

## Open letter to

Dr. Joachim Gauck, President of the German Federal Republic,  
Prof. Monika Grütters, Minister for Culture and the Media,  
Party leaders in the German Federal Parliament

### **The Humboldt Forum - the plan is to reconstruct the Berlin City Palace and hold an opening exhibition. What happens to the Ethnological Museum's valuable collections?**

Dear Federal President,  
Dear Minister,  
Dear Sir or Madam,

The Bundestag's decision of 4 July 2002, "Reconstruction of the Berlin City Palace", along with the attendant recommendations, as well as the approval of EUR 595 million by the budget committee of the German Bundestag on July 4 2011, relate solely to the reconstruction of the Berlin City Palace and its furnishing.

### **The plan obviously does not include integrating the Ethnological Museum's valuable collections into the Berlin City Palace!**

Although the Berlin-Dahlem's storage space has long been struggling with various insect species on a daily basis and objects are regularly damaged by insects, and although the fire protection measures in place no longer meet today's standards, there is no budget and no binding schedule for the reconstruction of the storage space and the relocation of some 500,000 objects. There is neither a plan nor a budget for the decades-overdue inventory and official recognition of what is missing. Therefore it remains unclear, for example, how many of the objects which appeared on the art market in the 1950s to 1980s, which were undocumented and had possibly disappeared illegally from the museum. There is no allocation of the unnumbered objects, nor of the fragments, which account for an estimated five to eight percent of the total stock. Nor has the number in need of restoration been determined. Similarly, cleaning the objects of toxins is not provided for. Efforts to photograph all the objects and register the collection data are so inadequate that, in the online database for the opening of the Berlin City Palace in 2019, at best 20% of the objects will be on display with photos. Because the entries are not checked by specialists, they are often wrong or outdated. The extensive collection documentation will not be scanned until 2019.

### **The Humboldt-Forum, referred to as "Germany's biggest cultural-political project" by the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, actually lags far behind the standards achieved in other ethnological museums in Europe.**

By following the examples of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, the Museum of Ethnography of Geneva or the Leiden Museum of Ethnography, those responsible for the Humboldt Forum could have known what work and finances would be required. The focal and starting points for these were the collections. In particular, the Paris museum should have been a clear model, because all the work that

the Humboldt Forum had at that time before it had been completed there from 1999 to 2009. For example, more than EUR 30 million were invested in order to ascertain the condition and what needed to be restored to protect the objects from insects, clean them of toxins and re-label them, to measure each piece, to weigh and photograph them. At the opening in 2006 all of the approximately 275,000 objects were accessible worldwide through the online museum database.

**The following will not be completed by the Humboldt-Forum:**

- The reconstruction of the storage buildings
- Transferring the collections (over 500,000 pieces)
- Cleaning the objects and treatment against insect infestation
- Re-labelling (with a scannable code)
- The inventory with an official statement of what is missing
- The assignment of unnumbered objects and fragments (about 5-8% of the total)
- The clarification of what needs to be restored and the valuation of each object
- The standardized photography of all objects
- Scanning the collection documentation
- The reporting and confirmation of collection data
- An online database with photos of all objects.

**In 2019 the Humboldt Forum will be no more than an opening exhibition. Are the preservation and publication of the collections less important than the symbolic-representative ceremony in a Prussian palace?**

We appeal to you to fulfil your responsibilities towards the collections and the online database. Appropriate studies and financial decisions are urgently needed. How this can be achieved may easily be determined by comparison with those European museums that have completed this work. The collaboration with and learning from European neighbours would be political signals that would be in the spirit of Alexander von Humboldt.

**You may be wondering why we need this preliminary work from its opening in 2019 onwards?**

Ethnographic museums are archives for the material culture of thousands of groups of people from the different regions of the world. Exhibitions can never show more than a selection of the objects whose quality depends on what is available in the collection and on the knowledge of those involved. The diversity of these cultures and materials calls for cooperation among many specialists, including the descendants of those who produced the artefacts (the indigenous communities). The online presentation of the collections is as essential for the object selection in global cooperation as is access to the objects in storage. While in the past it was museum curators and exhibition designers who - usually unilaterally - selected the objects from the collections and wrote the descriptions, in future the curators will present exhibitions created by teams which will be constantly forming anew. This important paradigm shift has not (yet) been recognized by those responsible for the Humboldt Forum.

Yours sincerely

The editorial team of the journal Kunst&Kontext, May 2015