

ExpoTime!

Dec 2015 / Jan 2016

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New Unterlinden
extension in
Colmar

Mosbrugger
extends the
Senckenberg

Discoveries in
Vienna, Basel
and Polling

Fairwell
to Zbynek
Z. Stránský

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Titel page picture: Musée Unterlinden, Extension, Colmar, France. View of the chapel with Grünewald and Nicolas de Haguenau: Issenheim retable., 1512-1516, Musée Unterlinden Photo : © Ruedi Walti. Herzog & de Meuron

THE TUNDRA AT OUR DOORSTEP

Eurasian Dotterel (*Eudromias morinellus*), offspring

Origin: Krkonoše Mountains, Brunnenberg (Studniční hora), 29.07.1874

With the story “My friend the dotterel” of the Swedish nature photographer and writer Bengt Berg the dotterel became more popular than any other bird in the Polar Regions: “Lahol is the dotterel, and there are only a few people in the lowlands which have seen him.”

The thrush sized dotterels live mainly in the tundra regions of entire Eurasia. Few animals also nest sporadically in the higher mountains of Europe. Thus, in the 19th century this typical tundra-bird occurred frequently on the ridge of the Krkonoše Mountains only 60 km from Görlitz. The bird was highly appreciated by mountaineers for its venison. However, until the 20th century, the numbers declined dramatically until the last breeding bird was observed in 1946.

The preserved juvenile specimen in the Görlitz collection presents a rare evidence of the occurrence of the dotterel at this time in the Krkonoše Mountains.

The two eggs were collected by the curator of the museum Robert Tobias in the same location.

Fortunately, the dotterel has been observed in the Krkonoše Mountains repeatedly since the 90s of the 20th century, and its successful breeding has been reported in recent years again.



On show till Mai 15, 2016 in the exhibition "Senckenbergs Verborgene Schätze" [Senckenberg's Hidden treasures] at Museum für Naturkunde, Görlitz, Germany (a Senckenberg affiliation).



"There is only one literacy!"¹

An interview with Volker J. Mosbrugger, Director General of *Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung* (SGN), Frankfurt, by Anette Rein

Professor Mosbrugger: since years, I listen with great interest to your presentations of research programs of the Senckenberg Society and the corresponding topics in the displays of the museum. What are the main topics of your vision? What are your values and long-term objectives you are working and fighting for?

We humans are part of nature and we live of nature. Unfortunately, this triviality is largely ignored in our modern high-tech world. Meanwhile, nature has become THE limiting resource for the further development of human well-being. But we neglect this fact and continue to damage our „home“ without even understanding what we are doing. We are brilliant scientists in the lab but we still know very little about how nature, i.e. the earth system works. My institution, the Senckenberg Society for Natural History Research, established in 1817, is a research institution that investigates with seven institutes and a staff of about 800 people the role of life in the complex dynamics of the earth System. In the tradition of Alexander von Humboldt, we strive to understand how nature evolves and functions as a system in which each component, such as the atmosphere, hydrosphere, geosphere, biosphere and anthroposphere interact so that the system is much more than the sum of its parts. To communicate the results of our research we run three museums, in Dresden, Frankfurt/Main and Görlitz, Germany. And in our largest museum in Frankfurt, we plan a major restructuring and enlargement of our exhibition in order to provide a more systemic approach to the understanding of nature and of Man's interaction with nature. Correspondingly, we have chosen the hierarchical tetralogy of themes „Man - Earth - Cosmos - Future“.

In the last presentation about the future plans, the section „Human“ (*Mensch*) was presented with the sub-sections „Human evolution“ (*Menschwerdung*), „Humans as a system“ (*Mensch als System*) and „Humans in the system“ (*Mensch im System*). Accordingly, all keywords relate to the human being, as a biological being, with all its senses and organs, or its influence on the environment. In this approach, I miss a cultural perspective. Where do you recognize your deficits, respectively the limits in your analysis of the „system world“?

You are absolutely right in pointing out this deficit – and it exists, mutatis mutandis, in virtually all museums! You, being an ethnologist, miss the cultural perspective in a natural history museum; I myself, being an evolu-

tionary biologist and geoscientist, miss the evolutionary aspects in ethnological and art museums, a physicist will presumably miss hints to the general relevance of cosmology, quantum mechanics and relativity theory. This disciplinary approach of museums and exhibitions is deeply rooted in our western tradition of disciplinary training and education. Consequently, all experts and museum curators tend to stick to their specific expertise and only a few dare to use a more systemic approach.

