

Intangible memory

الذاكرة غير المادية

Immaterielles Gedächtnis

By Jill Praus

Fairy tales and Museum Studies

On how museums collect histories and tell stories

Fairy tales (خرافة [khu'ra:fa], Märchen ['mɛ:ɕçən]) are cross-cultural, transcending cultures and adapted and interpreted across time and space. They are fictional, but always show a piece of the reality of the time in which they are created. They are testimonies to (old) social conventions, power structures and systems of oppression and patriarchy. Museums are indeed not fictional, but they tell of precisely these structures. They preserve stories, e.g. through collecting and displaying objects or intangible knowledge and memory, and have the ability to tell stories. But it almost always goes hand in hand with the danger of telling a single story. The fact that museums have grown historically, and therefore their collections too, means that they are not value-free per se. But the call for a museum that presents history and (hi)stories 'truthfully' and does justice to all voices is all the more important nowadays.

We started our SAWA journey in Sharjah by talking about the danger of a single story, a concept of novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), in which she explains how one-sided stories of people, groups or places shape stereotypes and clichés and could influence identity, and also how much power stories could

unfold. In contrast to the negative factors, stories are also able to connect and mediate between cultures. Our lives and our cultures are composed of many overlapping stories – and since museums should act as mirrors of society, they need to display shared narratives, especially against the background of the post-colonial discourse that cultural institutions currently have to face. It is therefore indispensable for a modern museum to work closely with the public and with people from diverse communities and from around the world.

During our journey with the SAWA Museum studies program, we, Lina Dolfen (Kultur- und Heimathaus Stadt Blankenberg, Hennef) and Jill Praus (Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin), came across several stories and aspects of museum work, which have left a lasting impact on us, and are relevant for our own museum work. We discussed how a museum (of the future) should look like, how we want it to be and what we could change to diversify it. When you work with a collection, it usually sets the topic. So for example when the Guerilla Girls set up data on diversity in museums, the results were disappointing but unsurprising. In their work “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?”, for example, they investigated that less than 3% of the artists in the Modern art sections are women, but 83% of the nudes are female. That’s why it’s so important to let other positions in, for example, through loans, new acquisitions, participatory programs, other stories etc.

When we think back to the theme of this year’s Sharjah Biennial “Thinking Historically in the Present”, which accompanied us during the whole program, we can say, that to critically center the past within contemporary times and to connect different moments of history or historical objects with the present thinking, is part of our daily museum work.

For example in the exhibition “(Un)seen stories” (31st May 2024 – 25th August 2024), which I (Jill) am currently working on, we focus on our contemporary contemplation and affectivity towards the stories of historical objects we chose

from different collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and their invisible backgrounds. The exhibition focuses on selected objects that are either little known, have been forgotten (in the depot), have undergone a change in values, or are now being viewed in a new context. We want to show that the omnipresent, historical stories of the objects have a constant influence on the present and future (also the non-visible impacts). During the preparations for the exhibition we came across the term “hauntology” (the concept goes back to the work 'Spectres of Marx' (1993) by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida), which implies that objects or the archives/depots in themselves manifest or invite the ‘ghosts’ of the past that remain as an affective ‘force’ (neither present nor absent), especially in collections that are saturated in historical violence and that we now consider sensitive. We asked ourselves how those feelings of the absent history are preserved, and how one’s own memories and backstories generate them. In general terms: How do we remember and forget in a museum? Heritage sites, physical objects as well as immaterial cultural assets can activate such collective memories. These probably could not be categorised as “intangible heritage”, but rather as **intangible memory**, or as another form of “intangible heritage”.

At the Sharjah Biennial, we came across the sound installation “Hum II” by artist Hajra Waheed, which can be seen as an example of activating intangible and collective memory, regardless of who experiences the installation. The composition of the installation, featuring seven songs that were banned or suppressed in the past, refers to mass social movements and uprisings, on anti-colonial struggles and women’s leadership in the Americas, Africa and Asia. The installation invites the ‘ghosts’ of the past while creating an enclosed space that becomes the site for an encounter with broken time and one’s own narratives.



Exhibition view of Hum II (2023) by Hajra Waheed at the Sharjah Biennial 15.

