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The large Ambers Collection of TUI AG Hannover reunited in the German Amber Museum

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Włączenie kolekcji bursztynu TUI AG z do zbiorów Niemieckiego Muzeum Bursztynu

Niniejszy komunikat dotyczy kolekcji Niemieckiego Muzeum Bursztynu w Ribnitz-Damgarten. Po rearanżacji wystawy w 2006 roku do ekspozycji włączono część niezwykle cennej kolekcji przedmiotów należących do TUI AG w Hanowerze (wcześniej własność Preußische Bergwerks- und Hütten-Aktiengesellschaft w Królewcu). Dzieła z dawnych zbiorów królewieckich stanowiły prawie 70% historycznych bursztynowych eksponatów na wystawie. Jesienią 2019 roku TUI AG zaoferowało sprzedaż całej kolekcji Niemieckiemu Muzeum Bursztynu. Kompleksowy katalog w języku niemieckim i angielskim wraz z krytyczną oceną źródeł będzie dostępny we wrześniu 2025.

Abstract

This communication concerns the collection of the German Amber Museum in Ribnitz-Damgarten. Thanks to the rearrangement of the exhibition in 2006, some of the extremely valuable collection of objects belonging to TUI AG in Hannover (formerly owned by the Preußische Bergwerks- und Hütten-Aktiengesellschaft in Königsberg) could be included in the exhibition. Works from the former Königsberg collection accounting for almost 70 per cent of the historical works in the exhibition. In autumn 2019, TUI AG offered to sell the entire collection to the German Amber Museum. A comprehensive catalogue in German and English with a critical appraisal of the sources will be available in September 2025.

The collections of the German Amber Museum in Ribnitz-Damgarten are relatively young. They are formed around purchases from the 1970s and 1980s as well as donations from VEB Ostseeschmuck Ribnitz-Damgarten which sponsored the construction of the amber exhibition in what was then the district's local history museum.

Following the 2006 renovation and redesign of the Amber Museum, part of the highly valuable amber collection belonging to TUI AG Hannover could be integrated into the permanent displays as a long term loan. These Königsberg treasures contributed almost 70% of historical amber artworks on show. In autumn 2019, TUI AG Hannover offered to sell the entire collection to the German Amber Museum. The offer involved bringing items in the collection then stored or exhibited elsewhere together with those already in Ribnitz. It was an offer of incredible importance. Yet, a purchase would also be a feat of some strength for the Ribnitz team. The prospect of raising a huge sum stood before us – a museum located in a medium-sized small town without generations of supporters to back us! The vendor signalled patience, goodwill and a desire to cooperate. But how far can patience and goodwill stretch?

Four years were needed to assemble the necessary agreements and financial resources. The Kulturstiftung der Länder (The German Federal Cultural Foundation) supported and coordinated the purchase and provided experienced appraisers. The state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern was generous and helpful from the start. The purchase was also supported by the Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien (Federal Government Minister for Culture and Media) and the Ostdeutsche Sparkassenstiftung together with the Sparkasse Vorpommern Foundation. The town of Ribnitz-Damgarten, now the proud custodian of the collection, also contributed. The acquisition was finalised in November 2023.

Looking back, the years, with all their rollercoaster of ups and downs, personal encounters, moments of joy and yes – even moments of sheer despair – have lost some of their drama, but remain firmly in the memory of all involved.

The collection is the only large amber collection originating in East Prussia to be preserved in its entirety. It was originally a traveling exhibition belonging to the State Amber Manufactory in Königsberg, used principally for advertising. With it, the famous manufactory symbolically united the high points of the East Prussian tradition of amber processing. As such, it is also an irreplaceable historical document and a unique cultural asset not only for East Prussian history, but also for the history of Germany as a whole.

It owes its preservation to a stroke of historical luck. In the spring of 1944, it was being hosted by the then famous Istanbul “Hotel Tokatliyan” on the Bosphorus. That June, Allied troops would land on France's Atlantic coast. The fate of the “Third Reich” was sealed. Turkey broke off diplomatic relations with Germany. The location of the crates with the exhibits was left a mystery. Five years after the end of the war, former employees of the Königsberg amber factory

began a quest to find them. In 1954, the crates were discovered in Istanbul. The 28 boxes with the amber treasures were found in a warehouse belonging to the company “Demir Toprak”, organiser of the 1944 exhibition. After lengthy negotiations, the collection was finally returned to its owner the “Preußische Bergwerks- und Hütten-Aktiengesellschaft” (Preussag AG), now based in Hanover and owner of the State Amber Manufactory, in 1961. The collection items were subsequently loaned temporarily or permanently to various museums and exhibitions. They were also highlights at the meetings of East Prussian emigre associations. On these occasions, National Socialist symbols and dedicatory inscriptions were covered or removed. In 2002, Preussag AG became TUI AG.

