

Overview of Concept and Contents



In times of scarce resources, the determination of implication and relevance – known in the English-speaking world as the Assessment of Significance – is a key issue in view of the continuous growth of collections and their conservation, documentation and digitalisation. Significance is, of course, not an absolute measure of value, for it is relative, dynamic and dependent on numerous factors.

The conference has set its aim in reflecting on the theoretical conditions, museum practices, possibilities and impossibilities, or indeed risks, in dealing with the assessment or the revocation of significance in museums of history. The Deutsches Historisches Museum intends to promote the scholarly discussion of this fundamental question of museum work. In the panels, an international plenum will undertake the task of examining six different approaches to historical objects through comparative analysis.

The programme of the conference follows a scenario that begins, in “Interpretation”, with the institutional character of the objects – and ends by revisiting this aspect in the last panel, “Prerogative of Interpretation”. In between, the thematic approaches vary from the active process of “Implication” to the “Reinterpretation” of an object’s “career” and the aspect of “Non-Interpretation”, and thus on to the question of a renunciation of concrete object contexts. Before getting to the final panel, “Prerogative of Interpretation”, the panel “Insignificance” will push ahead with the question of a potential dispensability of the original objects.

Interpretation

Relics, artefacts, traditions or remains of past times are, as realities and material witnesses of history, an essential medium of museum work. This is not limited to displaying historical objects, even though the museum achieves its greatest publicity in this way. Rather, the process of interpretation begins when the object enters the museum’s collection. Historical objects do not speak out to us by themselves: their interpretation is an essential part of the museum’s revelation.

Do the necessary differentiations of historical event locations, places of remembrance or memorials as well as the diverse spectrum among the museums themselves lead to a similar differentiation of the scattered stocks of objects? The use of the object and its critical reflection will be scrutinised before the background of this classification of museum-like locations with their necessarily specific programmes.

Implication

The panel “Implication” focuses on the active process of generating meaning and on the actors involved, such as curators, heads of collections and all researchers in the museum. What wealth of variants is characteristic for “implication”? Does displaying an object already have an effect on its contextual character? Does a canonisation of the visual worlds inherent in the objects come about in connection with collections and exhibitions?

Reinterpretation

The scientific perception gained from working with historical objects leads, as a rule, to a change in object contextualisation. This transformation is founded in the fact that existing context descriptions must always remain refutable.

Before this background, an interpretation can be described as something fragile. A change in interpretation can turn out to be an opportunity, in the sense of opening new possibilities of interpretation, but also a risk, in the case of historical-political rigidity. In any case, this reveals the close ties of museum objects to the conditions and developments outside the world of museums. Exhibitions, above all, represent an interface between the museum and the public. The interpretation of the objects acts as a social process of negotiation and is based on the reciprocal effect of the consensus and discrepancy of the museum presentation towards the outside world. Again the question arises as to who (why how whither and to what end) actively shapes the reinterpretation.

Non-Interpretation

This panel should expand the idea of a necessary change of context to include a possible reduction of contextual knowledge. Is non-interpretation actually a possibility or is the conscious negation of interpretation itself an act of active conceptualisation?

The existential loss of contextual knowledge usually occurs when complex collection contexts are lost or when documentation on the object is no longer available. But a decided concentration on certain contextual aspects is also necessary when collections are actively expanded or when objects are chosen for exhibitions, which in the end causes a temporary or lasting blending out of other aspects. This reveals that there are subjective perceptions of the objects, from which the actors in the museum are not entirely free.

This occurs particularly in the area of the active “collecting of the present”, which can be decisive for the historicisation of objects, but which is in no way based on an established system or methodology.

Insignificance

Collecting and exhibiting are not merely a matter of accumulating material objects, but rather, the fact is that the focal points and logics change in the course of time. Collections and exhibitions are more than the sum of the objects that they bring together.

Is there conceivably a space in museums beyond the objects? In the sense of a holistic understanding of the museum as a venue for many different ways of communication and presentation, the question of the primary role of original objects or, in fact, their replaceability must be raised.

This can refer to establishing the political frameworks of museum work, but the further development of the exhibition and collection activity is also affected in certain ways.

Prerogative of Interpretation

How do the individual actors in the museum act towards each other? How much of the prerogative of interpretation is granted them, how much do they demand? How are limitations set for them or how are the restrictions unblocked for them? What does institutional action mean in relation to the prerogative of interpretation? How does the



**DEUTSCHES
HISTORISCHES
MUSEUM**

historical museum conduct itself towards historical scholarship? Is the latter the Alma Mater or do the two function as equal transformers of the past?

In keeping with the questions about “interpretation” posed at the beginning of the conference, this final panel will take up the topic of the role of “leading” houses, or those that are “determining the discourse”. What consequences do the institutional condition and the position of the houses towards each other have for their work? Are there constellations of participation and political interaction that in the best case allow for a fruitful exchange or in the worst case cause a stigmatisation of role models? Under what conditions can the courage to experiment through trial and error be achieved in museum work?

Berlin, in March 2017

Dr Marc Fehlmann FRSA by participation of Darja Jesse and Marcel Kellner

