

From Declaration to Action

The 2025 Global Cultural Assembly Report

Introduction

From 15 to 21 June, the Humboldt Forum hosted the Global Cultural Assembly (GCA), an event with over 60 participants from around the world. The aim was to establish a permanent basis for international cooperation at the Humboldt Forum, legitimised by the Assembly itself.

The present text follows a report format and provides a concise contextualization of the project. Its main objective is to inform and offer a critical overview of the gathering and its process. The report was written in July 2025. Its authors joined the process at different times as curators, interns, researchers and active participants, and provide an overview of the background, preparation and course of the assembly in this text.

The GCA Process from 2022 to 2024

The Global Cultural Assembly is an ongoing initiative that aims to research, propose, experience and establish new forms of governance in the museum's and cultural institutions' landscape. The process to create an assembly to take part in the decision making regarding the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation's collections hosted at the Humboldt Forum started back in September 2022. Upon this occasion, international partners from those institutions were invited to think of new forms of collaboration and proposed several lines of action, drafting the Dignity-Continuity-Transparency Declaration.¹

In order to figure out concrete collaborative practices between international partners and representatives of the institutions (Stiftung Humboldt Forum and the Ethnologisches Museum), a core group of nine people were invited to participate in a workshop in October 2023. The invitation criteria were based on the individuals' engagement in the discussions that took place between the aforementioned events. In this context and as a result of the 2023 workshop, the guests named themselves the Preparatory Group (PG) for the Global Cultural Assembly and took on the mission to establish an Indigenous Embassy² to guarantee participation in decision making regarding the collections and museums.

Between 2023 and 2024, the Global Cultural Assembly represented by the Preparatory Group gained more and more influence in the Stiftung Humboldt Forum (SHF), the Ethnologisches Museum (EM), and within the project CoMuse: *The Collaborative Museum*. They worked on preliminary guidelines for working together, expanding the network, negotiating budgets, and creating an exposition room in the Humboldt Forum about their work together with the institutions as well participating in the Family Cluster 2025. Besides that, in the context of their second workshop with the Berlin team (BT) in October 2024, they hosted an event with migrants and diasporans in Berlin called Critical Bridges in order to incorporate their respective demands into the GCA work.

Preparations for the Assembly

The workshop between the Berlin Team (BT) and the Preparatory Group (PG) in October 2024 was tense for various reasons. Although a temporary exhibition was set up as the 'GCA Room' during this workshop, giving the group greater visibility at the Humboldt

¹ Available at: https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/fileadmin/user_upload_SPK/documents/presse/news/2022/Dignity_-_Continuity_-_Transparency.pdf, accessed 10.07.2025.

² This naming did not proceed because not all First Nations, source communities or international partners with a genuine relationship with the collections identified themselves as *Indigenous*. Although the position of an Indigenous Director is still under negotiation, the final name of the proposed governance structure is Global Cultural Embassy, which will report to the Global Cultural Assembly.



Fig. 1 The Global Cultural Assembly on 20.06.2025, Stiftung Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace, photograph: Johannes Berger.

Forum for the first time, the question of long-term participation and influence within the institutional hierarchies remained unresolved. Here, opinions also differed within the PG. While some people sought representation at a vertical level, preferably in the form of a director position, others advocated for the greatest possible autonomy for the future Global Cultural Embassy (GCE). There was still uncertainty, however, within the Berlin team about its own role: was it possible to work with the PG or later the Reference Group (RG) to drive institutional transformation, or was the team limited to simply establishing an enabling structure?

Despite the differences of opinion and scope, there was broad consensus that the top priority for the coming months would be to prepare for the Assembly in June 2025 and to organise an election for a RG that would be legitimised by the Assembly to continue the work towards the Embassy.

The first challenge was to draw up invitation lists. Due to budgetary constraints,³ apart from the Preparatory Group, which was logically included, it was possible to invite 40 people from non-European countries and 20 people from other European countries and Berlin. Including the few participants of the 2022 conference who had stayed in touch with PG and BT, individuals who had collaborated with the EM and/or the SHF in previous years, as well as people who were considered interesting for the GCA by members of the PG.

