

Presseinformation

Museum am Rothenbaum

Rothenbaumchaussee 64 | 20148 Hamburg Germany | markk-hamburg.de

First Things – Looking back to look forwards

Press conference: 11 September 2018 2 pm

Opening: 11 September 2018 7 pm

“Every beginning holds its own magic...” – so runs the start of a well-known poem by the German author Hermann Hesse.

Might this also be true of the beginnings of the Museum on Rothenbaumchaussee? As part of its repositioning, the Museum is looking back to its roots in the ethnographic collection in Hamburg which marked the starting point in its foundation, and is showing objects from the first half of the 19th century, many of which have not been presented to the public since 1867, when they were first listed in a catalogue.

The types of things which had accumulated as donations tell us in their randomness a great deal about the knowledge of the wider world prevalent at the time and how people understood it. In the main, they fall into the category of “souvenirs of contacts”, as mementoes of people their owners had met or impressions they had received. Many of them have a certain narrative character and were probably intended to give a visual idea of other cultures, their way of life or traditions, and were made by local craftsmen to sell to the foreign trading representatives. Others were presumably brought back as curiosities which had caught the eye of the buyer due to the materials they were made of or their exotic nature. Yet others served as examples of technologies and possible models for commercial products.

The exhibition *First Things* focuses on the early phase of the Museum through this original inventory in order, by looking back at its own history, to launch a new process of realignment. This is intended to lead to a comprehensive reconfiguring of the permanent exhibitions as well as to intensified research into the collection, its provenance and its links with the colonial past.

Together with the opening of the exhibition, the former Museum für Völkerkunde in Hamburg is presenting at the same time its new name - “Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt” (Cultures and Arts of the World) and its new corporate design.

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Background

Hamburg's ethnographic collection was established in 1871, at first under the designation Culturgeschichtliches Museu. In 1879 it was renamed Museum für Völkerkunde. This was accompanied by a change in the collecting profile, which from that point on was primarily to concentrate on "objects related to the culture of the exotic races". Looking back on the conceptual focus of the time, which was to alter continuously over the following 150 years, the Museum today also sees itself confronted with the need to redefine the parameters of its remit according to issues relevant to where we stand today: the wave of renamings of Museums which once termed themselves "Völkerkundemuseum" or "Museum of Ethnography" which has spread throughout Europe in the last two decades reflects the change of emphasis within the discipline away from simply describing ethnic groups towards investigating the cultural and social foundations of humanity, cultural interconnections and the historical context in which they exist(ed). The exhibition has as its topic the beginnings of our own work as a museum and would like to stimulate visitors to think about the way in which the objects are arranged in museums today. It traces the interplay between how others were seen and Europeans' own self-image of the time as expressed in the way the collection was put together, thus directing interpretation at the period along certain lines, which from our perspective today are felt in some respects to be exoticizing or racist.

The exhibition

Visitors are greeted by one of the first items in the collection, which bears the significant number A1: the Indian processional sculpture of the goddess Durga modelled over a straw core and painted. Riding on a lion, she overcomes the attacking demons. The Hamburg merchant H.C.T. Krogmann, who maintained business relations with India, donated it to the Hamburg ethnographic collection in 1852. In fact made as an ephemeral work of art, intended to be left to decay after the festivities, it is today a rare and unique example of its type.

This is only one of the "first things" on which the exhibition centres and which, as the core collection, were the deciding factor in later founding the Museum. The minimalistic design of the exhibition architecture is deliberate, to let the objects themselves exert their full effect. The contemporary formal language anchors their contemplation in the here and now. Their histories, the high esteem in which they were held and their "museumization" are examined from different perspectives.

But it was not solely the objects themselves which prompted the founding of a museum. It was rather above all the interest of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg to establish a position for itself as the centre of global and colonial trade in Germany, and not to take second place to other major cities in which ethnographic museums were successively being founded. In terms of its contents, the exhibition spans an arc from the criteria for organizing museums and the habits of perceiving ethnographic objects encouraged by this via excursions dealing with the history and origins of some groups of objects to the donors and their trading networks. These three theme complexes closely intermesh, and the exhibition architecture presents them as a single spatial

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unity. Arranged on long rows of tables, the presentation reflects both the working situation and the arbitrariness with which objects can be grouped together, which can take on new forms depending on the research interests of those doing the arranging.

