



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the inauguration of the exhibitions of the Ethnological  
Museum and the Museum of Asian Art of the National  
Museums in Berlin  
in Berlin  
on 22 September 2021**

At last, here it is! What next?

The rebuilt Berlin City Palace, the Humboldt Forum, is without a doubt the centrepiece of our capital's Neue Mitte, the new city centre – both as a building and as a symbol. In architectural terms it represents the culmination of the vast project of reinventing Berlin's Mitte, and yet in terms of substance it is more of a beginning.

This palace and this Forum are – by virtue of their location, their history and the mission which they pursue, aside from anything else – a place of national significance. But this place is at present generating more questions than answers. The unanswered questions that this place poses to us are unanswered questions from our nation and also questions to our nation.

Can we endure this?

Some people find this palace – simply because it generates so many questions – unsatisfactory, deserving of criticism. Some wish it had never been built.

But here it is. After all the many years of fierce debate and the plans discarded, redrafted and finally approved, the building is finished. The people of Berlin and visitors from around the world are already making it their own. They are strolling through the courtyards, they are sitting outside in the sun, exploring the exhibitions that are already on display. As we have just heard, one hundred thousand people have already been here.

And yet it is provocatively unfinished. So the question is: Can we endure this?

I was always grateful for the opportunity to engage with the Humboldt Forum as it emerged and grew – in terms of its construction, which I was able to observe from the nearby Foreign Office, as well as its intended use. I well remember a mild summer evening in 1999 outside the Chancellor's bungalow in Bonn, when Klaus-Dieter Lehmann proposed to the then Chancellor the idea of reshaping Berlin's entire Museum Island. A remarkable vision! I was fascinated and enthused. And I was just as fascinated by the idea of involving the Ethnological Collections from Dahlem in the reshaping of Berlin's Mitte. "The cultures of the world belong in the heart of Berlin." That, Mr Lehmann, was your firm conviction. Opening up to the world instead of intra-German navel-gazing – I too was convinced.

They have now arrived, the cultures of the world. I am delighted to be here today, and I am extremely grateful to you, Mr Dorgerloh, Mr Parzinger and Mr Koch, for inviting me. The Ethnological Collections and the Museum of Asian Art can now be seen here in this Forum. And I would like to congratulate you most sincerely on this – although I am aware at the same time how controversial some aspects are and remain.

This Forum is not yet complete, but as of today it is a core part of Berlin's network of museums – a major step forward and one for which I am grateful. But it is, of course, only a beginning. It is not the completion, but the initiation of a project. Just as our present age is quite distinctly a time of upheaval and of beginnings. This Forum is designed not only as a place for science, art and culture to meet. It is to be a hub for international dialogue, for critical and self-critical thinking and for engaging with the world and with one another in the world.

There is certainly no need to worry about a lack of criticism. How this place has been argued and fought over. This building, by virtue of its sheer size alone, self-assuredly demands the right to fill an empty space which German history has left behind. This new, old Berlin City Palace seeks to be nothing less than the new, old centre of this city, the republican heart of the new, old German capital – a democratic monument with baroque facades. Can it work?

You can tell that I, too, still have a few questions on my mind. And I want to be honest with you – I will not be able to give an answer to everything today, and I certainly will not be able to make everybody happy. But perhaps it is this questioning and doubting itself which helps us as visitors to better approach this building. This is, one might say, not a place for affirming one's sense of self, but for interrogating it. And I mean that in a thoroughly productive way. A place that does not leave us in peace – such a place can indeed become a democratic place.

Even a brief glance into the past gives us an idea of the ambition, the desires, the lust for power that this place has aroused over the centuries: a monastery, a residence of princes, kings and emperors, a parade square and the Palace of the Republic, mocked for its ostentation

while simultaneously beloved for the leisure activities it offered, the seat of the only freely elected East German parliament and a condemned asbestos ruin, a stage for artists, the Humboldt Forum. This place reflects better than almost any other our history, the fallacies, the darkest moments, the tyranny and the reconstruction. And it reminds us that only a fraction of our history, a mere three decades, is the history of a reunified, free and democratic Germany.