From October 2024 until the Assembly, PG and BT were supported by the Piron agency, which, at the suggestion of a PG member during the October workshop, had held a day of organisational consulting and team building and were then contracted by the SHF. Piron took care of scheduling, preparation and minutes.

The biggest challenge regarding the agenda was balancing the time needed to nominate candidates with the time foreseen for substantive discussions that would lay the foundation for the Reference Group's work. After lengthy discussions, it was decided to nominate candidates in regional groups to ensure diversity in terms of background. In addition to geographical origin, diversity in the future reference group should also relate to age, gender, occupation, involvement in communities and other networks. However, it was not clearly defined in advance how the regional groups should carry out the nomina-

³ The GCA is co-financed by the Stiftung Humboldt Forum and the Collaborative Museum project.

tion process. It was decided that the members of the PG would not stand for election in order to enable renewal. Only two existing members would remain for a few months during the transition process, supporting the Reference Group and then leaving it.

The SHF production department took care of organising and producing the Assembly, including travel arrangements, so that no external agency had to be hired for this task.

The Assembly

Apart from a few last-minute cancellations, not only due to illness but also because of the political situation, for example, in the USA and the Middle East, all delegates were present for registration on Monday, 15 June, and received an introduction to the conference programme.

Subsequently, the Global Cultural Assembly took place over the course of one week in Hall 1 and 2 of the Humboldt Forum Berlin, weaving together people, ideas, and claims in person. Through various scheduled formats, such as discussions in multiple group sessions, one-on-one conversations, and collective plenary conversations, the delegates, together with the Preparatory Group and the Berlin Team, engaged in the development and formation of a Reference Group.

The group sessions were thereby organized into two primary formats: seven *Regional Hubs* (Oceania, Latin America, North America, French-speaking Africa/English-speaking Africa, Asia, Middle East/Central Asia and Diaspora/Europe) and four *Collaboration Hubs* (Relationships, Community, Museum, Embassy), to which the delegates assigned themselves according to their regional and thematic affiliations. However, it was made clear from the beginning that the whole Assembly schedule also embraced fluidity and openness toward adaptation and change over the course of the week.

The *Regional Hubs* played a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for the selection of the future Embassy, as each *Regional Hub* was tasked with selecting, through a consensual process, one individual by the end of the week who would like to participate in the proposed Reference Group. One major challenge in the preparatory process was deciding on the format of group sessions based on regionality, as this raised concerns about the problematic simplification of cultural and political realities, as well as matters of (under) representation, since a single delegate cannot reflect the full range of perspectives across an entire region. In response to sceptical questions from delegates, PG and BT members repeatedly stated that the selected Reference Group would represent the Assembly, not their regions of origin.

During multiple sessions in the *Regional Hubs*, the respective delegates had the opportunity to get to know each other and collectively agree on a preliminary formulation of selection criteria for the upcoming Reference Group. Building on this, each *Regional Hub* consensually selected two individuals to be proposed for participation in the RG. Afterward, the further election process for the seven final RG members was decided through a plenary discussion with all present delegates. In the end, the decision settled on an additional voting, through which each *Regional Hub* decided on one delegate to become an official member of the RG. Hence, the actual formation of the RG resulted from a complementary iterative process rooted in collective imagination, critical reflection, and participatory decision-making.

Meanwhile, the *Collaboration Hubs* functioned as working groups that facilitated the articulation of ideas and visions, informing the prospective goals and focus points that the Embassy would revolve around. For example, one of the questions which were discussed in the *Relationships Collaboration Hub* was, "How can we approach complex issues of repair such as restitution?" Further results of the *Collaboration Hub* conversations were to create regular dialogue between the Global Cultural Embassy and the Humboldt Forum

(HF), provide access to archival and depot spaces for external partners, continuously foster meaningful collaborations between the respective communities and the museum, apply new forms of artistic expression within the current museum practice, and centre non-human entities and emotional realities.

