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## Postmortem Objectification: A Spectacle of Human Remains in German Museums

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Helen Martin entitled "Postmortem Objectification: A Spectacle of Human Remains in German Museums." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in German.

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Postmortem Objectification: A Spectacle of Human Remains in German Museums**

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Helen E. Martin  
December 2023

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Thank you to my dogs Tibbi and Jordan for 13 wonderful years together. I miss you both terribly.

*I trust the seeds that I am planting, and I cannot wait to see what will grow.*

## **Abstract**

The net of scientific entitlement is woven from a single thread that extends from German colonialism to present-day exhibits like Körperwelten. The work of physical anthropologists in Germany and the development of the field from the late 1800s offers insight into the creation and continuity of scientific entitlement to the body of individuals deemed to be ‘others’. Museums and their exhibits embody the intentionality of the curators and researchers, and communicate these intentions to the visitors through curation and exhibit design choices. The inclusion of human remains in exhibits should be considered carefully as to be respectful of the individuals, their communities, and the visitors of the museum. The controversial Körperwelten and its creator walk the fine line of art versus science, allegedly providing an exhibit that fosters education and reflection, while in actuality trivializing the humanness of the individuals on display. The path of dehumanization and othering that are core to scientific entitlement deserve to be traced, as the exclusion of their consideration results in the negligent perpetuation of these notions.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter I: Introduction</b> .....	1
“Monument to Heroes” .....	1
Defining Human Remains .....	4
Purpose .....	6
<b>Chapter II: Colonization in Africa</b> .....	7
History of Colonization .....	7
100 Years Later .....	15
<b>Chapter III: Amassing and Presenting a Collection</b> .....	18
Physical Anthropology in Germany .....	18
Entitlement to Africa .....	26
Presentations in Museums .....	30
<b>Chapter IV: Körperwelten</b> .....	34
The Permanent Exhibits .....	40
Heidelberg .....	42
Berlin .....	51
Guben .....	60
Body Donation .....	69
<b>Chapter V: Conclusion</b> .....	71
Preservation of Dignity .....	73
<b>List of References</b> .....	78
<b>Vita</b> .....	88

## List of Tables

Table 2.1. German Colonialism in Africa .....	9
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## List of Figures

Figure 1.1. “Monument to Heroes” (1978) .....	2
Figure 2.1. Map of German colonial acquisitions in Africa .....	10
Figure 4.1. View from balcony of exhibit space and central mesh cube .....	43
Figure 4.2 First view from balcony of lower level .....	44
Figure 4.3. Second view from balcony of lower level .....	45
Figure 4.4. “The Angel” .....	47
Figure 4.5. “Figure Skating Pair with Woman Lifted” .....	48
Figure 4.6. “The Pacifier” .....	49
Figure 4.7. “Reclining Pregnant Woman” .....	50
Figure 4.8. View from the ticket counter .....	53
Figure 4.9. View inside the Berlin exhibition .....	54
Figure 4.10. Mirrors in the Berlin exhibition .....	55
Figure 4.11. View of mesh divider .....	56
Figure 4.12. “Ligament Body” .....	58
Figure 4.13. “Facing Death” .....	59
Figure 4.14. Plastination workshop showing the dissection lab .....	61
Figure 4.15. Plastination workshop showing the positioning lab .....	62
Figure 4.16. Interactive learning station in the Lernwerkstatt .....	63
Figure 4.17. The Lernwerkstatt .....	63
Figure 4.18. “Posed Whole-Body Specimen of Body Slices” .....	65
Figure 4.19 “Mystic Plastinate (2003)” .....	66
Figure 4.20. “Sitting Nude” .....	67

## Chapter I

### Introduction

The net of scientific entitlement is woven from a single thread that extends from German colonialism to present-day exhibits like Körperwelten. The path of dehumanization and othering that are core to scientific entitlement deserve to be traced, as the exclusion of their consideration results in the negligent perpetuation of these notions. Museums worldwide are searching for meaning and purpose in increasingly fast-paced and information overladen societies, while also operating in an increasingly sensitized and multicultural context. No museum or organization wants to lose its relevance, and like most institutions museums are not immune to the imperatives and pressures of the marketplace (Janes), and museums run the risk of becoming too preoccupied with money as a measure of worth, even at the cost of ignoring the short- and long-term impacts of their curation and exhibition decisions. This can manifest in several ways, including increasing their popularity and revenue by means of high-profile exhibits, as seems to be the case for exhibitions such as the ever-controversial Körperwelten.

#### “Monument to Heroes”

Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) was a Japanese American sculptor known for his experimental and political works. In the spring of 2022, Museum Ludwig in Köln, Germany hosted the first comprehensive retrospective of his work in Europe in over twenty years (“Isamu Noguchi”). Several of the 150 exhibited pieces draw inspiration from his engagement with the social and political questions of his time, including his opposition to racism and violence, as well as the lived experience of many Japanese Americans in the United States after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The piece that caught my attention is called “Monument to Heroes” (*Monument to Heroes*, 1978), which is the second of two identically named pieces (1943 and 1978) and the impetus for this thesis.

In 1942, Noguchi voluntarily entered the Poston War Relocation Center, the largest Japanese American internment camp in the United States, for six months. He created the first of the two “Monument to Heroes” pieces a year later, and it has been called “one of the most specific and melancholic examples of Noguchi’s time at Poston” (Bailey). The sculpture (Figure 1.1) exhibits

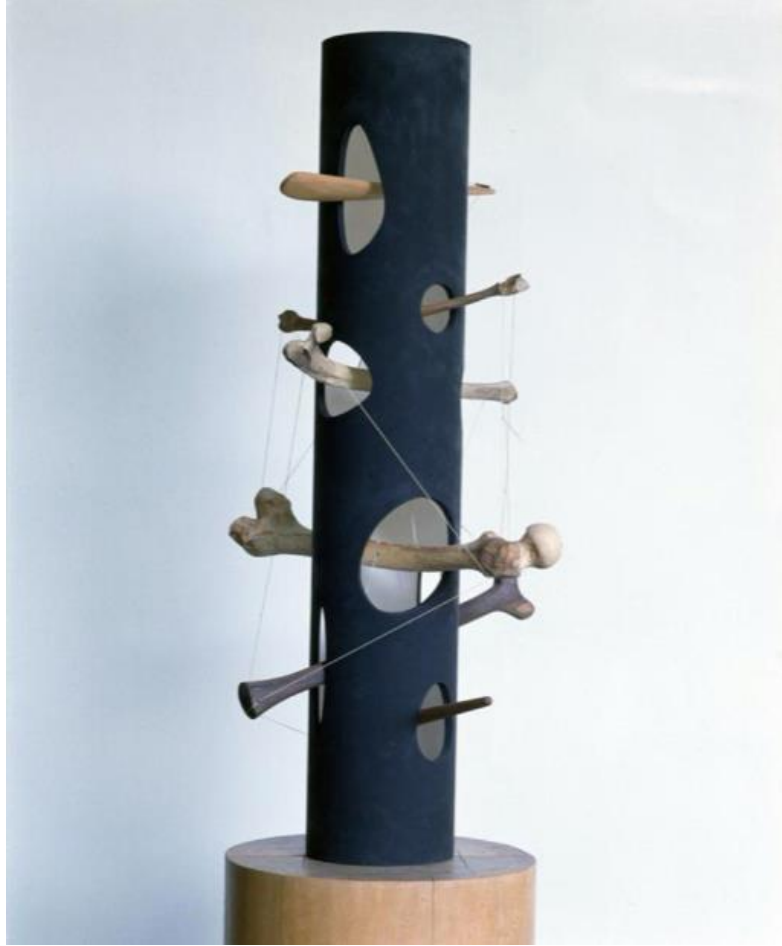


Figure 1.1. "Monument to Heroes" (1978). Source: *Monument to Heroes*, 1978

“the bones of the unknown – the residue of bravery, blown by wind” (*Monument to Heroes*, 1978). The materials included in these sculptures are “plastic, paint, bovine bones, wood, and string” (*Monument to Heroes*, 1978); however, my background in human osteology allowed me to recognize that two of the three bones included in the piece are human bones (a femur and a fibula). In the first version of the sculpture (1943), the material list simply reads “cardboard, wood, bones, string” (*Monument to Heroes*, 1943). The documented provenance for these materials is the estate of the artist (*Monument to Heroes*, 1943; *Monument to Heroes*, 1978). For Noguchi, the use of bones “carried deep meaning and suggested an intrinsic connection with the past” (Bailey). In fact, bones were a frequent motif for the artist, and he sourced some from a storage attic at New York’s Museum of Natural History (“Oral history interview with Isamu Noguchi”). This brings up a bevy of questions, including: Who do these bones belong to? How did they end up at the Natural History Museum? Should these bones be registered under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) as culturally unidentifiable remains and be treated accordingly<sup>1</sup>? Could Noguchi have made the same statement with these sculptures without using real human bones?

It is undeniable that the interaction between audience and art piece is integral to the weight and nuance of the impact of an art piece. In addition to the artist’s own bias in the creation of their artwork, each individual viewer brings with them their own wealth of lived experiences and knowledge that together shape the meaning of a piece. These are elements that the artist cannot possibly account for, and the result is a unique viewing experience for each visitor to the exhibit. For example, my background in biological anthropology caused me to take note of this piece and react to it in a way that visitors with no background in human anatomy likely did not experience. Furthermore, as an anthropologist based in the United States, I am aware of laws such as NAGPRA, which do not necessarily exist in other countries.

Noguchi was not the first and will certainly not be the last artist to use real human remains in their artwork. There is a fine line between science and art, and sometimes it is unclear where it

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<sup>1</sup> Culturally unidentifiable remains are human remains for which no cultural affiliation could be established, and these remains must be listed in an inventory (“Culturally Unidentified Human Remains”). As culturally unidentifiable remains, they should be treated with respect and not be displayed.

has been drawn. The exhibit “Krankheit als Kunst(form) – Moulagen der Medizin” of the Museum der Universität Tübingen (2016) navigates this space by presenting moulagen (a wax mold) as art. In fact, “die Mouleure werden als Künstler und die Moulagen als Kunstwerke ausgestellt” (“Krankheit als Kunst(form) – Moulagen der Medizin”). These moulagen were created to demonstrate real skin conditions, particularly for doctors. While these are not made of human remains, they do capture the faces of individuals who were suffering at the time the impression was made, leaving behind a very personal and identifying relic.

### **Defining Human Remains**

The presence and handling of human remains in museums has been a topic for international debate since the 1990s, when the number of claims for the return of human remains increased. Often the claims for the return of human remains originate from former colonial territories or from formerly colonized peoples. In light of this, the Deutscher Museums Bund provides guidelines such as the “Umgang mit menschlichen Überresten in Museen und Sammlungen” (2021) and “Umgang mit Sammlungsgut aus kolonialen Kontexten” (2021).

The Deutscher Museumsbund’s guideline titled “Umgang mit menschlichen Überresten in Museen und Sammlungen” (2021) defines human remains as, “alle körperlichen Überreste, die der biologischen Art *Homo sapiens* zuzurechnen sind” (14), and the definition applies to human remains originating from all around the world and from all time periods. This includes:

- “Alle unbearbeiteten, bearbeiteten oder konservierten Erhaltungsformen menschlicher Körper sowie Teile davon. Darunter fallen insbesondere Knochen, Mumien, Moorleichen, Weichteile, Organe, Gewebeschnitte, Embryonen, Föten, Haut, Haare, Fingernägel, Fußnägel, Zähne (die fünf letztgenannten auch, wenn sie von Lebenden stammen) sowie Leichenbrand” (14).
- “Menschliche Überreste nach der ... genannten Definition, die in (Ritual)Gegenstände bewusst eingearbeitet wurden, vorrangig Haare, Fuß/Fingernägel, Knochen(-teile)” (15).

This definition does not include the following<sup>2</sup>:

- “Abformungen menschlicher Körper(teile), Totenmasken, Tonaufnahmen menschlicher Stimmen, anthropologische Fotografien, anthropometrische Messblätter, Filmaufnahmen, mit menschlichen Überresten ehemals assoziierte (Ritual)Gegenstände wie z. B. Grabbeigaben” (15).

Human remains, the individual’s history, and their possible descendant communities should all be treated with the upmost respect. The circumstances of the individual’s death and the acquisition of the human remains by museums are also key factors in relation to the care of human remains, as the individual may have been a victim of injustice and their body was obtained by force or with coercion within the hierarchy of an unbalanced power structure against the will of the original owner(s) or the descendant group (*Umgang mit menschlichen Überresten in Museen und Sammlungen* 19). There is no overarching definition for what does and does not fall under the umbrella of the context of injustice, and the museum and collection in question must establish whether a context of injustice can be assumed in relation to the origin or acquisition of each item or set of human remains. It must also be established whether this context of injustice occurred so far in the past that it cannot be regarded as continuing to have an effect in the present day. Communicating with descendant communities is integral to this process.

Museums are public-facing, collections-based institutions. Their roles include the transmission and preservation of knowledge, culture, and history for past, present, and future generations. As a result, museums require the trust of the public, and this trust is maintained by making sound ethical judgements in all areas of work. The reasons for including human remains in a museum exhibit may include using them for educational and scientific communication purposes, provoking controversy or conversation as a means to bring in more visitors, shrinking the perceived physical and temporal distance between viewer and subject to make the past relevant again, and fundraising by means of increased foot traffic in museums. The tension between life and death, attraction and repulsion, and personalization and depersonalization generates

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<sup>2</sup> “Obwohl dieser Leitfaden die zuletzt genannten Objekte ausschließt, ist zu beachten, dass es sich auch dabei um kulturell sensibles Sammlungsgut handelt” (15).

attention, crowds, controversy, and income (Brooks and Rumsey). The presence of human remains in an exhibit has the potential to be both intriguing and unsettling for the viewer. Jenkins (2010) outlines three social influences that inform the focus on human remains: the scientific view of the body, the body as a site of identity, and the location of the body as a site of power and struggle. These influences work in conjunction with each other to impact how people consider the display and research of human remains. Displaying human remains in museums becomes problematic when the museum context is not considered legitimate by the viewer (Jenkins). Moira Simpson (2001) argues that the very presence of human remains in museums and museum collections is in itself evidence that, “academic and scientific interests have been placed before the interests and wishes of the deceased and their descendants” (Simpson 2).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of my thesis is to examine the broad context of how Körperwelten is able to exist the way it does presently in Germany despite all the controversy that has surrounded this exhibition since its inception. I consider the following: Where does scientific entitlement to the body in this context originate from? And what is the purpose of including human remains in these exhibitions? To this end, I discuss German colonization in Africa, the development of physical anthropology in Germany, historical examples of “othering” and displays of scientific entitlement to the body, museum display and curation strategies, the history of Körperwelten and its founder, and lastly the present-day permanent Körperwelten exhibitions in Germany.

## **Chapter II**

### **Colonization in Africa**

In order to understand scientific entitlement and the process and impact of dehumanization and othering, it is necessary to discuss the colonial origins of these concepts and how they were historically turned into policy. This context is necessary for understanding both the development of scientific entitlement and the present-day impacts of these attitudes in exhibits such as Körperwelten.

