

Collaborating on the Berlin Mazatec Collection

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Abstract: In 2024, the Mazatec writer and librarian Gabriela García came to Berlin to study the Mazatec collection in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Acquired by the museum from Wilhelm Bauer in 1903 and 1908, this ethnographic collection is a testimony to the past life of the Mazatec people, which has changed profoundly since then. In a joint project between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, and the Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova, Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca, Mexico, a travelling photographic exhibition has made this account of the past accessible to Mazatec communities. In addition, the collector's historical photos and language recordings are also subject to the ongoing collaboration. This article provides an overview of the projects' work in process and closes with an interview with Gabriela García, in which she describes her experiences with the collaboration.

[Mazatec people; collaborative research; travelling exhibition; language studies; ethnographic and archaeological collecting in Mexico; Wilhelm Bauer]

Introduction

It is the necessary resources and support from programmes such as the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse) that enable ethnological museums to take up new approaches in museum work. These approaches are no longer addressed only to scholars and museum visitors. Rather, the ethnographic objects and information collected since the nineteenth century at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (EM) are being shared on a larger scale through exchanges with interested partners from the societies of origin. One example is the CoMuse project on the Mazatec collection, which has so far been neither sufficiently documented nor analysed in terms of its holdings at the EM. Cooperation

on its documentation and analysis, including data on the Mazatec language (Mazateco), with partners from the region enriches knowledge and experiences for all sides.

The storage facility of the Department of American Archaeology at the EM houses around 470 ethnographic objects collected by Wilhelm Bauer in the Mazateca region, which is located in the north of Oaxaca and the south of the states of Puebla and Veracruz, Mexico. The collection was sent to Berlin in 1903 and 1908. It includes several ritual and everyday objects made of various materials such as wickerwork, clay, calabash, wood and especially cotton textiles. Indeed, above all, this rich collection documents Mazatec craftsmanship and art at around 1900. Particularly noteworthy are the *huípiles*, blouses worn by women and girls, which are usually embroidered with decorations made of blue and red cotton (Fig. 1). The cotton and silk textiles alone are remarkable examples of the art of weaving. However, there are also objects used in rituals that continue to play a role in people's religious lives today.

Bauer compiled and recorded a considerable amount of information on many objects, their uses, Mazateco terms and oral traditions, and he took several dozen photos of the region and its inhabitants. Most of them are now held at the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut Berlin (IAI), Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz and the Museum of Ethnography (Néprajzi Múzeum) in Budapest, Hungary. Given the wealth of information on language, cultural practices and history, which have changed fundamentally since Bauer's visits, this historical ethnographic collection is of great interest to the present-day Mazatec population. Collaborating on the Mazatec collection in Berlin means engaging with the history and present of the Mazateca region by jointly reworking the collection and, in the process, practising new formats of knowledge-production in and outside the museum.

The team consists, among others, of the Mazatec writer Gabriela García García, who is also a librarian at the Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova (BIJC), Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca. Ms García is a native speaker of Mazateco and an expert on the culture of the Mazatec people, with whom she has a close personal connection and for whom she works as a disseminator and mediator. She writes poems and stories about cultural life and is the winner of a CaSA prize for literary work in the Indigenous languages of Oaxaca. Together with other speakers, she is engaged in promoting literary and linguistic work in Mazateco and to foster its appreciation among younger generations.

As part of the CoMuse project, the materials in the Mazatec collection have now been processed and the objects extensively documented. The team created a travelling exhibition, which opened in Oaxaca City in May 2025. This exhibition will travel from town to town in the Mazateca region over a period of time. The first stop was Huautla de Jiménez, in the district of Teotitlán, Oaxaca, in October 2025. The exhibition aims to provide information about the Berlin collection, as well as the context of collecting around 1900. Thanks to Ms García's involvement, the exhibition goes beyond this documentation, as the historical objects are interpreted against the background of the present-day Mazatec culture. It is essential to highlight that Mazateco is by no means



Fig. 1 Photo of a *huipil* (*tsó/tsú*, IV Ca 25105) and a wraparound skirt (*jchó/jcháó*, IV Ca 25099).
© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, Photo: Claudia Obrocki, 2025

uniform. In order to avoid making one dialect appear dominant, the team has decided to design the exhibition in Spanish. A brochure and educational materials accompany it. The work process in Berlin was recorded in a documentary video that is being shown alongside the exhibition. Another video documents the reception of the project among the Mazatec people. We hope that the exhibition will inspire people to pass on their culture, language and history to future generations.

