

## Introduction

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# “Wild animals completely up close”<sup>1</sup>

On the Genesis and Implicit Messages of the Natural History Dioramas in the Museum of Alfeld

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### Abstract

In the Municipal Museum in Alfeld (Leine), a surprisingly large collection of taxidermic animals is presented in dioramas, thereby staging constructed illusions of natural habitats. In Alfeld, the origin of the collection can be traced back to the global wildlife trade which connected the small town to global trading networks. Next to the origin of the animal bodies, the dioramas and their representations of nature are subject to this analysis due to their close links to the traditional exhibition styles of natural history museums during the time of their emergence. Natural history museums were connected to the colonial expansion of Europe and the rationalistic ideologies of that time. Following, they were also reproducing colonial gazes. This chapter approaches this exhibition by analysing the history of the museum and the traditions it follows to elaborate on the implicit messages that exist ‘between the lines’ and the omitted stories of this complex past.

## Introduction

A relatively large collection of non-European animal specimens can be viewed at a seemingly unlikely place: Alfeld, a small city in the southern part of Lower-Saxony, Germany. These taxidermically prepared animals are presented to the interested visitors in dioramas – a display practice that is meant to create the illusion of natural habitats (Fig. 1).

The Municipal Museum advertises their collection with the goal that “visitors, young and old, feel transported to the African savannah when they observe cranes at the waterhole, they see tigers prowling through the Indonesian jungle and discover colourful parrots in South America.”<sup>2</sup> It is, thus, implied that the aim of the museum is to generate a bodily experience: to create the impression as if one is travelling the world. Yet, in their pursuit of creating these immersive experiences, the museum unwillingly creates stereotypical images and exoticised versions of world regions outside of Europe, as I will discuss below.

The Alfeld Museum holds over two hundred mounted animals and over one hundred ethnographic objects whose origins are uncertain, though they are likely of non-European origin.<sup>3</sup> The establishment of both collections is most probably linked to two leading trading companies of the city: C. Reiche & Brother and the L. Ruhe KG. These two companies specialised in trading animals, and they had their headquarters in Alfeld, thus connecting the small town to global trading networks. Animals from around the globe arrived in Alfeld, where they had to quarantine and were sometimes also trained.<sup>4</sup> As Claudia Andratschke and Lars Müller highlighted in their study of the Reiche as well as the Ruhe companies, not only animals moved along the networks of the global wildlife trade, but objects and – in part forcibly – humans, too. So-called ethnographic exhibitions (a phenomenon known as “*Völkerschauen*” or “Human Zoos” in the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century) act as good examples to showcase how the movement of animals, objects and humans went hand in hand. In these exhibitions, non-European humans were “displayed” in racialised and stereotypical ways, often alongside animals and



objects that were meant to illustrate their supposed way of life. These shows were highly staged, and both Alfeld companies engaged in their enterprise.<sup>5</sup>

The origin of the Alfeld collection and its presentation must be understood within this wider context. This chapter will focus on the *Tiermuseum* (Animal Museum), which is part of the Municipal Museum and which sports the aforementioned dioramas. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, museums played an integral role in transferring ideas of empire and "race" – a legacy that is still felt today. As historian Subhadra Das and curator Miranda Lowe have illustrated, natural history museums were no exception: Objects and specimens from around the world were exhibited in museums, often to legitimise colonial endeavours – also in the name of science and education.<sup>6</sup> According to art historian Tim Barringer, museums were part of a "three-dimensional imperial archive"; they were "a fantasy of knowledge made into power."<sup>7</sup> According to Barringer, this consisted of three aspects: firstly in collection (often under violent or at least problematic circumstances, where colonial or proto-colonial interests of the empire were executed) and secondly, through enforcement of colonial power through the collected knowledge and the display of objects that formed controlled images of "the other". Lastly, having the power to display these objects perpetuated the idea of the metropole as the centre of a global empire.<sup>8</sup>

While Barringer was looking at the ethnographic collections of the South Kensington Museum (today's Victoria and Albert Museum), his observation is equally true for natural history museums.<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, not only the origins of the animal bodies but also the dioramas and their representations of nature become interesting. In dioramas, the different taxidermy animals are grouped together and presented in a supposed "authentic" surrounding. To this aim, not only a lively appearance of these animals is created, but also an "illusory landscape" (Geraldine Howie) as its background. These three-dimensional museum exhibits have to be understood as constructs between fact and fiction, and defined as an idealised representation of nature that is not "nature" itself.<sup>10</sup> This chapter approaches the exhibition form by first elaborating on the history of the museum and the traditions it follows, and then analysing the dioramas themselves, asking how they are displaying the animals and which explicit and implicit narratives are thereby conveyed.