As mentioned, the ‘ghosts’ of the past could encompass collective histories for example of violence and exclusion, extinct lifeforms as well as personal narratives and histories e.g. of trauma. Museum depots are most likely to be frozen in time and tend to store those stories. During the first station as a scientific trainee at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in the project “WEITWINKEL – Global Perspectives on Collections” I (Jill) got the opportunity to work together with Julia Binter (Provenance researcher at the SMB), Golda Ha-Eiros (Curator at the National Museum of Namibia in Windhoek) and Larissa Förster (Ethnologist and head of the department at the German Lost Art Foundation) on a podcast episode about a doll, which was probably sewn by an Ovaherero girl at a mission station in the 1870s and that has been overlooked in the museum depot for more than a century. Namibian artist and fashion designer Cynthia Schimming discovered it in the depot of the Ethnological Museum during the provenance research project “Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures”. The doll, which she named „Uaṭunua” (in Otjiherero: „touched“) tells of German colonialism and Western ideologies of preservation and restitution, but between the lines also of trauma and emotions that impinges on the present. It tells of the legacies that such an object left behind and which remained in society, even though the object was no longer there.



Exhibition view of “Uaʕunua” as a photograph in the Humboldt-Forum, Berlin. The doll was restituted to the National Museum of Namibia in Windhoek, but its story remains and is shared with both museums.

All of these experiences in Sharjah and Berlin and also in our daily museum praxis have led us to create a different approach to our glossary terms *herstory* and *intangible memory*. We decided to merge them into a fictional story – the fairy tale *Herstory* – with amended elements of our own museum experience and that of many other museum professionals, who wish to make a difference and to scrutinise dusted systems and historically grown structures. Museums were and are never neutral places. They are subjective spaces, which tend to tell a single story. For us, this means we have to look beyond those individual subjectivities and stories and connect with others to find new ways of interpretation.

And we hope that our wishes for a modern museum work won't be told as a fairy tale in the end.



Snapshot during our visit to The Africa Institute in Sharjah, a globally oriented institute of research and documentation of Africa, its people and its cultures as well as its complex past, present and future.

Herstory

قصتها

feministische Geschichtsbetrachtung

By Lina Dolfen

Disclaimer: The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in the following text are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who loved museums.¹ Whenever she was able to, she would visit those magical places and learn about arts and crafts, culture and nature, history and the future. As time went by, she came to realise that the stories told in museums were mostly about men who were rich and powerful.² “But how is this possible? Half of the world is female, so where are our stories?”, the girl wondered. At first, she was sad, thinking it was a man’s world she lived in without enough space for herself and all of womankind. She came to accept that fact and tried to resume her love for museums so she went to another one the next day. While wandering the rooms full of objects the sadness turned into anger. Not only were there no stories with women at the centre, but also there was not a single woman named. Every mention of a woman was defining her solely on a man, be it a husband, a father, or a brother. And even if those men were kings and emperors, female names were omitted.

¹ I can see why you might think this is autobiographical. But it’s not.

² This is actually true. Do you know the Gorilla Girls? They collected a lot of data on the representation of female artists in US Museums. They found out that you have to be naked to get into the MET as a woman.

<https://www.guerrillagirls.com/>

The girl felt rage rise in her body and decided to step into action. So she decided to write a letter to museums to let them know about their mistake. But in return, she only got questioned. “Who are you to tell us off? You are just a mere girl and know nothing about museum work! We are the authorities on interpreting our objects, ordinary people like you will have to trust us on that.”³ The system did not want to listen and to be changed from the outside. “The inside is where I have to be to make real change!”, the girl thought to herself. The next day she went to the university and enrolled in a museum studies program to gain the knowledge that was required of her.

There was a very wise professor⁴ who taught her a lot about the history of museums. “The museum is an institution deeply rooted in racism, colonialism and misogyny!”, she called. The girl was appalled at that and nearly lost all hope. But the professor was sure there are things that can be done. “But for this, you will have to travel to the shores of the Emirate of Sharjah.” The girl was nervous at first but found new friends and allies on her long way to the faraway land. Once she arrived, she met more wise women and men and together with her new friends she learned everything that she needed to know about critical museum work.⁵ Thus equipped she returned to her home and with new hope in her heart she applied for jobs at the most prestigious museums. She said: “This is me! I studied long and hard. I am now one of you, so let me in and hear my voice!” One day she was accepted as a curatorial assistant in a museum full of stories to be told.

