

Überseemuseum Bremen. A museum that wants to be liked!

by David Said

If you are an Oceanic art lover, it is important that you do not judge the Überseemuseum on first impressions. When you enter the Oceanic section, you find yourself in an exhibition called "Life in the South Pacific" which is squarely aimed at local families and school children who know little about the Pacific. It is not until you look beyond the interactive displays and generic information on tropical foods and native life and focus on the objects themselves, that you realise you are viewing a very fine early collection of fantastic Oceanic material.

The Überseemuseum (Overseas-museum) began in 1873, when a monastery cabinet of curiosities was donated to the city. An anthropological section was added in 1875, and in 1896 it moved into its elegant current home on Railway Square.

Bremen is a Hanseatic merchant town, and the links between commerce and culture are strong. When the Bremen-based North German Lloyd line was given the postal contract for the Pacific, they offered to carry the Museum's scientists and equipment to the Pacific and carry specimens back to Bremen free of charge. Parts of whole houses from the Solomons and canoes from the Admiralties were carried as deck cargo on these museum-friendly vessels.

The Museum's zoologist, Ludwig Cohn, must have traveled on one of these ships when he went to Manus Island in 1912, bringing back one of the world's great Admiralty Islands collections. Part of Cohn's collection was destroyed during WW2, but what remains is most impressive and some of these objects are on display.

Most impactful are the large Admiralties pieces, including a large canoe in full sail, large carved ancestor figures and an amazing Manus slit drum with a head carved at one end of a massive section of tree trunk, and feet at the other.

Not that the display focuses on the Admiralties alone. As with most German museums, Bremen has a fantastic holding of early material from the Bismarcks. The centerpiece of the Oceanic display is the most impressive presentation of Baining tapa cloth pole masks I have ever seen. Pride of place goes to an immense structure which must stand all of 10 meters tall, supported on three bamboo poles the size of small tree trunks. Perhaps it was a stationary piece - how would the dancers ever get this monster to

move! The other pole masks on display are more maneuverable, and two of them have their wicker caps at the bottom of the poles that enabled them to be carried on the dancer's head, steadied by guy ropes on all sides.

There is a large amount of Sepik material too, mostly collected in the first decade of the 20th century, and this includes masks, orator's stools, dance costumes and figural carvings, as well as a dance ornament with bats suspended from it, the likes of which I have never seen before.

I noticed immediately that most of the orator's stools were quite small, roughly a meter high. Was this a local preference at one or two villages? Were they carved small for easier sale, even a hundred years ago? Or are the big ones we see today carved oversize for contemporary buyers? The impressive thing about this early Sepik material is that much of it could have been carved in 1960 or 1980 instead of 1900. There is obviously an amazing continuity of artistic style and quality in Sepik carving, even in tourist art.

The other area that is well represented is Buka. There is a rare U-shaped dance shield from Nissan Island with a human figure in the centre, and superb Buka canoe prow collected by Visser in 1900. In fact this is very much a German colonial museum, with the old German Pacific colonies well represented. The Sepik and Admiralties (the old Kaiser Wilhelmsland), Neu Pommern and Neu Mecklenburg, as New Britain and New Ireland were once called, and Buka and Bougainville, once the German West Solomons. Once we leave German territory and the friendly free carriage of the North German - Lloyd line, the collection becomes much thinner, though there are excellent individual pieces on show from Polynesia, Micronesia, British Papua and West Papua, plus outstanding artworks from Indonesia.



▲ A monumental Baining pole mask almost two stories tall dominates the central display at Bremen's "Life in the South Pacific" exhibition.

This museum has a uniquely open approach to its storerooms and reserve collection. These are housed in a building over the road which is shared with a cinema. At night, the lights are switched on so that cinema patrons can view the stored canoes through a glass wall. The idea is to encourage cinemagoers to visit the museum.

The storerooms themselves are very well laid out with excellent open storage and here I saw many treasures. Six Easter Island figures, 16 *tatanua* masks, Hawaiian pounders, Austral paddles and axes, a huge variety of bowls, a very large malangan collection, a dozen admiralties canoe prows, magnificent old sepik masks and figures, 10 war charms from the Admiralties, Fijian clubs, a very fine Sulka collection and more.

This storage area is open to the public on the first Sunday of every month and it is hoped that one day a land bridge will be built for the museum to the store. This is the most generous access policy I came across in Europe (or anywhere else for that matter) and I can only conclude the Überseemuseum is a museum that wants to engage with the community and wants to interest the public in its collections and encourage a learning process. How superb!

Practicalities: Bremen is more or less on the way from Berlin to Amsterdam by rail and easy to get to. The museum is a couple of hundred meters from the main railway station. It is open from Tuesday to Sunday, but you are advised to time your visit for the first Sunday of the month, when the storerooms are open to the public (email ahead first and check: office@euberseemuseum.de).



▲ (top right) A superb pair of male and female canoe prows from the Admiralties, probably from the same canoe.

► An astounding Admiralties slit drum as tall as a man - there is a human head on the one side, and the feet stick out at the other.