

The Mapuche Collections in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: (Re)Interpretations of the Collections in the Present

A Cooperation Project between the Ethnologisches Museum and Mapuche Representatives

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Abstract: The Ethnologisches Museum houses collections from the Indigenous Mapuche people, acquired since the mid-nineteenth century, primarily from what is now Chile. In a collaborative project with representatives of the Mapuche, we aim to analyze the significance of the collections at the present day and the stories, knowledge and practices associated with the cultural artefacts. This article describes the sensitive historical and cultural contexts of the collection and the resulting cooperation project. The significance and relevance of these artefacts for the Mapuche today, and their integration into cultural and social processes in relation to historical events and provenances, have a particularly important place. The planning, process, objectives and initial reflections on the project are also outlined.

[Mapuche, ethnological collections, transcultural collaboration]

Introduction

The collection's department of American Anthropology (*Amerikanische Ethnologie*) in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin contains cultural artefacts collected from the Mapuche, an Indigenous people in present-day Chile and Argentina. The collection comprises around 600 pieces that were acquired and brought to Berlin from the mid-nineteenth century until the 2000s. For the Mapuche, these pieces are still significant today, as they reveal cultural and historical processes and a resistant and vibrant culture existing right up to the present day. Their centuries-long resistance to coloniza-

tion by the Spanish colonial power from the sixteenth century and subsequently by the states of Chile and Argentina up to the present day, is reflected in Mapuche identity politics and cultural processes (e.g. Nahuelpan et al. 2012).

In a cooperation project as part of the Collaborative Museum,¹ representatives of the Mapuche have been working with the collection in Berlin on (re)interpretations of the objects in the present and the stories, knowledge and practices associated with them. During a Mapuche residency in Berlin in May 2025, the focus was on encounters with the pieces, their perspectives on their own (im)material culture and knowledge exchange. On the one hand, the cooperation project is driven by the sensitive provenances and collection contexts of part of the Mapuche collection, which are also linked to the settlement history of German migrants in Chile. On the other hand, the provenances and significance of the collection have hardly been analyzed to date. The size of the collections, the large time span they cover and spiritually significant pieces make the Berlin collections particularly valuable for the Mapuche people.

Historical Context of the Mapuche Collections

The territory of the Mapuche (*Wallmapu*) originally stretched from Santiago to the south of present-day Chile. In the fifteenth century the northern part of the area was conquered by the Inca Empire, leading the Mapuche to colonize areas to the south. Due to Spanish colonization from the middle of the sixteenth century the Mapuche lost large parts of their territory, but they were able to defend other parts successfully, so that the Spanish colonial rulers finally recognized the Mapuche's autonomy. As a result, the Mapuche also colonized parts of what is now Argentina, where they maintained trading relations with neighbouring communities and settlers. At its largest, the *Wallmapu* extended from the Pacific to the Atlantic, an area that is now governed by the Chilean and Argentinian states (Nahuelpan 2013:124–125; Bengoa 1996:14). After independence from Spain in 1818 and 1816 respectively, the nation states of Chile and Argentina aimed to assert control over their entire national territories, including those occupied by the Mapuche. In both countries, this meant a brutal military conquest between 1851 and 1885, during which half the Mapuche were killed and more than 90% of their land was stolen. This colonization was carried out by both Chile and Argentina to strengthen their national identity and for purposes of economic development, industrialization and the exploitation of natural resources in accordance with a colonial-capitalist logic (Nahuelpan 2013:126–129).

1 The project 'The Collaborative Museum' (2023–2025) of the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst promotes multi-perspective approaches to working with the collections with international partners and communities of origin.

