

# **‘We Don’t Want Another White Guy to Tell our Story!’ Reflections on a Collaborative Exhibition Project about the ‘Francis La Flesche Collection’ at the Humboldt Forum**

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**Abstract:** Collaboration with creator communities has become a new paradigm for ethnological museums. In this article, we discuss the possibilities and limits of cooperation with stakeholders from creator communities based on our experience of the last five years, during which we created an exhibition together with the Nebraska Indian Community College (NICC) for the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. In 1894, the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde commissioned Francis La Flesche, who is today considered the first Indigenous ethnologist, to assemble a collection of his own culture, the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>. ‘We don’t want another white guy to tell our story!’, Wynema Morris, Professor at the NICC, made clear when we told her about our plans to do an exhibition together with the college. The historical collection became the starting point for a collaborative project that was developed from 2017 to 2022. The experiences of racism, violence and loss of land still influence the living conditions of the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community today. In this context, the Berlin collection is of particular importance, because it bears witness to the resistance against colonization. It offers the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> the opportunity to reconnect with their ancestors and present their own history to a German public. The project also made clear how deeply inscribed colonial contexts are in the collections of ethnological museums.

*[collaboration, Omaha, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Humboldt Forum, provenance research]*

## Introduction

‘We don’t want another white guy to tell our story!’ is how Wynema Morris, Professor at the Nebraska Indian Community College (NICC) in Macy, Nebraska, reacted when she was first told about the plans to do an exhibition on a collection of Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup><sup>1</sup> cultural belongings<sup>2</sup> assembled by Francis La Flesche, today part of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. Her reaction is quite understandable since for a very long time Native Americans<sup>3</sup>, like other Indigenous<sup>4</sup> nations, have been talked about in museums instead of being able to talk for themselves and hence tell their own story.

The Cultural Belongings assembled by Francis La Flesche between 1894 and 1898 are the starting point for a collaborative exhibition project at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin involving the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss, the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the NICC. The collection is of particular interest because the Ethnologisches Museum commissioned Francis La Flesche to assemble a collection giving a comprehensive picture of his culture, the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>. The collection is therefore considered to be the first self-representation of a Native nation from North America in a museum. Today, Francis La Flesche is also described as the first Indigenous ethnologist from North America (Mark 1982; Mark 1988).<sup>5</sup> Besides cultural belongings, La Flesche sent a comprehensive catalogue to Berlin that allows one to understand his perspective, that of an Indigenous ethnologist in the nineteenth century. For the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> today the collection in Berlin has a special meaning, as it is evidence of their resistance to colonialism. It also provides an opportunity to reconnect with their ancestors, as well as tell their own history.

Cooperation or collaboration with so-called creator communities<sup>6</sup> has become a new paradigm for the Humboldt Forum. The collaborative project around the La

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1 The Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> (also: Omaha) are an Indigenous Nation and a federally recognized tribe who reside on the Omaha Reservation in northeastern Nebraska and western Iowa.

2 Cultural belongings (also called objects or exhibition items) are not to be reduced to mere things or artefacts, but to be understood as relationships between people, localities, and cultural and artistic practices relating to the past, present and future.

3 The term ‘Native American’ is a designation for the descendants of those who lived in the area of the present-day USA before its colonization by Europeans. The term is used for over 500 different indigenous nations, each with their own name. Wherever possible we use the specific names of the people.

4 We capitalize ‘Indigenous’, as it articulates and identifies a group of political and historical communities and indicates the plurality of diverse, sovereign communities who were living in specific regions when Europeans first attempted to name, categorize and colonize them (Weeber 2020).

5 Even though Francis La Flesche never studied ethnology, he was employed as an ethnologist in 1910 by the Bureau of American Ethnology and was already working and publishing on ethnological topics in the nineteenth century.

6 Like the terms ‘source communities’ or ‘communities of origin’, we use the term ‘creator communities’ to describe various groups of previous owners, custodians or users both in the past, when these Cultural Belongings were brought to museums, and to their descendants today (Brown and Peers 2005; Christidis et al. 2008; Golding and Modest 2013).

Flesche collection shows the significance of historical museum collections for stakeholders from Indigenous communities today and the potential that can be found in jointly conceived exhibitions. At the same time, the work on this project has raised some questions concerning collaborative museum work at the Humboldt Forum: to what extent do collaborative museum projects fundamentally and sustainably change museums? Have collaborations become an integral part of everyday museum life? To what extent do collaborative projects with partners from societies of origin run the risk of re-legitimizing the colonial institutions called museums? Furthermore, this project has encouraged us to reflect our own working methods, as well as the organizational structures of the Ethnologisches Museum and Stiftung Humboldt Forum. In many ways the existing working methods, structures and power relations in museums present obstacles to such collaborations.

The goal of this article is to provide insights into this collaborative exhibition and to critically reflect on the possibilities and limits of cooperation with stakeholders from creator communities. Before we reflect critically on the process of the collaborative exhibition project, we will provide an overview on the history of Francis La Flesche's collection and the time it was assembled. To do so we first must understand who Francis La Flesche was and where he came from.

