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Humboldt Forum - Global History in Berlin Global
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Global History in Berlin Global

REVIEWED BY

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phoebe Ka Laam Ng, coming from Hong Kong, is currently a third-semester Global History MA student at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. With the aspiration of becoming a museum curator, her research interests lie primarily in East Asian Studies, Buddhism and Art History.

After years of reconstruction and continuous delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the former Berlin Palace was finally opened to the public as the Humboldt Forum on July 20th, 2021. Located on Schlossplatz in Berlin Mitte and consisting of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, the museum complex aims to provide an immersive and innovative cultural experience by hosting various art and historical exhibitions and cultural events. However, such an ambitious goal has also brought heated controversy on the restitution of colonial artwork. Part of the museum collection contains artwork and artefacts allegedly looted from Africa and Asia during the German colonial period. In the era of postcolonialism, the public is aware of the controversy of displaying the stolen colonial pieces in the former colonisers' museums. Discussions in the cultural industry have advocated for returning such stolen goods to their places of origin. Meanwhile, museums argue that the items were purchased and obtained legally during the colonial era, and that their significant investment into the long-term maintenance of the pieces should be taken into consideration. As compensation, the European museums then suggest provenance research on the colonial objects, which is tracing the object's origin and trade history. By presenting the research outcome, the museums would thus address the colonialism question in the collection.

The official opening of the Humboldt Forum has been shaded by art historians and activists' criticisms of its failure to conduct restitution or provenance research of the controversial items. Bénédicte Savoy, a renowned French art historian and a former member of the Humboldt Forum panel, left the board because of the lack of progress in the provenance research. She argued "no Humboldt Forum or ethnological museum should open," as the public has to know "how much blood is dripping from a work of art".¹ For us global historians, we are eager to see how the museum responds to such strong criticisms and acknowledges the issue of colonialism in the exhibitions.

One of the Humboldt Forum's official opening highlights is its first permanent exhibition *-Berlin Global*.² The exhibition presents how Berlin, as a city, is connected to and influenced by the world regarding the past, present, and future. However, the curators faced many challenges in constructing the exhibit. In attempting to curate global history in Berlin, issues of colonialism and Eurocentrism are critical to address—similar to the writing of global history itself. In addition, as the first permanent exhibition of the Humboldt Forum, the curators had to deal with the public criticisms of the museum's controversial collections. Therefore, the current display attempts to not only connect Berlin's history and cultural scenes to the world, but also to fairly address and respond to challenges posed by the development of postcolonialism and globalism in narratives of Berlin. To address whether the museum expresses globalism through the lens of Berlin successfully, this review goes through the strengths and weaknesses of this exhibition. In so doing, it will evaluate whether the narration manages to describe the mutual significance of Berlin and the world - how Berlin's development has shaken the world and how the world has influenced Berlin's growth.

Highlights and Achievements

The 4,000-square-metre exhibit space is divided into a reception room named *Thinking the World*, an introductory area called *Berlin Images*, and then followed by seven main rooms with individual themes - *Revolution, Free Space, Boundaries Entertainment, War, Fashion* and *Interconnection*. The spaces are designed with a wide variety of immersive installations and rich in a dynamic presentation of perspectives from residents, experts, artists, initiatives and associations in Berlin. Such diversity shows the city's close connection with the world through its people and culture.

The first highlight in this exhibition is the extensive use of innovative technology, which encourages visitors' active participation throughout their visit. At the exhibition entrance, visitors are given a chipped wristband. They can activate it and choose their language preference using the check-in monitors in the reception room, called *Thinking the World*. This wristband helps visitors explore different interactive installations around the exhibition space and works as a personal tour guide. The wristband is also essential in the exhibition's voting feature. When visitors explore the themed main rooms, they can use the device to vote in different scenarios, such as their personal preference for participation in social movements, and play various mini-games throughout the tour. In addition, two portals are set up as voting entrances between the main rooms. There are two contrasting statements written separately on top of the portals, and visitors have to make a choice when crossing the rooms, where the wristband records their choices. At the end of the tour, the *Lounge* is where visitors can use the check-out machines to return the smart devices and print out their personalised tickets. They can check the voting results on the machines by comparing their choices and what others have voted for in the exhibition. A summary of the visitor's choices is also printed out on the ticket.

