

Margareta von Oswald
**WORKING THROUGH COLONIAL
COLLECTIONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHY
OF THE ETHNOLOGICAL MUSEUM
IN BERLIN**

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In an era where the legacies of colonialism are being critically re-evaluated, this book, which is divided into eight chapters, provides a timely and compelling exploration of the complexities surrounding ethnological museums. Margareta von Oswald's research initially employed participant observation, a methodological approach central to the discipline of anthropology. However, as she assumed responsibility for provenance research within the museum, her approach evolved into a form of observational participation – as she became actively involved working as an assistant to one of the Africa curators. She also worked with the museologists, exhibition designers, archivists, museum storage managers, and many more. This transition granted her unique access to the museum's objects, personnel, and historical files in the museum archive, including interviews with both current and former staff, which provided a nuanced understanding of the museum's operational dynamics. These interactions allowed her to delve into the heart of the Berlin Ethnological Museum, offering a critical analysis not only of the institution's

historical and contemporary practices but also of the broader cultural forces shaping museum collections and their interpretation. By situating her research within ongoing debates on colonial history, restitution, and the role of museums in modern society, she makes a significant contribution to the representation of museums' objects, cultural narratives, colonial histories, and museum exhibitions within cultural institutions, enhancing our understanding of their evolving role in a post-colonial world.

DECOLONIZATION AND THE ROLE OF ETHNOLOGICAL MUSEUMS

The book led me to reflect on the dichotomy between *ethnological* and *ethnographic* museums. And in my understanding, both types are concerned with the study and preservation of human cultures. Ethnological museums, such as the Berlin Ethnological Museum, adopt a comparative perspective across different societies, whereas ethnographic museums focus on more intimate, individualised cultural narratives. The Berlin Ethnological Museum, founded in 1886, is particularly poignant due to its deep connection with Germany's colonial past. The author's focus on the provenance of specific objects, such as the Luba stool (IIIc14966) and other objects identified as *Buli*, from East Africa (specifically a village in what was then the Congo Free State), which was mislabelled as having been acquired from West Africa, as well as the *bocios* from Abomey (in present-day Benin), highlight

how the museum's acquisitions were often shaped by colonial violence, exploitation, and a lack of institutional oversight. These troubling patterns may explain her shift in emphasis from collection biographies to object biographies. Similarly, her ethnographic research was originally driven by questions surrounding the mission of ethnological museums, their authority in shaping cultural representation, and their claims of rightful ownership over the collections. Although her initial plan was to conduct fieldwork across several European museums, her research ultimately began and concluded at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin (also known as the Ethnological Museum).

The author engages with the current moment in museum studies – when institutions are increasingly challenged to confront their colonial legacies and reframe their practices in a manner that engages with affected communities. Museums, once considered neutral repositories of knowledge, are now seen as active contact zones where competing narratives of power and identity intersect. The author underscores the expectation that museums today should not only preserve objects but also become transformative institutions that advocate for social change and contribute to the revival of cultural identities, often through restitution.

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND ACCESS TO COLLECTIONS

One of the most significant critiques the author makes is the unequal access to knowledge and collections. Despite the vast number of objects housed in the museum, only a fraction of them is accessible to the public, with only 71,500 of the museum's 495,000 data sets available online. This lack of transparency and restricted access reinforces a sense of inequality, where the

museum becomes an exclusive institution for a select few while obscuring the true origins and significance of the objects it holds. The author's contention that the naming of objects facilitates commodification rather than cultural understanding is a crucial insight into the politics of museum curation and knowledge production.