#### **History of Colonization**

The German empire was founded in 1871. Otto von Bismarck was the first chancellor of Germany (1871-1890), and he resisted pressure to construct a colonial empire until the Scramble for Africa in 1884. His statements indicate that he viewed colonialism as an activity for the other European nations, which he hoped would keep their energies and attentions sufficiently occupied to maintain European peace (Craig 117). Bismarck hosted the Berlin Conference (November 1884 – February 1885), also known as the West African or Congo Conference, which was a series of negotiations during which the major European countries divided the African continent, specifically the Congo and West Africa, into zones of European influence. Representatives from Africa were absent from this conference. It functioned as the formalization of the partitioning of the African continent and the regulation of European colonization and trade. Bismarck's reasons for entering the colonial field are unclear, as previously his stance had been that he was "no man for colonies" (Taylor 215). However, one theory is that each colonial acquisition was a move to exasperate the British (Taylor; Craig). For example, occupation of the Cameroons by Germany broke into an area where the British had monopolized trade for years, and German presence in German East Africa threatened British control in Zanzibar (Taylor). Domestic motives for Bismarck may have included the rising public enthusiasm for colonialism (Craig) and opinions at the time that colonial acquisitions were an indicator of true nationhood (von Strandmann). Furthermore, various colonial societies in Germany were organizing to persuade Bismarck to embark on a colonial policy, such as the Kolonialverein and the Gesellschaft für Deutsche Kolonisation (von Strandmann). Bismarck's apparent change of heart regarding his previously staunch stance against colonial policy was seen by some as an election stunt (von Strandmann).



Regardless of the reasons, Germany's decision to colonize Africa reinforced its position as one of the Great Powers of the time. Within one year of the Berlin Conference, Germany had constructed the third-largest colonial empire of the time by claiming much of remaining uncolonized areas in Africa by European nations. By 1914, the area of the German colonies was four-and-a-half times larger than Germany ("Facing the Past to Liberate the Future: Colonial Africa in the German Mind").

Bismarck favored 'chartered company' land management rather than the establishment of colonial government, and he used official letters of protection to transfer the administration and commerce of individual German protectorates to private companies, such as the German East Africa Company, the German Witu Company, the German New Guinea Company, and the Jaluit-Gesellschaft. Among other methods, unequal treaties (predatory, one-sided treaties that were signed after military defeat or because of the threat of violence) were used to make Indigenous rulers cede vast areas to the Germans in return for low prices and vague promises of protection. These unequal treaties were approved of by the German government and granted complete authority to the colonial companies without any oversight.

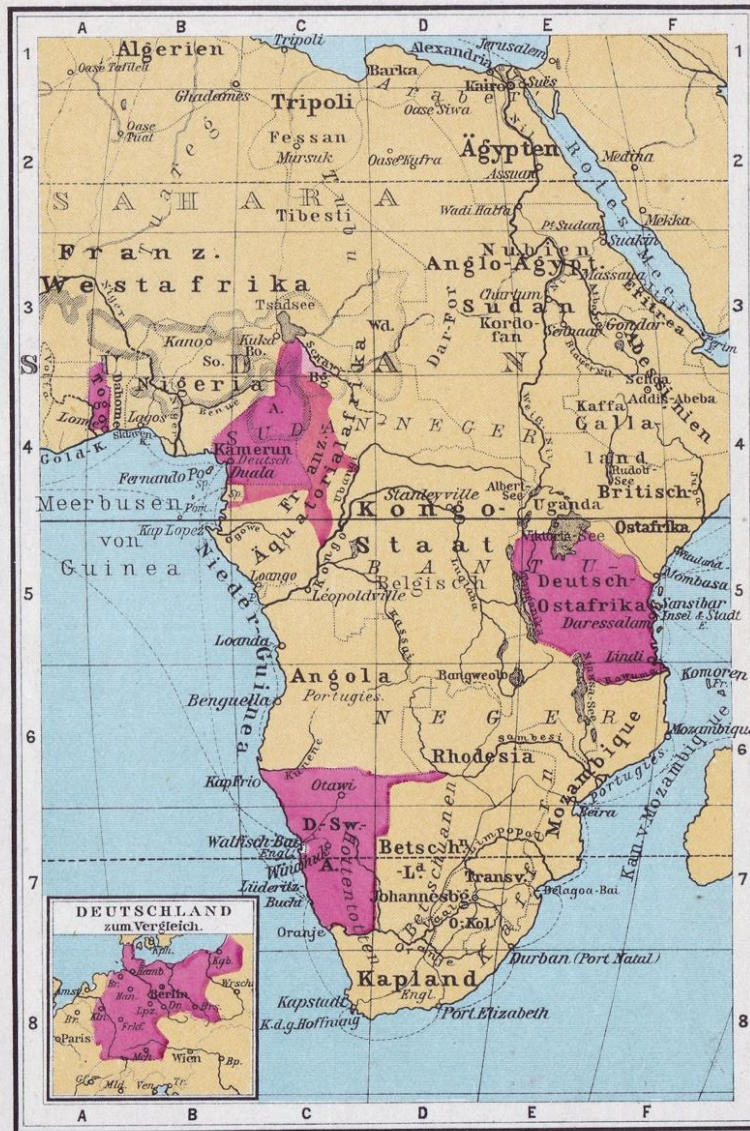
Unlike Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm II was very interested in expanding Germany's colonial holdings. Overall, colonial acquisition became an important factor in domestic politics in Germany. "Weltpolitik", the foreign policy adopted by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1891, aimed to transform Germany into a global power by means of aggressive diplomacy of overseas colonies, the acquisition of new colonies, as well as the development of the imperial German navy. Bismarck's successors as Chancellor, especially Bernhard von Bülow (1900-1909), poured substantial treasury assistance into Germany's existing protectorates. At a Reichstag debate in 1897, Bülow, as the German Foreign Secretary, famously stated, "Mit einem Worte: wir wollen niemand in den Schatten stellen, aber wir verlangen auch unseren Platz an der Sonne" ("Bernhard von Bülow über Deutschlands „Platz an der Sonne" (1897)"). The underlying sentiment was that Germany was a late-comer in regards to colonial conquests compared to the other Great Powers, and much effort was invested to catch-up. Table 2.1 shows the timeline of Germany's colonial acquisitions in Africa. Figure 2.1 is a map detailing the locations of these areas.

Table 2.1. German Colonialism in Africa

<b>Colony</b>	<b>Present-Day</b>	<b>Acquired</b>	<b>Lost</b>
German South-West Africa	Namibia	1884	1915
German East Africa	Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi	1884	1918
Cameroon	Cameroon + parts of Nigeria	1884	1915
Togoland	Togo + parts of Ghana	1884	1915

Die deutschen Kolonien in Afrika

19



www.deutsche-schutzgebiete.de 1 : 56.000.000

Figure 2.1. Map of German colonial acquisitions in Africa. (“Landkarten Deutsches Reich”)

While Germany established a foothold in Africa, the German colonial empire also expanded into the Pacific and China<sup>3</sup> (1884-1917). The characteristics of the regions that Germany occupied varied greatly, particularly the societies and local populations; as a result, effects of German presence in terms of the local populations' interactions with and resistance to the Germans was far from homogenous.

Germany was officially dispossessed of its colonies at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, and control over these areas was handed over to the mandate powers.

### ***German South-West Africa***

German South-West Africa became Germany's first protectorate in 1884. This colony was initiated by a Bremen-based tobacco merchant, who was also involved with illegal arms trading along the south-western coast of Africa (Conrad). When this merchant ran into difficulties, the German government stepped in. The Herero and Nama were two major Indigenous groups in this area. Both groups attempted to leverage the presence of the Germans to their advantage against the other. In 1894, Theodor Leutwein became the governor, and one crucial aim of his politics was to turn German South-West Africa into Germany's only settler colony (Conrad). He expanded colonial bureaucracy, and regulations were issued to control Africans by seizing their land and cattle. By the first World War, an estimated 14,000 European settlers were living in German South-West Africa, 12,000 of which were German; furthermore, 70 percent of the country's land was confiscated for German farmers (Conrad). In addition to this, an epidemic of rinderpest occurred in 1897, severely weakening the Herero's cattle stocks and robbing many Herero of their means of existence, thus making them dependent on the German settlers. By 1904, the political arrangements with local groups were no longer deemed necessary, giving way to the creation of a racially segregated exploitative state, which subjected the population to forced labor, rigid working regulations, and identity controls (Conrad).

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<sup>3</sup> The China Boxer Uprising in 1900 and the German's response to this uprising illustrates the brutality with which the German colonial empire was expanded and maintained. Kaiser Wilhelm II encouraged German troops with his "Hunenrede" speech, which instructed German troops to act like Huns, or barbarians, to enforce colonial rule in China (Zimmerman, 170).

The war fought by the Herero and Nama<sup>4</sup> against the Germans took place between 1904 and 1907, and it resulted in the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples. The revolt was a result of the effects of the rinderpest and malaria epidemics of 1897, political and social discrimination, the lack of legal rights, the abuse of women, and the exploitation of labor (“Facing the Past to Liberate the Future: Colonial Africa in the German Mind”). The German imperial government insisted that the conflict could only be resolved with the unconditional surrender of the Herero (Conrad), and command was transferred from Leutwein to General Lieutenant von Trotha in May 1904, who had impressed the German government with his experience in the colonial wars in East Africa as well as during the Boxer War in China (1899-1901). Von Trotha issued a ‘proclamation to the Herero people’, or a “Schießbefehl” on October 2, 1904:

Ich, der große General der deutschen Soldaten, sende diesen Brief an das Volk der Herero. Die Hereros sind nicht mehr deutsche Untertanen. Sie haben gemordet und gestohlen, haben verwundeten Soldaten Ohren und Nasen und andere Körperteile abgeschnitten, und wollen jetzt aus Feigheit nicht mehr kämpfen. Ich sage dem Volk: Jeder der einen der Kapitäne an eine meiner Stationen als Gefangenen abliefern, erhält 1000 Mark, wer Samuel Maharero bringt, erhält 5000 Mark. Das Volk der Herero muß jedoch das Land verlassen. Wenn das Volk dies nicht tut, so werde ich es mit dem Groot Rohr dazu zwingen. Innerhalb der Deutschen Grenze wird jeder Herero mit oder ohne Gewehr, mit oder ohne Vieh erschossen, ich nehme keine Weiber und Kinder mehr auf, treibe sie zu ihrem Volke zurück oder lasse auf sie schießen. Dies sind meine Worte an das Volk der Hereros. Der große General des mächtigen deutschen Kaisers. (“Der Krieg gegen die Herero 1904”)

After von Trotha’s genocide order, the Nama also revolted against the Germans in October 1904. The genocide involved massacres of both combatants and non-combatants, the hunting down and dispatching of Herero refugees after battle, and the implementation of a scorched-earth policy to destroy the locals’ livelihoods (“Reconciliation between Germany and Namibia: towards reparation of the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”). Prisoner camps were established in 1905 for Herero and Nama survivors, and despite the fact that they were not elimination camps, many

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<sup>4</sup> The leader of the Herero people was Samuel Maharero and the leader of the Nama was Hendrik Witbooi.

Herero and Nama died there due to the harsh conditions (“Facing the Past to Liberate the Future: Colonial Africa in the German Mind”). Overall, both the Herero and Nama sustained large numbers of casualties. A 1911 census reports 15,000 Herero compared to the 80,000 Herero reported prior to the outbreak of the war (Conrad 86). Other reports estimate the original Herero population size to be between 40,000 to 100,000 (“Facing the Past to Liberate the Future: Colonial Africa in the German Mind”). The pre-war population of 20,000 Nama was roughly halved over the course of the war (Conrad; “Facing the Past to Liberate the Future: Colonial Africa in the German Mind”).

Re-establishing order in German South-West Africa was seen as imperative by the German public for “the sake of the security of our other protectorates” and “for the sake of the reputation that we have as a colonial power – happily – with other colonial powers” (Hewitson 52), to the point where many German citizens, news outlets, and politicians were unwilling to criticize the government’s brutal policy and the ongoing atrocities occurring in German South West Africa (Hewitson).

By 1915, the German troops in German South-West Africa surrendered to South Africa. The country remained under South African control until it gained its independence in 1990 as Namibia.

### ***German East Africa***

German rule in German East Africa started with an imperial charter for a private corporation, which was primarily the work of Carl Peters. Starting in 1883, he explored the area as a private citizen when make ‘contracts’ (Conrad 50) with the local population, which were treated as official Schutzverträge by the German government and thus granted territorial powers to Peter’s German East Africa Society (Conrad). In 1891, the imperial government took over control of the area from Peters. Attempts by German military expeditions to conquer the inland area of this territory were met with resistance by Africans and Arabs. German East Africa was Germany’s most economically valuable territory, but it was still a large drain on Germany’s finances, as import numbers were consistently twice as high as export numbers. Among the exported goods

were cotton and sisal, which were produced on plantations by Africans working in conditions that mirrored slavery.

The Maji Maji Rebellion (1905-1908) was a reaction to foreign rule and land policy, principally against the recruitment of forced labor for cotton farming (Zimmerman). It resulted in the death of an estimated 80,000 Africans, and the victims of the famine that followed due to the destruction of fields and villages<sup>5</sup> during the war increased the total number of deaths to roughly 300,000 Africans (Conrad 87). Unlike the war in German South-West Africa, the German public was largely unaware of the events of the Maji Maji Rebellion (Conrad 86).

In 1918, the colony was surrendered to British forces, after which it was turned into a British mandate. Tanzania gained independence in 1964. Burundi and Rwanda were placed under the mandate of Belgium until they also gained independence in 1962.

### ***Cameroon***

German presence in Cameroon was officially established in 1884 by a treaty that was signed by the chiefs of Douala, a coastal port, and Gustav Nachtigal, a German explorer. German rule was concentrated principally to the coastal region and a few inland areas. Military expeditions brought large parts of the north-east under German control in the 1890s, but, control of these areas remained in the hands of the local leaders (Conrad 43). Cameroon was not considered as a potential German settlement colony like German South-West Africa, because of the presence of malaria (Conrad 44). This protectorate was known in Germany for its scandals involving abuses of power and brutality, which were largely the result of the system of economic exploitation that had been put in place in the 1890s. Cameroon became the largest plantation colony in western Africa, which required forced labor and the violent dispossession of land. The Duala resisted and sent a letter to the Reichstag in 1905 (Conrad 45). While Cameroon was one of Germany's most economically important colonies, exports never exceeded imports. After the end of the first World War, Cameroon was partitioned and turned into both a British and French mandate.

### ***Togo***

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<sup>5</sup> The German adopted a scorched-earth policy to starve the rebels (Zimmerman 158).

In 1884, Gustav Nachtigal signed a treaty with Mlapa III, the local chief, in pursuit of commercial interests. German missionaries had already been active in this region since the late 1840s. Notions of racial superiority were rigidly enforced (Conrad 47), but no major uprisings took place. The area under German administrative control was primarily along the roads and the two railway lines in central Togo. This was one of the few German colonies that did not require financial assistance (Conrad 50). In 1914, the German administrators left, and the British and French took over and split the territory lengthwise. The majority of the British half voted to join Ghana in 1956, and the French part gained independence in 1960.