Apart from the interaction with visitors, the element of active participation can also be seen in creating this exhibition, which celebrates ethnic and cultural diversity by mobilising individuals and institutions related to Berlin. Through interviews and artwork creations, residents, artists, and associations from Berlin are invited to contribute to this exhibition. The *Free Space* showroom leaves visitors with a strong impression of freedom in Berlin by depicting the diverse cultural scenes. Apart from the detailed reconstruction of *Potse-Drugstore* as the social centre for youth in Berlin, the hand-painted murals created by the exhibition curators also help explain Berlin's histories of subculture, religion, gender, and art in a clear, fun, and impressive way. To reflect on the potential threat of surveillance to Berlin's freedom in the future, the curators also cooperated with Berlin-based artists to create a sculptural centrepiece in the room. A giant human head painted in grey with a screen in hand uses different surveillance devices to spy on every part of the city. Another eye-catching collaboration is in the space of *Fashion*, where students from Berlin's School of Fashion participated in constructing and displaying different Berliners' daily outfits. On a global scale, the exhibition also invited New York graffiti artists *How&Nosm* to conceptualise and address the global issue of colonialism and cultural appropriation through an enormous four-wall mural in the *Thinking of the World* -the first space where visitors

enter. The exhibition succeeds in encouraging everyone's active participation and celebrating cultural diversity through its interactive installations and a wide range of collaborations.

To be Expected...

With the name Berlin Global, it is expected that this exhibition would have a balanced layout to discuss the mutual influence on cultural development between the international world and Berlin. However, the curation team extensively focused on how incidents in Berlin affected the world, and left out how international cultures changed Berlin. The parts that included foreigners, migrants, and refugees were the spaces of *Entertainment*, *War* and *Interconnection*, where their stories and interviews are featured in written texts, voice recordings, and videos. Still, the forms of presentation, such as written stories of refugees' experiences and interview videos about racial inequalities, lacks active engagement and overlooks other ethnic minorities' significant role in building Berlin as an international city. For example, Turkish, African, and Asian individuals not only contribute heavily to the famous multicultural scenes in Berlin, but also shape today's city landscape. Turkish, African, and Asian supermarkets and different religious centres like Jewish synagogues, Islamic mosques, and Buddhist temples can be easily found around the city. In the room of *Interconnection*, the representation of these prominent minorities' influences on Berlin's city development is expected. To highlight the globalism in Berlin, the exhibition should make good use of the remaining *Open Spaces* (three empty areas in blue and open for public-initiated projects to be featured) or rearrange the current exhibition rooms, so as to make sure the active contribution of ethnic minorities to the city's growth can be seen too.

Meanwhile, in regard to the recent controversy over the restitution of the Humboldt Forum's colonial collections, a response to such debate is expected in the museum's first permanent exhibition. Contrastingly, the discussion on colonialism in Berlin is rather limited in *Berlin Global*. Some items shown are related to German colonialism, but there is not much explanation on how colonialism influenced German and world history and the city planning of Berlin, such as street names and colonialist statues. Only a warning sign about racism, which acknowledges the danger of triggering images and terms of racism in the interview video, exists in the *Entertainment* space. Since the exhibition stresses the significance of Berlin's connection with the world, it is expected that the curating team would address the colonial controversies within Berlin and the Humboldt Forum. To improve the awareness of colonial history, curators may consider adding more educational signs next to the colonialism-related items to provide more background information. They could utilise one of the remaining *Open Spaces* to discuss the colonial history of the German Empire that affects today's Berlin.

In conclusion, the Humboldt Forum's first permanent exhibition, *Berlin Global*, successfully tells the story of Berlin through innovative technology and Berliners' active collaborative participation. However, the linkage of Berlin and the world is relatively weak, as the narratives mainly focus on how Berlin's socio-political incidents and cultures

influenced the world. The exhibition is quite conservative in addressing the heated public discussions on German colonial history. From a global historical perspective, the narration is Eurocentric and lacks the representation of ethnic minorities who have been contributing to Berlin. With the few remaining *Open Spaces* in the exhibition area, future improvements on raising the awareness of postcolonialism, Eurocentrism, and ethnic diversity in the exhibition narration are anticipated.

NOTES

¹ Philipp Jedicke, “Berlin’s Humboldt Forum launches with unanswered questions”, *Deutsche Welle*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-humboldt-forum-controversy-colonial-art-africa/a-55943819>.

² The visit to this exhibition took place on August 8th 2021. The Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, which are part of the Humboldt Forum and contain controversial colonial objects, were open from September 23rd 2021. However, the current condition may still be subject to change.