

17 Studying, Teaching, and Exhibiting Religion: The Marburg Museum of Religions (*Religionskundliche Sammlung*)

KONSTANZE RUNGE

Founded in 1927, the Marburg Museum of Religions (*Religionskundliche Sammlung*)¹ at the Philipps-Universität in Marburg, Germany, is the world's oldest university collection devoted to the comparative study of religions, and at the same time one of the first (and still few) institutions in which the variety of religions around the world is exhibited. Being at the interface of scholarly research on religion and the public, the Marburg collection with its more than 9,000 objects and images from more than twenty religious traditions holds a rich potential to be explored. The collection has been housed since 1981 in an attractive Renaissance building near the castle in Marburg, in ten exhibition rooms and a large vault. There museum visitors as well as students and scholars can discover objects from Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, or Shinto traditions;² objects of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic provenance; and pieces from the ancient Near East, ancient Egypt, from the Mayas, the Aztecs, and African and Oceanian religious traditions, as well as new religious movements (Figure 17.1).

This chapter will focus on the intersection of the study and teaching of religions and the communication of the findings of the scholarly study of religions to the public, this even today being the core mandate of the museum in Marburg.³ Among those museums devoted specifically to religions, our museum in Marburg has perhaps the most complex, and in any case the longest, relationship with teaching and research. Neither teaching nor research can be treated without the other, considering the institution's history.

After shedding some light on the founding of the museum in Marburg and its entangled and ongoing history of exhibition, teaching, and research, I will discuss some insights into the changing understanding of studying and exhibiting religions in Marburg in the twenty-first century by examining some of the recent activities in the museum. This will be completed by a look ahead into the museum's future.

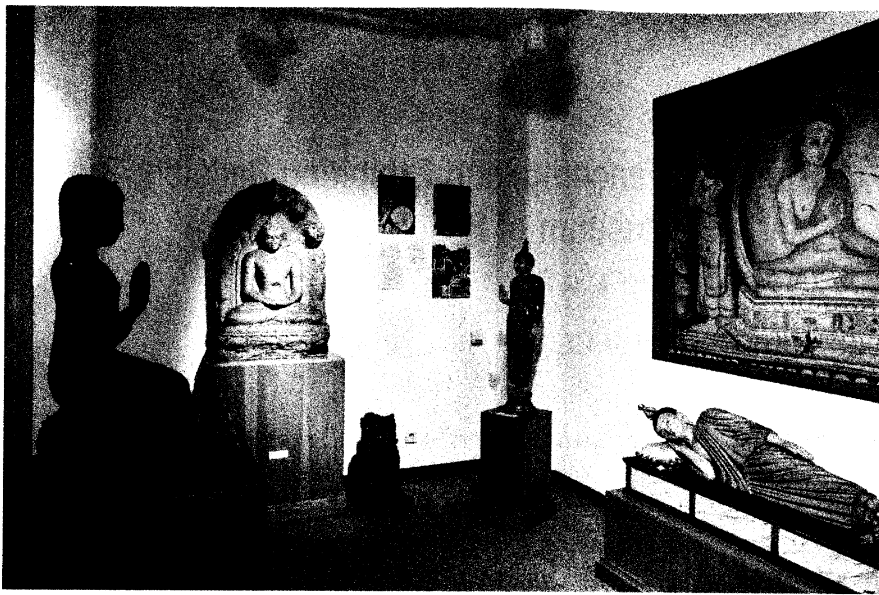


Figure 17.1 The Marburg Museum of Religions. "Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia." Photo by Georg Dörr.

Looking Back into the Museum's History

The museum's founder, Rudolf Otto, and his successors as museum directors, Heinrich Frick and Friedrich Heiler,⁴ were all professors of Protestant theology and practicing Christians; and they strove to use the collection to visually present "other religions" as well as mission activities. But this did not prevent them from fighting for the museum's status as a central university institution independent of the Faculty of Theology. As a result, today the museum is associated with the Department of the Study of Religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Philosophy. The benefits of this intermediate position, independent from any religious affiliation, will be pointed out in the following.

