

ExpoTime!

The international magazine for museum professionals

Double issue
March/April 2022

84 pages
132 links
4 videos
140 referred museums
and institutions

Focus: museum and monument destruction



Academic questions and real life



The willful destruction of monuments is desecration, even if you want people to believe that a monument is not a monument.

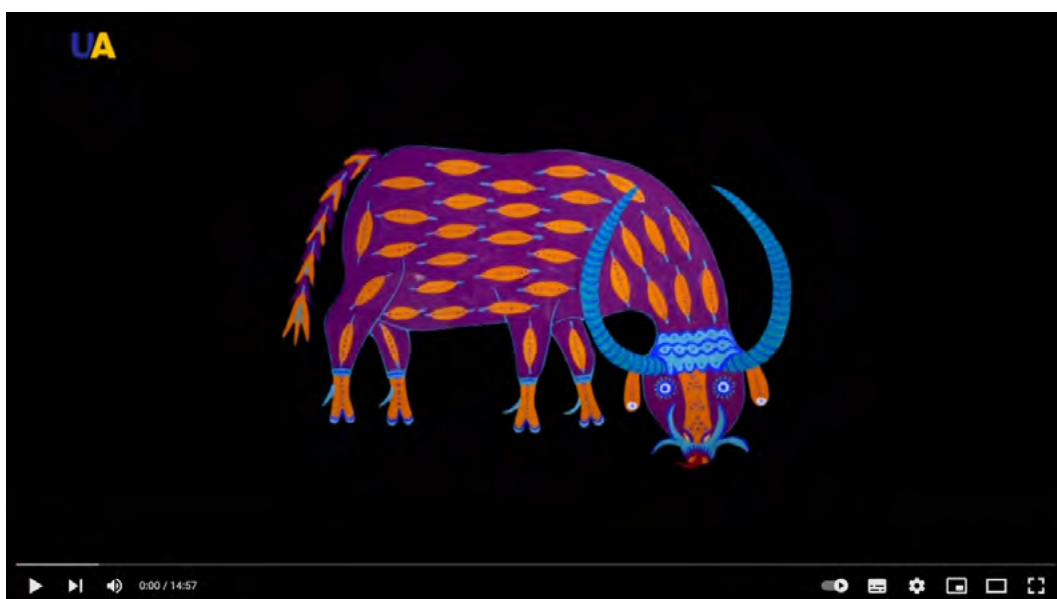
War crimes remain war crimes, even if you can convince your population that the largest military action since World War II is not a war at all.

After the experiences with the German Nazis, especially with their destruction of synagogues and systematic art theft, the world community had to decide in 1954 to outlaw certain acts of war: The targeted destruction of monuments, museums and religious sites was treated as an attempt to erase a country's identity, a war crime according to the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. Such war crimes were also committed by Serbian troops in the Balkan War for the targeted destruction of churches, monasteries, botanical gardens (Trstenol!) and mosques. The Soviet Union had signed the Hague Convention and with it Russia as the successor state. However, Russia is not keeping these obligations – this has already become clear in the shelling and bombing of Syrian hospitals, schools and markets.

What sense does it still make to mark the national historical heritage with the blueshield and to enter this with GPS data on maps when it becomes a war goal, to destroy precisely these cultural assets, national natural beauties, world heritage sites and precisely these places of contemplation, remembrance and identification? Wouldn't the reverse tactic be more appropriate: to remove all information on heritage assets and turn road signs into the wrong direction? Just in case another cowboy dependant on wrong secret service information and hugging on quack historical legends freaks out?

Another thing needs to be said quite clearly: we art and cultural scientists are known to tend to focus our attention primarily on irretrievable objects and things. Above all, however, it is the people who are irretrievable. No conservator is able to restore the dead – neither the own young fighters sent to perdition nor the peaceful neighbours killed and burned by incited accomplices.

Christian Müller-Straten
Publisher, art historian and member of ICOM Germany



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Monument and museum destruction



This issue is not for the faint-hearted. It deals in large parts on the destruction of art and artefacts, of collections and museums, both in peaceful times and in war. This pictures shows the mischievous demolition of a memorial pedestal for a former director of an ethnological museum ordered by a change-museum director recently in Leipzig.

Additionally, visitors were invited to smash showcases of museums worldwide.