In the following, we describe the genesis of this particular CoMuse project. We then discuss the various steps in documenting and collaboratively processing the collection. Next, we provide a brief summary of the archival research on the collector Wilhelm Bauer. In the final section, Gabriela García shares her thoughts in the form of a written interview about her experiences as a CoMuse fellow in Berlin in June 2024, the significance of the collection for contemporary Mazatec communities, and possible future collaborations.

Genesis of the Mazateca Project

During the opening of the east wing of the Humboldt Forum, Sebastián van Doesburg, researcher and member of the managing board of the BIJC, was an invited guest in Berlin. Previously, he had conducted extensive field research in the Mazateca region himself and was familiar with the Berlin collection, on which only János Gyarmati from the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest had previously worked (Gyarmati 2006, 2008). On her trip to Mexico, Ute Schüren, the curator of the collection, visited the Mazateca region from 28 February to 3 March 2023, accompanied by Gabriela García and Sebastián van Doesburg, among others. The journey took them over difficult roads to the highlands (*Mazateca alta*), to Gabriela García's home village and to numerous other villages and larger settlements, such as the district (*municipio*) of Huautla de Jiménez. The group then travelled back to Oaxaca City via San Juan Bautista Cuicatlan (outside the Mazateca region).

In advance of the trip, the collection manager of the Department of American Archaeology, Ines Seibt, had photographed a large part of the collection for the first time and entered it into the museum database. Based on this preliminary documentation, a catalogue with printouts of the objects and the index cards with information from Bauer, including the naming of many objects in the Mazatec language, could be shared with local inhabitants, including some artisans, during the trip.

All the people in the villages who were asked about the collection expressed a great interest in it. The differences between the material culture in Bauer's time and in the present were discussed. For example, the kitchen utensils varied greatly, and traditional costumes, which were widespread in Bauer's time, were the exception in the present. However, many people still had a vague knowledge of the meaning and function of the objects Bauer collected. In view of the great interest in the collection, the Maza-

teca project was realised. Below, Carolina Bayer, who joined the project as a CoMuse collection manager in November 2023, describes the collaborative work in the EM's storage facility.

Preparation of the Mazatec Collection for Collaborative Work

Before we started the project, many of the Mazatec objects kept in storage in the museum in Berlin-Dahlem were only recorded in the museum database by an identification number, the collector's information and a general indication of their respective origins. They therefore had to be located, photographed and measured. The digitization of the index cards, which had already been carried out in spring 2023, helped to locate the objects in storage, as many of them contained drawings that allowed for clear identification. This enabled the location of each object to be determined and the database updated accordingly. The next step, between winter 2023 and spring 2024, was to document the objects in the Mazatec collection better and to store them in a professional and contemporary manner. Handling the objects, which were often fragile, required teamwork in close collaboration with the conservators. Good storage and digital documentation were important prerequisites for the collaboration in the following months.

The joint work on the collection in the depot in Berlin-Dahlem with Gabriela García in June 2024 was enriching for the museum staff in many respects (Fig. 2). We compiled and shared information about each object, particularly its manufacturing technique, material composition and potential use, in both the Mazatec and Spanish languages. This exchange of knowledge and ideas was partly accompanied by Sebastián van Doesburg and the Mexican textile specialist Alejandro de Ávila from the Museo Textil de Oaxaca, Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca (Fig. 3).¹ On the first few days, we analysed numerous objects together from different perspectives and audio-recorded most of our conversations.

Bauer's Documentation of Mazatec Terms

Working on the Mazatec terms that Bauer had written down with reference to the different objects was another highlight of the collaboration with Gabriela García. While the Mazatec terms written on the numerous index cards were not always understandable (Fig. 4), the German terms that were already in the database were relatively easy to read and translate into Spanish and from there into Mazateco. With the support of

¹ Gabriela García, Sebastián van Doesburg and Alejandro de Ávila have previously published on their experiences in Berlin (García, van Doesburg and de Ávila 2024).



