer: Sven Stienen

You are both part of the large team behind the forthcoming presentation of the non-European collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) at the Humboldt Forum. What exactly are your roles in the process?

Andrea Scholz: I have two different roles in the process. On the one hand, I am the curator of the exhibition module on the Amazon, which will open mid-2022 in the eastern wing of the Humboldt Forum. I more or less inherited that job, because during my training at the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum), I developed the concept for the presentation together with the former curator. When he left, I took over curatorial responsibility for the module. In my second role, I am the coordinator for transcultural cooperation. I coordinate the international cooperative projects of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) with partners from the Amazon, Korea, Namibia, Tanzania and the Syrian diaspora, for example. I also develop ideas for projects, find scholarships and residencies, and I provide support for those involved. There are a lot of administrative hurdles, and we hope our assistance can help motivate more of our colleagues to initiate projects of this kind.

Christine Howald: I am a provenance researcher for the Dahlem collections; I specialize in Asia as one of a team of five researchers. Our job is to investigate the biographies of objects in the collections and the circumstances in which they were acquired. We are confining ourselves to selected objects, because the two participating museums have over 500,000 objects, and only about 20,000 of them will be shown at the Humboldt Forum. The history and origin of all these items can only be uncovered gradually, and that is more than a lifetime's work for five researchers. So, first of all, we are concentrating mainly on the “hot topic objects” from former colonies of the German empire. At the same time, our job is to shed light on the problematic nature of these objects and to bring the issues of provenance and colonial injustice across in the exhibitions at the Humboldt Forum.

What does that mean in concrete terms?

CH: For example, we are currently making a companion booklet on the provenance research involved in the exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für

Asiatische Kunst at the Humboldt Forum. This informs visitors which objects are problematic and why, and it explains how we are handling them. And with our colleagues from the department of education and outreach, we are drawing up supplementary programs with a focus on the provenance of objects: tours, workshops, and so on. We are also trying to see to it that these issues are taken up more often in external communications, because it is enormously important to handle provenance research transparently and openly.

The Humboldt Forum is currently the most widely discussed cultural project in Germany. The risks and problems are well known, but what opportunities do you see in the project?

CH: The Humboldt Forum, in my opinion, offers the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) and its museums the opportunity to embrace the public debate, including the critical viewpoints, and to rethink the idea of the museum as such. We shouldn't be afraid of criticism but instead see it as an invitation to join an international discussion with other researchers, artists, critics and visitors and rethink the job of museums and the future of the items in their collections.

AS: This process has already begun. In recent years, we have witnessed how the Humboldt Forum has brought public attention to discussions that hardly ever took place in the past. I remember very well the situation in museums when I started there nine years ago. At that time, some people felt that it was bad publicity to point out the problematic context of a collection. A lot has changed since then. The current attention is holding up a mirror to museums – how we react to that remains to be seen. But one thing is perfectly clear: the increased attention is also generating funding, and funds are needed to change things. That is especially true of the cooperative international projects that are so important in this context. They require resources, time and money. So more funding also means an opportunity to change museum practice through new projects and partnerships.

Is this a process of catching up with a trend, after which the museums will be more up to date?

CH: All museums are currently in this situation, not just us. Some of them may be a bit further along in the process than we are. But we also have a special role, because the Humboldt Forum is such a large project, and because there is always a focus on Berlin as the capital. When you are that exposed, the criticism tends to be very sharp, but I think it would be quite similar somewhere else if the project were this large.

AS: And “up to date” may not be the right phrase in this context. Because we don't know where this development will lead us. No museum is perfect. At the moment, all of them are trying to reinvent themselves and respond to social expectations and challenges. But it's important to go beyond addressing the problematic origins of collections within the museums and also understand injustice and colonialism as larger issues that society as a whole has to reappraise.

The discussion involving the Humboldt Forum has given the topic a new significance, at any rate. The Humboldt Forum is a mega-project – how much influence do you have on it as participants and staff members? Can you contribute your own ideas and noticeably shape and impact the future exhibition? What sort of ideas can be realized; how much latitude is there behind the scenes?

