

On the Road to ‘5 Questions on the Collections’: The Zurich Ethnographic Museum Collaborative Workspace Series Exhibitions 2022-2024

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Abstract: Collaborative research on museum collections is standard today in ethnographic museums, where the power of interpretation, questions of expertise and ownership rights are critically discussed as necessary steps towards decolonizing western museums and knowledge. After a range of collaborative projects, between 2022 and 2024 the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich ran the Workspace Series as a format for making knowledge production in an ethnographic museum transparent and for sharing collections, museum work and collaborative research with originator and migrant communities, as well as the general public. Five key questions were formulated to show how mutual understanding depends on negotiating basic information and ascertaining insights into different perspectives. The aim was to demonstrate how important this mutual trust is for collaborative research that is relevant not only to western audiences, but particularly also to originator communities of collections preserved in our museums.

[provenance research, contemporaneity, reconnecting, object diasporas, trust, skilled practice, object expertise, collaboration, sensitive objects, alternative knowledge systems, pluriverse]

In recent years, agendas concerning provenance research, decolonization and critical curatorship have challenged and entirely transformed museums holding sensitive collections (Brandstetter and Hierholzer 2018:12),² particularly ethnographic museums worldwide (see e.g. Doll 2024). Most museums today are committed to this agenda. When the directors of ethnographic museums in the Germanophone world published

1 The author was chair in social anthropology and director of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich from August 2008 to January 2025. Responsible for the museum's overall scientific profile, in the case of the Workspace Series 2022-2024 I was one of a collective team of five curators who jointly, supported by the entire museum team, ultimately developed and realized five exhibitions. In this article I thus include information related to the respective exhibitions provided by Miriam Saada Elabed, Alexis Malefakis, Maike Powroznik and Martina Wernsdörfer. I warmly thank them as well as the new chair and director, Alice Hertzog Frazer, for critically reading and commenting on this contribution. I am also grateful to Helen Rana in Bristol for her English copy-editing.

2 Brandstetter and Hierholzer define sensitive collections as ‘artifacts that, from today’s perspective, are considered sensitive primarily for ethical reasons and due to their relationship to people outside the collection and [that] therefore require special handling’. See also Fründt 2015.

the joint ‘Heidelberg Statement: Decolonizing requires dialogue, expertise and support’ in 2019, they explicitly underlined the necessity of collaborative research.³

In Switzerland, a country without formal colonies, this transformation came along with a growing academic and public awareness of the countries’ entanglements with colonialism (e.g. Putschert et al. 2013; Putschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015). Today the ten Swiss ethnographic museums in Basle, Berne, Burgdorf, Geneva, Neuchâtel, Lugano, St. Gallen and Zurich are all dedicated to decolonial agendas in one way or another and have put their collections under critical scrutiny. Multiple research projects concerning provenance, if not restitution issues, have been or are being realized. A key project was the Swiss Benin Initiative 2021–2024, a cross-canton project involving eight Swiss ethnographic museums holding so-called ‘Benin Bronzes’ in their collections. The project was conducted in close collaboration with Nigerian partners and was managed by the Museum Rietberg in Zurich; it resulted in a report outlining the holdings of Benin objects in the participating museums and their provenances. It generated joint declarations and actions in the form of a series of exhibitions in each museum, as well as the joint publication ‘Mobilizing: Benin Heritage in Swiss Museums’ (Museum Rietberg; Benin Initiative Switzerland (BIS); Tisa Francini et al. 2024). Negotiations about transferring the ownership of Benin objects identified in the project as having been looted are currently under way.

While obtaining funding for provenance research and collaborative investigations into collections was initially difficult in Switzerland, more recently the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (Bundesamt für Kultur, BAK) – which also funded the Swiss Benin Initiative – and other funding institutions have understood the urgency of critical and collaborative research on museum collections and launched related funding schemes. All this currently translates into local and national exhibitions⁴ broadening and deepening the scope of decolonizing Swiss museums and collections. Thus, recognition of a need to decolonize knowledge and museums has reached the Swiss public.

