

Hidden Corners, Illuminated Things.

‘Divinatory’ Objects
as Early
Collecting Interest
at the Germanisches
Nationalmuseum

— Marie-Therese Feist with Heike Zech

[E]xtremely pleasant is the thought that we are surrounded by spirits once dear to us in life as friends. Dear, yes, beloved friends that I have lost through the demise of the body, and I can imagine nothing more pleasant than to know that they surround me in spirit, though I see and hear nothing of them. In my understanding of consulting the dead, I consider it no sacrilege to hope for certainty in this only through a seeress, if it is possible at all; therefore allow me to ask whether you consider this possible and whether an opportunity for this might not present itself when we see each other? It would simply be very interesting at any rate to observe, just once, with my own eyes and ears things which I have previously only learned about from books and which seem so very important to me, and now I am determined to make the trip.¹

Some ten years before he would succeed in founding the Germanisches Museum in Nuremberg, Count Hans von und zu Aufseß addressed these ruminations on the practice of consulting the dead through a ‘seeress’ to the poet and physician Justinus Kerner of Weinsberg. The latter had gained fame for his literary and scholarly contributions on ghostly apparitions and ‘animal magnetism’ in the tradition of Franz Anton Mesmer. His 1829 case study of his patient Frederike Hauße, the ‘Seeress of Prevorst’ (cat. 83, 84), became particularly popular.² In this work – a point of some controversy in scholarly circles – Kerner recounted the apparitions and insights described by his patient, who had received them in a ‘somnambulist’ state brought about by her illness and therapy. He was convinced that women near death and of weak constitution, precisely like Hauße, were particularly prone to receiving clairvoyant abilities and could establish contact with the spirit world. Kerner managed to convince Aufseß not only to provide him with historical writings, but also to contribute contemporary accounts of unusual events for his periodical *Magikon*. In subsequent letters Aufseß sent stories from Schloss Unteraufseß for Kerner’s journal, which was intended as an archive to preserve for posterity ‘observations of intrusions of a spirit world into our own, examples of prophetic dreams, premonitions, sightings, and so on, and particularly also observations from the realm of magical and magnetic healings’.³ Aufseß did, however, insist that he not be named as a contributor to Kerner’s publications.⁴

Was Aufseß’s interest in ghostly apparitions and clairvoyance merely the private passion of an eccentric who often retreated to the company of books in the tower of his family castle? Subsequent letters from his correspondence with Kerner leave the question unanswered as to whether he actually got to witness a séance or somnambulist at

Kerner’s house, although the latter received many prominent visitors in this period. Aufseß’s correspondence with Kerner may reflect less a personal concern, and more a professional one, with the underlying intent being scholarly inquiry and discourse with an expert in the theory of ghosts and ‘animal magnetism’.⁵ Aufseß’s lively interest in ghostly apparitions should in fact be understood in the context of a growing tendency to reconsider the occult and explain traditional knowledge of magic and divination in the light of new scientific and philosophical approaches.⁶

In his *Geschichte der Magie* (History of Magic) of 1842, for example, the physician and magnetist Josef Ennemoser explained certain manifestations of magic and divination as natural phenomena, which had only become interpretable in the present thanks to the theories of ‘animal magnetism’. Magnetism seemed to offer a model that explained the living subjects of divination and magic so disdained and ridiculed by the Enlightenment, as well as their historical manifestations, and placed them in a broader scientific context.⁷ After the foundation of the museum, proponents of this theory were nominated to serve as experts on the museum’s academic board: in 1853 Josef Ennemoser,⁸ and, somewhat later, the physician Johann Karl Passavant.⁹

