

(Re)collecting Natural History in Europe

Study Visit to Weltmuseum Wien

03–06 February, 2026

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1. Introduction

This report outlines the outcomes and reflections from a study visit to Weltmuseum in Vienna, Austria, conducted between 03 and 06 February 2026, as part of the broader research project (Re)collecting Natural History in Europe. This visit was made possible through the **Statensfonden grant for Kuratoriske researchrejser**.

The project investigates colonial collections in European museums in order to understand how they are:

- Curated and preserved
- Researched and interpreted
- Exhibited (or withheld from exhibition)
- Contextualized in relation to colonial histories
- Made accessible to source communities and contemporary audiences

This visit follows an earlier research visit to Portugal. While the Portugal trip functioned primarily as a research visit, focused on observation and introductory institutional contact, the Vienna trip developed into a study visit, marked by deeper institutional exchange and dialogue.

2. From Research Visit to Study Visit:

The distinction between the two visits is methodologically relevant.

Portugal | Research Visit

- Guided tour of collections
- Introductory presentations
- Limited interaction with curatorial staff
- Brief follow-up conversation

- Observation-based engagement

Austria | Study Visit

- Extended curatorial conversations
- Meetings across departments
- Exchanges with external researchers
- Introductions to other collection curators (including North America)
- Institutional reflections on colonial legacies

This shift allowed for deeper insight not only into collections, but into institutional thinking and practice, and it is the basis for a systematic engagement with other curatorial practices in future study visits.

3. Hosting and Institutional Exchange

We were exceptionally well received and hosted by Claudia Augustat, Curator of the South American Collection at the Weltmuseum Wien.

Her hosting extended beyond formal meetings and included:

- Long-form curatorial discussions
- Introductions to researchers and collaborators
- Meetings with other curators
- Conversations with professionals knowledgeable about the museum's history and operations
- A guided visit to the Natural History Museum Vienna

This created a networked and dialogical study environment.

4. Colonial Awareness in Contemporary Museum Practice

A strong theme throughout the visit was a high degree of institutional awareness regarding the colonial foundations of European museums.

Many professionals we met demonstrated:

- Critical reflection on their collections' origins
- Engagement in cooperative and reparative initiatives
- Sensitivity toward source communities
- Awareness of language as a tool of access
- Ethical considerations around display

Examples include:

Language and Access

Attention to translation, terminology, and source-community naming frameworks.

Diasporic Programming

Cultural programming engaging diasporic audiences, such as the Brazilian music event hosted within the museum that we had a chance to see, functions not only as audience development but as a relational strategy that fosters community presence, cultural ownership, and active participation. By bringing diasporic communities into the museum environment through living cultural practices (music, performance, foodways, language, storytelling), the institution shifts from being solely a space that *displays* cultures to one that *hosts* them.

These initiatives create conditions for diasporic visitors to encounter the museum not as an external authority on their heritage, but as a platform where their contemporary cultural expressions are recognized, activated, and centered. In this way, outreach programming operates reconnecting historical narratives to present-day communities.

Ethics of Display

Certain sacred objects are not exhibited, following consultation and ethical review processes conducted in dialogue with source communities and cultural advisors. This approach was further elaborated by the hosting curator, who outlined specific display strategies designed to navigate the ethical tension between the responsibility to make collections visible for public learning and the obligation to restrict access out of respect for cultural protocols, spiritual significance, and community-defined boundaries. In practice, this has resulted in differentiated modes of display, ranging from partial visibility and mediated interpretation to complete withdrawal from exhibition, ensuring that educational goals do not override the rights and values attached to the objects.

One particularly compelling example involved a flute from a South American indigenous community that, due to its sacred status, could not be publicly displayed. Rather than being entirely removed from the exhibition narrative, the object was presented through an alternative sensory and spatial mediation: visitors could hear the sound of the flute through an audio

element, while the instrument itself remained concealed behind frosted glass within a showcase. In this way, its presence was acknowledged without material exposure, communicating cultural significance while respecting community protocols regarding visibility.