## The History and Exhibition of the *Tiermuseum*

The *Tiermuseum* in Alfeld was opened in 1933 as part of the Municipal Museum, which had been founded five years earlier. Plans for the museum were already made in 1917, but a suitable exhibition location was missing at the time. It was to showcase the geology, culture, craftsmanship and religion of the region.<sup>11</sup> As was common at the time,<sup>12</sup> the local history society (*Verein für Heimatkunde des Kreises Alfeld*) was instrumental in pushing for its own regional museum.<sup>13</sup>

At first, a collection of mounted specimens of the local fauna became part of the permanent exhibition. It consisted of 220 birds, 42 mammals and some amphibians.<sup>14</sup> No animal of non-European origin was exhibited at the beginning. Only when additional space was acquired could an exhibition exclusively about non-European animals be realised. It was opened to the public in 1933.<sup>15</sup> Over two hundred taxidermically prepared animal bodies were moved into the newly acquired building at Kirchplatz 4 – where they can still be viewed today. The foundation of this collection can be traced back to the local teacher Alois Brandmüller (1867–1939), who was an active member of the history society from 1917 onwards.<sup>16</sup> He initiated and prepared both collections of animals (the local and the non-European fauna) and designed the dioramas for their presentation – in part with his former student and later employee Carl Bartels. While he had initially built the collection for his natural history lessons, he later donated it to the museum. Meanwhile, his students had received a “hands-on” education by practicing taxidermy on many of the animals themselves.<sup>17</sup>

It is unclear how Brandmüller acquired the animal bodies. Their origins can only be speculated about as no written accounts of Brandmüller’s have been preserved. It seems likely that he received at least some of the bodies from Reiche and/or Ruhe.<sup>18</sup> As a picture shows Brandmüller outside of Europe, he may also have acquired animals during his travels. Furthermore, he could have received material through his connections with staff of the University of Göttingen.<sup>19</sup> He may have additionally bought bodies from individual Alfeld animal dealers who returned from their voyages (and not through the companies they worked for).<sup>20</sup> As it is not uncommon for small museums, the individual animal biographies cannot be reconstructed. Most certainly, however, Alfeld’s position as a centre for wildlife trade created the conditions under which this collection could be acquired.

Two animal trading companies, Carl Reiche and L. Ruhe KG, were located in Alfeld. The success of their businesses allowed them both to operate around

the globe.<sup>21</sup> After taking over the C. Reiche company in 1910, Hermann Ruhe II expanded the L. Ruhe KG in the 1920s, and it became one of the biggest animal dealerships in Europe and North America.<sup>22</sup> The arrival of humans, animals, and objects from different world regions to Alfeld influenced everyday life in the small town. Alfred Glenewinkel, an employee of Ruhe, described how the animal transport brought "a lot of excitement to all of the citizens."<sup>23</sup> Alfeld employees, Indigenous caretakers and the animals marched from the train station to the enclosures of the Ruhe company, passing through the city centre. The global entanglements of the trade in general and the company in particular were therefore visible in the city itself.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Charlotte Hoes argues that in Alfeld the animal trade is a local memory space perpetuating until today the idea of successful business and global adventures (see also her introduction to this volume).<sup>25</sup> Surprisingly, the trade itself was not part of the *Tiermuseum's* exhibition until the 1990s.

When Brandmüller donated his collection of taxidermic specimens to the museum in 1933, he also designed their display for dioramas,<sup>26</sup> a practice that had already become somewhat old-fashioned in the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> The *Tiermuseum* moved out of focus during the rule of National Socialism and did not reopen after the Second World War. Only due to a change in the museum management did the exhibition become publicly accessible again in 1977. The specimens had been restored, though the dioramas little changed: the general exhibition style was retained. Twenty years later, the exhibition saw a thorough remodelling. The taxidermy was restored once more, and the history of its genesis and its connections to the wildlife trade were researched more in-depth. The *Tiermuseum* reopened its doors in 1996, with new accompanying information about the trade, which is still part of the exhibition today. However, the dioramas themselves remained, again, nearly unchanged and resemble closely the display that Brandmüller designed in 1933 – even as of now. Small rearrangements in the dioramas as well as the addition of information were thus the only changes conducted within the last century.<sup>28</sup> However, the museum has been actively engaged in several provenance research projects on its collections and exhibitions, signalling that it is open and indeed eager to address the objects' and its own past.<sup>29</sup>

As for the arrangement of the animal specimens, they are presented in three-dimensional dioramas exemplifying their natural habitats. Some species are shown in groups. The primates are mainly presented in bigger groups as families, and the cougars are featuring one mother animal with several younger ones. Thus, they are shown as if they would engage in social interaction (Fig. 2). However, in most of the cases, one animal of each species is presented.

The dioramas are organised geographically and meant to represent five world regions (Africa, Asia, Australia, South and North America) and their “characteristic” animals. Different species are fused together in the dioramas as part of one “community” and thus create an idealised version of the regional nature. In addition, a canary bird, a Brown bear, two Mississippi alligators, a Galápagos giant tortoise, and a Komodo dragon are shown outside the dioramas. The descriptions of the dioramas include the continent of origin, and the German names of the animals. There is also a key of the diorama so that visitors can find the corresponding animals in the display.

The diorama called “Africa” is the biggest (Fig. 3); it fills the whole ground floor. The other imagined four continents share the space on the second floor. In the “Australia” diorama, a Tasmanian tiger specimen (thylacine) can be seen, a today extinct animal of which the museum is especially proud.<sup>30</sup> The information on the animals and especially on their regions of origin is scarce: only the continents are named.<sup>31</sup> The question if these regrouped animals actually lived close to each other or were scattered about different regions of huge continents remains unanswered. Instead, a classical image of “peaceful nature” is created. Considering that representations of supposedly “objective” sciences are also constructed and presented to the public, museums in themselves are a “staging of science”, i.e., they intentionally connect facts with the imaginary in order to convey a message.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the dioramas in Alfeld do not represent “the nature”, but a construction of a specific knowledge about it. The animal bodies and their bodily position are adjusted in a deliberate way to create a certain image in accordance with that construction. At the same time, they are placed in a fictional habitat to generate a sense of reality. This “authentic” image is shaped by the curator Brandmüller, and the knowledge and ideas of the time. The fictionality of these dioramas is hidden behind the seemingly “natural” and “authentic” presentation of the animal bodies. In the following paragraphs, I will further examine how the scientific knowledge and museum practices of the time influenced the exhibition style of the Alfeld Museum.