### **100 Years Later**

2004 was the 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the beginning of the Herero Rebellion in former German South-West Africa. On August 14, 2004 in Namibia, Entwicklungsministerin Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul became the first member of German government to officially apologize for the atrocities that occurred in Namibia at the hands of German forces:

Wir Deutschen bekennen uns zu unserer historisch-politischen, moralisch-ethischen Verantwortung und Schuld, die Deutsche damals auf sich geladen haben ... Ich bitte Sie im Sinne des gemeinsamen ‚Vater unser‘ um Vergebung unserer Schuld ... Verblendet von kolonialem Wahn hätten Deutsche Gewalt, Diskriminierung, Rassismus und Vernichtung über das Land gebracht. Heute würden die Verbrechen von damals als Völkermord bezeichnet und der Oberbefehlshaber der deutschen Kolonialtruppe, General Lothar von Trotha, vor Gericht verurteilt. (“Gedenken an Herero-Aufstand”)

This apology was on behalf of the German federal government, and Wieczorek-Zeul pledged further developmental aid for Namibia and support for land reforms. Since Namibia’s independence from South Africa in 1990, Namibia has received over €500 million in aid from Germany. Hifikepunye Pohamba, then Namibia’s Minister of Lands, accepted the apology “in the name of the Namibian people” (“Germany Asks for Namibians’ ‘Forgiveness’”). However, this statement by Wieczorek-Zeul fell short of the expectations of many descendant groups, as



they had been asking for from Berlin was the classification of the colonial war as genocide and an official apology. The term genocide had been intentionally avoided previously<sup>6</sup>.

Despite the lack of official apology for the genocide, some efforts were made to begin the reconciliation process. The presence of human remains of Herero and Nama and other groups in German museums, medical schools, and hospitals acted as constant reminders of the genocide. From 2011 to 2018, human remains of genocide victims have been repatriated from Germany to Namibia (“Reconciliation between Germany and Namibia: towards reparation of the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”). In 2019, Hendrik Witbooi’s bible and riding whip, among other objects of significant cultural memory that had been stolen during the colonial conquest, were returned to Namibia from the Linden Museum in Stuttgart (Pelz).

In 2021, Außenminister Heiko Maas officially acknowledged on behalf of the German government that it had been a genocide:

Unser Ziel war und ist, einen gemeinsamen Weg zu echter Versöhnung im Angedenken der Opfer zu finden. Dazu gehört, dass wir die Ereignisse der deutschen Kolonialzeit im heutigen Namibia und insbesondere die Gräueltaten in der Zeit von 1904 bis 1908 ohne Schonung und Beschönigung benennen. Wir werden diese Ereignisse jetzt auch offiziell als das bezeichnen, was sie aus heutiger Perspektive waren: ein Völkermord. Im Lichte der historischen und moralischen Verantwortung Deutschlands werden wir Namibia und die Nachkommen der Opfer um Vergebung bitten. (“Außenminister Maas zum Abschluss der Verhandlungen mit Namibia”)

Additionally, the German government pledged funding in the amount of €1.1 billion for projects related to reconstruction and the development of Namibia.

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<sup>6</sup> Außenminister Joschka Fischer had previously avoided apologizing for the atrocities committed by German forces in Namibia during his visit in October 2003, saying that there would be no apology given that might give grounds for reparations (“Wieczorek-Zeul bat um Vergebung”). By giving reparations to one group, Germany opens itself up to claims for reparations from other groups as well, such as other ex-colonies or countries seeking compensation for World War II war crimes (Melber).

There are divided opinions in Namibia regarding the statements and promises made by German officials. The accusation has been made that these announcements are carefully compiled statements to avoid legal culpability. Factions of the Herero community are still seeking to sue the German state for the genocide. This new statement by Maas addressed resulted in the recognition of the genocide, but it was still deemed hollow by many descendants of the Herero, Nama, and other groups, as it seemed to have been made in haste for domestic and other political reasons<sup>7</sup>, and failed to achieve the reparations demand (“Viewpoint: Why Germany’s Namibia genocide apology is not enough”). Many traditional chiefs in Namibia released a joint statement rejecting the arrangement proposed by Germany and Namibia as it fell short of their expectations, in large part due to the lack of inclusion, because the descendants of the victims were not consulted or represented in negotiations between the two countries (“Viewpoint: Why Germany’s Namibia genocide apology is not enough”). Herero paramount chief Vekuii Rukoro called the reported agreement a “sellout”, and other chiefs have added that the offer is an insult to their community (Hayes).

Solidarity-based post-colonial policy of reconciliation and justice is possible. It is imperative to consider who is benefiting from this current conception of reconciliation: is it really to the benefit of the descendant groups or is it simply a way for Germany to absolve itself?

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<sup>7</sup> It is speculated that the timing of this statement was to seize the spotlight after French President Emmanuel Macron apologized in May 2021 to Rwanda for France’s role in the Rwandan genocide in 1994 (“Viewpoint: Why Germany’s Namibia genocide apology is not enough”).

### **Chapter III**

#### **Amassing and Presenting a Collection**

This chapter discusses the development of German physical anthropology from a liberal anthropology to an anthropology rooted in Rassenkunde and eugenic thinking. Situating these conceptual building blocks allows for a better understanding of the perpetuation of dehumanization and othering tactics to the benefit of scientific entitlement to the body for whichever desired purpose, whether for research or display. Museums and their exhibits embody the intentionality of the curators and researchers and communicate these intentions to the visitors through curation and exhibit design choices.

#### **Physical Anthropology in Germany**

Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902) was a German pathologist who contributed significantly to the development of physical anthropology and is regarded as a founder of German anthropology<sup>8</sup>. He represented liberal anthropology, which argued that races were nothing more than morphological variations and that race categories could not be used to make judgements on mental ability (Evans). As a physical anthropologist, he measured the bodies and bones of both the living and the dead. Additionally, he sketched the skulls, standardized osteological measurement methods, and photographically documented remains. He was able to amass his collection of significant proportions, because he requested that remains be sent to him in Germany for his studies about the physical and cultural differences of people. The final destination of these remains and objects varied:

Aus vielen Regionen der Welt werden ihm [Virchow] neben Präparaten auch Kleidungsstücke, andere alltägliche Gebrauchsgegenstände und kultische Objekte zugeschickt. Manches behält er für sich. Das meiste leitet er an einschlägige Berliner Museen und Sammlungen weiter. (*Dem Leben auf der Spur* 73)

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<sup>8</sup> He also significantly shaped the development physical anthropology in the United States through his student Franz Boas, one of two figureheads of physical anthropology in the United States.

Virchow opened the Pathologisches Museum in 1899 in Berlin. Featuring more than 23,000 wet and dry specimens, this space was intended for students of medicine as well as interested lay people. This museum was replaced by the Berliner Medizinhistorische Museum der Charité in 1998<sup>9</sup>. The book about the new museum discusses Virchow's intention:

... Virchow [hoffte], den Besuchern grundlegende Einsichten über das Wesen körperlicher Krankheiten und ihrer Verläufe zu eröffnen. Letztlich wollte der Pathologe seinem Publikum dadurch nicht nur ein besseres Krankheitsverständnis vermitteln, sondern es auch zu einer gesundheitsbewussten Lebensführung anregen. (*Dem Leben auf der Spur* 24)

Anthropology was initially a leisure pursuit, and it was carried out in the inclusive and sociable atmosphere of clubs instead of in the exclusive atmosphere of a professional workplace (Zimmermann). As such social interaction was imperative for scientific interaction. Virchow imagined German anthropology as a masculine republic (Zimmermann 130), and he suggested that the common pursuit of anthropology would lead to social and political harmony. For anthropologists at this time, the state was regarded as a guarantor of the social order that was integral to their scientific practice. Adolf Bastian<sup>10</sup>, an ethnologist, and Rudolf Virchow founded the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte in 1869<sup>11</sup>. This organization financially supported expeditions, digs, and the navy that was used to claim the German colonies (*Dem Leben auf der Spur*). The intention for increasing the involvement of the state in the organization was to make the organization permanent and stable. In comparison to their ethnology-focused peers<sup>12</sup>, physical anthropologists were struggling to establish themselves in the German university system or museums before World War I (Evans).

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<sup>9</sup> Many of the original specimens were destroyed during World War 2 and in the years afterwards. Before the war, the collection consisted of 34,000 specimens. By 1989, the collection had once again grown to an estimated 10,000 specimens (*Dem Leben auf der Spur*).

<sup>10</sup> Where Virchow “grounded the unity of the concept of humans biologically, Bastian justified this concept psychologically and idealistically” (Hewitson 121)

<sup>11</sup> This organization still exists today. They credit themselves with being responsible for contributing a significant portion of the collections of three museums in Berlin: Ethnologischen Museum, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, and the Museum Europäischer Kulturen. This organization has also been responsible for curating the Rudolf-Virchow-Sammlung since 2010. (*Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*)

<sup>12</sup> In Germany, anthropology encompassed three distinct but related disciplines: ethnology, physical anthropology, and prehistoric archaeology.

Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theories on human evolution<sup>13</sup> had a significant impact on physical anthropology. For example, an extremely negative impact was how Sir Francis Galton, a statistician and early anthropologist, found a justification for his elitism<sup>14</sup> in Darwin's idea of 'natural selection' and used this to propose that society could improve itself with a system of artificially and efficiently selecting for desirable traits; in this work (1883), Galton also coined the term "eugenics"<sup>15</sup> (Larson 180). 'Darwinian' attempts to distinguish between races and to find missing links in the evolution of apes to humans was dismissed by Virchow and von Luschan, among others (Hewitson 57). Virchow considered Darwinism to be an unscientific hypothesis (Zimmermann 131).

In the 1870s, the Germany Anthropology Society, with the direction of Virchow, conducted a study of the external characteristics of school students and new military recruits in Germany. Although race-defining types were identified by hair color in this survey, "the architects of the study associated them with skin color" (Hewitson 136). The argument became that skin color now constituted a racial marker and thus corresponded to skull shape more so than eye or skin color. An assumption of racial difference between non-Jewish and Jewish Germans was incorporated into this study almost from its inception. It was from this survey that Virchow came to view Jews as a separate race (Hewitson 142). The findings of the study were published in newspapers and disseminated to the public. These findings also brought about the argument that racial characteristics could not be changed – neither by "climate or crossbreeding" (Hewitson 145) – which Virchow used to argue his anti-Darwinism stance and support German eastward colonization. This survey was one of the most important ways in which anthropology made its mark on 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. Indeed, this study was "an unintended contribution to a restructuring of discourse about German nationality that would result in the Nazi "racial state"" (Hewitson 146).

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<sup>13</sup> The theory of survival of the fittest. Darwin believed that individual variation matters and that these variances are heritable. Additionally, variation is what drives differential survival and reproduction over many generations. In sum, "natural selection" is individuals responding to the environment.

<sup>14</sup> He viewed nonwhites to be inferior to whites in terms of intelligence and other heritable traits (Larson 154).

<sup>15</sup> Galton's intentions were "positive eugenics": creating laws that incentivize reproduction in the group that you want to preserve (over time, the desired traits become the majority). However, it also spawned "negative eugenics": suppressing people from reproducing (by means of sterilization, genocide, etc). (Larson)

After Virchow's death<sup>16</sup> in 1902, there was no longer a single dominant voice in physical anthropology and a very notable move away from liberal anthropology. Evans (2010) argues that this abandonment of the liberal version of the science, "was facilitated by a series of changing circumstances inside and outside the discipline, both environmental and ideological, created by the war itself" (19). Several key shifts occurred in physical during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: anthropologists turned to the field to collect data, which was in part a reaction to collectors bringing less-than-satisfactory objects and remains back from the colonies (Zimmerman 217) and members of field embraced genetics and the advance of racial hygiene. World War I further changed the context in which anthropologists were working, and it pushed the field into an increasingly nationalistic direction. Members of the field were eager to attract the notice of the state to gain a more secure foothold in the academic world, and during this time, many anthropologists turned the attention of their science toward the conflict in order to support the war effort. This included seeking connections between race, nation, and Volk (Evans), paralleling the racial ideologies of the National Socialists, and portraying enemies of the state as racial 'others'. Eventually, the gradual process of socialization to wartime environments also played a role, as younger members of the discipline were now pursuing their research in highly politicized settings (Evans).

After World War I, anthropological institutions, such as the Rudolf Virchow Foundation, faced hardships including employee shortages and lack of funding, and this "cut into every aspect of scientific work in anthropological institutions" (Evans 194). This spurred another search for new scientific missions that would make anthropology more relevant in society. Rassenkunde<sup>17</sup> (racial science) became the new disciplinary paradigm in the 1920s, and adherents sought to link physical, cultural, and psychological attributes. This shift was a "triumph of genetic thinking over the morphological and descriptive anthropology of Virchow's day" (Evans 200). The central task of Rassenkunde was the classification of Europeans, especially Germans (Evans 208). This reflected an effort to racially differentiate between central Europe and other areas of Europe. These studies had a nationalist perspective that saw increasing internationalism as a

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<sup>16</sup> "With Virchow's death in 1902, ... German anthropology lost its most active enforcer of its anti-Darwinist orthodoxy" (Zimmerman 215)

<sup>17</sup> A science that sought to link physical characteristics to mental and cultural faculty (Evans)

threat, as “the races within the German population would soon be mixed to the point where they could no longer be determined ... something valuable – a kind of Germanness – was in danger of being lost” (Evans 208). Moreover, the high cost of life during the war fanned fears of population decline. Anthropologists considered racial hygiene (an approach to eugenics) a way to aid a broken and ailing post-war society<sup>18</sup>. Racial hygiene gave anthropologists a tool to demonstrate the practical uses of their science and allowed them to continue to wartime mobilization of their discipline during this period in service of state and nation. Eugenic thinking predated the first World War, however the postwar version differed from prewar eugenic thinking by “aggressively incorporating racial ideas” (Evans 214).

Anthropologists such as Eugen Fischer<sup>19</sup> (1874-1967), Otto Reche<sup>20</sup> (1879-1966), and Theodor Mollison<sup>21</sup> (1874-1952) gained positions of power and influence in the field in the aftermath of World War I. These were individuals who had “gained their professional experience in the hypernationalist contexts of empire and war” (Evans 12), and nearly all of them served in the military during World War I. Most of the anthropologists of this generation moved toward an illiberal brand of anthropology before 1914, which led them to work with the Nazi party and professionally benefit from for this connection (Evans).

Zimmerer (2003) argues that German colonialism and imperialism provided important precedents for Nazi genocidal thinking, linking the war waged against the Herero and Nama to the crimes committed by the Nazis (1118). Madley (2005) highlights this link as well, claiming that Nazis borrowed policies established in German South-West Africa, including Lebensraum, the dehumanization of the colonized peoples, legally institutionalized racism, and the centrality of Vernichtungskrieg (war of annihilation). Madley (2005) also traces the communication of

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<sup>18</sup> Eugenics could “address economic problems by improving the quality of the population and therefore increasing national efficiency” (Evans 215).

<sup>19</sup> He participated in colonial expeditions and made a name for himself studying the children of European settlers and Indigenous peoples in German South-West Africa (Evans 12). He became a professor of anthropology, was head of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Genetics, and Eugenics, and later was named rector of the University of Berlin in 1933.