## Francis La Flesche

Francis La Flesche was born in 1857 to Tainne and Joseph La Flesche on the Umo<sup>ho</sup> reservation, which today lies in the US states of Nebraska and Iowa. Francis was his mother's first child. His father already had three children with his first wife, Mary (Mark 1988).

Joseph La Flesche (also Estamahza or Iron Eyes) was the son of a Ponca woman (a neighboring Indigenous Nation of the Umo<sup>ho</sup>) and a French fur trader. After his father's death, Joseph was adopted by Big Elk, a chief of the Umo<sup>ho</sup>. When Big Elk died, Joseph himself became one of the most influential yet controversial chiefs of the Umo<sup>ho</sup>. Along with his first wife Mary, he was part of a small group who converted to Christianity and lived in an area of the reservation disparagingly called the 'Make-Believe White-Men Village' (Swetland 1994). Joseph sent his children to the mission school, where on the one hand they learned to read and write English but on the other hand were forced to abandon their Umo<sup>ho</sup> language and way of life. However, the mission school also provided educational opportunities for the children, which certainly contributed to the fact that two of Francis' sisters are still important figures in Native North America today. While his half-sister Susette La Flesche became an important activist for Native American civil rights (Rhea 2016), his sister Susan La Flesche was the first Indigenous woman in the U.S. to study medicine. Subsequently she founded the first hospital on a reservation (Starita 2016).

At the age of eight, Francis La Flesche was sent to the Presbyterian Boarding School close to the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> reservation. Years later Francis La Flesche wrote about his experiences there in the book *The Middle Five* (La Flesche 1978). In many of the mission schools for Indigenous children in North America at that time, violence and systematic psychological and physical abuse of the children was very common (Adams 2020). The largest of these mission schools, the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, incidentally had the motto 'Kill the Indian, Save the Man' (Fear-Segal and Rose 2016). The experiences at the schools traumatized several generations of Native Americans to this day. Francis La Flesche does not describe experiencing systematic violence and abuse in his book. Nevertheless, the boarding-school experience caused generational trauma among the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> that can still be felt today.

After the Presbyterian Boarding School that Francis La Flesche attended had to close in 1869, he returned to the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> reservation. Once there, he participated in important Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> social and religious events. Unlike many other Native Americans of his generation who spent their entire childhood at a boarding school, he thus learned to live the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> culture from an early age on.

In 1879 La Flesche and his half-sister Susette decided to accompany and support Standing Bear, chief of the Ponca, on his journey across the United States in the fight for Native American civil rights (Tibbles 1995). Standing Bear's sixteen-year-old son had died as a result of the violent relocation of the Ponca to a new reservation in 1878. While attempting to bury his son in the original Ponca settlement area, Standing Bear was arrested and subsequently taken back to the Ponca's new reservation in Nebraska. In the ensuing court case, Standing Bear was acquitted with the historically significant ruling that Native Americans are also entitled to the fundamental rights of the U.S. Constitution. After the trial, Standing Bear, Francis and Susette La Flesche went on a tour of the eastern United States to advocate the enforcement of civil rights for all Native Americans.

During this trip, Francis La Flesche met the Senator from Iowa, who got him a job as a clerk at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington DC. After a few years of living in Washington DC, Francis La Flesche began studying law in the evenings, earning his bachelor's degree in 1891 and his master's degree in law just one year later. It was during this time that he met Alice C. Fletcher, who became a central figure in his professional and personal life. Francis La Flesche accompanied Fletcher on her assignment to enforce the Allotment Act on the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> as her scribe, translator and informant (Mark 1988). Together they studied and recorded Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> ceremonies and sent Cultural Belongings to the Peabody Museum at Yale University in Connecticut. Upon their return to Washington DC, Fletcher and La Flesche were employed in various capacities in the Office of Indian Affairs. Together they processed their rich research material. Fletcher published initial findings under the title *A Study of Omaha Indian Music* (Fletcher 1893), which acknowledged La Flesche's role on the book's cover. Finally, in 1910, they jointly published their entire research in the 27th Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology under the title 'The Omaha Tribe' (Fletcher and

La Flesche 1911). It is the most comprehensive and complete work on the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> culture to date.

## The 'La Flesche Collection' in Berlin and its Historical Context

In 1894, the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde* in Berlin (today's Ethnologisches Museum) commissioned Francis La Flesche to assemble a collection of Cultural Belongings from 'his own culture', the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> (*SMB-EM, I/MV 565, E 1050/1895*).