In the period after the Peaceful Revolution and reunification, Berlin's city centre once again came to the fore as somewhere that crystallised our place as a nation. A nation in search of its lost centre, and not only in architectural terms. Restoration or demolition, a new design or a replica, modern or baroque – the dispute over this palace raged with the force of a religious war, until the idea of reconstructing it prevailed. "A republican promise", in the words of the newspaper FAZ, or a "monument to ahistoricism", as Die Zeit put it? A conclusion to history? Or perhaps rather a revision of history, a symbol of the failure of socialism as an idea? This, in any case, was how Joachim Fest – one of the most prominent supporters of reconstruction – justified the project.

Those old battles are now decided. But that certainly does not mean that a baroque memento of Prussian dominance, a memento made stone and crowned with a cross, is self-explanatory in our reunified, democratic Germany. This palace, this Humboldt Forum, must yet find its identity and its purpose in our democracy.

When we seek to find this purpose, we do so differently than we did thirty years ago. Today we can see more clearly that, while reunification was in some ways an end point – the division of Germany was no more, the German question was resolved – it was, much more so, a beginning. The beginning of a process in which not only Berlin, but German society as a whole, would change more radically than most people could have imagined at the time – and not just in the East, but in the West, too. And this process is far from complete.

On the contrary, this Forum is just as far from being complete as our democracy, a little over thirty years since the fall of the Wall and reunification, is from being permanently finished and complete.

But the world beyond our borders, too, is a changed one. Our society today is globally interconnected and has become more diverse and pluralistic.

Here in Berlin's Mitte, we can see a microcosm of this new society every day. Mitte has changed quite breathtakingly in the last thirty years, and I am not speaking merely of its buildings but also of what has changed behind the facades, both old and new. The cultures of the world have arrived, and I mean that in a double sense – here inside the Humboldt Forum as well as outside, beyond its monumental facades.

Here in Berlin's Mitte, the rest of the world is no longer merely a visitor. The world is at home here – this may sound like a smooth marketing slogan, but it has resulted in far-reaching changes. People from Turkey, Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal; from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria; from Nigeria, the Congo and Somalia; from Asia and North and South America – people from all around the world now live in Germany, have in many cases become Germans. They are a part of what it now means to be "German". They are a part of our national identity, part of an active civic community which speaks up in debates. They are not people with a migrant background – we are a country with a migrant background! What, then, can and should this Forum that bears the name Humboldt be in this changed country, this changed world?

As an initial answer, I will say quite clearly that I cannot imagine a better name for such a place. With the Humboldt Forum and the Humboldt-Universität, Berlin's Mitte pays a double tribute to two great scholars. It is perhaps one of the many ironies of our history that Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt apparently had no particular love for this Berlin, their city of origin, and are said to have returned only reluctantly from abroad.

Yes, this name is a tribute to Wilhelm von Humboldt, the expert in constitutional law, researcher of languages and Prussian envoy to the Vatican, who founded Berlin's first university after being ordered to return by the Prussian king in 1809 and whose bold vision of the unity of research and teaching, whose ideal of a comprehensive education still shapes our universities and our education system today.

And it is a tribute to Alexander von Humboldt, the great naturalist, explorer and philosopher, to whom we owe invaluable findings concerning what was then an unknown "New World". His vision of himself as a universal scholar, as a researcher, stood in radical contrast to the colonial acts of conquest, exploitation and enslavement; in contrast to the clinical process of merely measuring and cataloguing. To this scholar, who is today honoured as the "second discoverer of America", we owe the very modern recognition that on our planet everything is connected with everything else. "Everything is interaction," he wrote in his travel diary. What a fitting motto that could be for this Forum – not a forum for self-absorption, where we Germans do what we so love to do, namely discuss ourselves, but a forum where we engage with the world, a globalised world in which today, more than ever, everything is interaction! Everything is connected with everything else.

Those who take the naming of the Forum, this homage to the Prussian Enlightenment, at its word know that the name entails an obligation. Enlightenment means bringing existing values before the tribunal of reason, as the historian Golo Mann put it.

We Europeans are rightly proud of the achievements of the Enlightenment: respect for human dignity, reason and freedom. The values on which our modern liberal democracies are founded.

But if we take seriously the aspirations of those who gave this Forum its name, then it must not only celebrate the idea of enlightenment; it must itself provide enlightenment. And that means critically examining the historical reality of the Enlightenment, the political history of Western modernity – leading to uncomfortable questions: On whose shoulders was Western modernity built? At what cost, with what contradictions, what injustices? With what consequences that still affect our world today?

