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## On the Weltmuseum Wien and its Things

### A paratext<sup>1</sup>

“How do you feel in a museum with all these stolen things?” I was asked this question recently by a visitor of the Weltmuseum Wien I had got talking to – or rather whom I had sought to engage in conversation – in one of the galleries. The question surely arose less from an individual opinion as such than from an image that is regularly evoked in public by our critics. And it is not the only view associated with an ethnographic museum as an institution. It is usually accompanied by accusations that we arrogate interpretational sovereignty over foreign cultures, that we close our minds to the discussion of restitution, that we are ignorant of how objects came to be in our holdings, even that we hide away collections in storage if the circumstances of their acquisition are sensitive, that we are still the heir of colonialism – the list is far from complete. It could almost make one despair that despite all our efforts over the past few years – even decades – we have not yet managed to dispel such opinions. So before I outline my thoughts on the core issues of this publication, that is, provenance research and the consequent demand for restitution, I want to address the issue of this public image and offer a corrective interpretation. Defining a standpoint will make our position on these issues become more readily understandable.

Criticism of museums of ethnology is still often confined to the framework of the observations on museums made by Michel Foucault many decades ago. Foucault saw museums as institutions of capitalist and imperialist power, used to categorize and ultimately control the world. For him, museums were spaces of conflict, power relations, and of difference.<sup>2</sup>

At the Weltmuseum Wien we have been working on correcting this image for a long time, both in terms of the permanent exhibition, which opened in 2017, and in the shape of temporary exhibitions, events and cultural education programmes. The term “postcolonial turn” has not remained a mere slogan for the Weltmuseum Wien over the past few years; we have endeavoured to fill it with meaning through our thinking and actions. We do not limit ourselves to presenting and classifying the

objects of “Others”. When we invite voices from “outside” to speak, working together with them,<sup>3</sup> we allow the persons who once held these objects in their hands and in doing so had an impact upon their world to become manifest. We have to build a bridge to enable visitors to find a way of approaching these “Others”. Experiencing the so-called “Other” must lead to a reflection on the “Self”, whereby the reflected view of the “Self” in turn sharpens one’s understanding of the “Other”. Museums thus become one of the few spaces in which a far-reaching debate on the intersections between cultures takes place, and the concepts of “the Others” and “the Self” ultimately reveal themselves to be constructs that no longer have a place in a modern globalized world.<sup>4</sup>

“Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and futures. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary well-being.”<sup>5</sup>

This passage can be found in the new definition of museums proposed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 2019. Even though this new (and long-overdue) definition has not yet been adopted and is currently being re-negotiated, it throws into sharp focus the museum as a twenty-first century institution with all its duties and responsibilities. Beyond their original defined core tasks of “collecting”, “research” and “exhibiting”, museums are charged with providing their contribution to the representation and negotiation of society’s social, political and cultural focuses. Weltmuseum Wien strives to and must be a meeting-place of active social, artistic, scientific and political actors, in order to make the general public aware of social injustices, power relations and global problems, not only in the distribution of wealth.

We have an almost ethical obligation to bring people from the countries our holdings derive from to the museum, and not simply as visitors – our aim is to offer them the museum as a stage on which to reach out to our museum audience.

To return to Michel Foucault, who saw museums as institutions of power with which to categorize and ultimately control the world; in my view, the term “institution of power” can be something to aspire to, albeit with a completely different meaning. Museums today, especially those of ethnology, should be a powerful social agent in modern society. As such, they must have a positive influence, creating the capacity for intercultural dialogue and sparking informed and civilized debate. When cultures

encounter each other in ethnological museums, interest is shown in the “Other”, enabling fruitful exchange and fostering dialogue. Here awareness must be generated, an awareness that leads to pressure from society for a change in the global status quo. Of course, when making declarative statements or offering interpretations, museums were and are children of their time. Times change, however, and with them museums – and museums can also be proactive when the challenge is to change the times.