Figure 3 | The "Africa-Diorama" in Alfeld's *Tiermuseum*.  
© Municipal Museum Alfeld, Photo: Martin Liebetrueth

## The “Biological Turn” at the Roots of the Exhibition Style

Brandmüller’s way of presenting nature and animals cannot be understood without reference to the reform movement of the German natural history museums in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Natural history museums were simultaneously authors and objects of a paradigmatic shift: the scientific focus shifted from taxonomy to biology, and with it, the style of exhibition also changed.<sup>33</sup> Where previously a sober systematic alignment of natural history objects was the fashion, a preference for staged groups of animals prevailed. This “biological turn” around 1900 was triggered by new scientific findings. The best-known new established forms of representation were so-called “biological groups” and dioramas.<sup>34</sup> The former set out to represent the “life” of animals. Therefore, “biological groups” were supposed to show where animals lived, what they ate, and their offspring, as well as the different stages of aging. These representations also contained plants, soil and stone, and aimed to simulate an “authentic” depiction of the animal in their natural habitat.<sup>35</sup> To this aim, scientists tried to determine ranges of distributions of animals, thus defining clearly separate regions with their stereotypical animals.<sup>36</sup> The idea of defined regions connected to characteristic animals proved to be an especially persistent scientific base for the re-organisation of exhibitions, and proved equally attractive to visitors.<sup>37</sup> Alongside the rearrangement from clear systematic taxonomy to staged group arrangement, taxidermy was an important factor in the “biological turn”. Taxidermy made it possible to form the animal bodies around a core of clay, wood, straw, mesh, or plaster and to create an allusion of corporeality, movement, and liveliness. This form of presentation became dominant in German natural history museums without bigger disputes or controversies.<sup>38</sup>

A further development or subcategory of these “biological groups” were dioramas, featuring not only the direct surroundings of one species, but whole landscapes.<sup>39</sup> In German natural history museums, the focus was laid on smaller “biological groups” that became the dominant form of presentation – in contrast to the USA and Sweden, where the wider presentations of whole landscapes in the form of dioramas became the norm.<sup>40</sup> Both forms were – and are – far from authentic. They need to be seen as constructed illusions of animals in their habitat, located in between fact and fiction, which are highly idealised; e.g., only healthy animals without any “unsatisfied”

characteristics were deemed suitable to represent their conspecifics.<sup>41</sup> While these forms of presentation were highly innovative at the beginning, they became dominant and therefore more and more static. Exhibition styles were scarcely revised and determined display in natural history museums for decades to come, and in some cases, up until today.<sup>42</sup>

It is thus no surprise that we can still find the same exhibition style in Alfeld. After all, it is a small local museum at the periphery. Many of the aforementioned aspects can be found here, too: animals are supposed to represent their kind. The dioramas were created to depict geographical regions through the display of their "characteristic" animals, and the surroundings at least evoke the impression that an "authentic" habitat was meant to be presented. Additionally, the chosen positions depict the animals as seemingly alive. As previously mentioned, different species are displayed alongside each other even if their proximity would not occur in their habitats. One scene showcases a "hunting" moment, further purporting the illusion of liveliness and authenticity. All of these exhibition choices are at once representative of the time they were created in as well as of the therein constructed vision of "nature". However, the question of why Brandmüller chose the less-widespread dioramas over the more popular (in Germany) "biological groups" remains unanswered, as no accounts of Brandmüller's are preserved.

## Colonial Gaze and Heteronormativity in Natural History Museums

Seeing that the display methods of many natural history museums have not changed fundamentally, it is important to ask what remnants of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century scientific discourse remain. The roles of 19<sup>th</sup>-century natural history museums within colonial mindsets are slowly being debated. As Das and Lowe elaborate, natural history museums transported ideas about the "hierarchies of races" and thereby scientifically legitimised global collecting strategies and colonial endeavours. A core element of these procedures were the exhibiting and "othering" of non-European people and regions. Since "race" as a biological category was disproved after the Second World War, the concept of "race" was removed from the museum plates. However, with it, the topics of racism and its socio-political consequences were erased from the debate as well. Colonial entanglements and forceful methods of science

were not mentioned either. Consequently, racist structures did not vanish from museums, they just became less visible. Implicitly, they still shape exhibition styles and the stories that are told, and determine what is silenced or rendered invisible.<sup>43</sup>

Natural history museums are not the only museums tied to a colonial and racist past,<sup>44</sup> but they are slower in reckoning with their legacy. Natural Sciences had been defined as “neutral” and, accordingly, “free of ideology”, making them less obvious agents than, for instance, ethnographic museums. Nevertheless, natural history museums played a crucial role in spreading and legitimising the now falsified ideas of “race sciences”, a fact that is often not addressed in current exhibitions.<sup>45</sup> What is more, the colonial contexts of collecting are commonly not part of the museal knowledge and presentation, which leads to selective and depoliticised stories about how these objects came to Europe, and in consequence, to a “provenance amnesia” (Holger Stoecker).<sup>46</sup> Colonial expeditions collected, purchased, and stole vast quantities of objects and specimens, even if the collection was not their primary concern. Those so neutrally called “expeditions” were most often linked to violence and to the subjugation of the local population.<sup>47</sup> Establishment of natural history museums and the imperial expansions thus belonged together, the former supposedly honouring the latter’s assumed deeds, while colonial hierarchies allowed vast amounts of objects and animals to be amassed.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, scientific knowledge about different regions was necessary to enforce colonial power.<sup>49</sup> Collections were not only documenting landscapes, they also implied a claim over the region, even symbolising possession of it.<sup>50</sup> The omission of scientific racism and colonial entanglements from the official museum narratives reproduces colonial narratives and causes gaps in the museums’ and collections’ pasts and stories.<sup>51</sup>