Even before the conquest of Mapuche territory in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Chilean state was recruiting European settlers. German immigrants in particular were to build up the infrastructure and industry in the south of the country in the interests of the Chilean nation state. They were provided with supposedly uninhabited land (*terra nullius*), but in fact they displaced the Mapuche from their territory with state support (Bernedo and Bilet 2022:18). They thus became part of the Chilean state's policy of displacement and extermination, settling in Mapuche territory as entrepreneurs and manufacturers and becoming active in the military, politics and science. During the occupation, many cultural artefacts were appropriated by the state's military, as well as by Chilean and foreign settlers. Many Mapuche objects, such as silverware, looms, pottery, wood carvings and stones, among others, and even the human bodies of the enslaved *peñi* (brothers) and *lamuen* (sisters), were killed or looted from the tombs of *toki* (warrior chiefs) and *weichafe* (warriors) (Huinca 2013; Coña 2002; Joseph 1928). Due to the precarious conditions, impoverishment and the reductionist model imposed on the Mapuche, which forced them to sell their material culture, there was a rise in the acquisition of Mapuche 'traditional objects', such as silverware. The diverse contexts in which the objects were acquired reflect complex historical dynamics. Through raids and looting, as well as bartering and buying, the military and settlers appropriated material cultural assets that were then often incorporated into museum or private collections in accordance with museum and Western categories. To this day, this represents a profound loss of cultural heritage for the Mapuche (Flores Chávez 2013:839; Nahuelpan 2013:126–130; Vargas 2019).

Today, the Mapuche live in the central and southern regions of Chile and Argentina. In Chile, they make up around 80% of the Indigenous population and 10% of the total population of 19 million. The phrase 'the Mapuche' refers to a range of heterogeneous actors in urban and rural areas with diverse histories, territories and perspectives. Their demands and struggles for autonomy, cultural and political self-determination and land restitution remain strong to this day. Knowledge about the meaning, practices and production of their material culture also plays a major role in the positioning and visibility of their cultural identity.

The Mapuche Collections in the Ethnologisches Museum and their Provenances

The cultural artefacts of the Mapuche in the Ethnologisches Museum were brought to Berlin between 1829 and 2015, with the majority coming to Berlin in the decades following the colonization of Mapuche territory and the arrival of German settlers in Chile. This period also saw the founding of the Ethnologisches Museum (then the

Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Royal Museum of Ethnology) in 1873,² whose collections grew massively in the years that followed. The founding director of the Museum, Adolf Bastian, wanted to create an extensive 'archive of humanity'. He also pursued the idea of the Rescue Paradigm, according to which the cultural heritage of societies supposedly threatened with extinction had to be collected and preserved for future generations (Fischer 2022:1–2). The collections from the Americas originated on the one hand from research expeditions and specific collecting activities. On the other hand, Bastian motivated Germans around the world to participate in the mission of an 'archive of humanity' and created global networks of collectors, especially in German communities abroad (Penny 2019:13, 19, 52). Bastian also cultivated networks of scholars and members of the German community in Chile. These included Rudolf Philippi, director of the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural de Chile (1853–1897). His brother Bernhard Philippi played an important role in the recruitment of German settlers, working as a 'colonization representative' for the Chilean state (Bastian 1878:27; Bernedo and Bilot 2022:21–22).

The Mapuche collections in the Ethnologisches Museum include silverwork, riding equipment and accessories, clothing and textiles, everyday objects and sensitive ritual pieces. There are also around 1,200 media (photographs, sound and film recordings). The circumstances of their acquisition are diverse and often undocumented. Current work with the database and the acquisition files of the Ethnologisches Museum show that the pieces in Berlin were largely acquired or transferred by German settlers, military personnel, travellers and German scientists. Due to this settlement history, most of the Mapuche items in the Ethnologisches Museum today, according to the museum database, come from present-day Chile, with only a few from Argentina. In the period during and after the invasion of Wallmapu, cultural artefacts were acquired by purchase and exchange, which must be seen against the background of the extreme impoverishment of the Mapuche, as well as by robbery and grave robbery (Flores Chávez 2013:838–839). In the Chilean national context, the material culture of the Mapuche became the spoils of war and dispossession, where museums and the discourses of claiming Mapuche material culture as heritage transformed them into the instruments of a national narrative (Rufer 1984). Chilean settlement politics contributed to this. As a result, many of the collections of Mapuche materialities have ended up in European museums, as is the case in Berlin. Overall, the early Mapuche collections from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries must be viewed in the context of the interweaving of Chilean colonization and extermination policies, German settlers, the territorial and cultural dispossession of the Mapuche, and political and scientific networks.