I am convinced that culture has the power to unite people.

In the past decade we have ceased to speak *about* and have begun to speak *with*, the “Others”. The Weltmuseum Wien is a democratic space in which voices from outside (in the sense of people other than museum staff) also find a visible and accessible place. Although now a matter of course for ethnographical museums, it should also be emphasized that temporary exhibitions result from close collaboration with scholars of the country from which the exhibits derive. The subject of the “Other” is talked about not only from a European perspective; rather, in collaboration with colleagues from the group of the “Other”, a picture is built up from the findings of the most recent research.<sup>6</sup>

But as museum curators we also have a right to voice an opinion. The Weltmuseum Wien is first and foremost an ethnographical museum. One of the fundamental pillars of the science of ethnology, alongside meticulous historical research, is personal experience “in the field”. Experiences that are as it were translated and made accessible for our visitors here at the museum, with the means and methods of a museum.

All ethnologists have gained insights from individual experience. When starting out, perhaps even they thought that any knowledge of the “Others” was mere supposition and conjecture. That can be dispelled, however: what is needed is to sit down and talk quietly with one another – which is not to deny the effort and hard work it takes to learn a foreign language.

Here I am reminded of Alfred Janata, who curated the Eastern Islamic collections of the Museum of Ethnology, as our museum was then called, from 1960 to 1993. He once apologized to us as young students for his accent in Urdu having such a strong Pashto colouring. He had learnt both languages during his long years of field research in order to share a part of life’s journey with the people he encountered in Afghanistan and Pakistan. I never heard him uttering the word “decolonization” (with whatever colouring he might have pronounced it). All the louder are the voices which do utter it, or the demand for it, invariably belonging to those who have not put in the necessary work to acquire such experiences.

Before I turn to the actual subject of my text please allow me a brief observation on ethnological collecting, that is to say, on the transfer of an object from its original

context to a museum, on the ultimate change of an object's meaning. The objects no longer play the role they once did in the world from which they originated. Having become an exhibit in a museum, they speak of who made them, who used them and on what occasion, who bequeathed it to whom, who used it to impress whom, what thoughts it provoked in its original owner when he or she looked at it, what understanding of the world guided its use, what meaning it gave to the world of its original owner. The catalogue of questions that a thing opens up – and can answer – is limitless. The stories contained in objects reveal the cultural abundance of the world in time and space – and the relationship that exists today between them and the visitors to the museum.

At the moment when objects are handed over and accepted, a long-term commitment is incurred on both sides to maintain interest in each other. The object is a kind of material pledge offering the potential for understanding, dialogue and respect, and ultimately leading to the re-examination of entrenched clichés. The collections of the Weltmuseum Wien function as links, contributing to a deepening of cultural understanding.<sup>7</sup>

Even though many people in (originally) non-European cultures live, work, think and feel differently to us, this can teach us that our view of the world is not the only possible one – and probably not even the best one at that.

In the Weltmuseum Wien many objects also reveal how it is inextricably connected with colonialism.<sup>8</sup> Relations between people in colonial times led to objects being acquired in ways that are examined in an extremely critical light in this volume. The issue here is the recollection of the power relations between the acquirers and the societies from which these things were acquired. The re-examination of our past as an ethnographic museum with its entanglement in colonial contexts together with the duty to bring light into the darkness of the acquisition history of our collections must in future lead to a new quality in our relationships with their countries of origin. The Weltmuseum Wien must and will face up to this task – even if its own history makes this task a painful one.

We have already gone a fair distance down this path. And that's not just how we see it: in 2019 the Weltmuseum Wien won the European Museum Forum's coveted Kenneth Hudson Award. The European Museum of the Year Award jury justified the award of this prestigious prize as follows:

“Few European museums face in depth the colonial past or address its continued legacies in the 21st century. With unique intellectual honesty, the Weltmuseum Wien acknowledges the dilemmas embedded in its collections and strives to create a new identity as

a contemporary museum that celebrates the cultural abundance of the planet and promotes respect for human rights, integration and cultural coexistence”.

