

Provenance, Science & Profit: Natural History Museums and the Global Network of the Umlauff Natural History Trading Houses

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Abstract

Natural history traders have been crucial, yet under-researched contributors to museum collections. The Hamburg-based J.F.G. Umlauff family company, founded in the mid-19th century, exemplifies this significance. For nearly 100 years, members of the Umlauff family supplied zoological and ethnographic specimens to museums all over the world.

During a two-day workshop, an interdisciplinary group of museum practitioners, archivists, as well as scholars from the fields of History and Cultural Studies, mapped Umlauff's impact on natural history collections, particularly in German museums, by reconstructing their global trading networks. Research questions include identifying beneficiary institutions nationally and internationally and tracing interdisciplinary procurement practices, especially for collections from colonial contexts.

Keywords

colonial contexts, ethnographic collections, global trade networks, J.F.G. Umlauff, natural history collections, natural history trade, trading companies, transdisciplinary collecting practices

Introduction

In the past, natural history traders have traditionally been important sources of specimens and information for natural history museums, in addition to private and institutional collectors. So far, scholars have focused mainly on the last two. However, trading companies have contributed significantly to the development of historical collections. Studying their procurement practices and the provenances of these collections is extremely relevant, which still form the basis of exhibitions and research activities in natural history museums. One such trading house with worldwide business partners was the long-established Hamburg company of the [J.F.G. Umlauff](#) (1833–1889) family (Fig. 1). Founded in the mid-19th century, Umlauff supplied both natural history and ethnographic museums with zoological and ethnographic objects from all over the world for almost 100 years. Umlauff's market position and availability of material was enhanced by family ties to the Hanseatic family business of [Carl Hagenbeck](#) (1844–1913), founder of the Hamburg Zoological Gardens, amongst others.

Concentrating on the example of the Umlauff family's business, a two-day workshop investigated their impact on the development of natural history collections, in Germany and worldwide. The contributions followed three key questions:

1. How to reconstruct, characterise and visualise the Umlauffs' worldwide trading network?
2. Which natural history collections and museums benefitted from the Umlauffs' trading activities on a national and international level?
3. Which procurement channels and appropriation practices can be traced for the various objects, particularly for those natural history collections from colonial contexts?

These key questions guided the participants, who, in total, outlined an interdisciplinary field of research shedding initial light on the intersection of economic, political and

scientific interests during a pivotal period in the development of global natural history museums.



Figure 1. [doi](#)

Stand of the J.F.G. Umlauff company with numerous naturalia at the International Fisheries Exhibition in Berlin in 1880. From Carl Günther [1880/81]: Erinnerung an die internationale Fischerei-Ausstellung zu Berlin im Jahre 1880. (Public Domain, via Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin [ZLB](#)).

The workshop

The two-day workshop was organised by Eva Bischoff (Trier University), Katja Kaiser (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin), André Koch (Museum Koenig Bonn) and Sabine von Mering (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin). Each day encompassed three presentations and three shorter “Flashlights & Case Studies”. The workshop was attended by 40+ international participants. More information can be found at the workshop’s website: <https://www.museumfuernaturkunde.berlin/en/umlauff-workshop>.

The workshop started with an introductory presentation by the organisers about Umlauff specimens at the natural history museums in Bonn and Berlin, while the following talks focused on the Umlauff family and their ethnographic trading firms, a subject that has received more attention in previous research.

Day 1

André Koch (Museum Koenig Bonn) & Katja Kaiser (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin): Traces and Spaces. Tracing Natural History Specimens from Umlauff and their Documentation at the Museum Koenig Bonn and the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

Part one: André Koch

The research project on the Umlauff family's trading company emerged from investigations by André Koch into the provenance of exhibits at the *Museum Koenig Bonn* (LIB), where archival materials including historical letters, photographs, invoices, labels and notes were examined to provide thorough context information for educational guided tours for visitors. The museum's founder [Alexander Koenig](#) (1858–1940) was an avid hunter and collector whose ambition was to establish a zoological museum showcasing his personal trophies and collections for the edification and education of the interested public and professionals. As a wealthy heir, Koenig undertook several expeditions to Africa and Northern Europe in order to collect various animal species. For big game and other iconic species which he could not collect personally, he frequently turned to natural history dealers. Accordingly, archival research revealed that several significant specimens in the museum's collections and exhibition were acquired by Koenig from the Hanseatic Umlauff company (Fig. 2). Notable acquisitions include a Northern white rhinoceros (Koch 2023), an Okapi (Koch 2022) and a male gorilla (Umlauff 1901). Further investigations were prompted by biographical information about Carl Hagenbeck, [Johannes Umlauff's](#) (1874–1951) uncle, which referenced two remarkable crocodile skins forming part of the impressive gharial group at the Natural History Museum in Vienna (Koch and Schweiger 2023). In order to obtain more information, the unpublished memoirs of Johannes Umlauff from the Tierpark Hagenbeck archive in Hamburg were consulted. This typescript of personal memories, newspaper articles, photographs and information from order books proved to contain extensive data about Umlauff's worldwide client network, documenting 69 national and 80 international museums, institutions and private collectors who purchased naturalia from the company. Additional correspondence and documentation were sought from the *Museum für Naturkunde Berlin* (MfN) archive. These findings led to cooperation with the co-organisers for developing a comprehensive research project, starting with a workshop assembling existing research and expertise on the Umlauff's trading activities and their impact on global museum collections.