Five years before the publication of his very influential *Das Heilige*, the theologian and philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto had already formulated in 1912 his innovative idea of founding a collection of the "cultic and ritual means of expression of religions,"⁵ as he put it, as an addition to his collection of written sources on religions. In building up the collection with the financial support of the Prussian state, Otto did not focus on the artistic or historical quality of the objects he acquired as much as on their, so to speak, educational value, on their capacity to instruct the museum's visitors about religious practices and concepts. During his extensive travels to India, China, Japan, and North Africa, he collected objects from popular religious cultures that made it possible to see and understand the very core of each religion. While it remains questionable whether these objects could really evoke and stimulate a feeling for the common "sense of the numinous" in the

various manifestations of religions and a sense for the proclaimed unity of religions in general, as described by Otto in *Das Heilige* (1917),⁶ the first exhibition of the *Religionskundliche Sammlung* in the autumn of 1929 entitled *Fremde Heiligtümer* (Foreign sacred sites and objects) is said to have nonetheless attracted more than 6,000 visitors in only five weeks.

In the museum's founding period, Otto used the collections and displays as visual aids to explain them and the beliefs connected with them to his target audience of (theology) students and scholars, as well as to missionaries, merchants, diplomats, and physicians who were preparing to work overseas. With his focus on religious practices and on the capacity of the displayed objects to educate and inform visitors about the everyday religious culture of—above all non-European—believers, Otto purposely set this project apart from other museum models, such as museums of ethnology or art.⁷

This concept was shared and developed further by the missiologist and theologian Heinrich Frick, Otto's successor as museum director. "It is not simply an art collection or a museum for the study of ethnology. It is to be a collection illustrative of the whole of man's religious development, brought together for the purpose of stimulating and assisting in the study of religion," wrote Frick (1931, 7) and stressed the function of the collection as a research tool. Otto, Frick, and their successor Friedrich Heiler were all convinced of the crucial role the exhibited objects played in the competition of the so-called *Kulturreligionen* (cultivated religions), although they did not doubt that the winner of this great competition between religions would be their own.

Otto and Frick also had a vision that the collection should be the basis for an "International Institute for the Study of Religions,"⁸ which would integrate the collection as a visual and teaching aid, the large library, and space for academic conferences and international guests of various religious backgrounds. This institute was to be housed in the most spectacular venue Marburg could provide: the castle overlooking the small city. Although the plan could not be realized in its entirety, Heinrich Frick succeeded in reopening the Marburg Museum of Religions in the castle in 1950.

As already mentioned, Otto, Frick, and Heiler were using the exhibits to instruct visitors about "other religions" and to induce a sense of the unity of religions. As experts on religions, they were educating their visitors and students through guided tours and university lectures, demonstrating their affirmative approach toward religion, an irenic program aiming to promote interreligious tolerance, ecumenical endeavor, and mutual understanding. They played an active role in the theological and interreligious debates of the time.

Today we practice a more open and differentiated understanding of the objects, integrating students, visitors, and colleagues into the process of exploring, researching, and exhibiting material religion. The objects themselves still play a core role in the teaching program of the Department of the Study of Religions; and since the launch of the BA and MA study programs in 2005, various study modules have been developed to enhance the integration of the collection into the teaching process. The collection attracts students of religions to Marburg, where they find a

unique environment in which the scholarly study of (intangible) religious concepts and beliefs is supported and stimulated by the use of tangible “real objects” of the studied traditions themselves. Rudolf Otto’s vision of adding a new dimension to the scripture-based study of religions by using three-dimensional objects of the religious communities is cherished and developed, based on our growing understanding of the complexity of religions and their materiality (Houtman and Meyer 2012). Our students, as well as interns from other universities, can gain experience in museum work alongside their academic education.

Special Exhibitions on Various Aspects of Religions

It is not only since the material turn in cultural studies that exhibitions have been read as the presentation of research results. The whole process of planning and designing an exhibition on religion includes extensive research in the field of material religion and religion itself. Being invaluable sources of knowledge, religious objects teach and inform us about (popular) religious cultures and practices and about the people who made, used, and venerated them. The object’s materiality forms a kind of data bank that can be used fruitfully for further scholarly investigation.