AS: The whole process is extremely complex. There are different levels of planning. The planning of the content began with an instruction from the management to present the highlights of the collections, and that actually remains unchanged to this day. At various times, new players also came into the process and changed things, first the Swiss cultural entrepreneur Martin Heller, and then later, Neil McGregor, the former director of the British Museum in London. The responsibilities are also distributed among the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz and the Stiftung Humboldt Forum (Humboldt Forum Foundation), which involves further processes of coordination. So there is a road map, and there are a great many participants and interests, and in a process like that, it is difficult to bring your own ideas and inspirations all the way to fruition.

CH: The structures in the SPK are also very hierarchical, with many branches, and that doesn't make it easier to put ideas into practice quickly – which is not to say that it's impossible.

AS: On the other hand, given the large institutions involved in this project, it does allow a great deal of discretion in other ways. With the Humboldt Forum, I've been able to get financing for the most extraordinary projects, like the facade projection dealing with the annual ecological cycle of the Tiquié River in Brazil, which was quite a big production. There is a lot possible here that might not work out at a smaller museum. In that sense, the Humboldt Forum has opened up new possibilities, too, and that makes me hopeful for the future.

Is it frustrating sometimes when your own ideas don't make it through the approval processes, or is that outweighed by enjoyment of the project and the work it involves?

CH: I haven't been working that long at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, so I can't judge how it is for someone who has been in the Humboldt Forum project from the beginning and worked on a lot of ideas that were ultimately dropped. My co-workers and I are new arrivals, and we're full of enthusiasm. We're very motivated by our projects, and we have the opportunity to set up a new field at the institution – the field of post-colonial provenance research. At the same time, we're aware that we're performing an important task: the public expects information and positions regarding the subject of provenance, and we're helping develop a position at and for the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Of course, that's very much dependent on what sort of discretion we're allowed – we need intellectual and financial leeway to develop new fields and establish contacts. It's a question of finding new ways of engaging in research and cooperation. In a project as large as the Humboldt Forum, with so many participants, there is always an interplay between great opportunities and complex decision-making processes – some things work, and others are practically impossible.

Everyone is looking forward with excitement to the opening of the Humboldt Forum. What are the long-term prospects for the museum in your view? What role will the Humboldt Forum play in the global process of coming to terms with colonialism?

CH: At the Humboldt Forum, we have the advantage of being well staffed compared to other museums, not just in Germany but internationally. There are four permanent positions dedicated to provenance research, along with a temporary post and, soon, a project-based position. More will follow, and in Andrea Scholz, we have a permanent staff member working on international cooperation, which is also not common. Although that is still not enough, in view of the size of the collections, it gives us the ability to make progress with the investigation of our own collections, perform high-quality research and have an impact on the universities and schools. So we have the chance to become a genuine forum for exchange, networking and innovation at the international level – which would be in keeping with the ethos of the name Humboldt. The big question will be whether we continue to get the funding and the leeway that we need, and whether we're given free rein. I also hope that the permanent exhibitions at the Humboldt Forum will change dynamically over time and be adaptable. At the moment, everything is very fixed. Everything has to be perfect for the opening, and there is almost no scope for changes.

AS: I think that's a reflection of the very rigid and meticulous planning that's necessary in this huge project. I think when the museum is open, our biggest job will be to bring about a change in thinking. We have to stop looking at nothing but ourselves all the time, at the Humboldt Forum and its objects, at the dark chapters of our own history – it's just as important to look out into the world today and notice what's happening

around us. Because there too, we see the effects of colonialism, and it's our responsibility today to change things for the better. If the people involved in the Humboldt Forum have the courage to set changes like that in motion and take a stance on them, then it can be a museum that sets an example.

“Courage” raises an important issue. There is currently a heated discussion under way about returns, cooperation and responsibility – what is the right way to deal with these challenges, in your opinion?

CH: Returns can't take place as long as we haven't sought a dialog with the societies of origin. So we need cooperative international projects in order to build up contacts and form closer relationships.

AS: First, we have to give up our universalist pretense that we alone can decide what shared cultural heritage is and what the most important problems are that must be solved. For that, as Christine mentioned, we have to continue to build and cultivate relationships with other societies. That is a huge task, and I view it as our central task.