Fig. 2 Gabriela García working in the depot, June 2024. © Photo: Carolina Bayer



Fig. 3 Joint work in the depot, June 2024. From left to right: Ute Schüren, Sebastián van Doesburg, Gabriela García, Alejandro de Ávila. © Photo: Carolina Bayer

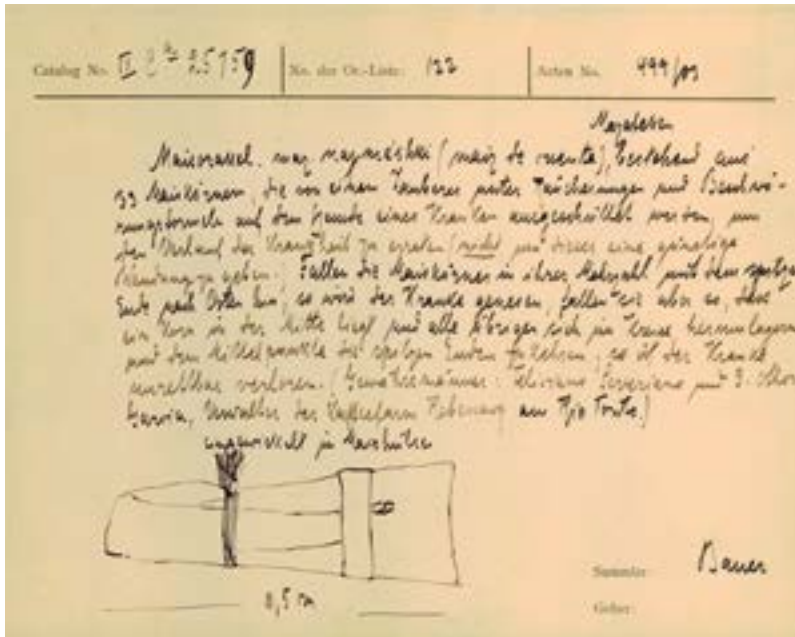


Fig. 4 Index card of a maize oracle, IV Ca 2519, collected by Bauer in 1903.
© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, Digitisation: Ines Seibt, 2023

Gabriela García and Sebastián van Doesburg, contemporary equivalents for the Mazatec terms Bauer had recorded were found. An interesting finding that emerged during this work was that many of the objects of everyday use that Bauer had labelled are apparently no longer in use. The transformation of the objects in the material inventory of the Mazateca in the twentieth century has led to many of them being unknown in the vocabulary of the younger generations. Even for Gabriela García, who consulted older family members and other Mazateco speakers, it was a challenge to identify some of the terms. Those that were identified were read by Gabriela Garcia in Mazateco, and her comments on the meaning of the terms and/or objects were audio-visually recorded. Some of this work also involved rewriting the specific term for each object in the variant of Mazateco spoken by Gabriela García. For example, Bauer noted *shíáo* for a wrap-around skirt and *tsū* for a *huipil*, while Gabriela uses the terms *jchó* or *jcháó* and *tsó* or *tsú* respectively. This work was important to us and later facilitated the description of the individual objects from different perspectives when preparing the exhibition.

All recordings and documentation were later shared among the project partners. The intention is to incorporate the language documentation for the objects into the database, along with the transcriptions, and to make them available for future work with the collection. This work is not yet complete, but it is hoped that it will contribute

to the long-term preservation of the cultural heritage and language of the Mazateca region.

Research on Wilhelm Bauer

It was also important to understand the collector Wilhelm Bauer, his collecting practices and his relationship with the former *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde* in Berlin (Royal Museum of Ethnology, KMV). Research on Bauer was undertaken by Yannick Dreessen beginning in August 2024.² A key source for the reconstruction of Bauer's connection to the Mazateca region was his correspondence with the museum, particularly with Eduard Seler (1849–1922). Seler had himself undertaken extensive collecting trips in Mexico together with the researcher and photographer Caecilie Seler-Sachs (1855–1935), who was also his wife. He was a professor of American languages, ethnology and archaeology at the *Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin* (now *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*) and had taken over the direction of the America Department of the KMV in 1903. As stated above, other documentation on Wilhelm Bauer's time in Berlin is now housed in the IAI, including most of his photos of the Mazateca region and language recordings in Mazateco, transcribed by Walter Lehmann (1878–1939), along with translations. Based on these and further traces, a brief characterization of Bauer and his connection to the Mazateca region can be presented here.

