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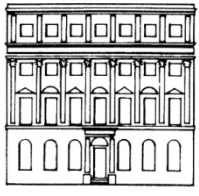

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ARTICLES

CREATIVE MISUNDERSTANDINGS: CIRCULATING OBJECTS AND THE TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE WITHIN THE PERSONAL UNION OF HANOVER AND GREAT BRITAIN

DOMINIK COLLET

Early museums have recently experienced a radical reassessment. Once regarded as hermetic assemblages enjoyed by a limited circle of connoisseurs, they are now seen as crucial spaces of encounter. James Clifford and Peter Galison have identified them as 'contact zones' or 'trading zones', while their exhibits have been reconceptualized as 'boundary objects' that stimulate and organize exchange across disciplinary, religious, and national divides.[1] This reinterpretation has become so pervasive that Germany's largest museum project, the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, will be organized around a reinvented *Kunstkammer* that, it is hoped, will embody an alternative, more respectful form of encounter with the world.[2]

Collections and their objects should, therefore, offer a promising locale in which to study exchanges in a range of transnational frameworks. They might encourage a re-evaluation of the level of interaction, especially in settings where such exchanges have been disputed

[1] James Clifford, 'Museums as Contact Zones', in id., *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 188–219; Peter Galison, *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics* (Chicago, 1997); Susan Starr and James R. Griesemer, 'Institutional Ecology, "Translations" and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39', *Social Studies of Science*, 13 (1989), 387–420.

[2] Friedrich von Bose, 'The Making of Berlin's Humboldt-Forum: Negotiating History and the Cultural Politics of Place', *Darkmatter*, 11 (2013), online at <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/category/journal/issues/11-afterlives/>, accessed 1 Nov. 2013. For a less politicized British attempt to look at objects as agents of knowledge transfer, see Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London, 2010).

or seem to be missing. One such case is the Personal Union of Hanover and Great Britain. This political link connected the north German electorate with the United Kingdom and the wider British Empire from 1714 until the dissolution of the Union in 1837. It provided, amongst other things, a shortcut between the important collecting hubs of Göttingen and London. Research on Britain's 'Hanoverian dimension' and 'continental commitment' has revised much of the older interpretation of the Personal Union as an insubstantial facade or a mere dynastic tool, and placed it firmly within the European tradition of the 'composite state'.[3] This reassessment is closely linked to bourgeoning studies on intercultural exchange and *histoires croisées* in transnational settings.[4] Nevertheless, the focus has remained on politics and the revision has been limited in scope—transfers from Hanover to Britain, for example, have remained elusive. A focus on objects and their exchange within the Personal Union and throughout the British Empire might well provide a different view of Anglo-Hanoverian contacts, illustrating vibrant practical forms of exchange and transfers of knowledge.

The new enthusiasm for collections and the associated 'object turn', however, often disregards the problems associated with such exchanges, especially in stratified early modern societies. Collecting is undoubtedly one of the most social of all scientific enterprises. It involves not just physical objects but a unique range of agents, merchants, informers, travellers, and visitors. This intriguing mix can certainly broaden our understanding of who actually brokered ex-

[3] Brendan Simms and Torsten Riotte (eds.), *The Hanoverian Dimension in British History 1714–1837* (Cambridge, 2007); Jeremy Black, *Continental Commitment: Britain, Hanover and Interventionism 1714–1793* (London, 2005); Stephen Conway, 'Continental Connections: Britain and Europe in the Eighteenth Century', *History*, 90 (2005), 353–74; Nicholas B. Harding, *Hanover and the British Empire 1700–1837* (London, 2007).

[4] See Johannes Paulmann, 'Internationaler Vergleich und interkultureller Transfer: Zwei Forschungsansätze zur europäischen Geschichte des 18. bis 20 Jahrhunderts', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 267 (1998), 649–85; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung: Der Ansatz der Histoire croisée und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28 (2002), 607–36. For a recent application of these concepts to the Personal Union see Steffen Hölscher and Sune Schlitte (eds.), *Kommunikation im Zeitalter der Personalunion (1714–1837): Prozesse, Praktiken, Akteure* (Göttingen, 2014).

changes during the Personal Union. But meetings of this heterogeneous group held potential for conflict as well as contact. In addition, exchanges in a museum setting required not just a translation between different social spheres, but also fluid and repeated transfers between different media, objects and texts. This challenging process invited distortions and mistakes. As a result, we might need to acknowledge another ubiquitous form of exchange: creative misunderstanding and unintended consequences.

Because museums are by definition conservative institutions, the analysis has to start some time before the Personal Union. This allows us to illustrate two closely connected cases of cultural exchange in a museum environment: the experiences of the early Royal Society in the mid seventeenth century, and their repetition and emulation by Göttingen academics in the late eighteenth century. Both fit rather uneasily into the success story of a museological 'trading zone'. Instead, I hope to illustrate the laborious social work that characterized this process of exchange. The translation across geographical as well as substantial social barriers often fostered unexpected consequences, marking incidental and circuitous but no less potent forms of 'exchange'.

