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EDITOR'S NOTES

This special issue delves into the complexities of decolonization efforts within museums across Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. These regions, frequently overlooked in global conversations on provenance research and restitution politics, present unique historical and cultural challenges. The focus of this issue is on how museums in these areas engage with their collections – collections shaped by imperialism, internal colonialism, and ideological legacies. Through a series of case studies and theoretical explorations, this issue aims to shed light on how these museums are confronting their pasts and reevaluating their roles in contemporary cultural and political landscapes.

Particularly museum collections in Eastern and Southern Europe have historically been situated on the peripheries of major empires, such as the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires or Tsarist Russia. These regions were part of empires that had no, or relatively little, overseas colonies, although their political and cultural elites were deeply entangled in imperial networks of power, knowledge, and material culture. The countries that emerged from these empires possess collections that reflect both the impact of internal colonialism – whereby certain regions or groups within an empire were subjected to cultural and economic domination and colonial violence – and the broader implications of global colonialism. Some of the collections discussed in this issue emerged during what Dan Hicks calls "World War Zero," the period between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the First World War, in which European empires waged a militarist-corporate-colonial war across the Global South (Hicks 2020). Other museums and collections are discussed in the context of the interwar period and the Second World War, as well as post-WWII in the context of Yugoslavian Non-Alignment. In reading the articles, it is particularly helpful to approach them through newer concepts such as "implicated communities" (Lehrer 2020) or the "duality of decolonization" (Bukowiecki, Wawrzyniak, and Wróblewska 2020), the former of which draws our attention to how different, (often minoritized) actors are implicated in the material culture of museums beyond direct-source communities, and the latter of which draws our attention to how effects of past imperial rule and internal colonization can be addressed without resorting to overly simplistic and nationalistic views of these historical dependencies.

Unlike museums in the UK or France, which have attempted to make strides in decolonizing their collections, museums in Central, Eastern, and

Southern European regions are often viewed through a lens of "colonial innocence," as described by Matthew Rampley (Rampley 2021). This notion suggests that since these countries lacked overseas colonies, museum authorities often argue they were untouched by such colonial legacies. However, these museums house significant collections that are deeply implicated in imperialist, colonial, and nationalist practices. This special issue offers an interesting mix of places and locales analyzed, as well as their collections. While many authors analyze museums in the big metropoles and centres of former empires, such as Berlin or St. Petersburg, they more specifically analyze how specific collections – from India, the Amur region, or the Balkans – have been integrated, narrated, and showcased in these museums. Germany's colonial history was less prominent before debates began over the reconstruction of the Prussian Palace, now home to Berlin's major museums, known as the Humboldt Forum. Similar to some countries in Eastern Europe (Leher and Wawrzyniak 2023), conservatives and right-wing groups in Germany also actively seek to hinder or resist critical examinations of colonial history. This intricate historical context makes studying museums and collections practices in these various locales vitally important.

Organizing Principle of the Special Issue

The contributions in this special issue follow a structured approach, beginning with a broad institutional analysis and progressively zooming in to examine specific collections and individual artworks. This layered organizing principle allows for exploring the complexities involved in debates around decolonizing museums in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. By starting at the institutional level, we investigate how museums have historically functioned as tools for consolidating imperial and national power while simultaneously serving as sites for artistic inspiration and the expression of sentiments of solidarity with the Global South.

From there, we move to the level of specific collections. This shift reveals how material culture within museums has often been shaped by ideological, political, and disciplinary forces, reflecting the power dynamics of the time. These collections are not neutral; rather, they carry the biases and assumptions of the imperial or national projects that shaped their formation. By analyzing collections at this level, we can better understand how they need to be addressed in terms of contemporary decolonization strategies, while also attending to historical dynamics of power and control that underpin them.

Finally, the issue narrows its focus to individual artworks and objects, showcasing how singular pieces continue to engage with present-day cultural and political discourses. This level of analysis allows us to highlight the ongoing significance of artistic interventions in restitution debates, as well as their broader implications for how museums and societies confront the legacies of empire. This tiered approach – moving from institutional analysis, through collections, to individual artworks – provides a multifaceted framework that captures the entangled histories and complex realities of museums in the process of decolonization.

Contributions

The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of Saint Petersburg and the Temporalization of the Russian Empire – Johanna Hügel

Johanna Hügel's article, "The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of Saint Petersburg and the Temporalization of the Russian Empire," explores the pivotal role this museum played in shaping and temporalizing the representation of the Russian Empire. Hügel highlights the museum's significance in constructing an imperial narrative, focusing on two key artists – Vladimir Markov and Varvara Bubna – who both studied under prominent figures, such as Kazimir Malevich. In 1913, Markov and Bubna visited the museum, where they were particularly captivated by the exhibits from the Amur region.

The Amur region, newly integrated into the Russian Empire at the time, held a unique status as a space for the study of "deep time," a concept through which scholars believed they could trace humanity's distant past. The region was frequently referred to as the "El Dorado of Russia" due to its rich cultural and historical significance. Hügel's article investigates how this region was represented by scholars – especially St. Petersburg–based figures like Schrenck and Shternberg – and how these representations materialized in the museum's exhibitions. Through her analysis, Hügel demonstrates the systematic implementation of the deep-time concept in the museum's display of the Amur region, shedding light on how the museum's curation of this area reinforced the temporal and spatial narratives that underpinned the Russian Empire's self-conception.

The Ambivalence of Museum Discourses About the Other During the Non-Aligned Movement in Slovenia – Tina Palaic

In "The Ambivalence of Museum Discourses About the Other During the Non-Aligned Movement in Slovenia," Tina Palaic examines the ethnographic museum in Goričane, Slovenia, during the period of non-alignment. Palaic argues that the museum's discourses during the Non-Aligned Movement were marked by an ambivalence stemming from the interplay of five narratives that both supported and contradicted the political and cultural shifts in Yugoslavia.

The author argues that the non-aligned period is particularly intriguing because it disrupted traditional Western notions of the "Other" through the principles of non-alignment, which emphasized solidarity with countries in the Global South. However, while this solidarity was clearly articulated in Yugoslavian foreign policy, it did not always translate into consistent museum practices. On the one hand, there was a strong emphasis in the museum on support for national liberation struggles and the broader goals of the non-aligned movement. On the other hand, as the author shows, the exhibitions simultaneously created a sense of distance between the museum visitors and the material culture on display. This distancing effect led to an exoticization of the Other, where foreign cultures were portrayed through a developmental lens that emphasized their supposed lack of progress relative to the West. Despite the ideological commitment to solidarity with the Global South, the exhibitions reinforced hierarchical and exoticized representations of these cultures. This complicated the museum's role in both constructing a progressive stance toward its collections and asserting its claim to belong to the "civilized" West.

Caught Between "Mundane West and Medieval Orient": On the Origins and Implications of the Balkan Collection in the Museum Europäischer Kulturen Berlin – Matthias Thaden

Matthias Thaden's article, "Caught Between "Mundane West and Medieval Orient": On the Origins and Implications of the Balkan Collection in the Museum Europäischer Kulturen Berlin," delves into the origins and implications of the Balkan collection housed at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin. Thaden thereby focuses on the collections of Gustav Adolf Küppers, who conducted five collecting expeditions between 1935 and 1939. While Küppers was not officially a member of the NSDAP, the author highlights how Küppers

aligned himself with imperial and National Socialist ideologies, which influenced his collecting approach.

Thaden argues that it is essential to consider the collector's background when assessing the Küppers collection, as his work was framed by a belief in German entitlement over the Balkans. Küppers, along with his network of collaborators, supported National Socialist plans for Southeastern Europe, seeing themselves as the rightful custodians of the region's ancient folk culture. Küppers's collecting efforts were driven by the belief that this folk culture was on the verge of extinction, and it was this sense of urgency that fueled his expeditions.

In a particularly striking quote, Thaden observes that it was "the ominous mixture of classical rescue ideology and Nazi imperialism" (p. 162) that casts the Küppers collection in a distinctly problematic light, positioning it within the broader context of colonial collecting practices. Although Küppers did not acquire the objects through overtly illegal or deceptive means, they were nonetheless collected in service of an imperialist agenda. The author argues that the collection cannot be separated from the motivations behind its acquisition, emphasizing that Küppers ultimately succumbed to a romanticized view of the Balkans – one shaped by the scientific theories of his time and deeply intertwined with ideological ambitions.

Decolonizing Narratives: Rethinking Indian Collections and Ethnographic Museums in Germany – Shraddha Bhatawadekar and Mrinal Pande

The article "Decolonizing Narratives: Rethinking Indian Collections and Ethnographic Museums in Germany" by Shraddha Bhatawadekar and Mrinal Pande examines how the Indian collections at the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin are shaped by 19th-century German Indology. This influence is particularly evident in the stark distinction made in the exhibition between representations of Buddhism and Hinduism. The exhibition draws a clear intellectual and cultural connection between Buddhist ideals and Christian ideals, as well as between Buddhist art traditions and Greco-Roman traditions. This connection reflects a continuation of a 19th-century version of German Indology and resonates with Western interest in Zen meditation since the 1960s, which has linked Buddhism in the West with notions of tranquillity and happiness.

Hinduism, however, does not receive the same favourable treatment in the museum. Descriptions of Hindu deities are marked by adjectives such as "bloodthirsty" or "seductress," (p. 187) and the exhibition seems unable, or perhaps

unwilling, to distance itself from the outdated narratives of 19th-century Indology. As the authors note, Hindu deities were often dismissed because they did not align with Western ideas of order and rationality; gods and goddesses with multiple arms or legs were deemed "irrational."

The authors also highlight the museum's reliance on an outdated division between the Brahmanical-Buddhist and Muhammadan periods – categories developed by European and British colonial archaeologists, which the museum has uncritically adopted. This rigid framework ignores the region's multilayered history. The authors argue that collaboration with source communities and experts could help dismantle these outdated colonial narratives and redefine the exhibition in ways more reflective of current understandings.

The Deadlock of the Decolonization of Museums: When the Colonizer Becomes the Decolonizer – Cihan Küçük

Cihan Küçük's article, "The Deadlock of the Decolonization of Museums: When the Colonizer Becomes the Decolonizer," offers a philosophical and artistic reflection on *Stereo*, a work by the artist Cevdet Erek that engages with the Great Altar of Pergamon. This artwork was first exhibited in Germany in 2019 at the Ruhrtriennale in Bochum. The author, who served as the production manager at Arter Gallery in Istanbul – where he previously oversaw an exhibition of Erek's work – traces the historical and political significance of the Pergamon Altar, which holds a central role in the artwork.

The article critically examines the presence of the Pergamon Altar in contemporary spaces, particularly its connection to the Humboldt Forum, which is now housed in the reconstructed Prussian Palace in Berlin. The author highlights the Forum's complex history, tracing its evolution from its predecessor, the GDR-era structure, to its current incarnation as the Humboldt Forum. According to the author, the Forum represents not merely a reconstruction of the past but also a problematic *reincarnation*, one that seeks to erase other layers of Berlin's history, including its Nazi and communist past.

Additionally, Küçük draws attention to more recent challenges. In 2022, three Cameroonian researchers from a provenance research team were denied visas by German authorities, who questioned their intentions to return to their home country upon completion of the research project. This event illustrates how researchers from indigenous or Global South communities are systematically excluded from fully participating in the decolonization process in Germany.

Conclusion

The case studies featured in this special issue grapple with the legacies of imperialism, internal colonialism, and national identity-building. Some museums, like the Goričane Museum in Slovenia, reflect the tensions between national narratives and international solidarity, while others, such as those in Berlin, grapple with a past that was shaped by colonial revisionism – ironically attempting to alleviate this past by housing museums in a resurrected Prussian castle.

As Amy Lonetree argues in "Decolonizing Museums" (Lonetree 2012, 23), it becomes clear that decolonization is not only about changing how collections are presented within museums themselves. As Lonetree argues, decolonization must involve a shift "from curator-controlled presentations" to a more inclusive and collaborative process, whereby the communities represented (e.g., Indigenous or marginalized communities) are actively involved in shaping exhibition content. In this way, the Indian collections in Berlin could be reframed into more contemporary and diverse exhibitions, previously deemed less problematic collections scrutinized more deeply, and the museum's role in a broader sociopolitical and historical context analyzed more carefully. This perspective reminds us that museums cannot be viewed in isolation; they are embedded in larger sociopolitical environments that shape their narratives, practices, and the challenges they face in addressing colonial legacies. Therefore, the work of decolonization must consider the broader historical and political contexts within which these institutions operate.

* * *

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Melanie Janet Sindelar
Guest Editor
Urban People / Lidé města journal

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THE MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY SAINT PETERSBURG AND THE TEMPORALIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

Johanna Hügel
(Universty of Erfurt)

Abstract: ***Focusing on imperial depictions of the Amur region, this article examines the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Saint Petersburg (MAE) as a central agent in the production and institutionalization of images of empire. Within the walls of this museum, the imperial elites of Saint Petersburg-based geographers, ethnographers, curators, and museum visitors imagined and constructed the only recently conquered far-eastern portion of the Russian Empire as not only a spatially, but also temporally remote place. Carefully arranged according to the logic of evolutionary anthropology, the exhibition resonated well with the interests of the avant-garde artist and art critic Vladimir Markov, who searched for "primitive art" and visited the collection in 1913. Influenced by the most recent publications of his contemporaries on the interconnections between aesthetics and psychology, Markov found that the objects perfectly embodied the pureness and timelessness he was looking for.***

Keywords: ***Evolutionary Anthropology, Amur region, Henry Lewis Morgan, Leopold von Schrenck, Lev Shternberg***

In the autumn of 1913, two young lovers and artists strolled through the exhibition rooms of the Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE) in Saint Petersburg.[1] Vladimir Markov (1877–1914), born near Riga as Voldemārs Matvejs, had recently published the first Russian-language account of Rapa Nui art, *Iskusstvo Ostrova Paschi ("Art of Easter Island")*, and was about to release a second essay-monograph about what he termed "primitive art": *Iskusstvo Negrov (The Art of the N***)*. Varvara Bubnova (1886–1983), a close friend and spouse of Markov, studied alongside him at the Imperial Art Academy in Saint Petersburg. Both were intimately acquainted with the key figures of the revolutionary art movement that would later be canonized in art historiography from the 1960s onwards as the "Russian avant-garde". Over the preceding four years, they studied with artists like Pavel Filonov (1883–1941) and exhibited with Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964), and Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935). Earlier that summer, Markov and Bubnova had travelled together through Europe, visiting eleven ethnographic collections and taking close to 100 photographs. At the time, Markov was recognized as a distinguished art theorist and critic (Howard 2015).

During their visit to the museum, Markov and Bubnova were particularly interested in wooden objects from the Amur region, a far eastern territory that had only been incorporated into the Russian Empire a few decades earlier. Judging by the approximately 30 photographs taken by the young couple in this collection, they were especially captivated by the small wooden spirit figures belonging to the shamanistic tribes along the Amur River.[2] While some of the photographs show the figures' full anthropomorphic bodies, others are close-up, portrait-like shots of their silent faces from the front, the side, and back. Why did these particular objects from the Amur region catch the attention of the two young artists? The first clues to this question can be found in Bubnova's notes:

1 Parts of this article are developed in more detail in my full dissertation manuscript, forthcoming in 2025, Johanna Hügel: *Kunst, Ethnographie, und das verborgene Leben der Dinge: Saint Petersburg 1890–1920*, Göttingen 2025. Regarding this article, I want to thank both of the anonymous reviewers, whose feedback helped me to sharpen my argument.

2 The photographs are stored in the Latvian National Library, LNB RGRN Latvijas Nacionālās Bibliotēkas Rīgas Reto Rokrakstu un Grāmatu Nodaļa [Latvian National Library, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts], Fond R ; more information on the context of these photographs can be found in Bužinska 2015.

Вскоре после знакомства со скульптурой Африки Матвей заинтересовалься и искусством малых народов Севера Азии (Приамурья) - нанайнцев (гольдов), нивхов (гиляков), орочеи. Мы ходили в Этнографический музей Академии Наук и там делали снимки с примитивных деревянных скульптур, необыкновенных по простоте и чистоте форм. Это были обрубки древесных стволов, по большей части березы, обработанные нескольким искусным ударами топора (или другого примитивного орудия), которые высекали строгое лицо идола, или просто - человеческое. Голова непосредственно сидела на туловище - стволе, каторый часто сохранял покров коры. И здесь Матвей получал помощь заведующих Музея, каторых трогал энтузиазм Матвея. Опять собирался новой материал и записи новой книги.

Shortly after Matvej became acquainted with African sculpture, he developed an interest in the art of the small peoples of Northern Asia (Priamur region) – the Nanai (Goldi), Nivkh (Gilyak), and Orochen. We went to the Ethnographic Museum of the Academy of Sciences and took photographs of primitive wooden sculptures, which were unusual in their simplicity and purity of form. These sculptures were tree stumps, mostly birch trunks, carved with a few skilful axe blows (or other primitive tools) into stern faces – those of idols or simply human figures. The head sat directly on the tree trunk, which was often still covered in bark. Matvej was once again supported by the museum management, who were moved by his enthusiasm. More material was collected, and notes were written for a new book.[3]

Markov compiled these photographs and notes for his third publication *Iskusstvo Servernoi Azii ("Art of Northern Asia"),* which was never published due to his untimely death in 1914 (Bužinska 2015). While his oeuvre is not widely known, and these photographs have been almost completely forgotten, I will demonstrate how they offer a fascinating point of departure into the mechanisms of temporalization and coloniality within the Russian Empire.[4]

I will argue that Markov's conception of the objects from the Amur region as manifestations of primitive art was not merely based on his personal

[3] Varvara Bubnova, Poslednie Gody Zhisni i Raboty V. I. Matveia. Vospominania [Varvara Bubnova, The last years of the life and work of V. I. Matvejs, Recollections], 1960, RGALI F. 3310, op. 1, del. 33, l. 1–26, here p. 18, translated by the author of this article.

[4] The only article that features Markov's photographs compiled in the MAE is Bužinska 2015.

impressions, but it can be historicized and used as an epistemological lens through which to examine how the Amur region was incorporated into the Russian Empire. While the region first gained attention in Russian metropolises and imperial discourse during its conquest in the 1850s, as a space that – through its resources and infrastructural connection to the Pacific Ocean – would enhance the Russian Empire's prospects of a prosperous future, it had been transformed into a place of "deep time" by the end of the 19th century.[5] Analysing the writings of geographer Leopold von Schrenck (1826–1894) and ethnographer Lev Shternberg (1861–1927), I will demonstrate how this significant shift in the region's portrayal occurred. Drawing on Johannes Fabian's classic work *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983), I will argue that the region gained importance in ethnographic discourse as a place where humanity's deep past seemed to be preserved and could be studied *in situ*. Tracing the depiction of the region from ethnographic discourse to the exhibits of the most popular ethnographic museum of the Russian Empire, I will show how the deep time of the Amur region was conveyed through an arrangement of objects that could be understood even by the untrained eyes of common visitors, thus gaining interpretative authority beyond the limited circle of ethnographers and imperial scientists. As the temporalized landscape of the Russian Empire had already been translated into the materiality of the ethnographic exhibition, it was but one step further to portray the objects from the Amur as primitive art, thereby inscribing an aesthetic from the empire's fringes into the deep past of humanity.

Depicting the empire as not only spatially immense but also as a landscape encompassing the vast dimensions of human history – from the Stone Age to present-day modernity – provided a seemingly natural justification for the conquest and control of territories that appeared not only geographically remote but also temporally behind. In this analysis, ethnographic knowledge becomes visible not only as a powerful tool for imperial elites, who relied on it to adapt their administrative and governing practices to new imperial subjects.[6] The

[5] The term "deep time" has been popularized by Stephen Jay Gould's *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. 1987.

[6] As Ricarda Vulpius, for example, has shown for proto-ethnographic knowledge in the Russian empire of the 17th and 18th centuries; Ricarda Vulpius: *Die Geburt des Russländischen Imperiums. Herrschaftskonzepte und –praktiken im 18. Jahrhundert,* Köln, Weimar, Wien 2020; for the interconnections between imperial rule and the discipline of physical anthropology, see Marina Mogilner: *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*. Lincoln 2013.

ethnographic knowledge embodied in the neatly arranged and sorted objects on wooden shelves and in glass cases within the exhibition rooms was also a powerful epistemological tool, making visitors of the ethnographic collection aware of imperial rule and revealing to them their own place within this imperial space-time.

1. Russia's "El Dorado": Imperial Conquest and Imagination of the Amur Region

Turning from the imperial metropolises of Saint Petersburg and Moscow to the eastern frontiers of the empire, it is striking how perspectives on and depictions of the region shifted over the course of the 19th century. As geographer and historian Mark Bassin points out in his monograph *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (1999), the Russian conquest of the Amur region in the 1850s was accompanied by a euphoria that linked the region with prosperity, progress, and new possibilities, dubbing it Russia's "America," "California," "El Dorado," or "Russian Mexico" (Bassin 1999, 93f.). While few people in the imperial metropolises were familiar with the region or its exact geographical location before the 1850s, visual representations played a major role in popularizing the region and its annexation within the Tsarist empire. In generating significance for the region, older notions of Siberia as a *zolotoe dno* (gold mine), dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, were revived, emphasizing firstly the region's agricultural potential and natural resources and secondly its strategic infrastructural position, particularly regarding inland navigation via the Amur and Ussuri Rivers and access to the Pacific Ocean (Bassin 1999, 5–9).

However, these factors only gained significance through the rise of Russian nationalism in the first half of the 19th century. The expansion of the empire into the Amur region appeared to signal a break from the reign of Nicholas I (1796–1855), which was perceived by parts of the imperial elite as a period of stagnation and a revitalization of Russian national consciousness. In this context, the conquest of the region was discussed as a decisive step, promising a glorious and expansive future for the empire. Intellectuals such as Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) placed particular importance on the region for the progress of civilization. Additionally, "Amur euphoria" was tied to the ongoing debate about the Russian Empire's orientation and identification with either Europe or Asia, as it seemed to herald a new era of independence and a shift in focus

towards the empire's eastern frontier (Bassin 1999, 275-80). Thus, the region was considered to represent the bright future of the Russian Empire, with its potential for economic prosperity, territorial expansion, and infrastructural independence. The conquest of the Amur region was even compared to the European conquest of Central Africa (Bassin 1999, 31), drawing parallels between Russian imperial discourses and both the American frontier myth (and thus, settler colonialism) and the colonial euphoria of various European empires. As in European colonial discourses, a fundamental ambivalence is evident here: on the one hand, there was excitement about a possible "conquest" and domination of the territory, while on and the other, there was a devaluation of the local population and a focus on economic extraction by the metropolis.

This ambivalence highlights some of the reasons how and why the image of the Amur region in the Russian metropolises and beyond changed in the following decades. As exemplified in Anton Chekhov's (1860–1904) travelogue *Ostrov Sakhalin (Sakhalin Island)* (1893–1895), the region's use as a penal colony from 1881 onward transformed its image into that of a distant, almost unreachable place "at the end of the world". While this shift did affect the region's living conditions – e.g., through the Russian imperial administration or the spread of disease (Grant 1996) – these changes appear to be more a consequence of altered perceptions of the region than the cause. While Bassin points to economic factors, I will show how the imperial discourse about the region, which emphasized its future potential in the 1850s, shifted in the following decades, and how ethnographic discourse redefined it as a "place of the past".

2. Imperial Ethnography: Turning the Amur Region into a Place of Deep Time and a Scientific Object of Ethnographic Discourse

The enormous relevance attributed to the Amur region in ethnographic discourse around the turn of the 20th century arose from the prominence of evolutionary anthropology during this period, and the place the people of the Amur region were assigned within this temporalized framework of global cultural diversity. The region emerged as a focus of scientific inquiry in imperial ethnography in the 1870s and 1880s, when the Baltic German/Russian zoologist and geographer Leopold von Schrenck wrote his *Reisen und Forschungen im Amur-Lande (Travels and Research in the Amur Region)*. In these travelogues, von Schrenck introduced a new understanding of the population of the region,

notably bringing the "Gilyak"[7] into ethnographic discourse as a distinct cultural entity for the first time.[8] Although this differentiation of the Amur region's population was based on von Schrenck's linguistic research, using language as a marker of cultural autonomy,[9] the true significance of the inhabitants of the Amur region for the emerging discipline of ethnography lay in their temporalization. Referring to the inhabitants of the Amur region, von Schrenck introduced the term *paläasiatisch* (*Paleo-Asiatic*) into ethnographic discourse (von Schrenck 1881, 246f.). He argued that the people of the Amur differed from other groups on the Asian continent, citing their small and dwindling numbers as well as their remote geographical location at the edge of the continent. To this spatial remoteness, von Schrenck added the dimension of time, portraying the Amur as not only a geographically distant place but also one that was temporally removed:

> Ausser dem sprachlichen und geographischen Gesichtspunkte möchte ich aber bei Betrachtung dieser Völker auch noch einen dritten, weiteren, historischen Gesichtspunkt geltend machen. Erwägt man nämlich ihre sprachliche Vereinsamung, ihren Sitz am Rande der Continente oder überhaupt verschiedener grösserer Erd- und Völkergebiete, erwägt man ferner die geringe Erstreckung ihrer Wohngebiete und ihre kleine, im Schwinden begriffene Kopfzahl, so drängt sich einem unwillkürlich der Gedanke auf, dass sie nur Reste ehemals stärkerer, weiter verbreiteter und verzweigter Völker sind, gleichsam nur die Ausgehenden einer älteren Völkerformation, über welcher sich durch wiederholte spätere Fluthen neue Formationen abgelagert haben. Da namentlich die ehemalige weitere Verbreitung und Verzweigung dieser Völker unzweifelhaft auf asiatischem Boden, näher zum Innern des Continentes lag, so möchte ich sie, so lange die Sprachforschung keine anderweitigen Beziehungen und Gliederungen nachweist, vom historisch-geographischen Gesichtspunkte in eine Gruppe unter dem Namen der Paläasiaten oder,

[7] As I am referring to the historical discourses here and in the following, I am using the terms derived from the respective sources.

[8] Von Schrenck and Shternberg not only wrote the first dictionaries on the Gilyak language, but it was von Schrenck who actually defined the Gilyaks as a distinct "tribe", supporting his argument with their independent language: "At the time of my journey to the Amur region, it was believed that the Gilyaks were one tribe with the Ainu or Kuril people [...]. If he had known even a few words of these languages, the fable of the 'Kurils of the mainland' and North Sakhalin would not have arisen", von Schrenck (1881), p. 208–210.