It is these questions that are now charging to the fore of our debates. It is the voices of those who for far too long had no voice in Western discourses. It is the stories of those who lived, and often still live, in the shadows cast by the success story of Western progress. Black Lives Matter, racism, discrimination, global justice, colonial looting – all of these debates are being had in the countries of what we call the global South, and now here and in the US, too.

And I believe this is absolutely necessary. In my view, it is both historically wrong and politically dangerous to dismiss these debates as “identity politics” – as disadvantaged groups fighting to assert themselves, as a tool for social division, as a “them against us”. No, these questions are, very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment, universal questions. They concern us all. Because they relate to our shared history, and much more yet – if we believe in the humanist project of the Enlightenment – our shared future.

“The truth is that the universal does not belong to any one group of people,” as you, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, once said in a speech to American students. I am delighted that you are here today and will shortly be addressing us. The story of every individual has the potential to be universal – that is your credo.

But the truth is that, to date, far too many stories have been neither told nor heard. Here in this Forum, in these collections, the aim is that they will be. If this succeeds, then we will have come a great deal closer to answering the question of the Forum’s purpose.

Today we are inaugurating the centrepiece of this Forum. There is no doubt that ethnological collections alone continue to hold an enormous fascination. The cultures of the world come to us and we look upon what is foreign to us. We learn and perhaps even understand, very much in the Humboldtian spirit. Research, curiosity, collecting – for the Humboldt brothers, all of this was also a way of liberating themselves from the parochialism of their Prussian home. And in some way it remains so today – the key to an open and cosmopolitan approach to the world.

But there is also – as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us – a very different perspective, that of many African countries for example, which is now quite rightly seeking to assert itself anew. The countries of Africa in particular lost a vast quantity of their art – partly to raids by Europeans. “We grew up without an important part of our historical heritage,” as the Nigerian artist Emeka Ogboh once said to me. A sentence that has stayed with me, that must stay with us.

We know today that, in many cases, the story of how these works of art and ritual objects came from Africa, from Asia, from Latin America to our museums is still unclear or has not yet been disclosed. Worse still, that more than a few were not legally “acquired”, that the story of their journey to us is one of subjugation, pillage, theft and murder. But ambiguity abounds – and the debate around the so wonderfully crafted Luf boat is virtually the perfect example of how much research is still needed on this topic.

A Federal President is no maker of museums. But museums which do more than display artefacts, which also make a serious effort to address the history of colonialism, must look different to traditional museums. How exactly they must look is the subject of heated debate in Dresden, Stuttgart, Brussels, Paris and London just as here in Berlin. And we could not have it any other way. Ethnological collections are no longer shown merely for their own sake – they address the history of our relations with their places of origin. Not least, they examine the legacy of these relations in the here and now.

And that goes far beyond the question of how a museum must be designed. It is a question of our perception of ourselves and our responsibility in light of history. We – by which I mean Europeans as a whole – will have to set aside certain ways of thinking, and recognise and accept other perspectives. This also means that we must seek out dialogue with the countries and regions from which these artefacts come. And we will see that what some describe as simple solutions are often no solutions at all. I would add that despite all of the criticism, this dialogue has begun and is yielding its first results.

The return of significant Benin bronzes, which was negotiated together with Nigeria, is a sign of change, and I am grateful to the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, the Humboldt Forum, the Minister of State and the Federal Foreign Office for their commitment to this process. The discussion with these countries around the origin of artefacts and their restitution, around new forms of museum cooperation, including assistance for countries to establish their own museums, will have to be had, not only by us Germans, but by all European nations with a colonial past.

This process will be a painful one, that much is clear. But we Europeans have a responsibility in light of the past – each country for itself and we as Europeans together.

What about the extent of our responsibility? It is minuscule in comparison to the history of the major colonial empires – the French, British, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch or Belgians. This is an opinion held by many. But as Federal President, I must say quite clearly that, even if the Second Reich began its quest for a “place in the sun” relatively late, there is no reason to have a clear conscience. And so this reborn palace must also serve us as a reminder and a warning: of militarism, of nationalism in the Second Reich, and of German colonialism, too.