I. *An Empire of Things*

During much of the seventeenth century, traditional scholars and amateur collectors imagined themselves standing in opposite corners of an intellectual sparring ring. Collecting was characterized by a rigid anti-scholastic attitude, upheld by a social group outside the ranks of classical learning. They saw collecting as a space of gentlemanly friendship, consensus, and sociability in opposition to the notorious disputes that characterized university life. Scholars and academics, in turn, regarded the activities of the collectors as naive and superficial, willing to place form over substance, and visual appeal over learned thought. Such carefully guarded dichotomies, of course, belong to the genre of scholarly self-fashioning, and a closer look at the actual practices illustrates multiple forms of entanglement and interaction. As I will try to show, however, the 'translation' between two social spheres and two scientific codes came with costs attached. The imaginary character of such boundaries does not mean that they

remained inconsequential. Crossing them proved a risky gamble for many, and often had severe consequences if not supported by social skills—consequences that tend to be overlooked in an all too optimistic appreciation of the hybrid, the liminal, and the material.

The tension between scholars and collectors, books and objects, is especially prominent in the case of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge. When it was founded in 1660, its Fellows were decidedly partisan. Following Francis Bacon, they strongly favoured direct observation over textual knowledge. The establishment of a museum, therefore, figured high on their agenda. Such a tool suited their view of science as based on indisputable 'facts' rather than philosophical speculation. They hoped that the physical objects would help eliminate the divisive discussions that plagued the scientific debates of their day and English post-Civil War society in general.[5]

The Fellows had ambitious plans to use their planned research collection as a 'contact tool' to facilitate direct observations across the British Empire and beyond, an endeavour explicitly directed against the tradition of text-based practice. The collection's curator, Robert Hooke, argued that books were

> for the most part [so] superficial and the Descriptions so ambiguous, that they create a very imperfect Idea of the true Nature and Characteristick of the thing described . . . . It were therefore much to be wisht for and indeavoured that there might be and kept in some repository as full and compleat a Collection of all varieties of Natural Bodies as could be obtain'd, where an Inquirer might be able to have recourse, where he might peruse, and turn over, and spell, and read the Book of Nature, and observe the Orthography, Etymologia, Syntaxis, and Prosodia of Natures Grammar.[6]

[5] Michael Hunter, *Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy: Intellectual Change in Late Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Woodbridge, 1995), 135–50; Dominik Collet, *Die Welt in der Stube: Begegnungen mit Außereuropa in Kunstkammern der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 2007), 269–314.

[6] Richard Waller (ed.), *The Posthumous Works of Robert Hooke: Containing his Cutlerian Lectures and other Discourses, Read at the Meetings of the Illustrious Royal Society . . .* (London, 1705), 365.

Hooke's vision was to transfer the practices of reading books to 'reading nature'. His goal was to challenge the established texts of his day in the museum and replace them with knowledge based on direct observation of objects, a charge that returned in the Society's proud motto 'nullius in verba'.

Putting such an object turn into practice, however, proved rather more difficult. In 1660, when the Fellows set their minds on building a collection, England had been sidelined from the world of collecting on the Continent by the Civil War. Accordingly, their initial collection had to be acquired from a German entrepreneur, Robert Hubert, a gifted showman who had relocated to England as a result of the Thirty Years War and made a handsome profit from introducing this new form of entertainment to Londoners.[7] In Germany, collections had been around for more than a century and had established their own traditions, a network of dedicated virtuosi, and a rigid canon of collectables. After its acquisition, Hubert's popular collection was found to contain many marvellous curiosities, but few well-documented specimens. Popular rarities such as the bones of 'Giants' and the ribs of a 'Triton or Mereman' accounted for many of its exhibits. They came with a multitude of unmarked 'Chests and Boxes furnished with many hundreds of Rarities . . . all different shapes, and operations, and of divers countries', an assemblage that immediately confronted the Society's membership with the difficulty of 'reading' objects stripped of all contextual information.[8] As a result, the Fellows decided to acquire objects via their own channels, and switch to a mixture of text and object. For this they chose a well-established tool of control, the questionnaire.[9] In an ambitious project, learned men of rank and repute from all over the known world were provided with sets of 'inquiries' that listed the desired objects and informa-

[7] See Collet, *Welt in der Stube*, 278, for Hubert's shows in Germany.

[8] Robert Hubert, *A Catalogue of Many Natural Rarities* . . . (London, 1664), 1, 26, 59.

[9] On the use of the questionnaire as a tool of control and governance see Simona Boscani Leoni, 'Queries and Questionnaires: Collecting Local and Popular Knowledge in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Europe', in Kaspar von Greyerz, Silvia Flubacher, and Philipp Senn (eds.), *Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Geschichte des Wissens im Dialog: Connecting Science and Knowledge* (Göttingen, 2013), 187–210; and Joan-Pau Rubiés, 'Instructions for Travellers: Teaching the Eye to See', *History and Anthropology*, 9 (1996), 139–90.

tion. Responsibility for this enterprise fell to another native German, the Society's secretary, Henry Oldenburg. He excerpted long lists of questions and desired objects from travel narratives, translated them, had them printed as broadsheets or in the *Philosophical Transactions*, oversaw their distribution, and collected the returning answers. Almost a hundred of these lists have survived.[10] Inquiries went to respected contacts in the Bermudas, the Bahamas, and Virginia, to the Governor of Bombay, the president of the English East India Company in Suratte, the English Consul at Aleppo, and the English agent at Isfahan in Persia, but also to contacts outside the English dominions, to French, Portuguese, and Spanish America, to Japan, Lapland, Russia, and even Ethiopia. In just a few years Oldenburg created a large network of exchange that spread from London to the colonial world.

