



The Transformative Potential of Research in Museums

Report on the 1st Global Summit of Research Museums
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Key results

Museums have a unique potential to address the grand challenges of the Anthropocene, connecting cultures and natures, science and society.

Collection-based research is the unique strength of museums.

Museums are guided by a broad concept of knowledge and research, connecting and combining theoretical knowledge with practical expertise and societal engagement.

An open-minded, self-aware dialogue based on the recognition of the entangled history of museums' objects is needed to find appropriate ways of future collaborations, including dealing with the colonial past.

Key questions

How to open up collections and research to other disciplines, from local to global communities, to critical inquiry and (self-)reflection?

How to create the museums of tomorrow as public places where everybody's voice can be heard?

How to create new communities, new global networks and reach out and beyond the museum's walls?

The Transformative Potential of Research in Museums



Research museums are the most visited scientific institutions globally and every year reach hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Research museums have a strong collections based research agenda alongside their outreach activities, They preserve most of the global natural and cultural heritage, generate and showcase scientific knowledge, and illuminate the process of science and knowledge production. Thus, research museums, while being a strong and integral part of the wider scientific community, at the same time play a vital role in communicating the relevance of science, cultural knowledge and research to a wider public. Their research activities offer unique insights into culture, history, science and nature. But what makes a research museum? How does the term research apply to the diverse knowledge-generating activities in museum?

The Global Summit of Research Museums, organized by the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (Museum of Natural History in Berlin, Germany) in collaboration with the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in Berlin), the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, the Natural History Museum and the British Museum, both in London, brought together museum leaders from over 20 countries to reflect and discuss the state and the future of research in museums.

In this report, we want to highlight some of the most interesting and discussed topics of the conference as well as provide a comprehensive summary of all keynotes and sessions.





I. Research in Museums, Colonial Heritage and the Anthropocene

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Conference Highlights

The purpose of the summit was to review current imaginations, understandings and practices of collection-based research in museums in order to explore and develop perspectives for more comprehensive and border-crossing methods and collaborations. The summit brought together different museum sectors (arts, cultural history, science, technology, etc.), each with their unique challenges and opportunities. A broad range of topics was discussed in the two days conference – e.g. how to strengthen transdisciplinary collaboration and to identify and advocate for shared interests, locally, nationally or globally. Three topics dominated and were constant features in most sessions and conversations:

1. the definition and scope of research in a museum
2. colonial heritage and the question of global justice
3. the anthropocene and the intertwined social and ecological crisis

What research in a museum?

The modern university, for example the Humboldt University in Berlin (founded in 1810) was built around collections. Historically, there have always been strong ties between academic research and collections in research museums. Today, the role of museums has changed. They now encompass a broader responsibility including social, cultural and global questions. This has developed from a custodianship for collections with a highly specialised respective expertise and the emphasis of representation of scientific research. In an inter-connected world, museums have to strengthen their efforts to open up their collections and the research to other disciplines, from local to global communities, to critical inquiry and (self-) reflection in order to create spaces for dialogue about relevant and urgent issues. Cultural/historical museums contribute with their collections and research to a better understanding of the past as a means to inform the present and the future, as Hermann Parzinger (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany) pointed out. It is indeed the strength and the “unique selling point” (Samuel Alberti, National Museums of Scotland,

Edinburgh, United Kingdom) of museums to do collection-based research and activities, and it is vital to consider and acknowledge the specific and manifold character of museum research. Many examples at the conference reinforced this notion and showed that museums are guided by a broader concept of research, connecting and combining theoretical knowledge with practical expertise and societal engagement. Collaborative, inter- and transdisciplinary inquiry in museums often goes beyond academic research or academic discourses by integrating different forms and practices of knowledge and knowledge generation. But despite the ICOM-definition of museums as research institutions, some of them just can’t afford costly research. Gus Casely-Hayford (Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C., USA) remarked that often the first thing cut in a museum is “research”. Many contributions at the conference indicated that it would be useful to broaden the academic concept of research in the context of museums. Some even considered the term ill-suited to understanding what the activities in a museum are and in what ways knowledge is being created through e.g. curating, exhibiting or community engagement. Ken Arnold (Wellcome Trust, London, United Kingdom) highlighted, research in museums is different: less ‘dogmatic’, more inspired and curiosity-driven. What makes knowledge production in museums special is their unique place at the intersection of inquiry, questioning, science, politics and society. A central objective of our museum community therefore is to collectively think through ways in which research museums can or indeed should engage with social transformations at the local or even at the global scale.