We are of course immensely gratified to have won the award for the reasons given by the jury, as it confirms that what we have achieved is of solid value. Above all, it will spur us on to continue on this path.

Provenance research is the subject of expert scholarly contributions by acknowledged authorities in this volume. I will therefore not go into it any further but add a few remarks on the subject of restitution as the necessary consequence of this research. A subject that since the speech given by Emmanuel Macron in Ouagadougou in November 2017 has become the focus of increasing attention from a broader public for its statement that African heritage could no longer remain a prisoner of European museums. Macron also commissioned a study of the objects acquired during colonial times that are today held in French public collections. In 2018 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy published their brilliant historical analysis and survey of African cultural objects in French ethnographic museums under the title of *Restituer le patrimoine africain*.<sup>9</sup> Their demand for the total restitution of all objects that had ended up in museums during the colonial period had perhaps not been thought through to its ultimate consequence. Nevertheless, it is in any case a very important and long-overdue book, since it not only swept the subject of restitution into the ken of a broader public, but also made the urgency of the subject clear to political decision-makers. As so often, voices from outside sounded much louder in the ears of those who can and must take the decisions than those of the museums themselves.

In Germany, for example, budgets running into the millions are now provided as an imperative prerequisite for extensive provenance research in order to enable a debate on restitution to take place. First steps have also been taken in this direction in Austria.

Funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture, Civil Service and Sport, the project dealing with the Emmerich Billitzer collection is a contribution to the current debates on questions of provenance and restitution within European ethnographic museums. Consisting of artefacts and natural history specimens collected from East Africa by Emmerich Billitzer, an imperial-royal ship's surgeon, his collection was assembled on an expeditionary voyage undertaken on the corvette SM *Fruntsberg* in 1884/85 on behalf of the Ministry of War. The project deals in detail with this complex collection history and examines the specific contexts of

acquisition. The project will also shed light on possibilities for curatorial practices when dealing with the collections of the Weltmuseum Wien and expand existing perspectives. In particular, the results of the research are expected to yield strategies for dealing with difficult and sensitive collection contexts. By examining this set of objects in an exemplary manner, options for systematizing provenance research will also be considered.<sup>10</sup>

In many European countries there are now clear statements by politicians. Only governments can decide on the restitution of objects in state ownership. Here an example from the Netherlands, a recent statement issued by Ingrid van Engelshoven, minister for Education, Culture and Science:

“The colonial past is a subject that still personally affects many people every day. This is why we must treat colonial collections with great sensitivity. I believe it important that colonial collections should be accessible and that they tell their stories from a variety of perspectives. This could mean a painful confrontation with the injustices in our past, the effects of which are in some cases still felt every day. There is no place in the Dutch State Collection for cultural heritage objects that were acquired through theft. If a country wants them back, we will give them back.”<sup>11</sup>

Like Macron’s speech, this is a very striking statement – but a striking statement is all it has remained, in terms of what has actually been achieved. Such statements are viewed by many in the countries where these objects originated as examples of a long series of hollow words which have spawned a plethora of further statements crudely hedged about with legal clauses.

The past few years have seen demands for the complete return of all objects acquired in a colonial context. But to send everything back to Africa – citing just one continent as an example for the whole non-European world – without reaching a common decision with our colleagues there would again ultimately only signify a continuation of colonial thinking. Once again, it is we who exclusively decide what is good for “those down there”. I deliberately use the expression “those down there” to unmask the ultimately patronizing, paternalistic nature of such demands.

