

Global outlook inspires daring new directions

For curator Andrea Scholz, one thing is clear: the Ethnologisches Museum would be inconceivable without the cooperation of people all around the world.

From Oliver Hoischen

A new exhibition is opening, and Andrea Scholz is pleased. There are magnificent feathered headbands, bird-shaped stools, and masks as tall as a person. Most of these objects, carefully chosen from the South America collection of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum), have never been shown to the public. Now, meticulously restored and provided with detailed commentaries, they fill an entire room in the eastern wing of the Humboldt Forum's second floor. Andrea Scholz, who holds a doctorate in the field of ethnology, is the curator of the Amazonia exhibition and the museum's officer for transcultural cooperation. She travels to Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia; establishes connections with local communities, organizes workshops – and learns. Of course, her South American partners have also traveled to Berlin: they have examined the objects in the storage rooms, provided explanations, posed questions and often been surprised themselves. "What we're presenting now at the Humboldt Forum is a collaborative effort," says Scholz. "These exhibitions would be unthinkable without the knowledge and support of people all over the world."

What she means is soon apparent to anyone who looks at the objects in the exhibition room. One example is a shield made of fibers from the liana plant. This particular item was acquired by German ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg in 1907 during an expedition to the upper Rio Negro. For decades, it was described in museum records as a "dance shield" – but that was not quite right, as pointed out not long ago by the Colombian members of a joint research project. This shield, they said, was used in certain ceremonies. It had a mythical significance and served to protect the community. This new information is now presented on the display case alongside the old description. Scholz included both descriptions quite deliberately, and also explained how the original was corrected with the help of fellow researchers from Colombia. By doing so, she is helping to make knowledge transparent and giving visitors new insights.

She and her colleagues are taking their own approach to the ethnological artifacts they study. For them, the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum are not just a burdensome legacy of colonialism, but also an opportunity to reestablish relations with the people in the regions from which the objects came. Scholz is feeling her way forward, exploring possibilities. She is exhibiting a newly acquired Venezuelan basket made of plant fibers, for example. It is

displayed next to older, historical baskets. An indigenous organization named Kuyujani purchased the basket especially for the Humboldt Forum so that visitors in Berlin can see both past and present, and how very close they sometimes are. Informative connections and correlations are repeatedly established in the exhibition: What does a certain object signify for people today? What does it mean for the relationship between Berlin and countries of origin all over the world?

Many contemporary artworks likewise help to build this bridge. As do films – for example, a documentary made by the indigenous Venezuelan film maker Saul Lopez. It was created in order to explain the nature of a jaguar-shaped stool, an item acquired in 1913 by Koch-Grünberg, who bartered for it in the area of the upper Caura River and later brought it to Berlin. For the film, Lopez interviewed a now-deceased elder of the Ye'kuana tribe. The film shows how and why shamans are able to transform into jaguars, according to a myth of the Ye'kuana. It was created specifically for the Berlin exhibition – a fascinating account that truly breathes life into the stool in the display case.

Andrea Scholz is especially proud of the architecture of the Amazonia exhibition, which is unexpected and eye-catching. The objects in the room form concentric rings; you could say they are arranged in a circle. This is inspired by the shape of an öttö, a type of roundhouse used by the Ye'kuana as a meeting place. The Ye'kuana have maintained ties with the museum since 2014, and this relationship has given rise to a close, very fruitful partnership. “The öttö is supposed to show that this isn't about us Germans; it's not about how and why Germans collected, what they bought and stole, frequently using violence,” says Scholz. “We Germans are not the focus here. This exhibition primarily has to do with the perspectives of the people in Amazonia, with indigenous perspectives.”

Scholz wants museum visitors to learn something about the world and about other ways of experiencing it. “I don't want a visitor to stand in front of a display case and think: these things are lifeless objects,” she says. “That's not what they are at all.” She wants to tell stories, not just about the origin of the objects and how they were acquired but also about how people live today, and what is important to them. That goes for all the items of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) that are now being shown in their entirety in the eastern wing of the Humboldt Forum: the monumental Cotzumalhuapa steles from what is now Guatemala, for example, or the artworks from Canada's western coast, or the world-famous bronzes from the historical Kingdom of Benin, many of which have been returned to Nigeria.

And in this spirit, the museum has arranged five temporary exhibitions to complement the permanent exhibition. For example, one display case on Tanzania presents the viewer with a

sort of post-colonial emptiness, representing the absence of objects that were looted in the brutal Maji Maji Rebellion and will soon be returned to Tanzania. In a different room, the exhibits show how important cedars are to indigenous people in the Canadian province of British Columbia, who use them in ceremonies and rituals.

The approach being pursued by Andrea Scholz and her colleagues puts a premium on exchange, and on promoting a culture of dialogue. "Above all, we have to listen," she says. And sometimes, projects and plans may undergo radical changes as a result, as she herself has experienced. In one instance, for example, Scholz and her coworkers in South America attempted to set up an interactive database for museum objects. That project began at the Indigenous University of Venezuela, deep in the heart of the country, on the banks of the Taucá River. The idea was to create an opportunity to pursue joint research on objects that were acquired from this region and are now held by the Ethnologisches Museum. These include baskets, feather headdresses, masks and valuable vessels that have been lying untouched in the storage vaults for decades. "I wanted to let the local indigenous communities know what we have here in Berlin and create a way to access those objects online and study them," says Scholz. But during trials of the system, the database proved unsuitable because of its rather one-sided focus on the items as museum objects. A new database was therefore created in which "plants," "myths," and "territories" are just as important as objects. Scholz also learned what the indigenous participants expect from the museum in Berlin: not a return of the objects, at least for the time being, but rather educational assistance, so that elders can pass on traditional knowledge to the younger generation.

"We're still at the very early stages," says the officer for transcultural cooperation. "It's a process – and I consider it a privilege to be a part of it." Scholz develops new ideas, organizes scholarships and residencies, and provides support to all of the participants. The work has brought her an ever-growing network of contacts: from the Fijian boat builders who were in Berlin this summer, to the trainee restorers in Angola, to the young musicians from Bolivia who are reinterpreting the historical music recordings held by the Ethnologisches Museum.

Together with her colleagues, she is determined to embark on a new discourse. She strives for a new, global mindset. Scholz enthusiastically recalls a gathering that took place quite recently, before the eastern wing of the Humboldt Forum opened. More than seventy guests had come to Berlin from over twenty countries. Indigenous people from Amazonia sat in workshops next to community representatives and artists from Japan, Namibia, Tanzania, and Nepal. "That was a very special experiment," Scholz explains. "People who would otherwise never have met, visiting our storage rooms together, talking about the future of the things there, about education or global environmental crises, and how we are all learning from one another. We were in agreement: that's what our future in this building should look

like.” What emerged was a world of many voices, a genuine forum. A Humboldt Forum, in fact.