Colonial heritage and the question of global justice

How to decolonize museums – and how to deal with the colonial heritage represented in many collections? The present international debate on ownership, colonial history, restitution of collections and global justice was a prevailing topic in many sessions and aroused varied and at times controversial discussions. It became very clear that an open-minded, self-aware dialogue based on the recognition of the entangled history of museums' objects is needed to find appropriate ways of collaborations in dealing with the colonial past. George Abungu pointed out the continuity of asymmetric international relations between the global North and the global South and made a very strong plea for an engagement as equals: "Not about us without us". The statement of a native American student, „museums are not places of trust in my community“, quoted by Stefan Simon (Global Cultural Heritage Initiatives, Yale University, New Haven, USA), echoed this shift of perspective that can help research museums to reflect what shared heritage actually means or, in the future, should mean.

Colonial history not only questions raises of ownership of museums' objects, it is also often interwoven with the history of places and the museums themselves. The special exhibition "Rum, Sweat and Tears" at the Schiffahrtsmuseum Flensburg (Germany) was a compelling example how the colonial violence in the transatlantic trade can be addressed as a heritage that connects the local history of a German city with Africa and the Caribbean today (Imani Tafari-Ama, University of The West Indies – Mona, Kingston, Jamaica).

Yet, colonial heritage is not easily turned into shared heritage, and even though museums take the responsibility as "stewards of the cultural and natural heritage", the question how to create decolonized museums and how to deal with objects stemming from a colonial context remains a central question when thinking about how to shape the international relationships in our field.

Museums in the Anthropocene

We live in times of an accelerating global crisis, defined by a harmful human impact on the atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric and other earth system processes, often framed as the Anthropocene, Earth's most recent geologic time period. As Matthias Kleiner, president of the Leibniz Association (Berlin, Germany), pointed out in his welcome address, research museums are becoming venues for discussion of the challenges of the Anthropocene, like climate change, migration, or biodiversity loss. But how can museums define their role as change agents of the Anthropocene? In his opening speech, Johannes Vogel, director general of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (Germany), emphasized the interdependence of social justice and nature conservation: „Climate change and the extinction of animals and plants are closely related to global justice.“ Many museums regard the concept of the Anthropocene and the public interest in it as unique opportunities to address global challenges and connect them with local community narratives, as Morien Rees (Varanger Museum, Vadsø, Norway) pointed out. They also have the potential to display different time scales, enabling visitors to grasp the complexities of ecological eras, and, by doing so, to raise the mental awareness of planetary time spans and the dimension of human impact on the planet Earth.

II. Keynotes and sessions

The conference was opened by a welcome reception in the headquarters of the Leibniz Association, followed by two days of plenary sessions and parallel workshops. A closing plenary presented the conference’s outcomes. Finally, a joint declaration was discussed, signed by many participants and published as an open document.

Sunday, Nov 4th, 2018

Welcome reception

In his welcoming address, **Matthias Kleiner** (President of the Leibniz Association) highlighted the role of research museums for scientific outreach, knowledge-building, and as most trusted and visited research institutions. Museums are ideally suited to address questions relevant to society because they reach out to highly diverse audiences and address multiple stakeholders. The German Minister of State for International Cultural Policy **Michelle Müntefering** took a broader stance and asked: “Is our perception of nature out of date when humankind is having such a decisive impact on it?” In a situation where Europe has long since stopped being the (self-declared) intellectual centre of the world, international cooperation between not only governments, but also societies and social actors, are becoming more and more relevant. Emerging or current global challenges, such as new disruptive digital technology, migration and climate change, can only be solved as a global community. Facilitating these challenges, Müntefering added, is a key task of Germany’s international cultural relations and education policy.