I will shortly return to the question of restituting all objects. But first let us turn to the questions of what, how, under what conditions, and to whom these objects should be restituted. In the meantime several linear metres of literature have been published on the subject. For me, a set of guidelines condensed into just a few pages and published in 2019 under the title *Return of Cultural Objects: Principles and Process*<sup>12</sup>

the Dutch Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen points the way ahead. Defined here are the criteria that would allow restitution to be considered. Of these I will list those which seem to me to be the most important:

“It can be shown that the cultural object(s) was collected/acquired in contravention of the standards of legality at the time. This includes but is not limited to cases where the cultural object was acquired from a possessor who acted in contravention of the standards of legality at that time and who did not have legal right to ownership of the cultural object(s) acquired from a possessor found since acquisition to have engaged in illegal practices relating to the ownership of cultural object(s).”

There is a further criterion for restitution which for me is one of the most fascinating and least regarded in the current debate:

“It can be shown that the cultural object(s) is of such value (cultural, heritage or religious) to nations and/or communities of origin that continued retention in the collection of NMVW can be tested in relation to analogous standards articulated by The Heritage Act (Erfgoedwet) 2016 for Dutch national heritage and culture. This includes (a) cultural object(s) whose sacred purpose make them unsuited to public display and continued scientific research; whose relative national historical significance outside the Netherlands or influence on continuous cultural well-being outside the Netherlands outweighs all benefits of retention by the national collection in the Netherlands.”<sup>12</sup>

In this connection I would like to recount an experience I had as director of the Weltmuseum Wien, related as an anecdote.<sup>13</sup> Last year, through the offices of Georg Grünberg, a Viennese ethnologist who has carried out field research in Mesoamerica for over fifty years and thus has an unrivalled network of connections, a representative of the Bribri indigenous group from Costa Rica came to visit the museum.<sup>14</sup> Alí García Segura is a university professor of linguistics, and as such fully integrated in the Western scholarly community. However, he is also the scion of a family in which the role of a priest who makes contact with the gods of the indigenous spiritual world has been handed down for many generations. He had learned that a representation of Sibú, the most important god in Talamancan mythology, was kept at the Weltmuseum Wien. Sibú is the creator of the world and humankind, the god of wisdom and traditional values and morals. Only by means of this particular object, which looks



**Fig. 1** A very welcome meeting in my office with members of the Bribri ethnic group from Costa Rica. From left to right: Dulytami Garcia Corrales, Christian Schicklgruber, Ali Garcia Segura, Valeria Corrales Araya, Gerard Van Bussel, Georg Grünberg. At the centre on the table stands a representation of the deity Sibú. For our visitors he is the “owner” or “guardian” of humanity, as he created the first human beings out of maize seeds. He is missing from their religious practice, while in the museum he plays a more secondary role. © Natascha Strassl

like a stone basin with the head and legs of a jaguar, can a direct link with the supernatural world be achieved. For mythical reasons, the representation of Sibú from our collection cannot be replaced by any other. Before Professor Alí García Segura arrived in Vienna, the object was brought from the museum storage facility to my office. For me it was highly moving to be present when he saw the representation of Sibú, which he knew only from his father’s stories, standing there in front of him – and asked permission to touch it.

After a few minutes of reverence he then told us that the oral tradition of his group relates how this figure, which is regarded as the “owner” or “guardian” of humanity, had “disappeared into the sky”. His scholarly research had revealed that this representation of Sibú had been “abducted” by helicopter from the summit of a sacred mountain by an Austrian ethnologist (he did not want to give the name) and eventually ended up at the Museum of Ethnology (Museum für Völkerkunde), as our museum was known at the time.

A clear-cut state of affairs: the object must be given back! It fulfils all the conditions: I take its provenance as clarified by his information, it is required in living religious practice, and it is clear to whom it should be returned.



This is what I told him, and also that, as much as I wanted to (in this case), I could not take the decision myself. The museum preserves, carries out research on and makes objects available for display to the public, but they are owned by the Republic of Austria, and only representatives of the state can decide what happens to them. My advice to present the competent authorities in Austria's political landscape with a demand for restitution has not yet led to the taking of any relevant steps from Costa Rica.

