

What is a WeltenMuseum?

Multi-disciplinary institutions such as the Landesmuseum Hannover, the State Museum of Lower Saxony, are rare. Although there are some museums showing different exhibitions under one roof, it is highly unusual to provide an overarching link between art and nature, even within an international context. In addition, the museum has for many years been home to a vivarium – prompting many a visitor to ask derisively about the possible connection between fish and great art.

Put differently, multi-disciplinary set-ups are often negatively described as general stores without a clear direction and thus inferior to specialist museums. However, the resulting call for a separation of the individual sections stands in contradiction to Humboldt's notion of a world museum.

In contrast with the collections in Berlin or Dresden, the Hanover "Museum für Kunst und Wissenschaft" (Museum of Art and Science) had no royal connection: The "Naturhistorische Gesellschaft Hannover" (Hanoverian Society for Natural History), the "Historische Verein für Niedersachsen" (Historical Association of Lower Saxony) and the "Verein für die öffentliche Kunstsammlung" (Association for Public Art Collection) had decided in 1852 to combine their collections. In 1856, the new museum opened its doors in Sophienstrasse 2, now the "Künstlerhaus" (House of Artists), before moving in 1902 to its current position at the Maschpark, then known as the "Provinzialmuseum" (Provincial Museum). A multi-disciplinary museum from the start, the new building now permitted a division into three departments: a history department with the collections on archaeology, the history of Hanover, a coin collection and ethnological exhibits, a natural history department and an art department.

Even at the time of its establishment, its name "Museum für Kunst und Wissenschaft" (Museum of Art and Science) put it far ahead of older royal cabinets of curiosities and wonders; to our ears, this title sounds most progressive and programmatic. Wilhelm Leibniz, the great proponent of the Enlightenment, already saw museums as "theatres of nature and art", as spaces where art and science would meet. These days, the art scholar Horst Bredekamp not only recognises in this a historic dimension, but goes as far as viewing "art and science in a productive laboratory situation" as a "motto for the upcoming century".

Museums thus not only embody and preserve the world, but they also stand outside of space and time. The internal and the external condition each other: there is a constant input from the outside, while the museums on the inside are a reflection of the world outside. What better place to rise to this challenge than in a museum with five collections, with the State Gallery, the Coin Cabinet, with natural history complete with vivarium, with archaeology and ethnology? Where could the WeltenMuseum as a reflection of the world present itself more comprehensively than in an institution which is more than just a museum of art and natural



sciences as are so many others, but which as one of the central museums of Lower Saxony is tasked with contributing towards the identity of the inhabitants of this federal state? The new concept, gradually implemented from 2013, takes guidance from the museum's history with its three departments and from the architecture of its building as a reflection of the world. The ground floor is now home to the NatureWorlds as a link between the previously separated sections of vivarium and natural history. The first floor is given over to the HumanWorlds, the unrivalled combination of the archaeological and ethnological departments, of the Old and the New World. Above both are the ArtWorlds with paintings and sculptures from the Middle Ages to the 20th century.

This approach, despite being rather abstract, is well received by our visitors. The State Museum is one of the most popular destinations for family outings within Hanover and its surroundings, and many culture enthusiasts have discovered it afresh thanks to the new presentation of its collections. The museum's concept also focusses on people with a migration background, because cultural contacts and migration play a decisive role in the HumanWorlds and its central question as to the actual innovative powers behind human progress. Otherness is thus not seen as strange or even frightening, but understood as an enrichment also for our society. This is inclusion at its best. Children, parents or "best agers", irrespective of their background, social status or education – every visitor finds something special within the Hanover State Museum with which he or she can identify.

For that reason, the result of this new concept is not diversity but a new unity, linking the old and the new, art and nature. According to Michel Foucault, it is the deliberate combination of the incompatible. And thus truly unique.

The NatureWorlds

The new NatureWorlds on the ground floor have created a vital link between a vivarium and natural history, between living and past nature, that is currently unique within North Germany. The exhibits not only concern Lower Saxony, but are internationally located. The exhibition concerns itself with popular holiday destinations such as the Canary Islands or the Caribbean as well as with "Steinhuder Meer" (Lake Steinhude) – and throws light on all.