The museum, which has its roots in the *Brandenburgisch-Preußische Kunstammer*, was founded in 1873 as an institute for research and a repository for the safekeeping of Cultural Belongings from the Americas, Africa, Asia, Oceania and Europe. As a product of the European appropriation and colonization of the world, the museum embodied an attitude that set Europeans apart from the perceived 'exotic other' (Heller 2017; Ethnologisches Museum n.d.; Kuster et al. 2013; Penny 2002, 2019; von Oswald 2022; Zimmerman 2001). Colonization, the appropriation of Cultural Belongings, and the accumulation of museum collections in Berlin went hand in hand. In 1889, the German Bundesrat stipulated that all items appropriated by civil servants, military personnel and participants in state-sponsored research trips to the German colonies should be sent to the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*. In 1896, this resolution was extended to include German military campaigns explicitly. The museum staff were essentially given 'first pick', and after inspecting the Cultural Belongings were free to decide to include them in their collections or pass them on to other ethnological museums in Germany (Binter et al. 2021). During this time the collections grew enormously, from around 40,000 Cultural Belongings in 1880 up to nearly half a million at the end of the First World War in 1918 (Ethnologisches Museum n.d.). Large parts of the material and immaterial collections from all over the world that are now in in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin were compiled under colonial conditions, often with violence (Ethnologisches Museum 2021).

The collection brought together by Francis La Flesche was a different case. Together with Fletcher, La Flesche visited Berlin in 1894 and met, among others, Adolf Bastian, the director of the museum, and Eduard Seler, the curator of the collections from the Americas (Bolz and Sanner 2000; *SMB-EM, I/MV 544, E 1205/1898*). It was Alice Fletcher who convinced the museum to commission La Flesche to assemble a collection that would best represent his own people, the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>.

Four years later, the collection arrived in Berlin with around sixty Cultural Belongings and an accompanying catalogue.<sup>7</sup> The collection of Francis La Flesche in Berlin is different from his other collections in North American museums. Not only was he commissioned to assemble it specifically for the museum in Berlin, but he also had a

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<sup>7</sup> La Flesche's catalogue is included in the publication 'Against the Current. The Omaha. Francis La Flesche and His Collection', Labschinski et al., 2023.

large number of the items newly made, as they no longer existed or were no longer in use. It was La Flesche's self-proclaimed goal to show as comprehensive a picture of his culture as possible (La Flesche 1898; *SMB-EM, I/MV 565, E 1195/1895*). The collection consists of Cultural Belongings representing various aspects of Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> culture, including ceremonial items, a war shirt, tools, games and musical instruments. While we now know that the Cultural Belongings were collected by Francis La Flesche, the producers of the pieces and their former owners are unknown.

Francis La Flesche assembled the Cultural Belongings at a time when the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> way of life was radically changing. Several decades before La Flesche gathered the collection for Berlin, the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> had moved on to the reservation and had been forced to abandon the traditional buffalo hunt. Like other Indigenous nations of North America, the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> faced the choice between resisting the United States government or leaving their traditional way of life behind and integrating into the new nation of the United States.

With the end of the American Civil War in 1865, the colonization of the Midwest gathered momentum. Numerous states were founded, and the *white*<sup>8</sup> population grew rapidly. Simultaneously the Indigenous population declined. While at the beginning of colonization diseases were primarily responsible, in later years it was violent conflicts, reservation policies and economic dependence that were the reason. Overall, the situation for the Indigenous population was characterized by land loss, racism and violence (Colwell 2017; Mattioli 2018; Yenne 2008).

With the construction of the Pacific Railroad from 1865 onwards, hundreds of miles of track were laid between Omaha and Sacramento. The railroad connected the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and changed the region forever (White 2012). With the railroad came a massive settlement project that gave railroad employees land that was previously owned by Indigenous nations in the Great Plains (Belich 2009). By 1890 millions of new settlers had reached the region, and land the size of France was privatized (Mattioli 2018). The railroad disrupted bison migration routes and cut up the hunting grounds of Indigenous nations. Soon, endless grasslands were replaced by cultivated corn and wheat fields, and the roaming herds of bison had to make room for fenced-in herds of cattle (White 2012).

The near extinction of bison represents the colonization of the Great Plains more than anything else. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was estimated that the bison population of the Midwest numbered 27 to 30 million animals, of which only 800 survived in 1881 (Isenberg 2020). A single herd of bison survived colonization of

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8 We put the word *white* in italics intentionally to raise awareness of these power relations, and to encourage readers to reflect on their own identities. The terms 'Indigenous' and 'Black' constitute a political concept of identity. We also use this word to draw attention to unequal power relations with systemic historical roots. At the same time, the word serves as a self-designation for People of Colour who seek not only to express shared experiences of discrimination and exclusion, but also to draw attention to the potential for resistance against white power structures.

the Great Plains. In a few years, an entire animal population was nearly wiped out. Responsible for this was the global demand for bison leather, which fuelled unprecedented massacres of bison by profit-hungry hunters. The extinction of the bison made it impossible for Indigenous nations to maintain their traditional ways of life (Taylor 2011).

Collective land ownership by Indigenous nations in the Midwest also conflicted with the colonization by white settlers. The U.S. government therefore attempted to prohibit it through legislation, thereby facilitating the expropriation of land. The Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851 was the beginning of the reservation policy, establishing precisely defined tribal lands for Indigenous nations. The lands were again significantly reduced by the second Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 (Mattioli 2018).

The U.S. government sought to enforce reservation policies largely peacefully. In cases where Indigenous nations resisted this policy, the government resorted to military means. In the second half of the nineteenth century many people died in bloody conflicts and colonial massacres in the Midwest. Many of the early conflicts were won by Indigenous nations, but the introduction of the repeating rifle shifted the balance of power in favour of the U.S. Army. While the Sioux, Cheyenne Arapaho, and Comanche went to war with *white* settlers and the U.S. Army, the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> chose not to rebel against the reservation.