Aufseß’s already well-known Romantic understanding of history thus also had a significant impact on the treatment of the subject of divination and magic in the early history of the museum. Underlying the museum’s founding in 1852 was an ideal view of the structures of history, and the newly opened museum was supposed to reflect the continuing history of ‘ancient times’ that lived on among the common people – the Volk.¹⁰ In the spirit of the Grimm brothers’ collection of myths, in his publication *Anzeiger für die Kunde der deutschen Vorzeit* (Journal for the Study of German Antiquity) Aufseß himself initially called on readers to collect stories and evidence of superstition, in order to preserve them from the bane of ‘blind’ enlightenment.¹¹ His collection of sources was meant to be comprehensive, but rather than being a chronological survey, it was instead arranged thematically according to ‘states’ (*Zustände*), which could be understood as historical frameworks. This organic organization by topic followed the contemporary practices of natural historians in the 18th century.¹² Included among the historical ‘states’ were the speculative sciences, or ‘false philosophies’ (‘divination, chiromancy and physiognomy, interpretation of dreams, card reading’), and the material ephemera of natural-scientific interpretation (‘astrological charts, prognostications, books of planets, weather books, calendrical systems [...], farmers’ almanacs, runic calendars’).¹³

As this intriguing prelude to the founding of the museum suggests, the institution soon gathered a remarkable collection of mantic objects. Today the Germanisches Nationalmuseum houses extensive holdings containing numerous artefacts that bear witness to a highly diverse culture of divination. These include a unique collection of astronomical and astrological devices, instruments of iatromathematics, handwritten horoscopes, forecasts, and prophecies, broadsheets presenting prodigia, wall almanacs and Schreibkalender (booklet almanacs for personal notes), medical recipe books and books of magic, printed manuals and textbooks on mantic techniques from the 15th to the 20th century, lot books and games of chance, oracle cards, talismans and amulets, magical medicines, astrological and alchemical medals, and much more. These holdings are distributed across the museum's many departments, including the Library, the Numismatic Collection, and the departments of Prints and Drawings, Scientific Instruments, History of Medicine and Pharmacy, Folklore, and Toys. The seeds of these particular holdings were sown in the early years of the museum, and in fact most of these objects entered the museum's collection in the first decades after its opening. Despite this, the curatorial attitude towards mantic objects in the museum was long one of ambivalence. This paradox is, of course, not unique to the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, but the collections here provide a particularly good case in point.

In later years, the holistic conception of history characterized by Romanticism as represented by Aufseß gradually lost significance in the face of the differentiation of university disciplines. The natural sciences, to which he had assigned various fields of divination, were increasingly regarded as separate disciplines, clearly distinct from the esoteric and extrasensory. In addition to this trend, when August von Essenwein took the helm as Director in 1866. He transformed the Germanisches Nationalmuseum into an institution dedicated to cultural history by concentrating on the systematic expansion and reorganization of the collections.¹⁴ While in the early years a clear distinction still existed between the scholarly cataloguing of source material in what was called the 'General Repertory' and the 'picturesque' arrangement of exhibits in the gallery, now new departments were forged, intended to make the museum accessible to the general public as well as to experts.¹⁵

Following the extensive restructuring in the late 1860s, in 1871 the natural science was also given its own department. On the one hand, this department followed in the tradition of the early modern 'cabinet of physics', while on

the other hand it was also clearly influenced by the presentation methods used at world's fairs and the novel arts and crafts exhibitions of the industrial powers. In order to meet the new expectations, the collections were substantially transformed and expanded through loans and acquisitions. The selection of exhibits on display was to be limited to what could be presented in tangible 'monuments' to the past, and was to be consistently overseen by experts.¹⁶

This new orientation also forced a reconsideration of the status of objects already in the museum's collection. This particularly affected the subjects of magic, astrology, and divination, with their associated artefacts such as magic sigils, mandrakes, and horoscopes, all of which had formerly been assigned to the natural sciences as a matter of course. These obviously no longer fitted into a history of scientific progress. In the last third of the 19th century they were therefore removed, at least partially, from the History of Science Department, and added to other collections, such as jewellery or household tools. Some of the objects, however, remained in the History of Science collections as 'relics' requiring explanation. This becomes clear, for example, in the positivist description of the collection of 'mathematical' instruments by the geophysicist Dr Siegmund Günther, who felt little responsibility for these 'hidden corners'¹⁷ of the sciences, which he described as an 'appendage' made up of charms and magical objects.¹⁸ Those artefacts that were nevertheless exhibited were identified for visitors as examples of the 'detours' into superstition characteristic of the early natural sciences. The publications intended to classify these subjects and artefacts clearly reflect this ambivalent stance between presentation and condemnation.