The ethnologist and archaeologist Wilhelm Bauer³ made a name for himself as a collector of and dealer in ethnographic and archaeological objects, mainly from Mexico, while pursuing scholarly ambitions at the same time.⁴ With respect to the Mazateca region, Bauer established early ethnographic collections in Berlin (1903, 1908), Budapest (1903) and Stockholm (1910). The beginnings of his interest in the Indigenous past and present of Mexico seem to have been sparked during his time as a teacher in the German school in Mexico City and were probably fostered later while working and studying with Eduard Seler.

Born in 1871 in Hoechst am Main, close to Frankfurt, Bauer studied philosophy at the *Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin* (1892–1894) and graduated in 1896 with

² This contribution focuses on the extensive documentary research in the museum's archive. Demián Ortiz Maciel, curator of exhibitions of the BIJC, has made key contributions to the historical understanding of the traces of Bauer in Oaxaca and Mexico and reconstructed the paths taken by Bauer in the Mazateca region.

³ In his marriage certificates, Bauer is called an ethnologist (1904) and archaeologist (1906). Bauer also used the Spanish version Guillermo and occasionally added the maternal surname Thoma.

⁴ It is important to note that the KMV preserved not only the Mazatec collection, but also numerous archaeological pieces that Bauer transferred to the museum, mainly from the central highlands of Mexico. However, these were not included in the project.

a doctorate from the Universität Bern, Switzerland.⁵ After two years at the German school in Mexico City, Bauer returned to Berlin for several months and began studying the anthropology of the Americas with Eduard Seler, working with him at the KMV.⁶ Speaking Spanish and being academically trained, Bauer was identified by the museum staff as an ideal person to increase the collections from Mexico, at that time particularly from the regions of Tehuacan, Cuzcatlan and Teotitlan del Camino.⁷ Equipped with the title of an agent and representative ('encargado y representante'), Bauer returned to Mexico in September 1901 and began collecting for the Berlin museum.⁸

In this context, Bauer organized his first trip to the Mazateca region in 1903. For three weeks he gathered, among other ethnographic and archaeological objects, the Mazatec ethnographic collection,⁹ which Eduard Seler describes as being 'the first one [of the museum] which entails information on the household items [...] of a primordial people ['Urvolk'] of the Mexican republic'.¹⁰ As János Gyarmati has elaborated in more detail, at the same time Bauer was acquiring a Mazatec collection for the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest. During his travels, Bauer generally purchased items from villagers, local traders and collectors with the intention of reselling them. He mentions that he stayed for several days or weeks to befriend the locals, as they were initially reluctant to offer him their possessions. He also excavated some archaeological objects himself (Gyarmati 2006:48–49).¹¹

Driven by academic interest, he took notes about the provenance, designation and attribution of the objects and took several photos. In his publications, Bauer mentioned a few Mazatec informants and linked their knowledge to the objects he sent across the Atlantic (see, for example, Bauer 1908). Among them were Othón García, a former Huautla political leader and administrator of the Rebenacq coffee ranch close to the Río Tonto, and the ritual specialist Feliciano Severiano, who explained to him the meaning and use of ritual objects. Both are also mentioned in the detailed descriptions

5 Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Studentenliste Philosophische Fakultät 1810–1907, 83. Rektorat, p. 18; Matrikelbuch 1891–1893, 82–83. Rektorat, p. 102. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern, STABE BB 05.10.1703, Pp. 251, 255.

6 Historical Archive of the Field Museum, Chicago, letter by Wilhelm Bauer to George A. Dorsey, 5th of July 1904, Pp. 1–7, here p. 2.

7 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 771/1901, letter by Karl von den Steinen to unknown, 29th of July 1901, no specific page.

8 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 771/1901, letter by Wilhelm Bauer to Karl von den Steinen, 26th of September 1901, no specific page.

9 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 499/1903, letter by Wilhelm Bauer to Eduard Seler, 3rd of March 1903, no specific page.

10 Original: '[Die Sammlung Ethnographica der Mazateken] ist eigentlich die erste Sammlung, ... die über den Hausrat ... eines der Urvölker der mexikanischen Republik Aufschluss gibt ...'. Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 499/1903, letter by Eduard Seler to the Scientific Commission of the Museum, 23rd of July 1903, no specific page.

