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 (Trsteno!) 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 bladeshield 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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Title page: see pp. 50ff
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
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), the invited guests heard loud banging and beating in the stairwell. 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.

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.

Weule undertook his research expedition in 1906/7 “under the protection of a heavily armed police force” 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 in which an estimated 200,000 people died. The Colonial Department of the German Foreign Office informed Felix von Luschan (director of the Völkerkundemuseum in Berlin) that the “spoils of war” were stored in the central warehouse in Dar es Salaam 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.” 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.”

“...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.”

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.” 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.”

He explicitly summed up, “Masks were obtained only by cunning, resolute demeanor and perseverance; and even then only for relatively high prices.” Not only in the exhibition “Weltensammler”, the content of this quote is abbreviated to distortion of meaning, but already in the in-
Monument destruction in peace

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

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.”  

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...”  

ExpoTime!, double issue March/April 2022
Karl Weule. He knew how to use cleverly the Ger-
man colonial policy for himself and the museum.
During his tenure (1907-1926), he succeeded in
enhancing the museum’s Museum’s collections
almost fivefold.”

Until March 3, 2022, the ped-
estal remained headless but undamaged in the
stairwell of the museum.

The masked demolition group were members of
the artists’ collective PARA from Berlin, Hamburg
ruins, narratives of the politics of commemora-
tion 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 re-
search and fiction.”

Illuminating are details on
the site-specific and performative, with techniques
of reconstruction and speculation, between re-
search and fiction.”

The current performance was not mentioned in
the press invitation of the museum, however, it
was not entirely unexpected. An article in Sü-
deutsche Zeitung had announced the demolition
and misrepresented it as a decision of the whole
museum staff. In fact, many participants were
not informed of what to expect and were emotion-
ally overwhelmed by the demolition. Reactions to
the “act of senseless destruction” were predomi-
nantly negative; no “hurrah” was heard. The deep
embarrassment was expressed by questions like:
“How much was that, I wonder?”, and “Was it tax-
payers’ 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 includ-
ed two representatives of the German Federal
Cultural Foundation, Program Development (Lutz
Nitsche, Executive Board, and Uta Schnell, Scien-
tific 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), Laris-
sa Förster (German Lost Art Foundation, Head of
the Collections from Colonial Contexts), Volker
Rodekamp (former President of Deutscher Muse-
umsbund and former Director of Stadtgeschichtli-
ches Museum Leipzig), Wolf-Dietrich Baron Speck
von Sternburg (patron of the arts in Leipzig). Some
of them, such as Karl Heinrich von Stülpen-
gel (senior conservator/VDR and furniture his-
torian 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.”

If the mon-
ument is considered part of the museum inven-
tory, 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.

Independent of aspects of monument preservation
and criminal law], the question arises of how to deal
appropriately with evidence of one’s own institu-
tional history.”

According to museum ethics, it
would have been correct to label the unloved ped-
estal with a commentary.

On the SKD website, under the heading: “Um-
enennung von Werktiteln”, the following state-
ment is published: “Former iconoclasts destroyed
the works, because they seemed to them danger-
ous or obscene. The task of the SKD is to preserve
and protect the works.”

Another statement of the SKD on the events in Ukraine also points in the
same direction, in which “support for the protec-
tion of cultural treasures is offered.”

This empa-
thetic and appreciative offer of the SKD is in stark
contrast to the goal of triggering the greatest pos-
sible outrage by destroying the memorial pedes-
tal, on which the commissioned artists’ collec-
tive 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 per-
formance, 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.

Independent of due provenance research and
restitution: 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-
ster 32, the question remains whether the new orientation of the house justifies this kind of destruction.

Notes


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 columnne [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=1022077778121562981&id=12707490188&sfnsn=scwspmo

4  https://leibniz-ifl.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Bibliothek_Archiv/Archiv_Findb%C3%Bcher/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 Everbeck. 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


16a s.a. Kilb 2022


18  https://www.p-a-r-a.org/web_mobil PARA.pdf [transl.]

19  https://www.bastiansistik.com/about; see also the video on the project "Moving Mountains" [transl.] https://www.bastiansistik.com/projects/moving-mountains

20  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 proceed 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 spokeswomen 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.
The specific legal situation – e.g., § 304 StGB – must be assessed by more professional colleagues for this topic.

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.]


https://www.skd.museum/ueber-uns/stellungnahme-zur-ukraine/ [transl.]

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The dark side

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Contributors of the issue:

Dr. Utz Anhalt MA

okualla@gmx.de

Pepa Babot
Museo Picasso Málaga
Calle San Agustín 8, 29015 Málaga, Spain
T. 952 12 76 00
comunicacion@mpicassom.org

Albrecht Czernin
Restorer und Senior Assisstant at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna
albrecht.czernin@posteo.at

Dr. Christian Mueller-Straten
Verlag Dr. C. Mueller-Straten
Kunzweg 21, 81243 Munich, Germany
T. 0049-(0)89 839 690-43, Fax -44
https://www.museumaktuell.de/

Dr. Anette Rein
Ethnologist, journalist, cert. writing coach, president of the German association of freelance ethnologists, former member of the boards of ICOM Germany and ICME. Specialised in science moderation, theories of museum mediation, scenography.
Schifferstr. 68, 60594 Frankfurt/M.
T. +49 (0)170 27 58 231
vorstand@bundesverband-ethnologie.de
https://www.bundesverband-ethnologie.de/webvisiten-karte/15

Nelly Riggenbach
Head of Novartis Campus Communication
pavillon.novartis@novartis.com

Dr. Michael Stanic
Art historian, specialised in architecture and city planning
Rugendasstr. 4, 86153 Augsburg, Germany
T. +49 (0)151 2468 1024
dr.michael.stanic@gmail.com
https://www.museumaktuell.de/index.php?site=wissenschaftler_2&TM=9

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