Natural history museums worked with clear dichotomies that contributed to the “othering” of regions and people. They put reason in opposition to nature, male to female, human to animal, civilisation to wilderness. In many ways, today’s museums still systematically present non-European cultures in this way, thereby reproducing colonial hierarchies. Natural history museums in particular followed 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropological ideas. Non-Europeans were presented as part of nature, whereas Europeans stood for civilisation, enabling the differentiation between “us” and “them”. Colonised regions and peoples were often naturalised and exoticised.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, exhibited taxidermic animals tell stories about the white people who brought their bodies to the museum. Mainly, the white male hunter is put centre stage. His adventures, the dangers he seemingly overcame, and the

wilderness and the rarity of these animals were crucial parts of the marketing strategy of the museums, as spectacular exhibits attracted visitors.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, racism was not only in the gaps between the displays, but also in the heroisation of the white man and in stories about his supposed superiority over nature. Moreover, circa 1900, German natural history museums contributed – alongside other types of museums – to the imperialistic discourse of "*Heimat*", a patriotic term for homeland. Most natural history museums in Germany at the time displayed taxidermy of regional animals that were meant to represent an illusion of the undamaged nature at home. This romantic idea of an ideal homeland was prioritised and exhibited initially. Mostly later on, representations of more remote areas were added. These displays were complementary and interrelated to each other, creating images of "the homeland" and "the colony" and thus, strengthening the hierarchical dichotomy.<sup>54</sup>

Many of these aspects – "provenance amnesia", dichotomies, othering, idealisation of the white agent, the concept of "*Heimat*" – can be found in the exhibition of Alfeld's *Tiermuseum*, too. In line with the fashion of the 1930s, the Alfeld Museum focused first on the representation of "*Heimat*", exhibiting taxidermically prepared regional animals. This was according to the aim to become a *Heimatmuseum* to the city and region. Only afterwards and with larger display space available could non-European animals move in and accordingly were seen as complementary to the "homeland" animals. The separation between "homeland" and the "exotic" had a spatial component, too: the two collections were displayed in two different houses, furthering the "othering" aspect. This opposition may have emphasised the dualism of "us" and "them" to the visitors. Additionally, the exhibition of ethnographica from non-European peoples alongside animals in the *Tiermuseum* contributes to the falsely assumed idea that these artifacts would somehow belong more to nature than to civilisation.

In the accompanying exhibition material that was added in the 1990s, the focus was laid on the Alfeld protagonists, especially on taxidermist and founder Alois Brandmüller. His biography is presented alongside a portrait and another photo of him at his desk where he is studying a human skull. It emphasises his scientific aspirations while at the same time stressing the close entanglements between rationality, natural history, and the racist anthropological study of humans. This connection, however, is not further contextualised. The other plates introduce the two trading companies (and their European protagonists) and detail their hunting procedures. Combined with the big taxidermies of crocodiles that are on the ceiling in the staircase –

hovering over and gazing at the visitors – and the emphasised focus on the rare, now extinct Tasmanian tiger, the narrative of a wild, potentially threatening (and at the same time vanishing) nature that is opposed to European civilisation is enforced. Those narratives strengthen the idea that science and the hunt by white men would conquer those animals and nature. In much the same vein, the other dioramas reduce whole continents to naturalised groups of animals who are themselves idealised and stereotyped. The dioramas are not telling stories about the colonial entanglements of the collecting, but they represent one-sided interpretations of a multifaceted space.

Some of the animal specimens, especially monkeys and primates, are arranged in families or in groups of mothers with their offspring. There are also masculine animals who seem more aggressive and protective of their group. In some cases, it could also be the mother animal who fiercely defends her offspring. In that way, dioramas and “biologic groups” showcase heteronormativity and gender roles. Animals were – and often still are – presented as families, consisting of father, mother, and offspring, but these presented families probably did not exist in real life. Even if the individual animals’ stories cannot be reconstructed, it seems unlikely that they lived and died together before being shown in the dioramas, given that Brandmüller collected the animal bodies over a prolonged period and on various occasions. This underlines how this arrangement follows patriarchal norms and roles of the idealised family that was seen as the origin of life. The idea that the family represents the ideal shelter filled with love and care was reinforced and promoted to the visitors. Accordingly, the animal groups symbolised social relations between men and women, children and elders, friends and foes. The imagined inner safe space could easily be extended to the nation and homeland.<sup>55</sup> These political as well as social categories were staged as “natural” and thereby legitimised, as well in the case of the *Tiermuseum*.<sup>56</sup>