11 See also: Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 420/1904, letter Wilhelm Bauer to Eduard Seler, 29th of February 1904, p. 1.

of practices and rituals on the museum's index cards (Fig. 4).¹² Bauer returned to the Mazateca region to assemble a second ethnographic collection, which arrived in Berlin in 1908. He maintained a particularly close relationship with the KMV in his role as an agent until 1910.¹³ Bauer also worked for collectors and individuals in the USA, Europe and Mexico. Over the years, he established archaeological and ethnographic collections in several museums in Europe and the United States of America (Gyarmati 2006; Gaida 2011; König 2007; König and Sellen 2015; Sellen 2015). He also published some scholarly works (Bauer 1908, 1916).

However, Bauer disagreed with the Mexican Revolution and the end of the Porfiriato,¹⁴ especially with the coming to power of Francisco Madero, who initiated the insurrection to depose President Porfirio Díaz. Accordingly, he left Mexico in 1912. He also published a critique of German foreign policy, which he considered too opportunistic (Bauer-Thoma 1913). A late trace of him in the archive of the EM is his correspondence with the director of the America Department from 1927, Konrad Theodor Preuss, in which he sells photos to Berlin of private archaeological collections, including those of the collector Fernando Sologuren from Oaxaca, and asks for recommendations to sell them to other anthropological museums as well.¹⁵

At this point, we can conclude that Bauer was an important seller of archaeological and ethnographic collections from Mexico who worked within the scientific networks of his time and used his scholarly identity especially to offer his services to museums. His biography and international connections have a lot of potential to complement our knowledge of early anthropology and collecting (Dreessen 2025). The historical and cultural value of his Mazatec collection, including information about local customs and the Mazatec language, will be best assessed by today's Mazatec people. The extent to which Bauer acted unlawfully or unethically in his collecting activities must be investigated further.

12 See also Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 634/1904, letter Wilhelm Bauer to Eduard Seler, 13th of April 1904, no specific page.

13 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0554 I B 042 Amerika, E 326/1927, letter by Ernst Vatter to Karl Theodor Preuss, 18th of March 1927, no specific page.

14 The authoritarian regime of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico (1876–1911), which ended with the Mexican Revolution.

15 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0554 I B 042 Amerika, E 326/1927, letters by Wilhelm Bauer to Karl Theodor Preuss, 26th of March 1927, 7th of May 1927, 16th of May, 1st of June 1927, 25th of June 1927, Pp. 24–28.

Gabriela García's Experiences

In the following section, Gabriela García shares her thoughts on her experiences in Berlin and with the collection.¹⁶

How did you experience the collaboration and your stay in Berlin?

I thought the work we did as a team was very important. The availability of colleagues in Berlin and the fact that they had already made progress with the documentation and registration of the collection were very significant steps forward. It served as a basis and facilitated my approach to the collection. We made a good team in the textual analyses and the interest that each of us showed in contributing our knowledge. For instance, the Mazatec language was written with German spellings and without everyone's support it would not have been easy to discover some of the names of these objects that Bauer recorded in the field notes.

What meaning does the Mazatec collection have for you and the Mazatec people in general?

As a Mazatec woman, this collection means a lot to me. I find it very valuable and interesting to rediscover the use and meanings of each of the objects in the collection. These objects tell us about the history of the Mazatec communities from over a hundred years ago. It is as if these stories have been suspended in time. It gives us food for thought about our region and its natural environment, an example of which are the changes that have been occurring, especially to the climate, and how this has affected the production of plant material, which as Mazatecs we used in the production of different utensils. It also makes us reflect on when we have introduced so many industrially produced everyday utensils into our homes. For me it is important to mention that in the Mazatec communities there are people who dedicate their lives to different areas: there are artisans, producers, artists, weavers, potters, etc., and there are also those who create art for personal or family use. One of the examples I can mention are the grandmothers and grandfathers, father or mother: when a baby is born in the family, they take their machete, walk to the forest, look for a tree, cut off a branch and make a cradle from it. This is life in the Mazatec culture and in the regions of Oaxaca.

I dare say that more than one person will be interested in learning more about this collection.

