

Collecting, museums, postcolonial debate and colonial objects in Berlin

In the past ten years there has been a wider debate about Germany's colonial past and an acknowledgement that **museums and collections** have to reassess how they deal with the objects in their collections. Whom do the objects belong to? How should they be stored, cared for, publicly displayed (if at all)? Should they be returned?

One focal point of this debate has been the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, where most of Berlin's ethnological and ethnographic museums/ collections are being relocated to. The (virtual) opening of the Humboldt Forum took place in December 2020, and physical openings are planned for autumn 2021. One of the main criticisms lies in the *building* Humboldt Forum itself, as a reconstruction of the "Schloss", the royal palace of the Hohenzollerns. Certain objects, like the Benin bronzes, sparked a particularly controversial discussion regarding the appropriate response to official restitution claims by governments of the states of origin of these objects. On the other side, arguments are being made for the Humboldt Forum as a stage for the discussion of colonial histories and for a "dialogue of cultures", "in the spirit of the enlightenment, cosmopolitanism and tolerance". This is a current, ongoing and often fierce debate. (It is interesting that, at least in wider public opinion, Alexander von Humboldt stands for exploration and science in the spirit of enlightenment, as it is upheld here, and his image seems hardly affected by postcolonial perspectives, whereas with Leichhardt – no doubt because his image is not as historically established – all entanglements in the context of colonial history can be examined with less ideological bias.)

Leichhardt's specimens in Berlin. Regarding Leichhardt, herbarium specimens ("Herbarbelege") as well as wood samples that he collected in Australia can be found in Berlin's Botanical Garden. "In 1842 and 1844 Leichhardt sent about 700 plants to Berlin, including fungi and wood samples, but few specimens survived the bombing of the Berlin herbarium" (Darragh). Other plants from his collection are stored in Paris, while birds that were collected by John Gilbert on his earlier Port Essington expedition and the ones saved from the Leichhardt expedition are to be found in British collections.

Natural history collections. Whereas today the imperative to repatriate human remains is (finally) undisputed, the conservation of plants in botanical collections and animals in natural history museums that come from a colonised country or were collected in a colonial context is seldom questioned. Anja Schwarz (who is conducting research on Australian objects in German collections) points out that natural history objects "constitute the biggest body of artefacts gathered by nineteenth-century collectors", and were often sent to Europe by the same collectors as were controversial specimens like human remains and secret sacred objects. That animal specimens, plants and even geological samples are seen as "seemingly harmless objects" in this context shows a hierarchy and a Western, humancentric view that is in fact questionable.

The ephemeral nature of sound makes these questions even more poignant. Through exhibitions and in debates the collecting institutions themselves, for example the famous Phonogramm Archive (also soon to be housed at Humboldt Forum) more and more pose questions about how to deal with "**sound objects**" obtained in colonial contexts, especially where song and music with ceremonial or sacred content are concerned. (The revisitation of media collections and the "repatriation" of recordings was one topic in relation to the collections of the Australian American Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land.) Again, dealing with animal calls (for example insect sounds, as in the *Cobourg Nets* composition), natural sounds and field recordings only accentuates the subjects of debate. Digitisation and accessibility – the fact that recordings today can be copied and distributed without loss of data – are of relevance, but the contextualisation of knowledge, the continuous task of renegotiating and reevaluating knowledge, is what is called for most.



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Hilden, Irene, Harriet Mellow & Andrei Zavadski. Present Imperfect, Future Intense: The Opening of the Humboldt Forum, 2 February 2021. <http://www.carmah.berlin/reflections/present-imperfect-future-intense/>

Johanson, Mark. Mungo Man: The Story Behind the Bones That Forever Changed Australia's History, International Business Times, 3 April 2014. <https://www.ibtimes.com/mungo-man-story-behind-bones-forever-changed-australias-history-1558234>

Peterson, N. & A. Kenny (Eds.). *German Ethnography in Australia*, Australia: ANU Press 2017.