3 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/About-us/statements-declarations/Restitution-debate-The-Heidelberg-Statement.html>, accessed February 23, 2026. See also the 2024 Zurich Declaration, <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/About-us/statements-declarations/zurich-declaration.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

4 For details on BAK initiatives, see: <https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/en/home.html>, accessed February 23, 2026. For local and national exhibitions see e.g. in 2023 the city of Zurich launched the exhibition ‘Blinde Flecken: Zürich und der Kolonialismus’. See https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/de/stadtleben/kultur/kultur-leben/kulturangebote/stadthaus-/ausstellungen/rueckblick.html#000032023_blinde_fleckenzuerichunderkolonialismus, accessed February 23, 2026. In September 2024 the National Museum launched the exhibition ‘kolonial: Globale Verflechtungen der Schweiz’, <https://www.landesmuseum.ch/kolonial>, accessed February 23, 2026. In 2025 the Berne Historical Museum launched the exhibition ‘Resistances: On Dealing with Racism in Bern’, produced by the collective ‘Das Wandbild muss weg’; see <https://www.bhm.ch/en/a-changing-museum/bhm-lab/resistances-comment-aborder-le-racisme-a-berne>, accessed February 23, 2026 and <https://www.das-wandbildmussweg.ch/>, accessed February 23, 2026.

Collaborative Research and Exhibiting in a University Context: The Case of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (EMZ)

The Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (EMZ) is described as a case study here, since it was the sum of experiences in collaborative projects which ultimately brought the museum's curatorial team to the conclusion that we should, as the next step, open up the museum to the public as a workspace for collaborative reflection; for this we chose the format of a Workspace Series.

Since the 1990s, when Michael Oppitz was its first chair and director (1990–2008), the EMZ has been conceptualized as a public university museum linked to a chair in social anthropology. This chair is simultaneously director of the museum and therefore responsible for the museum's scientific profile. Each directorship marked and marks a particular era of research and exhibiting as defined by the current team and their individual projects, styles and ambitions, as well as the leading topics and theoretical agendas of the respective times in the history of social anthropology in Switzerland and beyond. Key to understanding these periods of the EMZ are their specific collaborations with originator communities and indigenous scholars.

In the past, several attempts have been made to write the EMZ's history (Szalay et al. 1972; Henking 1980; Münzer and Gerber 1989; Münzer 1989; Gerber et al. 2014), which have provided chronologies and timelines. The EMZ archive holds ample testimony of past and present collaborations. A quick look into these materials shows that the EMZ, like all ethnographic museums, has its own history of collaborating with originator communities and indigenous scholars, which has not yet been academically explored. Even though it is assumed that collectors, researchers and museum curators may have used the power of interpretation to read cultures in Eurocentric ways, there is more to discover in the archives. Today we know all too well that all the actors involved, including creators from originator communities, former owners and those from whom objects may have been looted, will potentially have tried to use their agency and have thus left their traces in the archives. The paradigm shift towards decolonization has made us sensitive to such traces. What questions of authorship and power of interpretation were discussed in past projects? What visions did past collaborators have, and were these understood, muted or respected, listened to, documented and eventually integrated into projects and archives?

One example which impressed me early on was Michael Oppitz, who collaborated closely with the Magar in Nepal on his film *The Shamans in the Land of the Blind* and, in the early 1980s, held the very first screening of this film in the village of the community where he had done field research.⁵ The question of collaboration in this film

5 See https://www.filmportal.de/film/schamanen-im-blinden-land_e8bc8d3f6285458b991b509f-06cb0d69, accessed February 23, 2026; see also <https://www.berlinale.de/external/programme/archive/pdf/20148212.pdf>, accessed February 23, 2026; Oppitz 1981.

project, and how it impacted collaborative projects during Michael Oppitz's time as EMZ director, is certainly worth closer attention.

In 2008 I was appointed professor in social anthropology and started my directorship of the museum. Over the years, our team and I stumbled again and again across hints to past collaborations. This became particularly apparent when collaborators would stand in the museum years after initial contact, reconsidering and reflecting on their past engagement and role, and eventually asking to update or reconsider documentation.⁶

When taking up my directorship, I set a leading agenda for the university museum on the anthropology of skilled practice. Even though not all projects and exhibitions between 2008 and my retirement in 2025 followed this track, skilled practice, the question of expertise and knowledge related to objects and collections always remained central. Over the years, it became one of the museum's defining perspectives.