<sup>20</sup> One of the central participants in the POW studies and he participated in colonial expeditions. He later became a professor and argued for the close connection between Volk and race throughout his career (Evans)

<sup>21</sup> In 1933, he proposed that the anthropological collection of the Ludwig Maximilian University be organized into a new public exhibit on Rassenkunde (Evans 223). He was a professor of anthropology at the time. This exhibit is an example of how anthropology was put at the ideological service of the National Socialist state.

colonial ideas to Nazi Germany through conduits, such as Hermann Göring<sup>22</sup>, Franz Ritter von Epp<sup>23</sup>, and Eugen Fischer. For example, Fischer gained personal experiences in German South-West Africa, where he studied children (Basters: members of an Afrikaans-speaking Namibian minority) in the concentration camps<sup>24</sup>. He published his findings in Germany, establishing his reputation and influencing all subsequent German racial legislation, including the Nuremberg Laws<sup>25</sup>. In 1927, Fischer became the director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics, which produced scholarship to support Nazi radical beliefs and goals. Towards this end, Fischer's focus was cementing biological justifications for antisemitism, and he used his position and authority to disseminate the racist ideas he had developed in colonial Namibia (Madley). He acted on his beliefs in many capacities, including being one of three scientists on the Gestapo's 'Special Commission Number Three', which performed forced sterilizations on the Rheinland bastards (Afro-Germans), and giving 'scientific' testimony on the racial heritage of German citizens under investigation by the Nazis (Madley 456). In addition to influencing his students<sup>26</sup>, Fischer's influence also spread through the connections he forged with the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. This includes Josef Mengele, who received training at and became a member of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. The Institute helped secure funding for his projects, including his "research" in Auschwitz (Madley). Apart from personal connections being a channel of influence, literature and photography also communicated colonialist and genocidal ideas and methods from the colonies to Germany, normalizing these concepts built on othering and dehumanization, for the laypeople. This is only a glossed over summary of the complexities of this transitional period in German anthropology<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Göring's father was the first Reichskommissar for German South-West Africa, and in his father's example "[he] learned that the conquest and subjugation of non-Germans was a patriotic path to glory" (Madley 451). In his career, he helped plan Nazi war efforts, led the Luftwaffe, established Germany's first concentration camps, and was a key contributor to the implementation of colonial policies on the occupied East.

<sup>23</sup> Von Epp was a volunteer soldier sent to suppress the Herero Uprising (1904-1906) who served as a Company Commander under von Trotha and witnessed the establishment of concentration camps. After his military service in WWI, he employed, influenced, and nurtured several future Nazi leaders, including Rudolf Hess, Gregor Strasser, Walther Schultze, Ernst Röhm, and Adolf Hitler (Madley).

<sup>24</sup> Physical characteristics and measures of intelligence

<sup>25</sup> On September 15, 1935, the Nazi regime announced two new race-based laws that deprived Jews of rights.

<sup>26</sup> Such as Eva Justin, whose work about the European Roma frequently led to their sterilization and murder.

<sup>27</sup> For further reading (among many other sources): Hewitson, Mark. *Germany and the Modern World 1880-1914* (2008); Evans, Andrew D. *Anthropology at War* (2010); Zimmerman, Andrew. *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (2001)



### *Data Collection*

A system of colonial exchanges helped establish German colonial rule. By 1900, the Berlin Museum of Ethnology had the largest anthropology collection in the world (Zimmerman 153). This was in part because of these colonial exchanges, but many of the items were also procured by navy officers. Anthropologists would sometimes instruct officers in regard to specific artifacts they should bring back to Berlin, but this was not always the case. As a result, the navy made objects available to anthropologists that they would have otherwise not have been able to obtain. Instead of purchasing these goods, many were stolen or taken forcibly from the Indigenous people (Zimmerman 156). Felix von Luschan<sup>28</sup> (1854-1924) was particularly adept at acquiring anthropological material from colonial governments in Africa as well as in the Pacific. These same imperialistic networks also gave anthropologists access to the body parts of the colonized, especially their skulls. Colonial warfare resulted in the deaths of many individuals that physical anthropologists were keen to study, and these were sent to Berlin. Virchow requested that travelers bring back bones, hair, salted skin, and dried hands, while von Luschan was less specific with his requests<sup>29</sup> (Zimmerman 158). The Maji Maji Rebellion in German East Africa was a particularly good occasion for collecting human remains for physical anthropologists. For this, von Luschan wrote the following to the governor of German East Africa:

I devotedly allow myself to inquire if there exists any possibility that the skulls might be dug up and sent to Berlin. If the opportunity to rescue for science a freshly severed head ever presents itself again, I would be most grateful if these heads would be treated with formaldehyde or in another appropriate way and sent to the Royal Museum. It would be of very great scientific value if soft parts, especially with various tattoos, could be saved for posterity in a secure and unproblematic way. (Zimmerman 159)

War gave physical anthropologists access to bodies in a way that had not been possible before. Even in times of peace, grave robbing was another commonly employed method for gathering remains for collections. When shipping human bodies or body parts was not an option,

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<sup>28</sup> One of Virchow's students who was also a strong proponent of liberal anthropology.

<sup>29</sup> However, von Luschan did create an "Anleitung" with instructions for travelers bringing back human remains (Laukötter 29).

anthropometric measurements or plasters were taken and sent in their stead. Taking skeletal measurements of the living was an uncomfortable process for the individual being measured, which meant that anthropologists had a difficult time getting people to submit to the lengthy procedure. Death made this significantly easier, as was seen in the case of von Luschan's failed attempts to take measurements of the colonial performers at the Berlin Colonial Exhibition of 1896 (Zimmerman). When several performers passed away while in Berlin<sup>30</sup>, and von Luschan and his colleague Wilhelm Waldeyer considered this a good opportunity to collect anthropological data (Zimmerman 35). This illustrates how unimportant consent was for these anthropologists.

Colonial prison camps and hospitals were other settings that anthropologists like Virchow and von Luschan took full advantage of in order to collect data. In these places, "data gatherers measured not the people they wanted to measure but those whose social position required obedience" (Zimmerman 164). An example of this was the scientific exploitation of the victims of genocide in the German war of extermination against the Herero (Zimmerman 244). This pattern of forceful data collection continued in prisoner-of-war camps during both World Wars (Evans; Zimmerman; Madley). Physical anthropologists had the "blessing and support of the state and military authorities ... to harness the "opportunity" provided by the camps and, by extension, the war itself" (Evans 3). Later, the Holocaust also made it possible for anthropologists to collect bodies, body parts, and plaster casts from individuals in Nazi concentration camps, mirroring what had happened with the institutions of the colonial state in Africa and the Pacific<sup>31</sup> (Zimmerman 243). These unequal power relationships created distance between scientist and subject, leading to the relentless 'othering' and dehumanization of the latter.

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<sup>30</sup> The summer of 1896 was unusually cold in Berlin, and many performers became sick and required hospitalization.

<sup>31</sup> Eugen and his contemporaries copying von Luschan.

## Entitlement to Africa

### *Völkerschauen*

The power of colonial representations was expressed in popular culture in Germany. Among other examples, board games, collectable pictures, books<sup>32</sup>, and architecture were influenced by the spike in interest in colonialism. These made the ‘exotic’ accessible to everyday people in Germany. Another important forum for colonial imagination that became increasingly popular and available in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were ethnographic spectacles (*Völkerschauen*) and dioramas. In the 1870s, Carl Hagenbeck, a Hamburg animal dealer, introduced spectacles that featured exotic-seeming people to counterbalance the loss of revenue of his animal-import business (Conrad 140). The *Völkerschauen* presented Germans as “masters of the world, and as benevolent civilizers in the colonies” (Conrad 140) and conveyed to the audience that there were natural hierarchies of races and peoples (Zimmerman).

The largest *Völkerschau*, the Berlin Colonial Exhibition of 1896, was visited by over seven million people and was a place where European visitors could “get an impression of our [Germany’s] acquisitions in Africa” (Stinde 200). This exhibition featured over a hundred individuals from the German colonies in Africa and the Pacific (Zimmerman 24), and visitors were shown dances, folklore, colonial goods such as food, and images of the colonies (Conrad 141). The promoters of *Völkerschauen* such as this wanted to make the individuals appear real “despite the artificiality of the setting and the frequent misrepresentations of the subjects’ identities” (Hewitson 47). This ‘realness’ was intended to fall in line with the contemporary colonial-anthropological discourse, but the performers were often people who had been in close contact with Germany, and they were unfamiliar with the customs they were supposed to represent (Zimmerman 25). In fact, many of the Africans and Pacific Islanders present in Berlin had been recruited and “coached by anthropologists<sup>33</sup> and other European experts to perform cultures that were not their own” (Zimmerman 30). As a result, situations like this were common: days were spent performing for visitors what the visitors expected to see, and evenings were spent entertaining themselves with their actual practices, including singing German folk songs and “Deutschland über Alles” (Zimmerman 26). The German state tried to recruit

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<sup>32</sup> For example, Karl May wrote books in the context of the Balkan crisis.

<sup>33</sup> Felix von Luschan was among the recruiting anthropologists.

Indigenous elites to the Berlin Colonial Exhibition, creating a “kind of two-way Völkerschau” (Zimmerman 24); for this, Germany also ‘performed’ for these elite individuals<sup>34</sup> from the colonies by attempting to impress them with German museums, theatres, zoos, and military parades in hopes of bolstering Germany’s colonial domination (Zimmerman).

These stereotypical representations of foreignness contributed significantly to how African people were gradually racialized and depicted as fundamentally different from Europeans: the creation of the colonial ‘other’. Embedded in this ‘othering’ were unequal power relationships, which easily transformed into entitlement regarding the personhood and body of someone deemed to be lesser than in this constructed hierarchy. Hewitson (2018) expands on the benefits of ‘othering’, explaining that “colonialism and world policy together became a significant framework for the definition of a ‘European’ and a German ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’” (48). Challenges to this ‘othering’, such as noncompliance to the ‘rules’ of how colonized “natural peoples” should act or dress compared to European “cultural people” were dangerous, because they disrupted the workings of the social and cultural system of imperialism (Zimmerman 33). In other words, this dissonance destabilized the very categories of peoples that anthropologists understood them to exemplify. For example, Bismarck Bell, a political leader of one of the two major Duala ruling families in Cameroon, refused to be photographed in anything other than a black tie (as opposed to in what was regarded as authentic Duala clothing) (Zimmerman 30). This proved to be endlessly frustrating for von Luschan, who wrote extensively about his experiences (Zimmerman). A year after his encounter with Bell, von Luschan wrote to a colleague that he, even in his own mind, could no longer maintain a clear distinction between natural peoples and cultural peoples (Zimmerman). Nonetheless, cases contradictory to the expected norm continued to be written off as anomalies by anthropologists.

### ***Chief Mkwawa’s Skull***

Chief Mkwawa was the chief of the Wahehe tribe in German East Africa (present-day Tanzania), who fought against the invasion of Germans in the 1880s. He declared that, “rather than submit

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<sup>34</sup> Samuel Maharero, the leader of the Herero in German South-West Africa, sent his eldest son Friedrich and four other nobles to the colonial exhibition (Zimmerman 27). Friedrich Maharero refused to wear a folklore-based costume (conforming to what ‘heathens’ were expected to wear) and insisted on wearing a suit during this visit (reflective of their established relation to European culture) (Conrad 142; Zimmerman 28).

to German rule he would fight them to the utmost limit, and rather than surrender he would die by his own gun” (Desplat). In the August of 1891, the Germans lost their commander and a quarter of the colony’s armed force in one day at the Battle of Lugalalu, which was a devastating blow for the Germans and their colonization efforts in German East Africa<sup>35</sup>. It took three years for the German forces to recover sufficiently to mount another attack. In 1894, the German forces overran Kalenga<sup>36</sup>, forcing Chief Mkwawa to flee. The Wahehe conducted guerrilla warfare until July 19, 1898, when Chief Mkwawa shot himself to avoid capture<sup>37</sup>. The German forces removed Chief Mkwawa’s head and took it back to Germany.

The Treaty of Versailles (1919) called for the return or deliverance of, “various objects, mainly of artistic and archaeological interest, which [had] been seized by the Germans and which [had] to be restored” (Desplat). Chief Mkwawa’s skull was included in this list<sup>38</sup>. Article 246 stated:

“Within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty ... Germany will hand over to His Britannic Majesty’s Government the skull of the Sultan Mkwawa which was removed from the Protectorate of German East India and taken to Germany.”  
(Desplat)

In May 1920, the German Foreign Ministry stated that they were unable to locate the skull<sup>39</sup>, and there was a lack of proof that the skull had been brought to Berlin. By August 1921, Winston Churchill, the newly appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies, decided no further action was necessary for the time being (Desplat). Enquiries about the skull were made by various parties from the 1930s to 1950s. In January 1953, the German Foreign Ministry announced that Chief

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<sup>35</sup> Emil von Zelewski was the commander for the German expeditionary force. Prior to this battle, the Germans had not come up against any serious resistance from inland tribes, which likely contributed to their overconfidence. News of von Zelewski’s defeat was published in many European newspapers at the time (“The Battle of Lugalalu – 17<sup>th</sup> of August 1891”).

<sup>36</sup> A portion of Chief Mkwawa’s castle was brought to Berlin (*Eine Kopfjagd – Auf der Suche nach dem Schädel des Sultans Mkwawa*).

<sup>37</sup> A bounty had been placed on his head by the Germans (*Eine Kopfjagd*).

<sup>38</sup> One of the reasons for including the skull was that it “would have a good local [German East Africa] effect, and it would also afford tangible proof in the eyes of the natives that German power had been completely broken” (Desplat).

<sup>39</sup> “There are no indications whatever of the head having been brought to Germany and the researches made hitherto in the skull collections of Germany have been fruitless. Paragraph 2 of Article 246 of the Treaty of Peace has thus no longer any object” Dated May 6, 1920 (Desplat).

Mkwawa's skull might be in the large collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Bremen as there were several skulls that matched the description<sup>40</sup>. Of the 71 skulls from the collection, two were selected based on their cephalic indexes, and one of these final two had a bullet hole that was consistent with the type of rifle used by German troops in German East Africa (Desplat). Sir Edward Twining returned the skull to Chief Adam Sapi, Chief Mkwawa's grandson, on June 19, 1954 in Kalenga<sup>41</sup>. More than 30,000 Wahehe attended the ceremony. Chief Mkwawa's skull is now on display at the Kalenga mausoleum.

In the documentary *Eine Kopffjagd – Auf der Suche nach dem Schädel des Sultans Mkwawa* (2001), Is-Haka Mkwawa, the great-grandson of Chief Mkwawa, retraces the 'steps' of his ancestor's skull<sup>42</sup> and visits European museums and archives to learn why German colonial officers stole the skull. Is-Haka and director Martin Baer speculate one of the reasons might have been to study Chief Mkwawa's head and brain to understand how he had evaded the Germans for so long (*Eine Kopffjagd*). According to their research, a German botanist named Götze brought Chief Mkwawa's head to Berlin in 1899, where first Virchow and then von Luschan studied it<sup>43</sup>. Since his death, Chief Mkwawa has become a symbol of the struggle against colonial powers as well as for freedom and independence, and the return of his skull to Tanzania was long overdue (*Eine Kopffjagd*; Desplat). This documentary underlines through Is-Haka's conversations with the museum and collections representatives that these German organizations still control the physical evidence of his personal family history, meaning that the return of Chief Mkwawa's skull was not the resolution of all lingering effects of colonization for that group. No plan or timeline has been put in place to return other personal family items to the Mkwawa family.

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<sup>40</sup> Purely visual confirmation was unlikely, but the skull's cephalic index could be compared to Chief Mkwawa's grandson's (Chief Adam Sapi) cephalic index. Apparently Chief Mkwawa's index had been an unusual 71% (Desplat).

<sup>41</sup> During the ceremony, Twining added that he hoped the Wahehe would "continue to give [their] unstinted loyalty to Queen Elizabeth II and her heirs and successors" (Desplat).