This results in new perspectives on the living environment of the inhabitants of Lower Saxony, time and again revealing astonishing connections between seemingly different places and topics. A look at the history of the earth shows that the climatic conditions in the now tropical Caribbean once prevailed here in an older, but very similar manifestation during the Late Jurassic period. This results in a great advantage in the conveyance of knowledge: geological aspects are linked directly to those of current habitats and both combined with the wealth of life in the aquariums and terrariums. The main focus is thus on an intensive interlinking of all aspects of natural history, in the same way that they actually occur in the appearance of the environment on our earth.

It starts with the "WasserWelten" (Water Worlds), home to more than 200 different species of aquatic animals from very different habitats: cold or warm water, salt or fresh water. Amidst the aquariums, additional animals from our seas and oceans are presented in a "cabinet of skulls". From water to land: an elegantly designed transition area compares the extant life in the aquariums with that of various fossilised marine organisms and also prepares for the next part of the exhibition.

The "LandWelten" (Land Worlds) are occupied by dinosaurs, reptiles and amphibians. Visitors "travel" along various coastlines from the familiar North Sea via the Mediterranean and the Canary Islands to the Caribbean and the coast of South America. This makes it possible to explain and illustrate complex scientific concepts such as the high biodiversity of insects, the specific development of new species on islands, but also the creation of volcanoes, using





popular holiday destinations as stations. In addition, a key focus is on “South America – the Amazon River”, with numerous terrariums, home to living inhabitants of the tropical jungle, complemented with explanations and objects on aspects of important expeditions such as Alexander von Humboldt’s exploration of the equinoctial regions.

For the first time ever, the exhibition also includes a large number of original stone slabs with spectacular dinosaur prints from the Obernkirchen quarries. They confirm that 140 million years ago, the giants truly roamed the trails of Lower Saxony.

Interwoven with this is the exciting topic of “evolution”, because the development from dinosaur to bird is one of the prime examples of evolutionary theory. With the aid of the museum’s unrivalled bird collection, the story of the life and death of three extinct species of birds is shown, all eradicated by humans: the Great Auk, the Passenger Pigeon and the Carolina Parakeet. In a large aviary, 80 more birds from hummingbird to Darwin’s rhea show the entire range of bird species. The exhibition also includes two large terrariums. One of them is home to a Plateosaurus skeleton as well as several live and active bearded dragons. The second terrarium provides space for green iguanas. The range of exhibits is complemented with unique finds of crocodiles and tortoises as well as numerous fossilised plants and skeletons, e.g. of iguanas and giant salamanders.

The HumanWorlds

The HumanWorlds present the success story of *homo sapiens sapiens*, based on the principle of migration, trade and the exchange of ideas. Progress is not advanced by demarcation and exclusion, but by openness and intercultural exchange. The exhibition draws a line from the beginnings of human history to modern cultures outside of Europe. At its heart are the collections on archaeology and ethnology, complemented by natural history exhibits on evolution together with exhibits from the State Gallery illustrating the transition from the Old to the New World.

This unique exhibition calls upon all the advantages of an interdisciplinary institution, providing visitors with an entertaining and diversified insight into the history of humankind. Visitors start their tour of the HumanWorlds by travelling through the evolutionary history of human



development and becoming acquainted with their “line of ancestors”: from prehistoric humans, already able to walk upright, and artisans able to produce stone tools to early humans whose anatomy is very similar to that of modern humans, who had learned to master fire and who had left Africa as the cradle of humankind. Precious historical dioramas depict our ancestors in their respective environments.

The next part of the exhibition tells the story of early humans in the region of Lower Saxony; there is a lot to learn about them, even though it goes without saying that there are no written records of that period. The exhibits themselves tell this story, from cabinet to cabinet like leaves in a book: how humans migrated here from distant lands, how dramatic climatic changes affected the appearance of the land, how technical innovations influenced economy, society and culture and their effect on the environment, how a warrior caste developed, how wealth was amassed and power wielded, and how even 3000 years ago a society developed with similarities to an advanced civilisation.