2 Earlier objects taken from the Mapuche were kept in the Ethnographic Collection of the Brandenburgisch-Preußische Kunstkammer, which was founded in the sixteenth century and later divided up among the various royal museums.



Fig. 1 Mapuche silverwork at Ethnologisches Museum

Paradigmatically, the appropriation of a Mapuche funerary statue (*chemamüll*), which was donated to the Ethnologisches Museum by the German consul in Concepción, Wolrad Schumacher, in 1888, can be pointed out here. The Mapuche erected *chemamüll* next to the graves of their deceased; for the Mapuche, they are therefore more than objects – they represent their ancestors. According to a letter from Consul Schumacher to the museum in the acquisition file, the *chemamüll* now in Berlin, a ‘figure representing a man’, ‘stood on the grave of an Araucanian³ Cacique in the province of Cautin, from where it was abducted not without danger, as the Indians hold the graves of their chiefs sacred and guard them closely’ (Acta 1076/1888). The consul’s letter and the historical context indicates that the *chemamüll* was stolen from a Mapuche burial site in a context of injustice, despite realizing its importance for the Mapuche.

On the other hand, pieces that entered the collections in the second half of the twentieth century originate, for example, from specific purchases. A collection mainly of silverwork purchased by Günther Hartmann⁴ for the museum in 1988 for 50,000

³ Foreign designation of the Mapuche since Spanish colonization.

⁴ Günther Hartmann has been head of the Department of American Anthropology (*Amerikanische Naturvölker*) at the Ethnologisches Museum, then the Museum für Völkerkunde, since 1985. He has also published on the museum’s extensive collection of Mapuche silverware (1974: *Silberschmuck der Araukaner, Chile*, 1988: *Gold und Silber: Gold der Puna, Panama, Silberschmuck der Mapuche, Chile*).

German marks can be mentioned here (Acta 1982–1995). Also in this case, information on the manufacturer, origin, functions, etc. is not further documented, making it subject to an ongoing investigation as part of the provenance research for the project.

Mapuche *kimvn* (Knowledge) in the Collections

Mapuche material culture is kept, selected and classified in museums in the form of petrified artefacts and as a witness to a historical past (Alvarado 2020). Therefore, from a Mapuche perspective, and in a counter-hegemonic and decolonizing exercise, it is necessary to focus on the need to rethink one's own existence beyond the classical anthropological and historical categories and general Western sciences (Antileo et al. 2015; Nahuelpan 2013). By taking these objects out of their original context and presenting them as something exotic and folkloric worthy of study, as seen in various exhibitions and in research on traditional objects, an abstracted view is created, which makes invisible the origins, territorial significance and meanings of the Mapuche's *rakizuam* (thought) and *kimvn* (knowledge) of the *gvrekafe* (weavers), *ruxafe* (silversmith) and *kimche* (wise people) (Alvarado 2020; Paillalef 2017; Stüdemann 2018). Ultimately, the problem does not lie in the museums and exhibitions but in the powers inscribed in these practices. This means that the recognition and distribution of material and power must be inextricably linked. This permits a dialogue between Mapuche knowledge and new museological practices, emphasizing how the people themselves can discuss and speak about the vitality of their material culture, as well as a review of museum collections through the lens of the Mapuche *kimvn* (Paillalef 2017).