<sup>42</sup> His goal is to make Chief Mkwawa's story more well-known beyond Tanzania (*Eine Kopffjagd*).

<sup>43</sup> The Wahehe did not allow themselves to be studied / measured, so their skeletons were of great interest to anthropologists such as Virchow and von Luschan (*Eine Kopffjagd*).

## **Presentations in Museums**

Museums play a starring role in “producing and representing a nation” (Levitt 2), and they act as embodiments of a city’s “cultural armature”<sup>44</sup>, its diversity-management regime, and deep cultural structures (Levitt). As a result, museums curate a reputation for themselves and can influence how a nation is perceived by visitors to the museum and those abroad alike.

Historically, museums have been used by nations to justify imperialistic projects and collections (Levitt; Atalay; Wade), as was the case for German anthropologists who sought to expand their collections.

The purposes of every museum are influenced by the host country’s development, goals, global claims-staking projects, and the types of citizens it believes it needs to achieve its goals (Levitt). This strong influence can be seen in the exhibits and displays that museums feature, as well as in the architecture and layout of the museum and even the museum’s physical location (Levitt). Moreover, the order and reordering of objects in museums and how the objects are positioned in relation to each other are all also choices made with the objective of communicating a specific message to the audience. Thus, museums are never egalitarian and are exclusionary, as they expose the individual to certain kinds of knowledge based on certain values (Levitt). Each museum needs to be considered and evaluated within the political, historical, cultural, and locational context and its informational and/or educational pursuit. Museums can and must reinvent themselves in order to retain their status as socially relevant institutions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As “contact zones”<sup>45</sup> in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, museums should operate in such a way that encourages empathy, curiosity, tolerance, creativity, and critical thinking (Levitt).

The ways in which displays are organized and visitors are informed about the human remains send a strong subliminal message about the attitudes of the curatorial and design team, which in turn informs the visitor what attitude is expected of them in relation to the human remains (Brooks and Rumsey; Simpson). These curation and design choices communicate what is deemed respectful handling of the human remains by the museum and institution. The way in which human remains are conceptualized in a museum enables human remains to be collected,

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<sup>44</sup> Its social and cultural policies, history, and institutions (Levitt 3)

<sup>45</sup> Places home to ongoing historical, political, and moral relationships (Levitt 8)

stored, displayed, and viewed (Brooks and Rumsey). Studies of the conception of the body show overlapping but changing conceptions of the body across history and time (Jenkins). These changes both influence and are influenced by religion, politics, medical science, and technological advances (Jenkins). Depending on the cultural context, human remains can be conceptualized as an object of mourning or a scientific object (Jenkins).

The definition of a “body” in a museum context has changed over time and varies between organizations, as the complex definition provided by the Deutscher Museumsbund illustrates. Human remains are categorized both as “person” (human, body) and “thing” (remains, corpse, cadaver, skeleton) (Jenkins). As a result, human remains function as a “border subject” (Jenkins 107), meaning that they disturb the boundaries between real and unreal, as well as between person and non-person. Julia Kristeva (1980) also categorized the human cadaver as the “ultimate abject”, a category that bridges the boundaries of subject and object. The living community imposes meaning onto the dead body, and these meanings can often be very different from each other and even conflicting. Depending on viewer and their individual-specific understanding of death and the human body, looking at human remains can trigger a reflection on mortality and/or be a disturbing experience that embodies a range of qualities such as horror and dread. Similarly, human remains and the dead body can also be projected with emotions of love and care by the viewer (Kristeva). This seemingly contradictory range of possible responses to human remains is a confirmation of the fact that human remains occupy a liminal space (Nilsson Stutz).

The presence of bodies in museums can be interpreted as desecration and theft, or scientific, archaeological, and medical research (Brooks and Rumsey). Acceptability of the presence of human remains in a museum context can depend on perceived temporal distance between the viewer and the subject. In this sense, research has found that viewers feel less strongly in terms of acceptability about bodies from the distant past (Brooks and Rumsey). Those surveyed also distinguished between the acceptability of displaying prehistoric versus more modern remains, dry bone versus flesh, and adults versus babies (Brooks and Rumsey). A greater emotional response to one over the other can imply that the body becomes more threatening to the viewer as the perceived similarities between the body and the viewer increase.



Cases and barriers in exhibits have both physical and symbolic purposes (Brooks and Rumsey). On one hand, they function as a way to maintain physical distance between the viewer and the human remains in order to preserve and protect the latter. On the other hand, the distance created by the barriers can also function as a means of, “culturally ‘cleansing’ protection” (Brooks and Rumsey 347). Influenced by Mary Douglas’ (1984) exploration of the boundaries of the acceptable in terms of purity and impurity, Brooks and Rumsey (2007) argue that while a body on display is potentially a pollutant for a space, the Western perception of a museum as a sacred space can purify the display of the body and make it acceptable for the viewer in that context. The conceptual framework for Western museums enables the objectification of the body, making the viewing experience culturally acceptable (Brooks and Rumsey). Moreover, the viewing experience becomes an educational, historical, or scientific process instead of an emotional or spiritual experience (Brooks and Rumsey). Some museums use displays that prepare visitors to view human remains respectfully or implement design choices such as moveable screens that allow visitors to choose whether or not to see the human remains, thus actively engaging the visitor in the viewing decision (Brooks and Rumsey 2007).

Regarding the development of physical anthropology in Germany, anthropologists made intentional design choices for the exhibit spaces for the opening of the Royal Museum of Ethnology in 1886 in Berlin. Their intention was to present the “objects of the colonized” in a way that made them “natural rather than historical and as the objects of science rather than of Schaulust” (Zimmerman 176). Bastian was the director of this museum at the time, and he wanted to build “a system of pavilions of glass and iron” (Zimmerman 178), that would allow light into the enclosed areas of the museum. The anthropologists used glass cases to display the object with the hope that glass would distract visitors the least, allowing the museum to fade into the background. This also had the effect that visitors could see a large number of objects simultaneously, pushing visitors to compare them in a way that encouraged anthropological induction (Zimmerman 181). Finally, the museum refrained from using introductory placards on the walls and only supplied shortly worded labels for objects; this meant that any knowledge acquired in the museum would stem from the objects rather than from text (Zimmerman 183).

The intentional design choices of this ethnographic museum is an excellent example of how the curation of a space can influence its impact on the visitor.

Museums are in a challenging position in which they have to balance duty to the dead with the needs of researchers and visitors, while also operating in an increasingly sensitized and multicultural context. Sometimes this means that museums choose to forego displaying human remains entirely out of respect for the individuals (Brooks and Rumsey). This is complicated further when the human remains' provenience is unclear or they possibly stem from contexts of injustice as outlined by the Deutscher Museumsbund.

## Chapter IV

### Körperwelten

The Körperwelten exhibitions need to be understood in the context of the past two centuries of history discussed in the previous chapters. Its entire existence is dependent on the foundation of dehumanization and othering that allows for scientific entitlement to continue existing in this capacity.

Körperwelten, also known as Body Worlds, are a series of exhibitions of dissected human and animal bodies that have been preserved through plastination, a process that removes water and fat from the tissue and replaces them with plastics. Gunther von Hagens invented the technique of plastination in 1977, began the first body donation program in the 1980s, and completed the first whole body plastinate in 1992 (“Gunther von Hagens”). In 1993, von Hagens founded his private company: the Institute for Plastination (“Gunther von Hagens”). The exhibition aspect of his work began in 1995, when he and curator Dr. Angelina Whalley created the first public Körperwelten exhibit in Japan (“Gunther von Hagens”). The Gubener Plastinate GmbH, a plastination laboratory, was opened in Guben, German in 2006, and it considered the world’s leading plastination research, development, and preparation facility (“Gunther von Hagens”). A series of permanent Körperwelten exhibitions were opened from 2015-2018, including those in Heidelberg and Berlin, Germany (“Gunther von Hagens”). Since its inception, variations of Körperwelten exhibits have been shown in over 150 cities around the world. Many of the exhibitions have special themes, which are influenced by current topics<sup>46</sup>.

The Körperwelten website broadly introduces the exhibits thusly:

Eine Reise unter die Haut: Die Ausstellung KÖRPERWELTEN nimmt den Besucher mit auf eine unvergessliche Reise in den menschlichen Körper. Sie ermöglicht Einblicke in dessen komplexen Aufbau und erklärt für jeden verständlich Funktionsweise und

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<sup>46</sup> The special themes available at the time that this thesis was written are Zyklus des Lebens (Cycle of Life), Anatomie des Glücks (Happiness), Vital (Vital), Eine Herzenssache (Heart), Am Puls der Zeit (Pulse), and RX – Körperwelten Kompakt (RX). More information about these themed exhibitions can be found at <https://koerperwelten.de/ausstellungen/menschen/>.

Zusammenspiel der einzelnen Systeme und Organe. Die Ausstellung geht aber noch viel weiter: Während wir in einen fremden Körper schauen, entdecken wir unseren eigenen auf komplett neue Weise. Dabei geht es den Ausstellungsmachern nicht nur um anatomische Wissensvermittlung. Vielmehr wollen sie den Besucher anregen, bewusst zu leben, stärker auf die eigene Gesundheit zu achten, die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des Körpers zu erkennen und über den Sinn des Lebens zu reflektieren. (“Eine Reise Unter Die Haut.”)

They argue that Körperwelten is a site of education, where the lay person can learn about anatomy in way that aims to inspire more self-awareness. The stated intentions of the exhibits are to strengthen one’s sense of health, show the potential and limitations of the body, and cause reflections on the meaning of life (“Philosophy”). This is very similar to Virchow’s alleged intention for his museum. Von Hagens’ credo expresses that as an anatomist, he is forced to reject the taboos and convictions people have regarding death and the dead. His wish for the visitors of Körperwelten exhibitions is that they find it to be a place of enlightenment and contemplation where they can transcend their fundamental beliefs about death (“Gunther von Hagens”).

### ***History and Controversy***

The Körperwelten exhibits have been internationally controversial and numerous legal, ethical, and moral concerns have been raised over the years since its inception.

An article in *The Guardian* (2002) addressed the opening of the Körperwelten exhibit in London, and the author referred to von Hagens as a shaman and showman similar to P.T. Barnum, except that the Körperwelten exhibit is his freakshow, who is “bent on shaking up a western society that he [von Hagens] regards as living in denial of its own corporeality and death” (Jeffries). By using phrases such as “the corpses start to arrive this morning”, “the flayed cadaver”, and “his body resembles a sashimied totem pole” (Jeffries), the author’s personal attitude regarding the exhibit is made abundantly clear. While von Hagens is quoted in this article saying about himself and his work that, “there are obviously aesthetic elements to what I am doing, but I am chiefly a scientist who wants to enlighten people by means of aesthetic shock rather than cruelty

shock" (Jeffries), the grotesque language frequently used by laypeople such as this article's author to describe exhibit exemplifies that the cruelty shock may in fact be the predominant take-away from this exhibit.

In 2004, "Händler des Todes" was published in the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. This article delved into von Hagens' background as well as provenience of the individuals used for his plastination business (Röbel and Wassermann). The plastinated individuals have a number of possible destinations and uses: they can be displayed in exhibits such as *Körperwelten*, used as spare parts to repair or replace body parts of individuals used for displays, or be sold for profit to outside institutions as either full-body individuals or body parts to be anatomical study material (Röbel and Wassermann). According to Röbel and Wassermann, there is reason to believe in a correlation between the provenience of the plastinated individuals and their final destinations. For example, the quality and state of the 'material' sourced from Dalian, China<sup>47</sup> was subpar in nature due to presence of "Fehler der Ware", which made them less ideal for display purposes compared to undamaged individuals (Röbel und Wassermann). These flaws were noted in detail and included descriptions such as "Einschussloch im Kopf" and "Bauchdecke kreuzweise aufgeschnitten" (Röbel und Wassermann), which allude to the nature of these individuals' deaths and where they were sourced from: both are typical characteristics of a state-sanctioned execution in China. Investigations by Amnesty International in 2001 registered over 2000 executions in China, and it was found that the prisoners were killed by either a shot to the head or to the neck at the base of the skull. Additionally, the investigation found that it was typical for organs to be illegally removed from executed individuals to be used for clinical transplants (Röbel und Wassermann). Von Hagens told reporters that taking and using these so-called "herrenlose Leichen" was customary in Germany until the 1980s ("German "Doctor" Denies Using Executed People in Work.") In November 2002, the surfacing of a body-trafficking scandal involving individuals from Siberia and Kyrgystan of unclear origin being exported to Germany caused von Hagens to backpedal and state that he knew nothing about any illegal practices (Röbel und Wassermann). This body connection allegedly ended after the trafficking scandals came to light (Ulaby). Concerns about the origins of the individuals were shared

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<sup>47</sup> At the time of this article, Dalian, China was the site of one of three "Fabriken der Toten" employed to plastinate individuals (Röbel und Wassermann).

internationally (Röber and Wasserman; Ulaby). While von Hagens frequently stated that he never paid for the “Rohstoff seiner Plastinate” (Röbel und Wassermann), maintaining that all the individuals were either donors or from medical institutions, the paper trail of emails, purchase confirmations, and discussions of possible sources of individuals indicate otherwise<sup>48</sup>.

In 2009, the Verwaltungsgericht in Köln placed restrictions on the exhibit “Körperwelten – eine Herzenssache”. For example, the full-body individuals in a sex position called “Schwebender Akt” was not allowed to be displayed, as it was deemed that it violated the dignity of the dead, which the Körperwelten organizers unsuccessfully attempted to counter by calling on the basic right to academic freedom (“Sex-Plastinat bleibt bei Kölner Körperwelten-Schau verboten”). Additionally, children under the age of 14 years old had to be accompanied by adults in order to visit the exhibit<sup>49</sup> (“Sex-Plastinat bleibt bei Kölner Körperwelten-Schau verboten”). Von Hagens called the ban inexplicable and further argued that the work includes four “consenting donors” (“Body of controversy”), and as such should be allowed to be displayed. Christoph Heckeley, a spokesperson for Köln’s archbishop said, “they [the individuals] are literally displayed as objects ... by doing so, voyeurism is given a veneer of scientific interest” (“Body of controversy”).

The establishment of a permanent Körperwelten exhibit in Berlin was met with significant contention from the districts of Berlin and religious organizations that lasted several years. In May 2014, the Bezirksamt Mitte von Berlin released a report that the planned exhibition of plastinated individuals in the Körperwelten museum went against mortuary and burial laws<sup>50</sup>, which state that corpses cannot be displayed publicly (“Körperwelten und rechtliche Rahmenbedingungen für die Zurschaustellung von Leichen und Leichenteilen.”). The consensus of the Bezirksamt Mitte von Berlin was that the individuals in the Körperwelten exhibit count as “Leichen” under the Bestattungsgesetz, which necessitates the following:

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<sup>48</sup> For more information and examples refer to “Händler des Todes” by Röbel and Wassermann (2004). In 2003, von Hagens made the following statement: “ich versichere für die Vergangenheit und Zukunft, das sämtliche Plastinate jetziger und zukünftiger Körperweltenausstellungen von legal erworbenen Leichen oder Präparaten stammen bzw. stammen werden”. Note that he explicitly refers to the Körperwelten exhibits, and excludes the anatomical study materials he and his company produce.

<sup>49</sup> Originally the decision stated children and youth under the age of 16 had to be accompanied by adults (“Sex-Plastinat bleibt bei Kölner Körperwelten-Schau verboten”; “Body of controversy.”).