Focusing on issues of skilled practice entailed including experts of different kinds, among them first of all local community experts. Collaborating was part and parcel of this central focus on skill, in part in view of the fact that the archives usually lack much information about skilled practices linked to objects held in the museum collection. Past collectors' and museum staff's evolutionist, diffusionist etc. agendas haunted how collections were documented: while today we speak of coevalness (Fabian 2014) and a global pluriverse of diverse and alternative knowledge systems when approaching collections, the archives have rarely been updated and have to be read in the contexts of their own times.

We countered such gaps in the archive by bringing experts together in close collaboration on the collections: child creators in Burundi with collectors, industrial designers and anthropologists in the project 'Auto Didactic: wire models from Burundi', curated by Alexis Malefakis and Reto Togni (Malefakis, Togni, and Laely 2017);⁷ ceramic masters from Longquan, People's Republic (PR) of China and Swiss and German ceramists and anthropologist/sinologists in 'Celadon in Focus: jade-like porcelains and their masters in Longquan, PR of China', curated by Anette Mertens with Mareile Flitsch in 2019 (Mertens and Flitsch 2019);⁸ steep-slope cultivators from Switzerland and South-west China with anthropologists Rebekka Sutter and Thomas Kaiser in 'ZuHören im

6 One example is the Ethiopian artist Falaka Armide Yimer, whose woodprints from 1970-72, held in the EMZ's collection, were displayed in the exhibition 'Willkommene Kunst: Druckgrafiken aus Kanada und Äthiopien' from November 2010 to February 2012. When Falaka Armide Yimer, now resident in Australia, saw his woodprints in the exhibition in 2010, he was deeply touched and rediscussed his art with the curators Elisabeth Biasio (curator 1988-2006) and Peter Gerber (curator 1975-2010). See Biasio and Gerber 2010.

7 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Auto-Didactica-wire-models-from-Burundi.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

8 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Celadon.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

Steilhang: Körper, Ding und Klang in der Schweiz und im Himalaya' in 2019;⁹ and 'Talking with drums: West African percussion skills in global conversations', curated by anthropologist and drummer Alexis Malefakis, who in 2019 brought together an interdisciplinary team of scientists and drummers from Ghana, Nigeria, Germany and Switzerland.¹⁰ In 2020 the exhibition 'Without honey you have nothing to eat: on the bee knowledge of Ayoréode, Gran Chaco, South America', co-curated by Henriette Stierlin and Maïke Powroznik, brought together indigenous wild bee experts with apiculturalists, veterinarians and social anthropologists.¹¹

Furthermore, we reconsidered the role of restoration and conservation for ethnographic museums, firmly including technical staff in the research and exhibiting. In my contribution, 'Skills and competences in ethnographic collections' (Flitsch 2019), I proposed developing a method of transprofessional collaboration to show that in many ways conservators and indigenous craftspeople and creators are potentially closer to understanding the material and technical sides of ethnographic objects than curators or the European public. In 2021, 'Hidden complexities: unfolding Miao women's textile skills' was co-curated by handweaver Karola Kaufmann, Asia curator Martina Wernsdörfer and textile restorer and master hand embroiderer Ina von Woyski in collaboration with Miao embroiderers (Wernsdörfer and Flitsch eds. 2022).¹² A follow-up project was the Digital Initiative Zurich DIZH-funded project 'Partners in a trading zone', in which computer scientists, social anthropologists and trained embroiderers explored the question of how scientific disciplines whose links to digitalization are not obvious can become part of the digital transformation.¹³

The increasing awareness and interest of descendants of originator communities in their cultural heritage preserved in western museums and collections slowly led to a rise in these communities' demands for access to the EMZ collections, or at least information on them. Since 2015 we have opted to share if not proactively open up our collections, which began by contacting originator communities before starting research or exhibition preparations. To name but some examples: after the critical exhibition 'Man muss eben alles sammeln' on the collection of the Swiss botanist Hans Schinz, who had been part of the German colonial Lüderitz expedition, we shared the

9 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/ausstellungen/Vergangene-Ausstellungen/steilhang.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

10 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Talking-with-drums.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

11 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Ayor%C3%A9ode.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

12 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/hidden-complexities.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

13 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/Forschung-und-Lehre/forschungsprojekte/dizh-partners-in-a-trading-zone.html>, accessed February 23, 2026; see the project website <https://sticken-programmieren.ch/>, accessed February 23, 2026.