Reservation policy not only served to reduce the land of Indigenous nations to just a fraction of the area they had previously claimed, it also placed them in a dependency of the U.S. government, and it created the social and cultural opportunities to integrate Native Americans into white American society against their will. Thus, model farms, schools and mission churches were established on reservations. Inhabitants of the reservation were not allowed to leave it without permission. The goal was to completely eradicate their traditional way of life. Of course, this meant the total eradication of whole cultures, including their social and political organization, economic systems, cultural belief systems and in particular tribal languages. The assault launched through federal policy was not only brutal but had long-lasting negative impacts that resonate until today.

The reservation era was also characterized by extreme poverty. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was the economic situation rather than the military one that threatened Indigenous nations. Native Americans were deprived of their livelihoods, the reservation policy had significantly reduced their lands, the bison were nearly extinct. They became dependent on federal aid in the form of food and clothing. This new dependence was often used as leverage against Native American resistance.

To this day, settler colonialism and the experience of racism and violence continue to shape the lives of the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>. This political-historical context is important to understand the genesis of the Berlin collection and the reason why it's still so important for the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> today.

## Process of the Exhibition: 'Against the Current'

Francis La Flesche's collection has become a link between the past and the present and the starting point for a new chapter in the relationship between Berlin and Nebraska. It is a connection that began at the end of the nineteenth century with Francis La Flesche and was continued with several members of the Umo<sup>ho</sup> Nation for a temporary exhibition that opened at the Humboldt Forum in September 2022.

The Humboldt Forum is located in the centre of Berlin and brings together exhibitions and programs by four cultural institutions: the State Museums of Berlin – more specifically the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst; the Stadtmuseum Berlin; the Humboldt University; and the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss. The Humboldt Forum is highly disputed and has been much discussed by the German public and press (Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, n.d.; Decolonize M21, n.d.; Häntzschel 2019; Starzmann 2019). One reason for this is the architecture: the building is a reconstruction of the former Berlin palace, which was demolished after World War II. In the GDR the so-called Palace of the Republic was erected in its place. This became an important cultural centre for East Berlin, but in 1990 it was closed and later torn down. Some say the Palace of the Republic has been 'replaced' by the Humboldt Forum. The architecture of the Humboldt Forum certainly draws a strong connection to the historic baroque Hohenzollern palace. Critics argue that the reconstruction ignores the history of the Palace of the Republic: for them the new building represents a symbolic erasure of the GDR's cultural contributions and a return to Germany's pre-war and pre-divided history. As a result, it symbolizes the desire to restore a German national identity based on its imperial roots. Critics argue that the building perpetuates a narrative that romanticizes and glorifies Germany's imperial past. The Hohenzollern dynasty, associated with the original palace, was closely linked to Germany's history of colonialism and expansionism. It is therefore criticized as a celebration of past imperial power and a reminder of Germany's colonial aspirations. The inclusion of a cross on top of the reconstructed Berlin Palace adds to the perception of the Humboldt Forum as a symbol of Christian superiority.

Another reason for strong criticism was the decision to present the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum in the reconstructed palace. Already in 2013 various postcolonial and diasporic organizations started the campaign 'No Humboldt 21' and demanded a stop to the construction of the building. They issued a statement saying that 'the current concept violates the dignity and property rights of communities in all parts of the world. It is Eurocentric and restorative. The establishment of the Humboldt Forum is in direct contradiction to the aim of promoting equality in a migration society' (No Humboldt 21 2013).

The exhibition 'Against the Current: The Omaha, Francis La Flesche and his collection' is one of several temporary exhibitions at the Humboldt Forum. These are spaces within the exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Museum



für Asiatische Kunst on the second and third floors of the building. These temporary exhibition spaces were created by the founding directorate under the chair of Neil MacGregor, who was appointed by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, in the context of the so-called 'optimization process'. This optimization process meant that the original exhibition concepts developed by the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst were revised by the founding directorate, and some of the planned projects were put on hold. Some of the exhibition rooms used by the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst were then handed over to the general director. The goal was to create a more flexible exhibition design in these spaces and to use them for projects with interdisciplinary curatorial teams. More specifically collaborative projects with international partners were to be shown there.

We began working on the project 'Against the Current: The Omaha, Francis La Flesche and his collection' in 2017. There had been some research and publications done on the collection by former curators from the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (Bolz and Sanner 2000; Hartmann 1973, 1985) but the items had not been on view before, at least not as a whole collection. For us the La Flesche collection was interesting for several reasons, but most importantly because it was collected by an Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> who at the same time was an established ethnologist.<sup>9</sup> The accompanying catalogue also gives very interesting insights into the collector's intentions. Further, the collection is not too big and is nearly complete, only a few pieces having been lost over the course of time.<sup>10</sup>

Our proposal to do an exhibition on the La Flesche collection was welcomed by the founding directorate. The acquisition process of the La Flesche collection is well documented, and there is no doubt that the collection was rightfully acquired by the museum. In times of questioning the rightful ownership of museum collections, the desire to establish 'unproblematic' provenances was great on the management level of the Humboldt Forum.