In the mid-19th century illustrated volumes presenting a visual cultural history, often featuring objects from the museum's collection, became increasingly popular. The plates, themselves a visual compendium on a specific subject, reflect a kind of visual survey of material history: sculptures, manuscript illuminations, and paintings are presented together as testaments to various aspects of the life and material culture of past eras.¹⁹ While August von Essenwein designed a picture atlas focusing primarily on arts and crafts, which largely excluded objects from the collection related to the mantic arts,²⁰ another illustrated volume from the museum did address these, and attempted to situate them within cultural history. It was published by Brockhaus in Leipzig as part of the *Ikonomographische Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* (Iconographic Encyclopaedia of the Arts and Sciences), which in turn was part of the series known as the *Bilder-Atlas zum Conversations-Lexikon*. In its

second edition of 1875 this elaborate multi-volume work included 20 topics, or 'departments', including architecture, agriculture and home economics, sculpture and painting, astronomy, folkloric tradition, geography, and cultural history.

The essay on cultural history was written by August von Eye, director of the Collection of Art and Antiquities since the museum's founding, and inspector of the General Repertory. With his Visitors' Guidebook²¹ and various other publications, von Eye had endeavoured to provide a popular review of cultural history. Now he was given the opportunity to portray the museum's holdings as meaningful testaments to cultural history in the context of a comprehensive survey, and to arrange them into a narrative.

On 55 plates in the *Iconographic Encyclopaedia*, he unfolds a chronologically organized history of European and specifically German culture, subdivided by topic: clothing and jewellery, household items and utensils, agriculture, and commerce and industry. Finally, one of the last plates also presents the subject of 'superstition' (fig. p. 33). It depicts amulets, horoscope figures, magical symbols, an anatomical 'Zodiac Man' illustrating the proper locations for bloodletting, a theosophical ring, and depictions of a witches' sabbath and of an alchemist in his laboratory.²² In the accompanying essay, von Eye describes these objects as products of 'superstition'. They were on the one hand, von Eye writes, a mixture of remnants of popular misconceptions left over from pagan times and, on the other, examples of misguided scholarship and empirical learning gone astray. Seen from this angle, von Eye unsurprisingly describes the 'false sciences' as strange and nonsensical, treacherous, and above all as unverified and unscientific, even though, as he asserts, their monstrosities are primarily located in the past.²³ Such 'fraudulent sciences' were almost completely thrown overboard – and rightly so – 'as soon as science had, with the flowering of the German universities, been snatched away from the dilettantes and given into the hands of qualified experts'.²⁴ Astrology and other fortune-telling techniques were thus not only historicized, but also assigned to a group of covert disciplines which were identified as traditional forms of irrationalism and contrasted with a new rational scientific culture.

Herrmann Peters, who founded the Pharmazeutisches Zentralmuseum (Pharmaceutical Collection) in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in 1883 at the behest of August von Essenwein, takes the same tone in his writings.²⁵ For him, any aspects of 'superstition' in medicine and pharmaceuticals and the classification of related artefacts obviously belonged to the historian's field. This attitude went hand in hand with equally clear ideas of what constituted superstition:

Superstition, this half-brother of faith, is obviously the true son of holy simple-mindedness. In earlier centuries he [superstition] knew well how to infiltrate all areas of human knowledge in such a way that there is hardly a science into which his madness did not penetrate. He led astronomy, with its precise calculations, astray to the most foolish and treacherous foretellings of astrology, and with it created the interpreters of constellations, flights of birds, and dreams. He was the father of the many fools brought to life by alchemy, who sought to turn everything to gold and make man immortal with the philosopher's stone. With the loyal help of theology, he created that devilish spectre of ghostly visitations and spirit apparitions. And it was he who misled the representatives of earthly justice to delight the world with the abhorrent trial by ordeal or judgement of God, which was finally followed by the pinnacle of all superstitious aberrations of justice, namely the witch trial, that eternal shame of humanity.²⁶