Part two: Katja Kaiser

Research conducted at the *Museum für Naturkunde Berlin* (MfN) revealed complex networks surrounding Umlauff's trading activities. While both Sabine von Mering (MfN) and Katja Kaiser (MfN) had encountered the Umlauff's in inventories and archives, systematic research had been limited so far. The initial investigation was undertaken in the context of developing guidelines for handling natural history collections from colonial

contexts. It initially focused particularly on human remains, including a ritual-engraved skull from Papua New Guinea originally from [Heinrich Christian Umlauff's](#) (1868–1925) ethnographic trade company. Additionally, a key discovery that led to further research was the prominent role of [Georg Zenker](#) (1855–1922), a German colonial official in Cameroon (Kaiser 2023). His name appeared disproportionately often in correspondence between Umlauff family members and [Paul Matschie](#) (1861–1926), the curator of the mammal collection at MfN from 1890 to 1926. Zenker, who lived in German Cameroon for three decades, served as both colonial official and plantation owner while collecting zoological, botanical, ethnological and anthropological specimens for Berlin museums. The correspondence reveals a triangular relationship where Zenker sent collections to MfN, Matschie identified duplicates and these surplus specimens were forwarded to Umlauff for commercial distribution. This arrangement raises critical questions about colonial contexts of acquisitions and injustice in natural history collecting. The correspondence documents complex professional and personal relationships, including Umlauff's dissatisfaction with Zenker's non-exclusive arrangements with other museums (Fig. 3). Despite MfN's apparently privileged position — with Umlauff claiming in 1898 to always offer new specimens to Berlin first — questions remain about whether such promises were made to all museum directors, particularly wealthy collectors like Alexander Koenig who likely spent considerably more money than Berlin on Umlauff materials. Therefore, at MfN, there is a special interest in finding out more about the business relationships, the market position of the MfN, the number of acquisitions from colonial contexts and the quantity of Umlauff material in our collection.



Figure 2. [doi](#)

Advertisement by the J.F.G. Umlauff company for naturalia and ethnographica, including a list of their catalogues, on the back of the brochure '[Der Riesen-Gorilla des Museum Umlauff Hamburg. Schilderung seiner Erlegung und wissenschaftliche Beschreibung](#)' (1901). (Public Domain, via Thüringer Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Jena [ThULB](#)).