## Forgotten Agents: Gaps and Silences in the Museum

To fully examine the museum’s exhibition, it is crucial to consider not only the stories told, but also the gaps and silences these narratives produce. Silences need to be seen – according to Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Saynor – as performative and productive, and therefore as being an integral part of

communicated knowledge.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, being left out denies the individual recognition and can lead to their erasure from collective memory. Recent museum studies have detailed how less privileged voices in society are often excluded on a structural basis from museum narratives.<sup>58</sup> Natural history museums are no exception. The skills, knowledge, and scientific contribution of Indigenous actors are seldomly fully acknowledged and their names and biographies often obliterated – even though the colonial and collecting endeavours relied heavily on them.<sup>59</sup> Equally, animal hunters mention Indigenous aid only in passing as “loyal helpers”; achievements were mostly attributed to the so-called leader of the mission.<sup>60</sup> These gaps and silences are hard to recover since this information was not preserved. Not only exhibitions, but also archives followed a colonial logic. Their pre-selection of facts and objects influenced and guided – sometimes unconsciously – the narratives in the museums.<sup>61</sup>

This negligence can also be seen in the histories around the animal trading companies in Alfeld. The role of non-European actors cannot be underestimated (Fig. 4): They were crucial for the acquisition, capture, and transport of the animals, and many continued to care for them in Germany, too. Non-European actors often travelled back and forth from the regions of capture to the destination where the animals were to be sold.<sup>62</sup> Yet, while their help was necessary for the trade to work, they are, for the most part, scarcely mentioned in sources and by extension, in today’s exhibition. An exception are photographs that depict the hunt of a giraffe and a zebra. These photos show that during capture, the physical work of Indigenous agents was required, though further contextualisation of these images is missing. However, the importance of Indigenous help for capturing animals in general is mentioned in the texts, though there is no further information on their personal stories, nor on their involvement in the transport and care for the animals. In consequence, beyond their “usefulness” for the hunt, their individual agendas and biographies disappear.

Another often-criticised aspect of natural history museums is that information on non-white humans or their objects is frequently presented alongside fauna and flora of the regions. This reinforces the dichotomy between civilisation and nature, placing non-Europeans closer to nature.<sup>63</sup> Sadly, Alfeld, too, shows non-European ethnographica only in the *Tiermuseum*, thus aligning them with flora and fauna (as opposed to being shown alongside the European artefacts that can be found in the main complex). The objects





Figure 4 | This photograph shows the hunt and is presented in the *Tiermuseum*. A remodelling of the exhibition is planned for 2024. © Museum der Stadt Alfeld

are not further contextualised, and information on the places and peoples from whom they were taken is lacking. A possible hint on the provenance of these objects is a photograph of Ruhe employee Alfred Glenewinkel, who most likely brought them as souvenirs from his trips to South America. Even if this connection remains vague, the photograph links these objects back to only the “collector”. Not unusual for exhibition foci of the 1990s in regional museums, the *Tiermuseum*, too, misses the chance to critically engage with the missing information.

The stereotypical way of presenting non-white agents next to “primitive” practices or “nature” did not stop at the museum. Animal companies such as Reiche and Ruhe also engaged in the display of live animals in zoological gardens and organised several “*Völkerschauen*”.<sup>64</sup> These shows instated colonial gazes and reinforced “racial” and cultural hierarchies.<sup>65</sup> Andratschke and Müller illustrate how in the case of Reiche and Ruhe, objects, animals and humans were all part of the same shows and how, consequently, provenance research will help to untangle these histories and to understand them better.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, “*Völkerschauen*” are mentioned only briefly in the Alfeld

exhibition. Their story is not omitted, even though it is presented solely from an economic point of view, and only the animal trading companies are presented as agents. A critical assessment of their colonial and racist history is missing, as are the imperial networks they worked in. Also, the imperial networks linked to the animal trade<sup>67</sup> are (as of now) not mentioned in the exhibition.

Another perspective is absent in the museum which might not spring to mind immediately. It is the stories and biographies of the exhibited animals themselves and their agency and role within the trade.<sup>68</sup> In this respect, many natural history museums today (and museums in general) do not consider the perspective and role of animals in society – except for dedicated exhibitions. In the case of the Alfeld trade, it would be especially worthwhile to examine their role more closely. Their “embodied agency” (Gesine Krüger) influenced and interfered with the trade in multiple ways, e.g., through resistance or through their death.<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, animal reactions needed to be considered and trade practices adapted. As their life was linked to the profit of the enterprise, their survival and well-being was of utmost importance. Their corporality rendered it impossible to treat them like mere commodities.<sup>70</sup> The exhibition offers a glimpse into the plight of the animals as well as how they resisted their capture and suffered under the living conditions and the transport. The trade also had a high mortality rate, resulting in many animals dying before even reaching European shores.<sup>71</sup> Looking more closely at them individually would open up new stories. As the *Tiermuseum* focuses on them as representations of nature and species, very much like natural history museums at the beginning, these histories are buried. The dioramas only express human imaginations about nature, but they do not represent the animal. Their individual stories, resistances, and suffering remain unknown to us. To include the individual biographies of the specimens would be a chance to show the vast global networks of the animal trade and the often-violent human-animal-interactions. To this end, the dioramas could then be deconstructed and seen more easily as a testimony of the human society of that time, instead as representative of an authentic nature.

## Conclusion and Prospects

The Alfeld wildlife trade was deeply entangled in colonial contexts, a fact that is not highlighted enough in the exhibition of the *Tiermuseum* that was reworked in the 1990s. The dioramas and the simultaneous display of ethnographic objects inadvertently replicates the implicit colonial gaze. This is not surprising as the exhibition style can be related back to the “biological turn” and the modernisation processes in 19<sup>th</sup>-century natural history museums. The dualism and the simplifications of nature and non-European regions reproduce racism, too, by failing to include the agency of non-European actors. Furthermore, including a focus on animal agency would allow for new approaches to this complicated history. At the current state, the lack of either of these perspectives leaves room only for a strong focus on the white male animal hunters, traders, and scientists.