[9] For more background information on the role of language as a signifier of cultural autonomy, see Vermeulen (2015).

> specieller, der nördlichen oder nordöstlichen Paläasiaten zusammenfassen. (von Schrenck 1881, 246)
>
> In addition to the linguistic and geographical aspects, I would like to emphasize a third, further, historical aspect when considering these peoples. If we take into consideration their linguistic isolation, their location on the fringes of the continents or of various larger areas of the earth and peoples in general, if one also considers the small extent of their living areas and their small, dwindling population, the thought inevitably arises that they are only the remnants of once stronger, more widespread, and branched peoples – outgrowths of an older population structure, over which newer groups have settled through successive migrations. Since the earlier, wider distribution and branching of these peoples was undoubtedly centred on Asian soil, closer to the continent's interior, I would like to group them, as long as linguistic research does not prove any other relationships and divisions, from a historical-geographical standpoint, under the name "Paleasiates" or, more specifically, the "northern" or "northeastern Paleasiates".

This initial description of the Amur inhabitants as "paleoasiatic" coincided with the rise of evolutionary anthropology, popularized by works such as *Prehistoric Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (1865) by John Lubbock (1834–1913), *Primitive Culture* (1871) by Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), and *Ancient Society* (1877) by Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881). As the anthropologist Johannes Fabian famously argued in his classic *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983), the category of time was essential in defining ethnographic research objects. Evolutionary anthropology derived much of its legitimacy as a discipline from the claim that it could uncover the early, unknown history of humankind – one not traceable through traditional historical methods due to the absence of written sources – by drawing parallels with contemporary societies that had not yet been integrated into global infrastructures of transportation and communication. Therefore, these societies were believed to have not yet arrived in modernity. In this context, the Amur region seemed like a particularly promising ethnographic "discovery".

This depiction of the region reveals more about the perspectives of the Saint Petersburg-based scientists who were creating, disseminating, and receiving this geographical and ethnographic knowledge than it does about the region itself or its inhabitants at the turn of the 20th century. Inscribing the logic of evolutionary

theory into the empire's peripheries served not only to legitimize the discipline of these imperial scientists but also to reinforce their own subjectivity and professional status.[10] Regarding the Amur region, these scientists were not the first to "discover" it, nor were its inhabitants the isolated remnants as portrayed by von Schrenck. On the contrary, the Amur region had long been a zone of intensive cultural and economic interdependence between the Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Korean empires, with its inhabitants being attractive trading partners (Grant 1996, Sablin 2019). This is also evident in the multiple interconnections and references in the material and visual culture of the Amur region.[11]

Only by relating the region solely to its new imperial metropolises did it appear distant, isolated, and remote in both space and time. However, through the study of its inhabitants, it seemed possible to explore the roots and origins of human history on the soil of the Russian Empire in contemporary times. This new interest was part of a broader quest for a "native antiquity" (Kunichika 2015) of the Russian Empire. Whereas Rome and Athens had served as primary historical reference points during the reign of Peter I. (Kalb 2017, Meyer 2017), and Byzantium was added as a key historical anchor point in the first half of the 19th century (Taroutina 2018), the search for a deep past from the second half of the 19th century onward largely took place east of the Urals: in the Central Asian steppe (Kunichika 2015, Dmitrieva 2009, Biyashev 2023) and the Far East (Slezkine 1994).

The Jewish political activist Shternberg, who was sent to Sakhalin in 1889 as a convict and inmate of the penal colony (Kan 2009, 25), would take this quest further. While von Schrenck had introduced the term *paleoasiatic* to the region, thereby laying the foundational stone for making it a place of deep time, he was more a geographer and zoologist than an ethnographer. As a result, he justified the originality of the Amur region primarily in geographical terms: with its location on the edge of the continent. It was Shternberg who would root the primordiality of the region and its people in their customs and culture and popularize its inhabitants as a scientific object of ethnography.

Shternberg's engagement with the Amur region can be traced back to his very first stay there from 1889 to 1897 (Kan 2009, 25f.). When he arrived in the

[10] For the mutual creation/stabilization of research object and scientist, see Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge 1999, especially chapter three, "From Fabrication to Reality: Pasteur and His Lactic Acid Ferment" (p. 113–144).

[11] A fact that von Schrenck already referred to (von Schrenck 1881, 8f.).

Far East, Shternberg had barely been exposed to the discipline of ethnography. He was sent to the Sakhalin penal colony as a prisoner and political exile due to his involvement with Narodnaja Volja (People's Will), a group that advocated for transforming Russian society according to a socialist agrarian revolutionary model. The group gained international attention following their assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander II in 1881 (Kan 2009, 6f.).

This involuntary stay in the region provided Shternberg with the opportunity to learn several local languages and conduct extensive field research – with the permission of authorities who had their own interest in acquiring knowledge about their new imperial subjects (Kan 2009, 40–50). While Shternberg did not have von Schrenck's writings to hand until he returned to Saint Petersburg in 1897 (Grant 1964, 4), another text clearly served early on as an analytical tool for his ethnographic observations: Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State: In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (1884). This text would eventually become one of the core references in Soviet ethnography.[12] Estimates vary as to when Shternberg first encountered this book, but it was no later than during his first years of exile that he studied it thoroughly (Kan 2009, 448). For Shternberg, this monograph was likely his first exposure to the ideas of evolutionary anthropology, which for the rest of his life remained his primary tool for interpreting, organizing, and classifying ethnographic material. In 1893, Shternberg published his first article in an ethnographic journal titled *Sakhalinskie Gilyaki (The Gilyak of Sakhalin)*. In this article, Shternberg classifies the Gilyak people as remnants of another time, incorporating Morgan's evolutionary anthropology into the Amur region. I will closely examine a summary of this article, which was presented at a meeting of one of the most important scientific societies advancing the institutionalization of ethnography as a discipline,[13] the Imperial Society of Friends of Natural Science, Anthropology, and Ethnography (IOLEAE) in Moscow (here cited in the translation of Friedrich Engels). I will then trace the characteristics used to portray the Gilyak as remnants of prehistory.

12 For the reception of Morgan and Tylor by Marx and Engels and their imprint on Soviet ethnography, see Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca 2005.

13 For a thorough history of the IOLEAE, see Mogilner, Marina (2013): *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*. Lincoln, London.

In der Sitzung des 10. Oktober (alten Stils = 22. Oktober neuen Stils) der anthropologischen Abtheilung der Gesellschaft der Freunde der Naturwissenschaft in Moskau verlas N.A. Jantschuk eine interessante Mittheilung des Herrn Sternberg über die Giliaken, einen wenig erforschten Stamm der Insel Sachalin, der auf der Kulturstufe der Wildheit steht. Die Giliaken kennen weder den Ackerbau noch die Töpferkunst, sie ernähren sich hauptsächlich durch Jagd und Fischfang, sie erwärmen Wasser in hölzernen Trögen durch Hineinwerfen glühender Steine u. s. w. Besonders interessant sind ihre Institutionen in Bezug auf Familie und Gens. Der Giliak nennt Vater nicht blos seinen leiblichen Vater, sondern auch alle Brüder seines Vaters; die Frauen dieser Brüder, ebenso, wie die Schwestern seiner Mutter, nennt er allesamt seine Mütter; die Kinder aller dieser ‚Väter' und ‚Mütter' nennt er seine Brüder und Schwestern. Diese Benennungsweise besteht bekanntlich auch bei den Irokesen und anderen Indianerstämmen Nordamerikas, wie auch bei einigen Stämmen in Indien. Während sie aber bei diesen schon seit langer Zeit nicht mehr den wirklichen Verhältnissen entspricht, dient sie bei den Giliaken zur Bezeichnung eines *noch heute giltigen Zustandes*. Noch heute hat jeder Giliak Gattenanrecht auf die Frauen seiner Brüder und auf die Schwestern seiner Frau; wenigstens wird die Ausübung solcher Rechte nicht als etwas Unerlaubtes angesehn. Diese Ueberbleibsel der Gruppenehe auf Grund der Gens erinnern an die bekannte Punalua-Ehe, die auf den Sandwich-Inseln noch in der ersten Hälfte unsres Jahrhunderts bestand. Diese Form der Familien- und Gentilverhältnisse bildet die Grundlage der ganzen Gentilordnung und Gesellschaftsverfassung der Giliaken (Engels 1892).

At the meeting of October 10 (old style = October 22, new style) of the anthropological section of the Society of Friends of Natural Science in Moscow, N. A. Yanchuk presented an interesting communication by Mr. Shternberg about the Gilyak, a little-researched tribe on the island of Sakhalin, which remains at the cultural level of savagery. The Gilyak practice neither agriculture nor pottery, they live mainly by hunting and fishing, they heat water in wooden troughs by throwing red-hot stones into them. Their institutions in relation to family and kinship are particularly notable. The Gilyak refer not only to their biological father as "father," but also to all his father's brothers; they refer to the wives of these brothers, as well as the sisters of their mother, all as "mothers"; the children of all these "fathers" and "mothers" are called "brothers" and "sisters". This naming system is also found among the Iroquois and various Indian tribes of North America, as well as among some tribes in India. However, while this system has long since lost its

> original significance among these other societies, among the Gilyak it remains *a condition still valid today*. Even today, every Gilyak retains the right to marry the wives of his brothers and the sisters of his wife; at least the exercise of such rights is not considered illicit. These remnants of group marriage, based on kinship structures, are reminiscent of the well-known Punalua marriage that still persisted on the Sandwich Islands in the first half of our century. These forms of family and kinship relationships form the foundation of the entire social and kinship order of the Gilyak.

In this article, the temporalization of the region under Shternberg's pen becomes evident. Shternberg presents the Gilyak as the last cultural group known to still practice the defining feature of social organization at the lowest developmental stage characteristic of savagery: group marriage. This gives them enormous significance for ethnographic research: the Amur region represents the last place on earth that could provide firsthand knowledge about the social organization of humanity in its earliest history.

In labelling the Gilyak as remnants of the developmental stage of savagery, Shternberg clearly draws on the scheme of developmental stages that Engels had adapted from Morgan. According to this scheme, all groups essentially pass through the same three developmental stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization (Morgan 1877). Hence, Morgan's framework contains a clear logic of linear development. While Morgan's classification of human history is based on the assumption that all humans and cultures have the capacity to progress, this progress does not necessarily occur simultaneously, as different groups can be seen as being stuck at different developmental stages, and thus in different times (Morgan 1877, p. 32–48). This can be identified by their cultural practices: while the so-called Punalua marriage points to the lowest stage of development,[14] the so-called "monogamian family" characterizes the highest (Morgan 1877, p. 325–421). Similarly, subsistence economy indicates the stage

[14] Morgan identifies the so-called "Punalua family" as a characteristic feature of this stage (which refers to a complex network of social relations, with "punalua" referring to those partners that have the same spouse). See the third chapter of Morgan's *Ancient Family*, titled "The Punalua Family", which starts with the following sentences: "The Punaluan family has existed in Europe, Asia, and America within the historical period, and in Polynesia within the present century. With a wide prevalence in the tribes of mankind in the Status of Savagery, it remained in some instances among tribes who had advanced into the Lower Status of barbarism, and in one case, that of the Britons, among tribes who had attained the Middle Status" (Morgan 1877, 339). Engels modified the "Punalua family" and referred to it as "group marriage" (Engels 1892).

of savagery, while the organized accumulation of property characterizes civilization (Morgan 1877, p. 445–468).

Although Morgan specifies a corresponding time period for each developmental stage, it is noteworthy that only the starting point and approximate duration of these stages, and not their endpoint, are defined. In the logic of evolutionary anthropology, all developmental stages could exist synchronously side by side. Thus, with Shternberg's ethnographic "find", the contemporary Russian Empire appeared to encompass an immense span of human history. Morgans estimates "100,000 years as the measure of man's existence upon the earth" and suggests that "the most advanced portion of the human race" spent "at least 60,000 years [...] [in] the period of savagery", 25,000 in barbary, and the last 5,000 in civilization (Morgan 1877, 41). Thus, Shternberg's text about his contemporaries in the Amur region offered the Muscovites gathered at the 1892 meeting of the IOLEAE the opportunity to travel back in time at least 30,000 years, seemingly embarking on a journey into their own prehistory.

With the involuntary help of his research subjects, over more than three decades as an ethnographer and curator, Shternberg attained the status of a founding father of ethnography in the Russian Empire. He remained one of the most important ethnographers from the turn of the century until his death in 1927 (Kan 2009). He was a key figure in transforming the people of the Amur region – referred to in the Soviet nomenclature from 1925 on as the "small peoples of the Far North" (Grant 1996, 41, Slezkine 1994) – into scientific objects. Through numerous lectures at international congresses and publications in ethnographic journals, he popularized their social institutions and religious practices.[15] Shternberg maintained personal contact and corresponded with influential figures like Franz Boas (1858–1942), Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), James Frazer (1854–1941), and Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957), all of whom shaped the discipline of ethnography at the turn of the century and for the decades to come (Kan 2009, 171–172).

Beyond the specialized discourse of imperial ethnography, Shternberg also played a key role in communicating this scientific knowledge to a broader public. In 1901, he began working at the MAE and curated exhibitions on the Amur

[15] For example, Shternberg published in the ethnographic journals *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie* [*Ethnographic Review*] and *Zhivaia Starina* [*Living Antiquity*] and, quite early on also in international journals, including German ones; see for example, the comprehensive overview of Shternberg's publications Kan 2009, pp. 512–515.

region (Kan 2009, 121). Thus, the metropolitan population of Saint Petersburg viewed the Far East through Shternberg's eyes.[16] In the exhibition rooms of the ethnographic museum, the opportunity to travel back in time with contemporaries from the Amur became institutionalized and accessible to the general public. Shternberg was also responsible for acquiring many of the objects exhibited at the MAE, which Markov and Bubnova admired and photographed during their visit to the ethnographic collection in 1913 (Bužinska 2015). There is no evidence that Markov and Bubnova had read the research literature produced by von Schrenck and Shternberg – yet to them, it seemed obvious that the objects from the Amur were "primitive". How was this assumption formed? Let us examine the mechanisms of late imperial museology and how the ethnographic discourse about the Amur region was translated into material culture.

3. Imperial Museology: Translating the Temporalized Landscape of the Amur into the Materiality of the Ethnographic Exhibition

When Shternberg took up his position at the MAE in 1901, Vasily Radlov (1837–1918) had just become the museum director seven years earlier and was in the process of transforming it into one of Europe's leading institutions for ethnographic research and its dissemination to the public (Matveeva 2014, Stanjukovich 1987, 123ff.). For this endeavour, a new system was urgently needed to classify the already vast and rapidly growing inventories of the MAE (Stanjukovich 1987, 134). Although the research literature highlights the significance of this new classification system – called the "Copenhagen Classification System" – as the first systematic approach to structuring the vast museum collection since its beginnings in the early 18th century (Stanjukovich 1987, 124ff., Matveeva 2004, 85ff.), no attention has yet been paid to the fact that it provided the basis for a synthesis between archaeology and ethnography, as well as a temporalization of the entire exhibition narrative, as I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs.

[16] To a certain extent, this can even be claimed with respect to the visitors of the American Museum for Natural History New York (AMNH), as Shternberg was not only providing many objects from the region for its director, the organizer of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, Franz Boas, but also significantly shaped his view on the region when he stayed at the AMNH during several months of a research stay. See Kan 2009, p. 143, 153, 159. Boas also tried to publish Shternberg's opus magnum about the Gilyak in a series of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, but this was never realized, see Kan 2009, p. xix.

The Copenhagen Classification System, then still referred to as the "three-age system", was developed by the Danish archaeologist Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865) while reorganizing the object inventory of the Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities in Copenhagen (Thomsen 1836, Hansen 2001). It was essentially based on the materiality of the objects – stone, bronze, and iron. However, other factors were also central to Thomsen's classification of objects into the various object groups. Particular attention was paid to the context in which the object was found, as well as to the form and function of the objects. Thomsen thus invented nothing less than the division of early human history into the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age, which is still in use today (Hansen 2001). The decisive point was that Thomsen did not consider these three object groups to be static, but rather dynamic, as a temporal sequence. This was the first time that a "relative chronology" was established, in which the sequence of prehistoric epochs was based not on an analysis of ancient writings, but on objects (Hansen 2011, 12, Stabrey 2017, 79, 111). Although both Thomsen and the three-age system have received little attention in the research literature to date, I agree with the archaeologist Svend Hansen, who described Thomsen's three-age system as a scientific revolution in Kuhn's sense (Hansen 2001, 11; Kuhn 1962). Thomsen's classification system is nothing less than the first "text-independent dating method" and thus serves as the "scientific foundation of prehistoric archaeology" (Hansen 2001, 17, 10).

It is no exaggeration to say that the invention of the "three-age system" has significantly influenced the development of evolutionary anthropology. One of the works that greatly popularized the parallelization of early European history (archaeology) with contemporary ways of life in the outermost peripheries of the European empires (ethnography) was written shortly after its author had visited Denmark twice and enjoyed a guided tour of the newly arranged collection rooms with Thomson: John Lubbock's *Prehistoric Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (1865) (Hansen 2001, 19).

The "three-age system" was introduced in the MAE in 1896, and its application to the museum collection had two specific effects. First, it gave new meaning to the materials of the displayed objects and related them to time (Stabrey 2017). Second, since the chronology was relative, it allowed for the interweaving of objects from the archaeological and ethnographical parts of the collection. Although the Stone Age seemed to have ended many centuries ago in the part of Russia west of the Ural Mountains, it appeared to have endured

into the present day in the Far Eastern provinces, such as the Amur region. Therefore, this notion resonated well with the basic assumptions of evolutionary anthropology, whose application to the Amur region we have already witnessed at the Moscow meeting of the IOLEAE.

During a short imaginary tour based on the new museum guide of 1904, the first published after the revision of the entire object inventory according to the "three-age system," we will visit the exhibition rooms of the MAE to see how the systematic implementation of the category of time and the overlapping branches of archaeology and ethnography were put into practice.

In 1904, the MAE had four large exhibition rooms: two on the first and two on the second floor. Additionally, small rooms to the right of the staircase and a platform on the landing between the first and second floors were also used for exhibits. Visitors began their tour of the exhibition on the first floor. After viewing objects from Brazil and Peru in two small rooms to the right of the entrance, they entered the first large room. In addition to objects from America, the first objects from the Amur region could be seen in this room. Objects attributed to the Gilyak and Goldi were displayed here, while other objects from the Amur region, such as those of the Orochen or Ainu, were in the second large room. Visitors could use the stairs to reach the second floor, where they could see objects grouped under the label of "Buddhism" on the landing between the two floors. On the second floor, further objects related to Buddhism were displayed in the first large hall, along with objects from Mongolia, China, Japan, Korea, and India. In the fourth room, visitors could view objects from Polynesia, Australia, and Africa.

In addition to classifications by continent, religion, nation, culture, and "tribe" – which also serve as the headings in the museum guide – the 1904 exhibition guide applies another categorization to structure and suggests a specific narrative for its collection: time. This principle assigns individual entities of "culture" and "tribe" to different historical periods. This structuring approach is evident from the very beginning of the exhibition tour. Upon entering the vestibule,[17] the museum guide informs the visitor which displays objects from Brazil, about "the tribes on the Shinga River":

> Путешественники [...] нашли на р. Шингу (притокъ Амазонки) рядъ племенъ, находившихся на самой низкой ступени культуры. Полное

[17] On the relevance of the museum guide for visitors, see Franz (2020).

> отсутствіе желѣва, господство камня и костия, примитивное гончарное производство, воздѣлываніе культурныхъ растев, [...]. (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 2)

> The travellers found at the river Shingu (a tributary of the Amazon) a number of tribes at the lowest stage of culture. Complete absence of iron, predominance of stone and bone, primitive pottery, cultivation of crops, uncomplicated weaving [...].

Significance is attributed to "the tribes on the Shinga River" by assigning them to a different time: the emphasis on specific materials (stone, bone, iron) is clearly derived from Thomsen's three-age system, while the focus on cultural techniques and tools aligns with Morgan's classification of developmental stages.

How was the Amur region depicted? Referring to the chronological classification systems of Thomsen (based on material) and Morgan (based, among other criteria, on cultural practices and tools), which were already noticeable in the description of objects from Brazil at the start of the exhibition tour, is the exhibition guide makes it clear that the different cultural groups of the Amur region occupy distinct positions in time. Its inhabitants were categorized under the heading "extreme northern Asia,"[18] which was generally placed in a distant past within the exhibition narrative. Among them, the Ainu appeared to have progressed further compared to the Gilyak:

> Айны. [...] Аборигены японскаго архипелага, постепенно вытѣсненные японцами на сѣверъ - на о. Есо и южную часть Сахалина. [...] По культурѣ выше своихъ сосѣдей-гилякъ, такъ какъ знакомы съ ткачествомтъ, хотя ткацкій станокъ ихъ очень примитивенъ. Гончарное искусство, видимо, забыто ими, такъ какъ на ихъ территоріи находятъ глиняные горшки. (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 42)

[18] Compared to the guide from 1891, this becomes evident as a significant re-categorization. As the historian Marisa Karyl Franz noted in her article "A Visitor's Guide to Shamans and Shamanism" (2020), the objects of the small peoples of the Far North, which were exhibited as part of the "Russian section" in 1891, were moved to the "Asia" section in 1904. This was accompanied by a new geographical conceptualization of the imperial space of the Russian Empire, in which the small peoples of the Far North (culturally) and both the Amur region and the entire Far East (geographically) were presented as exterior to the heartland of the Russian Empire.

> Ainu. [...] The indigenous peoples of the Japanese archipelago were gradually driven north by the Japanese – to the island of Eso and the southern part of Sakhalin. [...] They are culturally superior to their Gilyak neighbours as they are familiar with weaving, although their loom is very primitive. Pottery seems to have been forgotten a long time ago, as clay pots have been found on their territory.

The distinction of being familiar with weaving is significant, as it marks the transition between the stages of "savagery" and the next stage of "barbarism" in Morgan's classification scheme (Morgan 1877, 18–20). The phrasing used here – "they are culturally superior" – also highlights how temporalization was directly linked with a qualitative assessment: practising specific cultural techniques implied not only progress in time but also cultural advancement. Consequently, assigning certain groups to a developmental stage carried a clear value judgment about the respective culture. It can thus be understood as an instrument of power, which could also serve as a basis for justifying control over a region or coercing a group to culturally adapt.

The Gilyak occupy a unique position, presented as the cultural group closest to an imagined cultural origin. This is evident both from comparisons with other groups and the extensive space their objects occupy in the exhibition. Objects classified as representing "Gilyak culture" take up the most space in the exhibition, filling ten cabinets and two display cases (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 30–39). The exhibition guide implies that nothing has changed among the Gilyak since time immemorial:

> Гиляки. Палеазіатское племя, [...]. Вполнѣ сохранили національный бытъ, обычаи, религозныя воззрѣнія. (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 30)

> Gilyak. Paleo-Asiatic tribe. They have fully preserved their national style, customs, and religious beliefs.

While no specific chronological period is assigned to the Gilyak, other groups, such as the Chukchi, are explicitly placed in the Neolithic period:

> Чукчи. [...] Русскіе въ XVII в. застали у нихъ еще типичную культуру неолитиковъ: орудія изъ камня и кости, – культуру, въ значительной мѣрѣ сохранившуюся донынѣ (см. Коллекціи орудіи и стрѣлъ, также скульптурныя издѣлія изъ кости). (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 20)

> Chukchi. [...] In the 17th century, the Russians still encountered the typical Neolithic culture among them: Weapons made of stone and bone – a culture that has largely survived to this day (see the collection of tools and handles, also sculptures made of bone).

The descriptive text on the Chukchi clearly shows how visitors are directly addressed and how a certain way of seeing the objects and interpreting their meaning is guided. Visitors are not encouraged to view the objects as individual and unique but rather as serial types, representative of a particular cultural group, and – according to the logic of evolutionary anthropology – developmental stage.[19] Whether an object is Palaeolithic, Neolithic, or much younger is not readily discernible to the layperson. However, the material of an object – whether stone, bone, or iron – can usually be identified by a non-specialist. These practices provide evidence for the new chronological classification of the exhibition display. Another technique used to suggest the affiliation of some cultural groups to ancient times is their framing as "remnants" and "leftovers" that are already in a state of extinction.[20] This framing can be seen in the descriptions of the Kamchadals, Itelmens, and Yukhagir:

> Камчадалы или Ительмены. [...] Русскіе, пришедшіе съ ними въ столкновеніе съ конца XVII в. застали ихъ еще періодѣ изъ камня и кости. За послѣдне два вѣка они значительно вымерли (въ настоящее время ихъ не болѣ 4000 душъ).
>
> Юкагиры. Остатокъ палеазатскаго народа, нынѣ почти вымершаго (около 500 чел.) [...]. (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 27)

[19] On this aspect of how the visitor is trained to perceive the objects as sequences, see: Bennett, Tony: *The Birth of the Museum*, New York 1995, especially the subchapters "The reordering of things" (p. 33–47) and "Seeing things" (p. 69–74); this was specially incorporated by the typological display, see: Chapman, William Ryan: "'Like a Game of Dominoes': Augustus Pitts Rivers and the Typological Museum Idea, in: Susan Pearce (Hg.), Museum Economics and the Community, London 1991, p. 135–176; Gosden, Chris; Larson, Frances: *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884–1945*, Oxford 2008.

[20] Although populations might have declined rapidly, there is no evidence provided for the visitor. Moreover, it would probably be almost impossible to validate this claim, as the boundaries between the respective cultural entities were only drawn and consolidated in the 18th and 19th centuries; see von Schrenck 1881, Slezkine 1994, Vermeulen 2015.

> Kamchadals and Itelmens. [...] The Russians, when they clashed with them at the end of the 17th century, still encountered them in the period of stones and bones. In the last two centuries, they have largely died out (at present, no more than 4,000 souls have survived). Yukhagir. A remnant of the Paleo-Asian people, which is almost extinct today (about 500 people).

Thomsen and Morgan's classification schemes provided the foundation for translating the temporalization of the Russian Empire from ethnographic discourse into the material display of the ethnographic exhibition. In this process, the materiality of the exhibited objects gained significance as it became a marker of time. This is evident in the case of the Chukchi, whose "weapons made of stone and bone" testify to their supposedly "Neolithic culture" (Imperatorskaya Akademiya Nauk 1904, 20). Regarding Morgan's classification schemes, the category of cultural practices proved particularly well-suited to ethnographic exhibitions, as these practices could be directly linked to specific tools or implements. For example, clay pots, looms, or fishing gear functioned as markers, indicating a particular stage of development, thus suggesting a specific temporality for the object or the respective group.