The 1960s and 1970s brought changes in how objects were dealt with in the collection and the purpose of “exhibiting” religions for teaching and research. When the indologist and historian of religion Martin Kraatz assumed the title of museum director in 1968, it was the first time that the collection was run by someone other than a theologian. The implications of this turn in the study of religions became apparent in the new permanent exhibit after the museum moved into the New Chancellery in 1981. In the course of his directorship, Martin Kraatz curated several special exhibitions, most of them devoted to religions with Asian origins.⁹ Peter Bräunlein (2004), museum director from 2000 to 2005, combined a museological perspective with a special focus on popular religious culture and its visual representation.

A new dimension was brought into this tradition of special exhibitions on religion in Marburg when two of the ten exhibition rooms were rededicated to this purpose under the directorship of Edith Franke, professor of the Study of Religions and head of the museum since 2006 (Pye 2014). This expanded focus on special exhibitions provides not only the possibility of shedding light on various aspects of religions and focusing on their more contextualized (re)presentation, it also allows for more flexibility in responding to current social issues and challenges with regard to the dynamic roles of religions in society.¹⁰

In the past ten years, the whole process of communicating research findings to a broader public (i.e., the museum’s visitors) via exhibitions has become the focal point of teaching and research in the Marburg museum. It has provided a forum for experimental teaching and learning approaches, where questions on the intersection of research on religions and the (re)presentation of knowledge about religions through the medium of an exhibition can be pursued. How can the complex realities of the sensitive field of relations and communications with the transcendent

be conveyed through the display of selected objects? Many ethical issues need to be considered. The exhibition *Tibet in Marburg* (2007–2009, curated by Adelheid Hermann-Pfandt) with its detailed catalogue is a striking example of the successful integration of students into the extensive scholarly research on the Tibetica of the Marburg collection (Hermann-Pfandt 2007). A focus on religious practices and their expression in religious artefacts was also evident in an exhibition on pilgrimage on the Japanese island of Shikoku (Katja Triplett 2009–11) and the exhibition *Ethiopia Celebrates: Fieldwork Photographs* by Konstanze Runge, which combined photos of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Meskel* feast and the *Irreechaa* feast of the Oromo people, with the museum’s rich collection of Ethiopian Orthodox processional and hand crosses (2011–12).

A Special Exhibition on Religious Diversity in Islam

The special exhibition *Von Derwisch-Mütze bis Mekka-Cola. Vielfalt islamischer Glaubenspraxis*,¹¹ which opened in 2013 (Figure 17.2), was the museum’s first special exhibition on Islam, showing the variety of Muslims’ individual interpretations of their religion, and integrating the Sufi Islamica of the collection.¹² In times of growing Islamophobia, it provided insights into the all-too-often neglected diversity of Islamic religious practice and strove to shed some light on daily (religious) routines and lifestyles, instead of presenting Islam from the usual orientalist perspective of Islamic art, mostly from a “glorious” Islamic past, as is done in many museum exhibitions on Islam.

“How to make a good exhibition on diversity in Islam from a study-of-religions perspective” was more or less the subject of various consecutive courses I taught at the Department of Religious Studies at that time. While the objects presented in the past

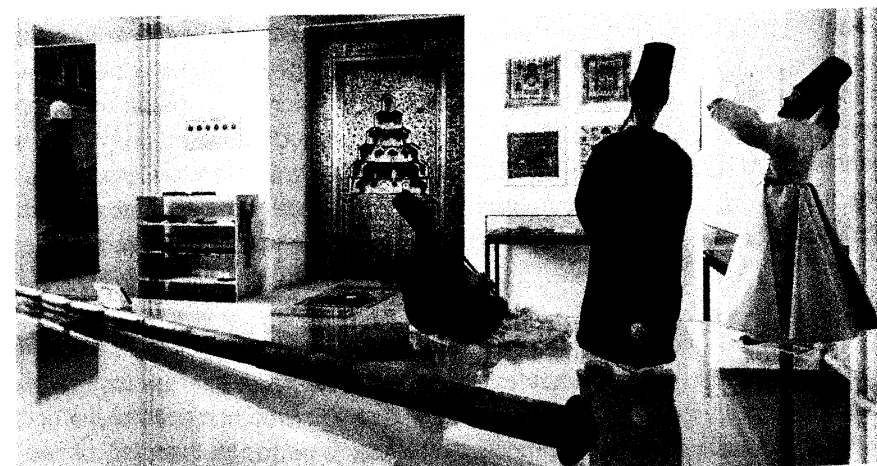


Figure 17.2 The Marburg Museum of Religions, Special Exhibition on Islam. Photo by Georg Dörr.