As von Eye and Peters agreed in their writings on cultural history, divination, along with other practices, belonged to the field of superstition, and thus to the false or pseudo-sciences. Aufseß himself had also used this terminology, but von Eye and Peters went farther, emphatically distancing themselves from the subject: in the tradition of the Enlightenment, they understood magic and divination as irrational practices performed in wilful defiance of reason. At the same time, the field of superstition served a narrative function in the museum's collection: it provided a backdrop of irrationality against which a history of (national) progress could be shown in sharp relief. Indeed, in von Eye's narrative – clearly reflecting the jingoism and nationalist sentiment of his day – the evolution of civilization reached its peak in the European festival culture of the 19th century and the colonial mission in Brazil. In his view, the rejection of superstition represented the mastery of his own culture – the newly founded German nation, governed by reason – over its own past, but also its mastery over those parts of the world that still needed to be 'civilized'.²⁷

Preoccupation with the 'irrational', on the other hand, could be understood – as Peters in particular states – as a constant warning to remember reason, for even though superstition was seen as increasingly in retreat, opposing currents still existed, both among scholars and the general public. Contemporary phenomena such as magnetism, somnambulism, theories of ghosts, and homeopathy prevented European culture from rising above the past: 'for the realm of a completely enlightened humanity lies, if not entirely in

the land of ideal dreams, then at any rate still in the distant mists of the future.²⁸

The narrative that von Eye and Peters wove of divination as a pseudo-science and as undying (naive) superstition had a significant and lasting impact on European (academic) culture. It also gave rise to a long-lasting moral dilemma for research and the museum. Now for the first time the museumization and archiving of objects were open to a broad historical and critical examination – and not only at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum – but the question of how they should be presented remained. Could a museum display the ‘irrational’, and simultaneously maintain a suitable critical distance from it? Was it permissible to explain the ‘logic’ of mantic practices? Or would it be better to ban all research on the ‘unscientific’, in order to leave no footholds for new adherents?

No-one embodies this dilemma more strikingly than the art and cultural historian Aby Warburg, who was repeatedly drawn in his studies to prophecy and astrology. When he curated an exhibition of pictures related to astrology in the 1920s – first planned in collaboration with the Deutsches Museum in Munich, and finally implemented in the Hamburg planetarium under the title *Bildersammlung zur Geschichte von Stern Glaube und Sternkunde* (Collection of Pictures on the History of Astrology and Astronomy) – he was plagued by worries that the show would be well received by the wrong kind of people and appropriated to their ends. In a letter to the museum dated 25 July 1927 Warburg criticized the previous proposal to place the fundamentals of astrological techniques at the start of the exhibition:

I fear that if astrological techniques are introduced right at the beginning and with such emphasis – carrying the authority of the Deutsches Museum – they could appear as an absolutely adequate science, which would then put a fanatic and enterprising maker of natal charts in a position to justify his actions through this exhibition.²⁹

For all his conviction of its cultural and art-historical relevance, Warburg’s view of astrology was grounded in the idea of historical and critical dissociation. At the same time, he was intensely interested in the magical and astrological thinking of his own time, which had been reignited following the First World War.³⁰ He meticulously collected newspaper clippings with fortune teller’s advertisements or accounts of spiritist séances.³¹ The root of Warburg’s fascination and his despair was the realization that, for all its achievements,

the European Enlightenment had done little to signal the end of the astrological and mantic practices that so preoccupied him.³²