The ethnographic exhibition familiarized visitors with the diversity of the Russian Empire, showcasing not only its vast geographical expanse but also its temporal depth. This approach seemingly allowed visitors to trace and depict human history back to its origins, based on the material culture of the Empire's contemporary inhabitants from the Amur. As sociologist Tony Bennett, a prominent scholar on the history and theory of the museum, observed:

> The museum was another "backteller", a narrative machinery [...]. In the newly fashioned deep-times of geology, archaeology, and palaeontology, new objects of knowledge were ushered forth into the sphere of scientific visibility. The museum conferred a public visibility on these objects of knowledge. Of course, it was not alone in doing so [...]. But it was in the museum and its sibling, the exhibition, that these new pasts were made visible in the form of reconstructions based on their artefactual or osteological remains. It was also in the museum that these new pasts were organized into a narrative machinery through which, by means of the techniques of backward construction, they linked together in sequences leading from the beginnings of time to the present. (Bennett 1995, p. 178f.)

Thus, the representation/production of the Amur region in Saint Petersburg made the inhabitants of the metropolis familiar with the newly incorporated portion of the empire, situating both the region and themselves within imperial space-time. This epistemological incorporation of the region into the empire also communicated a clear distribution of power, concealed within the supposedly objective classifications of scientific knowledge. The museum narrative implied that the arrival of the Russian Empire in the Amur region marked the onset of modernity in the imperial periphery. This narrative came with a distinct set of norms and values, emphasizing the "civilizing" and "elevating" nature of imperial rule, which were conveyed to museum visitors.[21] The Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography thereby becomes visible as an agent of empire, promoting norms and values that championed the effects of imperial rule, helping to govern its subjects both near and far, across space and time.

Outro: Primitive Art – Creating a Visual Language of Primordiality

Returning to the visit of Markov and Bubnova in the autumn of 1913 and their search for primitive art in the rooms of the MAE, their focus on the Amur objects seems less arbitrary. Considering the sheer quantity of objects from the Amur region in the MAE, especially compared to those from other regions within the Russian Empire, it is unsurprising that these objects drew their attention. What is more, the material culture of the Amur region was already presented to these two young visitors as a remnant of a distant past – a testimony to the early history of humanity – framed as "primitive" by the exhibition's narrative.

As I have demonstrated in this article, Petersburg-based scientists – especially von Schrenck and Shternberg – shaped the scientific career of the Amur region in the second half of the 19th century by establishing it as a key object of ethnographic research. They positioned the region as a site of seminal importance, as the last place on earth where the social institutions of early human history were preserved and could still be studied *in situ*. This discourse was translated into the materiality of the MAE's exhibition narrative following the

[21] Regarding the connection between power, state, and the disciplining nature of the museum see Bennett, Tony: "The Exhibitionary Complex", in: *New Formations 4* (1988), p. 73–102; and Bennett, Tony, "Civic Laboratories: Museums, Cultural Objecthood, and the Governance of the Social", in: *Cultural Studies 19* (5) (2005), p. 521–547.

restructuring of the collection based on the three-age system after 1897. This system, which invented the division of early human history into the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age, gave new significance to the materiality of objects: it not only linked the collections of archaeology and ethnography but also temporalized the ethnographic collection itself. Through this new system, visitors could journey back to the earliest times of human history by viewing objects appropriated by imperial scientists from contemporaries who appeared to live not only on the fringes of the empire, but also on the fringes of time. This constituted an epistemological incorporation of the newly conquered far eastern portion of the empire. It communicated to visitors a clear positioning of the Amur region – and themselves – within the coordinates of imperial space-time, ultimately justifying and legitimizing imperial rule, both in the metropolis and on the empire's peripheries.

Upon arriving at the Saint Petersburg collection, Markov and Bubnova had already been trained to "read" ethnographic objects from their visits to at least eleven other ethnographic displays throughout Europe, which followed similar narratives of cultural diversity grounded in the linear logic of evolutionary anthropology (Chapman 1985, Bennett 1995, Gosden/Frances 2007). This way of seeing and reading objects was further reinforced for Markov and Bubnova by current trans-European debates in art and art history at the beginning of the 20th century, where the powerful paradigm of evolutionary anthropology also gained momentum (Worringer 1907, Bushart 2007). In their quest for a radical reimagining of aesthetic expression, artists not only sought inspiration for new forms, colours, and materials from ethnographic collections (Markov 1914a, Hügel 2022). Markov's writings reveal his pursuit of the most elemental forms of artistic creation (Markov 1912, Markov 1914a, Markov 1914b, Markov 1919). He believed he could uncover these elemental forms in what he termed "primitive art": like the ethnographers, he assumed that something from the early history of human art and culture, long disappeared in imperial metropolises, had been preserved in the material culture of his geographically distant contemporaries. The ethnographic museum, functioning like a time machine at the heart of the empire, seemed to Markov the ideal space for this investigation.

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THE AMBIVALENCE OF MUSEUM DISCOURSES ABOUT "THE OTHER" IN SLOVENIA DURING THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT: BUILDING NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CLAIMING BELONGING TO THE CIVILIZED WEST

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Abstract: ***The author focuses on the exhibition narratives that were produced at the Museum of Non-European Cultures which operated between 1964 and 2001 as a dislocated unit of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. Situated in the baroque Goričane mansion near Ljubljana, Slovenia, it was the first institution in Yugoslavia dedicated to collecting and presenting non-European ethnological heritage. Through its own and visiting exhibitions the Goričane Museum shaped various narratives about the other. Some served to build affinity with other continents and their people, others to move away from them, closer to the developed West. The author examines the exhibition narratives that helped shape national identity and support the idea of belonging to the civilized West.***

Keywords: ***Slovene ethnographic museum, non-European***

Slovenian territory has a long and diverse history of contact with other continents and peoples. Individuals from present-day Slovenia have served as missionaries, diplomats, explorers, engineers, and sailors in the framework of the Austrian Empire and subsequent to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy,[1] of which

[1] The Austrian historian Walter Sauer (2012) convincingly illuminates the role of the Austrian Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in the colonial project, both at the level of individuals and at the level of state and private institutions.

they were a part (Šmitek 1986, 1995; Frelih 2009, 2010; Marinac 2017), as well as in the racialized efforts of overseas colonial empires (see Frelih 2007). These contacts contributed to the construction of knowledge about the geographical and cultural characteristics of distant places and people, which Edward Said (1996) referred to as "imaginative geography". The image of the Other was also shaped by the imperial and colonial literature that circulated in the Slovenian space (Šmitek 1986; 1988), as well as by the display of individuals from other continents in different settings (Ličen 2018; Mesarič 2021), reporting in newspapers – especially Catholic – and in numerous travelogues (Šmitek 1988; Frelih and Koren 2016; Jelnikar and Motoh 2021; Polajnar 2021, 2022). A significant share was also contributed by acquiring and exhibiting objects from non-European peoples in museums and seminaries (Motoh 2020).

Acquiring non-European objects for museum displays began soon after the first museum in Slovenia, the Carniola Provincial Museum, was founded in 1821. Its purpose was to present the history, statistics, natural history, technology, and physics of the Carniola region to show the diversity of the multinational Austrian Empire. In addition to preserving the remains of the past, the museum's mission was to educate the audience about patriotism and to emphasize cultural differences with other nations (Jezernik 2013: 169–170).[2] To do so, the Carniola Provincial Museum, in addition to other types of objects, has acquired ethnographic artifacts, both local and from different continents, since its foundation. Non-European collections were not collected in a systematic or planned manner, but rather as a result of coincidences, based on the interests and opportunities of individuals with different backgrounds who worked in non-European countries for various objectives. Both non-European and Slovene ethnographic objects were showcased to a limited extent, and museum curators gave little attention to their study until the Ethnographic Museum was separated from the National Museum, the successor to the Carniola Regional Museum, in 1923 (Hudales 2003: 81–82). The decades that followed, especially after World War II, were mainly focused on acquiring Slovenian ethnological collections in the spirit of salvage ethnography. Museum curators began to focus more on non-European material only since the middle of the 1950s.

[2] Although ideas for an ethnographic museum that would represent the characteristics of the entire Slovene territory appeared at the beginning of the 20th century, they could not be realized in the framework of the Austrian state (Jezernik 2009: 24–25).

Museum representations of non-European ethnographic collections in Slovenia reached a historical peak during the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which was formally launched in September 1961 at a summit in Belgrade, with socialist Yugoslavia among its founding members. In the context of the Cold War, the movement enabled political and economic cooperation, as well as exchange in the fields of education and culture, for many newly independent countries. After breaking free from colonial rule, they found themselves between the Western and Eastern blocs and tried to establish a platform for their voice to be heard in the international arena (Jakovina 2011). New alliances also facilitated the acquisition of new non-European museum collections, the organization of international traveling exhibitions from developing countries, and the cooperation of international students, who came to study in Yugoslavia, on collection interpretation (Palaić 2023).

According to Serbian historian Nemanja Radonjić (2023: 14), there is a lack of scholarship on representations of the Other in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, which is especially true for museums, as knowledge institutions generate ideas about the Other. Moreover, we need to explore these ideas because of the ambiguous position of the region itself. As noted by Radonjić (2023: 14), who focuses on the Yugoslav representations of Africa, in the Balkans "the relations of power and knowledge are not as unambiguous and clear as in the West Africa relation". The Balkans were, in a similar fashion as non-European parts of the world, defined as "the opposite of civilization, peace, and development" (Radonjić 2023: 15; see also Todorova 2001); however, at the same time, stereotypical and Eurocentric representations about other continents and people were generated there (see Gingrich 1998; Baskar 2011; Jezernik 2012).

The period of non-alignment is especially interesting for analysing a museum discourse on the Other. At that time, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, ideas about non-European spaces and people, often characterized in particular notions of lower development, static and immutable nature, and cultural hierarchy, were disrupted by Yugoslav non-aligned foreign policy principles of friendship and solidarity with the Global South. This has contributed to ambivalent museum discourses reflected in the exhibition narratives at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum's satellite branch, the Museum of Non-European Cultures in Goričane. The Goričane museum was established in 1964 to present the museum's non-European collections and host guest exhibitions from other continents. Until 1988, when Goričane Castle was temporarily closed for renovations, more than 80 exhibitions were prepared there. They showcased

the collections of Slovenian collectors, which were already the property of the museum, acquired both before and during the NAM, as well as private collections on loan for the exhibitions. Almost half of all exhibitions during this period were the result of international cooperation. Most international exhibitions were mediated by the embassies or governments of developing countries within the framework of international cultural and scientific cooperation, and they were prepared by museums in these countries or by commissions, scientific institutes, or other bodies designated for this task (Palaić 2023). The most important for the operation of the Goričane museum were Boris Kuhar, the then-director of the museum, who was in charge of the organizational and financial aspects of the museum's exhibition program, and Pavla Štrukelj, the curator, who was responsible for professional work with non-European collections.

The ambivalence of museum discourses is evident in the interweaving of five narratives that characterized the presentation of the Other in the time of the Non-Aligned Movement. Those narratives reflected and strengthened but at the same time undermined the political and cultural tendencies in the country. On the one hand, the museum thematized the significance of the national liberation struggle, both for Yugoslavia and other members of the Non-Aligned Movement or developing countries, which was frequently highlighted as a shared experience among the countries. This narrative was emphasized in the museum, especially in the first decade of its operation, although it could still be seen during the 1980s. In the mid-1970s, emphasis on non-alignment and anti-colonialism, as well as the role of culture and art in the fight against colonialism, began to replace it. On the other hand, the museum contributed to the strengthening of Slovene national identity and the formation of hierarchies between nations. It accomplished this by emphasizing the importance of Slovenian collectors, whom it ranked alongside European researchers, thereby establishing the proximity of the Slovene land to the "civilized" West. Additionally, a strong museum narrative contributed to exoticizing and stereotyping the Other. However, since the mid-1970s, Eurocentric concepts have occasionally been undermined, for example in media coverage of exhibitions or in scientific papers, with appeals for a shift beyond Eurocentrism and European standards of understanding other cultures.

The museum apparently employed contradictory narratives to generate both proximity and distance between visitors and the people whose material culture was displayed. Furthermore, collaboration with young people from other continents who came to Yugoslavia to study additionally illuminated the

museum's ambivalence toward the Other. Despite some display narratives that contributed to the exotification of other peoples, foreign students were invited to the museum to share their knowledge of the artefacts in the collections. Some students also sold objects from their home countries to the museum and participated in an accompanying program during exhibitions that allowed visitors to interact directly with them and their interpretations of the exhibited artefacts. Occasionally, Pavla Štrukelj also worked with foreign student organizations to lend museum objects for their displays. This was clearly an advanced approach at a time when participation, inclusion, and community collaboration had not yet been widely discussed (Palaić 2023: 159–160).

Given the complexities of museum discourses and practices at the time, I will focus in this paper on how the Goričane museum contributed to the exoticization of the Other and placed Slovenian collectors in the same framework as Western European researchers. Both discourses positioned Slovenian land within the Western civilizational framework while also elevating it within the cultural development hierarchy. I will analyse concrete examples based on a review of scientific and professional articles about museum collections, exhibition catalogues, and articles in various newspapers, as well as a review of the accessible archive kept by SEM and the personal archive of a museum curator Pavla Štrukelj. Štrukelj's writings make up a sizable portion of the texts that have been analysed because, at the time, she was the only museum professional who wrote extensively about how the museum had handled non-European artefacts. By deconstructing museum narratives, I aim to contribute to the recognition and disclosure of colonial continuity in social practices and mental habits in the region, which, according to anthropologist Erica Lehrer and sociologist Joanna Wawrzyniak (2023), is one of the key elements in the decolonization of museums in Eastern Europe.

Exoticization of the Other: Consolidating the higher position on the scale of development

The Museum of Non-European Cultures in Goričane featured a variety of original exhibitions that included 19th- and early-20th-century perceptions of foreign places and cultures. They were a product of the colonial knowledge that was disseminated in the Slovene territory through imperial literature, as well as Slovene participation in European scientific networks and colonial enterprises. These conceptions, which were based on differentiating mechanisms of time, space,

and perception of who a human being is, emphasized distinct progress among world cultures and positioned the European ones at the top of this hierarchy. Moreover, they denied non-Western peoples the ability to govern and speak for themselves.

The category of time played an important role in establishing these ideas. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019: 167–169), a scholar of visual culture and photography, argues that non-European peoples were cut off from their ways of life, which became viewed as a relic of the past. This has been done, among other things, by removing objects from the community and then collecting and preserving them in museums, as living knowledge was commonly performed through using objects. Indigenous life systems were characterized as a thing of the past that needed to be conserved. The result of this procedure was that entire peoples were denied their coevalness, which prevented them from engaging in theoretical discourse (Fabian 1983: 157) – in creating knowledge about their own existential dimension. Denying coevalness led to a search for primary and original cultural elements, which were thought to be disappearing as a result of advancements in technology or interactions between locals and Western colonists. The attribution of ahistoricity to non-European populations was also linked to the assumption that history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a separate entity. Since these populations were said not to have an adequate sense of time or evidence (sometimes not enough reason to be able to do so), they and their narratives were denied epistemic validity (Trouillot 1995: 7).

In her scientific writings, Pavla Štrukelj often emphasized that cultures progressed from less to more developed. According to Štrukelj (1980/1982: 127; 1977: 26–27), we can learn and understand the developmental aspect of cultures by studying non-European collections, which she saw as an important reason for the museum to continuously supplement them. Additionally, she wrote extensively about the importance of displaying original and authentic objects obtained before Westerners changed local traditions. These narratives were centred primarily on missionary collections that originated in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and were also summarized in newspaper reports about museum exhibitions. Štrukelj wrote about missionary Ignacij Knoblehar's collection gathered in the middle of the 19th century in modern-day Sudan and South Sudan, claiming that it was highly interesting from an ethnological perspective because the objects were still authentic and original at the time of acquisition (Štrukelj 1967a: 166). In her writing about the missionary Frederic Baraga's

collection acquired among Ottawa and Chippewa people in North America in the 1830s, she drew attention to the loss of authenticity of objects due to the influence of Western settlers:

> The culture of today's Indian tribes is changing more and more, despite the fact that the traditional ancestral way of life continues to develop in certain territories. The development of general American life and modern technology in the economic field also penetrates the Indian population. The young Indian generation is changing its way of life, getting used to modern life, and abandoning the former simple original way more and more. Many studies to date, carried out by American and European researchers on Indian groups, have shown many changes. Thus, we see that the Indians today are different in appearance because their former original costume is disappearing more and more. Many of them dress modernly, like other American residents; everyday and festive clothes are bought in stores. Young Indians are educated in various schools; and parents introduce their children to the modern way of life.
> (Štrukelj 1972/1973: 140)

Her writing directs readers to establish a dichotomy between the "traditional", which is original and authentic, and the modern, which is associated with white immigrants. Modernity is attributed to the latter, and they are understood as those who brought development or progress to the locals (see Traditional 2018: 140). Due to the modernization brought by the Westerners, the old and authentic is disappearing so the original objects must be protected (compare Azoulay 2019: 19-20). With the selected narrative, Pavla Štrukelj missed an important opportunity to present these exchanges in a more nuanced way, especially to problematize the destructive consequences of the colonialists' actions on other continents. She didn't write about the exploitation of local resources and people but rather characterized Westerners as being modern and advanced. Both marking those objects that were the result of the (violent) exchange between the colonized and the colonizers as less important to collect or less valuable and simultaneously perceiving indigenous cultures as lagging behind, as they had to be "modernized" and "civilized", placed the formerly colonized peoples in a doubly subordinate position.

Pavla Štrukelj also understood indigenous communities as static, as frozen in time. The sociologist and activist Hodan Warsame (2018: 82) defined the museum's presentation of locals as stuck in space and time as one of the

approaches to knowledge construction about these peoples. Objects and photographs, and sometimes also descriptions of cultural practices, displayed at museums, date back to colonial times when this material was collected. But most of the time, museum representations do not mention the wider context of colonialism and its aftermath, and they omit the description of change and the current situation the people in question live in today, left alone including their own voices and perspectives. Pavla Štrukelj, however, when dealing with individual elements of material culture, does present a developmental aspect, as mentioned above, but she uses this narrative to distinguish between more- and less-developed peoples:

> In our museums, these older ethnological collections represent important historical material, which today is valuable and necessary when researching the way of life of nations; some of them have achieved a high level of civilization, while people in developing countries have a different development of life forms.
> (Štrukelj 1977: 27)

With these words, Štrukelj directed the readers towards a hierarchical evaluation of cultures. As many decolonial scholars have pointed out, Western Europe constructed itself as a space of rationality, progress, and civilization, while other continents were defined as the opposite. This narrative allowed Europeans to treat both non-European space and peoples as objects of knowledge and domination (Quijano 2000: 555). Western Europeans imagine themselves as the pinnacle of civilization, as the only society that is the bearer, creator, and protagonist of modernity. Philosopher and essayist Sylvia Wynter (2003: 264) put the key question of who or what a person is at the centre of the processes of creating the Other. The exclusion of individuals who did not meet the concept of a human was created by a sequence of discursive and institutional inventions that constructed a definition of a human through dualisms: Christian–pagan, rational–irrational, primitive–civilized. This framework manifested itself in concrete actions, such as the mission of Christianization, the civilizational mission, and the formation of a racially inferior Other, all of which rejected universal humanity and provided ideological legitimation for a colonial project (Wynter 2003).

Primitiveness was also discussed in reporting on the exhibition *Culture of the Black Tribes along the White Nile in the 19th century*, which opened in 1968 in the Goričane museum. The display presented the Sudan and South Sudan

collection of Ignacij Knoblehar, a missionary from the mid-19th century. In the daily newspaper *Delo*, journalist Janez Zadnikar (1968: 5) described his view of what a visitor noticed when looking at the exhibited objects: "Expedience of form, [the] ingenuity of manufacturers [...], the firmness of the products [...], submission to the mythological purpose [...], and perhaps the strong will of the former savages to survive." V. V., a journalist for the daily *Večer*, emphasized the immutability and static nature of the peoples living along the Nile River Basin, noting that the message of the collection, according to him, lay in their struggle for survival. This suggests that he attempted to soften his stereotypical descriptions of the peoples in question:

> The culture of the black tribes in the area depicted in our exhibition probably did not undergo any major changes (the objects on display are from the middle of the 19th century). But no matter how we look at the collection, we are constantly learning about the ingenious efforts of tribes and clans – of man in general – to strengthen his life and to find the strength with which to preserve life.
> (V. V. 1968: 8)

In the daily *Večer*, journalist V. V. emphasized primitiveness again in 1969, writing about the traveling exhibition *Chilean Folk and Applied Art*: "This time [the exhibition] is about folk art as it developed in the area of the present Republic of Chile and which in its content design has all the signs characteristic of the lively spiritual feeling of primitive and of the most primitive peoples" (V. V. 1969a). He also established a difference between the technological and spiritual development of peoples from other continents:

> The low degree of civilization, which is almost the sole external factor that guides us when reaching conclusions about primitiveness, has created in non-European peoples a unique inwardness toward man himself. Such an inversion is apparent in the entire culture of man and nation, which has become inwardly sensitive while maintaining its outer form. Within the context of this fluctuation, special processes occurred that developed among primitive peoples a feeling for small things, a feeling for great artistic inspiration, which manifested itself in every everyday and useful product as a human confession imbued with spirit and sensitivity. It makes little difference here whether we appreciate African ebony statues, Polynesian masks, or Indian textiles.
> (V. V. 1969a)

In another article, the same author stressed the hierarchy between African and Asian cultures, ranking the art of Asian nations, such as China, Japan, Indonesia, and India higher (V. V. 1969b). Regardless of their position on the scale of development, these discourses created and maintained a divide between museum visitors and the peoples whose material culture was displayed. They conveyed the impression that museum visitors belonged in a developed, civilized world, and gave them the feeling of being able to observe the Other and draw conclusions about their ways of life. This narrative was important for establishing Slovene identity alongside developed Western Europe, as it attempted to exempt the Slovenian territory from the conceptualization of the Balkans, which for so long have been filled with imagined representations and attributions of otherness by the West (see Todorova 2001; Jezernik 2011). It also helped to legitimize the museum's work, as the museum was presented as carrying out the important task of preserving "traditional" and "authentic" artefacts, while also allowing for learning about other peoples and their development. Narratives that placed Slovenian collectors closer to Western scholars and collectors served the same objective of establishing distance between Slovenes and peoples from other continents, as well as helping strengthen Slovenia's position in a civilized, Western world.

Emphasizing the role of Slovenian collectors: Strengthening national identity

Pavla Štrukelj's professional and scientific writings focused primarily on 19th-century collectors, most of whom were missionaries. Despite her assertion (Štrukelj 1991) that it is critical to understand how, when, and why the objects were collected, my reading indicates that the necessity of investigating acquisition remained at the declarative level. Her fairly generic statement of her Slovenian compatriots' collecting habits further supports this:

> Numerous sources attest to the fact that historical collectors were more intrigued by the way of life of African, Asian, and other inhabitants than by their exoticism. Many of them conducted extensive research not only on a nation's general cultural traits but also on the origins of uncommon living forms, the structure of society, or a particular social order within a group.
> (Štrukelj 1977: 27)

This remark emphasizes collectors' curiosity about the social structure and way of life of the society in which they worked, as well as the concept of discovering unusual and distinctive cultural qualities, which again alludes to a Eurocentric perspective. When investigating collecting procedures, it is also critical to pay attention to what collectors did not include in their collection. Pavla Štrukelj casually mentions missionary brutality:

> Baraga especially made a name for himself in the field of science. He researched the Native American language and studied the Chippewa culture. Unfortunately, he was such a passionate Christian missionary that he took old religious Indian sculptures away from the Indians. Incidentally, we mention that there is no object in the museum collection that illustrates an Indian deity.
> (Štrukelj 1972/1973: 119)

Pavla Štrukelj did not explain how Baraga, in his enthusiasm for Christianization, destroyed all objects related to the locals' beliefs,[3] and how this loss of the tangible world affected the local people's connection to their spiritual world. Instead of addressing collection methods and the broader historical context that facilitated the missionaries' activities among locals, as well as their repercussions, she praised them, highlighting their pioneering and sacrifice. She formulated the pioneering of the missionary Baraga as follows:

> Frederic Baraga was the first Slovenian missionary in the land of the Chippewa and Ottawa Indians and our first researcher of these groups. He was also among the first researchers of the Indian language, as he wrote fundamental works in this field.
> (Štrukelj 1972/1973: 115)

Štrukelj also glorified the actions of Baraga's coworkers, missionaries Franc Pirc and Janez Čebul, portraying the villagers as lacking survival skills and the ability to protect themselves and their interests:

> Pirc tried very hard to accustom the Chippewa Indians to live culturally and manage wisely. He wrote religious readings and poems in the Indian language; like Baraga, he published a booklet about the life of the Indians and described his own experiences at length.
> (Štrukelj 1972/1973: 120)

[3] I kindly thank the curator Marko Frelih for this information.

> The missionary Janez Čebul was very popular among the Indians. He knew the Chippewa language [and] was a singer, poet, and musician. He strongly opposed the sale of spirits to the Indians and tried to obtain more rights for them from the American authorities of the time.
> (Štrukelj 1991: 170)

Missionaries in Štrukelj's work were portrayed as those who provided life lessons to the locals. Locals cannot "smartly manage" or be considered "cultured" if they do not adhere to Western customs. Therefore, the missionaries were the ones who, in addition to the true faith, gave reason to the people. The final quotation, however, demonstrates the recognition of indigenous people as victims who require Western assistance to achieve their goals. Missionary Čebul tried to obtain more rights for them, which at first glance could be understood as advocating for these people; however, such wording deprives them of the power to act, portrays them as helpless and in need of help, while at the same time denying their own struggle for their own rights.