had remained quite remote and even exotic to visitors, today their contextualized presentation in a temporal as well as a local perspective is our main focus. Thus—despite the small size of our museum—some of the demands of the new postcolonial museologies could be applied (Kamel and Gerbich 2014).

In the course of the exhibition planning process, our attention shifted from object-related research on various Sufi items to more general considerations about the representation of diversity in Islam within the restricted means of a special exhibition on a small budget in a German university museum. How to communicate the diversity and heterogeneity of individual Muslims' relationships with their own religion was of special interest for us. Against this background we created an exhibition that comprised sections on Shi'i and Sunni prayer practice, pilgrimage practices, and the popular belief in charms and amulets against the evil eye, as well as Alevi concepts and Indonesian Islam. More than 80 percent of our visitors are schoolchildren. Thus, we also addressed the religious education of children, the roles of girls and boys, and the religious worlds of Muslim children. Here new pieces were purchased: toys and games with religious connotations, dolls such as *Fulla* or *Razanne*, puzzles, books, and other educational media representing the wide spectrum of Muslim religious education, ranging from very strict *Wahabbi* to very liberal interpretations. The relatively young target audience had also to be taken into account while designing the contents of a media station that provided an introduction to Islamic and mystical Sufi traditions and presented Islam and Muslims in Germany using music, pictures, and video material. It also served as a tool for visualizing the newest research results on Muslim youth cultures in Germany (Maske 2013) and on the diversity of Islam in Indonesia (Franke 2012). Last but not least, the inscriptions on a Persian dervish's ceremonial cap that inspired the title of our exhibition, as well as on a *kashkul*, a beggar's bowl dating back to the seventeenth century, were deciphered for the first time with the help of colleagues from the Iranian Studies Department of Marburg University.

The tradition of students' and interns' active involvement in the whole process of creating exhibitions might be regarded as an encouraging basis for another special project in the department's and the museum's history: the special exhibition *SinnRäume. Einblicke in gelebte Religiosität in Deutschland*¹³ is based on interviews on the materialization of religiosity in the homes of people of various religious affiliations. It is the result of a student initiative and integrates reflections about the museal (re)presentation of research results and the interactive participation of visitors.

Conclusion: Looking Ahead into the Museum's Future

Despite our limited means as curators of an academic collection, the staff of the Marburg Museum of Religions try to implement some of the demands of the new postcolonial museologies (critical museum studies), in terms, for example, of contextualized representation, deconstruction of essentialist statements about religions, and a multiperspectivity on religious phenomena. The symbiosis of the academic

study of religions and museum activities and the integration of the collection into the teaching program of the Department of the Study of Religions is an opportunity, since working with students in a museum provides for an ever new and current perspective on a collection founded nearly a century ago. It is also furthered by our interdisciplinary networks and cooperations (with, for instance, the Saint Petersburg Museum of the History of Religions).

"After the exhibition is before the exhibition": what could special exhibitions look like in the future? What distinctive roles could the collection's objects and their contextualized exhibition play? Needless to stress here the growing importance of well-balanced and finely nuanced information and knowledge about the variety and heterogeneity of religions and their dynamic roles in our multicultural and multireligious societies. One example from the museum's practice indicates the urgent need for even more differentiated information to promote respect and mutual understanding. It also highlights the crucial role religious objects can play in this very process. Currently, in the relatively small university town of Marburg (73,000 inhabitants including 26,500 students), refugee children have joined forty classes in various schools throughout the city. In the training that their teachers will receive, religious objects from our Islamic and other collections will serve as excellent instances to carefully reflect on the various sensitive issues of the meeting of various religious practices (Sunni, Shi'i, Alevi, Ahmadi, and more) that are to date unfamiliar to the teachers and might be sources of conflict between children of diverse ethnic, religious, or nonreligious backgrounds.