Schwarz, Anja. Natural History's Colonial Entanglements: Australian Objects in Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde, 2018. <https://criticalhabitations.wordpress.com/2018/06/18/natural-historys-colonial-entanglements-australian-objects-in-berlins-museum-fur-naturkunde/>

Spinnenparadies Australien – Forschung in Hamburg, CeNak, 27 July 2017. <https://www.cenak.uni-hamburg.de/forschung/abteilungen/arachnologie/aktuelles/2017-07-27-news.html>

Worms Australien
Walzensammlung
Ernst Worms (1891-1963), Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1937
Aufnahmeort: Broome (Missionsstation)
Australien (Kontinent)
NW-Australien (Region)
Yauru, Nul-Nul, D'aba-D'aba (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 346

Probenius-Expedition NW Australien
Walzensammlung
Leo Probenius (29.6.1873 - 9.8.1938), Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1938-1939
Aufnahmeort: Kimberley-Division
Australien (Kontinent)
Nordwest-Australien (Region)
Ungariyini (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 94

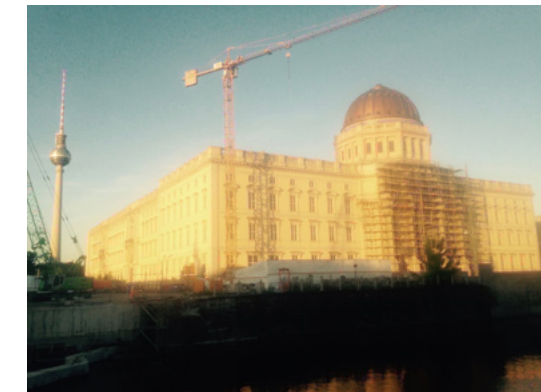
Myers Torres Straits
Walzensammlung
Charles Samuel Myers (1873-1946), Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1898
Aufnahmeort: Murray Island
Australien (Kontinent)
Torres Straits (Region)
Aborigines (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 226

Luschan Australien I
Walzensammlung
Felix von Luschan (11.8.1854 - 7.2.1924),
Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1906
Aufnahmeort: keine Angaben
Australien (Kontinent)
Australien (Region)
Aranda (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 208

Luschan Australien II
Walzensammlung
Felix von Luschan (11.8.1854 - 7.2.1924),
Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1914 (?)
Aufnahmeort: Eingeborenenlager
Corranderr bei Melbourne
Australien (Kontinent)
Australien (Region)
keine Angaben (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 209

Beagle-Bay-Mission
Walzensammlung
Beagle-Bay Mission, Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1910
Aufnahmeort: Broome
Australien (Kontinent)
Nordwest-Australien (Region)
Aborigines (Ethnie)
Ident.Nr. VII WS 51

Laurell Sunday-Islands
Walzensammlung
Yngve Laurell (1882-1975),
Sammler
Aufnahmejahr: 1911
Australien (Kontinent)
Nordwest-Australien (Region)
Aufnahmeort: Am Kings-Sundfluß
Ident.Nr. VII WS 181



"Sammeln, Bewahren, Erforschen,
Vermitteln"
Selbstverständnis des Ethnologischen
Museums (Berlin)
self-conception of the Ethnological Museum

The animals on display are from the
Museum's historic collection that
began in 1854. **Conservation** is the
foremost consideration in the
Museum's research and education.

Knowledge, which is power, knows no obstacles:
neither in the enslavement of men nor in
compliance with the world's rulers. ...Technology
is the essence of this knowledge. It does not
work by concepts and images, by the fortunate
insight, but refers to method, the exploitation of
others' work, and capital.
Adorno/Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

"The Dreaming and The Market
are mutually exclusive."
W.E.H. Stanner, *Continuity and
change among the Aborigines*
(after Stan Grant)

sleeping on the
ground in Trebatsch,
Brandenburg



other world
perspectives

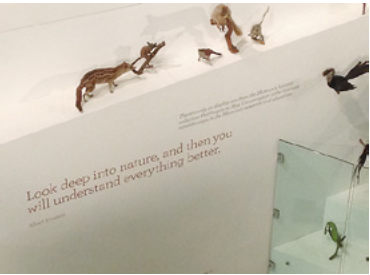


these clapsticks were a present
by Keith Risk, after our long
conversation at Mindell Beach
in Darwin - I would never have
bought clapsticks myself - too
cheesy - percussion
instruments come from all over
the world, from all cultures -
should there be a
decolonialisation of
instruments?



an important "collecting institution"
in Australia: op-shops (second hand
stores and book shops)

MIDI file of the score:
<https://gather.sl.nsw.gov.au/digital-heritage/great-dividing-range-song-women-menero-tribe-near-australian-alps-1834?page=1>



translation
understanding
transformation

Music is an important way of exchanging cultural
knowledge and learning language. While travelling
through the Monaro Region in the 1830s, the European
explorer John Lhotsky wrote in his journal that he had
"notated a song which he heard at a corroboree". The
result was "The Song of the Women of the Menero
Tribe", which was favourably reviewed by colonial
newspapers when it was published in 1834. Later
comparisons have shown that **this musical score bears
little similarity with Aboriginal musical traditions.**
(seen at an exhibition of the State Library of New South
Wales)

