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MEMORY CULTURES 2.0 AND MUSEUMS

JAS ELSNER IN CONVERSATION WITH MIRJAM SARAH BRUSIUS

Museums are central to memory culture. Material culture can function as a surrogate for written history. Germany offers an intriguing example with a recent addition to its national museums: the Humboldt Forum. Housed in the reconstructed imperial palace, it has attracted much criticism, but has also sparked debates about Germany's long-neglected colonial past. Current discussions have revealed the colonial worldviews behind ethnology collections now housed in the Humboldt Forum and the Museum for Asian Art, for instance. The custodians of the collections of antiquities on Museum Island across the road, however, have so far largely remained silent and aloof, as though they are uninvolved in this narrative. The conversation, it seems, has only just started, and the deeper one digs, the more issues emerge. What is also striking is the lack of engagement with something otherwise central to German memory culture: the question of Holocaust remembrance and how the Nazi era relates to these sites and museum collections. In this conversation, the classicist Jas Elsner and Mirjam Sarah Brusius discuss memory culture in the Humboldt Forum and its surroundings. They explore it as a multilayered site where colonial collecting and scholarship, antiquity and its reception, (the lack of) Holocaust remembrance, and contemporary politics tacitly converge in complex and largely unresolved ways.

MIRJAM SARAH BRUSIUS (MSB): Let us begin by outlining the status quo at the Humboldt Forum. Where do you see the major pitfalls and blind spots in what has been made of this urban space in the context of German memory culture?

JAS ELSNER (JE): First, we must ask to what extent the addition of the Humboldt Forum to the Berlin Museum Island nexus is a de-centring exercise in any sense. Does it grant a real voice to different non-Western cultures, rather than expressing models of thought sanctioned and spoken through colonialism or Eurocentrism? How do the materials that will be conserved, curated, stored, and displayed in the Humboldt Forum stand in relation to that extraordinary parade from classical antiquity at the Altes Museum, via the cradle of civilizations in

the Pergamon Museum and Neues Museum, Christianity at the Bode Museum, and the culmination of all these things in Germany and Italy in the Bode's sculpture collection, and in Germany in the paintings of the Alte Nationalgalerie? That is an extraordinary imperial narrative of the late nineteenth century rising to German nationalism, which has remained largely unchanged despite all that happened in the twentieth century. It is, apparently, undergoing significant—but not yet wholly clear—ideological and structural reconfiguration at this very moment. The centre of the old story is a direct line from antiquity to Germany. The addition of an ethnographic/Asian supplement in the old Schloss does not necessarily look like much of a challenge to that story and could easily be turned into a confirmation of it. This is a deep problem. The very reconfiguration of the current museums is itself potentially a problem. Their present form is well exemplified by the architectural structure and orchestration of the Pergamon Museum, which descends from the post-classical Hellenistic era via the colourful arabesques of the Ishtar Gate and ancient Babylon to end in Islam. One might have preserved this configuration and critiqued its form and ideology explicitly—this would at least have been an option. But instead, there will be a reshaping of the building that will have the great advantage of allowing much more into the display, but will effectively and inevitably adapt the old narrative rather than start again. There are real questions which need some airing—choices made (consciously or unconsciously) to preserve the ideological models of the past, even if one tinkers with them.

MSB: You are alluding to Johann Joachim Winckelmann and the *Geschichtsbild* (view of history) that derives from him. In a recent radio programme about Museum Island, which I made with Lorenz Rollhäuser and which also involves you as an interviewee, we discuss Winckelmann's work as an 'ideological template' that degrades other cultures, while the White Greeks are seen as the pinnacle of civilization and White Germans their heirs.¹ In other words, it was only through this elevated view of White antiquity that negative views of so-called

¹ Mirjam Brusius and Lorenz Rollhäuser, 'Imperiale Träume auf der Berliner Museumsinsel: Auf Sumpf gebaut', Deutschlandfunk Kultur, 28 June 2022, at [<https://www.hoerspielundfeature.de/auf-sumpf-gebaut-100.html>], accessed 1 July 2022.

‘uncivilized cultures’, now housed in the Humboldt Forum across the road, were validated. The monumentalism of Museum Island was perverted by the Nazis, who believed that superior German civilization was the rightful heir of classical antiquity, reduced to ideal ‘Aryan’ racial types. The Whiteness of these sculptures prevails, although we now know that neither the sculptures, nor the people of antiquity, were in fact White. You are a classicist who has recently been pushing forward debates about globalized classics, which are central to this problem. What are globalized classics and why does moving away from a concept of White antiquity matter for the future of museums as sites of national memory – and also for a more inclusive, multicultural approach to German memory culture in general, as some contributors to this special issue suggest?