Regarding another decisive question concerning restitution I would like to return to the Dutch minister's quote above. She also stated:

“This policy concerns requests for the return of cultural heritage objects that are in the possession of the State; such requests must come from a nation state. Such objects in the possession of the State that are to be returned will be transferred to the relevant nation state.”<sup>15</sup>

This is where it can become critical. For example, Baden Württemberg recently returned a bible and a whip kept in the collections of the Linden Museum in Stuttgart which once belonged to Hendrik Witbooi, a chief in the ethnic Khowsin group and one of the leading figures in the struggle for liberation against German colonial rule, to the present-day Republic of Namibia. The Namibian government sent the objects on a kind of road tour through the country. This was not in the interests of Hendrik Witbooi's family, who see themselves as the morally rightful recipients of the restitution.

This is clearly a case where provenance research would have been needed to clarify to whom these objects should have been returned: to a nation state or to direct descendants or to an ethnic group (as probably in this case). In connection with the so-called Benin Bronzes (on which more below) Phil Omodamwen,<sup>16</sup> a bronze-caster from the Kingdom of Benin, stated: “But if the objects ever come back, let them give them to the Oba<sup>17</sup> (the traditional king), not to the federal government bodies, because they would just resell those objects”.<sup>18</sup> Answers to the question of who should be the recipients of restituted objects will require intensive cooperation with historians, political decision-makers and also people like you and me, here as well as there.

In this connection one regularly hears that this dialogue is conducted on equal terms. But so long as “we” have something that “the Others” want to have back for themselves, also as a contribution to the healing of wounds from the colonial era,<sup>19</sup> this relationship cannot be understood as balanced. Only a completed act of restitution can enable an encounter with colleagues from these objects' countries of origin on

equal terms and open up a new calibre of exchange. The museum can then become a meeting-place for a whole variety of perspectives on cultural expression. The example of the Benin Bronzes demonstrates that what is merely art for “us” becomes for “them” a medium of cultural self-assurance.

Demands that are linked with restitution, or even made as a condition, are in my view extremely problematic. The restitution of the so-called Benin Bronzes may serve as an example. These are objects that were looted in the royal palace of the traditional kingdom of Benin (today territory of Nigeria) during the course of a punitive British military expedition at the end of the nineteenth century and dispersed via the art trade between a number of European museums. The Weltmuseum Wien also has a fine collection of these objects, carefully labelled with clear explanations of their acquisition. In Austria, even back then, it was known how these objects had come from the royal palace in Benin City. In the pan-European discussion about their restitution, or partial restitution, the demand often arises for them to be made accessible to the general public in a museum in Nigeria. Even though a museum of this kind is currently under construction, restitution should not be linked to any demands of a Eurocentric nature. By this I also mean the demand that objects should be displayed in a museum. This demand is Eurocentric because museums are a European invention. And as already mentioned above, objects assume a wholly different meaning in a museum context than to where they played their original role – and where some of them should play these roles again.

As the artist and columnist Victor Ehikhamenor comments:

“Whether the palace is accessible to everyone, whether everyone can see the objects there? That question betrays your western perspective! Those objects were intended not to be seen by everyone. Should every American have access to the White House? They were never meant for aesthetics, ‘art for art’s sake’, that’s not how we Africans look at it.”<sup>20</sup>

Sam Igbe, the Iyase (prime minister) of the Oba sees the matter differently:

“The Bronzes were made for the Obas, for the palace, and not for a museum. But the Oba also thinks it is important that they come to a museum and that everyone can see what we were able to make then; that we can be proud of it.”<sup>21</sup>

Restitution is restitution, without conditions attached to what should happen to these objects. This view may get me into hot water with museum directors who perhaps see this differently. Or maybe see it better than I do, because they already have greater