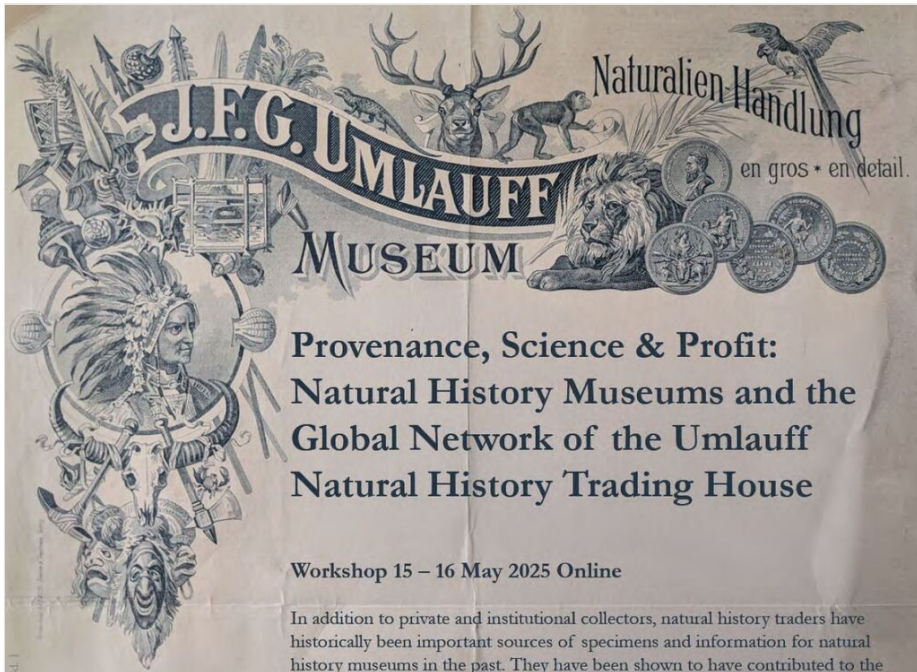


Figure 3. [doi](#)

Historical letter head of the J.F.G. Umlauff natural history trading house, adapted for the Umlauff workshop programme in May 2025. Archive Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, MfN, S02-01-03-01 Direktion, Signatur 5037 Bd. 1.

Hilke Thode-Arora (Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich): Between Academia and Show Business - the Umlauff Companies as Dealers in Ethnographic Artefacts

[Johann Friedrich Gustav Umlauff](#) (1833–1889), founder of the J.F.G. Umlauff company, was a brother-in-law of the Hamburg-based menagerie owner and zoo founder, [Carl Hagenbeck](#). There were several companies under the names of Hagenbeck and Umlauff, run by different members of the two families, partially operating in parallel at the same time, partially building on previous ventures. All of these Umlauff and Hagenbeck companies dealt in ethnographic objects for at least short periods of time and a number of them acted as organisers or venue providers for ethnic shows (“Völkerschauen”). Acquiring these artefacts often went hand in hand with the trade in wild animals and natural history objects. Carl Hagenbeck, his sons and heirs, but also his half-brothers [Johann](#) (1866–1940) and [Gustav](#) (1869–1947) arguably can be counted amongst the most active and financially successful traders in artefacts and animals, as well as organisers of the European-wide ethnic show business. The collaboration and business overlapped between different members of the Hagenbeck and Umlauff families and companies were manifold and maximised their respective networks. Similarly, ethnographic and other artefacts criss-crossed between the different companies. The contribution explored the

personal and business entanglements of the different Umlauff and Hagenbeck companies, as well as the continuity in creating exoticised settings through the use of artefacts and ambience, using the media of ethnic shows, museum displays and early films. The Umlauff companies' portfolio included equipping silent movies and creating dioramic scenes for natural history and ethnographic museums. A criss-cross of trajectories of objects, from collection items to museum objects to props for film sets and back to specimens in museum collections obscures provenances, as well as non-specific information in inventories, listing Umlauff even as collector and not trader, thereby bypassing the invisible middlemen. The Umlauff-Hagenbeck companies were able to maximise their profits due to their multiple diversified revenue streams and the use of colonial transport logistics. This infrastructure allowed for the processing of live animals, animal cadavers, shells, other natural material and objects, ethnographic artefacts and even people.

Rainer Buschmann (California State University Channel Islands): Linking the 'Fence': The Umlauff Family's Role in the Clandestine Commercialisation of Ethnographic Artefacts

Ethnography's coming of age in the nineteenth century was tied to the proliferation of museums dedicated to this discipline. Practitioners argued that Indigenous cultural manifestations were doomed to fall before the relentless expansion of European Imperialism and, therefore, urged to collect as much as possible. Ethnographic museum officials wrote copious letters to colonial actors on the imperial periphery to collect the cherished vanishing objects, inviting additional motives for ethnographic acquisition. Commercial companies saw an opportunity to enlarge their marketable portfolio by including Indigenous artefacts. Likewise, firms such as Umlauff emerged in the German metropole, specialising in selling cultural and natural scientific objects to further exploit commercialisation. This mercantile link proved somewhat of an embarrassment for museum officials, who fancied ethnography as a purely scientific endeavour. Although J.F.G. Umlauff added the name "museum" to his business in the late nineteenth century, ethnographic practitioners still maligned Umlauff as a lesser endeavour meant to plug holes in their ethnographic acquisitions. However, this situation changed shortly before the First World War, when [Georg Thilenius](#) (1868–1937), who assumed the helm of the Hamburg Ethnographic Museum in 1904, would re-align Umlauff's role. The commercial company became a "fence" in the more troubling meaning of the word by laundering artefacts for the presumably purely scientific institution when Thilenius's aggressive acquisition politics ran the Hamburg Museum into financial and political difficulties in 1906. Umlauff acquired objects for a higher-than-average price from the Hamburg Museum and explored foreign markets in the high-paying United States. Similarly, Umlauff successfully explored the seismic shift of clients for artefacts to include, besides ethnographers, artists and their wealthy dealers. This modification partially contributed to Umlauff's economic survival beyond the First World War.