JE: The challenge of bringing Berlin’s great collections of ethnographic materials and also Asian art into the arena of Museum Island and its unique displays of antiquities is vast. The bottom line is that in conceptual terms, Winckelmann’s template—brilliant solution though it was to a series of questions about European cultural ancestralism—is entirely useless as an empathetic interpretative model for understanding non-European cultures. It is entirely grounded in the conceptual and philosophical terminology of Greco-Roman and European Christian thought, inflected through the Enlightenment. How can that cope with equally or more ancient models of thinking grounded in concepts about materials, objects, images, art-making (let alone ontologies of being) that are entirely different? Take Buddhism. How can a European intellectual foundation based on the certainty that we have a single life (itself in fact a polemically constructed ideological fix in the twenty-second book of Augustine of Hippo’s *City of God*, even though it is secularists as much as Christians who hold such views today) make serious sense of a religious and cultural system in which reincarnation over endless lifetimes is simply a truth? How can an art history and a museology founded on presence (whether the ontological speculations of antiquity or Judeo-Christian-Islamic models of a monotheistic God) cope with the arts of a religion grounded in a very powerfully and philosophically argued theory of emptiness, as is certainly the case with Mahayana Buddhism? These

issues are even more fraught in the case of ethnographic collections of cultures whose oral histories and philosophies have only been written down in modernity. Yet to create dialogues with such different and differentiated worlds is the key to the problems of the globalized humanities—including classics, art history, and museum practice. It is both a cultural phenomenon and a scholarly agenda in the current world, and crucial also to new *Altertumswissenschaften* (the study of ancient cultures and societies) for a new era.

MSB: Berlin's latest neo-classical addition is the James Simon Gallery, which functions as the new entrance to Museum Island, and whose Jewish namesake is honoured by an inscription. Yet what is missing is a plaque explaining that the Bode Museum next door, which reopened in 2006, was in 1956 knowingly named after a former director and committed antisemite, Wilhelm von Bode, who dismissed Simon's Jewish colleagues. Curiously, the infamous *Zivilisationsbruch* (civilizational rupture) is materially almost absent from this site, although it was precisely here that it was prepared by disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology, which undergirded these museums with their scholarship and contributed significantly to race science around 1900. A sign at the entrance of the Humboldt Forum reminds visitors that 'much happened' at this site, yet it remains silent about the years 1933 to 1945. This is noteworthy given that the German state's memory politics, especially after 1989–90, elevated remembrance of the Shoah to *Staatsraison* while, until recently, it did not necessarily encourage colonial remembrance. At the Humboldt Forum we see an odd inversion of that, or at least no linkage between colonial atrocities and Nazism. What do you make of the fact that events that are so central to German memory culture feel strangely disconnected from this site as one walks through it?

JE: In the case of the Humboldt Forum and its packaging of the non-European and ethnographic, we may ask if this will stand magnificently and silently for itself, or whether it will need to carry a long post-colonial disclaimer in the form of an information-packed placard, full of apologies for the past and old photographs, of the kind that defines the memory landscape of so many monuments and sites in the city of Berlin?

This last is not a joke. Take, for example, the Kindertransport monument, which in 2015, during my three-month stint as a Fellow at the Humboldt University of Berlin, I passed daily on my way to work, alongside its explanatory plaque (Figs. 1 and 2). The monument is pretty awful (I admit that this is a subjective aesthetic observation out of keeping with academic objectivity!) and the claims it makes are tendentious. There really is no link at all between the Kindertransport and the trains to the camps, which were not only for children, except for the happenstance that this group statue stands next to a railway station and is concerned with trains. The thing really does need explaining in the panels. But those panels are worrying: not only on this statue, but in the whole monumental landscape of Berlin.



Fig. 1: Frank Meisler, *Trains to Life – Trains to Death*. Kindertransport memorial monument, Friedrichstrasse Railway Station, Berlin. Bronze; erected 2008. Photo credit: Jaś Elsner, 2015.



Fig. 2: Signage around the Kindertransport memorial monument, Berlin. Photo credit: Jaś Elsner, 2015.

They attempt, inevitably, to control the space of interpretation—and one can see *why* in the context of the return of neo-Nazism all over Europe, but also when monuments are as mediocre as this one, as ill-thought-out as this one—both aesthetically and topographically—in its attempt to make a claim through pure visual and spatial rhetoric, and as illogical in connecting different kinds of stories. But the strategy of interpretative control is inevitably—and in this capital city of Germany problematically—authoritarian, and I would suggest that this makes it potentially counterproductive. It has, however, become normative in Berlin, and a really striking, mega-informative feature of the museological and memorial landscape in a city which of course bears unique scars and caesuras scratched across its material cultural and visual environment. Yet when the authoritarian strategy of information control is not applied—in a city where such controls are ubiquitous and especially when insufficient consideration has gone into thinking through the monumental context—other problems arise.