The direct and often martial contact between Romans and Germanic tribes in the region of the modern Lower Saxony resulted in fundamental changes within the resident population. Germanic warriors served with the Roman legions, returning to their homeland after their period of service with foreign goods and novel ideas. The cultural contact led to a blossoming of trade and advances in craftsmanship and agriculture. An elite began to form whose pride of rank is evident for example in the rich funerary goods of the Roman imperial period. Moorland finds of textiles give us an insight into everyday garments, but also permit us to reconstruct the otherwise elusive splendour of lavishly manufactured clothes. Bog mummies such as the “Red Franz” help us to understand the hair and beard styles that were fashionable in the Germania of the Roman imperial period.

One large installation within this section of the exhibition draws attention to an interesting phenomenon: an imitation burial mound rises in the centre of the room. Such barrows have existed in Lower Saxony from the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. They are surrounded by interments of the Germanic population ranging over several centuries. Their choice of burial sites was guided by these even then “ancient” landmarks. Burials with numerous weapons or

lavish jewellery and clothing are evidence of Germanic elites who also existed amongst the historic “Saxons” of the early 5th century – and of their awareness of their own prestige. One of these rich warrior graves yielded a round silver pendant of roughly coin size, engraved with the oldest written record originating in Lower Saxony. The runes can be translated as “dedicated to the spear”.

From the second part of the 8th century, the Franks exerted increasing pressure on their Saxon neighbours: Charlemagne aimed to bring the Saxon territories under his control, both politically and militarily. Charlemagne’s war against the Saxons was not only a conquering expedition, but also a religious conflict. To break the stubborn resistance to his efforts, he employed tactics of long-term attrition: enforced resettlements, Christianisation, mass executions and hostage taking resulted in the ultimate success of the Frankish emperor after more than three decades. The stabilisation of Frankish rule was associated with the development and expansion of a particular form of infrastructure: imperial palaces and monasteries entrenched ecclesiastical and secular power within the landscape.

Having arrived in the High Middle Ages, visitors get introduced to a third influential group in society: the clergy and the secular gentry were joined by the burghers of the then booming towns. They defended their claims against secular rulers and ecclesiastical control and laid important foundations for the development of our modern form of society. One of the hall-marks of medieval towns was the concentration of highly skilled artisans who developed organisational forms that continue to have an effect to this day. All items such as leather clothing, bone carvings, pottery dishes and glassware were of a standard that remains impressive even now. Arts & Crafts blossomed, also within the religious context. Two examples of this are a baptismal font with a relief frieze and a panel painting showing the Holy Family in a medieval household. This creates an immediate link to the ArtWorlds. The discovery of the New World in the 15th century also changed peoples’ everyday lives. The most impressive indication of this are the numerous fragments of early modern clay pipes discovered in urban excavations, because the New World is highly addictive.

This leads to a change in the visitors’ perspective: while up to this point the focus had been on the timeline of the region of Lower Saxony from the earliest traces of culture to the Late Middle Ages, it now broadens to include the world outside of Europe which in this time of sea journeys and discoveries then came to the attention of Europeans. Two life-size paintings illustrate this change in perspective: the first depicts the Spanish king Carlos II, and the other across the room shows Don Luys of Peru, the noble descendant of the third Inca of Cuzco, the capital of the ancient Inca empire. The Peru that the conquistadores found and plundered was on a par with the Europe of that time. It boasted a complex system of state and trade and an artistically highly developed material culture. At the same time, the portrait of Don Luys also illustrates the Peruvian view of the Europeans, because it employs the latter’s forms of representation.

A change in perspective is offered by objects relating to Captain James Cook’s second circumnavigation of the globe between 1772 and 1775. These are particularly valuable, because they are amongst the oldest examples of material culture from the South Pacific. Furthermore, they are frequently seen as examples of an “as yet unchanged culture” prior to contact with Europeans.