Pavla Štrukelj also wrote extensively about the efforts of missionary Ignacij Knoblehar, who worked among the Bari, Shilluk, Nuer, Dinka, and other peoples in the territory of today's Sudan and South Sudan, from 1848 to 1857. She described the historical context of Knoblehar's missionary work:

> During Knoblehar's time, the political and economic situation in eastern Sudan was very chaotic. Especially the trade in slaves and the trade in elephant tusks, which was mainly in the hands of the Arabs, caused enormous injustices to the indigenous population. [...] Turkish and Arab traders came to the black tribes mainly to get ivory and slaves.
> (Štrukelj 1991: 170)

In describing the broader socio-political background of Knoblehar's activities among the locals, Pavla Štrukelj omitted both his involvement in Austria's colonial ambitions and his stance on the enslavement of the locals. Knoblehar recognized the importance of protecting the locals from Arab human traffickers in gaining their favour, thereby increasing the chances of his mission succeeding (Frelih 2005: 44). Knoblehar's second move was a visit to Emperor Franz Joseph I upon his return from the missionary station, with the goal of increasing missionary activity. The Emperor recognized an opportunity to conquer non-European areas in his support of Knoblehar's Nile mission; therefore,

he generously supplied financial help. Getting the Pope's support was a little more difficult for Knoblehar, possibly due to criticism of his conduct in Africa (Frelih 2005: 48–49, 54), something Štrukelj also omitted. Instead, she glorified Knoblehar's work and highlighted the dangers he had to overcome, while again emphasizing the pioneering nature of his research:

> Thus, we can say that it was the Slovenian Knoblehar who was the first European explorer who reached the farthest south into the interior of central Africa in the middle of the last century.
> (Štrukelj 1967a: 149)

The literature under consideration largely depicts the missionaries as pioneers who achieved considerable work, particularly as explorers. They are portrayed as both bearers of civilization and as agents who brought Western knowledge to the locals in an effort to better their lives. They are portrayed as active, whilst the locals are perceived as victims of wider circumstances who need help. As a result, the missionaries were portrayed as individuals who fought for the rights of the locals. However, I would like to draw attention to the fact that a more thorough explanation of the historical and social context is lacking, which would allow for a deeper comprehension of the circumstances surrounding the missionaries' work at the time and also depict the indigenous people in more formative capacities. We do not hear the words of the locals; rather, the missionaries spoke on their behalf as they introduced the locals through their works (e.g., dictionaries, language studies, and collections of local objects). There is a prevailing feeling that missionaries have the power to educate their Western compatriots about the history of those areas and the current circumstances of locals.

Exhibition catalogues and media coverage of exhibitions at the Museum of Non-European Cultures provide context for Yugoslav ambassadors' acquisitions of artefacts. Writers frequently emphasized the care, dedication, and depth of their collecting efforts, which they claimed sprang from their interest in and love for the cultures of the people among which the ambassadors served. In the introduction to the *Folk Art of Indonesia* catalogue (Kuhar 1964: 3), the then-director of the museum, Boris Kuhar, wrote that when Ambassador Dr. Aleš Bebler served in Indonesia, the Bebler couple "carefully and persistently collected objects of Indonesian folk art". He praised Bebler's collection of Indonesian textiles as one of the few in Europe.

Pavla Štrukelj (1967b: 5) emphasized the great work of Ambassador Franček Kos in his collection of ceramics in Japan: "It is due to his professional education in the field of art that he was lucky enough to collect so many beautiful original products of high artistic value." Kos began preparing an exhibition for the Museum of Non-European Cultures in Goričane, but he died suddenly before its opening. Štrukelj wrote her wish that with the exhibition "we would humbly remember him and thus repay him for the great work that he did with such joy in the distant Japanese land and with his collection enabled us to have a more correct and better understanding of the beautiful Japanese ceramic art" (Štrukelj 1967b: 5). Readers of the journal *Primorski dnevnik* could read about how:

> Franček Kos, an art historian and aesthete, together with his wife visited many ceramic masters in Japan and gathered their artworks. This painstaking effort resulted in the current display of contemporary Japanese pottery in Goričane near [the town of] Medvode.
> (D. K. 1967: 4)

Journalist Janez Zadnikar wrote in the daily paper *Delo* about Ambassador Dušan Kveder's diverse collection from several countries:

> Dušan Kveder is a prominent Slovenian collector and researcher. Wherever he went, he consistently answered his inner urge to learn about the history, culture, and art of the people he was visiting. Wherever he lived as a diplomat for an extended period of time, he tirelessly snapped photographs, collected typical instances of folk inventiveness, and thereby enriched his collection.
> (Zadnikar 1969)

Catalogue entries and media coverage of ambassadors as collectors of non-European collections are quite infrequent. They mostly highlight their collecting efforts and emphasize the breadth or significance of their collections for learning about the cultures of non-aligned nations. Except for the cases of the Bebler and Kos spouses, who visited the locals and attempted to acquire diverse and high-quality objects for their collections, the methods of acquisition are not explained in the records, which is consistent with the previous period of collecting non-European artefacts. We can also recognize a tendency to associate ambassadors with Western Europeans in their roles as explorers and collectors.

This is most obvious in the case of the Bebler collection, where the writers emphasized its value in the European space.

The rhetoric of aligning Slovene collectors and their work with Western explorers served to consolidate Slovene identity as progressive and developed, portraying them as bearers of civilization who sought to protect powerless people, as in the narratives about missionaries, or emphasizing their great enthusiasm for learning about cultures and presenting them to their compatriots, as in the context of ambassadors. These narratives never question the power relations that enabled collectors to operate on other continents in the first place; therefore, Slovene involvement in the colonial project wasn't acknowledged.

Conclusion

The era of socialist Yugoslavia and its foreign policy orientation towards the Non-Aligned Movement created new opportunities for acquiring and exhibiting non-European collections. Official discourses emphasized solidarity with distant but friendly countries, and state policies encouraged various collaborations and exchanges with them. In the field of culture, important activities took place in the Museum of Non-European Cultures in Goričane, which functioned as a dislocated unit of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum. During its operation, the Museum of Non-European Cultures acquired new collections from other continents, prepared original and traveling international exhibitions, and collaborated with various experts and foreign students on a rich accompanying program.

The Museum of Non-European Cultures employed exhibition narratives that were often ambiguous and conflicting. The museum quickly adapted to the demands of the changing social conditions, emphasizing the rhetoric of the national liberation struggle and non-alignment, which enhanced both the internal and foreign policies of socialist Yugoslavia. The displays included themes of friendship and solidarity with the non-aligned and other developing countries, as well as condemnations of colonialism and imperialism.

In addition to this discursive proximity to non-aligned and developing countries, the museum established and maintained a narrative that created a certain distance between museum visitors and peoples from other continents. This was manifested in the exoticization of the Other, the emphasis on differences and strangeness, and more importantly, the emphasis on the developmental aspect of cultures and the importance of preserving original and authentic objects. People from other continents were attributed with a static condition

and immutability prior to the arrival of white colonialists. The museum also attempted to promote a close relationship between Slovenian compatriots working in non-European countries and Western researchers and collectors, which was evident in both the presentations of collectors from earlier periods and the portrayal of Yugoslav ambassadors in countries outside of Europe.

While generating both proximity and distance between museum visitors and people from different continents whose material culture was on display, a vision of ourselves has been constructed. Slovenes were portrayed as benevolent in their interaction with developing countries, and free of colonial burdens, while also being civilized and developed compared to them. Standing alongside Western researchers and collectors reflected the idea of ideological proximity to the West and helped to strengthen Slovenia's position in a civilized, developed Western world. These ideas grew even stronger during Yugoslavia's disintegration and led to Slovenia's affiliation with the European Union and its withdrawal from the Non-Aligned Movement.

This work shed light on the complexity of the region's social reality, characterized by a space filled with imagined representations and attributions of Otherness by the West, while also being involved in the global processes and exchanges, including colonial endeavours and knowledge production about other continents and peoples. These factors significantly impact national identity-building processes and reinforce the idea that Slovenia belongs to the "developed" world. Adding to this complexity, the Yugoslav project of the Non-Aligned Movement advocated for solidarity, equality, and collaboration with other non-aligned countries while simultaneously exporting its own version of modernization, particularly to the African continent. Illuminating these complexities is especially important for ethnographic museums in the region, where discussions about decolonization occur rarely or not at all, allowing them to address post-imperial and post-socialist legacies while working with non-European collections today.

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CAUGHT BETWEEN "MUNDANE WEST AND MEDIEVAL ORIENT": ON THE ORIGINS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE BALKAN COLLECTION IN THE MUSEUM EUROPÄISCHER KULTUREN IN BERLIN

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Abstract: ***From 1935 to 1939, Gustav Adolf Küppers embarked on ethnographic collecting trips throughout the Balkans, aiming to preserve what he deemed threatened "native culture". His acquisitions, now housed in the Museum of European Cultures (Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, MEK), reflect both the museum's interest and ethnography's interest in regions well within Europe. While Küppers's trips were self-initiated, questions arise about the ideological and political influences behind his collecting practices. Despite lacking colonial contexts in a constitutional sense, scrutiny of the collection's provenance and its representation of the region is crucial. Thus, the text aims to both enhance and contextualize our knowledge about Küppers's motivations, the museum's objectives, and the ideological currents at play.***

Keywords: ***Balkans, Southeastern Europe, Serbia, Bulgaria, Anthropology, Volkskunde, Völkerkunde, National Socialism, Balkanism***

1 Introduction

Starting in 1935 and up until 1939, Gustav Adolf Küppers (1894–1978) embarked on as many as five ethnographic collecting trips through the present-day Balkan states. Only a planned visit to Greece and Albania as part of the last trip did not materialize, due to the outbreak of WWII, which ended the journey

prematurely. Küppers initially travelled with the photographer Hannes Rosenberg, and from the second trip onwards with his daughter and son. They did so by car with each journey lasting several months. Küppers's client, the „Eurasia" department at the Berlin Museum of Ethnology (Museum für Völkerkunde), was primarily interested in acquiring artefacts from European regions „that had remained largely untouched by modern developments" (Krüger 2011).

In 1999, the Eurasia department, now named „Europe", merged with the East and West Berlin folklore museums to form the new Museum of European Cultures (Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, MEK). To this day, the artefacts and photographs that Küppers acquired in the 1930s make up the largest part of today's museum collection on Southeastern Europe (Tietmeyer/Vanja 2013, 401–402).[1] With a total of around 3,600 artefacts and almost 2,000 photographs, they were a great enrichment for the museum's Eurasian department, which was being established at the time. Starting in 1934, the museum expanded its focus, which had been confined to extra-European areas, and began to also include regions within and on the borders of Europe. From the very beginning, it was precisely the areas that were deemed to be the "fringes" of the continent that caught the attention of the museum actors: Already in the late 19th century, collectors, traders, or mere "explorers" (e.g., Paul Traeger, Julius Konietzko, and Rickmer Rickmers) sold or donated large amounts of cultural and historical artefacts to the Ethnological Museum. Places such as Sardinia, Northern Scandinavia, and the Aran Islands were very much in demand and the museum was keen to obtain objects from there. This was even more the case for the Eastern and Southeastern parts of the continent.

However, the museum faced a severe shortage of foreign currency, which meant that its director, the Africanist Hermann Baumann, did not collect systematically but rather acquired the first collections by exchanging objects with other museums and through the initiative of individual collectors (Nixdorff 1973; 1982). Given this situation, Küppers was received with open arms when he approached the museum to go on a research trip to Southeastern Europe. He planned to „collect everything of native culture [*bodenständiger Kultur*] that remains in the Balkans and is threatened by destruction", as he wrote in a request for support for a later trip to the Reich Chancellery in February 1939

[1] A research project is currently in progress that is taking the first steps towards the selective documentation and cataloguing of the object inventory and the historical context of the collection.

(Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, Bd. 5). Such a claim to preserve „native culture" was an almost classic feature of contemporary „salvage ethnography", on which a great deal of research is now available (Schneider 2017, 131).

However, such museum collections from Southeastern and other parts of Europe have hardly been the subject of provenance and collection research. At the intersection of German *Volkskunde* (folklore studies; mostly concerned with the German-speaking populations) and *Völkerkunde* (ethnology that dealt with the people outside of Europe, particularly overseas), this may be caused by the fact that the acquisition of objects from Southeastern Europe did not take place in a colonial setting. Of course – and as we shall see – this is not to say that no power relations were at play in the acquisition of museum objects. In this respect, the decolonization of museum collections from, as well as within, Eastern and Southeastern Europe must also address "internal colonialisms". This is particularly true for the imperial environments of the 19th century, in which most of the collections were established (Lehrer/Wawrzyniak 2023). Politically and legally, however, Balkan states throughout the 20th century were not subject to colonial rule. Furthermore, the objects concerned here had already undergone a "stage of rejection/disposal before arriving in the museum" (Groschwitz 2018, 264). Most were everyday objects that seemingly held no symbolical significance or had been abandoned by their previous owners. In any case, no restitution requests, past or present, are known.

That being said, does this mean that the matter is settled and that the Küppers collection can be deemed entirely unobjectionable? If „provenance research as collection research [is guided by] the question of how museums direct the view of the world at a certain point of time" (Thiemeyer 2018, 28, quoted by Heck 2021, 567), then a closer look is necessary: What image of a region is manifested in a museum collection, and what ideological currents and political concerns influenced this way of imagining space and culture? To answer these questions, it is crucial to examine the biographical and institutional contexts of the collection. Did Küppers actively pursue a fascist ideology during his travels, as cited as the main reason for his expropriation in the early GDR (Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Protocol No. 20)? And, finally, is this actually relevant to the evaluation of the collection?

2 Gustav-Adolf Küppers and his perspective on the Balkans

Born in Krefeld in 1894, Gustav-Adolf Küppers came into contact with the youth and life reform movement at an early age, rising to become a leading member of the local „Wandervogel“ (Küppers 2011, 19–22). His patron, the architect and ardent anti-Semite Karl Buschhüter, was a formative influence on him. After the First World War, which Küppers, severely wounded and with an amputated leg, only just survived, he „completely“ joined Buschhüter‘s circle around the Krefeld „Dürerheim“, as he wrote to Werner Kindt in 1965, who excelled in uniting the Bündische Jugend and Hitler Youth in the 1930s (Archiv der deutschen Jugendbewegung, N 14, No. 189). The „Dürerheim“ not only experimented with radical forms of alternative lifestyles. Küpper‘s later affinity for nationalist and völkisch ideas can likely be attributed to this influence within the German “Lebensreform”-movement.[2]

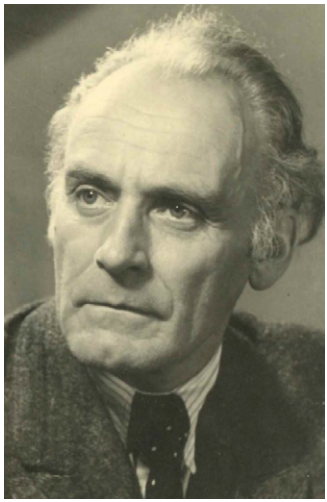
Küpper‘s later career, imbued with anti-urban and anti-modernist ideas and fully committed to the settlement movement, was shaped by this pre-influence (Wedemeyer 2000; Jantzen 1974). Together with his brother Oscar, Küppers cleared and settled a piece of land in the Lueneburg Heath, which they called, at first rather ironically, the “Sonnenberg”. Back then, Küppers started to use “Sonnenberg” as an unofficial addition to his name. While the area would gain minor recognition as a regional centre of the *Lebensreform* in northern Germany, Küppers also published and reflected on settlement practices. Being pushed to his physical limits rather early, he expressed his thoughts on this matter in various texts, letters, and publications, and also supported it ideologically. „Eigen Land“ (Own Land) and „Vom Akademiker zum Siedler“ (From Academic to Settler) were the first programmatic titles to appear after the war (Küppers 1918; 1924). Küppers‘s texts and publications contained figures of argumentation from the classical repertoire of the *völkisch* right. For instance, in a request for support to the Celle district office in February 1925, Küppers wrote that a „spiritual renewal“ could only take place „by rooting the intelligentsia in the soil“. To support his argument, Küppers referred to the writings of the *völkisch* theorist Andreas Thomsen. In his writings, Thomsen emphasized

[2] This refers to a variety of social reformist movements in Germany from the mid-19th century onwards. They included alternative forms of housing, education, nutrition, sexuality, and other aspects of everyday life and coexistence. What they had in common was a rejection of industrialization and urbanization and a criticism of the associated alienation from the human “state of nature”. For a lucid introduction, cf. Wedemeyer-Kolwe 2017.

Gustav-Adolf Küppers and his wife Eva Küppers as settlers, 1918/1919, Archiv der Jugendbewegung Burg Ludwigstein, P 1, Nr. 1906.

the need for new "ethnic sprouts" [*Volkskeime*] to combat the decline of European culture allegedly caused by "Slavdom" [*Slawentum*] (Kreisarchiv Celle). Unsurprisingly, Küpper wrote strongly German nationalist poetry during this period, even offering one of his first books to the race theorist Karl Ludwig Schemann, to whom he sent a „German greeting" which was to become obligatory only years later in Nazi Germany (Archiv der deutschen Jugendbewegung, P 1, Nr. 1906; Universitätsbibliothek Freiburg, Nachlass Schemann).

In the late 1920s, Küppers decided to opt for an academic career after his publications and other plans, such as founding a boarding school in the spirit of the



Gustav-Adolf Küppers, 1950, Archiv der Jugendbewegung Burg Ludwigstein, P 1, Nr. 1906.

Lebensreform, failed to bring the desired success (Küppers 2011, 39–40). He spent the following years studying in Berlin while commuting back and forth between the university, the "Sonnenberg", and Werder, where he resided with his second wife. Here, Küppers remained committed to the idea of settlement. He founded the Settlers' Association of the Unemployed and completed his studies in 1933 with a dissertation that also dealt with the subject of settlement (Küppers 1933). However, he did not achieve his goal of habilitation, as his reviewers harshly criticized his "activism" and his "pipe dreams" [*Fantastereien*], thus refusing to support the academic plans of the "highly sensitive eccentric" (Archiv der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Promotionsakte G. A. Küppers).

Apparently, membership of the NSDAP was never an option for Küppers, although according to his own memories, he "neither fully affirmed nor condemned the Nazi accession to power" (Küppers 1959, 183). After completing his dissertation, he worked as a freelance photojournalist and was also a member of the Reichsverband der deutschen Presse (Reich Association of the German Press), but still repeatedly ran into financial difficulties. Apparently, a radio programme on ethnological collecting in Africa heavily inspired him and became a major turning point for him and his future projects: During a research trip from the Balkans to the Baltic, he wanted to explore the supposedly "uncharted territories" of Europe. This plan, though limited to Southeastern Europe, he submitted to various Berlin institutions (Küppers 1970, 113). While he offered to make dactyloscopic recordings of the local population for the "Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics" (KWI-A), he proposed collecting regional songs and material culture for the Berlin Phonogrammarchiv and the Museum für Völkerkunde. All three institutions accepted his offer. In the following years, each of their collections benefited from Küpper's travels (Ivkov 2013; Ziegler 2011). In April 1935, Küppers assured the museum that the Ministry of Propaganda supported his project and served as a financier and guarantor of his credibility (Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, Bd. 1).

With his commitment to the KWI-A, in which he assisted eugenicist Wolfgang Abel by taking standardized pictures and fingerprints, Küppers became deeply involved in the ideology of National Socialism and its project of measuring and categorizing the European population according to racist categories (Küppers 1959, 210). Unfortunately, the relevant archive material did not survive the war. However, it can be assumed that Küppers's comments in later texts

about „human races“ in the region and their supposed characteristics were primarily based on this activity. His travelling plans, however, were also attractive to the Museum of Ethnology and were certainly compatible with contemporary discourses and ethnographic trends. In Vienna, for instance, the Folklore Museum, under its director Arthur Haberlandt, had amassed a considerable collection from Southeastern Europe (Schmidt 1960, 66–69). This collection served as a kind of disciplinary and geographical bridge towards a „folklore as ethnology of the European cultural nations“ [*Volksunde als Völkerkunde der europäischen Kulturnationen*], as Haberlandt himself put it (Haberlandt 1934, 43). For Hermann Baumann, who as the head of the newly founded „Eurasia“ department in Berlin had demonstrably and thoroughly studied the objects from Vienna,[3] Küppers's initiative presented an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the successful Viennese model. Collecting non-German ethnographic artefacts from regions of the „lower and middle Danube countries“, as Küppers's statement of commitment put it, was entirely in line with the study of the „margins of Europe“ in order to discover and compare the „retreats, remnants, and rests“ of cultures and people long vanished (Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, Bd. 3). Consequently, Baumann frequently campaigned for Küpper's funding through funds from the Baessler Foundation. After Küpper's second trip in 1936, Baumann wrote to the general director of the museums that he had „collected surprisingly well“, so that the museum now possessed an „excellent Hutsul, Gagauz, Ruthenian, and Romanian collection for relatively little money“ (Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, Vol. 3).

This study of the „remnants of past cultural layers“ is a topic extensively researched in German folklore studies (Bendix 1997). Notably, this perspective was also central to Küppers and his work as a collector in the Balkans. Not least, the idea of the region as a kind of „refuge“ played an important role: in one of his articles, Küppers was fascinated by the „encapsulated, primitive basis of life in almost original form“ that he had encountered here and that, at the same time, was increasingly losing ground and had to be preserved by the museum (Küppers 1939, 36). While we are dealing here with a classic argumentation figure of so-called „salvage ethnography“, it was always the supposedly „genuine“ and „authentic“ that inspired him and his travel companions in Southeastern Europe. Küpper's daughter and traveling partner Heimtraut

[3] This is evident from Baumann's fragmentary box of notes preserved at the MEK.

noted in her diary that the local market in Kriva Palanka in Macedonia was „really filled with genuine folklore and customs", and yet here too „the plague of rubber planks" was spreading, which were „sold by the hundreds" at the market, making „one's heart ache" (Heimtraut Küpper's diary, in the collection of the Museum of European Cultures). For Küppers, this culture-destroying potential of modernity was also evident in the cityscapes of the region. With a mixture of horror and admiration, he compared the building activities in Belgrade to a „fever attack". The city, in his view, was caught between the „sophisticated West and an Orient stuck in the Middle Ages". In today's North Macedonia, on the other hand, he imagined himself to be completely in the „land of illiterates", where life was good „even without Adam Riese, without syntax, algebra, and geometry" (Küppers 1937, 24).

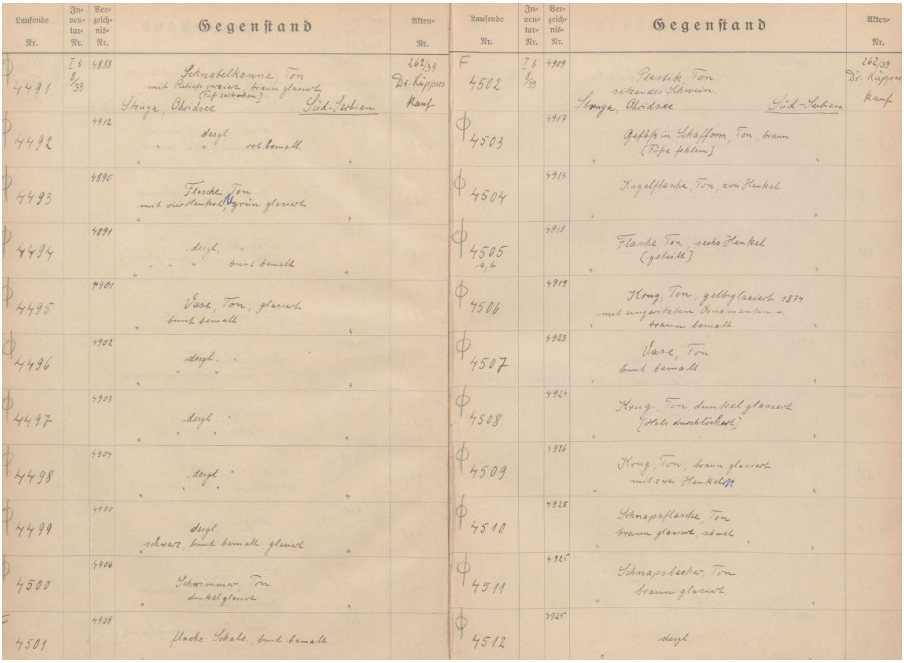
These remarks – made without any linguistic or in-depth local knowledge, of course – are exemplary of the classical topoi of the Balkans as a mixture of Orient and Occident and the notions of primitiveness and civilization inscribed in these categories (Todorova 2009; Warneken 2006, 26–30) The folklorist Gottfried Korff has pointed out that it was ultimately the anti-modern reform movements that identified „folk art as the antithesis of modernization per se" and saw in it the „traits of the elementary and constants of the primary and natural, the simple and original". He particularly emphasized the „Dürerbund", which had such a lasting influence on Küppers (Korff 1994, 380). His enthusiasm for the Balkans, where this originality had supposedly been so successfully preserved, is therefore unsurprising. Accordingly, Küppers – like Baumann, his ethnographic mentor from the museum – was keen to depict „rural life" with the greatest possible „authenticity". Trade, migration, urbanization, mechanization, and the associated transformation processes – all were of no interest to them. Instead, the material culture of the Balkan Peninsula that he collected was meant to show an idealized pre-industrial culture. And so Küppers endeavoured to record traditional crafts and rural tools, collected what he considered to be exotic festivities and customs, made assumptions about their pre-Christian origins, and followed in the footsteps of pastoral cultures and their supposedly characteristic products.

3 Imperial and national socialist plans for the region and their ramifications with the Küppers collection

This quest for authenticity always implied a search for an ethnically unambiguous original state, which – with a bit of collector's luck and by looking back far enough in history – could be identified through material culture. Küppers was by no means alone with this essentializing notion: the glorification of the region as a kind of „living folklore museum" is a classic component of a discourse that Maria Todorova termed „Balkanist", which portrays the region as an essentially backward, semi-civilized version of Europe. With the help of Küpper's information on the transport lists, the museum staff also immediately began to assign objects and photos to individual ethnic groups, thereby quickly blurring geographical and ethnic attributions. According to ethnologist Klaus Roth, such a de-historicized concept of culture was also the norm in Southeast Europe for a long time (Roth 1992).

This construction of the Balkans as a periphery and as the European „Other" has been discussed in detail and developed further in recent years with reference to postcolonial theories (Satjukow/Nießer 2022). In summary, this discussion does not focus on the actual coloniality of the region, which could likely only be claimed for the Habsburg regime in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Instead, it relates to an essentializing dichotomy of centre and periphery that is characteristic of colonial discourse (Chakrabarty 2000). The Balkans often functioned as „Europe's periphery, its close but still discursively and politically subordinated Other" (Kołodziejczyk/Huigen 2023, 5).