Do you feel as though you're being constantly watched right now, with the opening just around the corner?

AS: The pressure of this final phase is definitely being felt on the team. Everyone has a ton of things to do, there are countless meetings, and it's a dynamic situation. In conditions like that, many people are prone to react a bit irritably to extra requests and added work.

CH: The pressure is noticeable among our people too, because there's currently a lot of attention directed on our subjects – from the Benin Bronzes to the Luf boat – both among the general public and at the political level. But that also has its appeal, of course, because there are windows and forums opening up everywhere to talk about our work. And in the end, we in turn can observe all this interest that is giving us and our work such a huge boost.

Are there also reasons for optimism despite this tense and stressful time?

AS: Yes, of course there are. The most important one is that we are finding the courage to embark on a different discourse. We mustn't view these collections as just a burden of colonialism. We should also see them as an opportunity for a genuine transformation of intercultural relationships. At the same time, of course, we can't ignore the colonial past

and just focus on the beauty of the objects. The objects are certainly beautiful, but the point is that there is more behind them, and we have to risk starting the discussions needed to sort out this web of relationships.

CH: Exactly! We mustn't be afraid to seize this opportunity!

**Paola Ivanov:**

### **The research agenda can no longer be set from Germany**

Interviewer: Oliver Hoischen

Ms. Ivanov, the history of German colonialism will play a central role at the Humboldt Forum. Does that apply to Tanzania also?

PI: Yes, that was decided years ago and hasn't changed! Between 1885 and 1918, what is now mainland Tanzania belonged to the colony of German East Africa, where the colonial conquest was particularly cruel. So we have to behave especially responsibly in our handling of the objects that came to Berlin during that period. The Tanzania collection of the Ethnologisches Museum is very large, with more than 10,000 objects. During the colonial period, the ethnologists in Berlin developed a real mania for collecting things. They repeatedly asked for objects from the colonies, and then they received them through various channels. Ultimately, they had so many that a scholarly analysis of each was no longer possible. Now we're catching up with that, after more than a hundred years!

Starting in September, the Humboldt Forum will show some of these items, including a zither and a metal basin made of nickel silver – a specific alloy of copper. Why these particular objects?

PI: They're just the beginning. We are presenting the history of various collections from Africa in a space that is configured as open storage. We show the different ways in which various items at the Ethnologisches Museum came to Berlin. These include objects from Tanzania. We are piecing together their provenance and their mostly violent appropriation by the German officer Hans Glauning. Later on, there will be multiple exhibitions dealing specifically with the objects from Tanzania and the history of the country. These are being prepared in collaboration with partners from Tanzania. And

we're very conscious of the fact that any type of exhibition of the objects in Berlin is inevitably, to a certain extent, a reproduction of colonial power. At the same time, that really has to be illustrated for the public and critically examined, because people often don't know the history of Africa and European colonialism. The zither and the metal basin function as symbols in that regard; they are tangible representations of this colonial violence. Take the metal basin, for example. It was a war trophy and was given to the museum in 1897 by Hans Glauning. It originally belonged to Hassan bin Omari, also known as Makunganya, an influential trader in the southeast of what is now Tanzania. After years of armed conflict, he was finally captured by German colonial forces, sentenced to death and executed. The basin was probably a talisman that was intended to protect its owner in battle. For decades, it lay in a storage room of the museum – more or less forgotten.

And now you've rediscovered it?

PI: You could say that, yes. To begin with, our provenance research led us to its original owner. Then, five years ago, when Tanzanian researchers made a short trip to the region from which it came, they had the inscription on the basin transcribed and translated by Muslim scholars. It is actually a sura from the Koran (54:45, 46) that deals with the punishment of the sinful on Judgment Day. And that was when we first thought we understood what it was, what purpose it served. Unfortunately, we don't know the exact circumstances in which it came into the possession of Hans Glauning, but we suspect that it fell into his hands when the Germans looted the place that Makunganya had retreated to.

You carry out various projects involving the Tanzania collection of the Ethnologisches Museum together with provenance researcher Kristin Weber-Sinn. What sort of things do you focus on?

