

## **Exhibition Review: “Honeymoon? 5 Questions on the ‘Hans Paasche Collection’ from East Africa”**

### **Summary of exhibition concept**

A brief but thoughtful introduction into the work, challenges and responsibilities of a Swiss ethnographic museum by critically reflecting on unethical practices of our colonial past: The newly opened workshop-exhibition “Honeymoon? 5 Questions on the ‘Hans Paasche Collection’ from East Africa”, curated by Dr. Alexis Malefakis, is the first exhibition of a special series of four or five planned expositions until 2024, all revolving around the same five questions about museal work and research.<sup>1</sup> To celebrate the 50-year anniversary of the Ethnographic Museum of University Zurich as a public institution, the museum director Mareile Flitsche and her team decided to commemorate it through a gaze to the upcoming 50 years, one that may encircle the pluriverse of the objects’ narratives.<sup>2</sup> As she stated in the opening speech, the museum is ought to adapt and change and thus stripe itself off of old established paradigms that do not satisfy the multi-faceted expectations of this day and age and is challenged to re-learn how to represent the collections in the future. Thus, the team created not a conventional exhibition but a so-called “workshop-exhibition”, meaning the space is meant to be primarily used for discussion and exchange about museal work. The exhibited objects are carefully assigned to one of the five questions and underline the problems and ambivalence of the objects in light of the stated questions and lead visitors to engage with topics about complicity in colonialism, provenance research, due-diligence, problematic terms and cultural representation.

### **Presentation of the collection**

When entering the room, the visitor is immediately presented with a variety of East African objects that were collected by the German Soldier Hans and his wife Ellen Paasche during their honeymoon in 1909 to 1910. Starting at the entrance with the biography and map of travel of

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic Museum University of Zurich 2022, last visited on 27.06.2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the two collectors, the visitor gets an idea of the main interests and a possible reasoning behind the choice of what pieces they took with them. The layout of the sturdy showcases placed in the middle of the room lead the visitors naturally like a circle through the collection and introduce them to the visitors in a fixed order. After the brief introduction to the Paasches, the following sections are dealing with each of the five chosen questions on the collection, namely context (From which worlds of knowledge did the collections come to Switzerland?), provenance (What is attached to the objects due to their history(ies)?), skill (What should we talk about and agree upon?), contemporaneity (Who was and is talking to each other at the same time?) and reconnecting (What is the collections significance to their originator communities?). The objects do then serve as examples and underline the problems and thoughts behind the question asked, they are not divided thematically as for example in objects of everyday-life and weapons. However, this just shows again how randomly the Paasche's collected. All objects including knives, arrows, swords, hats, vessels, rituary and spiritual objects, statues, decoration and clothes, are represented in showcases, while some photographs and displays add even more context to the place, time and surroundings in which these tangible things were made. To add to that, some audio-guide is provided for smartphones for selected objects with QR-codes to the audio-commentary by the curator. All information are provided in both, English and German. Notable are especially the sometimes intentionally incomplete showcasing of provenances in short text fields next to the objects and the more elaborated, written information texts on the walls about the current state of knowledge, for example which exhibits are probably bought or commissioned by the Paasches during their honeymoon and which objects might have found their way to Hans Paasche by his position as a German soldier and thus showing how there is no certainty whether we look at spoils of war or simple honeymoon souvenirs.

To sum up, by going through the exhibition, instead of getting taught about a certain research topic, the visitor is confronted with a variety of beautiful East African objects and invited to dive into the complex thinking process of every anthropologist working in a museal institution, in hope of the museum to convey to what extent professionals need to navigate through the ambivalence of narratives.

### **Critical review**

As stated in the information text at the very beginning of the exhibition, the room with the showcased objects represents the concept of a 'workshop-exhibition' or 'open workspace',

and thus avoids providing any answers for the main questions. Neither the way of display of the objects nor the accompanying texts do suggest or lean towards a message based on any findings but exclusively illuminate the prevalent problems. Even though the inclusion of the visitors to the discussion about museum practices seem humble and broad-minded at first, I find it profoundly confusing at the same time. How can it be satisfying to round up the museum visit by having more questions than in the beginning? To simply know that things need to change but not remotely knowing how? If museum professionals - experts in their fields - do not seem to know the answers, who does? This and the fact that there is not a catalogue planned yet, meaning the happening discussions will conclude with loose ends, also conveys, indeed maybe falsely, as if addressing the issues is enough. Instead of waiting and preparing themselves for reactive steps, hoping that a ubiquitously accepted solution comes forth in the future, a courageous conclusion, or at least a careful suggestion is what I really missed in the exhibition.

Other than that, the exhibition teaches a lot about the amount of research and care a collection like this of Hans Paasche's needs, to be understood in an ethically respectful context. It indeed stays true to the mission of conveying the changing process in which the museum sees itself currently, as the main goal was to illustrate the challenges of ethnographic museums for the upcoming years. It should be appreciated how the curator decided not to hide the difficulties even for the presumably most basic words like "ethnography". Overall, a carefully curated exhibition that self-critically addresses timely issues and does ask legitimate questions about the role and responsibility of the museum as a public institution.

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## **Bibliography**

Ethnographic Museum University of Zurich 2022

o.A., "*Media Release and Material*", 5 Questions on the Collections, 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2022, last visited 27.06.2022.

[https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/Honeymoon\\_Workspace\\_Series/press-release-and-material.html](https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/Honeymoon_Workspace_Series/press-release-and-material.html).