The truth is that, when it comes to the colonial era, we Germans who are usually so historically conscious have far too many blank spaces! We have blind spots in our memory and our perception of ourselves.

Here in Berlin’s Mitte, in 1884/5, the Berlin Conference – also known as the Berlin West Africa Conference or Congo Conference – brought together the great European powers and the US at the invitation of the German Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to, in essence, divide up the African continent among themselves. But that is not the whole story – German colonialism was by no means simply a matter of monarchist ambition. Large parts of the population were in favour of colonial conquests. Just think of the clashes leading up to the Reichstag elections of 1907, which went down in German history as the “Hottentot elections”.

The German colonial era has in our collective memory long been either glorified or entirely forgotten. Perhaps we preferred not to know in any great detail which of these far-off places in what were then called German South West Africa and German East Africa, in modern-day Cameroon, in Togo, in Jiaozhou in today’s China, in Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific islands, saw colonisers from Germany oppress, exploit, rob and murder their people.

Shining light into this darkness is a task not just for historians. The injustices that Germans committed in the colonial era concern us all as a society. Because even now, everyday life in our country is by no means free of racism, discrimination or contempt for the supposedly foreign, culminating sometimes in physical assault and terrible acts of violence.

I firmly believe that we will only be able to understand and eradicate the deeper roots of everyday racism when we illuminate the blind spots of our memory, when we address our colonial history much more thoroughly than we have done to date!

Germany’s involvement in the colonial age – what better proof could there be than the example of Namibia. There, in what was then called German South West Africa, at the beginning of the 1900s, Germany’s so-called “protective troops” committed the first genocide of that blood-soaked century.

It took a long time, far too long, for Germany even to acknowledge this crime – an entire century. The crimes of the past still have an effect today. The suffering inflicted still marks the descendants of the victims; many of them still live in extreme poverty. And many Herero and Nama are still haunted by the knowledge that their ancestors found no final resting place, that they do not rest in peace.

Just a few years ago, the German Government began negotiations with the Namibian Government and descendants of the Herero and Nama on a reconciliation agreement which would name the crimes of the past for what they were: a genocide, from today's perspective. I very much hope that we will find a mutually acceptable outcome to these negotiations.

Jürgen Habermas has written in a new essay that remembrance of "a colonial history until recently repressed" is an important expansion of our political and historical self-image – without this detracting from the uniqueness or significance of remembrance of the Holocaust.

I strongly believe that remembrance of the Shoah, that betrayal of all civilised values, is and remains quite singular in our national memory. It is a part of our identity. I say this not as a historian – that academic discipline holds its own specialist debates on singularity and comparability – but as Federal President.

I would merely add that remembrance of the Holocaust does not preclude conscious, empathetic remembrance of other injustices, other suffering! On the contrary, our shattered perception of our own history as a result of the Shoah gives us a clear-eyed view, I hope, of the responsibility that our history entails. Human dignity, the principle at the root of our constitution, is, after all, the dignity of all humans.

The crimes of the colonial era, conquest, oppression, exploitation, theft, the murder of tens of thousands of people, need a suitable place in our memory. We must face up to the responsibility created by this part of German history. Because it will determine our future, our coexistence in a country where the cultures of the world are and seek to be at home.

If this Forum genuinely becomes a forum – a place where these debates are had and where we truly come closer to finding answers to the many questions that this palace opens up – then the question of its meaning will have been answered.

I have great faith that you, Mr Koch, Mr Parzinger, Mr Dorgerloh, and your teams, have precisely this in mind and will do everything to make it a reality. I would like to thank the three of you most sincerely today for your courage and your resolve not to shun controversy but to pursue your cause, often enough, in the face of it. Your task is truly difficult; criticising it is easy. But if we want to set out in new directions, if we want to find a different, enlightened understanding of these



artefacts and their history, an understanding that addresses the culture and the social circumstances in their regions of origin in depth, then we need people who will take on this task and this responsibility – people like you. And so I am exceedingly grateful!

I began by saying: here it is. What next? The answer is that now it is we who must act!

It falls to us to fill this building with meaning, with life, with debate. And if I could wish for one thing today, then it would be this. May you, may the visitors, may all of us together succeed in doing so!