PI: First of all, we ask the classic questions of provenance research: What are the biographies of the objects? Who were the original owners, and who may have had them as intermediaries? How exactly did the museum come into possession of the objects, and what significance and roles did they have in the societies they came from? Were these the sort of object that people would have let go of – meaning, was it even possible that they had been traded or sold? In seeking to answer these questions, we place importance on building up a cooperative relationship with Tanzanian research partners, because we are convinced that this chapter of history can only be analyzed together. And we urgently need this exchange for another reason: it's the only way in which we can permanently decolonialize the collection. We would also like to let our African partners decide what should be done with these objects in the future. We would really like to



know what significance these objects have for them. Generally speaking, you can say that the research agenda can no longer be set from Germany. The long-running, sustainable discussion and examination of sensitive objects from the colonial period should become an established part of museum work. I would like to see an endowment fund that enables long-term cooperation with colleagues and stakeholders from the societies of origin of the objects in Tanzania and Africa generally. We have partnerships with people from other countries, and the participants have to be able to come to us at regular intervals.

Hasn't that been possible so far?

PI: No, the visits from our Tanzanian partners have always been limited to individual projects. And because of the coronavirus pandemic, we haven't been able to travel for more than a year. But before the pandemic, scholars and artists from Tanzania visited us, and we traveled to Tanzania. That was very moving and emotional. All of the project partners felt the great weight of this violent history. For a long time, not even the researchers in Tanzania knew that there were so many objects from their homeland in Berlin.

Intensive engagement with historically encumbered collections is still relatively new. How do you deal with it on a personal level?

PI: My colleague Kristin Weber-Sinn and I are quite often really furious and distressed. The violence of the colonial conquests went beyond war: it was the destruction of the means of livelihood for entire populations. There were scorched-earth policies. Again and again, we are shocked by the ignorance and arrogance of the German colonizers and the way the soldiers, devoid of all inhibition, preened themselves with war trophies and often made money on them too. And the museum ethnologists back then tacitly condoned the violent appropriation of these objects. For them, the African societies were "primitive" peoples who hadn't gone through any historical evolution – in contrast to the "civilized" peoples of Europe. For colonial officials and officers, looting objects for the museum in Berlin was part of the day-to-day work of the colonial service – including during military expeditions, when entire villages and towns were plundered and livestock and ivory were seized, for example. It is good that the process of reappraising this history has now begun. But we also have to note that we are still at the beginning. This is a learning process, and we don't yet know where it will lead. What effect our debates and dialogs will have on the museum sector in Tanzania and Germany remains to be seen.

**Julia Binter:**

**We aren't showing original artifacts**

Interviewer: Oliver Hoischen

Ms. Binter, the rooms of the Ethnologisches Museum are opening now at the Humboldt Forum. What will the exhibition show about Namibia, the former colony of German South West Africa?

JB: The exhibition gives visitors a look at the ongoing research process. It has been put together in close cooperation with our Namibian research partners – first and foremost, with the Museums Association of Namibia. The goal of this cooperative project was to establish a research process which is as open as possible, with consideration for the needs and preferences of everyone involved. We on the Berlin team felt we had a responsibility to understand the colonial contexts in which the Ethnologisches Museum acquired the nearly 1,400 objects from Namibia that are now in its collection. It was especially important to us to analyze whether there were any objects directly connected to the genocide perpetrated by Germany on the Ovaherero and Nama from 1904 to 1908. At the same time, it was also important to our research partners – among them scholars, curators and artists – to think about the future of the objects.

What did they suggest?

JB: They had ideas right away about what could be learned from the objects, how they could be dealt with in creative ways. Our discussions and exchange of ideas were so intense and to some extent emotional that we quickly realized we didn't want to show any original artifacts at the Humboldt Forum. Instead, we would focus on our joint research process: What does it mean to work with artifacts that in some cases were acquired in extremely violent circumstances? As a provenance researcher, what information can I reconstruct about the origin of objects and their historical relationships from the European archives, which are by their nature very one-sided? What historical and cultural significance do our research partners attribute to the artifacts? What personal experiences have they linked them to? And what can be done with them in the future?

What does that mean for the exhibition in concrete terms?