From the Mapuche point of view, and based on Mapuche philosophy and spirituality, nature is inhabited by different energies. Each space, such as rivers, sea, lakes, forests, mountains, hills, stones, trees, animals, insects, plants, flowers, stars, etc., all have a *gen* (owner), spiritual energies that inhabit and live in all of nature (Becerra and Llanquiao 2015). Therefore, the different pieces are created by the different Mapuche arts, such as silverware, textiles, clay, stones and basketry. Each object has a Mapuche *kimvn*, that is, knowledge of the techniques, symbols, colours, shapes and qualities associated with each material. Mapuche *kimvn* is understood as a set of epistemological coordinates that allow the emergence of Mapuzugun (the Mapuche language) as an active and consensual body of knowledge accumulated by the transgenerational experiences of the Mapuche people. It is based on the notion of *kim*, which derives from an ontological order of reality construction. It is an ordered and consensual body of knowledge that constitutes the epistemological foundations of Mapuche ontology and action (Teillier et al. 2015).

Each piece has aspects to consider: the first is related to the territory of origin, which is anchored in a physical-geographical space and linked to the person who was its creator and/or bearer (Nanculef 2016). Therefore, the second factor is related to the

socio-political roles and positions of the people who were the bearers of these objects. This is related to the Mapuche *kimvn*, which, as a source of culture and cosmovision, is based on the thought of the ancient people. It links the people with the land, with an *ixofillmogen* (understood as all forms of life existing in the *mapu*), where there are life, nature and spiritual entities (Valenzuela Quintupil 2019).

An Ongoing Process: Preparation and Implementation of the Cooperation Project

Regarding the infrastructural and practical elements of the cooperation project, the Mapuche's stay in Berlin in May 2025, during which we worked intensively with the objects on site, had to be planned and prepared in advance. From the perspective of the museum and its employees, an important part of the project and its preparation is the ongoing documenting, conserving and preserving of the Mapuche collections, as they are the source of knowledge for the development of this project and the starting point for dialogues and collaborations in the present and future. The ongoing collaboration around these collections aims to foster a deeper understanding of the pieces within it, enhancing their documentation and conservation, and ensuring their relevance in ongoing dialogues about cultural heritage. From the Museum's perspective, and in line with the aims of the Collaborative Museum, the Museum seeks not only to improve preservation of the collections in its depositories, but also, through collaborations and partnerships, to learn and increase knowledge about this collection. In this sense, we understand the importance of working towards better documenting the collection to make it more available and accessible for future studies and research.

In the documentation phase of the Mapuche collection, it was necessary to follow strict safety protocols during the handling of the items to ensure the preservation of their physical integrity and their protection against pesticide contamination for those handling the collection. For several decades, chemical pesticides were applied in museum storage areas to prevent damage caused by insects, rodents and other pests. As a result, many cultural artefacts in the museum, including those in the Mapuche collection, became contaminated with these pesticides. Today, handling these items requires the use of protective equipment, such as masks, gloves and lab coats. This was one of the first precautions to be taken when working with the Mapuche collections. Furthermore, the collections contain large and sometimes heavy items, such as ponchos. Therefore, to ensure the preservation and safety of the cultural artefacts, it became necessary for these items to be handled by two individuals simultaneously. Another important issue in the conservation process concerns the packaging in which the Mapuche collections are stored. Many of the pieces are packed in old cardboard boxes dating from the 1980s and 1990s, which contain acidic components harmful to



Fig. 2 Documenting the Mapuche collection in the depository of the Ethnologisches Museum

the preservation of the objects. As a result, staff from the collection management and conservation departments are working to transfer the items into acid-free packaging and other materials that do not pose a threat to their preservation. With the safety measures in place regarding handling and contamination, it was possible to proceed with the documentation phase of the Mapuche collection. As a large proportion of the collections was not digitally documented, there were few or imprecise data in the database regarding items' locations in storage, nor were there any photos, measurements or records of weight. This posed the main challenge during documentation, as initially it was sometimes necessary to search for the items in the museum's cabinet, cross-referencing them with physical identification records. However, later work revolves around the question of how to document the information produced during the project and integrate it into the museum's records. This collaboration allows a more thorough documentation of the materials used in the objects, enabling us to gain deeper insights into their techniques and meanings.