Photos: private





Anette Rein

From object of respect to debris

The commissioned demolition of a monument relevant to museum history

On March 3, 2022, the first exhibition rooms in the GRASSI *Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig* were reopened. Already during the opening speeches by the Director General of the Dresden State Art Collections (SKD), Prof. Dr. Marion Ackermann (Art Historian), and the Director of the three Saxon ethnographic museums, Léontine Meijer-van Mensch MA (New and Theoretical History and Jewish Studies at Amsterdam, Jerusalem und Berlin; Protection of European Cultural Property/Museology in Frankfurt/Oder ¹), the invited guests heard loud banging and beating in the stairwell. ² A masked group demolished the pedestal with the dates of the museum directorate of Karl Weule in a brutal act with chisel and jackhammer. What remained was a ruined cuboid made of red Rochlitz porphyry, the noble material of the outer facades of the Grassi Museum and the staircase floor. ³

Karl Weule (1864-1926; geographer and *Völkerkundler* [ethnologist/anthropologist]) was the temporary second director of the *Leipzig Museum für Völkerkunde* (1907-1926). After his traineeship at the *Museum für Völkerkunde* in Berlin (1892), he became deputy director of the Leipzig Museum. After the return from a research trip to German East Africa, he became director of the museums as successor to Hermann Obst. His importance for the science and the museum is enormous: until his death, he was a Professor of *Völkerkunde* in Leipzig and Museum Director. He is considered a pioneer of academic *Völkerkunde* (Ethnology/Anthropology) in Germany and established it as a scientific discipline. Already in 1901, he was Professor of *Völkerkunde* and Prehistory, founded the *Institut für Völkerkunde* as director in 1914 and established *Völkerkunde* as a doctoral subject at the University of Leipzig. ⁴

Weule undertook his research expedition in 1906/7 "under the protection of a heavily armed police force" ⁵ on the Makonde plateau in German East Africa, after the violent suppression of the Maji-Maji uprising against the ruthless tax collection, forced labor, and everyday abuse ⁶ in which an estimated 200,000 people died. The Colonial Department of the German Foreign Of-

fice informed Felix von Luschan (director of the *Völkerkundemuseum* in Berlin) that the "spoils of war" were stored in the central warehouse in Dar es Salam and suggested that the "Africanist Karl Weule, who would travel to Dar es Salaam anyway, is to inspect the weapons and other objects stored there in the central storehouse and ... to inform which objects the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde* was interested in." ⁷ "Besides Berlin, from where the objects were to be distributed to the other ethnographic museums in Germany, Weule also selected objects [for Leipzig] Of the 'entire pile of loot,' as he called it, he only took about 2/5 and informs von Luschan that 'even in this limitation of the pieces' the scientific value of the collection is very low, on the one hand because of their composition, on the other hand due to the lack of precise indications of origin." ⁸

"Weule ... had spurned the muzzle-loaders in his selection ... This selection ... not only corresponded to the ethnological collectors' paradigm of the time, which researched societies in Africa ... beyond historical interconnections and change, but also solidified colonial ideological perspectives, whose representatives designed the picture of supposedly primitive and historyless African societies in order to widen the distance between colonisers and the African population'." ⁹

From today's point of view, his Leipzig exhibition practice was quite modern. "Weule ... deviated from the geographical concept ... in favour of experimental, comparative shows, developed in close coordination with the visitors. With their encouragement, he organised a whole series of special exhibitions, e. g. on transport methods or industrial forms of early cultures." ¹⁰ And there is something else to consider about Weule: "According to his own statement, Weule never acquired an object without having its use or mode of operation demonstrated to him." ^{10a}

He explicitly summed up, "Masks were obtained only by cunning, resolute demeanor and perseverance; and even then only for relatively high prices." ^{10b} Not only in the exhibition "*Weltensammler*", the content of this quote is abbreviated to distortion of meaning, but already in the in-

ventory data of the Makonde masks acquired by Weule.¹¹ The distorted quote was then leaked to the press.^{11a} By reducing the quote to "by cunning, resolute demeanor and perseverance", it is deliberately concealed that Weule paid for the Makonde objects – not a common practice in colonial contexts!¹²

In his publications as well as in his teaching "Karl Weule... also dealt with 'race' topics, among others. But these questions were not central to his work, nor did he had a keen interest in an anthropological collection. Also, an involvement in anthropological research projects is not evident from the viewed source material ... At the same time, however, it can be stated that, for example scientists of the next generation like Otto Reche and Eugen Fischer ... took up 'race'-issues and helped to shape them and continued in an extreme manner".¹³

After Weule's death, the new Grassi Museum building was inaugurated September 30, 1929. The 2nd chairman of the *Verein für Völkerkunde*, Herrmann Meyer, presented to the Museum a bronze bust of Karl Weule, created by the well-known artist Prof. Max Lange from Munich. 1932 this bust was initially placed in the front part of the Africa Hall.¹⁴ The reconstruction of the building, which was destroyed in the Second World War, began in 1947, and in 1954, the first permanent exhibition with two sections was reopened.¹⁵ As an expression of unbroken appreciation, the monument was placed in the stairwell in 1954.