<sup>50</sup> The statement outlines that hygiene and piety are considered in the creation of mortuary and burial laws (“Körperwelten und rechtliche Rahmenbedingungen für die Zurschaustellung von Leichen und Leichenteilen.”).

Wer mit Leichen umgeht, hat dabei die gebotene Ehrfurcht vor dem toten Menschen zu wahren. Grundrechtlich geschützt ... ist sowohl die postmortale Würde des Toten als auch das sittliche Empfinden der Lebenden. Die Menschenwürde wirkt über den Tod hinaus und begründet Schutzpflichten gegenüber Verstorbenen. (“Körperwelten und rechtliche Rahmenbedingungen für die Zurschaustellung von Leichen und Leichenteilen.”)<sup>51</sup>

Normally, it is required to apply for an exemption to the Bestattungsgesetz, but the Verwaltungsgericht Berlin decided in December 2014 this was not necessary for the Körperwelten exhibition (“Geplante Dauerausstellung darf stattfinden.”). This meant that the opening of the permanent exhibit by the Fernsehturm at the Alexanderplatz was allowed to proceed and open in February 2015. The deciding factor was that even if the plastinated individuals are still corpses according to the wording of the law, the legislature had not intended to include such plastinated corpses:

Das Berliner Gesetz ziele auf die schnelle Bestattung Verstorbener ab. Plastinate würden jedoch nicht verwesen und könnten damit auch nicht auf einem Friedhof bestattet werden. Eine Feuerbestattung scheidet ebenfalls aus, weil sie in den derzeit bestehenden Krematorien nicht eingeäschert werden könnten. Da die konservierten Körper somit einer Bestattung weder zugänglich noch hierfür vorgesehen sind, sei das Bestattungsgesetz gar nicht einschlägig. (“Geplante Dauerausstellung darf stattfinden.”)

However, this decision was reversed in December 2015, and it was decided by the Oberverwaltungsgericht that, “die plastinierten Ausstellungsstücke auch nach ihrer Herstellung unter den Begriff der Leiche im Sinne des Berliner Bestattungsgesetzes und unterliegen damit grundsätzlich dem im Gesetz geregelten Ausstellungsverbot” (Loy). This decision was praised by the representatives of religious communities in Berlin with statements such as, “Wir freuen uns, dass das Gericht die Menschenwürde höher bewertet als die Sensationslust” (Loy).

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<sup>51</sup> This press release can be reviewed for more insight into the legal framework for the Körperwelten exhibition in Berlin.

Additionally, at this time Brandenburg prohibited its schools from visiting the exhibition for ethical reasons (Loy). However, the reversal of the decision was also met with criticism, because the decision was deemed to have been made on moral and not legal grounds (Müller-Neuhof). Müller-Neuhof (2015) also added in his opinion piece about the decision that the judges are not “Sittenwächter” and concluded that von Hagens, “[mit seinen Leichen<sup>52</sup>] korrekter und handwerklich besser um[-geht] als diese Richter mit dem Gesetz”. The years-long legal battle between von Hagens and Berlin continued, and in 2018 it was announced that a settlement had been reached that would allow the Körperwelten museum to continue to exist at the Alexanderplatz. Among other things, this settlement requires the museum to announce the arrival of new plastinated individuals two-weeks in advance to the district office so that the district office can check the correctness of the individual’s provenience and the proof of the individual’s declaration of consent to be plastinated and displayed (““Körperwelten”-Ausstellung in Berlin darf bleiben”).

### ***Gunther von Hagens***

In interviews, von Hagens compared himself to the “Anatomiekünstler der Renaissance wie Leonardo da Vinci und Andreas Vesal”, seeing similarities not only in how they were misunderstood and disregarded by their contemporaries for their work with bodies, but also in their choice of hats (Röbel and Wassermann). This perceived similarity is also reflected in the stylistic choices for the Körperwelten exhibits, which frequently feature anatomical drawings and quotes by notable figures such as Goethe and Kant. Von Hagen’s black hat has become his trademark over the years, and it is meant to mirror the hat-wearing custom of anatomy artists of the Renaissance, which they wore even during autopsies (“Gunther von Hagens”). German magazine *Der Spiegel* gave him the nickname “Dr. Tod” in a publication in 2004 (Röbel and Wassermann); von Hagens has embraced the nickname, even featuring a large printout of the magazine cover in the lobby of the Guben Körperwelten exhibition.

In an essay titled “Gruselleichen, Gestalt-Plastinate und Bestattungszwang” (2022), von Hagens argues that the overarching goal of his work is the “Demokratisierung von Anatomie (226). He

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<sup>52</sup> Müller-Neuhof (2015) also states that he considers the plastinated individuals to be “Kunststofffiguren in Menschenform” instead of corpses.



also states that plastination has several cultural meanings: it presents an alternative option to traditional burial and mortuary practices, the presentation of aesthetically pleasing bodies can allow people to fully appreciate their own bodies, and it helps people come to terms with death (von Hagens 226). Additionally, in regard to spiritualism and religious beliefs, von Hagens writes that plastination can satisfy the desire for eternal life, which is something the church has monopolized up until now (von Hagens 227).

Regarding the morality and legality of his work, von Hagens expressed that, “für ihn ... ist eine Leiche kein sterblicher Überrest eines Menschen mehr, sobald sie in den Kreislauf anatomischer Wissenschaft eingespeist ist. Von da an sei es “ein Präparat”, eine Sache also, für deren “Organisation, Transport und Konservierung” Kosten anfallen, die selbstverständlich zu erstatten seien” (Röbel and Wassermann). In other words, these individuals are products for him from which he can profit as he or his organization see fit.

### **The Permanent Exhibits**

In this chapter, the permanent Körperwelten exhibits in Heidelberg, Berlin, and Guben are discussed<sup>53</sup>. The focus of this evaluation is on the design choices of these exhibits and several of the full-body plastinated individuals included in these exhibits. I have elected to refer to these individuals as individuals, instead of as “plastinates” as many of the placards and website do, because I believe it conveys more respect and better represents that these individuals were once living, breathing people that chose to donate their bodies to be plastinated. Photography for private use is allowed in these exhibits. Several examples with photos of the exhibit space and full-body individuals are included for each permanent exhibit. The utilized names are the same names that these individuals have in the exhibits, and they are written about in the order of appearance in their respective exhibits.

These spaces occupied by the exhibitions are distinct from one another. The Heidelberg location is a former swimming pool, which is still identifiable by the tiled walls and floors, and results in an open-floor plan. The Berlin location is in the Fernsehturm building, and the angular structure prevents the visitor from perceiving the entire exhibit at once. The Guben location is a former

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<sup>53</sup> These are the only permanent Körperwelten exhibits in Germany currently.

factory that has been repurposed as a museum, which gives the effect that the exhibit is the factory line, and the visitor can see through the central corridor from one end of the museum to the other. For all three, is it evident as a visitor that the exhibitions are simply occupying the space that was originally intended for something different with slight modifications made here or there<sup>54</sup>. All three exhibits are near large public transportation stops, which makes them as accessible as possible to visitors and increases the likelihood of visitors stopping at the exhibitions spontaneously. Additionally, signage for the Körperwelten exhibits is placed in visible locations such as the main train stations of each city to attract attention.

Two signs are present at the beginning of Körperwelten Heidelberg and Berlin exhibitions: the first outlines the photography rules, and the second sign states that the anatomical specimens on displays are authentic, human remains of donors wishing for their bodies to be preserved and made available for study to the public and physicians alike. Additionally, this sign states that identifying information of the donors has been removed. These signs were not present at the Guben location. A free audio-guide is available to visitors at the Heidelberg and Berlin locations in either English or German, which is accessible via QR code. Most of all displays and signs at the three locations are multilingual, with the addition of Polish signage in Guben.

There is significant variation in the display style of the full-body individuals. A glass case to create a barrier between the visitor and the individual on display is occasionally present, and there is no discernable reason for its presence or absence based on the exhibits. Based on conversation with employees of the exhibits, the glass case is present to prevent visitors from touching the individuals. However, the un-encased individuals are still easily within reaching distance of the average visitor, making this reasoning confusing. Adding to the confusion is the seemingly random presence or absence of signage regarding not touching the individuals on display that do not have a barrier around them. This was particularly noticeable in the Guben exhibition in the Lernwerkstatt portion of the museum. The need for direction is compounded by the large number of interactive exhibits (in all three exhibitions) that actively encourage visitors

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<sup>54</sup> An example of this experience is visiting a pop-up Halloween store in the United States that appears seemingly overnight in an empty store, stays for 1-2 months and installs temporary shelves, and disappears again just a quickly after Halloween is over.

to physically engage with the material. Another characteristic of all the exhibitions was the sparse presence of labels for anatomical structures. For exhibitions whose proposed purpose is education, it would follow that anatomical labels to help instruct and guide the viewer would be plentiful. Instead, the labels and audio guides offer only superficial instruction about the anatomy, and the placards and audio guide often veer into philosophical reflections of anatomy and life. No guides were present in any of the exhibition spaces<sup>55</sup>, which also influences the efficacy of any educational pursuit of the exhibit.

### **Heidelberg**

The theme of this location's exhibit is "Anatomie des Glücks". Happiness is defined as a series of electrochemical reactions in the brain in response to certain stimuli, and the evolutionary purpose of experiencing happiness is to improve our chances of survival and reproduction (*Körperwelten*. Heidelberg.). The Heidelberg *Körperwelten* exhibit is housed in the space of a former indoor swimming pool and is arranged across two floors. Upon entering, visitors see two signs about photography rules and a statement about the donors. The visitor accesses the exhibits via a staircase that leads to a central platform encased by a see-through mesh fabric, through which the rest of the exhibit hall can be seen. The tour of the exhibit hall progresses from the balcony walkway on the outer edge of the hall to the first floor, where the space has been divided to guide the visitor towards the exit. Cases of human body parts and full-body individuals are located throughout the entire exhibit. Aside from the sheer paneling around the first space (Figure 4.1)<sup>56</sup>, there is only limited visible separation between displays and exhibit sections. The wall erected in the lower section of the hall seem to serve primarily to delineate the direction of walking through the hall instead of functioning as a privacy divider. This is apparent due to the lack of coverage from the top, meaning that the entire hall can be viewed without obstruction from the elevated walkway of the second floor (Figures 4.2 and 4.3)<sup>57</sup>. In addition to the standard anatomy placard, some of the exhibits have added "Glück"-specific signs in red that further associate the exhibit with the overall theme.

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<sup>55</sup> Unless we are to count the anatomists working in the labs at the Guben location, and even if we are, their main priority is the preparation of new individuals, not the education of the visitor.

<sup>56</sup> This photo was taken by Helen Martin on May 26, 2023 at the Heidelberg *Körperwelten* Exhibit

<sup>57</sup> These photos were taken by Helen Martin on May 26, 2023 at the Heidelberg *Körperwelten* Exhibit.



Figure 4.1. View from balcony of exhibit space and central mesh cube.



Figure 4.2 First view from balcony of lower level.



Figure 4.3. Second view from balcony of lower level.

The following examples are just a few of the full-body individuals included in the exhibit: The Angel (Figure 4.4), Figure Skating Pair with Woman Lifted (Figure 4.5), The Pacifier (Figure 4.6), and Reclining Pregnant Woman (Figure 4.7)<sup>58</sup>. Other full-body individuals have not been included in this analysis, namely The Archer<sup>59</sup> and The Skateboarder<sup>60</sup>. For all these individuals, the lips, eyebrows, eyelashes, nose tip, ears, bellybutton, and nipples have not been removed, while the surrounding skin, fascia, and fat has been removed.

### ***The Angel***

Encased behind glass with a small hole at the top for her hand, the woman stands on the tips of her toes while reaching for the sky with her left hand. The upper back has been opened and moved to the sides to simulate wings. Her hair has been tied into a bun on the back of her head. The given purpose of this posing is to allow for simultaneous viewing of muscles from the front and internal organs from the back. The focus of the placard is the adrenal glands, as they influence energy and stress response through the synthesis of hormones. The accompanying red sign references the expression “Stress verleiht Flügel”, saying while everyone experiences stress, everyone deals with it differently. The advice is that a moderate level of stress is beneficial for the individual (*Körperwelten*. Heidelberg).

### ***Figure Skating Pair with Woman Lifted***

This display features a man, whose feet are on ice skate blades, lifting a woman above his head with one arm. The given purpose of this pose is to show the muscles just below the skin for the woman, and the deeper body muscles and heart for the man. Large portions of the man’s

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<sup>58</sup> These photos were taken by Helen Martin on May 26, 2023 at the Heidelberg Körperwelten Exhibit.

<sup>59</sup> This is the first posed full-body individual each visitor encounters in this exhibit. She is shown in kneeling squat position with the left leg extended, and she is holding a bow as if she had just released an arrow. Her skull has been cut open from the brain has been placed on top of her head. There is no glass case or other barrier between her and the viewer, but a small sign is placed at her feet that indicates visitor should not touch her. The given purpose of her pose is to show muscle tension in the upper body and reveal the anatomy of the joints in the lower body. The separate, “Glück” themed signage warns visitors away from being overzealous in the pursuit of happiness, as constantly striving for it – or “hunting it down” – may chase it away (*Körperwelten*. Heidelberg.).

<sup>60</sup> This is the first full-body individual the visitor encounters on the lower level of the exhibit hall. The man is posed as doing an invert on a skateboard, balancing on his left hand. The given purpose of this pose is to demonstrate the anatomy of the gluteal muscles and the sciatic nerve. The placard discusses movement, the coordination of muscles, sensory input, and body stabilization (*Körperwelten*. Heidelberg.). Various muscles and ligaments are severed and pulled aside to demonstrate the anatomy underneath, including the gluteal muscles. He is exhibited in a glass case.



Figure 4.4. "The Angel"





Figure 4.5. “Figure Skating Pair with Woman Lifted”



Figure 4.6. "The Pacifier"



Figure 4.7. "Reclining Pregnant Woman"

musculature, internal organs, and abdominal and thoracic walls have also been removed. The placard discusses the proportion of muscles relative to the rest of the body for men and women, as well as the lung capacity of people with ordinary fitness levels compared to professional athletes (*Körperwelten*. Heidelberg.). There are no barriers between the display and the viewer, and they are placed in a spot in the exhibit hall that is visible from the entire upper level and half of the lower level.

### ***The Pacifier***

The woman used for this exhibit is kneeling while cupping blood vessels in her hands that have been configured into the shape of two doves. Certain muscles and ligaments of the arms and legs have been severed, and the front wall of her abdominal cavity has been removed. The given purpose of this exhibit is to demonstrate the arteries of the intestinal tract. The red sign discusses the “Dictatorship of Happiness”, and how freedom and peace are valuable for enabling us to pursue happiness. Additionally, it states that governments cannot make happiness happen for their citizens, and that the goal for policy makers should instead be to create a foundation on which happiness can unfold (*Körperwelten*. Heidelberg.). She is inside of a glass case, which is in an alcove under the balcony walk-way.

### ***Reclining Pregnant Woman***

This is the final full-body individual displayed in this exhibit. It comprises a woman who is eight months pregnant. The fetus and placenta have been left in-situ. She has been posed to lay on her side, propped up on her right arm with her left arm and hand raised above her and resting against her head. She is inside of a glass case. To her right and left, plastinate fetuses of varying ages are displayed in individual glass cases. The sign for her exhibit explains how the mother’s organ systems adjust to the changes her body is undergoing throughout pregnancy. The red “Glück” sign discusses “Our Emotional Heritage” and how the fetus responds to external stimuli and emotional inputs (*Körperwelten*. Heidelberg.).