The third change in perspective then leads to the main narrative of this part of the exhibition. It is centred on the character of Epeli Hau’ofas, a Fijian writer and ethnologist who advocates an alternative view of the continent of Oceania. In his view, the focus should not be on small

islands within a large ocean, but the ocean be understood as a unit – as a continent made up of distant trade and travel routes, connecting rather than separating the island states. Oceania thus becomes the Earth's largest continent, covering almost a third of its surface. An alternative globalisation is depicted here, one emanating not from Europe but from the Pacific. Originating from South China, about 5000 years ago, a population known as Austronesians began to spread initially to Taiwan, then via the Philippines and Papua-New Guinea across the Pacific to Hawai'i and Easter Island and into the other direction across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar and the coast of East Africa. This "globalisation" took place with outrigger canoes over a period of several thousand years. Multi-perspective approaches break the one-sided, Europe-centred reading of these exhibits. Exemplary representative of this are African depictions of Europeans and other foreigners, known as colon statuettes, showing how the colonised viewed their colonisers. The exhibition starts with the evolution of humankind that took place mainly in Africa, and it end in Africa once again, but this time as a culturally exciting place of our time. In this way, correlations can be established across millions of years between natural history and ethnology.

Where do we come from, where are we now, where do we go? That are the central questions guiding this interdisciplinary exhibition. It allows visitors to experience the vast variety of human worlds, from their genesis and the cultural development in Lower Saxony to the discovery, conquest and transformation of the world.

The ArtWorlds

The second floor is home to the State Gallery with important works of art from the Middle Ages to the early 20th century. It offers yet another change of perspective in relation to the HumanWorlds, because the focus here is not on everyday life, but on the outstanding and the exclusive in the creation of art. The museum's Coin Collection enjoys a special status. From coins as the most common media carriers used in everyday life to extremely valuable and unusual medals, this collection permits an insight into the treasury of the Hanoverian kings. In terms of geography, the collection focusses on Lower Saxony, Great Britain and Ireland as well as the British colonies, resulting from the personal union between the Electorate and later Kingdom of Hanover and the British crown between 1714 and 1837.

The tour of the ArtWorlds starts with a focus on Lower Saxony – with its important altars from the International Gothic period around 1400. These include the Franciscan Altarpiece from Göttingen and the famous "Goldene Tafel" (Golden Tablet), originally on display in St Michael's in Lüneburg.

Artists such as Lukas Cranach and Tilman Riemenschneider demonstrate to visitors the great art of the German Renaissance, followed by the great Italian masters Sandro Botticelli and Jacopo Pontormo. Baroque art flourished in the Netherlands in particular, represented here with works by Peter Paul Rubens, Rembrandt van Rijn and Jacob van Ruisdael. Works by Caspar David Friedrich, Carl Spitzweg, Arnold Böcklin, Hans Thoma, Wilhelm Leibl, Adrian Ludwig Richter and others stand for the German art of the 19th century. And finally, the collection of German impressionists and early expressionists is unrivalled anywhere in the world. The State Gallery holds important groups of works by Max Liebermann, Max Slevogt, Lovis Corinth and Paula Modersohn-Becker. French impressionists, too, are represented with important works, including those by Claude Monet and Alfred Sisley. This comprehensive impressionist collection already points towards Classical Modernism.



The collection of more than regional importance is able to address a range of different aspects. The outstanding artistic value of the medieval altars gives rise to the question as to the start of the "Age of Art", or even how to define "art". Who were the mainly nameless creators of these masterpieces, what were their lives like? The art-historical analysis is thus also accompanied by a greater integration of their lifeworlds, particular the church interiors, from where these works originated.

Furthermore, links to other museums in Hanover can be shown: to the August Kestner Museum which has a focus on design as well as arts & crafts, frequently closely related to the "art" of the same period on show in Landesmuseum. Or to the Sprengel Museum, home to the art of the 20th and 21st century, thus the direct continuation of our museum's collection. Finally, coins and medals are important documents in the history of our region, thus constituting a bridge to the Historical Museum Hanover. In this way, the "WeltenMuseum" is a self-contained complex, but one that cooperates and interlinks closely with the city's other cultural institutions.