MSB: Could you give an example?

JE: What comes to mind is a problematic instance of the selection of visual culture in relation to a lack of explanatory material, found

very close to the Humboldt Forum and Museum Island's antiquity collections. Mount the steps of the Winckelmann Institute of the Humboldt University of Berlin, just next to Humboldt Forum and Museum Island, and you will be confronted by the magnificent casts shown in Figs. 3–5. First, on the mezzanine as the stairway turns back on itself, we have (unlabelled) a magisterial Roman historical relief: the great triumphal scene from the inner passageway of the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum, from roughly the 80s or early 90s CE (Fig. 3). This cast is grey. Then, further up, we have a fine relief from the Meroitic site of Musawwarat es Sufra in Sudan, dating to the third century BCE—this time with a label, since I suppose Musawwarat is a bit obscure to classicists (Fig. 4). This cast is brown. Finally, as we reach the top and the small figure from Olympia who nestles by the staircase, we turn into a great open space at the zenith to find a substantial section of the west pediment of the great temple of Zeus at Olympia from the 460s BCE, with Apollo at its centre, and the spectacular Victory (Fig. 5). These casts are pure white.



Fig. 3: The lower turn of the staircase at the Winckelmann Institute, Humboldt University of Berlin: plaster cast of the Jewish spoils from the Arch of Titus. Photo credit: Jaś Elsner, 2015.



Fig. 4: The upper turn of the staircase at the Winckelmann Institute, Humboldt University of Berlin: plaster cast of a relief from Musawwarat es Sufra in Sudan. The caption reads: 'King Arnekhamani and Prince Arka. Plaster cast from the south external wall of the Lion Temple of Musawwarat es Sufra, Sudan. Late Meroitic period, Kingdom of Kush.' Photo credit: Jaś Elsner, 2015.



Fig. 5: The light-filled room at the top of the stairs, Winckelmann Institute, Humboldt University of Berlin: casts of the Nike of Paionios and the west pediment of Olympia. Photo credit: Jaś Elsner, 2015.

Now what does this story mean? There are no explanatory panels; there is no strategy of interpretative control. At the top is the glory that was Greece, presented in its most Panhellenic and celebratory form and in some of its finest masterpieces, all from the classical zenith most supremely appreciated in later periods. This is simultaneously a story of German intervention, since these masterpieces are the product of German archaeology in the most significant dig conducted in mainland Greece by the German archaeological institute. Both the temple and the Nike statue were excavated by a German team in 1875. As we climb to this pinnacle, the simultaneous centre of Greece and Germany, of Greek culture and German scholarship, we ascend through a kind of antique ethnography. Can you see the relevance of this story to the problem of the Humboldt Forum? Immediately before Greece is Africa – not prior in time but primitive (. . . you fill in the interpretative dots . . .) and, interestingly, the results of a Humboldt University dig in GDR times. And what should we make of the reliefs from the Arch of Titus? These reliefs have no archaeological connection with Berlin. What can whoever chose to put this material here possibly have been thinking when they put the panel of the Jewish spoils, the Roman state's public celebration of imperial triumph over a recalcitrant ethnos, the image of the captured Menorah in this place, in this building, in this city of all cities – without any attempt to explain themselves? Did you know, by the way, that the archaeological institute got its name in 1941 (of all the possible dates since its founding in the early nineteenth century) during the tenure as director of Gerhart Rodenwaldt, the greatest German archaeologist of his era, who shot himself as the Russian tanks rolled into Berlin in April 1945, a few days before his Führer? And what do we do with the colour coding that mounts the steps towards white?

MSB: These casts illustrate how Nazism and antiquity are deeply intertwined, both in the museum and in the academy – although it must be said that universities as institutions appear to be reluctant to join these debates. The examples also demonstrate the impossibility of detaching the scholarly study of antiquity from the troubled colonial history of the Humboldt Forum's collections across the road.

Like anthropology, archaeology also underpinned race science, and also scientifically informed antisemitism. All these disciplines have colonial roots. I can further see the difficulty with respect to the control exerted by information panels, or the lack of them that you are pointing out here. What does this example tell us about the unchallenged universalism of the memory narrative presented to us on these sites?

