

# INTERVIEWS

Julie Sissia\* talks to Antoinette Maget Dominicé\*\*

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## Shaping Franco-German Cooperation in the Museum Sector

**Antoinette Maget Dominicé (AMD):** Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. Several bilateral treaties and agreements between institutions have sought to deepen cultural cooperation between Germany and France in recent years. What could be the critical factors that will influence and shape Franco-German cooperation in the museum sector?

**Julie Sissia (JS):** The Franco-German Berlin Declaration, signed at the end of the Franco-German Council of Ministers on 31 May 2021, defined as priorities in the field of museum cooperation the study of collections from colonial contexts, as well as youth, civic initiatives, digital technology, and mediation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Paragraph 39: "We will take account of the historical responsibilities associated with our colonial past. In particular, we wish to adopt a responsible approach to collections acquired in the colonial context, in close consultation with the countries and societies of origin. In particular, we intend to extend cooperation between French and German museums, especially on issues of common interest such as collections acquired in the colonial context, mediation, digital uses of collections or education through museums", <https://de.ambafrance.org/Declaration-franco-allemande-de-Berlin> [accessed: 26.10.2023].

This declaration found its first concrete expression in the Franco-German museum dialogue launched as part of the French Presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2022. Implemented by the Deutscher Museumsbund in Berlin, this programme was supported by the BKM (Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien), the French Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Europe (via an international technical expertise scheme<sup>2</sup>). The Franco-German dialogue on museums has established a common desire to create a network of professionals from both countries around four themes of shared interest: the management of collections from colonial contexts; audience development; digitization; and the creative industries.

The Franco-German museum dialogue has enabled the creation of an initial network of some 40 museum professionals, who met at the Overseas Museum in Bremen on 31 January and 1 February 2023 to discuss collections from colonial contexts.

These first thematic meetings enabled us to identify specific challenges for Franco-German cooperation in provenance research on objects taken from a colonial context: the development of joint residency programmes (on the basis of projects such as TheMuseumLab), including experts from the societies of origin, taking into account the different institutional attitudes to processes of change in museums (on the part of museum management, politicians, and museum staff, in particular with regard to the use of new technologies) as well as the development of new methods of research, particularly with regard to the study of the colonial past in French and German museums, and the different evolution of the public debate on collections from colonial contexts in France and Germany.

A number of priorities and challenges were identified at the conference, with a view toward strengthening Franco-German cooperation more widely. We were able to establish that there is a real demand for sharing resources (guides, databases, checklists, etc.), experiences (examples of good practice in research, exhibitions, cooperation, and mediation), research results, and archive collections. The participants also expressed their wish to see more opportunities for inter- or transnational exhibition and research projects, as well as to make greater use of pre-existing research or exhibitions. They also stressed the importance of Franco-German educational initiatives and work with young people, building on existing initiatives and the history of Franco-German work in this area (OFAJ, Franco-German University). In order to work more closely together, museum professionals have called for regular meetings on specific themes, the creation of databases or online platforms, and more broadly, communication tools such as a joint mailing list, a chat

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.expertisefrance.fr/en/web/guest/accueil> [accessed: 26.10.2023].

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room, or a newsletter (for example, the mailing list of the Provenances coloniales en Allemagne working group). The major challenge remains the implementation of international projects with a Franco-German impetus, and in particular accessing funding from the European Union.

While all these recommendations were formulated as part of a thematic workshop, they also apply to museum cooperation as a whole.

Since then, the BKM and the French Ministry of Culture have chosen to work together on the theme of collections from the colonial context of sub-Saharan Africa. On 10 October 2023 Claudia Roth, the German Federal Government's Commissioner for Culture and the Media, and Rima Abdul Malak, the French Minister of Culture, signed a declaration on the establishment of a research fund on the provenance of cultural goods from sub-Saharan Africa, to be administered by the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin and to be launched at the beginning of 2024, with a three-year pilot phase.<sup>3</sup> The two countries will each contribute up to €360,000 per year.

**AMD: How do German and French museums cooperate at present in order to preserve, promote, and share cultural heritage? What challenges and opportunities do they face in their efforts for the future?**

**JS:** Franco-German exchanges in the museum field are not yet structured, like those between Canada and France, around an agreement.<sup>4</sup> It is true that French and German museums are already cooperating, but they are doing so in the same way as other European and international museums. The need for bilateral cooperation is even greater for regional museums. The museum dialogue of the Deutscher Museumsbund has also been an important milestone, confirming the need for a structured and lasting exchange.

