



## WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

### Going digital and ‘the politics of visual representation’- questions, pitfalls, promises

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**Abstract:** To critically approach the colonial past of European museums, collections and research institutions, in the last two decades, scientists, curators and artists discussed ways of restitutions of material as well as visual and art collections. Barnard and Spencer argued that, appropriation and politics of representation are “closely connected to exercise control over the content and context of images and interpretations“ (2003: 383).

Digitization and open access publishing of multimedia collections allow a plethora of possibilities in digital restitution, but visual images are the most easily accessible and ready-made images of other cultures (Morphy/ Banks 1999). Is a full open access strategy and equal access a solution out of the politics of representation, or is it a strategy in which we do not care enough about ethical questions and long-term consequences.

How do we deal with these dilemmas? How do we avoid pitfalls like e.g. contributing to a single historic metanarrative or purporting to follow an approach of an assumed realism? How can we contribute to a “more particularised and multicultural construct of plural pasts“ (Zimmermann 2008) and avoid the pitfalls of power and representation. How can we follow various developments and “lives of representations“ when we contribute to the digital publication of visual collections? How can we collaborate with the people depicted and the upcoming generations, to (mediated) transcultural memories?

Based on the experiences of the ongoing project ZOZAN "Approaching mobility via multi-media documentations, art interventions, art-based research and (re)presentations" we would like to discuss strategies of visual representation, of ethical concerns, of the interconnectedness between the visible and the speakable/ expressible as well as of the circulation and mobility of images.

## SESSION SCHEDULE

**Tuesday, September 24, 2024 | Slot 1 | Room 4**

*Jana Reimer: Enhancing Digital Data of Ethnographic Collections: Identifying and Handling Sensitive Contexts under the Requirements of Digital Accessibility*

*Jamie Dau, Leslie Zimmermann: Developing an Integrated Strategy for Digital Transformation and Provenance Research: A Case Study from the Reiss-Engelhorn-*

*Museen in Mannheim*

**Tuesday, September 24, 2024 | Slot 2 | Room 4**

*Khanna Omarkhali, Vedat Demirbas: Some Challenges of Digitalisation and Archiving of Kurdish Oral Audio Collections*

*Eszter Hars: Pottery in the Werner Finke Collection*

*Marina Stoilova: Moving Images: Archival and medial representations of Kurdish weddings in the past and present*

## **SESSION PAPERS**

### **Enhancing Digital Data of Ethnographic Collections: Identifying and Handling Sensitive Contexts under the Requirements of Digital Accessibility**

*Jana Reimer*

As MARKK is currently involved in a migration process of digital data to a new database format, discussing the intricacies of handling digital data within an ethnographic museum's collections is at stake. Ethnographic collections require awareness of their specific cultural and historical contexts, which are often colonial or otherwise sensitive. Digital documentation necessitates an extraordinary form of engagement with the impact of language and image on multiple levels. Controlled implementation of terminology and content is met by the expectation of accessibility and transparency. As museums need to progress towards digitally inclusive environments, it is crucial to appropriately handle ethnographic collections on a digital level. Key topics are:

- **Sensitive Contexts in Pictorial Representations:** We will address the complexities involved in digitising and displaying sensitive objects by the example of images such as photographs, posters, and drawings. We will address the challenge of developing protocols maintaining the integrity and cultural context of these images, preventing misinterpretation and ensuring respectful representation.
- **Special Requirements for the Digital Handling of Ethnographic Collection Objects:** Ethnographic collections pose unique challenges due to their cultural and historical contexts. Furthermore, a number of holdings are to be considered secret-sacred or otherwise highly sensitive. This segment will explore these contexts, the necessary precautions and tailored approaches required for a digital representation, highlighting the critical role of metadata and technical capabilities of database systems.
- **User-Oriented Design for Research:** Given the importance of online access, it is crucial to navigate database accessibility to users from source communities and researchers as well as non-specialists. This includes considering multilingual interfaces and simplifying academic and technical jargon, thereby enabling users to conduct research and engage with the collections without requiring extensive ethnological knowledge.

This case study aims to provide an insight into the collection-based considerations that guide the migration process at MARKK.

## **Developing an Integrated Strategy for Digital Transformation and Provenance Research: A Case Study from the Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen in Mannheim**

Jamie Dau, Leslie Zimmermann

It is no longer sufficient to conduct provenance research disconnected from digitization processes in museums. Instead, research on sensitive collections and contested heritage must be tightly unified with the efforts of digital transformation in museums, to enable sustainable measures for transparency, accessibility, and participation in line with a decolonial agenda. In response to this challenge, the Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen have strategically created two academic positions – one for digitization, one for provenance research – which are closely linked together.