**Fig. 2** In Benin, when one speaks of “remembering,” the expression translates literally as “to cast in bronze”. All the objects in our collection of Benin Bronzes were created to mark decisive historical events. For many in Benin they form the basis of their cultural identity. In the museum they speak of the aesthetic power of their makers as well as of the history of the traditional kingdom. For many years representatives of European museums have been talking to authorities in Benin about how this cultural heritage should be treated and where particular objects should play a role in future. Opinions diverge widely even within the two sides. The acquisition history of this object is described in the museum’s online collection: *Commemorative head of a king – Uhunmwun Elao*. This commemorative head of a king is part of the historical holdings from the kingdom of Benin in present-day Nigeria. In 1897 the kingdom was conquered and Oba (king) Ovonramwen deposed and forced into exile. The objects plundered from the royal palace were then sold on the art market to subsequently finance the military expedition. Many of these objects are now held in European collections. © KHM-Museumsverband

experience of the subject, having dealt with concrete cases. Till today there have been requests for restitution to the Weltmuseum Wien by any government authorities with the exception of human remains by New Zealand. These objects were repatriated in 2015.

In the case of the Weltmuseum Wien one artefact in particular is the focus of public discussions on the subject of restitution: the ancient Mexican “Penacho” feather headdress.<sup>22</sup> The reader will probably have been waiting for the subject to come up since the start of my remarks.

If we look at the Penacho following the Dutch guidelines and political statements cited above<sup>23</sup>, we can briefly state that we do not know how it was acquired – whether bought, gifted or stolen; as yet no sources have yielded any information relating to the circumstances of its acquisition. But what we do know for certain is that today it would not – and could not – play a role as a ritual object.

The “crown of Moctezuma”, as it is still occasionally referred to, is not, and never was, the crown of Moctezuma II. At the Weltmuseum Wien it is called the “Ancient Mexican feather headdress” or “Penacho”; both terms were agreed on with the Mexican Embassy in Vienna before the reopening of the permanent exhibition in 2017. It also appears repeatedly as the “Penacho de Moctezuma”, as referred to by a journalist from a Mexican television channel in an interview in February 2021. I corrected him, pointing out that it is not the Penacho of Moctezuma but the Penacho *from the time of* Moctezuma II. The Aztec ruler could have seen it being worn by a priest making sacrifice to the gods in order to maintain the eternal cycle of life and death for the good of humankind. This much at least we know from surviving Aztec sources. To this day there is no evidence for all the myths that surround the ancient Mexican feather headdress.

We are often accused of using the defence of claiming it to be “too fragile to move” as a weak excuse to avoid having to give it back. However, its fragility was confirmed by a two-year research project undertaken from 2010 to 2012 by restorers from Mexico and Vienna together with scientists from the Vienna University of Technology.

Whenever the subject of the Penacho’s transportability is raised, various experts are regularly quoted who see the matter differently. This reminds me of the doctors and virologists in the current pandemic who appear on private TV channels, social media or in tabloid newspapers spouting opinions that contradict proven experts.

The case in which the Penacho is displayed was designed by Johann Wassermann from the Institute of Mechanics and Mechatronics at the Vienna University of Technology on the basis of 3D acceleration measurements. Inside the case acceleration values – generated by visitor footfall – do not exceed 0.04g. Measurements taken on



**Fig. 3** The reverse of the ancient Mexican feather headdress before restoration reveals the fragility of this object. Even though the feathers were tied into the supporting structure so that they swung flexibly when the wearer danced, the situation after more than 500 years is now completely different. Organic material desiccates over time, becoming brittle and extremely fragile. © KHM-Museumsverband

an art transport flight from Vienna to Washington showed acceleration values of up to 5.5g measured directly on an art object which was being transported in a specialized art transport crate. Sample measurements taken by technicians from Mexico on a flight equipped with a platform with vibration absorbers showed acceleration of up to 15.5g.<sup>24</sup> From 0.04g to 5.5g or even 15.5g – these findings make it easy to imagine what the Penacho would look like when unpacked in Mexico. We cannot take responsibility for the risk.

