

1st Meeting Washington DC

Symposium:

“Trust in Museums: Potential, Challenges, and Societal Importance”

January 29, 2024

9:00 am to 12:30 p.m.,

Venue

**German Historical Institute (DHI),
1607 New Hampshire Ave NW
Washington DC**

Networking Reception, 12:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Concept and Organization: German Embassy in Washington, DC, Science and Technology Section, Leibniz Research Museums, Germany and Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Participants Leibniz Research Museums:

Prof. Dr. Alexandra W. Busch, Leibniz-Zentrum für Archäologie (LEIZA)

Dr. Lorenz Kampschulte, Deutsches Museum (DM)

Prof. Dr. Sunhild Kleingärtner, Deutsches Bergbaumuseum (DBM)

Prof. Johannes Vogel, PhD / Anita Hermannstädter, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (MfN)

Prof. Klement Tockner, Senckenberg Gesellschaft für Naturforschung (SNG)

Dr. Heike Zech, Germanisches Nationalmuseum (GNM) (only online attendance possible)

Prof. Dr. Ruth Schilling, Deutsches Schifffahrtsmuseum (DSM) (only online attendance possible)

Participants Smithsonian Institution:

Dr. Scott Miller, National Museum of Natural History

Dr. Richard Potts, National Museum of Natural History

Dr. Dorothy Lippert, National Museum of Natural History (maybe only online attendance possible)

Junko Chinen, National Museum of Natural History

Celia Emmelhainz, Manager, National Anthropological Archive

Context and Goals:

Trust in Museums: Potential, Challenges, and Societal Importance

Introduction:

Trust in museums is a complex and multifaceted topic, which includes both individual interactions and societal developments. Trust plays a crucial role in the relationship between museums and society, particularly in the perception of museums as trustworthy institutions.

The exploration of trust in museums is of particular importance because museums are not only places where the transfer of knowledge occurs but also cultural and social agents who exercise considerable influence over civil and democratic society.

As part of this first symposium, organized together by the German Embassy in Washington, the Leibniz Research Museums, and the Smithsonian Institution in DC, we will

- i) **discuss key issues around research on the topic of trust in museums,**
- ii) **shed light on the difference between individual trust in science museums and trust in science in general, and**
- iii) **explore the potential that museums hold as trustworthy institutions for society.**

The discussion is intended to examine both the issues around trust in museums in general (covering multiple disciplines) and the specific issues around trust in research museums, especially science museums, and how that relates to broader issues of trust in science and humanities (e.g., do museums have a unique role in inspiring trust in science and humanities).

The aim is to promote future public and private research projects on this subject. In addition, we will also consider the part museums play in Germany and the U.S. in democracy, social cohesion, and the challenges relating to how museums are seen in the context of colonial history and the history of racism. A further goal is therefore to provide impetus for mutual learning.

Questions to Lead the Discussion:

1. Which factors influence visitors' trust in museums, for example, such as exhibition design, the quality of the information, and the credibility of the institutions?
2. What role do emotional ties, active involvement and personal experiences play in developing trust in museums? What is the unique role of physical museums in an increasingly digital world?
3. In what way does individual trust in research museums differ from trust in science and humanities in general?
4. How can museums build and maintain trust, particularly in light of social changes and technological progress?

Potential of Museums as Trustworthy Institutions: Museums have the potential to be trustworthy institutions for society in that they offer high-quality education and cultural experiences. They are able to build trust through transparent communication, open discussions, and integration of different perspectives. By fostering critical thinking and presenting science, history, culture and art, museums can build bridges between diverse social groups and engender a sense of community.

Role of Museums in Democracy, Integration, and Social Perception: Museums play an important part in democracy because they provide space for dialogue and critical discourse. They can present different views and diverse identities, thus helping to promote tolerance, understanding, and freedom. Museums are also able to contribute to developing national identities by showing the breadth of cultures and experiences that have shaped nations and made them what they are today.

Individual Trust in Science Museums vs. Trust in Science: Individual trust in science museums can be viewed as a specific kind of trust which is based on perception of the credibility, integrity, and expertise of the relevant institutions. This trust can differ from trust in science as a whole because it rests on direct interactions and experiences with the museums. By contrast, trust in science in general can be swayed by public debates, media reporting, and political influences.

Challenges in the Context of Colonial History and the History of Racism: Museums face the challenge of overcoming the distrust sowed in relation to colonial history and the history of racism. Museums must critically confront their own role in the past, consider corrective actions, and ensure that the depiction of cultures and history is fair and balanced. This requires open reflection on their own legacy and the active inclusion of all stakeholders.

Outline:

Symposium Program

January 29, 2024

9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Welcome 9:00 a.m.

Moderator Jörg Janssen

Science Counsellor, German Embassy, DC

Welcome 9:00 a.m.-9:05 a.m.

Simone Lässig

Director DHI, DC

Welcome and Introduction 9:05 a.m.-9:10 a.m.

René Haak

Head of the Science and Technology Section, German Embassy, DC

Welcome and Greetings 9:10 a.m.-9:15 a.m.

Scott Miller

National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

The Leibniz-Research Museums 9:15 a.m.-9:30 a.m.

Johannes Vogel

Leibniz Association, Museum of Natural History, Berlin

Keynote “Trust in Museums”: 9:30 a.m.-9:50 a.m.

Sunhild Kleingärtner, Deutsches Bergbau Museum, Bochum

The keynote summarizes the results of the transatlantic study, which was conducted in the spring of 2022 as part of a Thomas Mann Fellowship and in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution. It focuses on credibility indicators and the emergence of trust in museums in a developmental perspective and against the background of ICOM definitions. The study also focuses on trust relationships with the public and political supporters, particularly with regard to exhibition issues and is based on several interviews with museums directors. The results provide insight into the state of the art on trust from a leadership perspective in the U.S. and Germany and includes the Smithsonian Institution and the Leibniz Research Museums.

Coffee 9.50 to 10.15

Symposium: Discussion on Main Topic 10:15 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Introductory Statements (à 5 min.), Discussion and Results (Future Questions and Research Perspectives)

1. The **Social and Scientific Responsibility** of Museums as Trustworthy Institutions and Their Potential as Agents of Social Change
Introductory Statement: Alexandra Busch / LEIZA
Q&A (10 min.)
2. **Engaging indigenous communities** and building trust to forge new collaborations
Introductory Statement: Dorothy Lippert / Smithsonian

Q&A (10 min.)

3. **Avoiding an Age of Ignorance:** Increase of public engagement and participation within and outside of academia
Introductory Statement: Klement Tockner / SNG
Q&A (10 min.)
4. **The Role Trust Plays in Making Museums More Inclusive, Democratic, and Diverse**
Introductory Statement: Dr. Heike Zech, GNM (online)
Q&A (10 min.)
5. **The Relationship between Public Trust in Museums and Public Perception** of Museums as Politically “Neutral” or Engaged “Activist” Institutions
Introductory Statement: Lorenz Kampschulte / DM
Q&A (10 min.)
6. **The Impact of Trust on Participation, Collaboration, and Cooperation with Communities and Other Stakeholders**
Introductory Statement: Richard Potts /Smithsonian
Q&A (10 min.)
7. **What does our audience think?** Insights from surveys at the National Museum of Natural History
Introductory Statement: Junko Chinen /Smithsonian
Q&A (10 min.)
8. **Restoring history – How do we restore the voices of history that are under represented in our collections and research?**
Introductory Statement: Celia Emmelhainz, Manager, National Anthropological Archive
Q&A (10 min.)

Final Remarks

Scott Miller - Johannes Vogel

Next Steps

René Haak