From the beginning, we wanted to create this exhibition in collaboration with the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community. Therefore, one of the first steps was to get in touch with community representatives. We contacted Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> authors and some museums and archives in Nebraska to ask if they knew anyone from the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community who would be willing to work on such a project. Someone recommended the NICC as a contact point. There we found Wynema Morris' contact information. We emailed her, introduced the La Flesche collection in Berlin and explained that we were hoping to develop a collaborative project with the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community. Luckily Wynema

9 Even though Francis La Flesche was hired by the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1910, already in the 19th century he had worked and published on ethnological topics and presented at the AAAS, the predecessor of the American Anthropological Association, in 1884.

10 It seems that the following four items from the 'La Flesche collection' in Berlin are missing: a whistle, a bunch of stiff grass, an eagle feather and one of the arrows.



Fig. 1 Viewing the collection in storage at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin in 2018  
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Morris replied soon afterwards and was interested to find out more. After several emails and video calls, we were able to present the proposed project in person at the NICC in April 2018. We met with some of the community elders, descendants of La Flesche and visited the Tribal Government, soliciting support from various Umo<sup>ho</sup> stakeholders. Following this trip, we managed to contract Wynema Morris as the coordinator for the project at the NICC. We set up a Memorandum of Understanding that officially gave the NICC extensive input into the exhibit and all activities and publications surrounding the project.

In October 2018 and May 2019, two delegations from the NICC came to Berlin. The first group in 2018 consisted of Wynema Morris, the NICC's grant writer Michael Berger, the two students Tracy Mitchell and Isha Morris, and Pierre Merrick, a descendant of Francis La Flesche. The main goal of the trip was to view the collection, meet with the German exhibition team and see the exhibition venue, which was still a building site at this point. Furthermore, the team from the NICC was introduced to the German institutions involved in the project. The German exhibition team aimed to be as transparent as possible regarding the project's working methods and financial resources, the responsibilities the exhibition team had towards the museum and the General Director of the Humboldt Forum, and the organizational process of the German institutions involved.

The exhibition concept was still rather vague at this point, and there was plenty of room to discuss ideas. The Umo<sup>ho</sup> delegation made it quite clear from the beginning, during the ride from the airport, that this exhibition could not just be about the historical La Flesche collection, but that it had to speak about the social and political



Fig. 2 The curatorial team visits the future exhibition space at the Humboldt Forum in 2018  
© Stiftung Humboldt Forum

issues that are relevant to today's Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> people. Following this first visit and numerous discussions within the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community and the NICC, it became clear that an important pre-condition for the collaborative project was that the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> would be able to represent themselves in the exhibition.

The question of restitution never played a major role in the project. At an early stage the topic was addressed by the German curatorial team in one of the discussions held during the visits to Berlin. At that point, Wynema Morris and the group of Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> representatives stated that giving back the Cultural Belongings was not an option since the community did not have any facilities to house the items. Furthermore, they explained that restitution could cause problems, for example, in deciding who should take care of the pieces. During the public events surrounding the exhibition opening in September 2022 the topic was again addressed. Currently, the standpoint of the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> team is that neither the community nor the NICC has suitable facilities to house the collection. Nevertheless, many Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> want the Cultural Belongings to return home. As an alternative to restitution, we are therefore thinking of arranging a long-term loan to a museum in Nebraska close to the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> reservation. That way, many more members of the community can have access to their Cultural Belongings.

As our coordinator on the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> side, Wynema Morris has the very challenging task of mediating among the various interests within the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community, including the Tribal Government, the La Flesche descendants and the NICC. The opinions of the various persons and institutions involved differ in some points. For example, at the beginning of the project some of the La Flesche descendants demanded to be the main contact persons for the German museums, whereas some community

elders opposed the collaboration or criticized the NICC's role in the project. According to Wynema Morris, many Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> were not aware of the importance of the collection in Berlin when the German exhibition team reached out to the community in 2017. That is because the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> Nation has lost a large number of its possessions and has traditionally paid little attention to its own history. Therefore, in some cases the value of the historical Cultural Belongings was not immediately recognized by the community members. After news about the German La Flesche collection reached the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> they had to ask themselves some important questions: how should they deal with what is considered sacred knowledge? Is it possible to impart one's own knowledge to a German museum audience with a different cultural background? Who controls the knowledge and owns the knowledge? Who is allowed to make decisions about it? Once it was decided that the community would participate and it was agreed that the NICC as an institution could speak on behalf of the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>, additional challenges arose. For example, how should orally transmitted knowledge be put in writing, and how should one deal with the short attention span a museum audience has? The most important question was: are we perpetuating stereotypes with this exhibition? For the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> exhibition team, this was important because the goal was to revive, vitalize and strengthen the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> nation. Many colleagues were consulted in the process, and in the end the conclusion was that this project would be the first time that the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> would be able to provide their own voice in a museum exhibition.