The Küppers Collection clearly demonstrates that a certain exoticism played an important role in the selection of objects. As previously noted, this aligns with typical elements of „Balkanist" discourse. However, a look at Küpper's past and his involvement in nationalist and German *völkisch* networks in particular calls for greater consideration to be given to the time-specific ideologemes of his collecting that also influenced the „valuation" of the supposedly backward Balkans. For Todorova, this „Balkan" has always been inscribed with the role of the „middle-ground" between barbarism and civilization, on which progress only ever arrives halfway (Todorova 2009, 129–130). However, Küppers's ethnological perspective was more complex; he firmly believed that certain national characteristics had been better preserved in the multiethnic Balkans than elsewhere. In line with the ethnography of his time, Küppers saw the region as a „field of ruins and fragments of countless overlapping cultures". It was also



Inventory-list, Küppers collection, Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

the museum's interest to „salvage" and document these fragments (Küppers 1939, 36). In a letter to Küppers following his first trip, the head of the department, Baumann, sharply distinguished the „valuable" objects from the „modern wooden objects", ceramic „bazaar wares", and generally the „export kitsch" that, according to him, was becoming increasingly common in the region (Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, vol. 5).

This search for the original was in line with contemporary doctrine: As the Berlin museum director, Adolf Bastian had already made collections on European peripheries for this very reason. And this was also an unquestioned consensus for folklore in Southeastern Europe for a long time (Groschwitz 2015; Nixdorff 1973; Vojnović-Traživuk 2001). These perspectives were nothing special for the museum collections of their time either: for them, the focus was not on depicting contemporary people in their „real" cultural and economic surroundings and life circumstances but on presenting the supposedly „original"

Bread stamp from the Burgas area in Eastern-Bulgaria, Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Matthias Thaden

aspects that were meant to be preserved (Faber/Keckeis 2023, 294-295; Buchczyk 2023, 79–81; Johler 2005). In Küppers's case, however, this was combined with a thoroughly *völkisch* view of his environment, the people, and their history. This was reflected not only in his series of pictures, in which he depicted people in a standardized way and as nameless representatives of their „ethnic group", but also in his collecting.

For instance, Küpper's striking interest in shaped bread and the corresponding material may seem harmless at first glance. In fact, the ornamentation he was interested in was a classic approach to „holistic" cultural comparisons (Kauffmann 2020, 13–17). Küppers picked up on this and looked for deeper indications of cultural origins in the ornamental bread. In fact, he saw them as a direct link to the Migration Period. The ethnic implications of Küppers's collecting of such bread, the associated bread stamps, and other ornamented artifacts can only be understood by reading his texts. In these, he

directly used his collecting activities and the results of his research in this area to further his *völkisch* political aims and positions. Based on his ornamental studies, he claimed to have been able to prove that the „cultural legacy and the blood heritage of the Germanic tribes are more significant than we had previously realized" (Küppers 1942). According to Küppers, the carvings and ornamentation of the Šokci (sg. Šokac, an ethnic group in modern-day Northern Serbia) clearly revealed the considerable German influence in the region, which led him to speculate on the racial origins of this group (Küppers 1938).

He frequently drew parallels between Germany and Southeastern Europe in terms of techniques and forms. For example, the snake ornamentation in the timber framing of Lower Saxony and in various regions of the Balkans allegedly pointed to the formative example of the Lombards and thus to Germanic influences (Küppers 1940). He drew a line from corn granaries and burial mounds in Dobruja to similar objects and sites in the Lüneburg Heath (Küppers 1959, 205). His correspondence also indicates the search for „Nordic racial splinters" and Germanic heritage in the region on the basis of ornamentation, as he formulated in the letter to Hitler already cited (Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, Bd. 5). Just before the end of the war – in December 1944 – he asked Director General Kümmel to allow him to continue his studies in the future (Zentralarchiv der Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, I/MV 1361). And even after the war, when Küppers did not succeed in convincing the new head of the department, Werner Stief, to support further trips, he remained true to the topic and his scientific premises (Stief to Küppers, May 4, 1954, unrecorded files in the archive of the Ethnological Museum Berlin): He firmly believed that the movements of „peoples" over the centuries could be traced by means of certain types of ornament, in which he accordingly saw „the hieroglyphics of folk art" (Küppers 1959, 89). As already indicated, such ideas fitted closely with approaches claiming to understand "cultures as a whole" and to come to comparative conclusions by studying, among other things, forms and ornaments (Hahn 2014, 270). Küppers, however, continued to use this methodology by comparing material evidence and ornamentation in a somewhat arbitrary manner (Ulbert 1975/76).

The decisive issue here is not the scientific validity of Küpper's assertions. Instead, what is important is that such convictions gave Küpper's interest in the region a certain direction and thus also shaped the museum and its current collection. For all his fascination with the peculiarities of the inhabitants and their supposed „autochthony", he was imbued with ideas of a „natural" leadership

role for the Germans in Southeastern Europe. This attitude clearly brought him close to contemporary visions of „Central Europe" [Mitteleuropa]. These were not only about the economic penetration of the area in the sense of an economic „supplementary area" as envisioned by Economics Minister Hjalmar Schacht in his „New Plan". In addition to the region's – indeed extreme – economic dependence on Germany (Motta 2021; Vienna 2007; Ritschl 2001), a discourse that dismissed the newly founded states on the Balkan Peninsula as fragile and ultimately „unnatural" entities was equally powerful. After the Ottomans and Habsburgs left, many actors regarded them as a legitimate „colonization area at our gates", which historian Carola Sachse has accordingly described as an „informal empire" (Sachse 2010, 17–18; Thörner 2008).

The conviction that Germany was historically predestined for its domination was widely shared in German intellectual circles. Ethnic actors and think tanks in particular linked the ideas to National Socialist imperial plans (Mazower 2011). In institutions dedicated to racial and ethnic policy, they fantasized about a „widespread cultural penetration" of the Balkans and put forward theories about the racial composition of its inhabitants in corresponding journals and publications (Kirk 2010, 202). Gustav-Adolf Küppers participated directly in these debates with essays in which he gave these ideas a museum-oriented political spin. In his letter to Hitler, which has already been quoted several times, he pointed out that it was up to the Germans to preserve traditional folk culture, as „our prehistory is closely linked to the southeastern and Danube regions" (Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, Vol. 5). Even during the war, he continued to promote this position and, in June 1942, he spoke to Nevermann, an employee of the Eurasia department, about the comprehensive purchase of Bulgarian wooden ploughs. The modernization of agriculture, which was taking place under German influence, made it obvious to collect such „a landmark of Bulgarian folklore" for Berlin (Zentralarchiv der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, I/MV 225).

In this respect, Küppers saw the Germans as the obvious and rightful custodians of the cultural heritage of Southeastern Europe. Such parallels to the imperialist discourse on Southeastern Europe were by no means a coincidence or purely due to the „zeitgeist". Rather, a look at Küppers's contacts and networks reveals his deep involvement in a circle of people who, long before World War II, advocated a strengthening of Germanness in the region under National Socialist auspices proclaiming a racial and historical right to German leadership. Various individuals with whom he was apparently in close contact

had already been promoters of *völkisch* plans for Southeastern Europe in the 1920s. For example, one of his academic advisors, the economist Max Sering, had been an early advocate of the expansion and concentration of the German economy in Southeastern Europe. Karl-Christian Loesch, with whom Küppers later worked, was „head of the German Protection League for Border and Foreign Germans" and advocated the congruence of German national and state borders as the basis for a new European order (Retterath/Korb 2017). Küppers contributed both texts and images to several of Loesch's publications and invited him to attend his lectures at the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory (BGAEU) (Archive of the BGAEU, SIT 83; 248). The same applied to Friedrich Heiß, who, as a *völkisch* publicist, saw the „German European task [...] in the shaping of the Central European area determined by Greater Germany" (Prehn 2010, 173). Like Küppers, Loesch and Heiß had been active in the youth movement of the interwar period. Their enthusiasm for the „German colonization" of the Balkans and, above all, for the folklore of the Germans in Southeastern Europe was probably not lost on Küppers, who had already written enthusiastically about the ethnic movement of the „Artamans" in a pamphlet in 1928 (Archiv der deutschen Jugendbewegung, A 82, No. 30, Kalinke 2017).

In fact, the invitation lists received for Küpper's lectures at the BGAEU featured several personalities of the *völkisch* intellectual spectrum with invitees from the cultural sector (such as the museum director and folklorist Konrad Hahm), from eugenics and racial sciences (Wolfgang Abel and Ingeborg Lott-Sydow), and from geopolitics (Karl Haushofer). In addition to the „theoreticians" of the expansion into Southeastern Europe, some of their „practitioners" were also present at Küpper's lectures, such as Karl Passarge, director of the Advertising Council of German Business. Passarge was closely associated with the Institute for Economic Observation, which was responsible for „economic propaganda" in Southeastern Europe and also stressed the „colonial idea" (Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, R 2301, 7059). On behalf of this institute, whose largest financier was the IG Farben, Küppers used his travels from 1939 onwards for „market observation in the Balkan countries", drafting confidential dossiers which he sent to Germany via the German embassies, as the Federal Foreign Office reported in a confidential letter in June 1939 (Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, RAV 43/1, 146).

Küpper's collecting, his interest in "racial splinters", in the "remnants" of Germanic existence, the legacies of the migration of peoples, and the evidence

of ideotypical, ethnically pure peoples were widespread in the anthropology of the time. Küppers picked up on them and utilized his travels and his findings to support explicitly National Socialist discourses and agendas. In view of the contacts and his ideological affinities, it was certainly no coincidence that Küppers was transferred to the Balkan Division of the German Army Command immediately after the German attack on Poland. His collecting activities had made him a „Balkan expert", who saw the region as both a kind of pre-modern refuge and a natural German colonization area. Long after the end of the war, Küppers was still able to prominently publish some of his ethnographic observations. In doing so, he seamlessly tied in with the *völkisch* ideas that already had inspired his texts of the 1930s and 1940s (Küppers 1956). His attempts to present himself after the war as unjustly persecuted, or even as a victim of the Nazi regime, are therefore not very convincing (Küppers 1970, 113; Krüger 2011).

4 Practices of collecting "on the ground"

Küppers's political allegiances, his respective networks, and the ideological dimensions of his collecting were one – albeit enormously important – aspect of the evaluation of his collection. However, what were the specific appropriation contexts and under what conditions and circumstances did the objects come into Küpper's possession? Usually, such questions are difficult to answer, as the museum's own records rarely provide answers. In postcolonial and decolonial provenance research, it has therefore been suggested that, in addition to archival research, perspectives from the source communities/societies of origin should also be included (Peers/Brown 2003). Even if this term has rightly been problematized as being somewhat essentialist (Hauser-Schäublin 2023), it makes a lot of sense to engage in a direct exchange about the objects and photographs with local museums and experts (Bründlmayer 2023, 69; Scholz 2019). Accordingly, this also takes place as part of the work on the Küppers Collection. On the other hand, its analysis can benefit from the aforementioned diary of Heimtraut Küppers, who accompanied her father on his travels from 1936 onwards. In her notes, she repeatedly referred to the actual acquisition of the objects. In addition, Küpper's publications, in which he repeatedly discussed his collecting, are also being consulted.

Küppers came to the Balkans as a novice who was dependent on local and linguistic experts for all aspects of collecting. Most of these „brokers" came about through random acquaintances, such as among the German and Tatar

Packaging museum objects, Diary Heimtraut Küppers, 1939, Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Christian Krug

Aquisition of distaffs, Diary Heimtraut Küppers, 1939, Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Christian Krug

population, whose villages in the Dobruja served as regular starting points for his trips to the surrounding areas (see for instance Küppers 1937, 13–16; Küppers 1965, 182). On his first journey in 1935 in particular, he had also collected many items in the vicinity of German communities. This may have been due to his enthusiasm for German colonization efforts on the ground, but the museum was unable to make any use of it. In a handwritten assessment of Küppers in February 1936, department head Baumann therefore suggested that on his next trips he should „spend less time in the German colonies and devote more time to the old Romanian and Bulgarian customs and traditions, beyond the highways." Another point of criticism was that he had mainly sent handicrafts and mostly new objects from local markets to Berlin (Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, Bd. 2).

Küppers evidently embraced this criticism, studied the academic literature, and „became sworn" to the region over time, as he wrote to General Director Kümmel in April 1937 (Zentralarchiv der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, I/MV 302). This passion was obviously not faked: even decades later, musical instruments that he had privately brought back from Southeastern Europe were still in regular use and part of the furnishings in his house (private mail correspondence with Rotraut K., a granddaughter of Küppers). Although he also bought everyday objects on subsequent trips to local markets and stores, he focused on systematic collecting and acquired entire workshop inventories, for example, in order to fully record (also photographically) local crafts such as cap making, silversmithing, or rope making.

By collecting a large number of objects of the same type, he also tried to meet the museum criteria aimed at „cultural comparison". Küppers also sought to collect „highlight" objects: It is true that his plan to bring an entire Romanian wooden church to Berlin could not be fulfilled (Küppers 1970, 115). However, he visited the local museums at almost all stops, had their depots shown to him, and also acquired objects here and in monasteries that went beyond everyday and domestic use, such as icons, jewellery, and richly decorated festive clothing.

However, the objects that Küppers acquired on his next trips were mostly household goods and tools that the people themselves no longer had any use for or that they were obviously willing to give away for other reasons. Küppers, who made new contacts in some villages and towns with each journey and was sometimes recognized by the inhabitants, often purchased the relevant objects directly from them. It appears that many local people expressed little interest

Icon, Madonna with five Saints, Troyan, Bulgaria, Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Belt lock (pafti), Kriva Palanka, Northern Macedonia, Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Matthias Thaden

in the old objects in particular. In Troyan, Bulgaria, according to his daughter's diary note, many people recognized them and some women even „dragged" a bunch of „old things for the museum" (Heimtraut Küppers's diary in the collection of the Museum of European Cultures). In the Strandža Mountains, on the other hand, they went directly to the people and acquired – at random and from house to house – „a number of interesting items" (Heimtraut Küppers's diary in the collection of the Museum of European Cultures).

Naturally, the ethnographic departments of the local museums were interested in objects similar to Küppers', which occasionally led to conflicts. In June 1938, Küppers reported from his fourth trip from Sofia that everything was packed and that „at the most, the local ethnographic museum could take out a few rarities". However, the „boxes had already been nailed", so this would probably not happen (Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, Vol. 4). A year later, Heimtraut Küppers again noted in her diary that the museum, also in Sofia, had „taken away" some of the Karakachani spindle whorls mentioned above. The replica made from plaster, obviously as compensation, is still in the MEK's collection (Heimtraut Küppers's diary in the collection of the Museum of European Cultures).

Apparently, the respective diplomatic missions in Berlin sometimes became involved in such conflicts, although it remains unclear whether diplomatic pressure also played a role in the resolution. However, it is important to note that the objects were apparently not appropriated against the will of their former owners; there are also no known cases of obvious overreaching. Such an assessment can at least be made on the basis of the sources available so far. It should be noted, however, that these are based only on personal testimonies by Küppers himself and his relatives, many of them written retrospectively. Further research will have to show whether individuals felt they had been taken advantage of or gave away their objects due to different kinds of pressure. At the very least, Küppers was primarily interested in objects that were simply no longer needed or were for sale anyway. In view of the increasing urbanization and industrialization taking place in the region and the accompanying social changes, many of the objects acquired by Küppers had probably lost much of their practical and symbolic value (Paskalewa 1987). In this respect, an obviously unlawful appropriation, such as often occurred in colonial contexts, can likely be ruled out for the Küppers collection. Nevertheless, there seem to be grey areas here as well: again in Heimtraut Küppers's diary, we learn, for example, of „terribly rare" calendar sticks acquired from an old woman near the Black Sea coast or of a village of

the Karakachani minority in central Bulgaria, where many of the spindle whorls collected for the museum „were difficult to obtain", as they were commemorative gifts or even „wedding presents".

Again, it remains vague what this actually meant for the negotiations. However, contacts with linguists and other trustworthy people as middlemen were essential. This is particularly evident in the case of the Hutsul artefacts, which Küppers collected in 1936 and which he considered „remains of Bronze Age culture" (Küppers 1964, 202). Without the art historian and later politician Wladimir Zalozieckyj, who literally opened the doors to people's homes for Küppers and accompanied him with his expertise for several days to the Carpathian Forest – and the following year to Maramureș in Romania – the collection that still exists today would hardly have come into being. In Struga at Lake Ohrid, too, they travelled with the local merchant Haki-Isa, who was well known to the local people as a dealer in antiques. He was therefore a suitable intermediary (Heimtraut Küppers's diary in the collection of the Museum of European Cultures; a photo of the merchant is in the photo collection of the Musée du Quai Branly).

Although the selection of objects and Küpper's general collecting interests were clearly motivated by ideological considerations, his actual acquisition practices appear to have been far less compromising. Apart from his first trip, during which he made dubious promises to a Zagreb baroness about a purchase and she subsequently complained to the museum (Schühle 2011), there is no documentation of the collector taking advantage of people or any other misbehaviour. On the contrary, his negotiating position on-site seems to have been quite difficult sometimes. Before his third trip in 1937, he wrote to the director general of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin that he no longer wanted to appear as an „old goods huckster" who always had to push down prices and that he had simply lacked the money for many objects so far (Zentralarchiv der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, I/MV 302). He apparently had to spend more than planned on some festive and holiday objects such as a complete wedding costume in Romania (including a bridal crown) (Küppers 1964, 199). The fact that many local people were quite self-confident in their price negotiations with the collector and that supply and demand had evidently shifted also played a role here: Especially in Romania, Küppers wrote to Baumann in August 1936 on his second trip, he had endeavoured to „obtain what could still be found [...] because the country is already heavily plundered" (Archiv des Ethnologischen Museums Berlin, Sammelreisen Dr. Küppers, vol. 2).

5 Conclusion

The competition with other museums that Küppers and the Berlin museums found themselves in, as indicated in the previous quote, further increased the ethnological „salvage impetus“ described at the beginning. This, along with the claim, as the German hegemon in Europe, to have a quasi-natural „right of access“ to the „ancient folk culture“ – which was soon threatened with extinction – and to research and categorize it, was the main reason that Küppers and the museum started collecting in the Balkans. It is also the ominous mixture of classical rescue ideology and Nazi imperialism that casts the Küppers collection in a particularly dubious light and certainly also in the intellectual proximity of colonial collecting practices.[4]

At the same time, it has been shown that the actual collection practice on the ground took place under different circumstances. It remains up to future research whether there were instances of occasional profiteering or whether individuals gave up their possessions only under social or other pressure. It is important to consider the contexts in which the collector operated and the intention he had when selecting the objects and bringing them to Berlin as evidence and “typical” examples of Southeastern European folk culture. That being said, Küppers did not obtain the objects unlawfully, have them transported out of the country illegally, or take them from people under false pretences.

Ultimately, Küpper‘s biography is an example of the radicalization of interwar anti-bourgeois alternative culture, which vehemently rejected modernity and combined it with folk ideologies. In his engagement with Southeastern Europe and his collecting activities there, he projected these onto the region and fell prey to a romanticized and stereotypical Balkan discourse. Enriched by pseudo-scientific theories of the expansion of Germanic culture, which he believed he had been able to prove on the basis of the material legacies, he increasingly aligned himself with an imperial and racist policy towards Southeastern Europe, with whose protagonists he was also closely associated. It is precisely in this respect that the collection is ambiguous, as the objects cannot be separated from the intentions behind their acquisition. Their future presentation should therefore certainly take into account the historical background of the collection.

4 For general reflections on the role of the colonial in European collections, see Justnik 2021.

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DECOLONIZING NARRATIVES: RETHINKING INDIAN COLLECTIONS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS IN GERMANY

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Abstract: ***In the last few decades, ethnographic museums in Europe have witnessed a change in curatorial and display practices. With critical attention to differentiation and Othering resulting from the interconnected experiences of imperialism and coloniality, the role and responsibility of museums is evolving, intended at decolonizing exhibitions and narratives. However, the impact of decolonial approaches in those museum exhibitions in Europe, where colonial contexts are indirect, i.e., not involving territorial occupation, remains underexplored. This paper aims to critically analyse one such less-explored context, focusing on Indian collections in German museums. Taking the case of Indian collections in the erstwhile Prussian State holdings in Berlin (now housed in the Humboldt Forum), it traces the historical, institutional, and sociopolitical contexts in which they were acquired and continue to be displayed. This discussion is interlaced with interest in Indology–the study of Indian culture, history, and literature, which gained momentum in the 19th century. Engaging a theoretical-analytical lens, the paper examines how colonial knowledge systems shaped certain narratives and how they are reflected in the current exhibition. Moreover, it explores the use of contemporary strategies, influenced by the ongoing decolonizing discourses and their impact on presenting the story of Indian collections in German museums today.***

Keywords: ***Indian collections, narratives, decolonization, Indology, postethnology***

Decolonization in Ethnographic Museums: An Overview

In recent years, the discourse and practice of decolonization has gained a stronghold in ethnographic museums. The key criticism against these museums has been the partisan portrayal of world cultures that rendered the patterns of self-differentiation and determination among cultures and societies visible. Ethnographic museums, which emerged in many parts of the world during the 18th and 19th centuries, can be seen as an outcome of the emergence of ethnology as a scientific discipline and a principal way in which anthropologists addressed notions of alterity through material culture (Boursiquot 2014). In their quest to study and display other cultures, these museums persisted throughout the 20th century, despite anthropologists increasingly shifting from the material study of societies to focus on meaning, social structures, power relationships, and social practices (Boursiquot 2014).

Through the nexus of knowledge and power in colonial-imperial times, ethnographic museums created hierarchies while engendering notions of supremacy of certain cultures over others (Sturtevant 1969). This mode of knowledge production, deeply embedded in the colonial context, influenced the display and presentation of objects in museums and established the Western gaze that privileged people from the West as having authority in interpreting collections. The univocal lens of presentation and interpretation faced criticism due to complications of representing the Other in the era of decolonization and globalization, "as every place and every act became trans-cultural in our evermore-interconnected world" (Singh 2014, 3; see also Pieterse 1997; Yap 2014). Increased attention to anthropology's relevance within postcolonial critique, alongside transformations in the role and responsibility of museums towards contemporary societies, created an urgency to decolonize the exhibition of ethnographic collections in European museums (Harris and O'Hanlon 2013; Jones 1993; Pieterse 1997; Fromm 2016; Fairweather 2004). Interlaced with this discussion is the growing demand from communities of origin for the restitution of objects that once belonged to them.

In Germany, many ethnographic museums (Museum für Völkerkunde)[1] established in the 19th century, either through the initiatives of the state, universities, or private collectors, are facing the challenge of reframing their

[1] The term *Völkerkunde* became associated with the "non-European 'primitive' peoples" of those societies "marked by colonial expansionism" (Welz 2001, 4864).

collections and narratives (Kravagna 2015; Macdonald, Gerbich, and Oswald 2018).[2] The term *Völkerkunde* has come under criticism in recent decades due to its association with racial and unjust colonial practices (Dilger 2018) and is largely being disregarded in museums. In response, many museums have rebranded themselves as world cultures or art museums (e.g., the Museum of World Cultures in Frankfurt, the Museum of Five Continents in Munich, and the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum-Kulturen der Welt in Cologne). These museums have adopted hybrid strategies, redefining their engagement with communities through artistic interventions and knowledge exchange (Vogel 1989; Price 1989; Lidchi 2013; Kraus and Noack 2015; Wonisch 2018). Many have also initiated provenance research to include the complex past of objects in their presentation in museums.

While this reorientation has been termed *post-ethnology* by museums, it has faced criticism from scholars. In a post-ethnological context, the emphasis shifts from the classic methods and frameworks of ethnology to more critical, reflexive, and often interdisciplinary approaches. Moving away from a Western-centric viewpoint and giving voice to indigenous and marginalized perspectives, this reconfiguration recognizes the fluid and interconnected nature of cultures and emphasizes the need to decolonize the study of societies. However, critics argue that this shift is often superficial, with museums claiming to embrace post-ethnology but, in practice, only engaging in renaming/reorienting/refashioning towards art rather than making a genuine departure from classical ethnology. A case in point is the Musée du Quai Branly, a museum dedicated to art and ethnography of non-Western cultures that opened its doors in 2006 in Paris (Price 2007). While it offers an intriguing approach by showcasing ethnographic collections as high art in the heart of a city landscape, it still clings to the exotic display techniques and overlooks France's complex colonial legacies (Benoit 2008).

Such an approach offers new modes of co-creation, co-curation, and intellectual reciprocity, but at the same time risks diluting the historical, political, and anthropological context of these collections and the power asymmetries

[2] "In the historiography of the social sciences, ethnology represents an early stage in the development of the anthropological disciplines" and "indicates a scholarly interest in how aggregations of human beings are distinct from each other in terms of material culture, language, religion, moral ideas, or social institutions" (Welz 2001, 4862). On the other hand, ethnography is understood as a data-gathering and documenting practice. In this paper, the words *ethnology* and *ethnography* are used interchangeably.

underlying interactions and exchanges (Hoggart 2004; Clifford 2019; Oswald 2018; Schorch and McCarthy 2019). As art historian Christian Kravagna suggests, "'post' in ethnology should not be seen as a temporal 'afterwards' with regard to colonialism [...] but rather an oppositional force with the aim of overcoming colonial relations of power" (Kravagna 2013 in Wonisch 2018, 5). Many scholars have advocated for a more comprehensive notion of post-ethnology, one that foregrounds historical connections through provenance research and fosters collaborations with source communities to build more comprehensive and inclusive narratives (Oswald 2018; Sarr and Savoy 2018; Clifford 2019; Rassool 2022). As curator Regina Wonisch writes, "Decolonizing ethnological collections and museums [...] implies questioning the disciplinary boundaries between ethnology, cultural history, history, and art, and the corresponding orders of knowledge" (Wonisch 2018, 7). Our work positions itself within this critical discourse of post-ethnology, influenced by global forces, and analyses the museum narratives in relation to their rootedness in geo-historical continuities and contemporary practices.

