

Research day for school groups at Frankfurt Weltkulturen Museum

What is this doing here? A research day in the collection of the Weltkulturen Museum

“What is this doing here?” is a mediation programme developed in the framework of the TRACES action research of the education team at Frankfurt Weltkulturen Museum with the WP3 team. From January to June 2017 the educator-researchers carried out experiments in practice, documented them, analysed them, leading to new experiments (cyclical process of action research). “What is this doing here?” was developed from the insight that the question of ownership and restitution of cultural heritage in museums is a main topic of activist approaches to ethnographic museums, a constant theme of museological debate, but (as far as we know until now) there are no programmes that would discuss this in its complexity with audiences. The concept is to invite secondary school students to consult documentation from different sources on selected collection items, do their own research (via online research, reading the provided material and doing an interview with the curator of the collection) and form an opinion on the question: what should be this object's future? It was carried out 3 times between March and June with students aged 15-18 from different types of secondary schools/highschools in Frankfurt. Responsible for the concept are Julia Albrecht, Nora Landkammer and Karin Schneider and it counted with the support and participation of Julia Friedel, curator of African collections.

Itinerary of the Research day – facilitation notes

09:00-09:45 Introduction

(Nora) The students enter the room, catalogue cards (copies of the historical catalogue of the African collections) are spread on the floor. Students are asked to look at them and pick one.

Welcome and introduction of the mediators: who we are, what we are doing, that we don't work regularly at the museum)

Introduction round (sitting down): students are asked to introduce themselves and the card they picked, answering to the question: what does this card tell you about the museum we are in?

Students lay their cards down on the floor before them, so everybody can see all cards. Questions to the group:

- If you think that this is the documentation of the museum's collection, what surprises you, what calls your attention?
- What do the objects that are depicted or registered on the cards have in common?
- Why do you think this was collected?
- Which kinds of information do you find on the cards?
- When were these cards written? Do you find dates associated to the objects?
- Are you missing any informations? Something you would need to know to understand it

(Julia)

Temporal context: colonial history

A time-line of important events in German colonial history is spread on the floor (from early colonial endeavours to decolonization). Students who find a date of collection or acquisition on their cards attach them to the timeline; and a region that was a German colony. Clarification of the German colonies that existed. Students who find a connection to their card read out the info on the timeline.

(Karin)

programme of the day

What is this doing here? This is an open question – focus of your research today

- current debates on ethnographic museums. Why the question of ownership and restitution concerns us (the mediators)
- learning on different perspectives on objects and their history, and dealing with information from different sources: to which way to present the story do I agree and why?
- phases of the day: research phase – seeing the object in a collection visit – interview with the curator – discussion – create a statement on the object's future on a poster
- explanation of the steps for research
- students assume the role of external “consultants” to the museum
- the questions we ask are not “school questions”, to which we have an answer, and it is hidden somewhere. They are real questions, we do not have the answer to yet. That's the point why it is research.

Students form groups: catalogue cards of 5 objects from the African collections (Kom-Throne; Benin ornament; Herero knife; ceremonial knife from Congo; Herero adornment) are laid out in different places in the room. Students look at all objects and stay with the object they would like to work on.

9:45-11:45 research phase

groups assemble in different rooms to commence their research. 2 groups are accompanied by Karin, 2 by Julia, and 1 by Nora. In the groups:

Introduction to the worksheet (questions to guide research, like: what is known about the collector? What is known about the object? Contemporary voices on the object?....). Main question: what should be the object's future?

Research possibilities:

- Texts
- list if internet links
- own online research
- curator (think of questions you want to ask before!)

Introduction to the research materials laid out on the table and available on a computer: e.g. in the case of the Benin piece: collection documentation; description of a Benin collection from the 1920ies (Felix von Luschan), text on the object from a catalogue by the museum, video of the Benin Oba speaking on restitution, petition to the English parliament for return of Benin bronzes, newspaper article by a German museum director arguing against the possibility to reverse history on the occasion of a Benin exhibition, a Benin bronze in an activist campaign called loot. Invitation to further online-research. In cases like the Herero adornment, where hardly any information is available: contextual information, historical and contemporary.

Each group visits the collection and conducts the interview.

11:45 – 12:30 lunch break

12:30-14:15 Discussion of research outcomes

(Karin)

Format: One research group interviews the other about the outcomes of their research. After each plenary interview, others can ask additional questions or comment. We comment as well, bringing in information from our “argument box”

The argument box is a collection containing about 30 “arguments” relevant to ownership and restitution debates. It contains from extracts from UNESCO conventions to statements against viewing cultural heritage only connected to an original location, to a video of chancellor Merkel reclaiming german artworks from Russia....

14:15-15:30 Visualization of the Statement

(Julia)

The statements serve not only to resume your research, but also to inform other students in the next workshops. Working on the question: What should be this object’s future? The task is not only to show your conclusion, but also the process by which you have reached it, the arguments you considered. It is possible to represent diverging perspectives within your group.

(Nora)

Examples from art history (projection) that show ethnographic objects and material heritage in new contexts, that work with collage and montage. Possibilities: you can not only use text, also visual elements to show things that are more complex, visualize relations,....

15:30 – 16:00 wrap up

Posters are pinned to the wall, joint viewing of the results, individual questions. Final plenary: What does this have to do with you? Feedback on the day.