As mentioned above, in our new museum we follow a decidedly systemic concept. Correspondingly, we will explicitly and implicitly document and illustrate the limits of our scientific understanding. For instance, our sub-section „Human evolution“ will display the biological and cultural evolution of humans over the last 2.5 million years. Thus, it will become evident that culture is indeed a form of Nature, as stated by the Berlin philosopher Volker Gerhard. Moreover, this sub-section will document that our brain evolved as part of the evolutionary adaptation strategy of early humans, implying that there are evolutionary constraints to our understanding of nature („evolutionary epistemology“); arts and mythology are just examples of our attempts to transcend these limitations although they themselves are subject to evolutionary constraints („evolutionary ethics“, „evolutionary esthetics“).

I think it is important that our visitors will understand what science can do and what it cannot do. They need to know that the outcome of science and research is not „the truth“ but hypotheses which can be tested in an objective way and which help to explain and handle the world. On the other hand, it is equally important to understand the role and relevance of culture as part of our „subsistence strategy“ or „ecological niche“. Hence I welcome ideas and contributions from ethnological and art museums that may help to illustrate the systemic nature and complementarity of „science“ and „culture“.

You mentioned, that in your new museum you plan four sections: man, earth, cosmos, future. In vain, I was looking on your website for the keywords: cultures, traditions, art, diversity of life styles etc. According to Professor Christoph Antweiler, social anthropologist in Bonn, all humans have culture per se. Humans without culture do not exist. Why do you not include something like: „culture, an expression of spirit and creativity“ as a separate section and make a group of five? The presented model seems to me more or less a very mechanical, technical one.

The reason is obvious and more or less also explains why the Städel has no section on the evolution of humans and of human art: Senckenberg has specialized in the evolution of nature and of the biological and early bio-cultural diversity of humans. However, we are no specialists in the more recent cultural evolution of humankind and – equally important – we have no collections to address this theme. But again: we are more than willing to include more cultural perspectives into our exhibitions and are already developing a number of fresh ideas in this respect.

„How much monkey is inside of us?“ introduces the first section of the planned new museum. If we contrast the two approaches of natural sciences and humanities): what do you expect to be a similar question formulated from an ethnological perspective? Could it be: „How much culture is inside of a monkey?“ Does it make sense for you to ask the question the other way round?

Absolutely. The first question “how much monkey is inside of us” is meant to emphasize that our species *Homo sapiens* is not so unique as we are used to think. Of course, *Homo sapiens* has a number of very unique characters, a sophisticated culture is one of these. On the other hand, all species have unique characters, in fact this is a prerequisite to be recognised as a species. All in all, humans are just one out of about 2 million known plant and animal species – and all these species want to reproduce, expand and survive. Yes, by now, humans have become a geological force and have influenced the globe in such a way that geoscientists plan to introduce the “Anthropocene” as a separate geological time period. But other organisms such as bacteria and photosynthetic plants had and still have much more impact on the globe than we do. For instance, the 21 vol.-% of oxygen in the atmosphere is entirely due to the activity

of organisms with oxygenic photosynthesis. For comparison: We humans have increased the atmospheric CO₂ concentration from 280 ppm to “only” 400 ppm. For the same reason it makes sense to ask the other way round: “How much culture is inside of a monkey”? Whenever we look carefully, we realise that there is a continuous transition from our ape-like ancestors to *Homo sapiens*. And this is exactly what you would expect when evolution takes place as a historical process. Such an evolutionary consideration helps to avoid another frequent misconception. Many people would argue that bacteria are more primitive and less highly evolved than humans. But this is not the case: bacteria and humans had a common ancestor about 3.8 billion years ago and, since that time, both have undergone a successful evolution: they survived. Bacteria may be less complex than humans but they are as “derived” and “highly evolved” as humans. For this reason it comes as no surprise that chimpanzees as our sister species have a number of shared characters with us (about 98% of the genes are identical) and a highly complex and intelligent behaviour. There is a wonderful film on Youtube showing a chimpanzee that is obviously annoyed by a drone filming the chimpanzee and then takes a branch, climbs onto a tree and destroys the drone with the branch. ²

Since years, you are very interested in a closer collaboration with ethnographic museums and with social anthropologists. As we know, this is a very delicate subject because of the history of the Völkerschauen, which happened in Germany until the Nazi-Regime too. With the slogan “Primitive humans – wild animals“ (“*Wilde Menschen – wilde Tiere*“), ten thousands natives were imported from all parts of the world to be displayed in our zoological gardens ³ or world exhibitions. They were to perform the Western imagination



of primitive cultures. Each „ethnic tribe“ followed its own stereotyped traditions adjusted to a strict program of the organizers. This is one strong reason why ethnographic museums in Germany hesitate to be in a close relationship with zoological gardens or a Senckenberg Museum, which follows a natural scientific approach. How could natural sciences and the humanities enlarge and enrich their approaches mutually?