We found this strategy especially thoughtful and effective. It demonstrated how curatorial decision-making can move beyond binary choices of display or removal, developing forms of mediation that balance access with respect. Such approaches underscore the importance of allowing curators the autonomy to determine not only what is exhibited, but how it is exhibited. They also highlight the essential role of source-community knowledge in shaping display practices, as these decisions rely on culturally specific guidance, consultation, and ongoing relationships that curators help facilitate.

5. Preservation, Displacement and Ethical Custodianship

A key reflection shared by Claudia Augustat was: “Keeping objects can sometimes be a violent act.”

The comment reframed institutional preservation through an ethical lens, drawing attention to the conditions under which many colonial objects continue to be held. Although conserved within museum infrastructures, these objects often remain physically and culturally displaced, held in storage and largely inaccessible to the communities from which they originate.

Safeguarding material integrity does not necessarily address questions of belonging, access, or authority. For collections acquired through colonial expansion, continued custody can prolong histories of extraction, particularly where originating communities have limited involvement in decisions regarding their use, interpretation, or return.

The issue is further shaped by the scale of museum reserves. Large portions of collections remain in storage rather than on display, existing in a suspended state, protected, yet disconnected from both public engagement and community relationships.

Seen in this light, preservation becomes an ethically charged practice, raising questions not only of ownership, but of responsibility and future custodianship, including possibilities for restitution, shared stewardship, or other forms of reactivation.

6. On Restitution

Discussions also addressed the complexity of restitution processes, including:

- Identifying legitimate claimant communities
- Legal frameworks
- Institutional and diplomatic constraints

The conversation emphasized restitution as an ongoing negotiation rather than a binary position.

7. Collections vs. Exhibitions

A structural tension emerged between the scale of collections and their public visibility. This imbalance is widely observable across large European museums, particularly those shaped by colonial collecting practices, where accelerated acquisition historically outpaced capacities for conservation and display.

We learned that:

- Only approximately **1% of the South American collection is exhibited**
- Exhibition decisions are currently director-led
- A former committee structure is no longer in place

This governance shift has direct consequences for how and when curators can activate collections, reducing distributed decision-making and limiting curatorial responsiveness to emerging research, restitution debates, or collaborative community initiatives.

The question of visibility is further compounded by the material volume of stored collections. Large portions remain in storage facilities with restricted storage, existing administratively and conservationally, but not publicly or discursively. This condition echoes a broader colonial museum infrastructure: objects were accumulated as evidence of empire, scientific extraction, and ethnographic classification, rather than with long-term strategies for display, care, or relational accountability to originating communities.

Within this context, we also encountered the legal frameworks that govern collection management in Denmark. Under the Danish Museum Act, state and state-recognized museums are permitted, in specific circumstances, to deaccession objects from their collections. This includes the possibility of disposal once an object has been formally removed from the inventory¹.

Disposal may take several forms, including transfer to other museums, but the law also allows,

under approved conditions, for objects to be physically destroyed, particularly in cases involving severe deterioration, duplication, or the institution's inability to conserve them adequately. Such decisions typically require ministerial or governmental approval, especially for inventoried items of recognized cultural or scientific value.

While these regulations are designed as collection-management tools, addressing conservation limits, storage pressures, and institutional scope, they also produce an ethical tension. In the case of colonial or ethnographic collections, the possibility that objects may be destroyed, rather than restituted, recontextualized, or reactivated through research and collaboration, raises critical questions about custodianship, responsibility, and historical redress.

In practice, the combination of extremely low display ratios, centralized exhibition decision-making, absence of committee review structures, and legal mechanisms enabling disposal creates a governance ecology in which vast portions of collections remain dormant, with limited curatorial pathways for activation.

For curators, this affects not only exhibition planning but also research access, loan negotiations, and opportunities to work with source communities. The result is that collection activation becomes contingent on high-level institutional priorities rather than distributed scholarly or relational initiatives.

This structural condition is particularly significant for contemporary debates on restitution, decolonization, and shared stewardship. When decision-making is centralized and large percentages of collections remain unseen, the museum's ability to respond transparently and collaboratively to these debates is materially and administratively constrained.