While this was certainly an impressive achievement, the actual return of objects and answers fell far short of initial expectations. Only a minute number of specimens ever reached the Society's museum in London. Moreover, they were poorly chosen, often fragmentary, and came with little or no contextual information. The collection's influence on the work of the Royal Society remained marginal. Most correspondents simply repeated the questions on the supposed 'otherness' of the extra-European world back at the Fellows in the affirmative. Several self-appointed 'eye-witnesses' confirmed popular stories about gruesome exotic poisons, the presence of unicorns, or humanoid giants. The transmission of specimens did little to mitigate these shortcomings. The objects conformed to a narrow standard of established collectables. Most correspondents simply sent what they knew to be popular in European museums: rhinoceros horns, birds of paradise, or objects that illustrated the alien nature of the indigenous population. In addition, the textual documentation accompanying the objects was virtually non-existent, as most donors were confident that the necessary information could easily be retrieved from printed books, whose erudition they judged to be far superior to their own.[11]

[10] Royal Society Archives, London: CP XIX 'Questions and Answers'; and Collet, *Welt in der Stube*, 281–98.

[11] Dominik Collet, 'Big Sciences, Open Networks, and Global Collecting in Early Museums', in David Livingstone and Peter Meusburger (eds.), *Geographies of Science* (Dordrecht, 2010), 121–38.

A reliance on objects failed to secure a non-partisan, unadulterated exchange of 'Baconian facts'. Indeed, many correspondents were acutely aware that the Royal Society project was never planned as a network of equal partners, but as an enterprise in which knowledge would flow in one direction only. They knew that even innocuous information on natural history could quickly turn into a tool of control and exploitation. The connection between empiricism and empire was rightly feared to be particularly close in the case of the Royal Society, with its many ties to the colonial administration.[12] As a result, many colonial correspondents chose to exploit the delicate and fragile links between object and context, and used them for their own ends. When Philippo Vernatti, an official of the Dutch East India Company, received the Fellows' questionnaire, he responded by sending established curiosities—'stones' from the heads of snakes supposedly useful against poison, a curious 'bird's nest' formed like male genitalia and used in powdered form as an aphrodisiac by 'lecherous Chinamen'—while remaining ominously silent on all questions regarding maps, trade routes, or marketable products. His strategy of sending suggestively contextualized objects as decoys to divert the Royal Society's attention proved successful. The Fellows marvelled at the curious pieces and published Vernatti's 'information' immediately in the *Philosophical Transactions*, while the conspicuous gaps in his selective communications were quickly forgotten.[13]

At the same time, attempts to perform experiments on these products of exchange failed. Vernatti had sent a fascinating report on the 'Makassar poison', a toxin that could reputedly only be treated by the victim consuming his own faeces.[14] When the Fellows finally received a vial of this miraculous poison, they immediately tried it on several unsuspecting cats and dogs, but observed that none showed any symptoms of distress. The Fellows, however, found it impossible to trust their own, poorly documented sample, in the face of an ever

[12] Collet, 'Big Sciences', 129–34. On the larger debate on early natural history and empire see Sarah Irving, *Natural Science and the Origins of the British Empire* (London, 2008); and Arndt Brendecke, *Imperium und Empirie: Funktionen des Wissens in der spanischen Kolonialherrschaft* (Cologne, 2009).

[13] Collet 'Big Sciences', 126–7. On similar tactics used by John Winthrop in Connecticut see Collet, *Welt in der Stube*, 287–95.

[14] See Daniel Carey, 'The Political Economy of Poison: The Kingdom of Makassar and the Early Royal Society', *Renaissance Studies*, 17 (2003), 517–43.

growing number of mutually corroborative written reports. Rather than questioning the texts, they decided they had the 'wrong' object. The decontextualized specimen proved to be of little use in testing the validity of printed narratives that were uniformly confirmed by colonial observers and European authors alike, who, in many cases, had simply read the same volumes of travel literature.[15]

In the end, the Society that sported the motto 'nothing in words' had to settle for information compiled from books, an approach that culminated in John Ray's history of plants, a work of immense erudition comprising three folio-sized volumes of nothing but text—a complete but non-sensical translation of objects into printed words.[16] In the early eighteenth century the grand design for a 'new science' based on the exchanges fostered by objects through a central collection was unceremoniously abandoned. Collecting natural history had proved to be 'big science'. It required a multitude of collaborators from all walks of life working together across large distances, an undertaking ill suited to a scientific system that was based on close personal contact, the reputation of trusted witnesses, and the social status that came with financial independence.[17] Instead, the members refocused on the 'small sciences', such as mathematics and physics, that provided more manageable, repeatable, and decisive results in the confined and controlled environment of a laboratory. The Royal Society's museum quickly developed into a salon rather than a research tool. It served as a meeting place for Fellows and foreign virtuosi and became a major tourist attraction, but slowly lost its place in a Society increasingly set on 'experimentalism'.[18]

Unfortunately the Fellows, who were usually such faithful documenters of their activities, failed to record these rather discouraging experiences. Otherwise they might have saved the academics of eighteenth-century Göttingen University some trouble. Instead, they pub-

[15] Anon., 'On the Nature of a Certain Stone, Found in the Indies, in the Head of a Serpent', *Philosopical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 1 (1665), 102–3; and Collet, *Welt in der Stube*, 303–5.

[16] John Ray, *Historia plantarum species hactenus editas aliasque insuper multas noviter inventas & descriptas complectens . . .* , 3 vols. (London, 1686–1704).