## **Berlin**

This Körperwelten exhibit is in a central building on the Alexanderplatz. Large signs about the “Menschen Museum” are visible on all sides of the angular building, guiding visitors to the

entrance of the exhibit. The entrance to the exhibit hall is located immediately to the right of the ticket counter, and the space is divided by red cord, which functions as a division in a symbolic sense more so than in a literal sense, because it is easily possible to look through it into the exhibit itself prior to entering the space (Figure 4.8)<sup>61</sup>. As human remains are located in the first part of the exhibit hall, this means that they can be viewed without any preface or buffer. Upon entering, the visitor is faced with mirrors and quotes on the walls about seeing and knowing oneself (Figures 4.9 and 4.10)<sup>62</sup>. Mirrors and red cord are stylistic choices that continue throughout the entire exhibit, thus creating an environment in which the viewer is frequently observing both an individual on display as well as themselves simultaneously.

The layout of this space differs from the Heidelberg location, as the angular walls divide the space into smaller segments, and the addition of wall partitions creates private alcoves as well. The only area surrounded by see-through mesh fabric is the area dedicated to the fetuses (Figure 4.11). Cases of human body parts and full-body individuals are located throughout the entire exhibit. The smaller displays of individual body parts are very similar if not identical to the displays in the Heidelberg exhibit; however, the full-body individuals are unique. This permanent exhibit does not have an overarching theme like the exhibit in Heidelberg, however certain portions of the Heidelberg exhibit are duplicated, such as the video documenting the plastination process, the “Tyranny of Choice” chocolate display, which discusses unhappiness as a result of being presented with too many choices, the “DNA of Happiness”, which presents the percentage breakdown of what contributes to our happiness, as well as the “Long Goodbye” section, which is about Alzheimer’s disease and dementia. Unlike the Heidelberg exhibit, the Berlin exhibit features significantly more animal plastinates and incorporates more interactive exhibits, such as an anatomical heart educational puzzle which asks the visitor to “help mend a broken heart” (*Körperwelten*. Berlin.). a CPR practice station, tensegrity models of the spine and pelvis, and a fascia roller to test your feet’s fascia.

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<sup>61</sup> This photo was taken by Helen Martin on May 31, 2023 at the Berlin Körperwelten Exhibit.

<sup>62</sup> These photos were taken by Helen Martin on May 31, 2023 at the Berlin Körperwelten Exhibit.



Figure 4.8. View from the ticket counter



Figure 4.9. View inside the Berlin exhibition



Figure 4.10. Mirrors in the Berlin exhibition





Figure 4.11. View of mesh divider

The following examples are just a few of the full-body individuals included in the exhibit: Ligament Body (Figure 4.12) and Facing Death (Figure 4.13)<sup>63</sup>. Other full-body individuals have not been included in this analysis, such as Totally Expanded Fisherman<sup>64</sup> and FR:EIA<sup>65</sup>. For most these individuals, the lips, eyebrows, eyelashes, nose tip, ears, bellybutton, and nipples have not been removed, while the surrounding skin, fascia, and fat has been removed.

### ***Ligament Body***

This is one of the first full-body individual that the visitor encounters in the exhibit. The individual is sitting in a cross-legged position and looking at a smart phone that they are holding in their left hand. The given purpose of this pose is to demonstrate the body's joints. The placard discusses joint anatomy, joint functions, cartilage, and joint deterioration (*Körperwelten*. Berlin.). There is a glass case around the individual.

### ***Facing Death***

Two individuals are posed together with the first leaning back against the second. Both individuals have been prepared differently: the first has an opened thorax and abdominal cavity, revealing his heart and other internal organs. His eyebrows, eyelashes, nose tip, ears, and lips have not been removed. Most of the muscles and ligaments have been removed from the second individual, as well as their eyebrows, lips, eyelashes, and ears. Skin, fascia, fat, and upper half of the skull have been removed for both Individuals. The give purpose for this pose is to show the heart and lungs in-situ. The placard discusses death as a process, how human existence should not be taken for granted, and how life is most intensely experienced when we are nearing death

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<sup>63</sup> These photos were taken by Helen Martin on May 31, 2023 at the Berlin Körperwelten Exhibit.

<sup>64</sup> This individual is located at the back of the first room of the exhibit. The man is posed as a fisherman with a fishing reel. The spaces between his muscles, organs, and bones are artificially expanded, creating the illusion of an 'exploded' body. The given purpose of this pose is to allow for the organs to be viewed from all angles (*Körperwelten*. Berlin.). The placard states that this type of preparation was made possible through plastination, which hardens the tissue and gives it stability. Other than a waist high glass wall, there is no barrier between the viewer and the man. However, a no-touching sign is present.

<sup>65</sup> FR:EIA stands for "Fascia Revealed: Educating Interconnected Anatomy" (*Körperwelten*. Berlin.). This individual is in a glass case in a separate space dedicated to demonstrating fascia. The woman is posed as a dancer with her toes pointed and right arm extended to the ground. The placard describes how this is the first full-body anatomical specimen in the world that concentrates on the various fasciae in the body and how these are found everywhere in the body (*Körperwelten*. Berlin.). FR:EIA is the result of a cooperation between Gunther von Hagens, the creator of Körperwelten, and experts of the Internazionali Faszien Gesellschaft. This project took three years to complete.



Figure 4.12. “Ligament Body”



Figure 4.13. "Facing Death"

(*Körperwelten*. Berlin.). These are the last human full-body individuals displayed in this exhibit. This display is also paired with a placard that asks the visitor to reflect on death and think about what regrets they may have at the end of their lives; example responses of regrets are provided.

## **Guben**

The Plastinarium, both a *Körperwelten* exhibit and a fully operational plastination laboratory, is in a former cloth factory in Guben, Germany. The foyer of the exhibit is lined with a detailed timeline of the Plastinarium's history from its opening in 2006 to 2021, and the space is filled with glass cases of *Körperwelten* merchandise. The exhibit itself stretches across the entire lower level of the factory building as one, long hallway that has been subdivided into smaller sectors: Anatomiegeschichte, Körperspende, Plastinationswerkstatt, von Hagens Galerie, and Lernwerkstatt. Unlike the exhibits in Berlin and Heidelberg, this exhibit highlights the development of the plastination process and the current practices. Additionally, in the second room there is a space dedicated to how people across the world deal with death and choose to confront it. The plastination workshop is located midway through the entire exhibit, and visitors must pass through this room to progress to the rest of the displays. At the front of this sector there is a poster advertising a public autopsy from 2002 by Prof. Gunther von Hagens; seeing as visitors are encouraged to not only step into the separate glass-walled dissection lab to observe, but also speak with the working anatomists, it feels as though this public autopsy has been brought back to life again. This laboratory space is filled with ongoing plastination projects, and the process is outline step-by-step as visitors walk through the room (Figures 4.15 and 4.15)<sup>66</sup>. Signs in this space discourage photography in the plastination workshop to protect the privacy of the employees, not to preserve the privacy of the donors. Visitors can also see finished study models, which have been tagged with von Hagens' identifiable logo: the silhouette of his head's profile wearing a hat. The exhibit's proposed purpose of anatomical education becomes muddled in the von Hagens Galerie section, as personal objects such as von Hagen's car and motorcycle are included. This area is also predominantly filled with animal plastinates. The Lernwerkstatt is an abbreviated version of the other permanent exhibits (Figures 4.16 and 4.17)<sup>67</sup>. Cases of human body parts and full-body individuals are located throughout the rest of this hall. The majority of

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<sup>66</sup> These photos were taken by Helen Martin on June 3, 2023 at the Guben *Körperwelten* Exhibit.

<sup>67</sup> These photos were taken by Helen Martin on June 3, 2023 at the Guben *Körperwelten* Exhibit.



Figure 4.14. Plastination workshop showing the dissection lab



Figure 4.15. Plastination workshop showing the positioning lab



Figure 4.16. Interactive learning station in the Lernwerkstatt



Figure 4.17. The Lernwerkstatt



these smaller displays are the same as in the other permanent exhibits, however the full-body individuals are unique. This exhibit has the largest number of interactive stations of the three permanent exhibits, and these encourage the visitors to use the Lernwerkstatt as a hands-on lab space. Smaller rooms in this exhibit house the fetus exhibit, a photo gallery of elderly people from around the world offering advice about living a healthy and fulfilling life while aging (including von Hagens' own father), and the exhibit about sexual intercourse, among other things.

The following examples are just a few of the full-body individuals included in the exhibit: Posed Whole-Body Specimen of Body Slices (Figure 4.18), Mystic Plastinate (2003) (Figure 4.19) and Sitting Nude (Figure 4.20)<sup>68</sup>. Other full-body individuals have not been included in this analysis, such as Longitudinally Expanded Body (1996)<sup>69</sup> and Centaur (2011)<sup>70</sup>. For most these individuals, the lips, eyebrows, eyelashes, nose tip, ears, bellybutton, and nipples have not been removed, while the surrounding skin, fascia, and fat has been removed.

### ***Posed Whole-Body Specimen of Body Slices***

This individual is located at the front of the “Plastinationswerkstatt”. ‘Slices’ of tissue, including skin, muscle, and fat, have been removed, creating a ringed mummy-effect. The given purpose for this preparation choice was to demonstrate the compactness of tissue and proximity of anatomical structures to each other (*Körperwelten*. Guben.). There is no barrier or no-touching sign present.

### ***Mystic Plastinate (2003)***

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<sup>68</sup> These photos were taken by Helen Martin on June 3, 2023 at the Guben Körperwelten Exhibit.

<sup>69</sup> The man's body is posed in a crouched position with his arms behind his back. From his abdomen up, the body has been expanded upwards in layers to showcase the internal anatomical structures. The given purpose of this pose is to facilitate viewing (*Körperwelten*. Guben.). The muscles and ligaments of his pelvis, legs, and arms have been severed and spread apart around the bones. According to the placard, this expansion could be done in any direction, and that plastination makes it possible by providing the individual body parts with the necessary stability (*Körperwelten*. Guben.). There is no barrier around this individual and there is not any no-touching sign present.

<sup>70</sup> For this display, the upper body of a human has been placed atop the body of a horse to resemble a centaur. The individual is carrying a strung bow and arrow. Everything except for the blood vessels has been removed. The individual's eyes or fake eyes have been kept in-situ. The placard details the mythology of centaurs, but does not give any justification in terms of anatomical significance for the pose (*Körperwelten*. Guben.). The only barrier is a crowd control stanchion.



Figure 4.18. "Posed Whole-Body Specimen of Body Slices"



Figure 4.19 "Mystic Plastinate (2003)"



Figure 4.20. "Sitting Nude"

This individual is located at the very end of the long hall of this exhibit. Posed like a witch riding a broom, the man's muscles have been splayed away from his body in a way that resembled a lionfish. The skin of his face has been peeled over the top of his head, and his internal organs have been removed. The individual is holding his tongue, larynx, and lungs in his hands. The given purpose of this pose is to show the muscles' attachment sites to the bone, allow for the viewing of the facial muscles from the inside, and to encourage an atmosphere of imagination and humor for the viewer to reflect on their own transience (*Körperwelten*. Guben.). The individual is suspended from the ceiling by a set of strings, and a couch has been placed underneath him for the exhibit's visitors to sit on and look at the individual from below. There are no barriers around the individual, however a statement on the placard indicates visitors should refrain from touching the individual.

### ***Sitting Nude***

These individuals are in a separate small room at the end of the exhibit hall. A sign at the door advises that anyone under the age of 16 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian, but there is also no one to restrict access or enforce this policy. A man and woman are posed on a stool mid-coitus with the woman sitting on the man's lap with his arms around her and his head resting on her chest. The woman is wearing knee-high boots and earrings and the man has a black mohawk. A picture on the wall indicates that this is a secondary styling of these individuals, because in the original the woman was also wearing a bra and a hat, and the man was wearing a bowtie. Other photos depict two additional sets of individuals posed similarly. The placard describes sex, ejaculation, impregnation, and orgasms. Furthermore, it discusses sex as a taboo despite it being an essential component of our humanness; this can be combated with objectively learning about the anatomy of sex and sexual science (*Körperwelten*. Guben.). There are no barriers around the individuals, nor are there no-touching signs present. They cannot be viewed by the visitor unless the visitor elects to enter the small room, however aside from the name, it is not clear at the entrance what visitors will see inside the room.

## Body Donation

The body donation for plastination program reports 20,008 registered body donors worldwide as of December 2022, the majority of which are from Germany (17,957) (“Body Donation.”). The information packet outlines the history of creating anatomical specimens, the plastination process, the Institute for Plastination and the Gubener Plastinate GmbH, the Body Worlds and Menschen Museum exhibits, and the body donation program.

The following represent some of the yes/no questions from the Donor’s Consent form for the Institut of Plastination:

- “I agree that my plastinated body can be used for the medical enlightenment of laypeople and, to this end, exhibited in public (e.g. in a museum or in the BODY WORLDS exhibitions)” (“Consent Form of the Donor.”)
- “The body donor’s own identity is altered during the anatomical preparation. The process gives both the face and the body a new appearance on the basis of their internal anatomy. Therefore, a plastinated specimen could not be recognized from its external features – that would require complex reconstruction techniques. I request that my donated body and the permanent specimens prepared from it remain anonymous. (Checking ‘Yes’ means that, e.g., in a museum exhibit, the donor’s name, age, or origin may not be cited.)” (“Consent Form of the Donor.”)
- “I agree for my body to be used for any purpose, provided it serves medical research or training, or offer medical treatment training for doctors and medical institutions. This question becomes important in the event that decomposition of the body is too advanced for plastination to be possible, but it can still be used as a skeleton, wet specimen, or vessel configuration. It is also useful for specialist doctors and medical students to be able to practice on dead bodies during training before they operate on living ones.” (“Consent Form of the Donor.”)

- “Plastinated specimens, especially whole-body plastinates, are occasionally interpreted as anatomical works of art. Hence, I agree that my body may be transformed into an anatomical work of art.” (“Consent Form of the Donor.”)

It is clear from these questions, as well as the statements on the donation website (“Questions & Answers.”), while donors can determine broadly how and where their remains will be used in the context of Body Worlds and adjacent programs, the staff cannot guarantee the implementation of individually expressed wishes issued by the donors beyond what is outlined in the packet. This includes the inclusion or exclusion of certain poses. The staff also assures that the plastinated individuals will be unrecognizable and thus remain anonymous as the skin and subcutaneous fatty tissue is removed (“Questions & Answers.”). However, there is no explanation as to why identifying facial features such as eyebrows, lips, noses, and ears are not removed for the majority of individuals included in the Körperwelten exhibits. Having spoken with an anatomist who was actively working in the plastination laboratory and could offer no specific reason for this choice beyond that it was what had been assigned for the preparation work, I am led to believe that this is merely a stylistic choice. This begs the question: what is the priority at this point? Education or morbid fascination? The same should be said for the choice of poses, which fall more in line with artistic liberty than anatomical instruction. Furthermore, with more controversial poses such as Sitting Nude, Reclining Pregnant Woman, and Mystic Plastinate it is necessary to consider whether donors should be allowed to explicitly consent to or opt out of being styled into such positions<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> The 2016/2017 Ethical Review Update for the California Science Center reveals that body donors did consent to be posed in sex positions for public display (“Gunther von Hagens’ *Body Worlds: Pulse* Summary of Ethical Review Update 2016/2017”).