To battle the status quo means to shift the focus – toward the colonial aspects. This opens up the webbed trading networks that not only heavily depended on colonial infrastructure, but also on the help of Indigenous people and animals. Deepening these histories will help visitors to comprehend the full historical context of the dioramas. The colonial aspects of the global wildlife trade in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries should be established as the context of formation of the *Tiermuseum* and its collection. While it is often argued that dioramas are in themselves documents of the museum’s history,<sup>72</sup> their implicit messages and the power of their images need to be scrutinised, deconstructed, and clearly communicated to the visitors. To follow Das and Lowe’s demand, the history of Natural Sciences and natural history museums should be told including their colonial legacy. Indigenous people’s contribution to scientific knowledge as well as their agency should be made visible, and the provenance of the collections examined.<sup>73</sup>

Yet, a shift in focus can only go so far: sources and information to include new perspectives are lacking, as the archive and the preservation of historical sources are also shaped by colonial thinking, which makes it hard to reconstruct them – also in Alfeld’s case. Additionally, research and rearranging require resources which are often scarce in small museums. Despite these challenges, the museum of Alfeld actively took measures in order to meet these demands. A first major step was to include the history of the animal trade in the *Tiermuseum* for the re-opening in 1996, even if this – as detailed above –

is still wrapped up in the colonial past of the collection. To move beyond this, the museum allowed for so-called "First Checks" to be conducted in its collections in 2016 and 2019, examining whether there were possible Nazi loot in its depots.<sup>74</sup> With a long-term project dedicated to researching the origins of the taxidermy collections, further contextualisation is on the way.<sup>75</sup>

An important next step is to consider how these findings can be incorporated into the exhibitions, and thus be communicated to the public. Countering the colonial gaze should be paramount. In the special case of Alfeld, the ethnographic and natural history objects need to be seen as interconnected, especially because they are in part exhibited jointly, categorising the non-European cultures falsely along with fauna and flora. First steps could be to include the perspective of non-European agents and secondly animals' biographies, thereby also challenging the currently persisting focus on the agency of white men. What is more, the artificiality of the dioramas and the illusion of an untouched and pristine nature should be deconstructed. These steps would help to counter the outdated narratives that still prevail in today's exhibition style of the museum. The museum's openness to dialogue, actions in addressing its past, and interest in adapting the current exhibition (which is planned for 2024) give hope for a more complete representation of the collection's history in the future – a striking feat for a small museum.



- 1 „Wilde Tiere ganz aus der Nähe“, translation by the author. Stadt Alfeld (Leine) (Ed.): Tiermuseum - Alfeld (Leine), on: *Website Stadt Alfeld (Leine)*, <https://www.alfeld.de/leben-lernen/stadtmuseum-tiermuseum/tiermuseum>, accessed 19 November 2023.
- 2 „Große und kleine Besucher fühlen sich in die afrikanische Savanne versetzt, wenn sie Kraniche am Wasserloch beobachten, sie sehen Tiger durch den indonesischen Dschungel schleichen und entdecken bunte Papageien in Südamerika“, translation by the author. Ibid.
- 3 Hoes, Charlotte Marlene (2021): *Zwischenbericht* (unpublished), Deutsches Zentrum für Kulturgutverluste, Provena Database, p. 3.
- 4 Andratschke, Claudia; Müller, Lars (2021): „‘Menschen, Tiere und leblose Gegenstände.’ Die Alfelder Tierhändler Reiche und Ruhe als Ausstatter von Völkerschauen“, in: Lars Frühsorge, Sonja Riehn, Michael Schütte (Eds): *Völkerschau-Objekte. Beiträge der Tagung vom 27. bis 29.10.2020 in Lübeck*, Lübeck, p. 131–143, here 131f.
- 5 Ibid., p. 141. For more information on the history of these two animal trading companies, see also the introduction to this volume by Charlotte Hoes.
- 6 Das, Subhadra; Lowe, Miranda (2018): “Nature Read in Black and White: Decolonial Approaches to Interpreting Natural History Collections”, in: *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, vol. 6, p. 4–14, here 5f.
- 7 Barringer, Tim (1998): “The South Kensington Museum and the colonial project”, in: Tim Barringer, Tom Flynn (Eds): *Colonialism and the Object. Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum*, London; New York [Museum meanings], p. 11–27, here 11.
- 8 Ibid., p. 11.
- 9 Das; Lowe (2018), *Nature Read in Black and White*, p. 6.
- 10 Howie, Geraldine (2015): “Dioramas as Constructs of Reality: Art, Photography, and the Discursive Space”, in: Sue Dale Tunnicliffe, Annette Scheersoi (Eds): *Natural History Dioramas. History, Construction and Educational Role*, Dordrecht, p. 39–65, here 62.
- 11 Gravenkamp, Ina (1996): *Museum der Stadt Alfeld. Sammlung exotischer Tierpräparate*, Alfeld (Leine), p. 11.
- 12 Scheidegger, Tobias (2017): ‘Petite Science’. *Außeruniversitäre Naturforschung in der Schweiz um 1900*, Göttingen, p. 29–31.
- 13 Gravenkamp (1996): *Sammlung exotischer Tierpräparate*, p. 11.
- 14 This collection was not preserved until today.
- 15 Gravenkamp (1996), *Sammlung exotischer Tierpräparate*, p. 11.
- 16 Riemenschneider, Christian (2019): *Abschlussbericht. Nach dem Erstcheck – Provenienzforschung zu Verdachtsfällen und ausgewählten Beständen in den Stadt- und Regionalmuseen Südniedersachsens. Das Heimatmuseum Duderstadt und das Stadt- und Tiermuseum Alfeld an der Leine*, Göttingen, p. 277.
- 17 Gravenkamp (1996), *Sammlung exotischer Tierpräparate*, p. 9. Glenewinkel, an employee of the Ruhe company, reports in his memoirs that he helped Brandmüller as his former student to prepare animals. See Glenewinkel, Alfred (1983): *Zoodirektor Alfred Glenewinkel erzählt!* (unpublished), Mallorca, p. 15.
- 18 Hoes (2021), *Zwischenbericht*, p. 24. Hermann Ruhe II himself states in his memoirs explicitly that Brandmüller received deceased animals from the company. See Ruhe, Hermann (1960): *Wilde Tiere frei Haus*, München, p. 201.
- 19 Hoes (2021), *Zwischenbericht*, p. 24.
- 20 Gravenkamp (1996), *Sammlung exotischer Tierpräparate*, p. 11.
- 21 Andratschke; Müller (2021), „Menschen, Tiere und leblose Gegenstände“, p. 131f.
- 22 Especially in their self-promotion, but also supported by contemporary testimonies, they claimed to be the biggest animal trader in the world. Hoes, Charlotte Marlene (2022): “Live Cargo, Dead Ends: The German Wildlife Trade in Global Perspective”, in: *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, vol. 70, p. 67–96, here 73.
- 23 “[...] immer die ganze Bürgerschaft in Aufregung [brachte].” Translation by the author. Glenewinkel (1983), *Zoodirektor Alfred Glenewinkel erzählt!*, p. 10.
- 24 Ibid.