Richard Tsogang Fossi (Technische Universität Berlin): “Under normal circumstances, they are hardly to give them...”. What Umlauff Teaches us about Colonial Collecting Practices

Natural history dealers, such as Umlauff, Godeffroy, Reiche, Ruhe and others, operated within a large network of colonial officials, officers and many other local actors, including rulers, hunters and informants (Tsogang 2020; Tsogang 2023a). While the involvement of German individuals is well documented in archival materials, such as correspondence, the contributions of local actors to natural history collections have been rendered invisible and can only be revealed through in-depth research. Studies on ethnographic and natural history collections from the former German colony of Cameroon have shown that transdisciplinary collecting practices prevailed (Assilkinga et al. 2023). The men on the ground extracted artefacts and natural history specimens and, in many cases, they also appropriated human remains. This dehumanisation and objectification are characteristic of the often violent collecting practices carried out by colonial personnel who were dilettantes in most disciplines, yet had colonial administration and armed forces on their side. As reports by German colonial officials, the military and the merchants (Tsogang 2023b) reveal, these so-called collectors were well aware of the cultural significance of artefacts, as well as of plants and animals for the locals, who were reluctant to sell them. Contexts of colonial violence and war were, therefore, regarded as beneficial for acquiring these cultural artefacts and traders, like Umlauff were well aware of the violent, unjust and corrupt circumstances surrounding these acquisitions (Umlauff 1914; Tsogang 2025: 66-80). Further research requires a re-evaluation of colonial collections, addressing the silences and biases in sources and knowledge production. Documents such as travel logs, should be analysed, since published reports often obscure the role of local contributions and knowledge. Furthermore, a more detailed analysis of provenance and acquisition contexts is required to improve general attributions of locality, such as 'Cameroon'. As the case of J.F.G. Umlauff can also reveal, archives that were created to increase the value of artefacts and natural history specimens in ethnographic and animals market networks can, when read against the grain today, provide evidence of local resistance and the illegitimacy of many collections in various European museums today.

Flashlights & Case Studies

Bernhard Wörrle (Deutsches Museum, Munich): The Acquisitions of the Deutsches Museum from J.F.G. Umlauff

Between 1907 and 1929, the *Deutsches Museum* in Munich acquired over one hundred exhibits from J.F.G. Umlauff. The short presentation provided a brief insight into this collection that comprises mainly non-European ethnographica as boats, musical instruments, lamps, lighters, weaving tools etc., which formerly were used in the exhibitions to represent early stages of technological development. The presentation then shortly discussed the poor state of sources concerning the provenance of the exhibits that, in many cases, obviously came from colonial contexts. In most cases,

neither the preserved correspondence between the *Deutsches Museum* and the Umlauff company nor the company's business records reveal anything about who collected the objects — and how (Wörrle 2024: 38-40). Exchanges of holdings between museums in the past make it often even more difficult to trace the origin of these exhibits today.

Jana C. Reimer (Museum am Rothenbaum - Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Hamburg): Dealing with Ethnographic Collections – Holdings from the Umlauff Trading Company at MARKK Hamburg

As many other ethnographic museums, the Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) Hamburg, acquired significant holdings through the Hamburg trading company J.F.G. Umlauff. As the discussion of a selection of these holdings showed, there are aspects of Umlauff's business and the museum's work that should be viewed critically from today's perspective: the actual context of origin often remains in the dark. Up to the 1960s, around 6,200 Umlauff objects were added to the museum collections; about 3,300 are still stored at MARKK today. Its document archive holds an extensive collection of files and original account books from the first half of the 20th century. The photo archive also preserves the Bührmann Collection, which contains photographic documents relating to the history of the Umlauff company, its connections to Hagenbeck and the museum. These materials still await further research.