Between June and September 2023, the Deutscher Museumsbund also set up an experimental personalized advice service for its community of over 4,500 members. Its success confirmed the demand from the German side for exchanges with colleagues in France. These individual exchanges offered a path to make the German network aware of existing exchange opportunities, in particular the Ministry of Culture's "Résidence culture" exchange programme.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/bundesregierung/bundeskanzleramt/staatsminister-in-fuer-kultur-und-medien/aktuelles/engere-zusammenarbeit-in-der-kulturpolitik-bei-der-deutsch-franzoesischen-kabinettsklausur-in-hamburg-vereinbart-kulturstaatsministerin-roth-wir-stehen-gemeinsam-an-der-seite-israels--2229312> [accessed: 26.10.2023].

<sup>4</sup> Agreement signed in 1990 and renewed until today; see [https://accord-france-canada.ocim.fr/DATAS/custom\\_afc/accueil/afc-presentation.pdf](https://accord-france-canada.ocim.fr/DATAS/custom_afc/accueil/afc-presentation.pdf) [accessed: 28.10.2023].

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/fr/Aides-demarches/Appels-a-projets-partenaires/Appel-a-candidatures-Residence-culture-2024-pour-professionnels-etrangers> [accessed: 26.10.2023].

One way of strengthening cooperation would be to emphasize the attractiveness of museums as employers and the training of young professionals. The OFAJ programme for young museum professionals, which in 2023 will have been in operation for 30 years, is making a vital contribution to this, but young people in both countries need to be made even more aware of it. The same applies to other existing schemes, such as Erasmus + or the programme for hosting French-speaking foreign professionals and Résidence culture or Parcours de collections, offered by the French Ministry of Culture. Finally, other key players in the field of culture include museums in their discussions, such as the High Franco-German Cultural Council (HCCFA) or the Commission for the Compensation of Victims of Spoliation Resulting from Anti-Semitic Legislation in Force during the Occupation (CIVS), which reports to the Prime Minister and has a branch in the French Embassy in Germany, promoting exchanges between the two countries on this fundamental issue.

**AMD: The discussions aim to improve cooperation in various aspects of museum practice, including collection, documentation, education, and digitization. How can the institutions ensure that the projects and networks created are sustainable in the long term?**

**JS:** The Deutscher Museumsbund's dialogue with museums has enabled it to build up a significant network, thanks to the influence of its scientific council, which is organized in pairs by theme, and also thanks to the participants, who act as relays for developing projects on a wide range of targeted subjects, which they alone can initiate and work to ensure their sustainability. The Franco-German meeting was a trigger for some museums. For example, following the Franco-German workshop in Bremen, the Musée de l'Armée began to produce a guide to its colonial collections, following the example of the Deutscher Museumsbund guide. Similarly, at the Musée du Quai Branly, Felicity Bodenstern organized a workshop for professionals in June 2023, which incorporated the Franco-German dimension into the collective discussions and enabled new international players to be included.

The new Franco-German research fund on the cultural assets of sub-Saharan Africa will be a unique opportunity not only to further the dialogue between museums and research, but also to train the next generation of researchers and integrate the essential issue of sustainability.

**AMD: At the start of this year, a decision was made to establish a Franco-German fund. Its purpose is to enhance and broaden provenance research, encourage national and international transparency, and facilitate sharing of relevant findings and synergies. What potential benefits could this fund offer in terms of sustainable funding for collaborative projects?**

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**JS:** Provenance research, whether carried out with a view to restitution or not, is a priority for both countries. Thus, it is now also a priority for the Franco-German “couple”, both in the museum field and in research institutions. The challenge will of course be to work hand in hand with the countries concerned on the African continent, but also bilaterally, taking into account the differences between the centralized French system and German federalism, and the asymmetry in terms of existing structures (Germany already has the Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste [DZK], a Kontaktstelle of the Kulturstiftung der Länder for countries requesting restitutions), as well as their different histories and the sensitivities of the public on this subject. In Germany, several initiatives have been launched to encourage close collaboration with museum professionals on the African continent, including the aforementioned TheMuseumsLab programme, in which the Musée des Confluences in Lyon took part, which foreshadowed the establishment of the German museum cooperation agency currently being set up.<sup>6</sup> In France, following the adoption of a first framework law on spoliations between 1933 and 1945 and of a further framework law on the restitution of human remains belonging to public collections, a third framework law – concerning the restitution of colonial property – is now in preparation.

The Centre Marc Bloch, which has been approached to host the new Franco-German research fund on property taken in a colonial context, is a Franco-German research centre in the humanities and social sciences, which is interdisciplinary and open to a wide range of themes. The 20 researchers come from a wide range of disciplines (anthropology, history, art history, philosophy, sociology, political science, economics, law, comparative literature, etc.) and are now working on issues and research areas that span Europe and the rest of the world. Its structure makes it a guarantor of scientific independence as well as a forum for dialogue between institutions of diverse origins (academic, political, associative, etc.).