[17] Collet, 'Big Sciences', 129–34.

[18] Hunter, *Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy*, 150; and P. Fontes da Costa, 'The Culture of Curiosity at the Royal Society in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 56 (2002), 147–66.

lished a carefully edited catalogue of their collections that served as a model for many later generations.[19] That is why many of their ideas returned, almost word for word, a hundred years later.

II. *A University of Things*

The University of Göttingen, founded in 1737 by the British King George II, is another example of a reform institution. Göttingen had been a provincial backwater, but was transformed into a centre of academic learning when the scion of the house of Brunswick-Lüneburg, who had acceded to the British throne in 1714 and from then on ruled over both countries in personal union, founded a new university to provide for his German territories and account for his new position in the European hierarchy. Its unconventional combination of academy and university drew many inspirations from the Royal Society and its institutional design. As a result, a central research collection constituted an integral part of the university's conception and even its building plan.[20] Financial difficulties meant that the original idea could only be put into practice when, in another parallel with London, a private collection became available. In 1773 Göttingen, with the help of a royal grant from George III, acquired Christian Wilhelm Büttner's large and rather idiosyncratic museum.[21] The comments of the professors in Göttingen also sound remarkably familiar. Echoing Robert Hooke, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach proclaimed: 'Earlier collections made the mistake of gathering curiosities rather than what is most remarkable in nature

[19] Nehemiah Grew, '*Musaeum Regalis Societatis': Or a Catalogue and Description Of the Natural and Artificial Rarities belonging to the Royal Society and Preserved at Gresham College . . .* (London, 1686).

[20] Marie Luise Allemeyer, Dominik Collet, and Marian Füssel, 'The "Academic Museum": Göttingen's University Collections as a Space of Knowledge Production and Cultural Heritage', *Opuscula Musealia*, 18 (2010), 15–22; and on the museum building, Gunther Beer, 'Beitrag zur Baugeschichte des Akademischen Museums 1773 bis 1877 mit drei Gebäudeplänen des Akademischen Museums', *Museumsbrief*, 29 (2010), 2–20.

[21] Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, 'Einige Nachrichten vom academischen Museum zu Göttingen', *Annalen der Braunschweigisch-Lüneburgischen Churlande*, 1 (1787), 84–99.

. . . our academic cabinet, however, is not designed for pomp but for utility, it is destined for research and teaching . . . and we already find ourselves obliged to speak of it as an epochal phenomenon.'[22] This vocal propaganda hints at the museum's secondary aim: to attract well-off students and raise the university's international profile. It also pointed to the fact that universities had opened up to object-centred research only slowly and on the margins of their curriculum.

Like the Royal Society, Göttingen university initially inherited what, on closer inspection, proved to be a rather haphazard assemblage of curiosities. The professors found it increasingly difficult to establish their own scientific model of collecting, separate from the well-established traditions of collectors, especially as the museum was set up as a public institution. Instead of the pioneering research agenda they envisioned, they saw their museum assume a central position on the tourist itinerary and in the sociable exchange of gentlemanly curiosities, developments documented in a sizeable visitors' book with more than 3,000 entries in the first decade alone.[23] In order to counter these tendencies, they decided yet again to acquire objects independently. To achieve this goal, however, they had to employ people outside the university's customary ranks: travellers, agents, and informers. In a university setting, where status and reputation were constantly under threat and constituted important social markers, such a move was fraught with difficulties, even if it stayed within the confines of the Personal Union. Few collectors shared the professors' scientific and social codes.[24]

This had already become apparent when Albrecht von Haller, president of the Göttingen equivalent to the Royal Society, the Akademie der Wissenschaften, organized an expedition to the

[22] [Johann Friedrich Blumenbach], 'Etwas vom Akademischen Museum in Göttingen', in Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (ed.), *Taschenbuch zum Nutzen und Vergnügen fürs Jahr 1779* (Göttingen, 1778), 45–57, at 47–8 (trans. Dominik Collet).

[23] On the visitors see Christine Nawa, 'Sammeln für die Wissenschaft: Das Academische Museum Göttingen (1773–1840)' (MA thesis, University of Göttingen, 2005), available online at <http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/master/2010/nawa/nawa.pdf>, accessed 1 Nov. 2013.

[24] Dominik Collet, 'Universitäre Sammlungen als "contact zone": Gesellige und gelehrte Sammlungspraktiken im Akademischen Museum der Universität Göttingen (1772–1840)', *Traverse*, 3 (2012), 41–52.

Americas in 1752. During his time in Göttingen, Haller planned to make full use of the new link with Britain and openly referred to the Royal Society as a model to increase support.[25] But Haller was also acutely aware of the professorial traditions of his German university colleagues. As a result, he rejected offers by noble patrons and the Imperial Court in Vienna to finance the enterprise. In order to underline the independent, academic character of his venture, he opted instead for a subscription model, in which scholars shared costs and rewards. Haller publicly linked such a design to British traditions, but it also appealed to professors, who were familiar with it from the book market. In order to cater to the professors' textual traditions of knowledge, he promised subscribers not just objects, but also exclusive written reports and preprints of the travel account.[26] The professors, however, were not available to undertake stressful and demanding journeys. As a result Haller had to settle on Christlob Mylius, a Berlin man of letters more at home in the museums than the lecture halls. This immediately became a problem when Mylius died en route in London, after having stayed there for a considerable period. Exasperated Göttingen professors spread vicious rumours about Mylius's dubious character, focusing on the unseemly amount of time he spent with London's amateur collectors. Haller, luckily, was already on the way to his native Berne at the time and escaped the wrath of his duped colleagues. Similar *chroniques scandaleuses*, however, abounded around scholarly collections, suggesting that translating objects into texts required interpreters fluid in both languages. This could be a perilous affair.[27]

When Haller's colleague, Johann David Michaelis, initiated a similar expedition to the Middle East, he therefore took infinite care to

[25] Material on Haller's expedition to America, including printed pamphlets and instructions, is kept in the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen, department of rare prints and manuscripts, 2 H Lit. Biogr. IV 7270.