I think, it is essential that both fields, natural sciences and cultural sciences mutually know and respect their strengths and weaknesses and develop a common language. The evolutionary concept – not in the sense of Darwin’s evolutionary theory, but understood as a complex historical process – may be part of such a common language. Within this evolutionary concept there is no artificial or personal appraisal as "primitive“ versus "advanced“ character or culture, rather we talk about "earlier“ and "later“ or "original“ and "derived“ characters and patterns. Most importantly, there is the "normative force of facts“: all synchronous species or cultures have their very specific adaptations, value and success. From optimisation theory it is very clear why we have so many different species (and cultures). Whenever you try to optimise a structure, let’s say a bicycle, with respect to only one character such as weight you typically get one optimum solution under given constraints. If, however, you try to optimise a structure such as a bicycle with respect to several parameters (such as weight, prize, beauty, sustainability, etc.) then several optimum solutions exist, which are all different but all in all equally good. This problem of multi-criteria-optimisation explains why there are so many different life forms and cultures – and types of automobiles.

There is no doubt we would generate enormous synergies if natural scientists and cultural scientists would talk to each other more often.

What do you expect from a closer collaboration with the Museum of World Cultures?

We want to present a realistic view of the possibilities and limitations of natural sciences and natural history research – and this means in many respects their disenchantment. We have made enormous progress over the last couple of years in our understanding how the brain or the earth system functions, we have developed incredibly complex monitoring and modelling systems for both the brain and the earth system. And still our knowledge gaps are huge, if you only think of the "Blue Brain Project“, and the last IPCC report. Moreover, natural sciences are good in providing specific scientific information ("what can we do?“). We need the cultural sciences to transform this scientific information into orientational knowledge ("what should we do?“).

From my perspective, natural sciences and humanities represent two approaches to understand and handle our world; to obtain an integrative, systemic understanding of the dynamics of system earth including humans we need both.

In case, the Museum of World Cultures will accept your suggestion and agrees to open a branch in the Senckenberg Museum. With which of the four sections would you associate the new partner institution? Or do you imagine to giving them their own section – with a name like: "World cultures“?

At this moment we are still very flexible. We have developed a systemic concept for our new museum that is based on our strengths and collections but we still look for interesting and interested partners. For instance, concerning our section "cosmos“, the *Physikalische Verein* is an important partner to us and we plan to develop and run a planetarium together; we also talk with the European Space Agency how to include space research. Similarly, we discuss with a number of possible partners how we can jointly develop our sections "man“, "earth“ and "future“ into unique world-class exhibition spaces. Concerning the Museum of World Cultures, I can imagine several forms of collaborations to involve cultural aspects either in our sections "man“ or "future“ or both. An interesting aspect could also be to develop complementary "mirror exhibitions“ in Senckenberg and in the Museum of World Cultures addressing relevant topics, such as trade, climate change or migration, from different perspectives.

The Museum of World Cultures has these wonderful three villas on the riverside of the Main river between the other art museums. The Museum displays in non-permanent exhibitions topics, related to the collection (about 67,000 items) and to different societies and cultures, respectively contemporary art. Do you think about a permanent presentation of the Museum of World Cultures together with Senckenberg or would you prefer non-permanent displays?

Basically, both solutions are possible. It is most important, however, to develop a coherent long-term concept providing synergies through the combination of scientific and cultural aspects.

In a recent Senckenberg presentation, the change of paradigms was mentioned (*Paradigmenwechsel*). When I asked the speaker, he told me that the integration of art would be the special change of a perspective. But, as far as I know, since centuries art and science are in a close relationship to each other, if you think for example of Leonardo da Vinci. Let me give you an example, where I found a real change of perspective. In the Auckland War Memorial Museum (New Zealand) ⁴ they displayed in two separate galleries two versions of natural history: In the „Maori Natural History Gallery“ ⁵ the ontological concepts of the Maori were explained and exemplified with objects, text panels (mythological stories and background histories), pictures and media stations. A Maori view of the close connection between the ordinary and the other reality becomes obvious in this presentation. The adjacent second Natural History Gallery starts with the Western concepts of origins of the species

and mankind, and a linear timeline. If you plan to collaborate with the Museum of World Cultures, can you imagine to stepping back from your scientific natural science education, so other models explaining the world could have a voice in the new Senckenberg Museum? As we know, the natural science is just one model, one perspective on our world – and sometimes a pretty anthropocentric one.