For some, the Penacho today stands as a symbol of the Weltmuseum Wien's entanglement in its colonial past, which they see as persisting to the present day. For others it shows an immense artistry in using feathers, which for the Aztecs was their most valuable material. For others it tells of a culture destroyed by the Spaniards in the

sixteenth century. For many in Mexico itself, it seems to have become a tool, if the construction of cultural identity can be said to be the product of volition, although that is perhaps a little unfair. For me, it is an obligation to preserve a shared cultural heritage for generations to come, for the next five hundred years.

As a museum professional for whom the meaningfulness of an ethnographic museum is beyond doubt, I would prefer to speak of the potential restitution of “a number of” objects. Museums need objects in order to become one of the few spaces where a profound and non-polemical debate on the intersections of culture can take place. This is an opinion that is also frequently heard from the traditional kingdom of Benin.

In January of this year Emeka Assor came to visit us at the museum as the envoy of Oba Ewuare II. He confirmed once more that His Royal Majesty Omo n’Oba n’Edo desired the final return of some, but not all, objects. In the introductory note to the exhibition catalogue *Benin. Kings and Rituals. Court Arts from Nigeria*<sup>25</sup> his predecessor Omo n’Oba Erediauwa expressed his hopes: “As you put this past on show today, it is our prayer that the people and the government of Austria will show humaneness and magnanimity and return to us some [sic!] of these objects which found their way to your country”. And on the objects themselves: “So, as you step into the hall today, you will be reading, as it were, the pages torn out of the book of a people’s life history; you will be viewing objects of our spirituality, albeit you may not fully understand their import.”

We are putting all our efforts into giving our visitors at least a sense of this import.

Here I would like to cite my colleague Theophilus Umogbai, curator at the Benin City National Museum, who in a personal conversation mentioned that the aesthetic quality of African art once led Europeans to believe that it was made by master craftsmen from outside Africa. At this time, Europeans refused to credit Africans with such skills, because in their view they were ape-like savages. That this image has changed is partly due to us as an ethnographic museum. For this, we will continue to need objects in the future – objects which emanate the aura of the original.

Finally, I would like to voice a concern. Focusing on acquisition history and the biographies of individual collectors brings with it the danger that we are once again only talking about our own history. An ethnographic museum in the twenty-first century must also give the so-called source communities their history, making it quite clear that they have their own history which should be represented on its own terms, not simply incorporated into ours. The subject behind the object must appear as an active individual or agent. Anything less would ultimately amount to nothing more than yet

another colonial perspective on people from the object's country of origin, concealed behind a mask of well-meaning benevolence.

This is what it should be about, not self-pitying navel-gazing, which does not help the museum, and far less the relationship between our visitors and the people who lived and live outside Europe or have come from there to live amongst us. It is with these people that museum ethnologists must speak, in their languages and together to translate a joint view of the world for our visitors in exhibitions and events programmes.

The social anthropologist and tibetologist Christian Schicklgruber conducted extensive fieldwork among Tibetan speaking communities. He has curated major exhibitions in Austria and abroad, in recent years as director of the Weltmuseum Wien.

## Notes

- 1 I have chosen the expression “paratext” because what follows is neither a scholarly essay nor a foreword. It is, rather, an extended version of the speech I gave at the opening of the seminar *Das Museum im kolonialen Kontext. Unsere Verantwortung für Objekte mit belasteter Geschichte*. It is about the thoughts, reflections and fundamental attitudes of a director of an ethnographic museum in the 21st century.  
Translated by Sophie Kidd.
- 2 Beth Lord, “Foucault’s museum: difference, representation, and genealogy,” in *Museum and Society* (2006) 4: 1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 1970); Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1954–1984).
- 3 For example, the main text in the “Into a New World” gallery was written by Eric Hemenway, director of archives and records of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians. It addresses our visitors directly.
- 4 “Us” and the “Others”, the “Self” and the “Foreign”— these concepts are hard to eradicate from our thinking. And that includes my own thinking, too. To indicate that these terms are now outdated I put them in quotation marks.
- 5 <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/> (16 March 2021).
- 6 To mention just two recent examples of such exhibitions: *Nepal Art Now*, curated by Swosti Rajbhandari Kayastha and Christian Schicklgruber (2019) and *Japan in the Meiji Era. The Collection Heinrich von Siebold*, curated by Kaori Hidaka and Bettina Zorn (2020).