Monday, Nov 5th, 2018

I. What makes a research museum?

What makes research in a museum special is not only based on the care of its collections, but also the combination of collection-based research with interdisciplinary scholarship, embracing multiple disciplines, multiple media, and multiple methodologies, as **Samuel Alberti** (National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, United Kingdom) put it. Yet, only a fraction of the research published in international journals is object based, and only a small subset of these specifically mention object identifiers and source museums’ collections, Alberti showed, using examples in the field of the history of science. He suggested that museums should lead national and international collaborations with universities because they are stable partners and offer expertise for object handling and long-term storage, which the dynamic environment of universities cannot provide. **Bernard Alens Zako** (World Heritage Centre – UNESCO, Paris, France) highlighted the role of museums, encompassing not only research and dissemination of tangible and intangible world heritage, but also supporting changes in societies and helping in reconciliation, peace-building and security issues.

The following workshops deepened the question of research in museums, and discussed innovative approaches, interdisciplinary research agendas and the question whether a key role in society is in conflict with an excellent research agenda. **Ken Arnold** (Wellcome Trust, London, United Kingdom), for example, pointed out that curiosity is an action rather than a reaction and challenged the museums to re-engage the ‘natural’ curiosity in people. He presented an apt metaphor for the interplay between maintaining the collections and research on

one hand and public outreach on the other hand: “The walls of a museum maintain the collections. But also those walls are barriers. How can we make these walls as permeable as possible?” In the discussions, it was less the tension between research and public outreach that was focused (only a few contributors saw the danger of diminishing research quality), but the question how knowledge is being generated and constructed in the exchange between the museums’ experts and the communities they are working with. **Bonita Bennett** (District Six Museum, Cape Town, South Africa) emphasized that opening up to different ways of knowing need not lead to a dilution of research quality but can be enriching, empowering and amazingly ‘emancipating’ for museums as institutions and its public. Visitors and the museum’s communities should not only be seen just as recipients, but as co-designers.

II. Challenges for research museums today – Rethinking the institution ‘research museum’ from national to global scales in light of new global users and issues

Hermann Parzinger (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany) discussed three challenges and opportunities for research museums: 1.) Digitization, 2.) Identifying collection items and their context and 3.) Sharing and dissemination. Transparency is the key, and digital tools enable us to share information. Pointing out that colonial issues are a key challenge for museum collections, he also underlined the importance of securing the cultural heritage of the world and to fight illicit traffic and destruction. **Gus Casely-Hayford** (Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C., USA) raised and answered another challenge: How to interact with the stories and the ‘vanishing’ life of objects in museums, to reinstate their meaning. He made a plea to overcome academic constraints through a wider intellectual acknowledgement of different types of knowledge and the fusion of knowledge in order to make ‘knowledge’ accessible to a wider public.

The workshops dealt with a wide range of different aspects concerning collections: digitization, the

question of colonial and shared heritage, and knowledge transfer. **Bruno David** (Muséum national d’histoire naturelle, Paris, France) posed the pivotal question of why and how museums make and extend collections and called upon a reflection for whom and why collections are important, which is no longer self-evident. The social acceptability of enlarging collections, e.g. by extracting specimens from the wild, is not a given any more. Digital technologies enable us to maintain a unique strength of collection-based research, namely that the information is linked to objects to ensure reproducibility of scientific results. In many cases, one participant noted, these connections were already lost, e.g. hundreds of thousands of sequences in GenBank are not linked to objects and thus the identity of the taxa from which they were derived cannot be verified anymore - this is particularly worrisome as studies have shown a considerable degree of error in the taxonomic identification of GenBank sequences. **Martin R. Kalfatovic** (Smithsonian Libraries – Biodiversity Heritage Library, Washington D.C., USA) introduced the DART Framework developed at the Open Scholarship Initiative meeting to address questions about the discoverability, accessibility, reusability, transparency of scholarly communications in research museums. One of the workshops dealt with the quite different topic of how to manage collections from colonial context and how to work with the communities these objects originated from. **Imani Tafari-Ama** (University of The West Indies – Mona, Kingston, Jamaica) presented the example of Europe and the Caribbean and showed how European whitewashing of history, on the Continent and in the colonies, erased truth and cultural memories to such an extent that Caribbean countries’ claims for reparations for centuries of dehumanisation and human rights denial constitutes an ongoing debate about justice.