Look deep into nature, and then you
will understand everything better.
Albert Einstein

Exhibition "Wilhelm and Alexander
von Humboldt", Deutsches
Historisches Museum, 2019: for the
first time I saw "einfache Sprache" -
plain language - in the section labels
of the exhibition - I was very
impressed - to condense and translate
knowledge and interpretation into
simple language - a challenge, a
condensation like in an art work?

reflection and thought processes:
working with **costume** designer
Katharina Gault - we dismissed this
try-out sketch inspired by Namarggon
as "inappropriate **appropriation**"



"It is a quirk of human nature to
value only what we understand
and appreciate only what we can see."
D. H. Lawrence, *Under the Greenwood Tree*

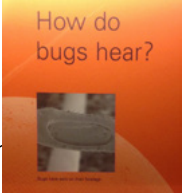
what we can see - what about
what we can hear?



Evolution section (closed for
cleaning)



visited:
Queensland Museum
(Brisbane) 15.8.2019



How do
bugs hear?

visited:
Australian Museum
(Sydney, founded in 1827)
14.8.2019



The specimens indeed are but the
peg on which to hang the story.
The Museum of the Australian People, 1988.
Credit: Victoria University of Wellington

The Hamburg CeNak (Centrum für
Naturkunde) holds the oldest and
most prestigious collection of
Australian spiders worldwide. The
holotypes of many Australian spiders
are in Hamburg. One of the leading
spider taxonomists in Australia,
Barbara Baehr (who herself migrated
from Germany 20 years ago, and
whom I met in Brisbane at the
Queensland Museum) visits Hamburg
when she needs to study the
holotypes of Australia spiders she is
researching. - Shouldn't these spiders
be "repatriated" to their country of
origin?

Many of these spiders were collected by natural
scientist Amalie Dietrich (1821-1891), who came to
Australia in 1863 and collected plants, insects and
other small animals on behalf of the Hamburg
shipowner Cesar Godeffroy. After Godeffroy's
private museum closed, these were integrated into
the collection that is now used for research at
CeNak.
(Amalie Dietrich, one of the few famous female
natural scientists of the 19th century, who came
from a very poor background, is a controversial
figure because she also sent "human remains" to
Europe.)

Many plants and
animals that were
collected 150 years
ago do not exist
anymore due to
habitat destruction and
other destructive
human impact.