This precious amber collection from Königsberg has now been brought together again after almost 80 years in the German Amber Museum. There are over 250 exhibits. The composition of the collection closely reflects the structure and purpose of the former traveling exhibition. A small natural history section is juxtaposed with a wide-ranging cultural history section. The extraction and processing of amber (as it was done in the past and in the 1930s and 40s) is documented by natural amber pieces in various colours and flow forms. Technical amber products such as plates and rods or moulded parts made of pressed amber show the performance of the pressing plant that was based in Palmnicken at the time.

The cultural historical section is extensive. So-called amber “corals” for the African and Middle Eastern markets, and green coloured pressed amber pearl-strings for the Chinese market are evidence of the factory’s traditionally broad customer base. These amber-corals are unique in their preservation through the exhibition. There are examples of Chinese and Korean amber carvings.



Fig. 1. Relief of the Annunciation to Mary, early 16th century, photo: Thomas Helms, Schwerin



Fig. 2. Carl Jan Holschuh: Rearing Horse and Saint Sebastian, 1927, and Asian Goddess, 19th century, photo: Thomas Helms, Schwerin



Fig. 3. Views of the newly designed exhibition room with the model of the “Wappen von Danzig” and state prizes designed by Carl Jan Holschuh and Hermann Brachert, photo: Thomas Helms, Schwerin

Prehistoric, especially Neolithic, finds from East Prussia represent an unbroken tradition of amber processing linking deep history with the 20th century. In this area, pieces from old Königsberg amber collections that would otherwise have been irretrievably lost were preserved through their inclusion in the touring exhibition.

Highlights of the collection also include an important relief from the 16th century showing the Annunciation of Christ to Mary, a small house altar from the second half of the 17th century, a writing case from around 1675 by Michel Redlin, probably from the possession of the Great Elector Frederick William of Brandenburg, and a chessboard attributed to King Frederick II of Prussia.



Fig. 4. Views of the newly designed exhibition room with the Vasa Sacra by Hermann Brachert, photo: Thomas Helms, Schwerin

High-quality smoking utensils from the second half of the 19th century and a large number of faceted amber bead necklaces, which were used primarily for traditional jewelry, are evidence of the then industrialisation of amber mining, which led to an unprecedented amount of raw amber becoming available and compelling their use. The large number of strings of beads present in the collection can be explained by an unexpected design application. These strings were

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used to form a colossal cascade that was a highlight of the presentation. Not long after its inception, around 1930, the factory attempted to leverage a new market by producing *Vasa Sacra* and objects for ecclesiastical use. In addition to chalices, the sculptor Hermann Brachert (1890–1972) designed, for example, a large amber cross with accompanying altar candlesticks. These large-format objects were presented at the World Exhibition in Chicago in 1933 and are now preserved in the German Amber Museum. Early carvings in amber by [Carl] Jan Holschuh (1909–2000) and the famous “Schwebende” [Floating Form/Figure] by Brachert are true highlights of amber art in the first half of the 20th century. There are also works by the Königsberg sculptor Hans Wissel (1897–1948) and rare amber intaglios by the important stone cutter Martin Seitz (1895–1988). The collection of trophies and prizes from the 1930s represent the most comprehensive survey of these outstanding and largely unique products made by the State Amber Manufactory to have survived. Important historical witnesses, their place in a public collection will now ensure they are available to researchers worldwide. A fitting end to this summary is provided by the impressive amber cog entitled “Wappen von Danzig” [The Arms of Danzig]. Completed over a number of years by the Gdańsk amber carver Carl Dreher (1881–1967), this vessel was to become the flagship embodying the resurgence of the East Prussian amber industry. This highly accomplished artistically crafted model of a Hanseatic ship from the 16th century was first exhibited in the summer of 1931 in the City-Museum in Danzig-Oliva. It formed the heart of the Manufactory’s traveling exhibition and was shown in at least 35 German cities before 1939. Thereafter, it was “berthed” in Vienna, Prague, Krakow, Warsaw, Amsterdam, Sofia, Zagreb, Budapest and Bucharest, to name but a few until finally coming to rest in Istanbul in 1944. Remarkably, the cog has also seen display at the World Exhibition in Chicago, as well as in Brazil and Argentina. Today it is anchored in its home port, Ribnitz. By succeeding in its acquisition of the collection from TUI AG Hanover, the German Amber Museum has secured a highly significant, unique collection that gifts the Museum a well-deserved place among the world’s specialist amber museums. A comprehensive catalogue in German and English, replete with an evaluation of critical sources is now forthcoming. It remains to thank our gracious and generous donors, supporters, and companions all of whom have been tireless and unfailing in the face of this great challenge. For colleagues and institutions facing such a feat, please do courage from the success of the German Amber Museum and its team.

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