A comparable set of governance and ethical tensions can be observed in other European contexts, particularly in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, where deaccessioning and restitution debates have been extensively examined in academic and policy literature.^{2 3 4}

Portugal offers a relevant Southern European point of comparison, particularly given the scale and global reach of its former imperial networks across Africa, Brazil, and Asia, and the resulting dispersal of ethnographic and natural history collections across national museums and universities. Academic and policy literature has noted that, unlike the Netherlands, Portugal has only more recently begun to formalize national discussions around provenance research, restitution, and the ethical governance of colonial-era collections.⁵

Taken together, these comparative cases demonstrate that the governance of stored collections is inseparable from wider debates on colonial accountability, public stewardship, and the future role of museums in managing historically entangled holdings.

8. Case Reflection: The Plant Exhibition

We visited a temporary exhibition centered on plants, colonial botany, and bioprospecting.

Strengths included:

- Narratives of extraction and empire
- Botanical colonial routes
- Histories of scientific exploitation

Approaching colonialism through plants feels very much like an exhibition theme of the moment. We see this perspective emerging in other institutions as well, such as *Plant Fever: The World on the Windowsill* at Ordrupgaard in Denmark and *Flora Indica: Recovering Lost Histories of Indian Botanical Art*, at Kew Gardens, in the United Kingdom.

This curatorial lens is compelling, as plants offer a powerful way to narrate colonialism through trade, circulation, scientific extraction, and environmental transformation.

However, within the context of an ethnographic museum with extensive collections, the exhibition made only selective use of its material holdings. While rich in stories, it was comparatively sparse in objects. As a result, the inclusion of plant elements appeared more anecdotal than structurally integrated, limiting the exhibition's capacity to communicate the full complexity of the issues at stake through object-based storytelling.

This opened up a valuable line of inquiry, particularly given that many ethnographic objects are materially and cosmologically entangled with vegetal worlds, including tools, fibers, medicines, ritual artifacts, and cultivation technologies.

It also raises a broader curatorial reflection: thematic exhibitions in ethnographic museums might productively emerge from the strengths of their collections ideally developed in dialogue, and co-curated, with source communities whose knowledge systems remain central to these vegetal histories.

9. Visit to the Natural History Museum Vienna

We were fortunate to be accompanied on our visit to the Natural History Museum by Gerard van Bussel, Curator for Middle and North America at the Weltmuseum. Rather than focusing primarily on the exhibitions themselves, van Bussel offered a thoughtful reading of the building's architecture and decorative program, drawing attention to how the intellectual frameworks of

nineteenth-century science are embedded in the museum's structure. His reflections highlighted how the architecture itself can be understood as a historical document.

Our guided walk through the museum revealed explicit architectural inscriptions of scientific racism. These included:

- racialized sculptural programs
- hierarchical classifications of human groups
- visual divisions between Europeans and "others"
- embedded taxonomies such as "civilized," "uncivilized," and "barbarian"

These elements are part of the building's permanent structure and are not substantially contextualized for visitors.

This absence of mediation suggests the urgency, and, of course, potential, for a meta-exhibition addressing not only the museum's collections, but the building itself as a historically constructed environment. The architecture, shaped by the same epistemologies that produced the collections, continues to frame how visitors interpret both the objects on display and the role of the museum as an institution.

As such, the building cannot be understood as a neutral container, but as an active narrative agent that participates in the production of meaning. Engaging critically with this entangled material and historical context would open space for a more reflexive institutional storytelling.

A meta-exhibition could therefore address:

- the museum's own architecture
- colonial science
- racial classification systems
- histories of display and power

10. Concluding Reflections

The Vienna study visit significantly deepened the trajectory of **(Re)collecting Natural History in Europe**.

Key takeaways include:

- The value of dialogical institutional exchange
- Strong colonial awareness within museum practice

- Structural limits between collections and exhibitions
- Ethical debates around display and restitution
- The curatorial potential of botanical narratives
- The urgency of addressing racist museum architectures

The visit affirmed that colonial museums today are not static entities, but evolving spaces negotiating preservation, accountability, and transformation.

11. Selected References

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