It is very clear, that science and the evolution of the earth system (including humans and their impact on Nature) will be the dominant narrative in the new Senckenberg museum in Frankfurt. A change in perspective, however, may help to better illustrate what science can do and what it cannot do. For instance, topics like death, cancer or climate change can be analysed from a scientific point of view, but it may also be interesting and helpful to look at their cultural dimensions in different parts of the world or to study their reflection and representation in art. By any means, what we should not do is to present and consider the scientific approach of problem solving as just an equivalent to other approaches such as mythology, art or religion. To put it bluntly: it is only science that allows to construct airplanes that fly.

In 2014, Senckenberg was the successful winner in the international competition for the archive of Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, with 300 km film material from three decades.⁶ As it is known, most of the social anthropologists are pretty critical concerning the methods of Eibl-Eibesfeldt in his behaviour research programs. What do you plan to discuss with the Museum of World Cultures about these documents? Can you imagine to display in the new Senckenberg those controversial positions?

Our idea is to develop this phantastic archive into an international research infrastructure. In 2014, we had an interdisciplinary workshop to explore its huge research potential in various fields ranging from film history, linguistics, evolutionary psychology, cultural anthropology to ethics and esthetics. We will certainly use some of these films (and some of them are already published) in our museum, but here we are still in the phase of planning. What is very clear, however – and this is part of our contract with the family of Prof. Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt – that all personal rights of all persons involved will be respected.

Professor Mosbrugger, if I read your CV and the impressive long list of your publications, the high merits you received the last years, and your ongoing research project in the Tibetan Highland, what were the most important decisive experiences in your life? How important were the different members of your family on this way (parents, grandparents, spouse, and children)?

I have always been a curious person, interested in learning and understanding and correspondingly have many interests but no particular talent. My father was a high school teacher in mathematics and economy, my mother

a tax consultant. They considered education („Bildung“) as most important for their children and sent me to a high school where I learnt Latin and ancient Greek. Since that time, I am fascinated by philosophy and even considered to study philosophy. But finally, my enthusiasm for nature dominated and I studied biology and chemistry to become a high school teacher. But then, I got hooked to science and did a PhD in Palaeontology. I became an assistant professor in Bonn, investigated the evolution and biomechanics of plants and finally got interested in vegetation-climate interaction, a research topic that still fascinates me today. Between 1990 and 2005, I spent wonderful years in Tübingen with my wife and my two girls, holding a chair in Paleontology. I very much enjoyed the freedom of research at a university and fell in love with China and Tibet where I am still doing research today. In 2005, I got the offer to become the Director of Senckenberg – a phantastic opportunity for me to conceive and develop in an international context large research programs with a systemic approach to understand earth system and climate dynamics and to combine this research with museum exhibitions. That we now have this large building program to renew and enlarge our institute and museum in Frankfurt is another wonderful gift.

In retrospect, I am extremely happy about how my live evolved – and, indeed, it was not planned right from the beginning, but evolved in a series of lucky circumstances – of course very much influenced by my family.

Professor Mosbrugger, thank you very much for your appeal to open up our minds as natural and social/cultural scientists together with different worldviews and mythologies for a closer collaboration. In an interview from November, 2012 your statement: „There is only one Bildung“⁷ summarizes perfectly our talk.

Photograph, p. 7: Sven Traenkner

Notes:

- 1 Interview on the Nov. 29, 2012; press conference for the presentation of the new project Senckenberg.
- 2 [Edition.cnn.com/videos/living/2015/04/13/erin-pkg-moos.chimp-takes-down-drone.cnn](http://edition.cnn.com/videos/living/2015/04/13/erin-pkg-moos.chimp-takes-down-drone.cnn)
<http://primatology.net/2008/04/29/orangutan-photographed-using-tool-as-spear-to-fish/>
- 3 <http://www.zoo-frankfurt.de/unser-zoo/geschichte/sondveranstaltungen/voelkerschauen.html> (accessed September 28, 2015); http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2009/7307/pdf/LampBenjamin_2009_11_04.pdf (accessed September 28, 2015)
- 4 <http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/> (accessed Oct. 12, 2015)
- 5 <http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/visit/our-galleries/maori-galleries/te-ao-turoa-maori-natural-history-gallery> (accessed Oct. 12, 2015)
- 6 http://www.senckenberg.de/root/index.php?page_id=5250&PHPSESSID=edv8ui95fhrbje4ngtski4iht5fn-8p1&newsID=2987 (accessed Sept. 26, 2015); <http://www.bild.de/regional/frankfurt/filmarchiv-von-eibibesfeldt-kommt-ans-senckenberginstitut-34679296.bild.html> (accessed Sept. 26, 2015)
- 7 „Es gibt nur eine Bildung“. Translation by the author.

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