A first "decapitation" of the stele took place under the previous director, Nanette Snoep, in 2016 on the occasion of the exhibition GRASSI invites #1: *Fremd* (from January 29 until May 8, 2016). Weule was "transformed from an actor into an exhibit, as his bust, which usually stands in the staircase, is taken from its pedestal and placed in a display case. Here it is located opposite the Makonde masks collected on Weule's East Africa expedition – the 'collector' and 'his collection' are related to each other ... In Weule's display case are explanation panels from the display of the ethnological museum as well as ... quotations from his work '*Mitteilungen aus dem Deutschen Schutzgebiet*'. In the statements aspects of ethnological research become visible, which usually prefer to be concealed, because they do not fit into the image of the correct, heroic researcher."¹⁶ Here it was only the activist approach that mattered: The alleged quotations in the showcase did not contain any source references and are therefore difficult to verify.^{16a}

After the exhibition, the bronze bust was returned by Snoep on the pedestal. Under the new director Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, the pedestal was finally decapitated, and before the opening of the exhibition "*Weltensammler*" (Nov. 24, 2019) it was moved to the depository. In its place piled a series of museum publications (which, by the way, had been started by Weule), the inscription was covered with a chipboard and a text panel: "Until September 2019, in this place stood the bust of the second museum director Museum director



The Weule memorial in Leipzig before the destruction ordered by the museum director Léontine Meijer-van Mensch.

Photo: <https://www.skd.museum/besuch/grassi-museum-leipzig/>



Two activists demolishing the memorial on March 3, 2022. Photo: private

Karl Weule. He knew how to use cleverly the German colonial policy for himself and the museum. During his tenure (1907-1926), he succeeded in enhancing the museum's collections almost fivefold." ¹⁷ Until March 3, 2022, the pedestal remained headless but undamaged in the stairwell of the museum.

The masked demolition group were members of the artists' collective PARA from Berlin, Hamburg and Frankfurt/M.: "The collective explores future ruins, narratives of the politics of commemoration and questions the suitability of cultural heritage of current modes of social coexistence. To this end, PARA works in an interdisciplinary manner, site-specific and performative, with techniques of reconstruction and speculation, between research and fiction." ¹⁸ Illuminating are details on the website of one of PARA's members, Bastian Sistig (partner of & sistig GbR): Sistig is engaged in "speculative research and adventurous obscuring of history formation ... Thereby, & sistig combines strategies of the documentation and soft fiction to documentary poetics. Content focus is the questioning and perverting of memory and politics of truth." ¹⁹ An obscure art action revolves around the ascent of Kilimanjaro in 1889 by the geographer Hans Meyer ²⁰, who allegedly took along the top stone of the mountain. ²¹

The current performance was not mentioned in the press invitation of the museum, however, it was not entirely unexpected. An article in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had announced the demolition and misrepresented it as a decision of the whole museum staff. ²² In fact, many participants were not informed of what to expect and were emotionally overwhelmed by the demolition. Reactions to the "act of senseless destruction" were predominantly negative; no "hurrah" was heard. The deep embarrassment was expressed by questions like: "How much was that, I wonder?", and "Was it taxpayers' money that was squandered?" or "Who appoints people organising such childish prank?" The artistic intervention was generally perceived as iconoclasm, remained incomprehensible, and certainly not at all suitable for a new permanent exhibition.

In addition to staff members, the guests included two representatives of the German Federal Cultural Foundation, Program Development (Lutz Nitsche, Executive Board, and Uta Schnell, Scientific Staff) as well as other personalities from the cultural sector, including Claus Deimel (former Deputy Director General of the SKD and former Director of the ethnographic collections), Larissa Förster (German Lost Art Foundation, Head of the Collections from Colonial Contexts), Volker