Leichhardt's
grasshopper
at MAGNT,
impaled like
all insect
exhibits

termite mound



visited:
**Museum and Art Gallery
of the Northern Territory**
6.8.2019

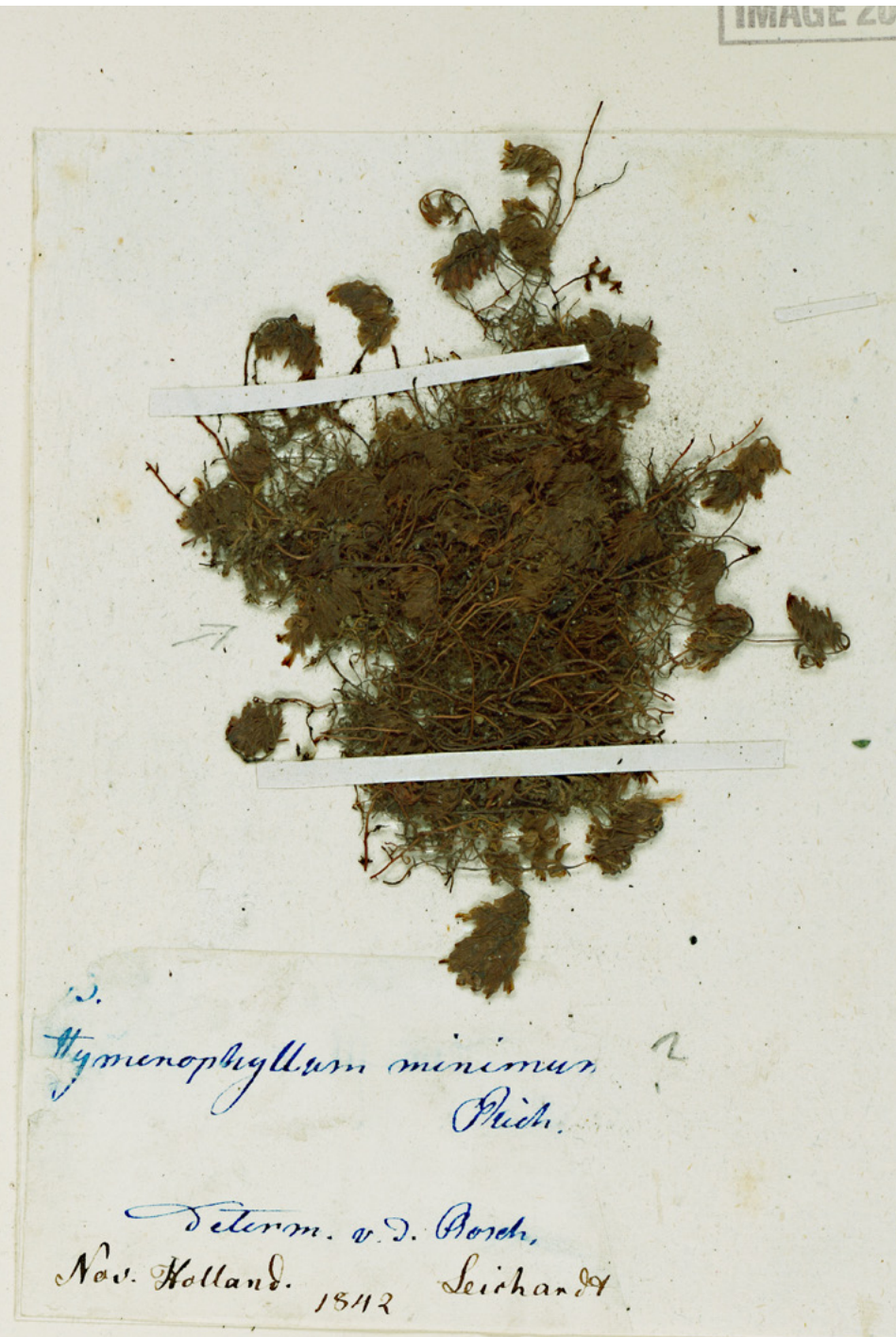
image of Namarggon, in
a replication at MAGNT,
on a rock wall with a
collection of rock art
images from different
Arnhem Land galleries



As the natural
world is habitually
understood as
lying outside of
the sphere of
human influence,
natural history
collections can
easily seem
irrelevant to the
human-centred
history of
colonialism. Long
treated as
taxonomically
stable, and hence
immutable
representations of
the non-human
world, these
objects have only
recently begun to
be re-articulated
within the
economic,
infrastructural,
ideological and
epistemological
frameworks that
brought them to
Europe's
collecting
institutions.
(Schwarz)

Botanical Museum Berlin

<http://herbarium.bgbm.org/object/B200100153b>
Collection Herb.#
Hymenophyllum
cupressiforme Labill.
Family
Hymenophyllaceae
V. D. Bosch:
Hymenophyllum
minimum;
G. Hieronymus:
Hymenophyllum
antarcticum;
B. Zimmer (B) 2006:=
Hymenophyllum
cupressiforme
Collector
Leichhardt, F.W.L. s.n.
Date **1842**
Location Australia
Label Nov. Holland



<https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN699928575>
William Blandowski's
(1822-1878) *Australien in 142
Photographischen
Abbildungen*, 1862
- only one known full copy
exists, the author's copy; it is
kept in Berlin (Staatsbibliothek)

Lake Mungo, NSW,
dried up around 14000
years ago and today
consists of sand dunes,
where wind gusts
constantly uncover
new exposures.

The **Lake Mungo remains** are three
prominent sets of human remains, dated
to around 40000 years old. Mungo
woman (LM1) was discovered in 1969
and is one of the world's oldest known
cremations. The traditional owners of
the Willandra Lakes formally requested
return and repatriation of the remains
and in 2015 they were handed back by
Australian National University scientists
and buried directly in the earth in 2017.

Paakantji Aboriginal guide Graham
Clarke visits this land perhaps more
than anyone else, yet he says he
doesn't tell a soul about new
"discoveries." Sometimes he'll leave a
marker ... but mostly he just walks on
by and lets the bones return to the
sand from which they came.

"It's never-ending because things are
constantly appearing and disappearing
and you can never keep up with it."