[26] Ibid. On early British botanical expeditions sponsored by 'crowd-funding' see Collet, *Welt in der Stube*, 241–3, 265.

[27] Ibid. 132–65. On the struggle of British naturalists, including the Fellows Joseph Banks and Hans Sloane, to secure the recognition of traditional circles of learning, see Caspar Hirschi, 'Men of Science versus Macaronies: Die Polemik gegen die *Amateur Gentlemen* der Royal Society im späten 18. Jahrhundert', in Frauke Berndt and Daniel Fulda (eds.*), Die Sachen der Aufklärung* (Hamburg, 2012), 193–206.

prevent a second disaster, especially as this undertaking was financed not by the academy but by the Danish king. He carefully selected travellers for their familiarity with the academic world, making sure both principal investigators received professorships before they set out. Additionally, Michaelis, who was familiar with the Royal Society's endeavours from his own visit to London in 1741, copied their scheme of providing extensive questionnaires. But when the leaders of the expedition died of malaria early on, the tragedy was followed by the same vitriolic attacks on their character that Mylius had suffered after his death. As a result, the sole surviving traveller, Carsten Niebuhr was inundated with repeated sets of instructions governing his mediation of the natural world to text. They culminated in a 400-page questionnaire that, while officially directed to Niebuhr, served equally as a justification of his enterprise to Europe's academics. This is why it was printed in several languages.[28] In his foreword Michaelis, a linguist by profession, stressed the pitfalls of transferring object knowledge into text in a passage reminiscent of Robert Hooke's earlier claims for books and objects:

> Most travellers . . . would have enhanced our scholarship far more if they had not been lacking two indispensable prerequisites. The first is the knowledge of the language . . . The foundation of natural history, its alphabet so to say, is in fact a proper dictionary ranged in order after the natural classes . . . Such a dictionary becomes useless if everyone uses a language of his own . . . The second deficiency consists in the lack of proper guidance through questions and instructions. The traveller sees a multitude of things and will—without instruction—report what ten travel writers before him have already reported, rather than providing what the scholars in Europe need to enlighten the darkness.[29]

[28] Johann David Michaelis, *Fragen an eine Gesellschaft Gelehrter Männer die auf Befehl Ihro Majestät des Königs von Dännemark nach Arabien reisen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1762); Johann David Michaelis, *Receuil de Questions, Proposées à une Société de Savans qui par Ordre de sa Majesté Danoise font le Voyage de l'Arabie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1763).

[29] Michaelis, *Fragen*, 'Vorrede' (trans. Dominik Collet).

For the linguist Michaelis, the major challenges for museological exchange were the translation of object into text, and the translation of amateurs into scholars.

As in the case of the Royal Society, such professorial control came at a price. Michaelis's printed questionnaire did, indeed, reach Niebuhr in India, after he had crossed Egypt, Arabia, and Yemen and before he returned via Persia, Turkey, and the Balkans. After his arrival back in Europe, however, it took Niebuhr almost ten years of diligent study to answer all the questions.[30] When he had finished, his work repeated the fate of the Royal Society's *History of Plants*. While Niebuhr's text met the highest standards because it conformed exactly to his superiors' expectations, his natural objects lay, disregarded, in the basement of the Academy of Sciences in Copenhagen. When Carolus Linnaeus asked Michaelis to inquire about them just ten years later, his Danish colleague sent a mortified reply, reporting that most had crumbled away and decayed without anyone ever having looked at them. The specimens of exchange had become mute and illegible without context or interpreters.[31]

In another repetition of the Royal Society's experiences, the Göttingen professors then tried to make objects speak on their own. Because their exhibits came with virtually no contextual documentation, this again proved to be exceptionally difficult. When in 1781 the Danish king donated an Egyptian mummy to Göttingen, the professors immediately jumped at this chance. Not only was the mummy a popular object of myth and superstition, but it was also a royal gift that, while it was certainly welcome as a symbol of the university's reputation and contacts, needed to be 'academicized' and stripped of

[30] Carsten Niebuhr, *Beschreibung von Arabien: Aus eigenen Beobachtungen und im Lande selbst gesammelten Nachrichten* (Copenhagen, 1772). See also Daniel Carey, 'Arts and Sciences of Travel, 1574–1762: The Arabian Journey and Michaelis's *Fragen* in Context', in Ib Friis, Michael Harbsmeier, and Jørgen Bæk Simonsen (eds.), *Early Scientific Expeditions and Local Encounters: New Perspectives on Carsten Niebuhr and The Arabian Journey. Proceedings of a Symposium on the Occasion of the 250th Anniversary of the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia Felix*, Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters (2013), 27–50.