In May 2019 the second visit by the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> delegation took place. The delegation again included Wynema Morris, Michael Berger and Pierre Merrick, as well as Barbara McKillip-Erixson, an educator and student at the NICC, and Vanessa Hamilton, member of staff at the NICC. The time was used to develop the design together with the designers and architects of the exhibition from the company The Green Eyl. The goal was to transfer some of the central cosmological ideas of the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> into the design. The most obvious is the circular arrangement of the exhibition. The circle (or circularity) is sacred and holy to the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>. Another example is the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> way of storytelling, which is mirrored in the video installation. A story has no end and no beginning but instead rotates around a common centre. The arrangement of the Cultural Belongings within the exhibition follows the structure in La Flesche's catalogue. Some items are not shown in the exhibition at all, either because they had been lost, are too fragile or are sacred. The selection was made by the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> team.

The visits to Berlin by the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> delegations naturally raised different expectations towards the project among the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> involved. The collection in Berlin was unknown to them before the Berlin team reached out to the NICC. Hence, their first encounter with the Cultural Belongings was marked by great emotionality. The pieces provide an opportunity for them to reconnect with their ancestors and past ways of life, and to look back on and present their own history with pride. Pierre Merrick, a descendant of Francis La Flesche who is part of the team, said that it filled him with special pride to be one of the first Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> to touch these belongings in over a hundred years. He hopes that one day his grandchildren will be able to come to Berlin too.



Fig. 3 The historical La Flesche collection in the exhibition at the Humboldt Forum. Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, Foto Alexander Schippel



Fig. 4 A view of the exhibition during the opening week in September 2022. The portraits of La Flesche are mirrored in the glass of the showcase. Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, Foto David von Becker



Fig. 5 The video inStallation as a circle of stories around the showcase. Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, Foto Alexander Schippel

It was of particular importance to Wynema Morris that some of the items had been in use before they were given to the museum and that the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> had left their mark on the pieces. In particular, La Flesche's catalogue is important to her and is even used in her classes at the college today. In general, for the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> delegation the project is of particular importance because, as they describe it, it puts the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> on the world stage. In the exhibition, they have the opportunity to tell their own story and represent their culture.

## Possibilities and Limits: A Critical Reflection on Collaboration in the Humboldt Forum

Collaboration with so-called societies of origin has become a new paradigm for ethnological museums. But has it become an integral part of everyday museum life, or, as Andrea Scholz from the Ethnological Museum Berlin asks, are collaborative projects primarily an object of academic discourse or cultural-political relations (Scholz 2019)?

In 2019, a group of 26 German museums signed the so-called Heidelberg Statement, agreeing to put relationships at the centre of their work, be it collaborative provenance research or partnerships with institutions in the societies of origin. The document states that 'relations have been established between humans through these Cultural Belongings, which have been – and continue to be – important for those who once created them, for their descendants as well as for all societies in general. These relations stand – similar to diaspora relations – in the foreground of our attention' (Directors of Ethnographic Museums in German Speaking Countries, 2019). Among the signatories was the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin and its director Lars-Christian Koch. The importance of cooperation is also stated in a position paper on the website of the museum: 'Cooperating with the descendants of the producers, users, and previous owners in what are referred to as the societies of origin of the objects, with the present-day nation states, and with members of the diasporas is of great importance for the museum staff. This form of cooperation has been part of the everyday work of the curators at the Ethnologisches Museum for decades' (Ethnologisches Museum, 2021). In a text entitled 'Colonialism and Coloniality' on the website, collaboration has also been mentioned as a central element in the work of the Humboldt Forum. 'An essential feature of this policy is the involvement of, and exchange with, representatives of the source communities of non-European objects. Their knowledge will be incorporated into the work with the objects, enabling them to be processed and presented from a variety of perspectives. In addition, the source communities' entitlement to appropriate handling of the objects will be taken into consideration' (Humboldt Forum 2021).

In these statements, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Humboldt Forum have put collaboration at the centre of their work. And in fact, a number of collaborative projects were set up in the last few years. But are the two institutions adequately equipped for such projects? What should the staff involved be made aware of before starting such a project? How can partners from creator communities best be involved? We would like to reflect on our experience of the last few years and address some issues related to collaborative work that we think need to be considered when doing such projects.

One of the first and most important steps in a collaborative project is to find partners from the creator communities. However, the term 'creator community' may be confusing because a society or community is not a homogenous group and therefore the perspectives presented in an exhibition are still those of individuals and not of an

entire community. Within a project team, there may also be different opinions on certain subjects. It is a challenge for a collaborative project to convey this complexity to the museum public.

In our case, the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> team was eager to speak with one voice and not show any internal conflicts. As already mentioned, it was Wynema Morris' difficult task to give a voice to the various interests within the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community, and it was important for her to act not as a private person but as a representative of the NICC. The decision who should be part of the exhibition team was also not made by Wynema Morris alone but was a joint decision together with her colleagues and director. The NICC not only supported the work of Wynema Morris, but the NICC has a good standing within the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community and therefore has the authority to speak for an Indigenous nation without being completely bound by the decisions of the tribal government. As an institution dedicated to education, the NICC can represent the cultural interests of the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> in a distinct manner that transcends the scope of elected political decision-makers and can bridge the gap to a museum, a related institution. This made the cooperation on the part of the German team a lot easier: instead of having to learn 'the language of the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>' themselves, they could fall back on a contact person who speaks both languages, so to speak.

