Virtual Exhibitions in the “Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek” (German Digital Library)

The “Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek” (German digital library) uses also virtual exhibitions for the presentation of complex context and highlights of special collections. Currently there are two “Virtual Exhibitions” realized: “The memory of dance” and “On myths and monuments”. These exhibitions have been curated by Dr. Silke Röckelein and Dr. Manuela Fischer, and coordinated by the “Service-stelle” and the “Fachstelle Museum” at the “Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek”.

These exhibitions have different ways and aims to present their content:

- “The memory of dance” wants to bring the visitor into contact with intangible cultural heritage and to explain different ways to archive and document dance.
- “On myths and monuments” wants to make archaeology and the work of archaeologists more visible and wants to make a contribution to a current scientific discussion that is grounded in the person of Konrad Theodor Preuss, an early actor in the field of Columbian archaeology.

The curators of the two virtual exhibitions used the opportunity to implement not only resources coming from their own institutions and those already in the DDB but also external resources and digital objects, e.g. Library of Congress, Synchronous Objects Project, The Ohio State University, and Världskulturmuséet in Göteborg for their virtual exhibition.

The creation of virtual exhibitions requires a lot of work, since it is an editorial process. For these two exhibitions digital objects from the following institutions were used: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Deutsches Museum in München, Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum, Ethnologischen Museum (SMB), Fachbereich Musik- und Tanzwissenschaft der Universität Salzburg, Haus der Volkskunst, Schwäbischer Albverein, Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (SPK), Kunstbibliothek (SMB), Landesbibliothek Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in Schwerin, Library of Congress, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de la Ville de Strasbourg, Museum anatomicum Jenense - Anatomische Sammlung der Medizinischen
We have so far only seen the beginning of the merge of professional work with the possibilities of what interaction with the audience and the accelerated development of technical options for exploring digital cultural heritage can bring to the institutions. The digital exhibition of the future is yet to be seen!


Both exhibitions in the “Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek” were implemented with the same tool, named OMEKA. This tool is also used by Europeana and other digital libraries. OMEKA is an open source software for displaying and web-publishing of library, archive and museum content and exhibition. A special “Exhibit Builder plug-in” allows combining narrative and digital object content. The software offers a great set of predefined themes but it is also possible to define one’s own themes.¹

One significant characteristic feature of digital exhibitions, displayed in the Internet, is the multimedia aspect providing pictures, texts, films and sound materials as well as animated graphics. A web-based virtual exhibition profits from this variety of object types and technical means of their presentation. Online-presentations can provide detailed or hidden views and astonishing confrontations using special computer applications.

By using links, online presentations allow us to break with predetermined, linear approaches and to place items in new and unexpected relations to one another. The “visitors” will be encouraged to discover the subject of the exhibition according to their individual interests. In this way, they will no longer be passive recipients but active participants, by passing over the ”borders“ of the exhibition, following links and investigating keywords and new objects independently. In addition, an online presentation does not depend on opening hours or exhibition spaces, but can be visited everywhere at any time.

Virtual exhibitions make user participation easily possible. If - in the future - exhibitions can be implemented with a simple tool, available to all partners or even to any user, it might be a way to generate new views of the 11 million digital objects of the “German Digital Library”. Today the virtual exhibitions of the “Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek” are a first step to improve visibility of diverse content and to improve the attractiveness of the “Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek”.

Indeed, in online presentations the exhibited objects remain of course in virtual reality. In contrast to a "real" exhibition, the immediate contact with the physical object (book, picture, dance figure, model etc.), i.e. the experience of its presence in the here and now, will be kept from the "exhibition visitor".

¹ The link to OMEKA can be found at <https://omeka.net/>.
Kugeltänzerin, ca. 1910, Foto: Spielzeugmuseum, Nürnberg

An archive of the dance, its memory, has to grasp all facets of this art form: movement, significance of space and time, music, motoric and kinetic aspects, gestures, facial play and clothes of the dancers. But how to realize an archive if the dance itself offers no material object? The presentation shows past and present-day methods of recording and simulating dance movements with a view to archiving them and bringing them to life.

Considering the fact that, ideally, dance can only be documented using a combination of pictures, text, sound and film, and more recently computer programs, a dance archive has to be a multimedia database. It is the only way to come close to capturing it in its entirety. This multimedia dimension is possible with the Internet. Links connecting the objects make clear that a dance figure, so, for example, the Port de bras, has hardly changed through the centuries, but has adapted its documentation to technical progress. The digital age has developed astonishing solutions for archiving dance, and an exhibition in the Internet does justice to this trend.

The online-presentation The Memory of Dance (Das Gedächtnis des Tanzes) benefits from the facets of the Internet. By nature a transient art, the fleetingness and the temporality of the movement and the music as well as the individuality of the performer are symptomatic of dance. The virtual exhibition discusses the question of how dance, an example of intangible cultural heritage, can be preserved for posterity and be made accessible, on demand, to the general public.
However, it is exactly this immaterial nature which is symptomatic of dance and which makes it hardly tangible. Finally, it is in a virtual exhibition where both the immaterial nature and the multimedia aspect can be experienced.