JB: The exhibition consists of three parts: On the one hand, there is a film by Moritz Fehr, which provides a perceptive look behind the scenes. Fehr is a Berlin-based film maker, and he looked over our shoulders during our research on the artifacts in the storage rooms of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. He also traveled to Namibia with us, and his camera captured the ways in which the country's colonial past is still present everywhere – from German street names to the anonymous mass graves resulting from the genocide. So his film also shows how German colonial history has shaped not just the collections in Berlin but also the country of Namibia and the everyday life of the people there to this day.

What else can visitors look forward to?

JB: We searched for a way to symbolize our intense discussions and information sharing, and hopefully, we have found one: it takes the form of a “network of knowledge.” We used pieces of leather and fabric to “weave” a network, and attached to that are photos of some of the twenty-three artifacts from the Namibia collection of the Ethnologisches Museum that our partners have asked us to bring to Namibia for further study next spring. Visitors can see our network in a display case at the Humboldt Forum. The installation shows what we gain when we are responsive to the needs of our research partners, give up custody of artifacts and let them travel. We gain so much – so much knowledge, esteem and mutual understanding. In addition to the pictures of artifacts, there are historical and contemporary photographs woven into the network, along with a whole variety of voices on text panels. The installation rejects the simple consumption of beautiful things, focusing instead on people and their relationships to artifacts. I am excited to see how visitors respond to it.

So the exhibition really doesn't show any artifacts from the Namibia collection of the Ethnologisches Museum?

JB: No, they weren't shown in Dahlem either. Our partners rightly asked why the artifacts should be shown at the Humboldt Forum now, of all times, when there are so many people in Namibia who, for historical and cultural reasons, have developed an interest in working with them and looking after them. In 2019, our Namibian colleagues visited Berlin on a research trip for several months, and they selected twenty-three historically, culturally and aesthetically important artifacts for further study – in the course of many discussions with experts at home, interest groups and representatives of a wide variety of organizations. The objective is to revitalize the artifacts in Namibia with the knowledge of community members, artists and scholars there. And it is only thanks to support from the Gerda-Henkel-Stiftung (Gerda Henkel Foundation) that we're able to carry out a follow-up project this large.

What sort of artifacts are these?

JB: A large part of the Namibia collection in Berlin consists of articles of clothing and jewelry. That means they are more than just testimony to historical events and relations. Our Namibian partners also view them as a source of inspiration for things like modern fashion design and works of art. It is a wonderful development that the Museums Association of Namibia in Otjiwarongo will soon open the new Museum of Namibian Fashion, where historians, fashion designers and community representatives will be able to confidently talk about the history and the identities of Namibia in a new way with reference to clothing. And the sources of inspiration for that include historical artifacts not just from Berlin but also from collections at the National Museum of Namibia in Windhoek. So we're bringing a variety of insights from the past and the present together and combining them – and creating something new.

And now let's hear about the third part of the Namibia exhibit at the Humboldt Forum.

JB: It's a textile-based work of art by Namibian fashion designer Cynthia Schimming, who looked at the Dahlem collection with us in 2019 and explored its potential for future projects. From the very beginning, she viewed our collection as an archive of Namibian design and fashion history; one time she remarked, "You talk so much; I prefer making things."

What does this work of art look like?

JB: Schimming's work consists of two parts, one related to the human body, and one to the landscape, and presents each as a setting of colonial experiences. On one hand, she has created a Herero dress, which incorporated her research into precolonial fashion. The pattern is modeled on Victorian dresses, with puffed sleeves and a wide underskirt. Along with it, there is a head covering that imitates the shape of cow horns and alludes to the proud history of the Herero as cattle breeders. The second part of the installation focuses on another key object in the collection: a leather patchwork quilt made by Nama artists. That comes from the personal effects of Gustav Nachtigal, which were given to the museum in Berlin in 1886. Nachtigal was Reichskommissar (Imperial Commissioner) of the German colonies in West Africa. He probably acquired the quilt when he concluded so-called treaties of protection with Nama representatives. Schimming has transferred the design of this patchwork quilt to a long panel of fabric and printed it with historical photographs from our archive. The result is really impressive. This work illustrates the philosophy of the artist: history isn't just something that we ought to write down and understand; wherever we go, we also carry history around with us.