

“Conservation in Dialogue”

A temporary exhibition at the Humboldt Forum

In May 2025 the temporary exhibition “Conservation in Dialogue” (in German: “Restaurierung im Dialog”) opened to the public at the Humboldt Forum. This exhibition by the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss, the Ethnologisches Museum (EM) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (AKu) of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz provides insights into the work of conservators and demonstrates the diversity of this field. This diversity applies not only to the techniques used and the specific knowledge needed, but also to the research questions and decision-making processes. Projects are increasingly taking place in dialogue with international partners from so-called source communities to ensure that their perspectives and needs are taken into account. “Conservation in Dialogue” is the first exhibition in the Humboldt Forum to highlight this field of museum practice and expertise and it presents four conservation projects dealing with five artifacts.

On display are two crest poles from the Northwest Coast of Canada (19th century), a cabinet in Bantam Work from the Chinese Qing Dynasty (17th century), a Mongolian *gungervaa* (Buddhist shrine, 20th century) and a ceremonial pipe from the Umoⁿhoⁿ in Nebraska in the United States (late 19th century). These four conservation projects are each colour-accented and labeled with guiding questions which are “What is actually possible?”, “Who makes the decisions here?”, “Why were reconstructions made?” and “How may it be viewed?”. These leading questions are intended to arouse curiosity and introduce the respective projects, with the different colours providing orientation. Additionally, a booklet entitled “Who cares? Conservation and restoration at the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst” provides an overview of the methods, techniques and ethical principles of conservation (Michaelis and Frank 2025).

Another educational component of the exhibition is the school project “Insights – Prospects”, an initiative that invited pupils from a secondary school in Berlin to look behind the scenes of the exhibition project over a period of six months. Their in-depth en-



Fig. 1 Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photograph: David von Becker.



Fig. 2 Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photograph: David von Becker.

gagement with the exhibition's topics and the cultural belongings on display resulted in four audiotexts, that can be heard in the exhibition.

A blue sofa in the exhibition is equipped with some reading material. The books invite adults and children to further explore the topic of restoration and conservation.

The Following Conservation Projects are Presented in the Exhibition:

Cabinet in Bantam Work (6515, Qing Dynasty before 1693, AKu)

This small Chinese cabinet was chosen to show what is actually possible in restoration. The outer surface is finished in Bantam Work, the inside has a wind-up mechanism. Originally, only the exterior was to be restored, as the inside was considered irreparable. Yet, after sorting the individual parts from the interior, some fragments could be matched to others. The additional finding of a historical photograph showing the inside before the damage made it possible to reconstruct the interior in its entirety. In the exhibition various steps in the restoration of the cabinet are shown. These were conducted by a professional conservator—and her husband. First, he only occasionally visited her workplace. But then, thanks to his technical skills, he found out how the mechanism worked and helped to get it running again.

A Gungervaa or Shrine from Mongolia (I D 34310, EM)

The “Inside Out” presentation¹ of the Buddhist shrine from Mongolia reflects the multi-vocal opinion of the Mongolian cooperation partners. Their decision is linked to a particularly violent period of Mongolian history in the 1930s, which is reflected in this “cultural belonging”.

Following the people-centered conservation approach (Wijesuriya 2022), the conservator and anthropologist Birgit Kantzenbach developed this perspective together with her partners during a research trip to Mongolia, which was then realized in the exhibition with the utmost respect for local traditions and the original material of the shrine (Kantzenbach 2017).

¹ In this context “Inside Out” refers to the way the content of the shrine is exhibited outside of it.



Fig. 3 gungervaa (buddhist shrine),
Stiftung Humboldt Forum, photograph:
Frank Sperling.

Additionally, the decision-making process and insights gained through research and discussions with the cooperation partners are presented, providing transparency and explaining the reasons behind this conservation approach.

Crest Poles from British Columbia, Canada (IV A 2299 and IV A 7098, EM)

Presented in the exhibition are two crest poles from the Haida and Tsimshian First Nations respectively. Looking at these two poles, the topic of transportation and installation of large exhibits is presented. A short film and a slide-show convey the necessary preparation, transportation and logistics needed to install oversized objects. This includes the close cooperation between the conservation department and logistic firms.

Furthermore, the process of reconstructing missing original parts is discussed referring to the Haida crest pole. An interview with a conservator and a slide-show with photos documenting various steps in the reconstruction process give insight into the conservation project, that finished in 2021. A reconstructed beak made of papier-mâché is on view to show an example of former restoration treatment.

Ceremonial Pipe of the Umoⁿhoⁿ (IV B 2193 a,b, EM)

Selected Umoⁿhoⁿ cultural belongings, collected by the Umoⁿhoⁿ ethnologist Francis La Flesche, were on display at the Humboldt Forum in the collaborative exhibition “Against the Current” until June 2025. A ceremonial pipe (*ni-ni-ba*) could not be included in the exhibition because the pipe bowl and stem were glued together. From an Umoⁿhoⁿ perspective, the bowl and stem are only allowed to be connected during a ceremony. Following a workshop in November 2023 with the Umoⁿhoⁿ partners, the involved museum conservators separated the two parts. But considering the pipe sensitive, a detailed drawing is shown in the exhibition “Conservation in Dialogue” instead of the original. Added video clips from online meetings and a timeline give insight into this collaborative conservation project which is still a work-in-progress.

Booklet "Who cares? Conservation and restoration at the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst"

This booklet provides a behind-the-scenes look at the work of the conservators at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. It outlines the ethical principles that guide their work – such as minimal intervention, reversibility, and respect for the original substance. Key areas of focus include examination and documentation, preventive conservation, conservation treatments, restoration and scientific analysis. A special focus is placed on respectful collaboration with communities of origin, ensuring that both the material and immaterial aspects of cultural belongings are considered. Language plays an important role as well: the term *object* is deliberately questioned, and instead, terms like *cultural belongings* are used to emphasize their deep cultural and emotional significance. The booklet aims to make conservation work more visible to the public and to create space for an open dialogue around the responsible care of cultural belongings.

"Insights – Prospects"

Fairly often, the mediation of exhibitions takes place behind the scenes. At all times it is not simply about transmitting knowledge to audiences but about initiating reciprocal learning processes. In this spirit, the project "Insights – Prospects" was developed as a joint educational initiative between a secondary school and the Humboldt Forum.² Twelve students were given the opportunity to speak to conservators, explore the historical and cultural contexts of the artefacts in focus and to engage with museum history. Through this process, they developed their own perspectives on the selected artefacts. However, in a conversation with the Umoⁿhoⁿ partners, they realized that interpreting the belongings of "others" is challenging – and at times even inappropriate. This new awareness shaped the students' engagement, that ultimately resulted in four audio pieces: one interview and three creative pieces, that can be listened to in the exhibition.

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² More precisely, the cooperation involved the Carl-Friedrich-von-Siemens-Gymnasium in Berlin-Spandau, the Academy (Department for Education and Research of the Stiftung Humboldt Forum), as well as the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

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Direct link to online version of the booklet:

https://www.humboldtforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/who_cares_broschuere_EN.pdf

https://www.humboldtforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/who_cares_broschuere_DE.pdf