By actively integrating both, expertise in the field of digitization and provenance research, the museum seeks to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive approach of its digital provenance research strategy which is currently under development.

Key outcomes of the cooperative process include the identification of diverse research methodologies, the establishment of clear ethical guidelines, and the integration of community voices and perspectives into the research process, significantly bolstered by effective communication. The collaborative approach facilitates the development of a robust framework for data management and sharing, ensuring transparency and accessibility of research outcomes.

This case study by the Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen serves as an example of how museums can navigate complex ethical and methodological challenges through inclusive and cooperative practices, ultimately enhancing the integrity and relevance of their research endeavors.

## **Some Challenges of Digitalisation and Archiving of Kurdish Oral Audio Collections**

Khanna Omarkhali, Vedat Demirbas

Items of audio collections are usually ‘frozen images’ of either life performances or once living traditions. With this paper, I want to address several issues related to the digitalisation and archiving of oral audio collections, using also as example the Werner Finke's audio archive from the ZOZAN project. Among these issues are the decontextualisation of audio materials, the need to use either emic or etic 'genre' categorisation, the impact of archives on traditional experts and the tradition itself, to name a few.

## **Enhancing Digital Data of Ethnographic Collections: Identifying and Handling Sensitive Contexts under the Requirements of Digital Accessibility**

Eszter Hars

This project explores the “life” of an ethnographic object in the museum, departing from a material-centered approach and observing anthropological devices at hand for uncovering the socio-cultural context of a ceramic object. I draw attention to the mobility in the creation, sale and use of handcrafted ceramic objects in the Kurdish inhabited regions in South-East Anatolia, as well as their journey from the Kurdish regions to the Vienna World Museum (Weltmuseum Wien) and the role of the collector, Werner Finke. The presentation delves into local pottery handcrafting in a Kurdish village and the challenges of reconstructing a lost tradition. Based on research data available in Austrian institutions, secondary literature, and interviews organized in Vienna it acknowledges its limitations due to the absence of fieldwork in comprehensively covering this complex ethnographic field, and calls for empirical inquiries on site about Kurdish pottery traditions and their remnants. Only a few ethnographic accounts on Kurdish communities mention pottery handcrafting and herein mainly the production process. The local economic relevance and the embeddedness in Kurdish mobilities for instance remain unexplored. The article exemplifies a collaborative research, underscoring the importance of involving local informants in studying material culture. It begun with a ZOZAN research collaborator recognizing items from his village in Weltmuseum Wien, sparkling stories and childhood memories about pottery handcrafting and local trade. The paper analyzes different forms of mobility in our informant’s account, as well as in the ethnographic collection, highlight fractions and discrepancies. These narratives underline the relevance of local pottery for of a Kurdish community. The research inspired our informant to uncover the identity of a pottery master whose work is in Vienna’s Weltmuseum. This paper serves as a starting point and a call for further research into Kurdish pottery handcrafting.

### **Moving Images: Archival and medial representations of Kurdish weddings in the past and present**

*Marina Stoilova*

Historically wedding celebrations among the Kurds living in Turkey have been theorized as an important aspect of resistance, as acts of gaining public visibility in a state that denies one’s existence. This paper aims to look at different modes of visual representations of Kurdish weddings in the past and present by combining insights on the one hand from my ongoing master thesis research on wedding videos in social media, and on the other from my investigation on Werner Finke’s photographs of a Kurdish wedding on a summer pasture.

Firstly, I analyse a series of 160 photographs from Werner Finke’s collection which depict a 1975 wedding celebration that took place on the summer pasture near Beytüşşebap, Turkey and highlight the different dimensions of mobility visible in the images. Different dimensions of mobility are traceable through the images and characteristics of how archives simultaneously enable and disable modes of remembering become visible. Furthermore, the ways in which Finke’s wedding images become mobile, transgress boundaries and help create diasporic spaces within the ongoing project ZOZAN "Approaching mobility via multi-media documentations, art interventions, art-based research and (re)presentations" are discussed.

This visual representation the archive is compared to Kurdish wedding videos currently

circulating on social media (i.e. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok), which I reflect on in collaboration with young members of the Northern Kurdish diaspora in Vienna. The act of recording, editing, posting and sharing those celebrations in the virtual space seems to highlight the intersections between negotiating identity(es), ways of communication of the practices of “being Kurdish” on social media, dynamics of visibility and invisibility, symbolic resistance to political violence and embodiment through dance practices.

The juxtaposition of these two studies aims to address how the forms, meanings and purposes of visual representation of the Kurds transform through time.