- 7 These lines are freely quoted from a text in a Christmas card from the Museum der Kulturen in Basel.
- 8 When we speak about “colonialism“ the term should not be reduced to political or economic conditions in a period of our history when for almost five centuries we thought we could rule the world. The term colonialism should be viewed as the quality of relationships between people – and this is by no means a closed chapter in our history; it extends right up the present day. We must be aware of this in order to better understand our present and to work towards a common future with those who were once colonized.
- 9 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Sayoy, *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, Philippe Rey/Seuil, Paris, 2018; English translation: *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, [http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_en.pdf](http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf) (16 March 2021).
- 10 <https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/science-research/provenance-research/> (16 March 2021).
- 11 <https://www.government.nl/government/members-of-cabinet/ingrid-van-engelshoven/news/2021/01/29/government-redressing-an-injustice-by-returning-cultural-heritage-objects-to-their-country-of-origin> (16 March 2021).
- 12 <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/sites/default/files/2019-06/NMVW%20Return%20of%20Cultural%20Objects%20Principles%20and%20Process.pdf> (16 March 2021).
- 13 Anecdotes cast a sharp light (not only for the reader) on everything that went into shaping them. When anecdotes no longer tell us anything we end up with intellectual monotony.
- 14 To talk to such individuals – and to react to their demands – is far more fruitful and welcome than talking to those who presume to speak for the source communities without possessing a mandate from them. Even if it is meant well, it is once again ultimately a patronizing act.
- 15 <https://www.government.nl/government/members-of-cabinet/ingrid-van-engelshoven/news/2021/01/29/government-redressing-an-injustice-by-returning-cultural-heritage-objects-to-their-country-of-origin>
- 16 Using an individual’s personal name is vital. There are no Benin citizens in the singular; if you speak to ten people you will hear ten different opinions. Here ethnological research in the field is required.
- 17 Oba is the title of the king of the traditional kingdom of Benin.
- 18 “Interviews: Finally we get to see the Benin Bronzes in Benin City,” *Trouw*, 19 July 2019, <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/interviews-finally-we-get-to-see-the-benin-bronzes-in-benin-city-b7b59c-2c/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> (16 March 2021).
- 19 I use “contribution“ advisedly. Even by giving back every single object, Europe cannot cleanse itself of the sin of colonialism.
- 20 “Interviews: <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/interviews-finally-we-get-to-see-the-benin-bronzes-in-benin-city-b7b59c2c/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> (16 March)
- 21 “Interviews: Finally we get to see the Benin Bronzes in Benin City,” *Trouw*, 19 July 2019, <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/interviews-finally-we-get-to-see-the-benin-bronzes-in-benin-city-b7b59c-2c/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> (16 March 2021).



- 22 The best literature by far on the Penacho headdress is Sabine Haag, Alfonso de Maria y Campos, Lilia Rivero Weber, Christian Feest (eds.), *Der altmexikanische Federkopfschmuck*, ZFK Publishers, Altenstadt, 2012
- 23 <https://www.government.nl/government/members-of-cabinet/ingrid-van-engelshoven/news/2021/01/29/government-redressing-an-injustice-by-returning-cultural-heritage-objects-to-their-country-of-origin> (16 March 2021).
- 24 Johann Wassermann, *Bericht zur Federkopfschmuck-Schwingungsmessung im Museum für Völkerkunde*, Technische Universität Wien, 2011 (unpublished).
- 25 Barbara Plankensteiner (ed.), *Benin. Kings and Ritual. Court Arts from Nigeria*, Ghent: Snoeck Publishers, 2007).