[31] See Johann David Michaelis, *Literarischer Briefwechsel*, ed. Johann Gottlieb Buhle, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1794–96), ii. 202; and Reimer Eck, 'Christlob Mylius und Carsten Niebuhr: Aus den Anfängen der wissenschaftlichen Forschungsreise an der Universität Göttingen', *Göttinger Jahrbuch*, 34 (1986), 11–43, at 34.

its aristocratic associations. As with the Royal Society's Makassar poison, a unique interdisciplinary team of professors from linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, and medicine descended on the specimen in a well-publicized dissection.[32] Their work was so thorough that almost nothing remained in place. Their findings, however, even though published in lengthy reports, were unimpressive. No one could tell them where exactly the object had come from, so they could not relate it to other known facts. Nor did they have anything to compare it to. In fact, the only other 'mummy' in the collection came from a local undertaker who had displayed the dried corpse of an unlucky local man in Göttingen's alehouses for a living.[33] When the professors later asked the Danish king for a second specimen, it was not for purposes of comparison, but because the first one was now too disjointed to be displayed with the king's name attached.

Of course, such endeavours did not remain without criticism. People who knew British collecting from personal experience had a rather more reserved attitude to the museum. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, for example, had travelled to England in 1770 and 1775 and drafted a bitter satire on British collectors shortly after the opening of Göttingen's academic museum. His text described the objects owned by a London collector, easily identifiable as Sir Hans Sloane, former president of the Royal Society and in this role a model for the Göttingen enterprise. According to Lichtenberg's satire, his collection contained 'a bed in form of a sarcophagus—for methodists and pietists . . . a suite of clothes for a child with two-heads' and 'double-ended spoons, for twins'.[34]

As Lichtenberg had feared, by 1800 the Academic Museum of Göttingen's faithful emulation of the Royal Society's 'object turn' had yielded strikingly similar results. The collection of this public institution reflected the tastes of visitors, donors, and merchants rather than the interests of the academics. Even the celebrated collection of ma-

[32] *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*, 123 (8 Oct. 1781), 985–92.

[33] On the mummified body of Conrad Schachtrupp in the Academic Museum see Gudrun Schwibbe, *Wahrgenommen: Die sinnliche Erfahrung der Stadt* (Münster, 2002), 184.

[34] For the 'Inventory of a collection of appliances, which are to be auctioned in the house of Sir H. S. [Hans Sloane] in the coming week', see Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Wolfgang Promies, 4 vols. (Munich, 1968–72), iii. 451–7.

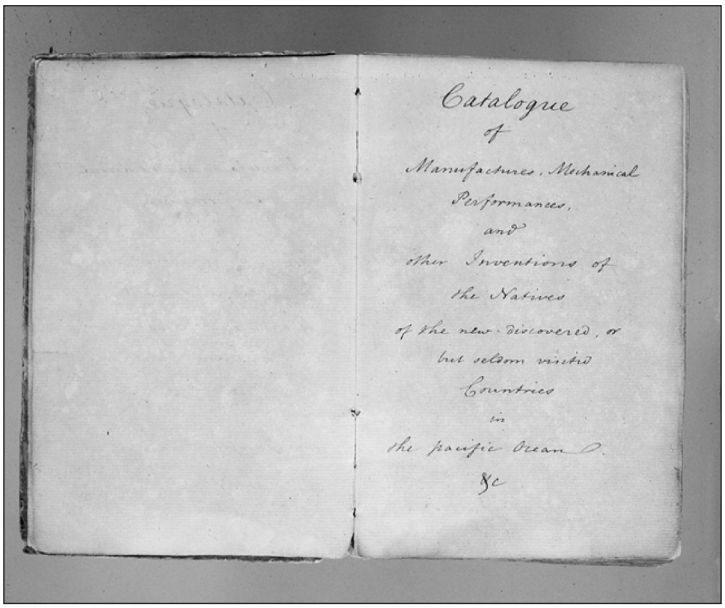

Illustration 1: George Humphrey, *Catalogue of Ethnographic Objects from the Voyages of James Cook sent to the Akademisches Museum in Göttingen on behalf of George III* (London, 1782). By courtesy of the Institut für Völkerkunde, Göttingen University.

terial from the voyages of James Cook, acquired in 1782, did not contain the natural specimens that the professors had asked for, but ethnographic 'exotica'. Nor did its composition reflect the tastes of the nominal patron, King George III. Instead, the exotic clothes, weapons, and utensils mirrored the preferences of the merchant George Humphrey and the virtuosi collectors he catered for (see Illustration 1).[35] In fact, in some cases it might have been indigenous people themselves who influenced the composition of the collection. For example, several skulls of Maori warriors could arguably be read as embodiments of the Personal Union of Hanover and Great Britain,

[35] Humphrey's taste is well documented in his manuscript catalogue of the items, now kept in the Institut für Völkerkunde in Göttingen. See Thomas Nutz, *'Varietäten des Menschengeschlechts': Die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in der Zeit der Aufklärung* (Cologne, 2009), 277–81.

