

Foreword

— Prof. Daniel Hess
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If public museums were temples of art at the time of their foundation in the 18th century, then today they are seismographs of social change. The contested nature of museum discourse throughout the contemporary world demonstrates what a crucial role these public institutions now play in highlighting processes of social change. Museums are expected to respond to issues ranging from the climate emergency and sustainability through to gender discourse and postcolonial questions, while at the same time engaging with conflicting views on religion, politics, and culture. The duty to remain socially relevant and to reflect the various groups and points of view found in modern society presents museums – irrespective of their content – with a swathe of new roles and challenges. The Germanisches Nationalmuseum’s mission is to preserve, research, and communicate the cultural heritage of German-speaking Europe. However, looking at cultural history is always about more than just taking a trip into the past. Rather, it is an ongoing process of finding new ways of seeing and approaching our understanding of the past – and, by extension, our contemporary context and lived experience. After all, questions about history necessarily take shape in the here and now, and the past can only be understood by reference to the present.

In European cultural history, the dialogue between East and West forms part of a centuries-long tradition, and as such qualifies as a topic of interest for the Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Even though practices of prognostication do not usually fall within the remit of a history museum, a study of fortune-telling methods in Europe and Asia promises to yield many fascinating and illuminating insights entirely true to the museum’s spirit of discovery. The subject’s considerable social relevance has only increased due to the tremendous uncertainty across the world caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

People in ancient Greece and Rome believed that humanity’s fate was in the hands of gods and goddesses, who revealed their will to mortals in variously arcane ways. Since humans were incapable of recognizing the will of the gods unassisted, divination served as a bridge between the world

of mortals and that of the gods. As Cicero argues in his book *On the Nature of the Gods*, if divine beings exist, then divination inevitably exists as well. Prophecies and premonitions of the future were proof of the existence of gods. However, Cicero’s attitude to divination remained critical and ambivalent. Indeed, he felt that many of the common divinatory practices of his day – interpreting the flight of birds, dreams, or sacrificial entrails, for example – had little merit. While the Roman politician and philosopher did acknowledge the political importance of faith in a prophecy, he was also anxious to clearly distinguish divination from superstition and its associated practices. It was Cicero who first set about critically appraising forms of prognostication, distinguishing evidence-based pronouncements from superstitious practices. This critical debate continues to the present day.

It was the sinologist Prof. Michael Lackner of the University Erlangen-Nuremberg who first came up with the idea and original proposal to conduct a research and exhibition project as a collaboration with the Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Through a partnership with the lecture series ‘Fate, Freedom, and Prognostication: Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe’ at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities in Erlangen, and over the course of conversations with Dr Ulrike Ludwig, professor of early modern history at the University of Münster, the question was expanded to encompass both East Asia and Europe. The project would now look in two directions, presenting both regions’ distinct traditions of prognostication in mutually enlightening dialogue. Additional enthusiasm and passion for debate was brought to this partnership by Dr Thomas Eser – until 2019, the Germanisches Nationalmuseum’s head of collections for scientific instruments, medical history, weapons, and hunting culture – who helped develop the raw idea for the presentation into a viable exhibition plan. Together with Prof. Ulrike Ludwig, he headed a project funded by the German Research Foundation entitled ‘Tradition, Perspective, and Uses: Attribution of Meaning to Artefacts of Clairvoyance in Europe from the 17th century to the early 20th century’. Pursued in collaboration

with Hadrian Mattern and Marie-Therese Feist, this project looked at artefacts of divination and their significance in European museum collections. This duly inspired a reappraisal of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum's own collection history, which was looked at afresh from different perspectives.

Sincere thanks are due to all three initiators of this project for their tremendous collective efforts. I am grateful to Prof. Michael Lackner and his team, and in particular to Chifang Tsai and Dr Yung-Yung Chang for liaising in person with potential partner institutions, acting as intermediaries between museums, advising on the selection of East Asian objects, and (just as importantly) lending their expertise on Asian cultural history. Their cultural-linguistic knowledge proved invaluable at every stage of the process, right through to the final negotiation of the loan agreements – and all during a period when pandemic-related issues even brought the postal service between Germany and Taiwan to a temporary halt. Thanks are also due to Prof. Ulrike Ludwig and her team, particularly Alexandra Kohlhöfer, for their fruitful and extensive work on the European objects, and for working together so successfully on the organization of the two preparatory conferences (held, respectively, in Münster in 2019 and Nuremberg in 2020). I would also like to thank these two universities, whose contribution to this partnership included generous financial support for the project and associated publications.