Schinz collection with Namibian colleagues and institutions (Beckmann ed. 2012).¹⁴ The project 'Points of View: visions of a museum partnership', curated by Thomas Laely, Raphael Schwere and Mark Meier in 2018/19 in close collaboration with the Igongo Cultural Center in Kampala, Uganda, generated a collaborative exhibition at the EMZ in Zurich and in Kampala, extended by a mobile exhibition through Uganda, on the topic of milk in Uganda and Switzerland (Laely, Meyer, and Schwere eds. 2018).¹⁵ In the case of the exhibitions, 'Mapping – Retracing – Encountering: the Tibet collections of Heinrich Harrer and Peter Aufschnaiter' and 'Encountering – Retracing – Mapping: The Expedition Collections of Heinrich Harrer' in 2018/19, the curators Maike Powroznik and Martina Wernsdörfer turned to sharing the collections and the exhibitions, in the case of the Tibet collections with Tibetans in Switzerland, and in the case of the expedition collections with Maroons in Suriname and the Netherlands. The idea was to understand the perspectives on Harrer and his collecting from those whom Harrer had met. Community members and institutions were involved in the exhibition process, their voices being included and their particular agendas accepted as far as possible. Delegates from the Maroon communities in Suriname, where Harrer had been collecting his artifacts, and in the Netherlands were invited to the exhibitions' opening ceremonies and gave their own guided tours. The exhibitions were documented in a 360° format to be shared online. In Suriname, this documentation was and still is used as teaching material in schools (Flitsch, Powroznik, and Wernsdörfer eds. 2018).

In 2020 we summarized our experience in a joint article entitled 'On the question of decolonizing knowledge in ethnographic museums' (Flitsch, Malefakis et al. 2020). Our idea was to frame the moment of colonial collecting as a moment in the encounter of coevals from alternative contemporaneous knowledgescapes and to understand their skilled practices, locked and preserved with objects resilient to colonial interpretations. This was the key to rewriting and thus decolonizing knowledge through new narratives and counternarratives.

Most of the subsequent exhibitions were collaborative projects, eventually leading to follow-up endeavours.¹⁶ Under Covid-19 pandemic conditions, coinciding with the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the department of social anthropology at the University of Zurich, for example, we shared the heritage of anthropologist Lorenz Löffler. Collaborating with Mrinal Kanti Tripura from the Maleya Foundation in Bangladesh and with descendants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts' (CHT) indigenous farmers Löff-

¹⁴ See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/ausstellungen/Vergangene-Ausstellungen/schinz.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

¹⁵ See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Upcoming-Exhibition-Points-of-View.html>, accessed February 23, 2026; <https://www.pointsofview.uzh.ch/en.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

¹⁶ For details of the exhibition projects, see <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

fler had once interviewed, an exhibition was collaboratively organized: 'Recollecting Lorenz Löffler: Multivocal approaches to an ethnographic legacy', curated by Rebekka Sutter, Thomas Kaiser, Mrinal Kanti Tripura and Mareile Flitsch in 2021 (Flitsch et al. 2021).¹⁷ This led to a *Stiftung für Wissenschaftliche Forschung*-funded student collaborative peace project in 2024, where Swiss and Chittagong Hill Tracts' indigenous students conceptualized the Löffler collections as a time capsule. They collaboratively investigated objects in the CHT, the Linden Museum in Stuttgart and the Löffler audio archive at the EMZ in light of their potential meanings under conditions of conflict.¹⁸