Example Virtual exhibition: On myths and monuments. The research expedition of Konrad Theodor Preuss through Colombia (1913-1919)

Commemorations
2013 was declared “Ano de la Cultura Agustíniana” by the Colombian government. The date, December 2013, is directly connected to the research trip of Konrad Theodor Preuss 100 years before. In December 1913, the curator of the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin arrived at the Upper Magdalena in Colombia with the intention of making a systematic survey of the sculptures that have been mentioned in this area.

Several events commemorated the beginning of his research in Colombia as well as in Germany. There was a symposium organized by the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia (ICANH). An exhibition opened in the Museo Nacional in Bogotá entitled El silencio de los ídolos. Una evocación de la estatuaria agustíniana. In Berlin a photographic exhibition Pioniere der Archäologie in San Agustín, was presented at the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut. This exhibition was even sponsored in part by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Several publications followed: An edition of the journal of the Academia de Historia was dedicated to the early researchers of San Agustín, the re-edition of the Spanish edition.

To make archaeology visible
This general interest fostered the idea of implementing the planned virtual exhibition within the “Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek” about the different aspects of the academic life of Konrad Theodor Preuss and his contribution to the archaeology of San Agustín. His intention was certainly not the discovery of this place. However, the publication of the sculptures made this place generally known and visible.

Since the 18th century, geographers and missionaries already had given descriptions of these sites but by defining the characteristics of San Agustín, this place for the first time acquired a so-called archaeological “culture”. Even though Preuss did not realize excavations in a modern sense, his publication was undoubtedly the beginning of a general interest which finally culminated in the admission of the San Agustín Archaeological Park to the list of world heritage sites of UNESCO in 1995.
No light without shade
In the course of the festivities there were not only homages, but there were also conflicts coming up. The legitimacy of the collection was questioned. Preuss in 1913 had obtained the permission of the land owner to dig and take away to Berlin the archaeological items he found there, even though there already existed legislation since 1906 restricting the exportation of cultural heritage. Nevertheless, Preuss sent the crates to Germany.

In 2013, the community of San Agustín used the right of petition to ask the Colombian government to pursue the restitution of the stone sculptures to Colombia. The sculptures as well as other archaeological and ethnographic collections are still hosted in the Ethnologisches Museum of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Preußischer Kulturbesitz), with the exception of those lost in World War II.

The public opinion
In this context, different aspects of this research trip were questioned: the integrity of the scholar, the size of the archaeological collection Preuss had gathered in Colombia, the composition of the entire collection from different areas of the country, etc.

Colombian newspapers covered the story and the most influential newspaper El Tiempo even offered a blog to gather signatures in an online petition for an eventual restitution of the artwork. As a consequence, German newspapers, journals, and TV stations also became interested in this “case”. There were frequent requests for background information to prepare interviews and articles to publish.

Background information
This was the moment when the digital exhibition presented by the “Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek” proved to be extremely useful. The exhibition provides not only a travel log or the presentation of a moment in the history of science. It is a contextualization of a research program, which visualizes the relationship of the contested collections to the history of ideas and the program of the museums as “Universal Archives” in the 19th century.

Preuss (1869-1938) was one of the former curators at the then Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, in charge of the North American collection and a well-known mesoamericanist. This second generation of anthropologists in Germany initiated a radical change in anthropological methodology. While the early scientific travellers tried to cover a broad area of undiscovered or poorly studied areas, the research methodology of Preuss and his peers was much more sedentary. They concentrated on their research program and did pioneering research. Preuss’ contribution is without doubt his recollection of texts in indigenous languages (Kágaba, Uitoto in Colombia).
The digital exhibition
„Zu Mythen und Monumenten. Die Forschungsreise von Konrad Theodor Preuss nach Kolumbien (1913-1919) | On myths and monuments. The research expedition of Konrad Theodor Preuss through Colombia (1913-1919)

The digital exhibition gives information about the context in which the collections had been gathered, but also about the scholar and his research questions, the curator as a collector, the historical context of his research, political tendencies of the personality, academic standards and the contributions to international knowledge transfer.

The multi-layered concept of the digital exhibition made it possible to relate different ideas and to follow the complexity of decision-making. The way the exhibition is conceived is a combination of texts, photographs, audio clips, maps, and graphics, and makes it possible to choose the depth of the information needed. Journalists who had been referred to the digital exhibition felt well informed and gave extremely positive feedback. The digital exhibition helped to depict complex stories in time and space in a vivid and intelligible way.

Bibliography


1. For more information see http://omeka.org/
3.http://www.bogota.diplom.de/Vertretung/bogota/de/06Kultur/Wanderausstellung_Arch_C3_A4ologie.html
5. „Derecho de petición“