The Politics of Cultural Representation: Othering, Indology, and Indomania

The debate on the politics of cultural representation and display has brought awareness to the relation between "the displayer, the displayed, and the viewer" (Kuwayama 2003). Considering museums in a postcolonial context, understanding cultural identity is crucial, as the portrayal of cultures as static or monolithic is challenged and/or ruptured (Hall 1990, 1997). This perspective urges museums to present artefacts and narratives in ways that reflect ongoing cultural changes and the complex legacies of colonialism, rather than perpetuating outdated or essentialist views of culture. The historicity of objects, along with their procurement and display, was shaped by underlying assumptions about the acceptability of "ways of thinking" and particular discourses of power (Foucault 1970). Comprehending this subjectivity and relationality is crucial to contextualizing Indian collections, and we therefore take recourse to postcolonial discourses.

Building on Edward Said's work on the concepts of Orientalism, the Western gaze, and imagined constructions of self and Other that empower the colonizer against the colonized (Said 1979), we proceed with Homi Bhabha's strategies of hierarchization and marginalization as employed in the

management of colonial societies (Bhabha 1986), alongside Gayatri Spivak's "epistemic violence", which provides an important theoretical paradigm for addressing this issue (Spivak 1988). The implication of the positionality or standpoint of the subject means that post-ethnological museums embody this concept by enabling us (the Other) through social imaginings of the past and its material relations, thus transforming contemporary relational configurations. The discourse of post-ethnology is embedded in the postcolonial critique, allowing museums to recognize and connect with the diverse aspects of ourselves, helping construct and understand the points of identification, dialogue, multiperspectivity, and representation politics.

Building on these concepts, subsequent scholars have utilized these frameworks to analyse the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of postcolonial societies, particularly in examining the dynamics of power and representation within global narratives. The notion of Orientalism, in particular, "marked by a series of fundamental absences (of movement, reason, order, meaning, and so on)", demonstrates how the constructed distinction between representation and reality reflects the broader division between the West and the non-West (Mitchell 2004). The European apparatus of representation, particularly museums and world exhibitions, has become instrumental in showcasing this difference and constructing Otherness, which facilitated national identity and served imperial and colonial intentions (Mitchell 2004; Bennett 2017; Clifford 1997). "For Spivak, epistemic violence is an integral part of proclaiming Western knowledge of the Other as truth" (Bartels et al. 2019, 153).

In an Indian context, several scholars called for a re-examination of narratives surrounding colonialism, arguing that these narratives undermine and dismiss indigenous knowledge systems by projecting European epistemologies onto the subjugated Other, misinterpreting Indian cultural history, particularly in Western museums (Mitter 1977; Ganguly 1988; Guha-Thakurta 2007; Chatterjee, Guha-Thakurta and Kar 2014; Singh 2014, Sullivan 2015). Keya Ganguly highlights the "intersections between the trajectories of colonialism and that of Indian art history" (Ganguly 1988, 39). She discusses the problematic articulation of Indian art as the colonized Other and the epistemic violence that ensues this discourse (Ganguly 1988). Adapting Raymond Williams' discussion of the "internal dynamic relations" in cultural processes, Ganguly uses the categories of "dominant, incorporated, and oppositional modes of cultural practice" to analyse colonial ideology in relation to Indian art history (Ganguly 1988; Williams 1977). This aspect of epistemic violence has also

been discussed at length by Partha Mitter (1977), who juxtaposes the myth of the innocent eye as elaborated by Ernst Gombrich (1960) and critiques the reception and interpretation of Indian (particularly Hindu) sculpture, painting, and architecture through a European eye. He observes a curious paradox in the reception of Indian art in Europe: while it remains one of the most discussed non-European artistic traditions, it is widely misunderstood in the modern West (Mitter 1977).

While our work addresses this issue, a key aspect to consider is the indirect colonial context. Unlike colonial powers such as Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal, Germany did not acquire territory in India. Nevertheless, the German intellectual interest in India developed from the late 18th century, leading to a deep engagement with Indian texts, philosophy, culture, and languages, as well as objects and people. Indology, as this discipline was termed, advanced in the German context distinctively and more robustly than other European countries and remains a rich source of historical study in a post-Orientalist debate. German Indology emerged, alongside Orientalism, in the context of colonial rule in the 18th and 19th centuries. In German Indology, the main focus was not on how Europeans viewed India, but rather on how Germans used India to shape and project their own self-image, seeking validation from other Europeans (Adluri 2011). In the 19th century, India became a significant reference point in shaping Germany's cultural identity, giving rise to the term "Indomania". As described in Wilhelm Krug's *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1838), Indomania referred to "a kind of mental illness", characterizing those obsessively infatuated with everything Indian (Chakkalakal 2024, translated). These so-called Indomaniacs romanticized India as "the only real source of all human wisdom, education, and morality" (Krug 1838). Douglas McGetchin writes, "The German interest in ancient India developed because of specific cultural, institutional, and political motivations" (McGetchin 2009, 17–18). He argues that Indology was used as a "counter to contemporary French cultural hegemony" (McGetchin 2009, 18). The Prussian State was instrumental in advancing Indology, establishing numerous academic chairs as key centres for Indological research, including Berlin as an important centre. On account of Germany's lack of colonial occupation in India, which led them to rely on Britain for resources, this has often led to the misconception that German interest in India was free from Orientalist motives.

However, by emphasizing myth and symbolism in sustaining India's Otherness, the Orientalist portrayal of India as "spiritual", "mysterious", "exotic", and related stereotypes are reinforced within the Indological discourse (Inden 1986; McGetchin 2009). Peter Gaeffke's analysis reveals that German Indology lacks self-criticism and ignores its historical roots, both in scholarship and its religious-political origins (Gaeffke 1990). Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism "as potentially directed inward" was inextricably linked with two sources: colonialism and evangelism (Said 1979, 77). But Sheldon Pollock suggests that in the case of German Indology, a third constituent may have been important: "German Romanticism-Wissenschaft" (Pollock 1993). This connection nurtured a specific reading of Indian texts, often idealizing the past and suggesting a cultural decline in the East, which was used to justify the Western colonial presence. Various approaches towards India, such as Indology, along with the enduring phenomena of Indomania (a mix of admiration and aversion), *Sehnsucht Indien*, and *Indienliebe*, continue to shape both scholarly and artistic perceptions. (McGetchin 2009; Chakkalakal 2014, 2024). The romantic preoccupation, still evident in modern museum interpretations, is critically examined here through a postcolonial lens, with attention to the narratives being promoted within the context of Indian collections in German museums.

Ethnographic Museums in Germany: Positioning Indian Collections

Indian collections have formed an important part of German ethnographic museums since their very foundation in the 19th century. Along with Indologists, expeditions by anthropologists, curators, missionary activities and also international market trade, exchange, and donations as well as other known and unknown ways and means resulted in the acquisition of Indian collections in German museums. In recent years, interest in Indology appears to be declining, with several Indology departments in German universities closing down. Consequently, Indian collections are increasingly reduced from display in German museums. Although museums in Germany have been undergoing narrative shifts in a postcolonial context, the study of the cultural historicity of Indian collections is often subsumed within other problematic (often African) collections and remains relatively unexplored.

Nevertheless, the Museum of Asian Art (Museum für Asiatische Kunst)[3] in Berlin houses one of the largest collections associated with India.[4] Although it is fashioned as an art museum, its origins date back to the Ethnological Museum (Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde), founded in 1873 by Prussian King Wilhelm I. Now housed in the Humboldt Forum, a reconstructed 17th century Baroque palace that once belonged to the Prussian royal family, the collections showcase "world cultures" alongside those of the Ethnological Museum (now a separate entity). Opened in 2021,[5] the Humboldt Forum has become a focal point of postcolonial debates. This controversy has heightened the focus on restituting objects with contested provenances and compelled the Forum to confront the colonial legacies embedded in its institutional history and collecting practices. The decolonial approach, such as provenance research, collaborations with communities, and the acknowledgement of diversity, is prominently applied to African collections in the Humboldt Forum and attracts considerable scholarly attention.[6] Although the Museum has begun to explore decolonial perspectives, their presence in the exhibition of Indian collections is still limited, and ongoing research on the subject is similarly underdeveloped.[7] Against the

3 All museum names have been translated from their original German names into English for consistency.

4 Other museums in Germany, including Berlin, also house Indian collections, like the Übersee Museum in Bremen, the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, and MARKK-Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt in Hamburg, to name a few. Most of these museums are predominantly ethnological museums; in contrast to the Museum of Asian Art, which is fashioned as an art museum, with roots in the ethnological museum. It underscores the compelling issue of distinguishing between categories of art and ethnology, a central critique in post-ethnological discourse.

5 After the online opening in December 2020, the Humboldt Forum was partially opened to the public in July 2021. The museum was fully opened from September 2022.

6 See, for instance, Margareta von Oswald's research on the history and problematics of colonialism in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, which offers useful references and parallels for the study of the Museum of Asian Art (Oswald 2022).

7 The Museum of Asian Art has engaged with a decolonial discourse and published a *Position Paper on Decolonisation*; however, this approach is not yet well reflected in the Indian exhibition. www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/about-us/colonialism/ (accessed 21.04.2024). A booklet published on the postcolonial provenance research in the permanent exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art in Humboldt Forum highlights only a single object from the gallery exhibiting Indian collections (2022).
A project to study provenance research on Asian Art has been introduced in Berlin since 2020 in collaboration with the National Museum of Asian Art of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin's Zentralarchiv and Museum für Asiatische Kunst. It explores trade networks and other movements responsible for circulation of objects. www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/

backdrop of emerging decolonial themes, we consider how historical acquisition practices and the institutional history of the Museum of Asian Art have influenced the presentation of Indian collections in the Humboldt Forum.

History of Indian Collections: Retracing the Prussian Holdings

The Indian collections in the Prussian holdings can be traced back to the Royal Museum of Ethnology, established in 1873 and opened in 1886.[8] Its early origins lie in the Prussian-Brandenburg Cabinet of Art established at the Royal Prussian Palace in Berlin in the 18th century. Following the creation of the New Museum (Neues Museum) in 1855, the early ethnographic collection was exhibited there before moving to the independent museum.[9] Art historian Claudine Bautze-Picron has documented the brief history of the acquisition of these collections, particularly from East India (Bautze-Picron 1998).[10]

In Berlin, Indian collections began to be acquired in the 19th century, with one of the earliest artefacts dating to 1846. These collections grew through donations and acquisitions, such as "four decorative terracottas" from a temple in Bollotpor, donated by Hermann Ansorge in 1857. As Bautze-Picron points out, Indian art historian Rajendra Lal Mitra, who worked on sites, such as Bodh Gaya, was a key figure in helping the ethnological museum in Berlin acquire

museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/collection-research/research/provenance-research-on-asian-art/ (accessed 21.04.2024).

Post-doctoral research by Ranjamrittika Bhowmik maps the emotional journey of museum visitors, exploring history of emotions, individual value production, memory, digital mediation, object biography, decolonization, and intersectionality between the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the Institut für Museumsforschung. https://museumsandsociety.net/en/team/dr-ranjamrittika-bhowmik (accessed 10.08.2024).

An ongoing doctoral work conducted by Habiba Insaf looks at the politics of display and interpretation of Indian objects in Berlin Museums. www.carmah.berlin/people/auto-draft-2/ accessed 21.04.2024). However, this work uses an object biography approach, with an object and its many lives and transformations as a starting premise with objects from various Berlin museums. In contrast, our work examines and contextualizes the current exhibition and narrative of Indian collections, particularly in the Humboldt Forum.

8 Ethnologisches Museum. www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/about-us/profile/ (accessed 20.03.2024).

9 Ethnologisches Museum. www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/about-us/profile/ (accessed 20.03.2024).

10 The Indian collections in the Museum originate from various sources, with each artefact carrying its own rich history. Here, only a few examples are provided to showcase the diverse pathways that brought these objects to Berlin.

"architectural fragments, glazed tiles, and sculptures from Gaur and Pandua" in the 1870s (Bautze-Picron 1998, 9). She also notes the contributions of collectors such as ethnologist Andreas Fedor Jagor, Captain James Waterhouse, Marion Rivett-Carnac, and medical officer Lawrence Austine Waddell in expanding this collection (Bautze-Picron 1998, 9). Jagor made multiple trips to India, collecting objects related to natural history and ethnology. He was supported by the Prussian Government, which corresponded with the British Government to offer assistance to Jagor during his visit to India.[11] Ethnologist Adolf Bastian, who became the first director of the Royal Museum of Ethnology, also made a few voyages to India between 1878 and 1903 (Kreinath 2013, 52–56). He was presented in 1879 with sculptures from Bodh Gaya, which were originally collected by Rajendral Lal Mitra.

In 1904, the Royal Museum of Ethnology established a dedicated Indian Department. The museum expanded its Indian collection by acquiring objects from Bodh Gaya through British orientalist Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner and Jain images collected by missionary Paul Wagner (Bautze-Picron 1998, 10). In 1911, Raj Kumar Shyama Kumar Tagore donated items during the Crown Prince's visit to India. Two years later, with support from J. P. Rawlins, the museum purchased another collection that was then located in England.

The turmoil during and after the Second World War led to the loss and reorganization of Indian collections. This must be viewed in the postwar context of divided Germany, during which the collections were damaged, lost, or scattered. Berlin's division into East and West further split the collections. In 1963, the Indian Department of the Museum of Ethnology became the separate Museum of Indian Art (Härtel 1973, 223). Herbert Härtel, an Indologist and the founding director of this museum, played a key role in establishing Indian art history as an independent academic discipline (Wessels-Mevissen 2006, 30, translated). The Museum of Indian Art officially opened on 7th October 1971 in West Berlin in the Dahlem area (Härtel 1973, 223). During this time, "large Hindu images were acquired [...] from the international art market" (Bautze-Picron 1998, 10).

The Museum of Indian Art came under the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz), which was established in 1957 for the purposes of "the maintenance, preservation, and augmentation of the Prussian art collections" (Waetzoldt 1973, 207). At the turn of the millennium,

[11] Correspondence in the General Department, 1873, Vol. 74. Maharashtra State Archives.

the Museum of Indian Art was merged with the Museum of East Asian Art, forming the Museum of Asian Art in 2006. Indian collections were displayed in Berlin-Dahlem for nearly 50 years before they were moved to the centre of Berlin in the Humboldt Forum. The establishment of the Humboldt Forum has become a key point of contention in recent years.

Confronting Colonial Legacies in the Humboldt Forum

The site of the Humboldt Forum has had a chequered history.[12] Understanding this history is essential to comprehending the debates surrounding the Forum. From serving as the seat of the Hohenzollern Dynasty of Brandenburg since the mid-15th century, with its grand Baroque Palace built at the turn of the 17th century, to the Parliament (Palast der Republik) of the German Democratic Republic in the post-World War II period, the site has often been at the centre of power. Following the reunification of Germany and the subsequent demolition of the Palace of the Republic, the demand for rebuilding the previous Baroque Palace intensified. In 2002, the Berlin Senate approved its reconstruction.[13] The Palace was to accommodate the Humboldt Forum, reminiscent of the exploratory spirit of the Humboldt brothers (Alexander and Wilhelm). It embodies their scientific quests, openness, and connection between the global and local perspectives.[14] Open since 2021, the Humboldt Forum houses several institutions, including the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art of the State Museums of Berlin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (overseen by the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), the City Museum of Berlin (Stadtmuseum Berlin) in collaboration with the Kulturprojekte Berlin, and Humboldt University of Berlin. The Humboldt Forum Foundation serves as an umbrella organization, overseeing the operations of the Humboldt Forum.[15]

12 Short Architectural History; https://berliner-schloss.de/en/palace-history/short-architectural-history/ (accessed 26.03.2024).

13 The construction began in 2013 with Italian architect Franco Stella winning the commission. The Palace was reconstructed in Baroque design, with only one side kept modern.

14 Impressions. The Humboldt Brothers. Press File. 2021. www.humboldtforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/HF_20210718_Humboldt-Brothers_Press-Kit-1.pdf (accessed 14.08.2024).

15 www.humboldtforum.org/en/about/ (accessed 25.03.2024).

Located on Museum Island in the heart of Berlin, the site served as a seat of nobility from 1443 when the Hohenzollern dynasty ruled Brandenburg. At the turn of the 17th century, a grand Baroque palace was built on the site by famous architect and sculptor Andreas Schlüter. This was also the time when Friedrich III was crowned the king of Prussia. Following the end of Prussian rule in 1918, the palace was abandoned

In its formal declaration, as displayed on the museum panel, the Humboldt Forum was envisioned as a "space for dialogue, civic participation, and the coequal contemporaneity of world cultures". However, the decision to reconstruct the Berlin Palace in the Baroque style (though partial) and the decision to present the ethnographic collections sparked a big controversy. The reconstruction of the palace was seen as "a historically problematic gesture of identity politics towards an alleged 19th-century Prussian glory", igniting the questions of authenticity and reconstruction in the context of cultural heritage conservation. Additionally, the idea of a universal museum has faced multiple challenges, given its 19th-century origins (Von Bose 2013). "The Humboldt Forum was originally touted as a place for world cultures, as a site that could open the Berlin museum system to a broader international dialogue: a global perspective, but one that conflictingly projected diversity through the homogeneous universality of the Enlightenment" (Majluf 2021).

The interplay between local, national, and universal identity creations makes the Humboldt Forum complex and contested. "The triangle of European high art (Museum Island), non-European arts and cultures (Humboldt-Forum) as well as of the sciences, represented by the scientific collections of Humboldt University, is not only said to resemble a unique 'sanctuary for art and culture', but is last but not least regarded as an important selling point in the cultural landscape of European cities" (Von Bose 2013). For critics of the Humboldt Forum, the decision to portray non-European cultures, especially ethnological collections, evokes memories of imperial brutality in the colonies, the looting of objects, and the perpetuation of Othering, reinforcing hegemonies rooted in the colonialist-imperialist discourses.[16] The Ethnological Museum's collections displayed on the second floor of the Humboldt Forum, especially the Benin Bronzes and collections from other African countries like Tanzania and Namibia, have been especially scrutinized (Sarr and Savoy 2018).

as a seat of power and was used for other purposes. Towards the end of World War II, it was damaged during the bombings. Following the occupation of East Berlin by the Soviet Union, it was subsequently demolished to make way for the Palace of Republic (Palast der Republik), with many important events of the German Democratic Republic taking place there. The Palace was closed in 1990, citing asbestos contamination. The calls for rebuilding the old palace started right after the unification of Germany. In 2002, the German Parliament voted with a majority in favour of rebuilding. The Palace of the Republic was finally demolished in 2008.

16 See for instance, No Humboldt21. www.no-humboldt21.de/ (accessed 21.04.2024).

Amid growing calls for decolonization, the Humboldt Forum has acknowledged colonialism and coloniality as the core theme to be redressed in the exhibition by engaging with postcolonial voices and perspectives.[17] Coloniality is defined in the discourses adopted by the Humboldt Forum as "the colonial patterns of thought and action that, in their various (re)configurations, continuously and sustainably structure today's realities in former colonized and colonizing societies".[18] The Humboldt Forum aims to break out of "the coloniality that is also inherent in the traditions and practices of educational and cultural institutions such as museums."[19] Among the key strategies of the Humboldt Forum, provenance research seems to have taken centre-stage, alongside working with communities of origin. The Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in particular has developed a policy for the "appropriate handling of non-European objects and their history".[20]

While the ethnological museum at the Humboldt Forum has actively engaged with redressing the colonial problematics, albeit disappointingly (Cardoso 2021), the Museum of Asian Art has echoed similar sentiments. In its "Position Paper on Decolonization", the museum acknowledges the role of its predecessor institutions and employees in the "European processes of studying, exploring, and appropriating the world, as well as those of imperialism and colonialism".[21] The Museum of Asian Art endeavours "to be sensitive to diversity" and "to critically reflect on their own perspectives and engage in a critical appraisal and overcoming of the practices and mindsets of museum-associated traditions of collecting and of disciplinary discourses". They aim to incorporate voices of "local and international partners and knowledge producers" to foster multiperspectivity. Overcoming discrimination, particularly Eurocentrism, is also a central goal of the museum, as asserted in the Position Paper. In view of this approach, it is important to revisit how the Indian collections are presented in the Humboldt Forum.

17 For instance, see the publication *(Post)Colonialism and Cultural Heritage: International Debates in Humboldt Forum*. 2021.

18 Colonialism and Coloniality. www.humboldtforum.org/en/colonialism-and-coloniality/ (accessed 27.03.2024)

19 Colonialism and Coloniality. www.humboldtforum.org/en/colonialism-and-coloniality/ (accessed 27.03.2024)

20 Colonialism and Coloniality. www.humboldtforum.org/en/colonialism-and-coloniality/ (accessed 27.03.2024)

21 Museum für Asiatische Kunst www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/about-us/colonialism (accessed 30.03.2024).

Presenting "Religious Arts of South Asia" and Narratives

The Museum of Asian Art, located on the third floor of the Humboldt Forum, consists of many exhibitions, such as *Southeast Asian Religious Art*; *Religious Arts of South Asia – Buddhism, Jainism*; *Northern Silk Road – Himalayas*; *Religious Arts of South Asia – Hinduism, Courtly Art*; *Northern Silk Road*; *Arts of Japan*, *Tea House*, *Sacred Arts of East Asia*; *Art of China and Korea – Study Collections*; and *China and Europe*.[22] Our paper primarily examines the permanent exhibition *of Religious Arts of South Asia* and the narrative it conveys.[23] Divided into two galleries, the first gallery (Room 314) is located next to the introductory room and is dedicated to Buddhism and Jainism. The second gallery (Room 316) focuses on Hinduism and Courtly Art.[24]

This exhibition can be analysed on multiple levels: its spatial layout and design, the choice and placement of objects, and the narrative contexts. As archaeologist Stephanie Moser has shown, various aspects of the museum influence the production of knowledge, be it architecture, location, setting; space; design, colour, light; subject, message, and text; layout; display types; exhibition style; and audience and reception (Moser 2010). While our focus is on the narrative aspect, as controlled by an institutional agency, the choice of objects, their categorization, and display need to be briefly referred to fully comprehend the narratives employed. The idea is thus not to discuss each and every object, but to highlight the larger themes and narratives presented in the exhibition that connect the various objects in these galleries together. A narrative integrates "objects and spaces – and stories of people and places – as part of a process of storytelling that speaks of the everyday and our sense of

22 The Eastern wing on the third floor has on view other exhibitions on Asia that are managed by the Ethnological Museum, which were not considered for the paper. Additionally, there are exhibitions, such as the *Naga Land*, which have objects from India; however, they remain outside of the purview of this paper. www.humboldtforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Lageplan.pdf (accessed 12.12.2023).

23 The Silk Road expeditions in the early 20th century and the objects collected form among the important collections of the Museum of Asian Art. However, this has not been dealt with in this paper, considering its geographical and thematic focus. Even though we refer to Indian collections, we are aware that the exhibition on *Religious Arts of South Asia* comprises objects from other South Asian countries beyond India. However, since the objects from India (and the Indian subcontinent before the partition) predominate this exhibition, our analysis and approach, with its focus on Indian collections, applies to these objects as well.

24 Even though visitors can freely move on the third floor, for the sake of clarity and ease of explanation, the sequence of room numbers as displayed on the map is followed.

self, as well as the special and the unique" (Hanks, Hale, and MacLeod 2012). It thus becomes a powerful tool that allows for multilayered interpretation. However, in a museum context, the narrative also serves as an instrument for legitimizing the institution's vision and agenda, thereby revealing the underlying power dynamics related to the material objects and the curatorial projects of the institutions involved.

In examining the overall arrangement of both galleries, most objects are displayed on pedestals and in vitrines, accompanied by short labels describing each object. Large panels on the walls provide details on the thematics of the exhibition. There are other panels which offer contexts for the displayed objects through texts and contemporary photographs. Additionally, the exhibition features various projector screens, showcasing films and touchscreen panels that cover a range of themes.

The exhibition on Buddhist art in South Asia features objects from notable sites, such as Sanchi, Amaravati, Bharhut, and Gandhara. The collection includes a variety of objects, ranging from sculptures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, decorative elements and narrative panels from the stupas, and a partial replica of the Sanchi Gateway. The gallery walls are predominantly white, except one wall painted in gold, serving as a background for the sculptures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. At the centre of the gallery, a reconstructed rotunda glass case displays the heads as remnants of various Buddha statues, while another rotunda, designed to resemble a stupa, features storytelling panels. The narratives here largely focus on the origins of Buddhism, stupas, and the iconography as seen in the panel "Buddhist Art in South Asia". A large projector screen at the exhibition's entrance (from the introductory room 313) greets visitors with talks about the history and spread of Buddhism throughout Asia and its contemporary revival. The Sanchi Stupa receives particular attention, with a replica of its half-gateway positioned in front of the projector screen. The panel "Stupa, Throne, Wheel, Tree" highlights the aniconic aspects of Buddhism. A number of iconographic illustrations, such as depictions of Buddha, Bodhisattva, and partial cast of the eastern gate of the Sanchi Stupa and the *Vedikas*—stone fences for sacred places, appear on various smaller panels.

The "Fascination Gandhara" panel explores British colonial efforts to excavate Buddhist sites and highlights the impact of Greek and Roman art on Gandhara sculptures, a result of ongoing Western cultural influences on India. Although Buddhist art developed concurrently in Gandhara (now in northwestern Pakistan) and in Mathura (northern India), the exhibition emphasizes

Gandhara art. The "Ideal Beings in Human Form" panel further illustrates this focus, showcasing the prominence of Gandhara art. Additionally, the panel on "Transformed Belief in the Land of the Buddha" features Buddhist sculptures from eastern India, dating from the 8th to 12th centuries, exploring the influence of Hinduism on esoteric Buddhism, as well as the development of similar rituals.

In the Jain art section, several sculptures of Tirthankaras (Jinas–the spiritual teachers) are displayed, along with a painted cloth and a wooden shrine depicting the temple of Shatrunjaya, a pilgrimage site in Gujarat, Western India. The panel "Jain Art in India" provides a brief history of Jainism and the Tirthankaras, comparing Jain statues to those of the Buddha from an iconographic perspective. Another panel, "Victors and Ford-makers", discusses the 24 Tirthankaras. The pilgrimage to Shatrunjaya is detailed in a smaller panel, offering context for the painted cloth, which serves as a "spiritual substitute for a real pilgrimage". The gallery features two tactile models that illustrate Buddha iconography and a Jain temple model. Additionally, two touchscreen displays focus on Buddhism and the Shatrunjaya pilgrimage. A reading corner in this gallery offers a selection of related books, and an audio guide, narrated by a German-Buddhist monk, which provides insights into the story of Buddhism, the importance of its teachings, and the role of meditation in leading a happy life.

