

The Sensitive Museum – From the Surface to under the Skin

“The fellowship experience has changed my life”. This was how most of the guest curators who participated in the *International Museum Fellowship* programme summed up their experience after their one-and-a-half-year work stay. The international researchers, or “fellows”, worked at 35 museums throughout Germany, collaborating with museum staff to put their innovative, museological ideas into practice.

The goal of testing new presentation and exhibition formats was closely tied to the wish to prepare museums to become an experimental stage for international activities. The participants cast familiar museum tasks in a new light by asking how, for whom and through what channels could museums focus their efforts on contemporary and modern reception and participation. What could they do to truly touch visitors, to show them what really happens at the museum, to get “under their skin”?

The *International Museum Fellowship* funding programme was established by the Federal Cultural Foundation in response to the needs expressed by the German museum community. The programme – allocated with 6.5 million euros to finance projects from 2011 to 2017 – was specifically designed to promote international collaboration. And the experiment was a success.

The project “Cultural Transfer” by an Afro-Caribbean curator at the *Schiffahrtsmuseum* in Flensburg, for example, urged visitors to take a critical look at the dubious origins of the so-called “rum tradition”. The *Bremer Kunsthalle* shed light on the “Blind Spot” of their own colonial collection history. At the *Frankfurter Historisches Museum* city residents visualised their “sensed city” in a “Sensitive Museum”. And the “Cabinet of the Unknown” at the Berlin *Museum der Dinge* greeted numerous Turkish neighbours who for years had walked past but never visited the museum.

The presentations featured many brilliant ideas and a broad international scope. Most of them reached out to audience groups which had rarely been targeted in the past. They also met the demands of the museological field and demonstrated how critical self-reflection can set new museum standards. As one can imagine, it was not always an easy process. Visa requirements, work permits for foreign workers, language barriers and bureaucratic hurdles sometimes pushed participants to their wit’s end. But they all pursued a common goal – to develop innovative exhibition formats.

The programme was accompanied by the Mobile Academy “Fellow Me!”, a series of events organised by the Federal Cultural Foundation. The fellows, mentors and international experts actively participated in the events staged at various museums around Germany in 2013/14 and 2016/17. The Mobile Academy served as a platform for exchange, knowledge transfer and networking. The central themes of the Academy, e.g. Designing Ethics, Bridging Human Clashes, Nature Meets Nurture and Shifted Objects, highlighted social issues and practices which museums in the 21st century (unlike before) are using to spotlight the global issues of resources and knowledge.

The programme’s title and motto were taken from the Academy event staged at the Historisches Museum Frankfurt, “The Sensitive Museum – From the Surface to under the Skin”. In this case, the word “sensitive” has a double meaning that emphasises the complexity of the sense of feeling. On one hand, it refers to our ability to perceive the world with our five senses. On the other, it points to things or phenomena which could be regarded as difficult to grasp. The Historisches Museum Frankfurt and its fellow from Brazil examined how the city, which the museum represents, actually feels. How does one perceive a city? And how does one depict the sensations? Such questions were investigated by means of target-group oriented, participatory methods. In presenting the “sensed city”, the project explored all the senses and deconstructed barriers, it touched the public by inviting them to take their primal emotions from the street and into the museum, and so doing, was able to forge a relationship between them and the museum narrative.

All museums are committed to and must demonstrate sensibility for creating a *common* local, but also global, public awareness. As public institutions, they bear responsibility for societal values. The Federal Cultural Foundation supports such processes, e.g. with programmes like *City Companions*, *Lab.Bode* and the *Global Museum*. Thanks to the efforts of the dedicated participants from around the world, the *International Museum Fellowship* programme addressed museum-relevant topics and explored and discussed new international museum formats. The Mobile Academy website *fellow-me.de* serves to document and archive the programme’s achievements and offers insights into the content and formats which deserve emulation. With the *International Museum Fellowship*, we have helped drive the conversation since 2011, one that has since found its way into the arts and cultural pages and above all, in numerous museums. We thank all fellows, their mentors and the participating museum staff for their important work which we hope will encourage new museum practices that open the world to us even further.

Marie Haff / May 2018