Joël Zouna (Technische Universität Berlin): Cameroonian Cultural Heritage in Umlauff Transactions

Leveraging the networks and infrastructures established to facilitate connections between the metropolis and the colonies, the Umlauff firm gained prominence by the end of the 19th century through its trade in naturalia, particularly to North American and European museums. It also offered ethnographic objects to its business partners including the *Field Museum of Natural History* in Chicago, which, in 1925, acquired a significant collection comprising nearly 1,800 objects and 600 photographs from Cameroon, a German colony between 1884 and 1919. Various actors, such as the *Field Museum's* director at the time, [Frédéric Skiff](#) (1851–1921) and New York art dealer [Jan Kleykamp](#), played a role in this relatively underexplored transaction. The paper is based on archival research conducted in the *State Archives of Hamburg*, the *Stockholm Museum of Ethnography* archives and the photographic collection held by the *Ross Archives of African Art at Yale University*, which includes copies of the sales catalogues for the Cameroonian collections assembled by Umlauff. It also builds on the extensive inventory work carried out by research teams from the *Technische Universität Berlin* in collaboration with the *University of Dschang* in Cameroon, which culminated in the publication of "The Atlas of Absence. Cameroon's Cultural Heritage in Germany" in 2023 (Assilkinga et al. 2023). Its aim was to trace the transatlantic trajectory of these collections, shedding light on the lesser-known commercial strategy behind the ethnographica sold by Umlauff. By focusing on the significant acquisitions made by the *Field Museum*, the contribution also highlighted the little attention still given to these collections nearly a century after their acquisition.

Day 2

The second day of the workshop was dedicated to various contributions about the naturalia trade of the Umlauff companies including more general aspects of wildlife trade, collecting practices, as well as trade networks and their visualisation.

Britta Lange (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): (Other) Economies

This contribution elaborated on the European culture of making the non-European “other” a spectacle, drawing on the example of the Umlauff company which, over decades, supplied exhibitions with non-European animals, mounted as taxidermic specimens, ethnographic objects and “types” of Non-European ethnic groups in the form of life-like manikins. The contrast to this Western capitalist economy of collecting and exhibiting is emphasised by the example of one of their collectors, [Georg Zenker](#) (1855–1922), who, in the German colony of Cameroon, was confronted with other economies when he hunted animals. Zenker’s correspondence with the *Museum für Naturkunde Berlin* suggests that he was often unaware of traditional hunting practices, economies and the religious and cultural significance of animals and hunting. Instead, Zenker was mainly interested in setting up a profitable business selling natural history specimens, especially great apes, to museums. For local hunters, however, the meat of the animals they killed was of economic value and conflicts arose when Zenker tried to implement German working economies (Lange 2006). This paper once again highlighted the role of the local population and impressively demonstrated the wealth of information contained in archival material.

Hannah Kressig (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin): Final Station Hotel Banana City. Johannes Umlauff’s Great Ape Taxidermies at the Natural History Museum Winterthur

This presentation focused on the business relationship between [Johannes Umlauff](#) (1874–1951) and the Natural History Museum in Winterthur through their correspondence from 1928 to 1936. It discussed the provenance of four great ape specimens – two chimpanzees, one gorilla and one orangutan – acquired from J. Umlauff during this period. Today, these specimens are stored deep underground in the museum’s depot in the building of the Hotel Banana City. It aimed at bringing back to light the hidden history of these specimens by highlighting the little-studied interwar period, after the heyday of Umlauff’s “Riesengorillas” before the First World War. This subsequent period marked the decline of the German natural history market because many German museums lacked the budget for large acquisitions, as the contributions by Buschmann and Zouna also stressed (see above). The economic crisis in Germany enabled smaller foreign museums, such as the one in Winterthur, to acquire specimens from J. Umlauff’s stock at reduced prices. The study of their provenance offered insight into colonial collection practices by identifying the collectors of these great ape specimens: Max Zenker and Florian Narr in Cameroon. Exploring the activities of Max Zenker, a son of Georg Zenker, supplemented previous research on the Zenker family by focusing on the

sons' collecting efforts after their father's death. Through the hunting report and photos of the German colonial officer Florian Narr, attention is also brought to the images that J. Umlauff circulated alongside the apes themselves. The presentation thus highlighted aspects of J. Umlauff's acquiring, taxidermy and business practices that have not yet been examined.

These findings were supported by a response by **Annekathrin Krieger (Landesmuseum Hannover)** (Krieger 2024).