Tuesday, Nov 6th, 2018

III. Collectives and collaborations – The benefit of collaborative and cross-disciplinary approaches for generating innovative research methods and new knowledge on museum collections

Museums intend to inspire and challenge people to explore and share their identity, culture, and environment, to give them a sense of place. The Western Australian Museum (Perth) and its new architecture, showcased by its director **Alec Coles**, is an inspiring example how a museum can focus on the people and communities it belongs to. Yet, even with applying the principle of inviting people to share their stories and knowledge, integrating and displaying the intangible cultural heritage (e.g. Aboriginal dream stories) in museum exhibitions remains an important task and a challenge. **George Okello Abungu**, Emeritus Director General of the National Museums of Kenya, stated that in order to decolonize museums and collections, a shared language is essential. The concepts we apply to museums - like “universal museum” and eventually also “research museum”, still carry and imply colonial power relations: “The collaborations in the past appear to have followed the existing power structures whereby relations were mostly north - south, with the south as the source of study materials while the north provided the intellectual capacity to decipher and produce the knowledge.” Museums must face the injustice of this past, often realized in the name of science, and “move beyond their walled worlds and world of comfort defined by research for research purposes to tackle issues beyond their traditional practices”. Yet, Abungu stressed, that the discussion about and the production of new and innovative knowledge, while aiming at correcting past mistakes, should not fully be dominated by the past.

The workshops focused on individual aspects of collaboration in museums: working with civil society and NGOs, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaborations and the conservation of cultural heritage. Many museums see the urgency to develop new types of collaborations and to develop a framework to acknowledge and value multiple knowledge systems. This can be achieved by close

collaborations with cultural knowledge holders, e.g. from indigenous communities. **Lori Bettison-Varga** gave the example how the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (USA) partners with people in a geographically vast region and diverse population through a variety of programs, including community/citizen science with Urban Nature Research Center scientists. **Stefan Simon** (Global Cultural Heritage Initiatives, Yale University, New Haven, USA) discussed the problem of intangible heritage. Preservation can alienate intangible heritage from objects since people who have this intangible heritage are not allowed to interact with objects. In addition, preserving intangible heritage may change or interrupt it. Adding perspectives to collections is a win, not a loss. Visitors prefer information that enables them to make up their own minds. They don't want the museums to tell them how it is. **Alison Wain** (University of Canberra, Australia) pointed out that preserving cultural heritage may include putting it at risk (e.g. by putting food on an altar). Preserving the intangible can also mean allowing to use the object. There is not a single best practice for the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage. Depending on the object and context, what constitutes best practice can be different.

IV. Vision and future of research museums – Speculative scenarios to imagine what research museums could or indeed should be

Kirk Johnson (Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Washington D.C., USA) and **Ian Owens** (Natural History Museum London, United Kingdom) presented the project “One World Collection”. A pilot study revealed that the majority of scientific collections are concentrated in relatively few large museums in the northern hemisphere (ca. 60), which hold some 1.025 billion objects. However, these collections do not represent the Earth's biodiversity hotspots: ca. 60% of these objects derive from North America and Europe, making large portions of the world under-represented in the world's collections, including regions that are the most biodiverse ones. From the discussions, the urgent need to decentralize the institutions collecting and analyzing biodiversity emerged, including capacity building in the regions where such institutions are missing. In his keynote, **Morien Rees** (Varanger

Museum, Vadsø, Norway) explored how museums can contribute to a sustainable future, what he addressed as the most important task facing the global community: who if not museums are able (and willing) to raise awareness and initiate global change?

