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**Review: Weltmuseum Wien**

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FACADE OF THE WELTMUSEUM WIEN.  
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## Weltmuseum Wien

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### REVIEWED BY ALINA RODRIGUEZ

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The *Weltmuseum Wien* (‘World Museum’) is no longer the *Ethnologisches Museum*. It is located in the same building in Heldenplatz, as part of the Hofburg Imperial Palace complex. It still guards mostly the same collection and proudly displays the same famous pieces—like the Benin Bronzes or the Mesoamerican Feather Headdress. It is still part of the *KHM-Museumsverband*, which also comprises the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* and the *Theatermuseum*. So, besides the name, what else has changed?

To answer that question, we must first pay attention to the name. Apparently, ‘ethnography’ is no longer suited to discursively sustain public-funded exhibitions about the ‘Others.’ Ethnographic museums surged during the nineteenth century, conveying a narrative of Western exceptionalism through its exhibitionary practices. It can be argued that other cultures similarly use comparison techniques to underline their uniqueness and/or superiority. Nevertheless, it is important to look at the particularities of every comparison technique. The nineteenth and early twentieth-century ethnology that backed the creation of ethnographic museums sustained its claims through the idea of a universal scientific discourse. This notion denied its own discursive standpoint and expressed itself as uniquely unbiased. On the other hand, as Annette B. Fromm has explained, ethnography’s history as a discipline is tightly knitted to European colonial enterprises as collections were gathered by scientific expeditions, collecting travellers, military incursions or missionary activity. For a museum located in the heart of a former imperial capital, holding and displaying pieces acquired in colonial scenarios, ethnographic discourse cannot be resignified. It cannot be useful or legitimate anymore: in this context it can only be regarded as negligent and tainted.

Hence, in April 2013 the *Ethnologisches Museum* announced its rebranding: a new name, and a project to remodel and reorganise its vast collection. In 2014, it was completely closed for remodelling. Museography, as historiography, organises words, images, objects—throws light on some of them, keeps another in storage—in order to create inside a delimited space—be it a textual or architectonic one—a functioning microcosmos, a particular world. Then, the *Weltmuseum* created its own.

“A world museum for a global city” and “It’s all about the people” are the phrases of the revamped institution that opened its gates again in October 2017 after three years of remodelling and fifteen years of planning. These mottos are rather

vague. According to them, the museum presumably stands for the broad category of ‘people in the world.’ So, we must zoom out of the textual dimension and see the material—space disposition—changes to grasp the world built within the museum. The *Weltmuseum* has reduced its galleries from nineteen to fourteen, and its objects in display from almost 7000 to 3127. But the space disposition change was not only reduced on the quantitative side. The galleries are thematically and not regionally oriented, as was usually the custom in earlier Ethnographic museums. Out of the total fourteen, twelve galleries are dedicated more or less to a particular area—“*Geschichten aus Mesoamerika*,” “*1873—Japan kommt nach Europa*,” “*Benin und Äthiopien: Kunst, Macht, Widerstand*,” are a few examples—and it is true that they do not reproduce the “Asia,” “Africa,” or other continental labels to indifferently group together otherwise unrelated cultures. But a new disposition also brings new challenges.

The “Histories of Mesoamerica” gallery contains the icon of the museum: the Feather Headdress, dated back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The vibration-proof vitrine enclosing the Headdress was built back in 2012 expressly for protecting the piece given its fragility and already damaged structure. Laying against a black background and carefully lit, it is impossible to pass by the headdress without being compelled to contemplate it. This is an exception. Even though the number of pieces displayed in the museum has been reduced, many of the vitrines in the Museum look cramped. It is perhaps what Rüdiger Schaper calls in his review of the museum “a presentation of the objects, that doesn’t deny the tradition of the cabinets of curiosities,” where marvellous and very diverse objects are all grouped together in the same type of uniform glass cases.

The ancient headdress shares the Mesoamerican gallery with other precious Pre-Hispanic objects, as well as with recently acquired pieces, such as images of the Virgin of Guadalupe used in contemporary Mexican Catholic practice. Here the museography links the Nahua conquered-people from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the current Mexican Catholic worshippers, distancing itself from the museographic narratives that think of the ‘Others’ as static cultures without history. But Guadalupeanism and the ‘celebration’ of Aztec ruling are closely tied to the official narrative of Mexicanity promoted by the Mexican state since the 1920s. Framing these two worlds under a singular path sounds too familiar to the nation-state discourse. The objects in the gallery—the Pre-Hispanic headdress, the colonial paintings, the contemporary handicrafts and images of the Virgin—drift across narratives of conquest, syncretism and nation-state, creating through the collection a *Weltmuseum*’s version of Mexican identity and aesthetics.

There are two galleries not displaying collections, but that are entirely theme-oriented: “*Welt in Bewegung*” is dedicated to migration; “*Im Schatten des Kolonialismus*” reflects on the *Weltmuseum* itself as it approaches the way in which objects arrived to the Hofburg—through the frame of colonisation and imperialism.

Both differentiate themselves from the other by not focusing on the museographic narrative via objects, but through text and images drawn in bright white panels and digital resources.

As the former director Steven Engelsman notes, the preparation for these particular halls showed that these topics—migration and colonialism—are *sui generis* and the challenge they pose should be approached in the future by a curator competent in tackling globalisation questions: a ‘*Globalisierungskurator*.’ The postcolonial, borderless world proposed by the microcosmos of the *Weltmuseum* is then one sustained by the ubiquitous concept of globalisation—a contested word that no longer has a precise meaning.

Globalisation and *Welt*-discourse in the museum is beyond continental categories to order the world, but the exhibitions only deal with communities that do not usually belong in the narrative of the Western history canon. A canon that is for example clearly present in the *Kunsthistorisches Museum*: it travels from Ancient Egypt, to Classic Greece and Rome, followed by European Medieval Art and ends with the European Master’s Paintings. So, the globalisation questions and concerns that arise from the world the *Weltmuseum* portrays are still linked to the problem of the ‘Other.’ It continues with an ‘Us’ (Europeans) and ‘Them’ (Everyone else) division. That is why the exhibitions maintain a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ aura and why it needs specific galleries to explicitly address the recently raised questions about repatriation or provenance. In exhibitions, form and substance should be integrated, and in this building the contradiction between both is tangible.

Through the galleries of ‘Migration’ and ‘Colonialism’ the spectator is asked to reflect on the different ways people relate to objects over time. The way we are shown is not the scientific-based discourse of ethnology anymore, it is the global studies discourse. The latter did not emanate from the natural sciences but from social sciences; it is not tainted with a history of racism as ethnography could be accused of. Nevertheless, it continues with a task of defining and constructing an ‘Other.’ If in its public uses, as with museums, it maintains the ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ binary construction, a deep change is still yet to come.