One day she was allowed into the most sacred space, the depot. Full of awe she stepped into the rooms and lost all hope again when her gaze met objects upon objects stacked on top of each other. The never-ending rows of cupboards full of

³ Of course, in reality, there are many committed people in the museum scene who work intensively on diversifying and scrutinizing historically grown structures. But as stated above this is a fictional story so we are allowed to invent things.

⁴ You might think of Prof. Dr. Susan Kamel. As stated above, these similarities are purely coincidental.

⁵ Something like SAWA. But not SAWA of course, because this is a fictional story. But imagine a similar journey, that would enrich and transform a museum professional’s career path and personal life a lot.

things that clearly belonged to other places and people oppressed by colonialism, made one thing very clear. The professor was right about the dark history of museums. “This is not right!”, she thought to herself. There she was again, seeing how nothing had changed and everything was frozen in time. And all of this after her hard work studying and travelling to gain all the expertise she now possessed. With a sinking heart, she returned to the depot to let the tears flow down her cheeks, far away from anyone who could see her emotions. She cried for herself and for all the people whose belongings were stolen and shipped far away from their homes, deprived of their stories.

“Why are you crying?”, a faint voice asked in the dark. The girl was startled as she had not seen anyone enter the depot. “Who is this? Show yourself!”, she demanded with a shaking voice. “It’s me, Uaṭunua”, the voice answered. The voice was nearby, but the girl could not see whom it belonged to. So she asked: “Where are you? Stop hiding and watching me!” The voice answered: “I’m not hiding. It was museum people who stuffed me into this box. Please help me out!”⁶

As if led by an invisible force the girl grabbed a box in front of her. As she opened it, a small puppet-like figure lay in front of her. “Thank you!”, said Uaṭunua and a sense of relief came over the girl as if sharing feelings with the figure. “What happened to you?”, asked the girl and Uaṭunua tried to remember: “There was a little girl. I remember her sorrow as she made me. She had to do it. They forced her, so they could collect me and stuff me into that box. She tried to protect me from their touch. So she made a lot of skirts for me, as that was the only way she knew to protect herself.”

⁶ In the story, we call up the concept of “hauntology”, which goes back to the work 'Spectres of Marx' (1993) by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It implies that objects or the archives/depots in itself manifest or invite the ‘ghosts’ of the past that still remain as an affective ‘force’ (neither present nor absent) and could activate certain memories, narratives and emotions. On this, see Colin Sterling, *Becoming Hauntologists. A New Model for Critical-Creative Heritage Practice*, in *Heritage and Society*, vol. 14 (2021) pp. 67-86.

Stunned by the story, the girl took Uaṭunua with her out of the depot and into the archive to find out more about her. For hours she threw herself into research and found her happy place right there. In the end, she knew Uaṭunua was from Namibia, and she had a plan. She knew it was not her place to decide what to do about the doll, so she searched for female Namibian voices to tell the story and figure out what to do. The project gained force quickly as she found an artist eager to work with her.

The girl and the artist made a beautiful exhibition on the life of Uaṭunua and her sisters. It told the story of Christian missionaries forcing little girls to sew dolls during colonial times. Of the sexual assaults Namibian girls and women had to endure, only protected by as many skirts as possible. Of an unknown girl, that had made Uaṭunua, and whose life's course we can only imagine. Of the word Uaṭunua, which means “touched” in Otjiherero, and the many hands that touched her. In the end, Uaṭunua was released back home. She travelled with the artist and went on to live in a museum in Windhoek, telling her story of returning to the little girls of Namibia.⁷

The girl felt the joy Uaṭunua felt on being seen and set free. She had also learned that little steps did make a difference and filled with new hope she stepped into the depot once more. One ghost had left, thousands remained. She took a deep breath and waited for the next one to talk to her...⁸

⁷ We have to admit Uaṭunua is real even though her story went a little differently. Co-author Jill did get to meet the researchers who worked together with the seeker of the doll, Cynthia Shimming, and made a podcast about her: <https://www.smb.museum/online-angebote/detail/weitwinkel-globale-sammlungsperspektiven-folge-8-die-puppe-ua-tunua-vom-museumsdepot-zurueck-nach-namibia/>

⁸ Looking back we might have to admit that the story is in fact not completely fictional. Story-telling is a universal human trait and in doing so we tend to draw from reality. The truth is, this story is partially autobiographical for both of us. You can see it as a translation of our career paths, our SAWA journeys and the essence of our glossary terms into something fun and light. Because museum work can be a lot of heavy lifting and we sometimes just need a sweet story.