And finally, in 2023, the Kawésqar Foundation from Patagonia in Chile approached us to collaborate on a public debate with citizens in Zurich. They were less interested in talking about the human remains of their ancestors, who had died in 'human zoos' in Zurich in 1882 and not been returned until 2010. Instead, they wanted to talk about who the Kawésqar are today, and which topics link Switzerland and Patagonia. Over the summer of 2023 we gave museum space to the Kawésqar Foundation members and collaborated with them in their dialogue with the public. Maike Powroznik and Francisco Gonzalez, a representative of the Kawésqar, organized the exhibition and programme 'Ko Aswál: the next day'.¹⁹ We were surprised to find that, without knowing about the Workspace Series, the Kawésqar's concerns came very close to the '5 questions on the collections' Workspace Series agenda. 'Ko Aswál' led to a follow-up project on the representation of the Kawésqar in Swiss school books. Another outcome of this project is currently emerging from Kawésqar contacts with indigenous Iivid in eastern Greenland, with whom they share traumatic colonial experiences and a keen interest in whale-hunting, as well as strategies of cultural reconstruction for the long processes of healing from colonial trauma.²⁰

17 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/recollecting-lorenz-loeffler.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

18 See <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/Forschung-und-Lehre/forschungsprojekte/friedensstiftung-bangladesch.html>, accessed February 23, 2026.

19 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/ausstellungen/Vergangene-Ausstellungen/Ko-Asw%C3%A1l_The-Next-Day.html, accessed February 23, 2026. See also the film which the Kawésqar Foundation created after the summer at the Zurich EMZ: 'Ko Aswál – Voices of the Next Day', Fundación Pueblo Kawésqar in collaboration with Filantropía Cortes Solari. The audiovisual production was by MaticoFilms in Punta Arenas, Chile, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB9rgUPE4kw>, accessed February 23, 2026.

20 Recently, a film on a collaborative project on colonial trauma has been released by the Fundación Pueblo Kawésqar: *Sanando el Trauma Colonial*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfO0mSTWK7Y>, accessed March 2, 2026.

The Question Mark as Icon

Towards the end of my directorship in Zurich, when the curatorial team was faced with deciding the topic for a last joint exhibition, the experiences described above with collaborative research and exhibiting led us to devise the Workspace Series. In the process we reconsidered where we had stood as an ethnographic museum in 2021, with a seemingly anachronistic name and its particular history and collections, and in a country now being reconsidered as colonially entangled. Out of many discussions emerged the idea of temporarily transforming the museum into a workspace to be shared with the public, as well as with concerned communities in and from the collections' countries of origin, and to put the museum under a more or less general question mark.

Where had past collaborative projects led this particular ethnographic museum? With the necessity of collaborative museum work already accepted, we discussed the key problems, failures and deceptions, as well as the positive experiences we had encountered. And it became clear to us that some very basic things had all too often been overlooked and were missing.

As ethnographic museums know all too well, each collection, each contact with originator and migrant communities, raises different problematics and topics. One important concern is that collaborative projects in western academia very often start with concrete research agendas, questions to be answered and results to be produced – albeit only because the funding and budgeting systems need specification of contents and aims at the outset in order to be allocated. Yet many important issues only emerged in the process of collaboration and often could not be addressed to the extent they deserved due to time schedules, funding limits, overall agendas, structural barriers within the system, etc. So how could we open up the process and develop research questions collaboratively in the initial planning process?

The idea of literally hanging a question mark over the museum, and of the 'Workspace Series – 5 Questions on the Collections', was born. It was announced to the public as follows:

Where do our collections come from? What stories are attached to them? What expertise is contained in the objects? What human encounters do they bear witness to? And what is the significance of the collections today? With the exhibition series '5 Questions on the Collections', we are thinking of the museum as an open workspace – a space for collaborative exploration and research, as well as critical self-reflection. In doing this, we are making our museum work visible and inviting people to look at the collections and objects from ever new perspectives.

We defined these five questions so as to be answerable for each collection in order to provide the conditions for dialogue with originator communities, as well as with the migrant and general publics.

The question mark became the central icon of the Workspace Series' exhibition design. As a further result of the intense reflection process, the museum is currently in the process of being renamed, with the temporary name 'Völkerkunde?museum'.²¹

5 Questions to Reframe a Collection for Collaborative Research

The following texts describe what the five questions entailed. They appeared on the walls of each exhibition, and many visitors took photographs of them and even selfies in front of them. The takeaway booklets with the exhibition questions had to be continuously replenished.

CONTEXT

From which worlds of knowledge did the collections come to Switzerland?

