

Religion at the Museum: A Changing Phenomenon? Some Examples at Museums in Berlin

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abstract

In the last two decades religion has gained considerable attention in some museums in Europe. In most cases the reasons behind this change lie outside the museums, in political, social and cultural transformations brought by globalization and migrations. In this context, Berlin constitutes a present a mutating place with a variety of exhibition projects in which the religious as a theme has begun to become a factor to be considered. This evolution has forced the use of other languages and communication means as forms to show the collections and bring them closer to the audience.

Religious collections and their displaying

Berlin owns a religious diversity with more than 250 different religious communities. Yet, and despite holding more than 170 museums on a plurality of themes and with large and varied collections with a high religious content, Berlin does not possess a museum dedicated exclusively to religion or the religious. This does not mean, however, that there is not a concern for the religious heritage in the Berlin museums. Recently, new proposals for the art, archaeology and ethnology collections went beyond the material conservation and preservation of these items, and made innovations on their representation and communication inside exhibition spaces of some museums through mechanisms that have made more visible the collections of religious character within a broader cultural context.



Perpetua Ajar
Perpetua Museum, Berlin (2012)



American Anthropology exhibition room
Ethnology Museum, Berlin (2012)

If we understand religious objects as a large group of items, which due to its origin, function or reception relate to certain confessions or forms of belief, then its religious dimension is diverse and is embedded in broader cultural phenomena. Due to this, the museum has had always the possibility to present their religious collections in a sacred or profane dimension, switching between them at its discretion. In Berlin this practice was instituted at the end of the 19th century with the separation between the "great art" as high culture, collected in museums of art, and the ethnography as low culture, collected in ethnology museums.

The Humboldt Lab Dahlem

This separation of collections and knowledges is being reviewed and reevaluated by current projects in Berlin, as the Humboldt Lab Dahlem. This proposal of the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz is in charge of preparing the next relocation of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in the reconstructed Berlin Palace at the Museum Island. The Lab does this by proposing its own set of specific questions and tries to coming up with innovative solutions that are exhibit for a short time in the Dahlem Museums.



Purukumba at the Humboldt Lab Dahlem, "Probationäre 2" Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin 14.03.-05.06.2012.



At the first Probe, some interventions interrupted the usual narrative of the exhibition rooms by introducing unexpected objects that may irritate the spectator but put emphasis in the religious aspects. In this context, at the exhibition opening day a ritual intervention Purukumba, created in collaboration with a Hindu temple in Berlin, took place with the intention of bringing living religion into the museums and calling attention on the continuing effects of older traditions in today world.



Shree Shiva, "Heimlich" 09/10/12/13/14
at the Humboldt Lab Dahlem, "Probationäre 2",
Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin 14. 03.-
07.10.2012.



Museum für Sprache at the Humboldt Lab
Dahlem, "Probationäre 2", Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin 14. 03.-07.10.2012.

In an effort to make visible the diversity of the collections in the Dahlem Museums, contemporary art and museographic interventions disturbing the homocentrism of some museum objects allowed the visitor to enter in contact with these collections via emotional relations of empathy or rejection.

Jewish Museum Berlin

The Jewish Museum Berlin opened in September 2001 and today it is one of the most visited Museums in Berlin. The purpose of this museum is to present the history and culture of German Jewry in its entirety. But the museum does not see itself as a museum of religion, but as a cultural and historical museum and collects objects of all kinds and materials, that tell of the history, religion and culture of the Jews in Germany. Both in its temporary and permanent exhibitions, the Jewish Museum has experimented with different expository languages to reach out to the publicum and communicate the diversity inherent in the Jewish culture in Germany, building sensitive experiences with the visitor, both of acceptance as of irritation. Remarkably, humor and irony have been introduced as a valid form to mediate between the collection and the visitors, which constitutes one of its main innovations.



Teil, Teil, Teil, Teil... everything we always wanted
to know about Jews, temporary exhibition
Jewish Museum Berlin, 02.03.-1.9.2012.



A Taste for Everything, temporary
Exhibition, Jewish Museum Berlin,
16.10.2010-2.9.2014.

Visual Agency Forgetting
Jewish Museum Berlin,
16.10.2010-2.9.2014.