This training project illustrates the potential of the *Religionskundliche Sammlung* in opening up a "third space" as a communication center on non-confessional but empathetic ground, facilitating discussion about sensitive religion-based issues against the background of well-researched and differentiated knowledge about religions from a neutral perspective. The objects of our collections are excellent media for visualizing and communicating religious concepts and attitudes and at the same time stimulating further research and reflection.

Notes

1. <https://www.uni-marburg.de/relsamm/>.
2. More than half of the objects in the collection are of Asian origin.
3. I am very grateful to Andreas Hemming, Halle, for proofreading the English manuscript of this chapter.
4. Heinrich Frick directed the museum from 1932 to 1952 and was followed by Friedrich Heiler as director from 1953 to 1961.
5. *der kultlichen und rituellen Ausdrucksmittel der Religionen*.
6. To my mind the Museum of World Religions in Taipei, Taiwan, founded by Dharma Master Hsin Tao, represents in many regards a museum that best corresponds to Otto's vision.
7. It was also for the purpose of teaching that the early museum directors acquired models of larger sacred buildings and copies of unique, rare, or expensive originals.

8. The title of a brochure written by Heinrich Frick and published in Marburg in January 1931.
9. The 1975 exhibition *Yokigurashi* on the then relatively new Tenrikyō movement was not only the first museum representation of Tenrikyō in Europe but it also had a religious expert from the Japanese religious community, a *Yoboku*, present as an informant during the exhibition.
10. One example here is the decision of the Regional Court of Cologne on religious circumcision in 2013, which we discussed from various perspectives in one part of our special exhibition on Islam.
11. "From Dervish-Cap to Mekka-Cola. Religious Diversity in Islam." Cf. the accompanying catalogue (Franke and Runge 2013).
12. Rudolf Otto's personal and scholarly fascination with the religious worlds of East and Southeast Asia—an interest shared by most of its successors up to and including Edith Franke—may explain the relatively small number of objects of Islamic provenance in the collection and the fact that they had been handled in such a stepmotherly fashion. The existing roughly five hundred items (including two hundred pictures and photographs) mainly illustrated the mystical paths and practices of Sufis and dervishes.
13. "Sensual spaces: Insights into lived religion in Germany," opened in October 2015.

References

- Bräunlein, Peter (ed.). 2004. *Religion und Museum: Zur visuellen Repräsentation von Religion/en im öffentlichen Raum*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Franke, Edith. 2012. *Einheit in der Vielfalt. Strukturen, Bedingungen und Alltag religiöser Pluralität in Indonesien*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Franke, Edith, and Konstanze Runge (eds.). 2013. *Von Derwisch-Mütze bis Mekka-Cola. Vielfalt islamischer Glaubenspraxis*. Marburg: diagonal-Verlag.
- Frick, Heinrich. 1931. *International Institute for the Study of Religions*. Marburg.
- Hermann-Pfandt, Adelheid (ed.). 2007. *Tibet in Marburg*. Marburg: diagonal-Verlag.
- Houtman, Dick, and Birgit Meyer (eds.). 2012. *Things. Religion and the Question of Materiality*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Kamel, Susan, and Christine Gerbich (eds.). 2014. *Experimentierfeld Museum. Internationale Perspektiven auf Museum, Islam und Inklusion*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Maske, Verena. 2013. "Gottesfürchtig auf Erfolgskurs. Der Pop-Islam, eine muslimische Jugendkultur in Deutschland." In *Von Derwisch-Mütze bis Mekka-Cola. Vielfalt islamischer Glaubenspraxis*, edited by Edith Franke and Konstanze Runge, 87–107. Marburg: diagonal-Verlag.
- Otto, Rudolf. 1917. *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*. Breslau. [English translation: *The Idea of the Holy* (London, 1923)]
- Pye, Michael. 2014. "Exhibiting Religion." Unpublished paper on occasion of the Third Tenri University—Marburg University Joint Research Project, "Materiality in Religion and Culture", September 17–19, Marburg.

Section V Museum Interpretation of Religion and Religious Objects