Rodekamp (former President of *Deutscher Museumsbund* and former Director of *Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig*), Wolf-Dietrich Baron Speck von Sternburg (patron of the arts in Leipzig). Some of them, such as Karl Heinrich von Stülpmagel (senior conservator/VDR and furniture historian at *Ägyptisches Museum Leipzig*), started a discussion with the official representatives: "With reference to the iconoclasm, I told Mrs. Meijer-van Mensch my opinion on the spot (and this was not very friendly...). She defended herself by claiming that the monument is not a listed monument, an assumption which may be wrong." ²³ If the monument is considered part of the museum inventory, then it is protected. If the stele has been placed in the staircase for many years and the integration into the design of the building forms a unit of monumental value, it has a share in the pronounced monument protection – according to a statement of the Monument Office. ²⁴ Independent of aspects of monument preservation ²⁵ [and criminal law], the question arises of how to deal appropriately with evidence of one's own institutional history." ²⁶ According to museum ethics, it would have been correct to label the unloved pedestal with a commentary.

On the SKD website, under the heading: "*Umbenennung von Werktiteln*", the following statement is published: "Former iconoclasts destroyed the works, because they seemed to them dangerous or obscene. The task of the SKD is to preserve and protect the works." ²⁷ Another statement of the SKD on the events in Ukraine also points in the same direction, in which "support for the protection of cultural treasures is offered." ²⁸ This empathetic and appreciative offer of the SKD is in stark contrast to the goal of triggering the greatest possible outrage by destroying the memorial pedestal ²⁹, on which the commissioned artists' collective together with the museum director seemed to be solely concerned with. The possibility that this may discourage potential object donors from entrusting things to the museum in the future is taken into account. With the commissioned performance, the SKD is presumably signaling the de-collection – if not even the destruction of the museum. For whoever visits the museum will see a plastic standee in front of the stele, which dresses up this request in a concise pictogram as well as a text panel that bluntly calls for violence against the showcases with ethnographic objects and ethnographic museums. ³⁰

Independent of due provenance research and restitution ³¹: Even if the background Kilimanjaro story is partly just an adventurous obscuring or fake and the artistic staging and its actors are at best reminiscent of the classic figure of the trick-

ster³², the question remains whether the new orientation of the house justifies this kind of destruction.