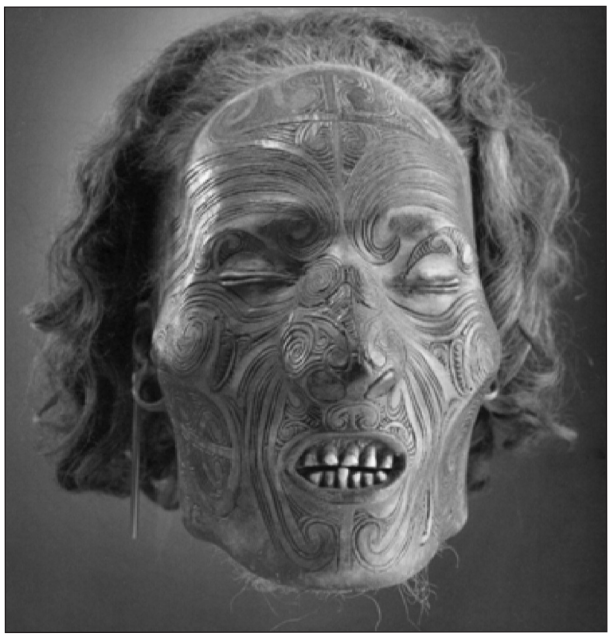

Illustration 2: Mokomakai, presumably the 'Head of a New Zealand Prince', donated by Hugh and Charlotte Percy, Duke and Duchess of Northumberland, to the Akademisches Museum in Göttingen in 1822. Private collection.

or as potent materializations of the British Empire (see Illustration 2). One skull did, indeed, arrive in Göttingen in 1822 as the gift of Hugh and Charlotte Percy, Duke and Duchess of Northumberland. Two others were acquired in 1834 through the intermediary Heinrich Ludwig Goertz, a humble upholsterer at the Court in Windsor. All of the visually striking tattooed skulls, however, had been mass produced by Maori craftsmen specifically for the European market. In some cases Maori craftsmen even used the heads of murdered white explorers to satisfy the growing demand and their own need for fireweapons.[36]

[36] Gundolf Krüger, 'Mummified Heads (mokomokai/upoko tui) from New Zealand in the Ethnographic Collection of Göttingen University', in Dominik Collet, Marian Füssel, and Roy McLeod (eds.), *The University of Things: History, Practice, Epistemology,* Yearbook for European Culture of Science, 9 (forthcoming Suttgart, 2014).

Contemporary research on these objects, custom-made to European tastes, was, of course, futile. Instead, in Göttingen as in London, research on objects was gradually replaced by text-based practices with the exhibits serving as illustrations rather than as source material. Even in areas where it is possible to trace intense, personal contact within the framework of the Personal Union, their symbolic value was high but the scientific results remained limited. The many exchanges between the president of the Royal Society, Joseph Banks, and the museum's director, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, are a case in point. Blumenbach certainly received numerous human skulls through Banks's extensive network. His influential theory on the genesis of human races, however, had been firmly in place long before they arrived, and was based on travel literature rather than actual objects.[37] Similarly, when in 1790 he was looking for illustrations to his momentous natural history, he skipped the extensive collection at his disposal and turned to books instead. His instructions to his engraver, Daniel Chodowiecki, stated:

> 1st human variety: an oriental scene—people of princely learning and slender frame—the whole scene breathing the utmost salaciousness—costumes in the style of Niebuhr's travels . . . 2nd variety—Chinese—in the distance their bizarre follies some drinking tea as in DuHaldes Description of China . . . 4th variety Brazilians—some parrots in the tree, the men in the style of the Virginian in Hollarts book' (see Illustration 3).[38]

Of course, many such objects were close at hand and had often been acquired through the Personal Union's colonial networks. But because of their dubious documentation Blumenbach preferred the tried and tested authority of established books, using the museum's objects as tools of visualization rather than as evidence.

[37] Nutz, '*Varietäten des Menschengeschlechts*', 260–1; and Céline Trautmann, 'Die Werkstatt Johann Friedrich Blumenbachs (1752–1840)', in Hans Erich Bödecker and Philippe Büttgen (eds.), *Die Wissenschaft vom Menschen in Göttingen um 1800: Wissenschaftliche Praktiken, institutionelle Geographie, europäische Netzwerke* (Göttingen 2008), 213–54, at 237–8.

[38] Frank William Peter Dougherty, *The Correspondence of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach*, 4 vols. (Göttingen, 2006–12), i. 289 (trans. Dominik Collet). The

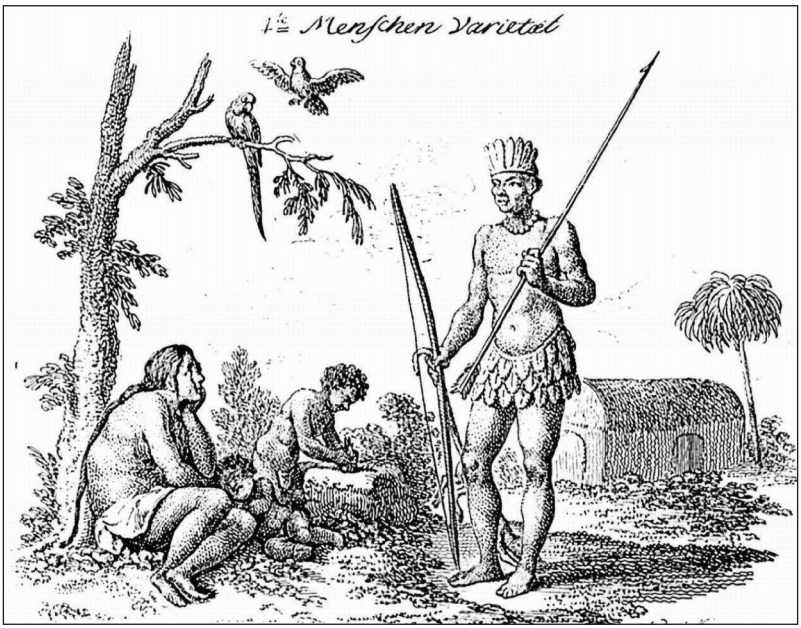

Illustration 3: Daniel Chodowiecki, 'Brazilians', in Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1806). By courtesy of the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen.

