

## Exhibition Review

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### ***Beyond Compare – Art from Africa in the Bode Museum, Berlin, 27.10.2017 – 24.11.2019.***

The exhibition *Beyond Compare – Art from Africa in the Bode Museum* in Berlin presents nearly eighty works of African sculpture from the Ethnological Museum in the Bode Museum's galleries of European sculpture. *Beyond Compare* is part of a series of exhibitions in preparation for the new Humboldt Forum in the reconstructed palace building in Berlin's historic centre, scheduled to open in 2020. The Humboldt Forum is planned to house the Ethnological and Asian Art collections of the National Museums in Berlin, along with other collections. The reconstruction of the former royal-imperial palace building and the conceptualization of the permanent exhibition of the non-European ethnographic collection have sparked controversy, since in the winter of 1884/85 the palace housed the so-called Berlin or Africa Conference, a gathering of representatives from several European empires, the Ottoman Empire and the United States of America to negotiate the colonization of the African continent. Against this backdrop, the exhibition might serve as a preview of the curatorial concept for the planned Humboldt Forum.

By co-presenting works, 'from two continents' as the website describes it, the exhibition aims to reveal 'possible correlations' among objects from the two collections<sup>1</sup>. Selected objects from the Ethnological Museum are paired with objects from the Bode's European sculpture collection; the respective pairs are juxtaposed throughout the galleries of European art in the permanent exhibition on the groundfloor and upper floor of the museum. In addition, a number of objects from both collections are presented together in a special exhibition space on the museum's lower floor, arranged in six thematic groupings, such as *The Others, Aesthetics, Gender – or the Multiplicity of the Person, Protection and Guidance, Performance and Taking Leave*. By inviting museum visitors 'to compare and interpret the objects' on display, the exhibition suggests to explore potential interrelationships among the co-presented pieces and ask 'what connects and what distinguishes' them from one another. Suggested comparisons range from 'visual or formal analogies' to 'substantive and conceptual correspondences' as one of the wall panels indicates. Exhibits are compared in terms of themes, function or use, spiritual significance, material and technique. For example, wooden figurines from nineteenth-century Cameroon that were used in rituals are presented together with wooden sculptures of Christian saints from France or Germany, dating from the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Another example pairs a reliquary copper bust of a male saint from fifteenth-century France with a wooden power figure (*nkisi*) from nineteenth-century Republic of the Congo that was used as a container for relics of ancestors or certain substances to counter threats.

While some reviewers in the German press expected more information about the provenance of the exhibits (Kilb 2017)<sup>2</sup>, others positively highlighted the catalogue and app for addressing the history of the objects (Memarnia 2017)<sup>3</sup>. Reviewers further missed exhibits from African countries produced before the encounter with and subsequent colonization by the Europeans (Kilb 2017), others criticized the curators' eurocentric notion of local audiences that excluded German and/or Berlin-based audiences with relations to the countries some of the presented objects originate from (Schramm 2017)<sup>4</sup>. Expanding on this, I would argue that the exhibition's comparative approach misses some more crucial points.

Firstly, while the introductory text in the exhibition indicates that the curators question the historical categorization of collected pieces into artworks on the one hand, and ethnographic

objects on the other, underlying disciplinary frameworks are not further contextualized historically and with regard to local historiographical debates among scholars and museum professionals from Berlin's national museums. While the curators indeed 'raise a number of questions' revolving around historical categorizations, as they claim, these questions do not seem to reach beyond disciplinary traditions. For example, the exhibition does not discuss the theoretical framework, historically produced by museums and academia, that generates appropriating notions of the object and transforms a piece - e.g. of ritual significance - into an acquired object of a collection and a museum exhibit. While the curators do provide information about the 'object histories' as they call it, in the exhibition catalogue and app, they shy away from exploring critical theoretical frameworks that allow to discuss the complexity of 'object journeys' in a more nuanced way. The analysis of an object's journey might, for example, include the respective time periods before and after the acquisition and integration of the objects into the museum collection and also consider the epistemic and ethical implications for rethinking notions of the museum, collection and exhibition.

Secondly, the exhibition implicitly builds on the notion of cultures as distinct from one another, and the curators do not seem to question the (historical) presumption that the pieces they suggest to compare originate from - and implicitly represent - distinct cultures. These two key conceptual assumptions, that the exhibition implicitly builds on, indicate a primarily collection and object-based curatorial approach that takes notions of the object and collection as given. Historical as well as current notions of the collection and the materially as well as intellectually appropriating practice of collecting are not further scrutinized. More than that, while it becomes clear that the curators suggest that pieces, once labelled as ethnographic objects, be considered artworks, the exhibition does not highlight how the co-presentation of historically shaped collections in the Bode's European art galleries might challenge historically eurocentric notions of the artwork, object or exhibit. Moreover, not only do the curators shy away from questioning (historical) collecting and appropriating practices; they also miss addressing the impact these practices have had on those societies the pieces historically originate from, as was explored in depth, for example, by the exhibition *Object Biographies*, commissioned by the Humboldt Lab Dahlem in 2015<sup>5</sup>, in collaboration with the Ethnological Museum.

Thirdly, I suggest that an exhibition in preparation for the Humboldt Forum—and the future Humboldt Forum herself— should critically reflect Berlin's national museums as local, historically charged spaces, as opposed to neutral, value-free containers. Not only do we need to consider the highly controversial motivations behind the demolition of the former East-German socialist *Palace of the Republic* and the reconstruction of the former royal-imperial palace building. It also needed to be discussed how local collecting practices relate to Germany's colonial, totalitarian as well as more recent past(s), and to current, controversial German identity building processes and politics. Considering their multi-layered contexts, exhibitions such as *Beyond Compare* need to explore how the National Museums in Berlin, and the Humboldt Forum in particular, reflect - and are affected by - current political debates about the country's colonial legacy, perpetuating East-West German divisions, today's multi- and intercultural societies and increasingly populist, reactionary and right-wing political shifts. Rather than primarily exploring its collections, current and future exhibitions connected to the Humboldt Forum need to challenge the forum's multiple legacies, reflect its institutional and urban contexts, and face today's political challenges.

## Notes

- 1 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, *Beyond Compare*. Website. <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/beyond-compare-art-from-africa-in-the-bode-museum.html>, accessed 22 August 2019.
- 2 Kilb, Andreas, 'Nägel geben den Leibern Kraft', Review, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 November 2017. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/austellung-im-bode-museum-naegel-geben-den-leibern-kraft-15290551.html?printPagedArticle=true#pa%E2%80%A6>, accessed 23 August 2019.

- 3 Memarnia, Susanne, ‚Wer ist wir?‘, Review, tageszeitung (taz), 26 October 2017. <https://taz.de/Debatte-ums-Humboldt-Forum!/5455513/>, accessed 23 August 2019.
- 4 Object Biographies, exhibition at Humboldt Lab Dahlem, 2015. Website. <http://www.humboldt-lab.de/en/project-archive/probebuehne-6/object-biographies/teaser/index.html>, accessed 23 August 2019.
- 5 Schramm, Katharina, ‚Das Humboldt Forum sollte viel proaktiver werden‘, interview by Susanne Memarnia, tageszeitung (taz), 7 October 2017. <https://taz.de!/5452183/>, accessed 23 August 2019.

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