- 25 Hoes outlines the heroism and focus on the own success in the reports or memoirs of the men engaged in the animal trade. See Hoes (2022), *Live Cargo, Dead Ends*, p. 68.
- 26 Gravenkamp (1996), *Sammlung exotischer Tierpräparate*, p. 9.
- 27 Nyhart, Lynn K. (2018): "Publics and Practices", in: Helen Anne Curry, Nicholas Jardine, James Andrew Secord, Emma C. Spary (Eds): *Worlds of Natural History*, Cambridge, p. 335–347, here 347.
- 28 Hoes (2021), *Zwischenbericht*, p. 33.
- 29 On these projects, see Hoes (2021), *Zwischenbericht*; Neef, Josefine (2021): *Klärung der Herkunft von menschlichen Überresten, vermutlich Aboriginal ancestral remains, im Museum der Stadt Alfeld* (unpublished), Deutsches Zentrum für Kulturgutverluste, Proveana Database; Riemenschneider (2019), *Nach dem Erstcheck*.
- 30 Stadt Alfeld (Leine), *Tiermuseum*.
- 31 Informations on the animals are only provided next to the big specimen who are presented in the hallway.
- 32 Samida, Stefanie (2011): "'Inszenierte Wissenschaft'. Einführung in die Thematik", in: Stefanie Saminda (Ed.): *Inszenierte Wissenschaft. Zur Popularisierung von Wissen im 19. Jahrhundert*, Bielefeld, p. 11–23, here 12f.
- 33 The term "biological" dominantly referred to the way of animal life between 1840 and 1900 and therefore needs to be understood accordingly in this context. Köstering, Susanne (2003): *Natur zum Anschauen. Das Naturkundemuseum des deutschen Kaiserreichs 1871–1914*, Köln, p. 108.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 1–3.
- 35 Kretschmann, Carsten (2006): *Räume öffnen sich. Naturhistorische Museen im Deutschland des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, p. 84f.
- 36 The definite amount and borders of these animal geographic regions were still object of scientific dispute. Most of the German Natural History Museums oriented themselves according to "The Geographical Distribution of Animals" from A.R. Wallace (1876). He established six regions which each had four subregions: the Palaearctic region (Northern Europe, Mediterranean, Siberia, Manchuria), the Ethiopian region (East, West, and South Africa, Madagascar), the Oriental region (Central India, Ceylon, Indochina, Indo-Malaya), the Australian region (Austro-Malaya, Australia, New Zealand, Polynesia), the Neotropical region (Antilles, Brazil, Chile, Mexico), and the Nearctic region (California, Eastern USA, Canada). *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 37 Köstering (2003), *Natur zum Anschauen*, p. 97; Kretschmann (2006), *Räume öffnen sich*, p. 81.
- 38 Köstering (2003), *Natur zum Anschauen*, p. 167–169.
- 39 Kretschmann (2006), *Räume öffnen sich*, p. 84f.
- 40 Köstering (2003), *Natur zum Anschauen*, p. 173.
- 41 Howie (2015), *"Dioramas as Constructs of Reality"*, p. 62.
- 42 Köstering (2003), *Natur zum Anschauen*, p. 280f.
- 43 This paragraph is mainly based on Das; Lowe (2018), *Nature Read in Black and White*, p. 5f.
- 44 Supplementary to other studies focusing on Natural History Museums, Aldrich demonstrates this also for „colonial museums“ which needed a realignment after formal decolonisation that lead at first to the complete eradication of the colonial past and the topic itself. See Aldrich, Robert (2009): "Colonial Museums in a postcolonial Europe", in: *African and Black diaspora*, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 137–156, here 143.
- 45 Das; Lowe (2018), *Nature Read in Black and White*, p. 7.
- 46 Holger Stoecker establishes this term in his analysis of the exhibition of the *Brachiosaurus brancai* in the Natural History Museum in Berlin. Translation by the author. See Stoecker, Holger (2018): "Ein afrikanischer Dinosaurier in Berlin. Der \*Brachiosaurus brancai\* als deutscher und tansanischer Erinnerungsort", in: Christiane Berh (Ed.): *Umstrittene Objekte*, Essen, p. 65–83, here 78.
- 47 Das; Lowe (2018), *Nature Read in Black and White*, p. 6.
- 48 Aldrich (2009), *Colonial Museums in a Postcolonial Europe*, p. 138.
- 49 Adams, William M.; Mulligan, Martin (2003): "Introduction", in: William M. Adams, Martin Mulligan (Eds): *Decolonizing Nature. Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era*, London, p. 1–15, p. 1–4.