It would be tempting to surmise that the intellectual self-fashioning in Göttingen based on British precedents within the framework of the Personal Union simply produced similarly limited results, a conclusion that would fit into the dominant interpretation of the supposedly one-sided and feeble Anglo-Hanoverian contacts. In an unexpected and somewhat surprising turn, however, the objects in Göttingen soon took on a life of their own. They certainly failed in the role that their early promoters had envisioned for them. The objects, however, soon acquired other, no less substantial roles. The Königlich Akademisches Museum quickly became a showcase for Göttingen University's international networks and reputation, as manifested in the academically disappointing but geopolitically

illustrations are published in Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1806).

charged James Cook collection.[39] It also served as a public showcase for the university and constituted a space of memorial culture for the professors and their achievements. Blumenbach also exploited the potential of the collection in other fields. His social skills allowed him to use the museum to expand the university's range of patrons. He also used this unique public space to open the university to new groups of experts and supporters in a move that might have been more instrumental for Göttingen's pivotal role in natural history than much of the research of its early professors.[40]

Most importantly, however, the museum objects played a crucial role in the process of disciplinary differentiation. They delineated emerging academic disciplines, naturalizing their cultural construction and giving material evidence to fragile claims for distinct professional identities. Many academic subjects were established in close connection with the university's collections. In the hands of Blumenbach, the James Cook collection legitimized and visualized early claims for an ethnography or *Völkerkunde*. In similar vein, the 'economic garden', eagerly supported by Banks, provided physical support for the field of forestry to break away from biology. What might have started as a misreading of earlier British success quickly turned into an influential catalyst for the emergence of new disciplines and scientific practices.[41]

III. *Creative Misunderstandings, Incidental Exchanges*

Early collecting constituted a 'contact zone' involving a heterogeneous body of contributors. For seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and early

[39] The 'Cook–Forster' collection was, of course, a scientific failure only in terms of contemporaries' expectations. Dougherty, *Correspondence*, i. 327. Today, its unique material record of the Pacific and North America constitutes a crucial resource for ethnographic research on a global scale, a reminder of the frequent revaluations that academic 'Cinderella collections' experience. See Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin and Gundolf Krüger (eds.), *James Cook: Gaben und Schätze aus der Südsee* (Munich, 1998); and Collet, Füssel, and McLeod (eds.), *University of Things*.

[40] Collet, 'Universitäre Sammlungen' and Trautmann, 'Die Werkstatt'.

[41] See Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (ed.), *Dinge des Wissens: Die Sammlungen, Museen und Gärten der Universität Göttingen* (Göttingen, 2012).

nineteenth-century scholars, the main challenge, therefore, was to overcome not the *geographical* distance between Hanover, England, and the colonial world, but the *social* distance between the many participants, especially in the fragile world of 'academics' and 'collectors'.

Replacing texts with objects failed to mitigate this problem. Once removed from their context and without functioning referential chains to tie them back to their original setting, objects lost their power to substantiate knowledge claims. In many cases the specimen and its documentation travelled along separate paths. The objects moved along the selective channels of traders and brokers, while supplementary information took a detour via the printing presses and had to be gleaned from books. As a result, foreign objects turned from a tool of verification into a subject of what might be called 'projective ethnography'.[42]

When the professors in Göttingen looked for models of improvement and reform, they looked towards the new cultural and social spaces provided by the Personal Union with Britain. Their rather credulous adoption of the Royal Society's scientific claims can be read as a misunderstanding, a mistake that was at least in part inspired by the will to work within the new alliance of Hanover and Britain. It did, however, cause unexpected innovation. The presence of this very public collection fostered new disciplines, new experts, and new forms of sociability, proof, and evidence—features that are now understood to be at the heart rather than at the periphery of the scientific process.[43] It is surprising but not coincidental that many of these 'unintended consequences' later found their way back to Britain. Many Göttingen alumni introduced Blumenbach's taxonomies to the British Museum and London's scientific societies during the early nineteenth century.[44] The dynamics of such 'creative misunderstandings' are particularly visible and traceable in the realm of culture and science. They do, however, constitute a particular form of circumstantial transfer that might be equally frequent and

[42] Collet, *Welt in der Stube*, 332–48.

[43] Steven Shapin, *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if it was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority* (Baltimore, 2010).

[44] See Thomas Biskup, 'The University of Göttingen and the Personal Union, 1737–1837', in Simms and Riotte (eds.), *The Hanoverian Dimension,* 128–60.

potent in other areas as well—areas where we have so far been quick to dismiss exchange altogether.[45]

[45] The potential for a reappraisal of exchange processes during the Personal Union in the fields of the arts, the sciences, displomacy, military culture, and economics is documented in Hölscher and Schlitte (eds.), *Kommunikation;* Horst Carl and Uwe Ziegler (eds.), *'In unserer Liebe nicht glücklich': Kultureller Austausch zwischen Großbritannien und Deutschland 1770–1840* (Göttingen, 2014); and Katja Lembke (ed.), *Hannovers Herrscher auf Englands Thron 1714–1837*, exhibition catalogue (Dresden, 2014).

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