The next gallery is divided into two main sections: Hindu Religious Art and Courtly India. The Hindu religious art section displays various objects, including sculptures, picture prints, textile and miniature paintings, and a travel shrine. The introductory panel "Hindu Art in South Asia" highlights the significance of key deities, such as the male gods Vishnu and Shiva, as well as the female goddess the "Great Devi". It explains their "multiple manifestations" and attributes such as having "more than two arms" and "multiple heads, vividly illustrating their superhuman abilities". Further panels delve into different aspects of Indian divinity. One panel, titled "Form-bearing, Feeding, Sometimes Frightening", explores the role of Hindu goddesses, noting that while they often serve as "companions to male gods", they also possess the power to act independently. The dual nature of these goddesses, whether benevolent or fierce, is emphasized, with particular attention to "the bloodthirsty Chamunda". The gallery also touches on the role of processional images used in festivals, accompanied by a pictorial depiction of a contemporary Durga Puja scene featuring a temporary idol of Devi. Additionally, two separate panels provide an in-depth look at the attributes of the God Shiva —"Dreadlocks, Crescent Moon, and Trident" and Vishnu—"Crown, Fiery Disk, and Conch Shell".

Another notable aspect highlighted on the panels is the "diversity" of Indian gods, such as the "Sun God, Fire God, Creator God". Many of these Hindu deities have origins in the ancient Vedic era (1500–800 BCE), a period renowned for the creation of the Vedas, revered as "primordial knowledge", and the revered Gayatri mantra, as stated in one of the panels. Another panel emphasizes the "colourfulness" of these gods, particularly focusing on 150 years of colour printing, which played a significant role in Indian religious life. While the exhibition showcases these vivid picture prints, the panel outlines the advancements in 19th century colour printing that allowed for the mass production of religious images. Special mention is made of Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) and the assistance he received from German experts in establishing his printing house. In this section, a big multimedia screen showcases the "Imagery of Hinduism", highlighting the iconographic aspects of important Hindu deities, like Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, and Agni. A touchscreen display visually narrates the story from the *Devi Mahatmya*, a text celebrating the great goddess. Additionally, a tactile model of Nataraja is also featured alongside these screens.

The gallery includes a section on Courtly India, with a focus on Islamic art. This display features a variety of objects, including glazed tiles from the Sindh region, Bidri ware, ivory, textiles, clothing, architectural fragments, and photographs. The architectural fragments, mainly from Eastern India and dating to the Sultanate period, are described as "masterpieces of Indo-Islamic culture" in one of the panels. Bidri ware is highlighted as part of a "long tradition" of Islamic art that continues to thrive today. Ivory, celebrated as a "definitive aristocratic material", became a prized addition to European art collections and cabinets of curiosities and is still displayed here.

A significant focus in this section is on the Mughal Empire (16th–19th centuries). The panel "Courtly India" emphasizes how "the courtly culture of this powerful Islamic dynasty shaped Indian art and architecture well into the 19th century". The Taj Mahal is highlighted as the most famous monument from the Mughal period. The panel also connects this history with Berlin, noting that the "enthusiasm for the refined Mughal style reached its peak in 19th-century Berlin, when many of the works displayed here were acquired for the Königliche Museen." It further explains how "Mughal painting, incorporating Persian, Indian, and European influences, achieved an exceptionally high level of artistry and served as a stylistic model for many later Indian courtly schools of painting", and how "Mughal decorative arts were primarily inspired by the flora of the garden, representing 'civilized' nature."

Another panel explores the Central Asian origins of the Mughals and their openness to Indian culture, which fostered a harmonious blend of Persian and Indian traditions. The following panel highlights how "the new Muslim rulers shaped Indian culture through their refined lifestyles and their proverbial lust for luxury". These rulers, known as collectors, connoisseurs, and artists, showcased their refined taste in fine textiles, intricate jewellery, and the use of precious materials. A panel on "Kashmir" reinforces this idea of how Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, with "the extreme heat and barrenness of North India and his longing for civilized nature", commissioned the first gardens in the Persian-Islamic tradition in India. It further mentions how the Kashmir Valley developed into a summer retreat and "the cradle of refined Indo-Islamic horticulture" during the reign of Mughal ruler Akbar and his successors.

Another theme presented here is the "Harem". As the panel describes, "A spacious area of the palace was reserved solely for women. Here, behind closed doors, they could move about freely and even engage in 'improper' activities such as smoking, exuberant celebrations, or bathing in the nude". A section on early photography (dating back to the 19th century), which talks about the advent of photography in British India, presents views of buildings from the Mughal Empire, including Agra, Delhi, Fatehpur Sikri, and Lahore.[25] Along with multimedia screens providing more information on Bidri ware, ivory, and Ragamala miniature paintings, the gallery features an interactive game where visitors can design a Mughal garden. A tactile model of the Taj Mahal is also on display. The centrepiece of this gallery is an 18th-century textile depicting the plan of the Taj Mahal. To preserve the textile, the object is kept in a closed cabinet, viewable for only five minutes every half-hour. The exhibition's focal point is an artwork by Alexander Gorlizki titled "Gardens in the Sky", which incorporates animation and music. Two other artworks, "Ram Darwaza No. 9" by Anil Revri, based in Washington D.C. and another by contemporary London-based Indian artist Shubha Taparia, have been presented in this gallery. Revri conceptualizes "the image space as the map of an inner world", hinting at his roots in Indian spiritual traditions. The symmetrical structure of his work is "reminiscent of Islamic principles of composition". Titled "Transitional Weaves 1 (Illumination Series)", Taparia's work plays with the two-dimensional

[25] During our recent visit, we noticed that the section on early photography had been removed from the exhibition. However, since it was present during our initial inquiries, we have still included its brief description in our paper.

industrial fabric, applying composition gold, transforming "the everyday material into something precious and sacred".

This description offers insights into the narrative underlying the categorizations and classifications of objects in the galleries showcasing *Religious Arts of South Asia*, which encompasses Buddhism and Jainism, as well as Hinduism and Courtly Art. The objects displayed can be traced through the history of museum collecting, from Prussian cabinets of curiosity to the ethnological museum, the establishment of the Museum of Indian Art, and later developments. The interpretations presented here reflect patterns rooted in both colonial history and contemporary decolonizing discourses. These themes also appear in exhibition materials, such as the exhibition catalogues, audio guides, and guided tours.

Analysing the Narratives with a Post-Ethnological Lens

The current presentation of Indian collections faces several challenges, including narratives that signify a particular choice and ordering of objects, aligning them within rigid temporal and typological classifications and categorizations. While these narratives have been shaped by institutional history and collecting practices, they continue to reflect notions of Western hegemony, influenced by the academic development of Indology and broader 19th-century social discourse in Germany. Although attempts to reorient current curatorial practices within a decolonial discourse are a welcome move, they fail to subvert the Western gaze, as can be seen through various examples. Moreover, a recourse to using indigenous knowledge by combining emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives, but without critical examination, further complicates the interpretation.

When deconstructing the narratives surrounding Indian collections at the Museum of Asian Art, it is crucial to consider 19th-century German perceptions of India, where Indology was driven by cultural and political motives. The exhibition's emphasis on Buddhism is rooted in this period's intellectual and societal interests, spurred by a quest for scientific inquiry, philosophical exploration, and a fascination with Asian culture – an influence that continues to shape the exhibition today. A stunning visual display showcases the history of Buddhism and its revival as a living faith on a massive screen at the exhibit's entrance, facing the partial cast of the Sanchi gateway, powerfully underscores the emphasis on showcasing Buddhist practices and philosophies. Meanwhile, a multitude of Hindu gods and goddesses are portrayed with descriptions that

use reductive and inarticulate vocabularies like "seductress" and "bloodthirsty", diminishing their profound significance, often portraying them as barbaric.

Within this colonial context, Buddhism was often aligned closely with Christianity, which was usually deemed superior. The influence of European traditions on Buddhist art became an important reference point in the narrative of Buddhism. In this milieu, the weightage given to the Gandhara art in the exhibition, as opposed to the Mathura School, is particularly striking yet hardly surprising. While the Mathura School was designated as an indigenous Indian development, the Gandhara School of Art has been connected to Greco-Roman traditions. The emphasis on the flourishing of Gandhara art resulting from "the repeated influxes of Western culture to India" perpetuates the narrative of Western hegemony. The continued curiosity about the teachings of Buddhism in Germany, be it the Zen meditation popularized in the 1960s (Baumann 1997, 37) or the recent general upward trend towards accepting Buddhism as a way of living a happy, compassionate life (Walker 2007), is reflected in the exhibition. It can also be discerned in the choice of creating a new replica of the Sanchi Gateway,[26] which is now positioned in front of the Humboldt Forum, juxtaposed against the Baroque façade, symbolizing "the diversity of the world in the centre of Berlin".[27]

In contrast to Buddhism, it is apparent that the case of Hindu sculptures presents a different narrative, one deeply entwined with colonial imaginations. During the colonial period, interpreting Hinduism proved challenging as Hindu art did not conform to classical European tastes. McGetchin has argued that German Indology functioned within a broader Saidian framework, where the study of the Other was intertwined with a desire for control (McGetchin 2009, 22). For the Western viewer, representations of Indian gods not only originated from a specifically Other community, but they also did not conform to Occidental ideals of order and rationality and could not be accommodated in

[26] What is intriguing is the creation of multiple casts of the Sanchi Gateway for the Berlin museums from the 19th century. The site of Sanchi, located in Central India and dating back to 3rd–1st BCE is one of the important sites of Buddhism. The Sanchi gateway has been linked to the museum since the 1880s, when the Ethnological Museum acquired its first replica. British colonial explorers discovering Sanchi in the 19th century sparked widespread interest, leading many European museums to obtain replicas based on Henry Cole's cast. In Berlin, this interest continued, with new replicas created in the 1960s, followed by the most recent one in 2022, placed outside the Humboldt Forum. The Sanchi casts and the representational politics surrounding their continued reproduction in the Berlin museums will be addressed in another paper (Singh and Bhatawadekar, forthcoming).

[27] Das Tor von Sanchi. *The Gate of Sanchi*. Brochure of the Humboldt Forum.

the Christian order of the universe (Ganguly 1988, 46). Mitter identified perspectives that viewed Hindu philosophy and its expression in Hindu idols as abstract and lacking naturalistic representation (Mitter 1977). For instance, the anthropomorphic conception of god, naturalized in the perceptual frameworks of Western viewers, made it difficult for Europeans to deal with the "irrationality" of gods with many arms and heads. The narratives denoting "more than two arms", "multiple heads", and "superhuman abilities" of the Hindu deities, especially the "bloodthirsty Chamunda" as seen in the exhibition, also stem from this colonial discourse revolving around the polytheistic traditions of Indian gods.

According to Indian philosopher Deepak Sarma, the depiction of goddess Kali – characterized by blood sacrifices and her fierce iconographic presentation as "exotic" – has historically been exploited to justify colonization and imperialism (Sarma 2015). He contends that Kali's representation is never innocent, but intended to provoke and challenge. This image of Kali, with its emic and etic archetype, continues to be used in the postcolonial imagination as well. Thus, it is crucial to stress that although labelling the "native" culture as savage does not cause it to disintegrate, the broader impact of "wars of position" fought within dominant/European discourses is the continued fetishization of the primitive (Ganguly 1988, 50). This underscores the ways in which the historical positioning of the investigating subject is embedded within the colonial matrix of power and processes of knowledge production (Ganguly 1988, 46). Such stereotypes and the Western gaze are reinforced in the narratives currently presented in the exhibition in the Humboldt Forum. For instance, the harsh depictions of Hindu gods are often juxtaposed with more benign portrayal of the compassionate Buddhist Avalokiteshvara, while the Tantric aspects of Buddhism are a recondite subject matter. This selective presentation perpetuates a stereotypical framing of Hinduism, reinforcing the colonial gaze. The violence exerted through knowledge, as discussed by Spivak (1988), is evident in the portrayal of these figures. Picture prints of Indian gods and photographs taken by British photographers also allude to this violence, as they often uphold a Western gaze.

The *Courtly Art* exhibition continues to reflect a colonial epistemology. The museum's presentation nurtures an evolutionist perspective, which positions monotheistic religions like Islam as the peak of cultural development. Although the term "Islamic art" references the Islamic religion, religion was not viewed as the main influence on art; rather, cultural and civilizational factors were

predominant, in line with diffusionist theories of an Islamic cultural area. It thus represented a purely formal definition of art, giving it a universal value (Shatanawi 2022, 255). For instance, in the case of Bidri ware, it is designated purely on stylistic criteria in the exhibition, as an Islamic work, regardless of its innovative origins, function, and cultural or spiritual significance. It is also evident in the descriptions of how the Mughals rulers "with their refined lifestyles" and "their longing for civilized nature" created gardens and served as patrons for art. Orientalist imaginaries are conveyed through narratives featuring opulent garden spaces, elegant courtly art, and architecture adorned with evocative plant motifs. The sensual fantasies surrounding the harem, along with the forbidden interactions between non-familial men and veiled women, introduce an element of mystery and intrigue. These themes serve to reinforce Western depictions of the "exotic Other". Such a restricted position, by default, leads to the exclusion of a broader view on Islamic material culture, overlooking its nuanced geo-historical interactions.

This narrative production can be attributed to the larger problem of writing and framing Indian historiography. Testimony to this is the practice initiated by the archaeologist General A. Cunningham (1854), who categorized Indian art into Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Muhammadan periods. Similarly, Scottish historian James Mill wrote *The History of British India*, where the history of Hindus and Muslims was considered to be divided from each other and conflicting (Mill 1817). A case in point is the portrayal of Islamic rulers as an external influence on India, coming from outside India to rule and contribute to Indian art. This shows how German Indologists reinforced colonial stereotypes, much like their British counterparts, particularly in their classification and interpretation of religions. The narratives in the exhibition ignore the multilayered histories and still adhere to this problematic compartmentalization and views supporting structural injustice and patterns of discrimination.

The issue is further compounded by the trajectory of Indian art history, which remains rooted in a colonial context, as Ganguly has already highlighted. The abovementioned categorization was uncritically adopted by many "nationalist" historians in their efforts to promote an ideology of unity in artistic production. Thus, even "nationalist" or "oppositional" histories produced by Indians have had to operate on colonialist turf. By failing to adequately address the heteroglossic nature of artistic traditions in India, this periodizing strategy undermined the nationalist agenda because it fostered simplistic ideas of the "unity" and "true" character of Indian art (Ganguly 1988, 49).

Extending the discussion on the presentation of India, it is crucial to recognize that stereotypes shaped by colonial imagination are not always etic perceptions. Many stereotypes and anxieties from the source regions resonate with, and reinforce, their counterparts in the Western context. Indian art history, deeply rooted in colonialism, has been critiqued, prompting a need for a perspective that embraces pluriversal thought and challenges the dominant narratives. Both dominant and incorporated histories of Indian art, displaying a particular aesthetic sensibility and exemplifying museum practices that, as Ganguly notes, are "ideologically consonant" with colonial discourses (Ganguly 1988, 48). Collaborations with source communities and experts should also be critically examined to avoid perpetuating these stereotypes.

Another important aspect that needs to be unpacked is the reorientation of the exhibition as "religious art", which has guided its narrative. The inclination towards art can be traced historically. In the 19th century, Adolf Bastian considered Indian collections to be separate from other ethnological objects "to be treated through the discipline of 'history', rather than 'ethnology'" (Bastian 1872, in Oswald 2022, 165). It is important to note that a significant portion of the objects in the collections at that time were Buddhist artefacts. The subsequent transformations in the institution, with the formation of the Indian Department in 1904 and the founding of the Museum of Indian Art in 1963, reinforced a shift towards "art", and continues even today. In line with art, the iconographic characteristics are highlighted, engendering aesthetic appreciation. However, the historical-colonial context and the ethnological-archaeological character and complex provenances of the objects remain overshadowed. As the post-ethnological critiques assert, framing the collections as "art" can render the objects "innocent", not directly associated with the discourses of Othering and discrimination. A post-ethnological perspective challenges this approach as problematic, when viewed in the context of decolonization, as it obscures the colonial issues associated with these objects and their collections.

The term "religious art" warrants a closer examination, especially considering its roots in the colonial taxonomies and hierarchical classifications. Displaying sacred objects in the museum context comes with its own challenges, often creating binaries of the secular and sacred, as discussed by Bruce Sullivan (2015). In the case of the Museum of Asian Art, the approach adopted aims to connect the objects to the living faith, echoing the demands of decolonization to refer to and connect to the indigenous knowledge systems. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta states, "In a freshly anthropologizing turn, much of Indian art, like

all of African or Oceanic art or Himalayan Buddhist imagery, is being powerfully re-inscribed within museums as religious icons, with elaborate attempts made by curators to recreate around these objects the performative practices of worship of priests and local communities" (Guha-Thakurta 2007, 157). The unresolved tensions between sacred and aesthetic tropes that surround the contemporary lives of India's art objects, both within and outside the precincts of museums, combined with "the multiple demands of art, authenticity, and popular devotion", lead to ambiguity and fluidity (Guha-Thakurta 2007). In the museum, the classification of objects from Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions as "religious art" contrasts with the labelling of Islamic artefacts as "courtly" or "civilizational". This distinction underscores the challenges of representing Islam in European museums today.

While the Museum of Asian Art has made efforts to shift these Eurocentric narratives through the adoption of decolonial approaches, such as focusing on diversity, shared practices, and collaborations with diaspora and source communities, these strategies fall short of addressing the complexity of India's history, religion, spirituality, and society. The use of notions like diversity remains superficial, failing to fully engage with the nuanced realities of the region. Even the acknowledgement of the long-standing knowledge exchange between countries (e.g., Ravi Varma and his use of German printing technology) does little to challenge the existing power hierarchies within the exhibition's narrative. Despite attempts to bring out the transcultural aspects, such as in the case of an ivory object depicting the "Good Shepherd" or a porcelain plate depicting the German princesses in Indian-styled garments, these remain isolated cases, and are not well integrated into the broader narrative. Additionally, multilayered trajectories of the objects, contested provenances, and stereotyping is not paid heed to in this process. The museum's narratives do not adequately reflect the country's historical course, colonial context, or the shifting geographical borders of India. The resulting narrative is overly simplified, ad hoc, ambivalent, and superficial, failing to capture the complex layers of religion, faith, and societal practices. Other interpretation material, such as the catalogues,[28] audio guides, and even the guided tour through the museum, also largely reinforce this "innocent" narrative.

[28] See for instance, Ausstellungsführer, Humboldt Forum: Ethnologisches Museum; Museum für Asiatische Kunst, 2021.

With reference to the provenance of objects, in both the galleries, the source of acquisition for objects has been mentioned in most cases. However, a detailed provenance research, highlighting the problematic contexts if any, in which the objects were collected, has not been elaborated. Only a single object has been subject to such a detailed inquiry (also see the panel in the exhibition).[29] It highlights the "harmonious situation" resulting in the gift of a Buddhist statue from the King of Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan, to the Berlin collections in 1928. It mentions the role of the French in excavations in Afghanistan at the time, and a 50-50 division of excavated collections between Afghanistan and France. What is foregrounded here is the "peaceful acquisition of objects by museums..." The text in both galleries is bilingual (German and English). In order to connect the objects to the contemporary contexts, photographs have been used, many purchased online via stock image agencies (e.g., Alamy), but no direct collaborations with the source communities are evident in terms of the interpretation material presented. The potential of stories like that of Rajendra Lal Mitra and his role in acquiring the objects for the museum remains untapped.

The *Religious Arts of South Asia* exhibition overall seeks to create a harmonious effect in the viewer's visual experience, as evident from changes made in the placement, staging, and lighting of the objects. For instance, a wall painted in gold stands out as a subtle overture to subvert the construct of a neutral container amidst a white space, designed to accentuate the richness of Buddhism. However, rather than circumventing the "white cube" (O'Doherty 1976), a place free of context, and where time and social space are thought to be excluded, it crystallizes Western cultural hegemony by erasing the colonial past of the objects (Wang 2021). As Shuchen Wang further states, through such a muséographie, the deities of the Other are "elevated" from ethnographic specimen into art in the West while "diminished" from sacred icons into art or historical artefacts in Asia (Wang 2021). Instead of restoring indigenous beliefs or identities, such displays often perpetuate new power struggles.

When comparing the Museum of Asian Art with the exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum on the second floor of the Humboldt Forum, stark contrasts in their presentations become evident. As Rafael Cardoso pointed out, "Whereas its downstairs neighbor is all jumble and darkness — with sleek

[29] em-power relations, a booklet on postcolonial provenance research in the permanent exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst at the Humboldt Forum, 2022.

showcases painted in matte black — the Museum of Asian Art is airiness and light. Its panels are colored in cream, gold, white. Its vitrines contain one or a few objects, not dozens. There is room for contemplation, rather than confrontation and prescription. Visitors are made to feel that they are in a cultivated setting, in which the purpose is to view extraordinary objects and appreciate them" (Cardoso 2021). This calls to attention the challenges of perceiving the Indian collections within the decolonial discourse. The exhibition's focus on "art" and its indirect colonial context prioritizes aesthetic appreciation of objects rather than bringing out their multivalence. This approach fails to challenge the hegemonic domains like ethno-orientalism and epistemic violence, as our analysis reveals. Recognizing this shifting perspective, Kavita Singh asserts, "All museums are inherently ethnographic". This awareness and conscious shift foster a deeper understanding of their histories and relationships, acknowledging their transformations and situating them within a transcultural, polyvalent setting.

Conclusion: Towards a Decolonized Future

The collections from Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and Asia present distinct challenges within the postcolonial discourse, reflecting the complexities of representation and ownership. As museums gain increasing prominence in the global cultural landscapes, they are increasingly expected to cater to a diverse global audience. In the era of immigration and multiculturalism, they have evolved into dynamic spaces and have sought to empower communities with the right to represent themselves and express their agency. By acknowledging these evolving roles and the unique challenges posed by their collections, museums can better align their practices with the expectations of a diverse global audience.

Embracing this responsibility and recognizing the diasporic nature of cultural objects, museums could challenge colonial ideologies, foster more inclusive practices, and develop dynamic and reflective curatorial approaches that honour global cultural heritage. Our study insists on the importance of rethinking how cultural institutions like the Humboldt Forum present and interpret non-Western collections within an indirect colonial context.

Integrating the concept of "object diaspora", which views cultural objects as moving across different cultural histories, could help museums move beyond the traditional debates of cultural patrimony. This perspective accentuates the

potential for transcultural dialogue and engagement with contemporary communities, rather than focusing solely on repatriation. Through the "remittance corridors", these objects could create and open up opportunities for mediating experiences of entanglement in a global mediascape, rather than relegating them to superficial roles within Western-centric narratives (Basu 2011).

As custodians of cultural heritage, museums play a pivotal role in shaping how cultural assets are perceived, valued, and preserved. While it grants museums the authority and ability to control narratives, it also presents a significant opportunity for museums to shift their agency. In an effort to foster transparency and openness, the museum could take significant strides by making the histories of its collection more accessible to the public. By acknowledging the agency of the Other and engaging them, for instance, through feedback sessions or public forums where people can ask questions and share their thoughts about the collection and its history, museums can further enhance transparency in the ongoing process of decolonization and post-ethnology within cultural institutions.

While our research provides a critical lens on the colonial legacies within the Humboldt Forum's Indian collections, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Our focus has been on the narratives constructed by the museum and their broader sociopolitical implications, but we have not explored the perceptions and experiences of visitors. Understanding how these narratives are received and interpreted by the public is crucial for a comprehensive analysis. This points to the need for further research that investigates visitor experiences, which could offer valuable insights into how museums can better engage with diverse audiences and contribute to more inclusive cultural networks.

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THE DEADLOCK OF THE DECOLONIZATION OF MUSEUMS: WHEN THE COLONIZER BECOMES THE DECOLONIZER

Cihan Küçük

Abstract: ***Museums have traditionally served as custodians of cultural heritage, yet their history is inextricably linked with colonialism, often involving the acquisition of artefacts through coercion, exploitation, and violence. This article explores the complex and controversial legacy of national museums, particularly those with colonial histories, as they confront increasing demands for decolonization. By examining the historical context, including pivotal events such as the Berlin Conference and the Scramble for Africa, this article highlights the systemic looting and cultural destruction that have shaped these institutions. The analysis focuses on the ongoing global movement towards restitution and the challenges museums face in addressing their colonial pasts, exemplified by the British Museum and the Humboldt Forum. The latter, inaugurated in 2021, symbolizes the persistent influence of colonialism and the difficulties in achieving genuine decolonization. Despite efforts towards restitution and inclusivity, museums continue to grapple with deeply rooted colonial legacies, raising questions about their ability and willingness to undergo fundamental transformation. This article underscores the need for a comprehensive reassessment of museum practices and narratives, advocating for a more equitable approach to cultural preservation and representation.***

Keywords: ***The Humboldt Forum, British Museum, decolonization, colonialism***

Museums have long been the custodians of cultural heritage, preserving and displaying artefacts from diverse civilizations. However, the history of these historic institutions is deeply intertwined with colonialism, where artefacts were

often acquired through coercion, exploitation, occupation, and violence. There is an increasing awareness of historical injustices and a corresponding movement toward social justice, equity, and human rights. This shift includes a focus on decolonization, emphasizing the need to address and rectify the lingering impacts of colonialism within various institutions, including national museums. The reason why museums are in a controversial position today is the legacy and the burden of their history. Dan Hicks describes such national museums with colonial histories as "brutish museums" (Hicks 2020: 4). National museums, which house artefacts acquired through colonial violence, can no longer evade accountability for this history. Regardless of the methods by which these artefacts were obtained, the time has come to return them to their rightful lands rather than keeping them in museums, mostly in storage units for decades. Museums often argue that the artefacts entered their collections through legal means, but this perspective, which absolves them of responsibility for the circumstances under which the objects were acquired, is no longer tenable.