The workshops picked up on this discussion. Museums are using the new lens of the Anthropocene to inspire cross-disciplinary collections-based research, scholarly-driven exhibition, and community engagement. **Nicole Heller** (Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh, USA) is the first curator of the Anthropocene in a Natural History Museum. She discussed some of the ways the museum is using its collections to comprehend the Anthropocene, and its plans for installing a scholarship center to foster humanities-science engagements, art-science exhibition, and new museum constituencies. Another way to approach the grand challenges was introduced by **Lucy Robinson** (Natural History Museum & ECSA, London, United Kingdom) who argued that citizen science can contribute to create a more inclusive society and securing a sustainable future. Research museums are ideally placed to harness the transformative potential of citizen science because they are uniquely positioned at the interface between public engagement and world-class research. **Purity Kiura** (Kenya National Museums, Nairobi, Kenya) presented capacity building and technology

transfer in museum science from a Kenyan perspective. Capacity building is not only one way from the North to the South, but also the other way round, as it already happened between museums in Kenya and Great Britain. And it means more than “training a few people“. Cooperation is always starting with personal contacts and meetings. Therefore, internships of museum staff from Europe in African museums would be extremely helpful. Still, some participants in the workshop stress that win-win situations should deliver more than just good relations. Real win-win situations should lead to new museum buildings, new infrastructures. Other participants stress that it’s about justice. After four centuries of exploitation of the South by the North, a way must be found to talk about it honestly and openly. Only then will capacity building at eye level be possible. Another big question is repatriation and the question whether the countries of origin can benefit from repatriated objects.

Vocies, impressions and quotes from the closing plenary

“The GSRM showed: you cannot do it for others without them. Do it with us, not for us. Museums must include everybody.”

George Abungu

“Cooperation is only possible if boundaries are fluid, if there is no suspicion. Shared heritage is only possible if we all can travel to the places where this heritage is.”

Freda Nkirote M'Mbogori

“Museums have to reach out of their buildings to be noticed and to achieve their mission.”

Molly Fannon







The joint declaration

Towards A Global Knowledge and Collection Network of Research Museums

Research museums are stewards of global knowledge, biodiversity and heritage. Their tangible and intangible collections contribute to a worldwide infrastructure. This is used for research, teaching, social and scientific engagement, transcending cultural or geographical boundaries.

Research museums are an integral part of science and society. Their research addresses global challenges of our modern world that comprise a wide spectrum of disciplines, such as natural sciences, humanities, arts and applied sciences, and a wide range of methods. They conduct academic, collaborative and interdisciplinary research, develop collections and communicate knowledge in dialogue and co-creation with a wide and diverse public. Research in museums aims to preserve, document and develop our natural and cultural heritage as a source for knowledge and identity and as a global scientific and cultural infrastructure.

Research museums link science, humanities, cultures and society in a unique way, acting as conveners, mediators and innovators in supporting democracy, human rights and the global knowledge society. Their innovative communication, public programs and exhibitions reach large populations. At the same time, research museums are dynamic, they actively engage in continued self-reflection of their own actions and their cultural contexts.

To be able to fulfill these ambitious goals, we aim to develop a global knowledge and collection network of research museums and to strengthen border-crossing connectivity and collaboration. Such a diversity of world perspectives is an expression of our common responsibility of globalizing knowledge and heritage. We take our responsibilities seriously and commit to creating and maintaining inclusive, diverse and robust knowledge communities and infrastructures.

In the future the dialogue between science, humanities, cultures and society needs to be intensified in order to develop new innovative solutions for the challenges of the modern world, using cutting edge science and international digital infrastructures. We continue to be a driver of these developments in order to strengthen our institutions, extend our reach into science, cultures and society, honor our global responsibility to create a better future and support a sustainable development of mankind and our planet.

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