¹⁶ The original interview was conducted by the other authors of this article in March 2025, in written form and in Spanish, and then translated into English.

How did you experience seeing historical objects from the Mazatec region in Berlin?

I admit that I was not familiar with some of these objects. As I mentioned earlier, I connected many of them to the stories my mother and grandmothers shared with me, so the words they imparted at some point took on a great deal of meaning when I had these objects so close.

Which object or objects caught your attention or inspired you?

The ceremonial bundles, the reed mats, the *huipiles*. They all caught my attention in one way or another. I wish I could have had the Mazatec community with me to show them each of these objects so that together we could contribute to their description, elaboration and use.

What is the significance of Bauer's documentation and information on the Mazatec for you?

This information is very valuable because it provides insights into the places Bauer visited in the Mazatec region, allowing us to identify the sources of some objects through this documentation. But what I find even more interesting is that the Mazateco that Bauer recorded is not from a single place. It is worth mentioning that the Mazatec language has sixteen linguistic variants, which means that there are different variants of the language in the notes that make up the collection, which enriches it even more.

What kind of collaborations do you imagine or hope for in the future between the EM and the Mazatec people and communities?

Having had the pleasure of getting to know the objects and materials in the Mazatec collection and working a little with them, I would like to contribute more knowledge in order to enrich the information about these objects. I would like to emphasize the following activities:

- Work on researching the history of materials that have fallen into disuse.
- Document the techniques used to make utensils that are still used in the region.
- Above all, describe each object, making the most of the knowledge of the elderly or the artisans in the region. This would facilitate the cataloguing of these materials.
- Digitize the images of the objects, notes and documents that form part of the collection for their preservation.
- Transcribe the Mazatec texts found in the notes and consider inviting as colleagues Mazatec writers from the municipalities where these objects were obtained.

We have also dealt with these points to some extent in the various work meetings that have been held with colleagues from the Museum there in Berlin. We are currently working on a photographic exhibition with the support of the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse) of the EM and the Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca Foundation. We really hope that this exhibition will be well received in the Mazatec communities and that it becomes a source of reflection and inspiration for those who are fighting to preserve the Mazatec language and culture in general.

Is there anything you would like to share about your experience in Berlin?

Acknowledgements. I thank God and each and every one of the people who took me in when I was there, those who guided me and looked after me, as it was my first time travelling abroad. Thank you for everything you shared with me, the meals, the laughter, the conversations, the little walks. Above all, thank you for having considered me for this project. (On a personal note, never leave your train ticket at home when travelling in the city!)¹⁷

Epilogue

At the time of the exhibition's inauguration, the Berlin Mazatec collection was made accessible online. Work and research on the collection continued, including the transcription of the notes in Mazateco. So far, the exhibition has attracted the interest of visitors in the history of the Mazateca region. This might stimulate future research and exchanges of knowledge about materials and cultural techniques within and outside the EM.

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¹⁷ Gabriela García accidentally left her public transport ticket at home. It was in another bag. She was checked. The ticket inspectors were unmoved by her situation and accused her of fare evasion, even though she later presented her ticket. She had to pay a large fine.

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Further acknowledgements

This project has received support from many people and institutions in a variety of ways, for which we are very grateful. We would especially like to thank our project partners Dr Sebastián van Doesburg and Demián Ortiz Maciel from the BIJC and Dr Alejandro de Ávila Blomberg from the Museo Textil in Oaxaca, Mexico. At the EM, we are especially grateful to the photographer Claudia Obrocki for her excellent documentation of the collection objects and the processing of the historical photos, to collection manager Ines Seibt for the initial preparation of the object catalogue and the digitisation of the index cards, Valerie von Stillfried from the Education and Outreach Department, the CoMuse team, the Department of Conservation and Restoration, especially Kai Patricia Engelhardt, and the Media Department. We would also like to express our sincere thanks to the IAI, in particular Dr Ulrike Mühlischlegel, Dr Gregor Wolff and Toni Matzdorf, as well as to the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest, Dr Tímea Bata and Dr János Gyarmati, for providing documents and historical photos of Wilhelm Bauer. Professor Dr Michael Dürr, linguist and specialist in American studies, helped us in our search for documents about Wilhelm Bauer with advice and assistance.