The first inventory list

The inventory list drawn up by the administrators Adolph Oberdörffer and Ferdinand Worlée in 1867 is regarded as the first systematic inventory of the ethnographic collection of the city of Hamburg. The 645 object numbers in it are grouped according to the continents of Asia, America, Africa, Australia and Europe. The descriptions of the objects as well as their allocation to regions reflect the conventions of the period. They are an expression of the aspiration of science to conquer the world and follow standard principles of classification which continue to have an effect to this day in cataloguing and determining the view of the inventories. This original method of arranging the objects is reproduced in one segment of the exhibition.

The origins

The regions from which the ethnographic objects originally came were the scene of far-reaching changes in the mid-19th century, which also went hand in hand with the increasing importance of worldwide trade. This impacted on the local power structures, throwing them off balance, and in this way preparing the ground for their colonial takeover by European powers. These connections are also reflected in the objects. The models of agricultural implements and technical installations from Java, for instance, show a keen interest in farming methods in the Dutch colonial regions, not least with a view to increasing production.

The early collection

The ethnographic collection in Hamburg in 1867 comprised a haphazard jumble of the most diverse objects, including works of art, weapons, garments, vessels, models or household objects. All were donated by private citizens. The determining factor in the accrual of this public collection was therefore the self-image of the wealthy middle class and their social networks and platforms. Among the donors were many persons who were active in various cultural associations in the Hanseatic city and who had international connections. It was their radius of action, their interests and their ideas of what was worth collecting, valuable and worthy of attention which shaped the profile of the collection at this early stage. A deliberate collecting strategy to expand the Museum's inventory only gradually took shape in the following decades.

The investigations undertaken during the preparation for this exhibition enabled us to reconstruct some of the background histories of the objects which had hitherto been unknown. Many questions as to the identity of donors who were only listed by name in the inventories remain unanswered, and any

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information from visitors which might help to provide insight into the biography and identity of such persons is very welcome. By leaving open these gaps in the documentation, the Museum would also like to draw attention to the challenges posed by provenance research.

Curators: Jeanette Kokott & Fumi Takayanagi with assistance from all curators of the Museum.

The exhibition has been made possible with support from the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius, E.H. Worlée & Co. (GmbH & Co.) KG, the Freunde des Museums für Völkerkunde Hamburg e. V. and the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. We would also like to thank the many individuals who donated funds for their contributions to this exhibition.

Quotations on the exhibition

Dr. Carsten Brosda, Senator for Culture and Media of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg:

“The exhibition *First Things* marks an important step in the repositioning of the Museum am Rothenbaum, in which its commitment to investigating its own collection and provenance research are key elements. The exhibition casts an eye back at the beginnings of the Museum, whose development is closely bound up with the history of our city. It invites the citizens of Hamburg to explore their Museum and their history, and not only to discover something about the objects, but also about our own history, the history of our collections and the way in which our view of the world has changed over the course of the centuries.”

Prof. Dr. Barbara Plankensteiner, Director of the MARKK:

“The exhibition not only draws attention to the Museum’s interesting early inventories, which were up to now almost completely neglected. Among them are some objects which are of outstanding interest, not only for science, and which tell us a great deal about the global links of Hamburg at the time. At this special moment in the process of our realignment, we at the Museum want to throw light for our public on an early chapter of our history which has hitherto hardly been investigated with this “retrospective”, which holds in store many clues as to the provenance of the objects.”

Quote from Jeanette Kokott, Curator at the MARKK:

“Working with the “first things” brought us many surprises. It was a chance for all those researchers involved to work with objects which had not up to now been in the focus of attention. In fact the first thing we needed to do was to find out what the objects of this founding inventory were to begin with. This proved to be much more complex than we had expected. The systems of numbering were altered during the course of the Museum’s genesis, some information is patchy and leaves a great deal of room for speculation. But that is precisely what the excitement and challenge of further research is all about: closing the gaps as far as possible in order to get to know the objects even better and to appreciate their full potential.”

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