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

The purpose of my thesis was to examine Körperwelten within the context of German history and current cultural, social, political, and ethical standards. By placing Körperwelten in a colonial context, we can better understand how these exhibits are able to exist in the present-day. It is imperative to analyze this foundation and not simply assume or conclude that Körperwelten was merely the result of von Hagens' morbid entrepreneurship. Instead, we must trace the thread through history and understand that nothing – including Körperwelten – occurs in a vacuum:

The task of a reader of war literature, it has seemed to me, must therefore be to work through the construction process that generated pertinent facts of a particular kind to thereby remove the attributes of timelessness, objectivity, and monumentality with which many historians and literary critics of the war and interwar periods clothed their arguments. (Natter 33)

Whether war literature or any other phenomenon – such as the collections built by physical anthropologists in Germany – that is born from the intersection of cultural, social, and political contexts, and ethics, it is our duty to unpack its history and not blindly assume that we fully understand the circumstances of their creation. The term “anthropologisches Material” is a

Distanzierung bzw. Verschlechterung dessen, um was es tatsächlich ging: um Abbildungen von Menschen, um das Sammeln von menschlichen Skeletten und Schädeln, von unfassenden Vermessungs- und Beobachtungsdaten von einzelnen Körperteilen wie Haut-, Haar-, Augenfarben, einer sogenannten Nasenhöhe und -breite oder eines sogenannten kubischen Inhalts – letztendlich also ging es um eine Verfügbarmachung und Aneignung des menschlichen Körpers. (Laukötter 27)

The logic of these researchers was that more knowledge could be obtained by collecting more anthropological material, resulting in the exponential growth of collections in Germany, both for private use and display. In other words, this mindset created a “Sammelwut”. Natter (1999)



presents an argument about the creation of meaning, its interpretation, and its maintenance. The context of German colonialism and imperialism gave meaning to the creation and expansion of collections: “Diese Körpersammlungen konkretisierten biologische Ansätze. In diesem Sinne wurden Körper und Knochen zu “epistemischen Objekten” (Laukötter 41). This context and socio-political and cultural approval were used as justification for these endeavors, and this history continues to impact exhibitions today. German colonialism, Völkerschauen, the creation of physical anthropology, the curation of collections of human remains, and the historical process of “othering”, among other things, are the foundation for exhibitions like Körperwelten, and they give meaning to scientific entitlement to the human body.

The sensitive nature of the subject means that delineating definitions such as of human remains and “sensible Sammlungen” by organizations like the Deutscher Museumsbund and the International Committee of Museums is complex, and these definitions are continuously being reassessed and renegotiated. This is an example of critical reflection of the past and how it manifests in the present. Per the Deutscher Museumsbund’s current definition of what qualifies as human remains, the individuals included in the Körperwelten exhibits are without a doubt included in this definition and are much more than just an object<sup>72</sup>. Museum exhibitions train visitors in a specific type of viewing (Laukötter 25). This ‘training’ is a consequence of curation and design choices, the presence or lack of guidance offered to visitors, and the promoted purpose of the exhibition. Just as was the case with Völkerschauen, the permanent Körperwelten exhibitions train visitors to “other” the individuals on display and see them as less-than-human.

I have traced the thread of scientific entitlement from German colonialism and imperialism to the Körperwelten exhibits. The dehumanization and othering in which this scientific entitlement is rooted was utilized by German anthropologists and the Nazis. Since the opening of the first Körperwelten exhibits, von Hagens’ personal familial connections to Nazis have been revealed. Before Guben, the original location von Hagens had selected for his Plastinarium was Sieniawa, Poland. Concerns were raised by Polish citizens because the plastinated individuals reminded

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<sup>72</sup> Recall von Hagens’ comment: “für ihn [von Hagens]... ist eine Leiche kein sterblicher Überrest eines Menschen mehr, sobald sie in den Kreislauf anatomischer Wissenschaft eingespeist ist. Von da an sein es “ein Präparat”, eine Sache also, für deren “Organisation, Transport und Konservierung” Kosten anfallen, die selbstverständlich zu erstatten seien” (Röbel and Wassermann)

them of “Seifen und andere Produkte, die die Nazis in Konzentrationslagern aus menschlichen Leichen herstellten” and that Sieniawa should not allow this history to be repeated (“Dr. Tod auf Reisen”). Gerhard Liebchen, von Hagens’ father, was working to help set up the laboratory and warehouse in Sieniawa, when it was brought to light by Polish journalists in 2005 that Liebchen had been a SS-Officer who had even been involved in the creation of deportation lists for concentration camps (“Dr. Tod auf Reisen”). In response to the comparisons being made between himself and the Nazis, von Hagens said the following:

Als nachgeborener Deutscher schäme ich mich für die Unmenschlichkeit, für den millionenfachen Mord der in deutschem Namen begangen wurde. Ich verneige mich vor den Opfern und versuche darüber hinaus das Erstarken neonazistischen Gedankenguts zu verhindern. (“Dr. Tod auf Reisen”)

Based on the Körperwelten exhibits, the way the individuals are prepared and posed, and the way the exhibits train visitors to view the individuals, the very existence of these exhibits indicates a severe lack of reflection on von Hagens’ part as the vision he employed in the development of Körperwelten originates in the German colonies, was shaped by German anthropologists, and deployed by the Nazis. Ironically, he is perpetuating the very ideas he claims to want to distance himself from while simultaneously happily adopting the moniker “Dr. Tod” for himself. Moreover, this very close connection to Nazis and their legacy underlines the temporal distance (or lack thereof) between Körperwelten and the history its existence is rooted in. The discomfort and wariness expressed by the Polish citizens and others regarding Körperwelten are a result of this ‘history’ still having a heartbeat.

### **Preservation of Dignity**

The Körperwelten Exhibitions inspire a variety of reactions in visitors. Some people walk away with a greater appreciation for the human body and others find the displays distasteful and macabre. For example, the pregnant woman with her fetus has prompted reactions on both ends of the spectrum, making comments such as, “Das Bild der Schwangeren geht mir nicht aus dem Kopf. Ich bin Mutter von vier Kindern. Das Wunder der Schwangerschaft aber habe ich erst vor dieser Figur begriffen,” and, “Eine plastinierte Schwangere in Pin-up-Pose kommt Kerstin

geschmacklos vor” (von Hagens 218). For this individual in particular, the intention for her pose was to make her seem lifelike while optimizing the visibility of the fetus and “der doppelten Todestragödie Ludwig werden” (von Hagens 218).

Making the poses of the plastinated individuals aesthetically pleasing is a priority for the Körperwelten organization, since the exhibitions are “primarily about life, not about dead bodies” (“Body Donation for Plastination”). Similarly, the “real-life” poses are meant to make the exhibition more accessible for visitors, by allowing them to identify with the individuals being displayed. Von Hagens expands on this:

Die Illusion der Verlebendigung lässt sich durch eine markante Gesichtspräparation, eine emotionale Pose, lebensstypisches Beiwerk wie Accessoires, Kleidung, Werkzeuge und durch das Schaffen von den dem Betrachter vertrauten Lebensräumen wie den Arbeitsplatz oder die freie Natur noch verstärken. (von Hagens 216)

In the “Questions and Answers” section of the Körperwelten website, they address the question “Doesn’t the public display of human preparations in Body Worlds violate human dignity?” (2023). The response outlines how the corpse is not just any object, but the remains of a human being and as such they are respected (“Questions and Answers”). In order to accomplish this, it is ensured that, “exhibits always correspond to their human nature ... the bodies or their individual parts would never be shown in a dehumanized form (e.g. a leg would never become a golf club and a bladder would never become a flower vase)” (“Questions and Answers”).

Another method for ensuring the human dignity of the individuals on display is preserved is by creating an environment in which visitor behavior consists of respectful interactions between the visitor and the exhibits. As such, the Körperwelten exhibits are, “designed to be noticeably calm, serious, and disciplined” (“Questions and Answers”). In the packet that outlines the body donation process and plastination for future donors, it is described that:

... visitors are notably quiet, serious, and disciplined throughout their visits, showing behavior rather usual in today’s society ... the exhibitions are educational places, but the

reverential contemplation of the visitors also makes them virtually sacred sites with a very special aura (“Body Donation for Plastination” 29).

Körperwelten was featured at the California Science Center several times over the past two decades<sup>73</sup>. Overall, the California Science Center decided that as long as the plastinated individuals were displayed in the context of science, health, and medical education, and an atmosphere of respect was fostered by means of curatorial decisions, the exhibit had the potential to be a powerful education experience (“Body Worlds: An Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies: Summary of Ethical Review”; “Gunther von Hagens’ *Body Worlds: Pulse* Summary of Ethical Review Update 2016/2017”). Before the opening of the exhibit an ethical review was performed to ensure there was sufficient donor informed consent, evaluate the educational value of the exhibit, and investigate the respectful treatment of human remains (“Body Worlds: An Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies: Summary of Ethical Review”; “Gunther von Hagens’ *Body Worlds: Pulse* Summary of Ethical Review Update 2016/2017”). The California Science Center made curatorial decisions based on the suggestions of the ethics advisors, including among other things the inclusion of text panels next to all full-body individuals that feature explanations for the pose<sup>74</sup>, the placement of the reproductive section of the exhibit in a separate, clearly marked area with age-restricted access<sup>75</sup>, guidance for parents for discussing the exhibit with their children, the informing of visitors about the exhibit prior to admission<sup>76</sup>, and the availability of time and space for guests to acclimate to the exhibit<sup>77</sup>. Another decision reached for these exhibits was that the non-viable fetuses would not be featured, “based on judgement that they did not meet the standards outlined in the Ethical Review, specifically that their science educational value did not outweigh community and

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<sup>73</sup> In 2004, 2005, 2008, and 2017 (“Body Worlds: An Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies: Summary of Ethical Review”; “Gunther von Hagens’ *Body Worlds: Pulse* Summary of Ethical Review Update 2016/2017”)

<sup>74</sup> The text panels should explain how the pose illustrates a particular anatomical or physiological structure (“Body Worlds: An Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies: Summary of Ethical Review”)

<sup>75</sup> Visitors ages 17 and younger need a parent or guardian to enter (“Gunther von Hagens’ *Body Worlds: Pulse* Summary of Ethical Review Update 2016/2017”)

<sup>76</sup> Informed about the organization of exhibit, the purpose of exhibit, the reasons for poses, the authenticity of the individuals, the suggestions of the ethics review (“Body Worlds: An Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies: Summary of Ethical Review”)

<sup>77</sup> For example, early spaces of the museum should not show full-body plastinated individuals, the exhibit should start with historical drawings or skeletons, and the exhibit should be designed in a way that slows viewers down and fosters a reverential and respectful mood (“Body Worlds: An Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies: Summary of Ethical Review”)

cultural sensitivities” (“Body Worlds: An Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies: Summary of Ethical Review”).

It is to the detriment of the Körperwelten exhibits that these suggestions were not implemented at all exhibition locations. For example, in Heidelberg, visitors are not provided with sufficient acclimation time and are quickly without warning confronted with the first full-body individual upon entering the exhibition due to the layout of the space. No staff or guides were present in the exhibit space to provide guidance or answer questions, leaving guests, including entire school groups, to their own devices. The poses are often only loosely justified, with some description panels completely leaving out any hint of educational purpose behind a pose, leaving the visitor with the impression that the pose was merely the result of a design whim – much like making a leg into a golf club or a bladder into flower vase. The supposed reverent atmosphere the Körperwelten exhibitions are intended to foster are juxtaposed by design choices<sup>78</sup>, questionable poses, and patronizing philosophizing about life that trivializes the fact that the individuals on display are real human beings. The invention of new creatures with human bodies, (“Mystic Plastinate (2003)”), the recreation of mythical creatures (“Centaur (2011)”), the creation of an artistic metaphor for peace (“The Pacifier”), and the re-stigmatization of sex by using tasteless props (“Sitting Nude”) – among many other examples – all blur the line between science and art, nullifying the purported purpose of making anatomical education accessible to laypeople. This is augmented by the lack of anatomical descriptions of substance, which all leads me to question whether there is any educational value for the Körperwelten exhibitions. And even if there is educational value, is it worth this type of treatment of human beings?

At the very end of their article, Röbel and Wassermann (2004) add several excerpts of emails between von Hagens and other members of the Körperwelten organization, including the following eye-opening correspondence by Gunther von Hagens on December 2, 2002, which underlines the attitude of scientific entitlement and disregard for the human body with which he approaches his plastinated “creations”:

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<sup>78</sup> Such as the placement of the couch under “Mystic Plastinate (2003)” that allows guests to sit underneath the individual or the themed items available for purchase in the gift shops.

Betreff: Weihnachtsdekoration: (...) Das Baby in der Krippe, ein plastinierter Fötus, erinnert uns auf eine neue, erschreckende Art an unglückliche Menschenleben, die öfter und früher Opfer von Hunger, Krieg und Abtreibung werden, als wir denken.“ – Günther von Hagens über seine Idee, als Weihnachtsattraktion seiner Londoner “Körperwelten” einen plastinierten Fötus als Jesus-Kind in einer Krippe darzustellen. (Röbel und Wassermann)

This email, among countless other examples, demonstrates the attitude with which von Hagens and the Körperwelten organization attend to their roles as curators, designers, and supposed educators. For them, the shock factor and profit are the top priorities, even above preserving human dignity.

The existence of Körperwelten is rooted in a history of scientific entitlement that can be traced back to German colonialism (if not further), and this connection deserves further examination out of respect for the donors and their living communities. Natter (1999) wrote, “no text exists outside of the support that enables it to be read” (15), and the same is true for Körperwelten: a consensus of meaning has to exist for a concept to persist, and as long as the standard consensus is that bodies can be objectified and used in the manner that they are in Körperwelten, so will these exhibitions continue to exist. I believe it is imperative for the assurances of the preservation of human dignity in the context of plastination, the Körperwelten exhibits, and the history of dehumanization that originated and developed during colonialism and the Third Reich that their value as educational sites and the acceptability of their display to be reconsidered.

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## Vita

Helen E. Martin was born in Boston, Massachusetts on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1997. She grew up and attended school in Knoxville, TN, and spent her summer and winter breaks living with family in Germany. She completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology and Spanish with a minor in German as a part of the Chancellor's Honors Program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2019 Summa Cum Laude. As a part of her degree, Martin presented her honors thesis titled "Estimating Sex Using Metacarpals". She studied abroad in Valparaíso, Chile at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso from 2017-2018. There she discovered her love of empanadas con queso y pollo.

Martin defended her thesis for her Master of Arts in German in August 2023 under Dr. Maria Stehle, and completed her Master of Arts in Anthropology under Dr. Lee Meadows Jantz in April 2023. During her three years (and a summer) as a graduate student, Martin has worked as a Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant, been actively involved in the Forensic Anthropology Center, worked in the UTK Donated Skeletal Collection, attended and presented at conferences, conducted outreach for the Forensic Anthropology Center, been an officer for the Anthropology Graduate Student Association, instructed German at the German Saturday School of Knoxville, learned how to embroider, and somehow also had a social life. Now that both degrees are completed, Martin plans on traveling, reconnecting with hobbies and books that have fallen by the wayside (and take a well-deserved nap). In the future, Martin would like to continue her education and pursue a doctoral degree in Anthropology that focuses on critical museum studies.