Colonialism is collective plunder planned and carried out by empires. The Berlin Conference, convened under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck on 15 November 1884, stands as a pivotal example of this collective exploitation and destruction. The General Act of Berlin, signed on 26 February 1885, may be regarded as the institutionalization of the Scramble for Africa, which had already gained significant momentum by the time of its enactment. Signed by Her Majesty the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Empress of India; His Majesty the German Emperor, King of Prussia; His Majesty the Emperor of Austria, King of Bohemia, etc, and Apostolic King of Hungary; His Majesty the King of the Belgians; His Majesty the King of Denmark; His Majesty the King of Spain; the President of the United States of America; the President of the French Republic; His Majesty the King of Italy; His Majesty the King of the Netherlands, Grand Duke of Luxemburg, etc; His Majesty the King of Portugal and the Algarves, etc; His Majesty the Emperor of all the Russians; His Majesty the King of Sweden and Norway, etc; and His Majesty the Emperor of the Ottomans, the conference paved the way for colonial powers to rapidly occupy different parts of the world, mostly Africa. Therefore, the conference is an important milestone in the history of colonialism that led to a period of looting. Dan Hicks calls the period between the Berlin Conference (1884) and the outbreak of World War I (1914) as "World War Zero" (Hicks 2020, 226). He explains how anthropology museums during this era were filled up with looted objects from Africa:

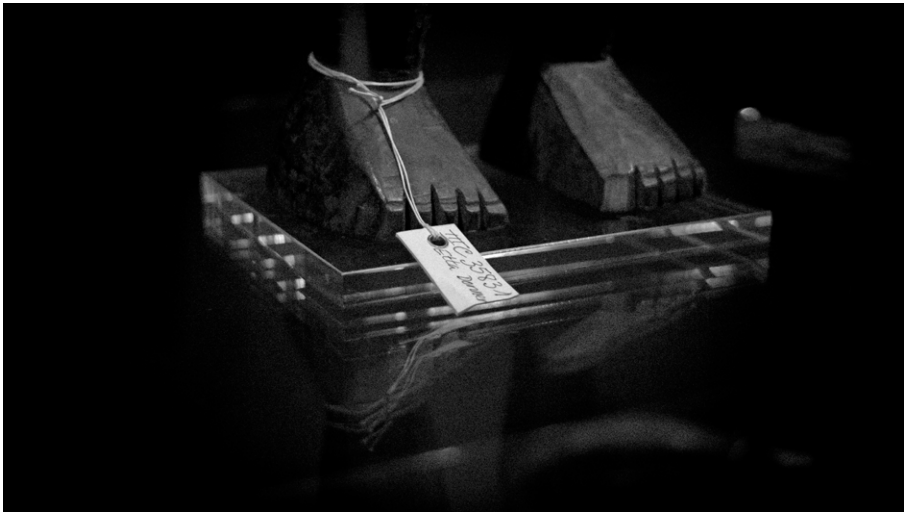

FIG. 1. A shackled object inside a showcase, the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum, 10 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

> Looting became something new during the three decades between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, through the actions of anthropology museums. This is the brutish museum: a prolongation of violence in the name of sovereignty. These colonial museums became the infrastructure for a new kind of white supremacy. (Hicks 2020, 233)

The cultural destruction resulting from this plunder is of unfathomable proportions. According to the report *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, commissioned in 2018 by French President Emmanuel Macron and authored by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, approximately more than 90% of Sub-Saharan Africa's cultural heritage is held outside of the continent (Sarr, Savoy 2018: 3). In total, 161 institutions across 23 countries hold Benin Bronzes, which have become the symbol of the restitution struggle, in their collections (Hicks, 2020: 248–252). Many of these artefacts from Benin, now housed in national museums, were explicitly labelled as "loot", as with the British Museum (Lunden 2016: 184). Ironically, some objects are shackled inside the fancy exhibition showcases and guarded by security like captives themselves.

Global movements have highlighted systemic racism and colonial legacies, prompting institutions and museums to reflect on their own roles in perpetuating these issues. Indigenous and local communities are increasingly advocating for the return of their cultural heritage and for greater representation and respect in how their cultures are portrayed. Academic research and cultural discourse have shifted towards a more critical examination of colonial histories and their ongoing impacts, influencing public opinion and institutional policies. The museum is not merely the institutional space where decolonization efforts are performed and enacted; it is also intertwined with the colonial power dynamics that are now being critically examined, and which curators, museologists, scholars, and more importantly, the public are striving to dismantle. As a result, decolonization has become an issue that museums can no longer avoid addressing, and it has increasingly become a priority on institutional agendas.

Nearly all nations with a colonial history are implicated in this dark legacy. To grasp the historical depth and ongoing relevance of this issue, one need only examine two museums established nearly 250 years apart. The British Museum, founded in 1753, holds vast collections acquired during the era of the British Empire, including numerous items obtained through colonial exploitation and military conquests. The Humboldt Forum, which opened in 2021, within the reconstructed Berlin Palace, similarly houses artefacts acquired during Germany's colonial period, including significant collections from Africa and Asia. Despite their different histories and contexts, both institutions face increasing scrutiny over the origins of their collections and are emblematic of the broader global movement demanding the restitution of cultural heritage looted during colonial rule. These two institutions, founded roughly 250 years apart, demonstrate that the legacy of colonialism persists today, still exerting a powerful influence. They share the same pathology: the imperial pride of holding plundered artefacts.

Museums can be seen as a "gift" of colonialism to humanity. If we liken these institutions to a tree, the exhibited works are the leaves, the institution is the trunk, and the colonial past forms the roots. Every step that museums take toward decolonization is invaluable in a situation where the problem is so deeply rooted, strong, and current. Undoubtedly, implementing the decolonization of the museum will primarily fall to the institutions or, more broadly, to government administrations themselves. However, this fundamental shift is too significant to be entrusted solely to the initiative of bureaucratic institutions, which are inherently resistant to change. In his seminal study, *The Birth of*

the Museum, Tony Bennett argues that since its emergence in the 19th century, public museums have served to produce a form of governmentality that seeks to "incorporate the people within the processes of the state" (Bennett 1995: 98). On the other hand, the museums have increasingly become entangled in what he calls "the governmentalization of culture" (Bennett 1995: 24). Historically, museums were intended to facilitate public participation. However, over the course of approximately two centuries, these institutions have evolved into sites where culture, often displaced from its original context, has been appropriated and transformed into a display of power and grandeur.

The decolonization of museums represents a profound and transformative shift in the role and function of these institutions. This process involves not only the reassessment and recontextualization of collections, often acquired through colonial exploitation, but also a fundamental rethinking of how museums engage with diverse communities and histories. By challenging traditional narratives and power structures, the decolonization of museums signals a radical departure from established norms, fostering a more inclusive and equitable approach to cultural preservation and interpretation. In the absence of external pressures like public demand, how prepared and willing would museums be to undertake this profound transformation toward decolonization? To address this question, we must first examine the "decolonizer". The identity of the decolonizer is formed by activists, scholars, academics, museum professionals, artists, and most importantly, victims of colonization. The first "decolonizers" were, unsurprisingly, the indigenous populations who actively resisted and opposed colonial powers. However, the accountability of the decolonizer was assigned to museum administrations, public institutions, and on a broader scale, the ministries of culture and arts. The current efforts led by the bureaucracy to address these colonial legacies, though well-intentioned, are frequently dictated by Western institutions, perpetuating a cycle of dominance and control. Undoubtedly, the decolonization of museums is not a transformation that can be achieved rapidly. Expecting institutions shaped over two centuries to undergo such a radical change in such a short period is unrealistic. At present, many national museums, including the British Museum, which is the symbol of the colonial past, are actively working to confront and address their colonial pasts, whether through voluntary initiatives or in response to public pressure. However, the Humboldt Forum, which opened in Berlin in 2021, exemplifies the numerous obstacles that museums encounter in the process of decolonization.

The Humboldt Forum, inaugurated in 2021, serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of colonialism. Established 137 years after the Berlin Conference – a pivotal event that ushered in an era of destruction and exploitation in Africa whose effects are still felt today – this museum presents itself as "a palace in Berlin for the whole world". Located at the very heart of Berlin's historical centre, Museum Island, the institution is formed by four partners: the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) with the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (Asian Art Museum – the State Museums in Berlin), the Stadtmuseum Berlin (Berlin City Museum) together with Kulturprojekte Berlin (Culture Projects Berlin), the Humboldt-Universität (Humboldt University), and the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss (Humboldt Forum Foundation in the Berlin Palace).

> The Humboldt Forum is taking shape in the historical heart of Berlin as a unique place of inquiry and encounters. A place with a significant past. A place for the arts and sciences, for exchange, diversity, and a multiplicity of voices. A place where differences come together. The outstanding collections that have been assembled under one roof and the varied programme of exhibitions, events, and educational and digital offerings inspire visitors to gain new insights into the world of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.[1]

The first discussions about the Humboldt Forum, which describes itself as "more than a museum" and "a palace for the whole world", began with the architecture itself and the cross crowning the building. This building, which was rebuilt as a replica of the Berlin Palace, representing Germany's imperial period, has also become architectural propaganda. The Humboldt Forum's reconstruction in the form of the Berlin Palace is more than the rebuilding of a cultural heritage; it is a reincarnation. With a cost of 670 million euros, the building became one of Europe's most expensive and ambitious cultural centres. As the capital of three different Germanies (the Kingdom of Prussia, Nazi Germany, and modern, reunified Germany), the architectural development plans of Berlin have always been in the hands of different political systems. Throughout this range of political systems, the site of the Humboldt Forum has evolved into a place with many historical layers on top of each other. However, the decision as to which

[1] "About", Humboldt Forum, Accessed 18 September 2024. www.humboldtforum.org/en/about/

cultural representation would reincarnate in which form in this historically layered area became a decision of which culture and political system (East–West, socialist–capitalist) would dominate the other in the new (or on the contrary, old) capital city of a united Germany. In 1997, during the Schlossdebate for the deconstruction of the Palast der Republik, which was erected on the ruins of the Berlin Palace after World War II and served as the parliament building of East Germany, the CDU Senator for Building in Berlin stated:

> Overall, regarding the design of Berlin Mitte, it can be said: if we want to give it an identity, in the new reunited capital city, we must base this identity on the roots of our shared history. Not only German history but also European history [...] However, it must also be in the common awareness that there was a unified Germany in a shared Europe and a common development line before the division of our country. (Russell 2017, 59)

Curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung describes the social level of West Germany domination over East Germany after the reunification as follows: "Not only did the people of the former GDR lose, expeditiously, their social, economic and political structures and ways of life, they also lost their bearings, as their street names were changed, monuments were contested, political figures chastised, identity questioned and shamed, and history challenged, to erase the communist past" (Ndikung 2018, 39-40). This war of social domination between the West and the East is one of the recent manifestations of colonial domination. These domination discussions became even more heated in May 2020. The already-problematic reconstruction of the Berlin Palace as the Humboldt Forum was crowned with a monumental, five-meter-high cross. Crowning a cultural institution resurrected as the form of imperial palace, raises questions regarding the sincerity of its commitment to confronting this legacy. After serving two years on the advisory board of the Humboldt Forum, the art historian Bénédicte Savoy resigned in disagreement with the museum's way of dealing with its colonial history. Savoy compares the Humboldt Forum to Chernobyl, due to its toxic heritage.[2] This is perhaps the most accurate analogy made for the Humboldt Forum, not just because it describes the toxicity of the building itself by comparing it to Chernobyl, but also because it defines the

[2] "Kritik an Humboldt-Forum-Konzept" TAZ, July 21, 2017. https://taz.de/Kritik-an-Humboldt-Forum-Konzept/!5434344/

people who have been fighting against its colonial past. In this sense, all of the researchers, activists, cultural workers, and artists who strive to decolonize the Humboldt Forum can be compared to Chernobyl liquidators, who were urgently called to remove the radioactive debris from the disaster site after the meltdown. They bravely carried out their duties. Their endeavours, particularly in cleaning the roof of the nuclear power plant, are still regarded with reverence to this day. Museums with colonial collections are in a state of radioactive poisoning. Just like in Chernobyl, many volunteers are working to clean up the symbolic debris from the roofs of both buildings to repair this toxic legacy. According to the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum – which organizes protests against the institution alongside other activist groups such as BARAZANI.berlin, No Humboldt 21, Berlin Postkolonial, Decolonize Berlin, and AfricAvenir – the Humboldt Forum is "dead on arrival".[3] In one sense, the Humboldt Forum is more of a "museal" than a museum – something with which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which is in the process of dying, as described by Adorno (1967: 175).

The numerous restitution projects undertaken with good intentions within the Humboldt Forum and its associated institutions demonstrate that these entities are not indifferent to decolonization efforts. For instance, the Ethnological Museum, which operates under the Humboldt Forum, has been a member of the Benin Dialogue Group since 2010. The museum, which houses a collection of approximately 500 "Benin Bronzes", reached an agreement with the Nigerian government in August 2022 to return these artefacts. As part of this agreement, about one-third of the works will be loaned to the Humboldt Forum for a period of 10 years.[4] Given that the Benin Bronzes have become a global symbol of decolonization and restitution, this action reflects a broader trend, with many national museums, including the British Museum, initiating similar agreements to return these works to their countries of origin. However, in this long-standing struggle, not all societies have seen the same level of success as Benin. Decolonization is not just about the restitution of the stolen objects but also the recognition of the Other. Many museums with colonial legacies justify retaining and exhibiting artefacts collected from former colonies by claiming

[3] "Dead on Arrival" Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, Accessed 18 September 2024. https://ccwah.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Dead-on-Arrival-CCWAHF-statement_EN.pdf

[4] "Temporary Redesign of the Benin Rooms: Benin Bronzes", Humboldt Forum, Accessed 19 September 2024. www.humboldtforum.org/en/temporaere-neukonzeption-der-benin-sammlung/

FIG. 2. The showcase of a bust collection from Afghanistan, The Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum, 10 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

that these objects should be accessible to global audiences. They argue that the artefacts are available to all, whether for tourism or research purposes. The museum's purpose is to preserve these artefacts for future generations. However, we can gain insight into how accessible these artefacts are to the society they belong to through a straightforward example. For instance, the visa process that an Afghan individual must undergo to travel to Berlin to study the bust collection from the Kandahar region, now exhibited at the Humboldt Forum – an institution that describes itself as "the palace of the whole world in Berlin" – is a telling example of how the Other remains insufficiently recognized. Following NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan in April 2021, in which Germany participated, Germany closed its embassy in Kabul and shifted its visa application processing for Afghan citizens to locations in Islamabad, Teheran, Dubai, and Istanbul.[5] To what extent, then, is it feasible for an Afghan individual to engage with artefacts of their own culture at the Humboldt Forum, as asserted by the institution?

While this may be accurate for the average visitor, a recent case highlights the critical need for embracing the concept of decolonization, extending beyond

5 "Visa and Entry", German Embassy Kabul, Accessed 23 September 2024. https://afghanistan.diplo.de/af-en/05-VisaEinreise

museums to include individuals and governmental bodies. In 2022, a team of provenance researchers from Cameroon was invited to take part in a conference and workshop at Munich's Museum Fünf Kontinente (Museum of Five Continents) to investigate the provenance of 200 Cameroonian artefacts that were acquired for the Bavarian royal collections in the 1890s by Max von Stetten. However, the authorities denied three researchers' visa applications, citing "justified doubts about [their] intention to leave before [their] visa expires".[6] The lack of recognition or disregard for the Other extends beyond visa-related challenges. Although various decolonization initiatives focusing on restitution and provenance research have been carried out within the Humboldt Forum, these efforts often come to a standstill. In September 2021, the Ethnological Museum opened the first part of its new exhibition in the Humboldt Forum. A specific gallery room dedicated to "Colonial Cameroon" consists of artefacts that had been "acquired" (*erworben*), by "collectors" (*Sammler*), in "punitive expeditions" (*Strafexpeditionen*) (Legall 2024: 4). One artefact that was exhibited, Ngonnso, a female figure from the historical Nso Kingdom in northwestern Cameroon, entered the collection of the Ethnological Museum in 1903, having been acquired by the colonial officer Kurt von Pavel. On the opening day of the Ethnological Museum, at a demonstration held by members of the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, Barazani Berlin, and Bring Back Ngonnso, activist Shiynyuy Semaiy Gad explained the importance of Ngonnso to the Nso dynasty:

> When the lieutenant, von Pavel, brought this object to Germany, Germans welcomed it and kept it in the Ethnological Museum in the bunker for decades without bringing out an exhibition. And today, the Humboldt Forum is proud to bring the object out in public for exhibition. I therefore stand with my friends to pass a message to the Humboldt Forum: Ngonnso is not a public object for exhibition. Ngonnso is not a museum object. Ngonnso, she is the centre of what is sacred to [the] Nso people and her rightful place is only in the Nso palace in the Nso Kingdom.[7]

[6] Catherine Hickley, "Cameroonian provenance researchers denied visas for Munich conference", *Art Newspaper*, 13 January 2022, www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/01/13/cameroonian-provenance-researchers-denied-visas-for-munich-conference

[7] Cihan Küçük, "The Chronicles of the Humboldt Forum", Filmed in 2020–2021, Posted on 2024, Affect and Colonialism, 25:40. https://affect-and-colonialism.net/video/the-chronicles-of-the-humboldt-forum-protests/

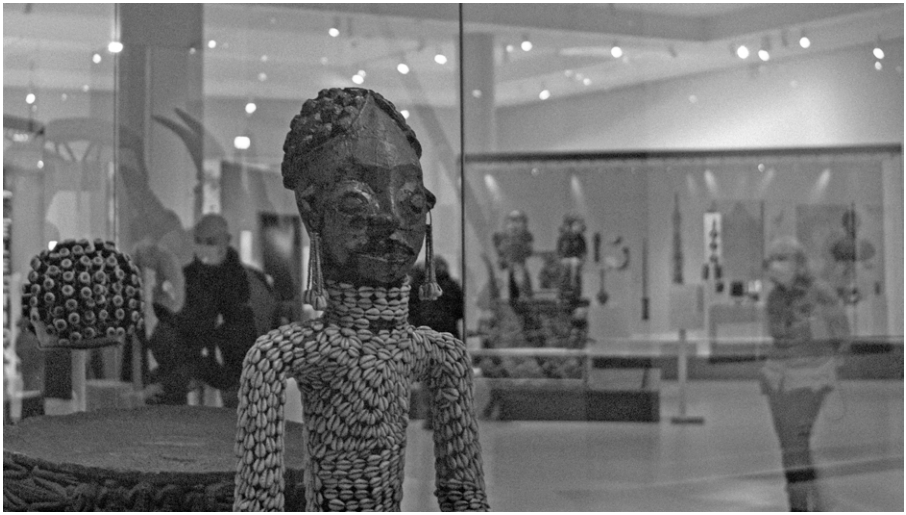

FIG. 3. Ngonnso, inside the showcase, the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum, 10 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

On 27 June 2022, the Humboldt Forum announced the decision to return the Ngonnso to Cameroon.[8] The king of the Cameroonian Nso people, Fon Sehm Mbingio I, had to wait more than 30 years to see the Ngonnso.[9] However, the people of Nso will have to wait even longer to see it, as the artefact still has not been returned to Cameroon. The continued absence of this work, removed from its homeland in 1903, despite a decision to return it nearly two years ago, cannot be justified solely by bureaucratic procedures, documentation, or permissions.

Frantz Fanon describes the process of decolonization as "total liberation that involves every facet of our personality" (Fanon 1961, 233). This complete liberation begins within individuals and should progress to institutions. Although the decolonizing of the museum has regularly been synonymized with the restitution of objects, their decolonization involves their liberation from principles that are deeply rooted in modernity and coloniality (Ariese,

8 "Press Release", Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Accessed 2 August 2024. www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/fileadmin/user_upload_SPK/documents/presse/pressemitteilungen/2022/220627_STR_Ngonnso_ENG.pdf

9 "Royal Visit From Cameroon in Humboldt Forum", Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Accessed 02 August, 2024. www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/news-detail-page/article/2022/11/23/royal-visit-from-cameroon-in-humboldt-forum.html

Wróblewska 2021, 12). When an individual in a decision-making role within the decolonization process fails to genuinely internalize the existence of the Other, these efforts are doomed to either fail or produce results that are ultimately superficial. Approximately 250 years after the establishment of the British Museum, often regarded as the first national museum, the revival of the German Imperial Palace in the heart of Berlin as "more than a museum" only compounds longstanding issues that remain unresolved.

In September 2019, I travelled to Berlin for two reasons. The first reason was to enrol in the Visual and Media Anthropology master's program at HKMW. The secondary purpose of my visit was to attend Cevdet Erek's Bergama Stereo exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof. Taking its cue from the Great Altar of Pergamon, an artist's installation was exhibited in 2019 first at Turbinenhalle as part of Ruhrtriennale in Bochum, and then at the museum Hamburger Bahnhof, as part of the series Works of Music by Visual Artists. A version of this sound installation was also exhibited at Arter (Istanbul) in February 2020. "Bergama Stereotip", produced by me, is a sound-based architectural installation designed by the artist specifically for the gallery space at Arter. Bergama Stereotip was the last exhibition I held at Arter as the exhibition production manager before I moved to Berlin to further my education in visual anthropology. As in the previous version – Bergama Stereo – sound, architecture, and historicity play a central role in Bergama Stereotip. The installation consists of an architectural construction and 13-channel sound. In Erek's interpretation, the auditory components of the work assume a role analogous to the visual elements in the historical altar. He reimagines the Grand Frieze, renowned for its depiction of the clash between giants and gods, as a frieze of loudspeakers projecting a sound composition throughout the gallery space. Cevdet Erek has never seen the Great Altar of Pergamon at the Pergamonmuseum, as it was closed to the public during that time too. This fact has shaped his use of the monument as a conceptual and architectural basis for his work. The process of realizing this installation is explained as follows in the exhibition catalogue:

> This impossibility of accessing the historical monument directly confirms that distance is a major constituent of Bergama Stereo and Bergama Stereotip. Proceeding by means of variation and differentiation, both works connect from afar with the source they share; each one takes a step further away from it, and every spacing they both make creates space for interpretation. In place of the "original" edifice, Erek has given shape to his work by referring to the textual and iconographic

> sources he had within reach: models and plans of the antique edifice, small-scale souvenir objects, and archival photographs that document the altar's odyssey, its political role in the course of history, and its perception here and abroad. (Evren, Ansel 2020, 2–3)

In this sense, as the curator of the exhibition Selen Ansen explained, Erek's installation was built on the ruins of the past, with the ghosts of the present (Evren, Ansen 2020, 54). Bergama Stereotip is an immersive experience that combines sound and space. Each speaker in the installation plays a different sound. As you walk around the structure, you hear the different sounds. You can hear the drums, bells, and heavy breathing like chanting. The sounds of Bergama Stereotip remind us that every act of repetition creates an alteration, along with the potential for change and novelty.

On 03 March 2023, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (State Museums in Berlin) announced that the Pergamonmuseum would be closing for major renovations. As part of the "Museuminsel Master Plan", the North Wing of the museum and the hall with the Pergamon Altar are expected to reopen in spring 2027. However, its south wing will not reopen until 2037. Discovered in the 19th century during archaeological excavations at the ancient city of Pergamon (in modern-day Bergama, Izmir Province, Turkey), the Great Altar of Pergamon, also known as the Zeus Altar, served in ancient times as an outdoor monument for sacrificial rites. Its expansive frieze depicts the legendary battle between the subterranean Giants and the divine Olympian gods. Gradually succumbing to decay, it remained partially buried until German archaeologists unearthed it at the turn of the 20th century. In the 1880s, the remains were transported from the Ottoman Empire to Berlin, the capital of the newly established German Empire. Excavation permits were granted around the same era of the Berlin Conference, on the condition that objects selected according to certain criteria were divided up and taken to Berlin. A dedicated museum, the Pergamonmuseum – built from 1910 to 1930 by order of Emperor Wilhelm II, according to plans by Alfred Messel and Ludwig Hoffmann – was constructed to house the altar, where it was reassembled and exhibited. The museum hosts the Pergamon Altar, the Market Gate of Miletus, the Ishtar Gate, Qasr Mushatta, and many other historical artefacts. The altar's historical relocation fuels an ongoing discourse surrounding the circumstances of its acquisition by the German state. As a researcher and cultural worker focusing on the decolonization of museums, I prioritize introspection on the emotional impact of these works, temporarily setting aside considerations

FIG. 4. Cevdet Erek's "Bergama Stereotip", Arter, February 2020 (Photographed by the author)

of the circumstances and agreements surrounding their acquisition and display in Berlin. The emotions it stirred within me then differ markedly from those experienced today as I wander around Museum Island.

Edgar Mittelholzer (1909–1965) was a Guyanese novelist, and one of the Caribbean's first significant literary figures, who came to England in the 1950s

and gained a reputation with his novels about the violence and the racism that had been at the heart of European empires. His famous novel, *My Bones and My Flute*, tells the story of a group of colonialists who travel up a river into the jungle in Guyana, guided by an old manuscript about a slave revolt. The manuscript's owner invites a painter, Milton Woodsley, to search for the remains of a Dutch slaveowner who died by suicide after his family was killed in the 1763 slave revolt. Anyone who reads this old manuscript starts to hear the distant sound of a flute. They become possessed by something that is reaching out from the jungle and infiltrating their thoughts. It is the anger and the fear of the slave owner who put down the rebellion and it refuses to release its grip on them. As an artist, Milton thinks he has been invited to make some paintings of a rich businessman. Instead, he finds himself surrounded by a ghost of the colonial past. Upon my relocation to Berlin in 2020 to pursue a master's degree in Visual and Media Anthropology, I identified parallels between my circumstances and those of Woodsley, the protagonist of the novel. The traces of violence and racism described by Mittelholzer are exhibited in museums in Berlin, and I listen to the sound of the flute just like the sounds in Cevdet Erek's artwork. This colonial past haunts the museums. To effectively address and dispel this issue, it is imperative to undertake a comprehensive decolonization of museums. However, for this process to be truly successful, it must be embraced on an individual level as well, in line with Frantz Fanon's assertion that decolonization represents.

Cihan Küçük (b.1987) is a an art worker, visual anthropologist, writer, and editor at e-Skop. Responsible for the section called "museum politics", his main research areas focus on art workers' rights, unionization efforts in museums, art-washing and decolonization of the museums. After working on many different museum and exhibition projects in Istanbul, he moved to Berlin 3 years ago to continue his education. I recently accomplished my second Master's degree in Visual and Media Anthropology at HMKW/Berlin, a significant achievement that complements my educational background. Prior to this, I obtained a Bachelor's degree in Information and Document Management, which provided a solid foundation for my professional endeavors. Furthermore, I hold an additional Master's degree in Museum Management, obtained from Istanbul University, further enriching my expertise in the field. The topic of her master's thesis in visual anthropology was on the decolonization of museums based on the Humboldt Forum. Also last year, his article on this subject, "Visitor of a Museum", was published in the University of Chicago/Illinois's journal Fwd: Museums.

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