Insofar as concerns the provenance research fund, it will be essential to make full use of this first experimental phase to build up an approach geared towards young people and civic participation – in particular by reaching out to associations and students. In this way, the fund will help to promote bilingualism and the learning of French and German. With the Ecole du Patrimoine Africain de Porto Novo in Benin, already a partner in the Franco-German museum dialogue, we are in the process of paving the way for long-term cooperation based on the needs expressed by our colleagues and are in constant dialogue with the teaching and scientific teams. The first cooperative ventures will most likely take the form of seminars, spring

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/bundesregierung/bundeskanzleramt/staatsminister-in-fuer-kultur-und-medien/sammlungsgut-aus-kolonialen-kontexten-1851438> [accessed: 26.10.2023].

schools, and residencies. In order to make the project sustainable, we would like to create synergies between the courses available in the universities and schools of both countries, as well as with those on the African continent, and to assess as soon as possible the possibility of encouraging the emergence of new Franco-German courses based on provenance research. From the outset, it will also be essential to anchor this Franco-German pilot project in a European and international dynamic by identifying possible funding as soon as possible in order to increase its capacity and play a driving role in bringing together new partners and initiating new forms of cooperation.

**AMD: Although German and French museums both follow the ICOM guidelines, they differ in how they manage and treat their collections, due to their legal basis. For example, their approaches to provenance research differ in some respects. What cooperation and information exchange processes already exist between Germany and France in the field of provenance research? Which possibilities could be improved by this new programme?**

**JS:** In this respect, I would like to refer you to the *Guides* of the Deutscher Museumsbund. These works – available free of charge upon request, are in French, German, and English – lay the foundations for a common approach that goes beyond legal differences. These *Guides*, written by working groups, are collective publications initially intended for German museum professionals. They help to identify good practices and provide guidance based on concrete recommendations. In particular, the *Guide to the Treatment of Assets from Colonial Collections*, which has already been published twice, as well as the *Guide to the Treatment of Human Remains in Museums and Collections*, are receiving a great deal of attention from French museums, which do not yet have equivalent tools. In Germany, these works have contributed to the creation of a Länder contact point to facilitate requests for restitution.<sup>7</sup> At the Franco-German museum dialogue workshop in Bremen, these *Guides* were distributed to all participants. At the Musée de l'Armée in Paris, which is one of the few museums to have a position dedicated to provenance research, this *Guide* was the starting point for consideration of a French equivalent.

But we must also emphasize the role of the “passeurs”, i.e. the personalities who, through their involvement in the two countries, play a key role in the dialogue by encouraging the emergence of new cross-cultural perspectives. In France as in Germany, Bénédicte Savoy, a French art historian and professor at the TU Berlin, has been moving the lines since the publication of the report commissioned by

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.kulturstiftung.de/kontaktstelle-sammlungsgut-koloniale-kontexte-startet/> [accessed: 26.10.2023].

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President Emmanuel Macron, which had immediate repercussions in Germany in 2019 with the creation of a department dedicated to provenance research on collections from colonial contexts at the DZK, headed by Larissa Förster and Jan Hüsgen. Felicity Bodenstein, who ran the Digital Benin database at the MarKK in Hamburg before being appointed as a lecturer at the Centre André Chastel at the Sorbonne, and is currently on CNRS secondment at the Musée du Quai Branly, is also playing a key role in building a network. The Centre Marc Bloch could, with the provenance research fund, act as a platform and promote provenance research in all its forms. I would also like to mention the role of the Genshagen Foundation, which is designed to promote Franco-German-Polish dialogue, and which has already – in 2020 – brought together European players in provenance research on colonial collections in an “Academy under the Trees”.

Training courses in provenance research already exist and are being developed in both France and Germany. Sorbonne-Nouvelle University and the Goethe Universität in Frankfurt have already launched a Franco-German doctoral college<sup>8</sup> focusing on the future of ethnological collections and museums. Its aim is to help internationalize the debate and clarify the status of collections, particularly those from colonial contexts. The Centre Marc Bloch could contribute, among other things, to consolidating this type of initiative, through the scientific programming of the provenance research fund and the funding of research projects involving young researchers.

**AMD: Thank for your time and for sharing your views on this important new step in the German-French dialogue on cultural heritage! We are looking forward to further developments.**

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.kooperation-international.de/aktuelles/nachrichten/detail/info/deutsch-franzoesisches-doktorandenkolleg-zur-rolle-ethnologischer-museen> [accessed: 26.10.2023].