Marie Muschalek (University of Basel): Killing 'Carefully' and the Commodity Value of a Collected Animal: Violence, Economy and Natural History

With this contribution, it was proposed to explore the collecting practices of a lesser-known German naturalist who went into the field in southern Africa at the beginning of the nineteenth century: [Ludwig Krebs](#) (1792–1844) travelled to the Cape Colony in 1817, at the age of 25, where he found employment with the pharmacists Pallas & Poleman of Cape Town. He immediately started collecting botanical and zoological specimens for that firm. In 1820, [Hinrich Lichtenstein](#) (1780–1857), director of the *Zoological Museum in Berlin*, gave Krebs an official commission to collect specimens for the museum. In the twenty years to follow, Krebs sent sixteen large consignments to Berlin, which the museum mostly auctioned off, amounting to an overall value of 12,424 *Reichsthaler*. Krebs never published any report or memoir about his travels through the Cape Colony. However, his extensive correspondence with Lichtenstein provides some insight into his everyday life and work as a professional collector. While working with these written records held at the *Museum für Naturkunde Berlin*, it became obvious that close attention must be paid to the violence involved in "collecting" animals: how did the practice of killing animals for natural history purposes relate to economic considerations and imperatives? How did the manner in which an animal was killed and prepared for shipping determine the price it would catch? How did market demands impact hunting specimens in the field? Who was paid what amount, if any, for providing services to Krebs' collecting enterprise, whose labour was simply forcefully taken? The goal was to understand how both the individual act of killing an animal and the larger phenomenon of massive specimen extraction from the wild was embedded not only in a moral economy, but also in a pecuniary one and how these processes were also interwoven with violence committed against human life, that is, within the broader historical context of colonial violence and its politics of difference.

Flashlights & Case Studies

Charlotte Hoes (University of Göttingen): Transimperial Opportunism. Divergent Methods and Adaptive Strategies in the Wildlife Trade

To contextualise the findings on the Umlauff companies, some results of a research project on the international animal trading companies of [Carl Reiche](#) (1827–1885) and [Ludwig Ruhe](#) (1828–1883), based in the small German town of Alfeld, were presented.

These animal traders also dealt with ethnographic artefacts in the 19th and 20th centuries, albeit to a lesser extent. As dominant players in the global trade in 'exotic' animals, the two Alfeld companies distributed zoological specimens and ethnographic artefacts to various places and institutions in Europe. Highlighting the transimperial entanglements of the trade, including the transportation of live animals and humans, raised questions about the knowledge systems required to keep animals alive. Furthermore, the practices of dealing with animals and even humans touched on the topics of agency and resistance to these practices, shifting the focus from Alfeld to colonised territories. As with the Umlauff case, the Reiches and Ruhes provide an opportunity to explore the connections between collector and trade networks of zoological specimens, as well as their correlation with ethnographic items and so-called 'Völkerschauen' ('human zoos').

Callum Fisher (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): Between Nature and Culture: The Dispersed Collection of the Former Museum Godeffroy

Another project presentation drew attention to the relational ties between collections dispersed across disciplinary, institutional and national boundaries. Here, the focus was on observing how the boundaries between 'ethnographic objects' and 'natural history specimens' are enacted. The project explored the ways in which objects with a similar provenance come to be so differently embedded in disciplinary frameworks and asked which generative potential lies beyond these categories. The project dealt with objects from colonial contexts and the ways in which museum practitioners engage with their contentious legacies. In particular, the study worked with parts of a collection divided between Hamburg's *Museum am Rothenbaum – Künste und Kulturen der Welt* (MARKK) and the *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle* (MNHN) in Paris. With regard to research on the Umlauff trading house, overarching questions were relevant here: similarly to Richard Fossi's presentation, the argument of the objectification of culture and nature and adding to that, how the dichotomy between these two fields affected the understanding of collections in certain types of museums. Furthermore, the contribution stressed the role of situated knowledge and how this affects the work with colonial collections in museums today.

Simon Ville (University of Wollongong): Networks and Transactions. The Key Strategies of the Natural History Trader

Commercial traders were central figures in the booming nineteenth-century global trade in natural history specimens (Coote et al. 2017). They supplied museums and private collectors with in-demand specimens and facilitated their delivery through access to the increasingly globalised world of international trade, shipping and finance. Seeking to achieve a profit for their endeavours, the two key questions for the trader were 'who' and 'how'. In other words, who should they trade with – geographically and institutionally – and how should the trade transaction occur – through buy/sell, exchange/barter or donation? Both of these questions were distinctive ones for the specimen trader – few businesses traded with such a wide network of individuals and institutions or conducted barter and donation. Obtaining extensive information about traders is difficult since few

detailed archives survive; exceptions include [Henry Ward](#) (1834-1906) of New York. Instead, it is often through the more extensive collections of natural history museums, along with a collage of other sources, that it is possible to reconstruct the history of traders. This presentation drew primarily upon evidence of the activities of commercial traders from several major Australian museums and the *Museum of Comparative Zoology* at Harvard. Amongst the conclusions are that trader networks were geographically and institutionally diverse, yet social, personal and professional connections also mattered. Secondly, traders understood and acted upon the relative merits and shortcomings of each transactional form in acquiring and disposing of natural history specimens.