Additionally, plenary sessions filled the room in between the *Collaboration* and *Regional Hubs*, in which the delegates presented the outcome of their respective discussions, as well as raising comments, questions, and concerns. On the one hand, the dialogue grappled with the urgency and individual motivations behind participating in this collective undertaking despite ongoing regional conflicts. The reflections highlighted the delegates' shared vision of a world where cultural institutions are considered to be no longer places of repetition but of repair, raising questions of repatriation, rematriation, and the creation of a new language of cultural and transitional justice. On the other side, the plenary discussions centred on critical questions and potential challenges an Embassy might face, for example in context of future government changes and the respective cuts on the German cultural sectors. Various individuals spoke up and built on each other's concerns, recognizing colonial epistemologies, mechanisms, and extractivist practices to be still embedded in current museum operations.

After the first day's initial excitement, numerous open questions about the actual scope for action continued to echo throughout the hall. Following a clarification of the institutional funding bodies involved, the delegates were encouraged to conceptualize the Assembly not as a fixed structure but rather as a dynamic movement, interweaving individuals, institutions, and ideas across diverse geographies, disciplines, and contexts. The PG and BT reiterated that the Assembly itself is constituted by the delegates, who jointly shape emerging pathways and envision future directions by an ongoing, participatory process. Simultaneously, the participants addressed the full complexity of this task, calling for collective listening, shared responsibility, as well as a sensitive attunement to tensions, contradictions, and unresolved questions.

Additionally, several public and semi-public events happened over the course of the week. From a reception on the first day, to a panel discussion as part of the outreach programme "Verflochtene Erinnerungen", as well as a conversation in the context of the event series "Objects Talk Back", to "Round Table Discussions" on Saturday, and a closing event with concert and DJ as part of the *Fête de la musique*, there were several possibilities for the museum colleagues and the wider public to engage with the GCA. Furthermore, as the Assembly embraced fluidity in its process, certain adaptations to the schedule took place throughout the course of the week. For example, instead of a Pecha Kucha session, originally scheduled for Tuesday afternoon, delegates were invited to share impressions of their work each morning of the Assembly. By the end, the declaration was read out loud so the delegates could decide whether they wanted to sign it or not. They also had the opportunity to express their thoughts, questions or suggestions for change. Some questions arose but there were few reservations. Thus, all but one signed the declaration.⁴

Ultimately, the final Reference Group consists of:

Marcella Katjijova (Africa Hub) is a licensed Psychological Counsellor and activist for the OvaHerero Genocide Foundation (OGF);

Lisa Hilli (Oceania Hub) is a contemporary artist, curator and a creative scientist;

Anna Sara Dias (Diaspora/Europe Hub) is an interdisciplinary scientist from Brazil who lives in Berlin;

Arazu Hassan Barawi (Central Asia/Middle East Hub) is a Kurdish artist, activist and cultural manager living in Erbil. She replaces Snezhana Atanova (Kazakhstan), who resigned in August 2025;

⁴ Available at <https://www.humanboldtforum.org/de/from-declaration-to-action/>, accessed 18.07.2025

Greta de León (Latin America Hub) is the head of the Americas Research Network (ARENET);

Amparo Leyman Pino (North America Hub) is an expert on education, inclusion and a Fulbright Specialist;

Tara Devi Rai (Asia Hub) is a Ph.D. candidate from Nepal at the Freie Universität Berlin and is actively involved in the Indigenous rights movement.

Conclusion

Similar to 2022, the Assembly was a special experience thanks to its collective energy. The outcome, with the Reference Group elected by the Assembly to continue the path towards an Global Cultural Embassy, gives the initiative more weight both within and outside the institutions. Apart from the close cooperation between RG and BT, there is hope that the Assembly 2025 has laid the foundation for continuing the work in the *Regional Hubs*, connecting the wider network of delegates to the initiative, and maintaining the motivation to take important steps towards a broader notion of heritage justice including restitution and beyond, as set out in the Final Declaration.

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