On embarking on their collaboration, the various international partners kickstarted a conversation that was to form the basis of the research and exhibition projects. In spite of the differences that the research brought to light, the participants soon realized that in the questions people routinely pose about the future there are several recurring threads that cut across history and cultures. Traditional methods of divination in East Asia and Europe also proved to have many similar features. We are very grateful to the two Taiwanese cultural institutions, not only for being so open to working with us, but also for sending objects on loan to Germany, and for the considerable trust they put in us throughout the project. Shuching Chang, Pei-Hua Chuang,

and Wen-Cheng Shih of the National Museum of Taiwan History and Prof. Jeng-Guo Chen and Yu-Yun Lin of the Academia Sinica honoured us with a visit in December 2018, having been invited to participate in a conference held in Nuremberg, where the basic idea for the exhibition was fleshed out.

Sincere thanks go to Academia Sinica and Dr Jen-der Lee, who as director of the Institute of History and Philology contributed some of her most valuable and ancient objects to the exhibition, most of which have never been shown in Europe before. Prof. Jeng-Guo Chen, Dr Ming-Chorng Hwang, and Yu-Yun Lin all played a crucial role as contacts at Academia Sinica's Institute of History and Philology, for which I wish to express similarly heartfelt thanks.

The National Museum of Taiwan History, under its former director Dr Chung-Hsi Lin, also generously contributes loans from its important collections. We enjoyed a very close and fruitful collaboration with our colleagues Shuching Chang, Pei-Hua Chuang, and Wen-Cheng Shih, and look forward to our joint exhibition being held at their museum.

Without the expertise and far-reaching assistance of everyone mentioned above – and without the support and considerable trust they gave to us as colleagues – this joint experiment in an Asian-European dialogue on divinatory techniques and prognostication would never have been possible.

Among the members of staff at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, particularly effusive thanks are due to Marie-Therese Feist. Having started work on the exhibition as a doctoral candidate alongside Dr Thomas Eser, she then took the reins of this project after the latter's appointment to the directorship of Nuremberg Municipal Museums. Showing considerable courage (and a level of care and professional expertise every bit as impressive), she took on responsibility for this major project and led it to success. Providing support and guidance for the project was Dr Heike Zech, who having recently been appointed the Museum's Head of Exhibitions stepped in as co-curator and kept the project on track. Thanks also to Manuela Grünzinger for the

extensive work she put into designing the exhibition in collaboration with the graphic designers Katharina Frick, Beate Zollbrecht, and Tanja Schüz. Finally, my thanks go to Curatorial Assistant Dr Fabian Brenker, who helped with the implementation and design of the multimedia stations, to Dr Barbara Rök for her support in organizing both the exhibition and catalogue, and to Dr Anne-Cathrin Schreck managing loan in these changing times.

The Museum's new Head of Publishing, Christine Dippold, oversaw editing the publication of this bilingual catalogue with her customary excellence and professionalism. It is the Museum's first exhibition catalogue to be published gold open access. With the COVID pandemic still ongoing, this will ensure that many more people across the world can engage with the exhibition's content, and direct access to the research's findings.

This collaborative project, involving numerous contributors from Asia and Europe working towards a shared idea for a research and exhibition project about 'signs of the future', became acutely topical during the COVID-19 pandemic. Around the world, trust in evidence-based forecasting was seriously shaken. The pandemic not only saw the rise of social distancing but also the re-appearance of national borders that many considered to have been consigned to the past with the rise of globalization. The virus has limited our horizons, re-activating old and isolationist patterns of thinking. By reflecting on our shared global cultural heritage, the exhibition project not only provides an inspirationally expansive scope of interest, but also builds bridges to promote dialogue for shaping the future together. Culture unites people across borders, with the capacity to transcend any crises we may experience in public health, the economy, and political life. Culture sparks dialogue that promotes mutual understanding, forging connections with which to forge the future together.