Current scholars see this insight as a widely accepted fact: while the adepts of the Enlightenment and their learned followers identified all kinds of fields of knowledge as irrational superstition or pseudo-science and, as Wouter Hanegraaf put it, tossed them into the ‘wastebasket of history’,³³ there was an unabated thirst and market for compendia and manuals of mantic practices written by autodidacts – people outside scholarship and science. Contrary to the narrative of their long tradition, many fortune-telling techniques experienced a dramatic revival precisely during the 18th and 19th centuries, and indeed some first established themselves in the era of the Enlightenment. Despite its exclusion from the academies, astrology experienced a flourishing renaissance, and science and art once again intersected in a wide variety of ways in mesmerist, spiritist, and occultist discourses. To this day ‘divination’ regularly resurfaces as a new temporal phenomenon.³⁴

Both the historical reassessment of early modern practices and the growing research into modern developments in ‘esoteric sciences’ are changing the image of a Europe that was long believed to have oriented itself solely towards reason, beginning with the Enlightenment. In recent years, scholarship has increasingly turned its attention to mantic techniques from the early modern period to the present. Considerable scholarly interest focuses on the functions and manifestations of divination, and on societal contexts and social attributions. Finally, the objects themselves and their museumization now increasingly form the focus of scholarly attention both in the museum itself and in its academic partner institutions, as seen previously only in certain iconographic and art-historical studies. The various forms of divination have in fact never constituted separate, defined areas of activity and knowledge, but instead have always comprised elements of various fields of action and discourse. They existed in the liminal zone between science, religion, magic, entertainment, and practical guidance for getting through life.³⁵ The fear that even displaying or explaining practices judged to be ‘irrational’ might contribute to making them applicable again and ultimately confirm them as ‘rational’ seems unfounded today, at least from a scholarly perspective. Last but not least, research networks such as the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities (IKGF) ‘Fate, Freedom, and Prognostication’ have been promoting interdisciplinary discussion for years. This clearly indicates that ambiguities between lived practice, scholarly prestige,

and political acceptance have long characterized the debate, and continue to do so, not only in Europe, but also, for example, in the Chinese-speaking world, albeit with different historical turning points.³⁶

Building on this groundwork, the Germanisches Nationalmuseum has embarked on a research and exhibition project that interprets mantic objects from its own holdings in a new context. In cooperation with the University of Münster and the IKGf Erlangen we are experimenting with an intercultural comparative survey, which we first tried out in the format of ‘object talks’ and now wish to pursue further as an extended dialogue with visitors in the exhibition space. While our previous ‘encounters’ were often digital, we are now bringing the physical objects together in one room. Spectacular loans from the Lanyang Museum, the Academia Sinica, the National Museum of Taiwan History, and from private collections allow us to bring to Europe particularly valuable and interesting mantic objects from the Chinese cultural realm, and to present them here for the first time. They provide exemplary insights into a culture of divination in East Asia, and particularly in Taiwan, that is both rich and diverse. In the exhibition *Signs of the Future. Divination in East Asia and Europe* we examine various forms of divination and their rich material culture in two cultural areas.

The objects juxtaposed here – feng-shui compass and astrolabe, yarrow oracle and geomantic manual, domino oracle and lot book – are artefacts made for mantic purposes or used in connection with the act of fortune telling that document or illustrate the outcome of this practice. In five thematic chapters, objects from East Asia and Europe are repeatedly grouped in pairs that prompt a comparison: prophetic manuscripts, astrological instruments, manuals of physiognomy, oracular games. How were they used? What was their function? Who mastered these techniques, and who sought out the prophecies? Where do the differences lie between these objects – for example, in how they were interpreted or when they were used?