Once project partners are found, the next step is to build up trust, which is a key element in any collaborative project. For a project such as ours to work, it is essential to build up a high degree of trust amongst the team members, especially between the museum and the partners from the creator community. And as we all know, building up trust takes time. In a museum setting where one is dealing with collections that in many cases stem from a colonial or violent context, building up a trustful relationship can be a huge challenge. It requires respect, time and a great deal of personal commitment that often goes beyond the daily working hours of the staff involved. But what if not all the staff members involved can or want to invest extra time and energy in this process? One thing a museum can do is give extra support to their staff to do so, for example, offer compensation for extra hours that are worked at weekends or in the evenings when hosting international guests. One option could be to involve extra staff to take care of some smaller jobs and free up the time for the core exhibition team, for example, a travel organization or pick-ups from airports. In general, a museum should prepare their staff for such projects and sensitize them to the relationship work it may involve. Especially if collaborative projects are to be a common element in a museum's profile, it is important for the staff to receive a briefing beforehand.

Once a project kicks off, decisions will have to be made. But how does one make decisions in a collaborative project involving several institutions and persons who live in different parts of the world? For us in the curatorial team it was clear that we wanted to make all decisions on an equal footing. But is this even possible in such a complex exhibition project? The spatial distances between the persons and institutions involved are often large, and decisions sometimes need to be made quickly, so there may not be time to coordinate with everyone involved. We established a regular online meeting for



the German and Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> curatorial teams to discuss relevant topics and questions. Besides this we tried to solve urgent matters by, for example, getting a press release approved via email. On the German side, we repeatedly reminded our colleagues from the other departments that it was necessary to wait for approval from the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> partners. If the latter live in places with bad phone and internet service, staying in touch may be more difficult, especially if something unexpected happens and input is needed from the partners at short notice. Also, unlike a staff member in a German museum institution, most international partners have other jobs and responsibilities to attend to. All these things need to be taken into consideration, and the museum staff involved need to be made aware that things may take longer.

An issue that can arise in a collaborative project is that the international partners from the creator communities have a problem with the hosting museum institution. Or, in other words: how openly can partners in collaborative projects criticize the hosting museum institution? Sumaya Kassim describes her experience at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery with the following words: 'Although we were allowed creative freedom within the exhibition and were encouraged to be candid, it often felt like the price of our honesty was any future chance to work with the museum' (Kassim 2017). Due to great economic inequalities, collaborative projects can lead to a certain dependence between the museum and the partners, which makes criticism difficult on the side of the community partners. Are there still ways to provide a platform for criticism? Constructive criticism can be especially helpful for a project. And should collaborative projects not be open to criticism and a change of plans that may result from this criticism?

A collaboration with a large German institution such as the Humboldt Forum and the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin may also create certain expectations amongst international partners. This includes financial expectations, which should be discussed and clarified beforehand. Due to the political importance of the Humboldt Forum project, we were in the privileged situation of having substantial financial means to compensate for the work of all the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> partners who contributed to the project, as well as covering the costs of the trips to Berlin. In our case, it was other expectations that we felt the Humboldt Forum needed to meet. For the individual partners, it may be the first museum project and the first opportunity to present their story to a wider public. In our case the project also offered the opportunity to travel abroad for the first time. And of course, getting to see the historical object collection was a very special moment for our Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> team. For partners such as the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> the project is a unique experience, but for the two German museum institutions, cooperation with them is one of several projects taking place at the same time. How can the high expectations of the partners be dealt with when a project is just one of many for a museum? In our case, the German exhibition team was quite open about the fact that our installation was one of several that would be shown at the Humboldt Forum. In the end our project received quite a bit of attention during the opening in September 2022, but what if it doesn't work out that way? We don't have answers to the above questions, but from our

experience the most important thing is that the museum staff involved are committed and show the partners that their project is meaningful to them and the institution. A project should above all be of benefit to the persons involved, especially the partners from the creator communities. The relationships that are established among a project team and the institutions involved are hopefully more meaningful than press reviews.