JE: I am not making accusations about the Winckelmann Institute: it is easy to explain away its amazingly egregious madness as simply unthinking. But the questions it raises are very real—the questions of unconscious repetition of (in this case) tropes of antisemitism and racist primitivism rising to the triumphant white of Greece, especially in a liberal context where you cannot control the responses of viewers, and a global context where non-Germans have little or no sense of the ideological and cultural baggage weighing down this whole display. I cannot fully control my own responses to the extraordinary display of casts. My reactions may not be the normative or appropriate ones in the context of modern Berlin, but what I see is the city's history—its open scars, its relentless commemorative culture, almost always commemorating horror—and the fact that my presence here is a happenstance of history, since my parents should both have died in Poland, as so many of the family did in the very year after Rodenwaldt renamed his institute and at the behest of the last great globalizing impulse of this nation. The very existence and presence of an ethnographic and Asian appendage to the incredible museological story of European supremacy that leads from Greece to Germany in Museum Island, and has done so since before the First World War, is a huge problem of interpretative credibility. Its very globalism, with universalist claims and collections, dwarfs the parochialism of my own concerns with the Jewish spoils and African reliefs on the staircase of the archaeological institute.

MSB: Meticulous care was invested in preserving bullet holes, scars of the Second World War, when the facade of the Neues Museum on Museum Island was renovated—scars of a war that Germany itself started. This uncomfortably recalls the fact that the German perpetrators of the Holocaust first saw themselves as victims of the war—a

view which held sway for decades. Yet, as we discussed earlier, other traces of Nazism are not fully explained around Museum Island, the Humboldt Forum, and their surroundings. This special issue is concerned with the topic of *Opferkonkurrenz*. Do you see any potential for colonial histories and their connections with the Holocaust to intertwine and – in theory – be made visible on this multilayered site? Can the reception of antiquity play a role here?

JE: What is the centre presupposed in the Humboldt Forum story? How does it construct the centre of its colonial, or post-colonial, or anti-colonial, or post-post-colonial narratives? How does it define its narratives? Ought it also to perform a huge screen of post-imperialist self-flagellation in the style of all the Holocaust monuments? And is such a performance any real kind of expiation or just the apologetic excuse after which we can get on with business as usual? These are questions with ramifications way beyond our specific focus on the Humboldt Forum – questions about the immigrant crisis in Europe today; questions about the refugee crisis and whether we privilege White refugees from Ukraine over non-White people from Syria or Afghanistan; questions about the failure of leadership in the West today. But they are hugely relevant to the immense, generous, and in so many ways laudable cultural enterprise that is seeing the Berlin museums reconfigured for the new millennium.

MSB: The master narrative of these sites, so it seems, invites visitors to see material evidence for the success of the Humboldtian promise of *Bildung*, of cultural education and humanistic improvement, of which these museums and academic sites formed a part. But we know that this ‘civilizing mission’ did not exactly work in Germany.

JE: So here is where I see the problem. The wilfully Eurocentric and Germanocentric cultural model of Museum Island is the instantiation of a philosophy of *Bildung* created in the nineteenth century here in Prussia and planned under the empire. It continued, despite the First World War and the great difficulties thereafter, until the completion of the Pergamon Museum (the last to be constructed on the site) in the late Weimar Republic. That philosophy of *Bildung*, grounded in *Altertumswissenschaften*, underwritten by the German university system, and cast in stone by the Berlin museums, proved itself not fit for

purpose in the years between 1933 and 1945. Put simply, if *Bildung*—cultural formation—makes you a better person, then how could the land where it was perfected have planned and conducted the Holocaust? In the post-war years, instead of rethinking the basis of what we want education, culture, and the museum to be, we—and by this I mean all the Western countries, including Europe and America—have been engaged in what is largely a redemptive process of putting back together the pieces shattered in the Second World War and its aftermath, the Cold War. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Berlin. What we have not done is to start again. Yet the premise that education and culture make you a better person is not true and has been disproved. In this city and this country.

MSB: The round table in this special issue focuses as much on *Opferkonkurrenz* as on alliances—that is, the historically informed and future potential networks of solidarity between victimized groups. What kind of epistemic tone would museums and the academy have to strike in order to foster such conversations?

JE: The challenge of globalization is a wonderful one because it does, in principle, allow the possibility of decentring, of finally giving up the central place of the European tradition (which is not the same as devaluing its qualities), and of a dialogue that could ultimately be on equal terms with other traditions whose modernity is rooted in great and venerable antiquity as well as deep philosophical thought. But that is a vast project and will take generations to achieve—it requires talking on equal terms, not European ones or Eurocentric ones, nor on post-colonialist and ‘decolonizing’ ones (which merely invert the tropes of colonialism), in discourses that empower non-European models of thinking and argument alongside European ones. We are not there yet. We are at best at the inception of such an enterprise, in which the globalized humanities (including classics and art history) have a key place. At the moment, frankly, we have no idea where we are, and are trying (at best) to find bases from which a new way of working might begin. If you set in stone, for the next hundred years, a formal instantiation of the current global vision, as is planned, indeed, arguably has already taken place for the Humboldt Forum, then you establish a Eurocentric confusion,

unconfident of its Eurocentrism but unable to escape it, long before we have the conceptual means to think outside the box. This is a disaster.

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