Societies leave their traces in the material world: in the order and biography of their things; in materials, technology and fabrication; in handling and the social attribution of objects; in the symbolism and meaning of things; and in speech and gestures about specific artefacts. Humans take care to transmit the required knowledge sustainably. From childhood we learn how to move in the material world that surrounds us. Each object is like a piece of mosaic in its world of knowledge, which has its own legitimacy in parallel to many further worlds of knowledge.

However, ethnographic museums' index cards or databases often only contain sparse information. The contexts of the knowledge which is preserved in a collection together with the objects themselves have rarely been sufficiently documented. Thus, a major part of the museum's work consists in exploring the objects' contexts. With the originators' communities and their descendants, we communicate about their 'object diaspora' (Basu 2011) as preserved in the museum. Therefore, it is important to listen carefully to each other.

Without context, objects stay muted, as does the knowledge preserved with them. The workspace series looks for ways to understand the contexts of collections collectively.

PROVENANCE

What is attached to the objects due to their history(ies)?

Each object preserved in the ethnographic museum has its own history(ies). We are hardly ever familiar with their biography of creation and use or know under what

21 In summer 2026, a joint exhibition at the EMZ will push this process of renaming further under the new directorship.

circumstances an object was handed over to whom. How did it arrive in the museum? The most that has survived are written reports or correspondence, which provide at least partial information about the contexts of origin and collecting. This is where provenance research generally comes in.

Where possible, object research today is carried out together with originators or their descendants. This also involves the sometimes problematic contexts of origin and appropriation. Ethical responsibility and the acknowledgement of originatorship oblige us to pursue the provenance of objects.

Our view of the collections' changes: once we can reconstruct the objects' histories, immediately questions arise about the obligations that may attach to an object because of its origin. The memories and perspectives of the originators and their descendants related to their object diaspora need to be listened to. The workspace series opens up a path to future-oriented provenance research. A new way of dealing with the preserved cultural heritage and its histories must, if possible, be found together. Restitution can also be an issue.

SKILL

What should we talk about and agree upon?

All societies have their own ideas about what abilities are needed to succeed in life in one's familiar environment. Humans internalize skill as measure and value. This is as much about dexterity as it is about social competence or about how to carry out a ritual correctly with the right objects. Skill individually drives humans to ever new challenges. As adults, we strive to help the next generation acquire proficiency.

Together with the collections in ethnographic museums, the skills are preserved which were necessary to fabricate the objects, use them and transmit the knowledge they embody. Only when we know what expertise is in the objects, so to speak, can we enter into conversations with each other.

The workspace series opens up the museum to communicate about skill. Our view broadens if we address originators as skilful persons. Which of our skills are comparable to theirs? How has skill changed on site since the objects entered the collections? Does the museum preserve any evidence of skills that might be important for the future? And finally, to whom does the expertise inscribed in the objects belong?

CONTEMPORANEITY

Who were and are talking to each other at the same time?

We call humans who have lived or are living in the same time contemporaries. The denial of contemporaneity was a strategy for exercising power, thus colonialism and slavery were possible because many Europeans did not acknowledge their contemporaries in the conquered territories as equals. Instead, European policy and science located their societies as being in a pre-modern era, removed from their history, as it were.

Contemporaneity, diversity and multivocality are valuable assets to us today, as they have a sustainable effect on museum practice. A particular challenge lies in making contemporaneity visible for the past as well. Which contemporaries encountered each other at the moment of collecting objects? How do we give space to the multivocal views of the collections, the many memories of the objects today and in the future?

The workspace series opens up a path to reflections on the encounters of people with one another. The world and the objects preserved in the museum appear differently as soon as we understand the originators and collectors who encountered each other as contemporaries. How did they communicate with each other? How did the Europeans and the objects' originators perceive each other? And how do these perceptions continue to have an effect today? How do we speak to each other today?

RECONNECTING

What is the collections' significance to their originators' respective communities?

Ethnographic museums preserve mosaic pieces of material and immaterial knowledge and skills from many regions of the world – but for whom actually?

Over a long time, the task of ethnographic museums, including those in Switzerland, has been to inform visitors about the social and cultural life of people in other world regions. The objects therefore served as illustrative material. Those represented rarely had an adequate say in them. In the meantime, this European sovereignty of interpretation has come under criticism. Hence there is currently a debate about what role ethnographic museums should play in the future.