- 50 Gröpl, Myriam (2021): "Von kolonialen Sammlungen und Dekolonisierungsversuchen. Das (ehemalige) Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg als (post-)kolonialer Erinnerungsort", in: Jürgen Zimmerer, Sebastian Todzi (Eds): *Hamburg. Tor zur kolonialen Welt. Erinnerungsorte der (post)kolonialen Globalisierung*, vol. 1, Göttingen, p. 279–292, here 290.
- 51 Das; Lowe (2018), *Nature Read in Black and White*, p. 8.
- 52 This paragraph is mainly based on Rodriguez, Julia E. (2020): "Decolonizing or Recolonizing? The (Mis) Representation of Humanity in Natural History Museums, in: *History of Anthropology Review online*, vol. 44, <https://histanthro.org/notes/decolonizing-or-recolonizing/>, accessed 25 November 2023.
- 53 Köstering (2003), *Natur zum Anschauen*, p. 204f.
- 54 Kretschmann (2006), *Räume öffnen sich*, p. 273–275.
- 55 This paragraph is mainly based on Kretschmann (2006), *Räume öffnen sich*, p. 290 and Köstering (2003), *Natur zum Anschauen*, p. 278.
- 56 Köstering (2003), *Natur zum Anschauen*, p. 278.
- 57 Mason, Rhiannon; Sayner, Joanne (2019): "Bringing Museal Silence into Focus. Eight Ways of Thinking about Silence in Museums", in: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, p. 5–20, here 6f.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Das; Lowe (2018), *Nature Read in Black and White*, p. 8.
- 60 Haraway has illustrated this for Carl Akeley in 1984. See Haraway, Donna (1984): "Teddy Bear Patriarchy. Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936", in: *Social Text*, vol. 11, p. 20–64, here 49–51.
- 61 Stoler, Ann Laura (2002): "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance", in: *Archival Science*, vol. 2, p. 87–109, here 90f.
- 62 Hoes (2022), *Live Cargo, Dead Ends*, p. 72; 81.
- 63 Rodriguez (2020), *Decolonizing or Recolonizing?*
- 64 Hoes (2022), *Live Cargo, Dead Ends*, p. 74.
- 65 Susann Lewerenz analysed that these strategies didn't always work out, also because actors were interfering and using their limited room for maneuver. See Lewerenz, Susann (2007): "Völkerschauen und die Konstituierung rassifizierter Körper", in: Torsten Junge, Imke Schmincke (Eds): *Marginalisierte Körper. Zur Soziologie und Geschichte des Körpers*, Münster, p. 135–153, here 135–138.
- 66 Andratschke; Müller (2021), *"Menschen, Tiere und leblose Gegenstände"*, p. 140f.
- 67 Hoes (2022), *Live Cargo, Dead Ends*, p. 94.
- 68 Human-Animal-Studies argue that, since animals are an important part of our society, we need to examine the relations and interactions between humans and other animals in order to fully understand the inner workings of our society. Thereby, animals should be regarded as agents that have the ability to produce their own history. See Chimaira-Arbeitskreis für Human-Animal Studies (2011): *Human-Animal Studies. Über die gesellschaftliche Natur von Mensch-Tier-Verhältnissen*, Bielefeld, p. 18–20.
- 69 Hoes (2022), *Live Cargo, Dead Ends*, p. 89.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ibid., p. 94.
- 72 Hutterer, Rainer (2015): "Habitat Dioramas as Historical Documents. A Case Study", in: Sue Dale Tunnicliffe, Annette Scheersoi (Eds): *Natural History Dioramas. History, Construction and Educational Role*, Dordrecht, p. 23–32, here 29; Munsch, Mareike et al. (2015): "Conservative Restoration and Reconstruction of Historical Natural History Dioramas", in: Sue Dale Tunnicliffe, Annette Scheersoi (Eds): *Natural History Dioramas. History, Construction and Educational Role*, Dordrecht, p. 114–130, here 128f.
- 73 Das; Lowe (2018), *Nature Read in Black and White*, p. 11f.
- 74 Riemenschneider (2019), *Nach dem Erstcheck*, p. 16.
- 75 Initiated by the museum itself, a research project was conducted in cooperation between the museum, the Network for Provenance Research in Lower-Saxony and the Chair for Modern History at the Georg August University in Göttingen.