Notes

- 1 Ms. Meijer-van Mensch finished her studies (1993-1999) at Amsterdam University with an MA, while studying in Jerusalem 1996-1997 and at FU Berlin 1997-1999 simultaneously. 2 years postgraduate studies followed at Frankfurt/Oder (her own statements at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/léontine-meijer-van-mensch-b072206/?originalSubdomain=de>)
- 2 The staging at the opening is part of the museum's reorientation of the museum towards becoming a network museum, which is that deals with its own history in a reflexive manner. An important step in this direction is the project funded by the Federal Cultural within the framework of the Initiative for Ethnological Collections. Future Program REINVENTING.GRASSI.SKD.
- 3 My explanations are based on statements from participants, archives, literature, social media, the Office of Historical Monuments, and visual as well as visual documentations. The ignorance of the age of the monument becomes clear in the comment of the director on Facebook on 8.3.2022: "The columne [sic!] was there since the 1960's/1970's ... don't overdue it with your 100 years" https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10220777781215629&id=1270749018&sfsn=scwspmohttps://www.facebook.com/search/posts?q=fred%20von%20bose&filters=eyJzZWVuX3Bvc3RzOjAiOiJ7XCJyYWI1XCI6XCJpbmRlcmFjdGVkX3Bvc3RzXCIsXCJhcmdzXCI6XCJcIn0ifQ%3D%3D
- 4 https://leibniz-ift.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Bibliothek_Archiv/Archiv_Findb%C3%BCcher_PDF/Weule.pdf; see also Seige 2004
- 5 Lang et al 2021, p. 227. Weule was accompanied by 13 Police Askaris and the district officer Ewerbeck. All on duty in the colonial administration had received orders to comply with Weule's wishes in every respect. Thus, the Wali instructed the entire population of his district to bring their material cultural possessions for purchase – especially masks and cult objects. (Blesse 2009 b, p. 296)
- 6 *ibid.* p. 225
- 7 *ibid.* p. 227f [transl.]
- 8 *ibid.* p. 228; quote in citation from Ivanov; Weber-Sinn 2018, p. 82 [transl.]
- 9 *ibid.* p. 229; quote in citation from Ivanov; Weber-Sinn 2018, p. 84 [transl.]
- 10 Noack 2019, p. 34 [transl.]
- 10a Blesse 2009 b, p. 297 [transl.]
- 10b *ibid.* p. 298 [transl.]
- 11 e.g. <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/1787013>
- 11a Schlehahn 2019
- 12 However, what Weule actually understood by "high prices" remains undetermined. In Leipzig, a total of 1088 inventory numbers – for 1206 objects – were assigned after this journey (Blesse 2009 b, p. 298). [transl.]
- 13 Laukötter 2007, p. 321f [transl.]
- 14 All costs incurred were borne by the *Verein für Völkerkunde*, Leipzig.
- 15 Blesse 2009 c, p. 359f
- 16 Julia Zureck, cf. <http://julzureck.com/mitteilungen-aus-demdeutschen-schutzgebiet/>; see also the video 1,25 min. <https://grassi-voelkerkunde.skd.museum/en/ausstellungen/grassi-invites-1/julia-zureck/> [transl.]
- 16a s.a. Kilb 2022
- 17 [transl.] <https://www.lvz.de/Mehr/Bilder/2019/11/Die-Weltensammler-im-grassi-museum/4>; https://twitter.com/_omwo/status/1232643842052108288/photo/1
- 18 https://www.p-a-r-a.org/web_mobil_para.pdf [transl.]
- 19 <https://www.bastiansistig.com/about>; see also the video on the project "Moving Mountains" [transl.] <https://www.bastiansistig.com/projects/moving-mountains>
- 20 [https://saebi.isgv.de/biografie/Hans_Meyer_\(1858-1929\)](https://saebi.isgv.de/biografie/Hans_Meyer_(1858-1929))
- 21 Many details are not verifiable and probably part of fiction or speculation, which the PARA group says is specialized in. Meyer is said to have presented part of the stone Wilhelm II, who, according to PARA, had it placed in the Grotto Hall of the New Palace in Potsdam – where he later should have been exchanged. An examination of the existing stone in the 1980s identified it as a fake, namely as biotite slate, which often occurs in German low mountain ranges. The other half is said to have served the Meyer family as a paperweight until it found its way to the antiquarian bookshop Kainbacher in Baden near Vienna. There is the rest of the stone for sale. According to PARA, the price was negotiated down from € 250,000 to € 40,000. "With the goal of returning the summit stone, PARA invites the public to take part in performative actions to remove building fabric of the GRASSI Museum [!!!] and to produce replicas of the stone from the extracted material. These can be purchased in the exhibition and at www.berge-versetzen.com. With the proceeds of the sold replicas the repurchase of the actual summit piece at the Austrian dealer will be made possible. The ethnological museum, which keeps the looted objects of colonized societies, becomes the raw material of restitution. To further raise the stakes, PARA removed the top six centimeters of the Zugspitze on September 16, 2021. The spire, which is on display in the exhibition, is the hostage in the process of restitution. Only when the summit stone of Kilimanjaro returns, the summit of the Zugspitze is also put back in its place." [transl.]
- 22 In his article, Peter Richter calls the monument: "not a listed substance, but a later added pedestal that once bore the bust of a former museum director, which was felt to be out of date in the house anyway" (Richter 2022; transl.). At this point it would be interesting to learn who "the spokeswoman of the museum" for this information was. As far as is known, this action was not the result of a joint discussion with all museum employees.

- 23 The specific legal situation – e.g., § 304 StGB – must be assessed by more professional colleagues for this topic.
- 24 eMail from the monument office of the city of Leipzig of March 8, 2022 to the author, "that the column of Karl Weule was not recorded as an individual monument by the State Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments. Regardless of this, it is of course part of the collection of the Museum of Völkerkunde and is thus already protected." [transl.]
- 25 cf. § 2 para. 2, Saxon Monument Protection Act
- 26 Karl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel: oral communication on March 9, 2022, [transl.], cf. also <https://www.facebook.com/MUSEUM.AKTUELL/posts/4981911858513136>
- 27 <https://www.skd.museum/forschung/werktitel/> [transl.]
- 28 <https://www.skd.museum/ueber-uns/stellungnahmen/stellungnahme-zur-ukraine/> [transl.]
- 29 Richter 2022
- 30 Kilb 2022
- 31 s. Rein 2018; Rein 2022
- 32 <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trickster>

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All websites visited between March 11 and 14, 2022.

Transl. by the author.



Michael Singer
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Holzschutz - Schädlingsbekämpfung - Gebäudereinigung

Ihre Profis für:

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Art-works_by_Luigi_Parmeggiani_in_the_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art?uselang=it

- 10 <https://www.musei.re.it/en/collections/parmeggiani-art-gallery/>
- 11 Campbell in Jones, p. 185ff
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We are thanking all museum teams for their important contributions.