The British anthropologist Paul Basu refers to ethnographic collections as 'object diasporas'. At the moment of collecting, reciprocal relationships are created. We see ourselves committed to these relationships. Which originators of the objects preserved in the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich can be identified today? What do people know about the whereabouts of their cultural heritage in Switzerland, and what value does it have for them today? Only they themselves can answer these questions, including whether their cultural heritage needs restitution.

The workspace series opens up new forms of shaping relationships and in doing so also explores how research questions can be developed together in the future. So what conditions are needed for the reconnection of knowledge, objects and archival materials in the museums with their originators' societies?

The Workspace Series Exhibitions and their Impacts

The Workspace Series was a series of five exhibitions with an overall design developed by the curators in close collaboration with Kathrin Leuenberger (photography and graphic design) and Melissa Cafilisch (communication and public relations), with each

exhibition depicted in a different colour. Between 2022 and 2024 the five exhibitions were opened one after the other and ultimately formed one large exhibition on five thematically linked collections. Each of the Workspace Series' exhibitions addressed one of the five questions with special reference to their collaborative approach.

The exhibition 'Honeymoon? 5 Questions on the "Hans Paasche Collection" from East Africa' kicked off the series in May 2022 with a focus on the question of provenance. Curator Alexis Malefakis analysed the collection of this German colonial soldier and examined its significance for Rwanda today in close collaboration with the Rwanda Cultural Heritage Academy. At the request of this Academy, the 'Hans Paasche Collection', which is kept in Zurich, has been made digitally accessible to the Rwandan public for the first time. An interactive digital version of the Zurich workshop exhibition 'Honeymoon?' has been installed at the Ethnographic Museum in Huye in Rwanda for this purpose. Visitors can enter the Zurich exhibition space virtually, learn more about the history of Rwandan cultural assets and their journey to Switzerland, and discover the close collaboration between the Zurich museum and Rwandan experts. In addition, all objects in the collection can be viewed on site in a digital database.

In October 2022, the second exhibition, 'Business Idea? 5 Questions on "the Object Set" from Noanamá, Colombia', opened with a focus on the question of reconnecting. Drawing on international experts of the collection, particularly Magdalena Nierzwicka, Museologist in the District Museum in Torún (Poland), curator Maike Powroznik examined the collecting practices of Polish ethnologist Borys Malkin and actively involved the indigenous Wounaan community and Afro-Colombians as the collection's creators in the research process. The project was funded by Citizen Science UZH and ETH. By reconnecting the collection from the Chocó region of Colombia,²² we renewed the relationship between the objects' creators and the museum. On the one hand, each individual piece was correctly recontextualized in the exhibition space by our partners from Columbia; on the other hand, the work of two women from the Chocó, Cruz Quilina Piraza and Gloria Murillo Moreno, on the collection in Zurich activated local cultural memory and transferred that memory back into practice – specifically, the production of objects based on historical models from the collection. The newly compiled practical and social knowledge was also summarized for the first time in a teaching aid for schoolchildren in the Chocó.

In early March 2023, the third Workspace Series exhibition followed: 'Looted Goods? 5 Questions on Objects from China at the End of the Imperial Era', with a focus the question of skilled practice. This focus was most rewarding due to the fact that looted objects are rarely well documented. It is only through the traces of skill they carry that their potential stories can be unlocked. Curators Yu Filipiak (from PR of China/Germany) and Mareile Flitsch focused on Chinese objects in Swiss museum

22 Departamento del Chocó, western Columbia.

collections that may have been looted during the Boxer War (1900/1901). The project was supported by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture. This was the first exhibition on looted goods from the Boxer War in the German-speaking world. One of its outcomes was the publication of the first report on possible looted art from the Boxer War in Swiss collections, written in German, English and Chinese.²³ Based on this report, ethnological museums in Switzerland are currently reviewing their collections and considering further research.