Sabine von Mering (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin): Entangled Ventures. The Potential of Wikidata to Document and Visualise Natural History Trade Networks

As demonstrated during the workshop, the Umlauff family's trade network was a global venture. However, apart from a few central figures such as the founder [Johann Friedrich Gustav Umlauff](#) or [Georg Zenker](#), our knowledge about the many people who participated in gathering and providing specimens is still limited. In addition to the traders, the process of "collecting" and preparing specimens for sale involved numerous local collectors, guides and informants, but also taxidermists, photographers and illustrators. New insights into the contributions of such hidden figures can be gained by opening up information on collection agents in different roles. [Wikidata](#) is used to document the relationships between traders, trading companies, natural history museums, "collectors" and other relevant entities. This open knowledge base is a multilingual and collaborative tool that stores structured data in a human- and machine-readable format. By creating and using persistent identifiers for different entities, such as people, places, taxa, expeditions, publications etc., scattered data can be connected, referenced and also linked to archival material and collections (von Mering et al. 2024). The information in Wikidata is reusable and can be updated and enriched by others, thus filling knowledge gaps and improving the quality of collection data. This improves the transparency and accessibility of natural history collections and archives, enabling provenance or other historical research related to the colonial contexts of specimens provided by Umlauff companies (Kaiser and von Mering 2024). Knowledge graphs help to visualise relationships within the global trade network, highlighting exchange routes and correspondence networks, but also uncovering hidden local contributors and their stories (Fig. 4). Linked Open Data related to collections including those on natural history trading houses allow us to expand our view of the museum's histories and how specimens were acquired from different sources (von Mering et al. 2025).

Conclusions & Outlook

The Umlauff family's trade in naturalia and ethnographica were deeply intertwined with colonial power and infrastructures of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Theirs was also, first and foremost, a commercial business, influenced by economic cycles, interested in

sales opportunities. They aimed at academic customers, as well as providing material for infotainment and entertainment alike. Boundaries between the two aspects were fluid. Moreover, their various activities created complex trading networks that pose significant challenges for provenance research in museums and scientific collections today. These core insights have multifaceted implications:

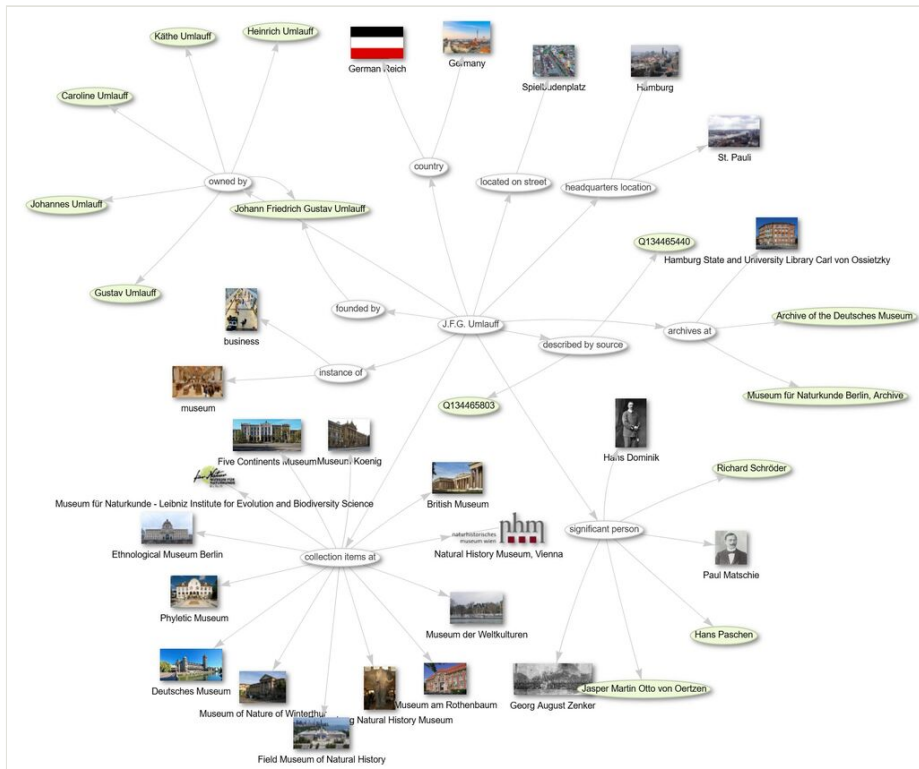


Figure 4. [doi](https://doi.org/10.26434/chemrxiv-2024-11)