The methodology of the collaborative part of the project has multiple stages. Nicolás Valenzuela Quintupil, a Mapuche anthropologist and historian based in Santiago de Chile, has been in contact with the Ethnologisches Museum since 2023. Together, the idea of the cooperation project was launched and finally made possible as part of the Collaborative Museum. The contacts and selections have been made by Valenzuela Quintupil since, working with material culture and being himself a Mapuche, he has

the necessary expertise and a broad network throughout Mapuche territory in present-day Chile.

Firstly, a participant selection process was carried out. This was based on Mapuche knowledge, which centres around the Mapuche concept of *rakizuam* (thinking), which ‘represents one of the cognitive processes characteristic of Mapuche rationality, whose orientation is related to a style of reflection (close to the notion of analysis)’ (Melin et al. 2016:18). This Mapuche knowledge is still present in the people among the *kimche* (the wise), elders, *lonko* (chief), *machi* (spiritual authorities), silversmiths and weavers, who all preserve and safeguard their memories, experiences and wisdom. Therefore, the criteria were the expertise they have in their trade, their knowledge of Mapuche spirituality and cosmovision, experience in working on other projects and the ability to work in a team.

The first person to be selected was Elena Huentuleo, a *gvrekafe* (weaver) from the commune of La Pintana in the Santiago Metropolitan Region, who is knowledgeable about the Mapuche cosmovision. Her mother is Luisa Quechupan, a well-known weaver and a speaker at Mapuche ceremonies. The second person is Antonio Chihuaicura, a renowned *ruksafe* (silversmith) from the Tirúa commune, Biobío Region (in south–central Chile), who has worked on exhibitions in the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolumbino in Santiago. He has also held his own exhibition in cultural activities in the Tirúa commune and has worked with several museums in Chile. The third person is the *machi* Patricia Huinca, a spiritual authority and an expert in several weaving techniques, who lives in her community of Ankapulli, commune of Cholchol, Araucanía region (southern Chile). She is considered to have a connection with the spiritual world through dreams, and it was through this dream channel that her ancestors had told her that she would be travelling to Germany, as she explained. As the days went by, she again dreamt that she was travelling by plane, which according to her meant that the spirits were giving her permission to travel. The last person is Gladys Huinca. She is a *zugumachife*, someone who interprets the *machi*, being the spiritual support and helping her in the whole process. She is Patricia’s sister and also lives in the commune of Cholchol. In the first instance, then, only four Mapuche were participating in the project, but during the process, the *machi* Patricia requested including a fifth person, her sister, to help her in case she goes into *keimi* (trance). This is a crucial element and an important part of the protocol, as the *machi* are always accompanied by their *zugumachife* or companions.

Once the committee had been formed, virtual meetings were held. The first meeting focused on introducing the Collaborative Museum project, the historical context of the Mapuche collections in the Museum and outlining the objectives of the project as well as the methodology to be used. The following process consisted of eight meetings to pre-select the pieces, where we would only choose the most significant ones to work with in Berlin. This process lasted about one month and was carried out through virtual meetings between the committee and Lena Steffens as the accompanying researcher from Germany.



Fig. 3 Working with the collection during the Mapuche's stay in Berlin in May 2025

As a method, the *nutramkam* (conversation) is employed, a Mapuche practice in which a gathering of people is convened, while respecting cultural protocols. The *nutramkam*

refers to a type of discourse carried out in Mapuzugun, whose structure is abstracted from Mapuche knowledge and involves initial greeting and handshake, followed by a *petukuwün* (reciprocal greeting to account for the emotional, family and community status of the person), then the reason for the visit is explained, and the interview is conducted in Mapuzugun. (Ñanculef and Cayupán 2016:11)

These meetings followed a *nutramkawum* logic for talking about the pieces, but it was also a way of getting to know each other and to know each other's state of health. Two languages are spoken, one Mapuzugun, the other Spanish, alternating according to the subject matter that is being discussed in each of the sessions. After the selection of 193 pieces came a process to filter the most representative pieces in the collection, whereby only a hundred were selected to be seen during the stay in Berlin. Unpublished pieces of silverware, mostly *llankatu* (personal adornments for Mapuche women), textiles, stone and wooden objects, were selected. As a last process, a selection of 21 pieces was made which can be touched with the hands, without the use of gloves, which is an important part of having contact with the materialities and their *newen* (energy).