From July 2023, we held the fourth exhibition, 'Mask Dances? 5 Questions on Ritual Costumes from Sri Lanka', with a focus on the question of coevalness. Through a newly acquired collection, curator Martina Wernsdörfer questioned how ritual masks and costumes from Sri Lanka were museum-ized and what role they play today for local actors – including against the backdrop of performances of mask dances during so-called 'human zoos' ('Völkerschauen') in, for example, Zurich around the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries. Linked to the exhibition, joint projects were developed with representatives of various social groups: an interdisciplinary exchange with the Moulagenmuseum der UZH (UZH Moulage Museum) on the topic of illness and healing in Western medicine and Eastern medicine; a 'transfer to society' in the form of a masked dance performance at former sites of 'human zoos' in Zurich with Sri Lankan multi-disciplinary artist Deneth Piumakshi Veda Arachchige and Sri Lankan dancer Lahiru Prabashwara Karunarathna; and a Master's thesis on the topic of 'human zoos' and their aftermath, with the participation of representatives of the Sri Lankan diaspora in Switzerland (Schärer 2024).

In November 2023, the last Workspace Series exhibition, 'Workpieces? 5 Questions on Negev Bedouin Embroideries from their Descendants' View', completed the series, taking into focus the question of context. Curator Saada Elabed, herself of Negev Bedouin descent, reflected, in collaboration with Bedouins and the Bedouin diaspora in Switzerland and France, on the political, cultural and social contexts of the embroideries. Her particular interest was issues of perspective, especially how people with a personal connection to these objects view the collection. The exhibition is part of Saada Elabed's doctoral dissertation, in which she examines the contexts and meanings of Bedouin embroidery in museums for Bedouins today. A key collaboration was developed with Bedouin artist Zenab Garbia, who presented her works as contemporary reinterpretations of Bedouin embroidery traditions in the exhibition. Further, the exchange with members of different generations of the Bedouin diaspora opened up a broader understanding. As a descendant of Bedouin embroiderers, Saada Elabed combines personal experiences with scientific reflections through autoethnography and exhibition practice.²⁴

23 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/Forschung-und-Lehre/abgeschlossene_forschungsprojekte/pluenderware-aus-dem-boxerkrieg.html, accessed March 2, 2026.

24 360° documentations of the workspace series exhibitions can be accessed at https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/ausstellungen/360_grad_ausstellungen.html, accessed March 2, 2026.

Concluding Reflections

The Workspace Series was an unusual format for a museum. In the past, exhibiting meant presenting the results of (our) research on collections to the public. With the Workspace Series, the curators were no longer exhibition authors. Rather, they presented a particular collection at the level of our knowledge at the time of the exhibition opening. The open workspace was a room for discussion and collaborative research, which then continuously changed the exhibition – as well as the knowledge about experts to be consulted, discussions to be developed, projects to be formulated, key questions to be answered or even new questions to be formulated.

For visitors to the exhibitions, the Workspace Series was equally unusual. No longer presenting set research results to be consumed, the Workspace Series was intended to inform but also encourage the public to engage in reflection and ultimately contribute their own perspectives, knowledge, thoughts and maybe doubts. Over a timespan of roughly two years, visitors who came to the EMZ wandered through a gradually increasing number of exhibitions. Always equipped with the same questions, the answers to these questions for different collections led to entirely different insights into issues of context, provenance, skilled practice, contemporaneity and reconnecting. During guided tours, workshops and discussions with the public, and in meetings in the workspaces with experts or migrant community members, ever new discussions and topics to explore were unfolded.

Collaborative research on the exhibited collections did not end with the closing of the Workspace Series, but led to new projects, new insights, new questions. In her paper ‘The future of the museum is ethnographic’, anthropologist Kavita Singh from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, argued that, due to their long road and experience with critically decolonizing museums, the decolonial attitudes ethnographic museums have developed should become a blueprint for the global museum (Singh 2015). Ethnographic museums meanwhile continue to decolonize. The Workspace Series was a testing ground for us to determine on which collaboratively negotiated frame of understanding of an object diaspora in our museum’s future collaboration could and should be based.

Academia and funding institutions expect researchers and museums to propose and address relevant topics. How do we define relevant topics and understand the relevance of research? Ethnographic museums should address key topics that are relevant not only to western academia, but hopefully and ideally also to the communities for whom we in the museums are preserving parts of their heritage for the future. Such relevant topics can only be collaboratively defined within processes of intense communication, gradually finding a ‘common language’, understanding and common ground within processes of building trust. For this, it would certainly be necessary to reassess funding schemes and structural frameworks for museums towards offering more open formats and more flexible and sustainable funding tools.

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