

Friedrich von Bose

The Humboldt-Forum as contact zone? Ethnological collections, gendered knowledge and the (re-)negotiation of Germany's colonial past.

The collections of the Berlin Ethnological Museum will take up a central part of the much-debated Humboldt Forum, once it is built in Berlin's historical center. The rationale for collecting objects for the Ethnological Museum in the late 19th century has prominently been to help Europeans better understand themselves, as Adolf Bastian and his colleagues hoped to decode a unitary "elementary thought" from the alleged natural peoples' cultural artifacts. The collections, for which the museum today enjoys a worldwide reputation, thus also tell complex stories of (colonial) contact and of imagining the European self in the light of the material artifacts of the "other".

As much as the collections may enable a view on the arts and cultures of those societies they have originally been collected from – and this still seems to be the museum's main interest –, they could thus also be taken as witnesses of a European and, more specifically, German cultural as well as scientific history.

Yet, regarding the museum as contact zone, new museum practice should engage in more than a self-reflexive gesture of turning around the gaze towards histories of collecting and exhibiting. Taking one contemporary ethnographic display from a Berlin exhibition as empirical example, I would like to address the question as to what histories of entanglement the Berlin ethnographic collections may entail. Thinking about the museum space as contact zone in this sense means engaging also in a "decentering" of Europe, shifting the focus towards histories of contact and mutual dependency and acknowledging the variety of agents in a postcolonial present.

Secondly, and closely related, I want to ask about possible politics of display that contribute to disrupting a repertoire of racialized and gendered knowledge, for which the Berlin Ethnological Museum has historically been a prime space of production. What exhibition strategies are thus imaginable that engage in an open process of meaning making, enclosing various social actors and openly dealing with the methods of collecting, classification and interpretation historical and present? Which critically engage in the discourses provoked by Anthropology and Museum Studies, by studies on material as well as visual culture? For this discussion, the planned Humboldt Forum with its aim to combine the exhibition of ethnographic collections with an engagement with major contemporary socio-political topics can serve as a productive location of addressing present and future possibilities of museum spaces as contact zones.