Setting aside the moral benchmark of reason (a European construct) allows us to gain an astonishing number of ‘reasoned’ insights into divination. These also allow the museum both to rethink strategies for collecting such objects in the coming years based on the research results and to abandon the strict division into individual collection areas in favour of multidisciplinary approaches. While in the first decades of its existence, the museum only collected objects that were created before 1600, the scope of the collection has long since expanded to include other periods, all the way

up to our own time. Aufseß’s General Repertory, in which ‘states’ were documented, has given way to research questions which also underlie the collecting activities of a museum geared towards both academics and the general public. For this exhibition the museum was thus able to acquire a few select mantic objects of more recent date, such as the crystal ball on a stand (cat. 14). Today this object is itself an easily recognizable, proverbial symbol of divination. From the museum’s point of view, it represents realms of belief and lived experience, and will continue to be studied with a view to the reconception of the permanent galleries on the 19th century. Ambivalence and a residual wariness remain, however, so that even 100 years after the considerations described by Warburg above, each acquisition needs to be weighed carefully as to the questions our research and our visitors may pose about the objects. Even in museums our views of things change over the course of time. We thus cannot predict today how future generations of museum staff will collect the material and immaterial culture of divination. Nevertheless, the exhibition *Signs of the Future* shows that fortune-telling practices are omnipresent in today’s world, justifying their presence in a museum of cultural history in the 21st century.

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- 1 Letter from Hans von Aufseß to Justinus Kerner, 20. October 1840, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, A: Kerner.
- 2 Kerner 1829.
- 3 Kerner 1840.
- 4 Letter from Hans von Aufseß to Justinus Kerner, 29. April 1843, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, A: Kerner. – Kerner 1843, p. 86–89.

- 5 For example, Aufseß studied Gotthilf Heinrich Schubert's *Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaft* (1808), Nicolaus Gerber's *Das Nachtgebiet der Natur im Verhältniß zur Wissenschaft* (Augsburg 1844), Heinrich Werner's *Die Schutzgeister* (1839). – as with Kerner, he also sought direct contact with some of these authors.
- 6 Sawicki 2002.
- 7 Hanegraaf 2011, here p. 68.
- 8 Ennemoser is named as expert of 'Magie und Magnetismus' (Magic and Magnetism), see *Namens-Verzeichnis der Mitglieder der Ausschüsse und der Angestellten des germanischen Nationalmuseums, gedruckt* 4 p., no year [1853], here p. 2. – Letter from Ennemoser to the Museum, 21. April 1853, HA GNM, GNM-Akten A-43.
- 9 Passavant had published *Untersuchungen über den Lebensmagnetismus und Hellsehen* in 1837, at the museum he was named as responsible for 'Magnetism, psychology related to magnetism of life and related subjects', see Organismus 1855, p. 88.
- 10 See Aufseß 1853, copy with handwritten additions: 8° Jk NUR 50/30.
- 11 Anzeiger 1854, p. 151–152.
- 12 Deneke 1974.
- 13 Denkschriften 1856, p. XI.
- 14 Kammel 2015.
- 15 Hess 2014, p. 44.
- 16 Essenwein 1870, p. 13.
- 17 Essenwein 1884, p. 80.
- 18 Günther 1878, p. 94.
- 19 Regarding these illustrated volumes see Schleier 2003, pp. 642–715.
- 20 Essenwein 1883.
- 21 Eye 1853. – Zöllner 2010.
- 22 Bilder-Atlas 1875, plate 53.
- 23 Eye 1875, p. 99.
- 24 Eye 1875, p. 100.
- 25 Essenwein 1887.
- 26 Peters 1886b, p. 157.
- 27 Eye 1875, p. 100.
- 28 Peters 1886b, p. 172.
- 29 Letter from Aby Warburg to the Deutsches Museum in Munich, 25 July 1927, quoted in Fleckner/Galitz/Naber/Nöldeke 1993, p. 38.
- 30 Korff 2008.
- 31 Hensel 2011, p. 220, note 20.
- 32 Neugebauer-Wölk 2008, here p. 12.
- 33 Hanegraaf 2013, p. 66. – Hanegraaf 2012.
- 34 The weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* recently stated that two thirds of all Germans believe in astrology, see Kittlitz 2020.
- 35 See Ulrike Ludwig's contribution to this volume.
- 36 Lackner: Introduction. In: Lackner 2018, p. 1–19.