Knowledge graph of J.F.G. Umlauff, created using Scholia (<https://scholia.toolforge.org/topic/Q113622640#context>) and available online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Scholia_Knowledge_graph_of_J.F.G._Umlauff_trading_house.jpg, Wikimedia Foundation, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

1. The Umlauffs often drew on personal and professional relationships, creating a vast network of partners at museums, universities, zoos, wildlife traders and suppliers like colonial officials and members of the German military. They relied on colonial infrastructures for acquiring and transporting living and dead animals, as well as ethnological and natural history collections. They were quite aware of the often violent acquisition and injustice of appropriating cultural artefacts, but also of hunting animals that had a cultural meaning. Thus, the trade in naturalia and ethnographica benefitted substantially from established colonial structures. These structures not only provided physical access to remote regions and their natural and cultural resources, but also created the administrative and logistical prerequisites for trade.

2. The trade in scientific and ethnographic objects was characterised by its distinctly transnational and transtemporal nature. Trading networks extended across continents, connecting diverse cultural and political spaces. Simultaneously, this trade was not confined to specific historical periods, but developed over extended timeframes, with trade routes, actors and practices continuously evolving. This temporal and spatial expansion led to the emergence of complex, often opaque trading networks.

3. Research into the provenance of specimens is significantly complicated by tangled trade networks. Objects often passed through multiple intermediaries and collection stations before reaching their final destinations in museums or scientific institutions. We also see a “criss-cross” of trajectories of objects, from collection items to museum objects to props for film sets back to museum collections etc. These complex transfer pathways make it difficult or sometimes impossible to trace the original contexts from which objects originated. This is complicated even further by the variable quality of documentation available in different museums. While some collections possess detailed records, others exhibit significant gaps in their documentation. Particularly problematic is the absence of crucial source materials: for instance, the Umlauff’s zoological sales catalogues have not yet been located, despite their potential value as important sources of information for provenance research.

4. The varying budgets of individual institutes and museums resulted in significantly different collecting strategies and documentation practices. While well-funded institutions could pursue systematic acquisitions and maintain detailed cataloguing systems, smaller institutes were often dependent on opportunistic purchases and possessed limited resources for documenting their holdings. These institutional disparities continue to be reflected in the uneven distribution of source materials available today.

5. A central problem of historical collecting practices was the frequently inadequate documentation of object origins. Many collection items contain only vague or no information regarding their original provenance. Often, museums’ catalogues only list “Umlauff” as supplier or even as collector. Frequent exchanges of objects between Umlauff and museums worldwide make it even more difficult to reconstruct the provenance of an object. The resulting information gaps not only complicate the scientific study of objects, but also have far-reaching ethical and legal implications for contemporary collection management.

These observations have repercussions for **future methodologies and research perspectives**:

1. An interdisciplinary approach is essential for investigating these historical trading networks. Only through the integration of various fields — from history and ethnology to the natural sciences — can the complex relationships within historical trade be adequately understood. This methodological pluralism will enable researchers to integrate different perspectives and develop a more comprehensive understanding of historical processes. They need to connect natural history collections, cultural artefacts

and the appropriation of human remains to fully understand the extent of Umlauff's global trade.

2. Another, crucial aspect of future provenance research must be the systematic inclusion of representatives of communities of origin in all steps of the research process. Their perspectives and knowledge are indispensable for a complete understanding of object histories. This collaborative approach not only contributes to scientific knowledge, but also aligns with ethical requirements for decolonising museum practices.

3. Taking the Umlaufts as a starting point for researching the role of natural history trading companies in general, follows the logics of the colonial archive. Unchecked, this approach reproduces colonial power relations and epistemologies. It is, therefore, imperative to listen to silences and the omissions in the historical sources and to counter them with additional sources and information from material beyond the scope of company or museum archives (e.g. travel logs and reports, private letters, additional publications).

There are also several **open research questions** concerning the differences and similarities between the trade in ethnographica and naturalia. While both domains benefitted from similar colonial structures, significant differences (as well as intersections) may exist in specific trading practices, actor networks and valuation systems. Systematic investigation of these differences and parallels could yield important insights for understanding historical collecting practices. Additional research priorities include mapping the full extent of trading networks, identifying key actors and institutions and developing methodologies for reconstructing incomplete provenance chains. Additionally, the role of scientific expeditions, missionary networks and commercial enterprises in facilitating trade requires further investigation.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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