Additionally, meetings were held with the project staff of the Ethnologisches Museum to discuss various aspects of the stay in Berlin. One key topic was how the Mapuche protocol would be implemented in the process. The first step upon arrival in the museum involved performing a *llepun* (a rogative), a prayer ritual conducted in front of the Mapuche objects, some of which may carry both positive and negative energies. It is therefore essential to seek permission and offer prayers for everything to proceed smoothly, ensuring that all the participants remain in good health.

Reflections on the Ongoing Process and Outlook

The Mapuche collections at the Ethnologisches Museum bear witness to the cultural identity of the Mapuche and their self-perception as a people that have resisted colonial expansion and exploitation for centuries. A positioning and (re)evaluation of the collection holdings in historical cultural processes, including their interpretations in the present, can only succeed through the perspective of the Mapuche themselves. The aim of the cooperation project is to open up the collections and understand the associated stories, knowledge and practices in the present. The musealized material culture is linked to people and communities living in the present, their knowledge, practices and social worlds. They are intertwined in many ways with social and cultural processes beyond a local and historical context.

Throughout the project, it has become evident how complex preparing and carrying out the cooperation process is. On the one hand, this is reflected in the still incomplete provenance research on the collection's contexts, a challenge due to the lack of available data. Provenance information is in turn essential for the Mapuche, as the territorial origin and history of the objects play an important role in how they are viewed today. The often violent historical processes behind the objects are still deeply intertwined with issues of identity, as well as social and cultural dynamics. Finally, the infrastructural and institutional conditions and guidelines within the Ethnologisches Museum are crucial parameters for the project. Navigating these in alignment with the needs, perspectives and expectations of the Mapuche is an ongoing process of negotiation that requires mutual patience, openness and a willingness to engage in dialogue. The extent to which colonial structures within the institution of the Ethnologisches Museum influence the project's process and outcomes – whether a sustainable and possibly new approach to the Mapuche collections can be implemented, whether the needs and expectations of the cooperation partners are met, and what resonance the project has for the Mapuche in their territories and communities – must all be part of a critical reflection process which may require some time.

Reflecting on the Mapuche's stay in Berlin, it is apparent that the face-to-face encounter with the pieces and staff in the museum was a valuable and meaningful opportunity for knowledge exchange, conversation and direct contact with the pieces. How-



Fig. 4 Working with the collection during the Mapuche's stay in Berlin in May 2025

ever, it also meant confronting the painful history of the dispossession and colonization of Wallmapu. A fundamental point that emerged was the need to understand the meanings of the pieces. They cannot be fully understood without the participation and involvement of the Mapuche themselves, as these objects contain essential information about their relevance, provenance, use, techniques, materiality and spiritual dimension, elements that are largely absent from the museum's documentation. Mapuche material culture remains alive and present in the memory and practices of the participants, who recognize the Berlin collections as a source that allows the reconstruction and revitalization of the Mapuche *kimvn* of different trades such as silversmiths, weavers and transmitters of knowledge. As next steps, the need to correct and supplement the museum's data with all the knowledge discussed was emphasized, as well as generating a transmission of everything learned and observed in the different territories, within a process of dialogue that is just beginning.

Unpublished Documents

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Credits

Figure 1 Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Pierre Adenis, 2024

Figure 2 Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Pierre Adenis, 2024

Figure 3 Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, 2025

Figure 4 Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, 2025