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## Plastics in Peril

**International conference discussed restoration and conservation of plastics in Museums**

**A joint conference hosted by the University of Cambridge Museums and Leibniz Research Museums addressed the threat of plastics deterioration in museum collections. Individual session and keynote videos are now available online.**

Over the past 100 years, plastics have increasingly become an important part of our everyday lives and thus of our cultural heritage. However, plastics are often inherently unstable and begin to gradually disintegrate in museum storage, some melting or starting to off-gas. Objects such as the first plastic keyboards, soccer cleats, eyeglasses, and even valuable works of art are affected.

In a virtual conference over several days in November 2020, researchers exchanged views on the challenges of restoring and preserving plastics. Video recordings of "Plastics in Peril: conservation of polymers in cultural heritage," organized jointly by the *University of Cambridge Museums* and *Leibniz Research Museums*, are now available on the *Leibniz Research Museums* website and the *University of Cambridge Museums* YouTube channel at

[www.leibniz-forschungsmuseen.de/en/projects/international-conference-plastics-in-peril.html](http://www.leibniz-forschungsmuseen.de/en/projects/international-conference-plastics-in-peril.html)  
and [www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDhExi\\_byiwnJwb4Nx3Z3Xk5SefFvBCdx](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDhExi_byiwnJwb4Nx3Z3Xk5SefFvBCdx).

"Plastics have become an integral part of our lives and are therefore found in all parts of our cultural heritage," said Julie Dawson, head of conservation at the *Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge*, introducing the conference. As part of the process, she stated, plastic objects have gone from being a sign of innovation and progress to becoming a global threat to the environment.

"Many of our institutes research sustainable uses of plastics coming from a wide range of disciplines," added Matthias Kleiner, President of the *Leibniz Association*. The *Leibniz Research Museums* focus on the history of the development and handling of plastic as a historical material. Kleiner emphasized the importance of this work in enriching international scientific research with conferences such as "Plastics in Peril," but also in museum exhibitions, open laboratory days and school programs. These programs make it possible for a broader public to experience the topic of plastics in history and research but also with its current social relevance. It is fitting, therefore, that the conference was funded by the *Aktionsplan Leibniz Research Museums* which aims to strengthen internationalization and the transfer of knowledge to society.

Stefan Brüggerhoff, General Director of the *Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum – Leibniz Research Museum for Geo-resources* and coordinator of the Leibniz Restoration/Conservation Network, made it clear that the conference title was a wake-up call to museums: museum research needs to transform "Plastics in Peril" into "Plastics Preserved" through international cooperation. In addition to the *Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum*, conservators from the *Deutsches Museum* in Munich and the *Museum für Naturkunde Berlin* played a leading role in organizing the conference.

Over four days and 15 time zones, conference participants discussed and explained various approaches to caring for plastic objects in museums: materials identification, collection management and storage, conservation treatments, and packaging.

The conference, held virtually due to the pandemic, allowed for an extensive and varied program to be offered to the more than 1,000 registrants from around the world. Leibniz President Matthias Kleiner expressed hope that the conference would be an impetus for greater and deeper international collaboration on global challenges facing conservation research and museums. Follow-up events for the summer of 2021 and a joint publication are to follow.

In addition to the video recordings, a blog article by Sophie Rowe, the *University of Cambridge Museums'* main organizer, provides a summary overview of the content and outcomes of the conference: [www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2021/05/18/plastics-in-peril-conference-videos-go-live/](http://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2021/05/18/plastics-in-peril-conference-videos-go-live/).

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### **Eight Leibniz Research Museums – one Aktionsplan**

Eight Leibniz Research Museums collect, investigate, and engage. Their collections and archives comprise well over 100 million objects and form the foundation for research into: the history of the earth and its biodiversity, the history of culture and technology, and preservation of scientific and cultural heritage. The Leibniz Research Museums are guided by the understanding that access to knowledge and factual information is the basis for critical thinking and is therefore fundamental to our society. The goal of the *Aktionsplan* is to promote conversation and discussion about the major global challenges of our time. The museums are not only showcases for collections and research institutes, they also accompany society on its ongoing path toward major transformative changes. In the *Aktionsplan Leibniz Research Museums*, they jointly develop innovative strategies, areas for action, and programs. Projects take place at the museums and innovative locations, in analogue and on digital media. **A World in Motion** is the theme of their collaborative projects with a focus on mobility / migration / movement in an interdisciplinary and international context. In addition, the museums in the *Aktionsplan* work on individual and joint projects in cooperation with external partners. The *Aktionsplan* Leibniz Research Museums is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the federal states in which the research museums are located, in accordance with a resolution of the Bundestag.

**[www.leibniz-forschungsmuseen.de/en](http://www.leibniz-forschungsmuseen.de/en)**

### **The Leibniz Association**

The Leibniz Association connects 96 independent research institutions that range in focus from natural, engineering and environmental sciences to economics, spatial and social sciences and the humanities. Leibniz Institutes address issues of social, economic and ecological relevance.

They conduct basic and applied research, including in the interdisciplinary Leibniz Research Alliances, maintain scientific infrastructure, and provide research-based services. The Leibniz Association identifies focus areas for knowledge transfer, particularly with the Leibniz research museums. It advises and informs policymakers, science, industry and the general public.

Leibniz institutions collaborate intensively with universities – including in the form of Leibniz ScienceCampi – as well as with industry and other partners at home and abroad. They are subject to a transparent, independent evaluation procedure. Because of their importance for the country as a whole, the Leibniz Association Institutes are funded jointly by Germany's central and regional governments. The Leibniz Institutes employ around 20,500 people, including 11,500 researchers. The financial volume amounts to 2 billion euros.

**[www.leibniz-association.eu](http://www.leibniz-association.eu)**