COLONIAL LEGACIES, MUSEUM POLITICS, AND THE “NO HUMBOLDT 21” CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE HUMBOLDT FORUM

Another of the book's most critical analyses revolves around the Humboldt Forum (currently situated in the old Berlin Palace – Stadtschloss), the new home of the Berlin Ethnological Museum's collection. The book focuses on the Ethnologisches Museum, earlier known as the Museum für Völkerkunde, from its founding in 1886 until 2000. Originally located in Dahlem, the museum closed its doors there in January 2017. Plans to relocate the collection to Friedrichshagen ultimately fell through, leading to the decision to move the exhibitions to the Humboldt Forum. The author critiques the Forum's concept and organisation, particularly its budget distribution and lack of alignment with contemporary museum practices. Despite its claims of transformation, the Humboldt Forum is presented as another venue in which the colonial heritage of the museum continues to be reproduced, albeit in more contemporary forms. The author contends that the Forum's resistance to restitution and the prevailing rhetoric of “shared heritage” highlight the institution's ongoing reluctance to fully address its colonial past.

The research also touches on the opposition movements such as “No Humboldt 21”, which argue that the Forum's emphasis on provenance research and its reluctance to engage in full restitution reflect the museum's continued attachment to colonial

ideals. These critiques echo broader debates in European museums, where the reluctance to return looted objects is framed not as a denial of history but as an attempt to share these cultural treasures within global institutions.

THE OBJECTIFICATION AND MUSEALIZATION OF CULTURAL OBJECTS

The striking feature of the book is its analysis of how museum objects are categorized, displayed, and sometimes objectified. The author reveals the power dynamics embedded in the categorization of objects, especially how African artifacts are often treated as static, singular representations of entire regions – divided into arbitrary sections rather than recognising the diversity of cultures they represent. She argues that this method of classification perpetuates stereotypical and reductive views of African cultures, reinforcing colonial narratives of the “other”.

Objects, as the author demonstrates, are not just passive items of display; they are imbued with historical and cultural significance, shaped by colonial violence and imperial conquest. This leads to a provocative insight: objects are active agents in the museum, acting as sites of memory, contested meaning, and power. The concept of “*entwesen*” – a German term that refers to the process of making an object agentive through toxicity (the process of deactivation) – is particularly compelling, as it underscores how preservation methods, such as the use of chemicals, are contributing to their ongoing alienation from their original context.

THE STAGNATION AND REGRESSIVE NATURE OF THE ETHNOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Throughout the work, the author critiques the Berlin Ethnological Museum’s

stagnation in confronting the colonial legacy that underpins its operations. Despite widespread calls for institutional change, the museum’s practices remain largely unchanged. The physical conditions of the museum’s storage facilities are depicted as substandard, with objects languishing in what the author aptly describes as a “graveyard for objects”. The lack of a proper database and the absence of transparency in the museum’s operations are indicative of broader institutional failings, including neglect and a lack of accountability for the handling, cataloguing, and preservation of objects.

This book also highlights the contradictions within the museum staff. On an individual level, some museum professionals, such as Hans Joachim Radosuboff (the former storage manager) and Boris Gliemann (the database manager), are portrayed as dedicated, with a genuine commitment to preserving the museum’s collections. However, this dedication is often overshadowed by institutional inertia and a failure to implement meaningful changes that could address the pressing issues of restitution and decolonisation.

CONCLUSION: MUSEUMS AS SITES OF CONTESTED HISTORY

The author concludes by positioning museums as crucial sites for engaging with contested histories. By making these histories visible, museums have the potential to foster critical dialogue about the past and its continued impact on the present. In this light, the museum is seen not merely as a place of preservation but as a democratic space where complex, often painful, histories can be reckoned with. The book’s title, *Working through Colonial Collections*, encapsulates this perspective, suggesting that the process of engaging with history is not one of nostalgia but of critical intervention.

The work employed a hybrid citation style, which helped keep the main body of the text concise while also providing additional context, definitions, and clarifications related to certain citations without overloading the reader with information directly in the text.

Ultimately, the book provides a valuable contribution to museum studies, colonial history, and the study of cultural heritage. It challenges museum professionals, scholars, and activists to rethink their assumptions about the role of museums in shaping public memory and how museums can –

indeed, must – become agents of social and cultural transformation in the post-colonial era.

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