So how do the involved institutions profit from collaborative projects? Ethnological museums as institutions benefit in many ways: through the exchange of information and knowledge collaborations, it is made possible to reconstruct the former meanings and functions of cultural belongings. Current interpretations and perspectives can be incorporated into the museum database, exhibitions or publications, and a re-contextualization and re-organization of the collection is possible. In our project, another benefit for the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin has been that a collection that was not well known has received much attention and care, for example, in terms of object conservation, and has also been able to be presented to the public. Furthermore, the museum can list the NICC as an international partner institution, which is beneficial for its reputation within the museum world. For the NICC itself the cooperation with two large German museum institutions has been beneficial in various aspects, for example, when applying for grants. The college depends on grants for most of its activities. Getting a copy of the historical catalogue accompanying the items has also extended the teaching materials available to the teachers and students at NICC. The catalogue is now used in classes to teach about Francis La Flesche and his work, as well as the historical items he gave to Berlin. The project has also resulted in a kind of training in museum work for those involved, for example, in archival work. Another outcome of the collaboration is that the NICC is currently working on a small-scale La Flesche exhibition for the college. For the Humboldt Forum, our project has brought some positive press reviews and most importantly valuable relationships with the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community, which can be used as a basis for future projects. Which brings us to a very important topic: once a collaborative project has been finalized, how can it be made sustainable? How can the relationships that have been established be kept alive? What happens after an exhibition has opened? What expectations do project partners have concerning long-lasting relationships? These questions were raised by around eighty international partners of the Ethnological Museum Berlin and the Humboldt Forum, including our project partners from the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> community, in September 2022 during the opening week. The days before the official opening were spent in four workshops, the outcome being a statement signed by most of the international partners that were present during those days. This is entitled 'Dignity - Continuity - Transparency' and asks right at the beginning for 'the Humboldt Forum to recognize its role and responsibility in facilitating and fostering international and intercultural collaboration. In doing so the Humboldt Forum is committing itself to act continuously as a reliable partner in building trust across different regions and communities' (Humboldt Forum, 2022).

As for the project on La Flesche, we have also been speaking about what happens next. We as a team have several ideas on how to continue this relationship, but of course

we are dependent on the institutions we work for. The Memorandum of Understanding between the NICC and the two German institutions is to be extended, which is an important step. But can it guarantee that there will be the financial support to do something? It will probably be easier to keep up the relationship on a personal level. But the question remains: how can a museum provide the resources for a long-term relationship?

## Conclusion

In the catalogue accompanying the Berlin collection, Francis La Flesche explains: 'The break up of the Omaha's native organization, the overthrow of their religious rites, of the authority of their chiefs and of tribal order, and the confusion of mind resulting from this sudden overwhelming of ideals, pursuits and all familiar forms of social life, although a story full of pathos and instruction, must be omitted here as it forms no part of my present duty' (Labischinski et al. 2023). The exhibition has been the first step in telling the missing story behind the collection. Up until today, the lives of the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> are shaped by the experiences of racism, violence and land loss. The personal stories presented in the video installation in the exhibition vividly show that the past still shapes the present and future of the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> people. The collection in Berlin has a special meaning in this context, as it is evidence of their resistance against colonialism. For the community the collection also provides the opportunity to reconnect with their ancestors and their ways of life and to present their history with pride. Museum visitors gain insight into the world views espoused by the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> and into key themes from their past and present-day realities. Key ideas such as circularity or the circle of stories are reflected in the architecture and design of the exhibition.

In the nineteenth century, it was a common assumption that Native Americans would soon die out, both culturally as well as physically. Therefore, the scholars and museums of the time rushed to collect and document the culture of the various indigenous nations of North America. It was during this time, and with this idea in mind, that the Francis La Flesche collection was commissioned. Francis himself was convinced that Native life and traditions would soon no longer exist and therefore tried to do everything possible to preserve Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> culture for future generations. Against all the predictions, the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> did not die out or disappear. Even though the people and their culture suffered under colonialism, political discrimination and violence, they managed to hold on to their Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup> identity. In order to tackle common stereotypes, which place Indigenous cultures in the past, the exhibition tells the story of Francis La Flesche and his collection from the personal perspective of today's Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>.

The collaboration with the NICC demonstrates the contemporary importance of historical collections and the potential of jointly curated exhibitions. These projects enable the exchange of information and knowledge by reconstructing the meaning and function of cultural belongings and integrating contemporary perspectives and inter-

pretations, thus re-contextualizing historical collections. The exhibition at the Humboldt Forum provides a platform for the Umo<sup>ho</sup> key message: ‘We are still here!’.

We consider the involvement and participation of diverse stakeholders in relation to Cultural Belongings, especially from regions of origin, in work with ethnological collections necessary for today’s museum work. But even though our collaborative project ran quite smoothly, we think there is still some room for improvement when it comes to the German museums involved. ‘The white walls signified the choices of white people, their agency, their museum collections, and the endeavours of colonialists’, Sumaya Kassim states in her essay ‘The museum will not be decolonised’ (Kassim 2017). To a certain degree this seems true in the context of the Humboldt Forum and the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin.

Cooperating with creator communities must not be allowed to become an empty slogan and a ‘cure’ for museums. Individual exhibition projects with representatives from societies of origin are not enough because they can, whether intentionally or unintentionally, become a cover-up. If that is the case, cooperation with indigenous stakeholders will just appropriate the criticism of the institution and leave existing power relations untouched (Bose 2016; Sternfeld 2009).

As we have explained above, existing working methods, structures and power relations in the two institutions still present some obstacles to transcultural collaboration. The staff and management of both institutions are aware of the fact that some things need to change. In the context of the opening of the exhibitions in September 2022, the over eighty invited international partners demanded change and action from the Humboldt Forum, hence their statement is entitled ‘Dignity – Continuity – Transparency’ (Humboldt Forum 2022). The question is: will the Humboldt Forum be able to live up to the expectations of the international partners?

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