

Access to letters from Napoleon to Johann Sebastian Bach

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The rich treasures of cultural heritage in museums today do not seem to be adequately known yet to the wide public. Museums, therefore, take a lot of efforts to make the references to their holdings widely known in public.

My museum is the “Stadtgeschichtliches Museum“ (City Museum) in Leipzig, Germany – a museum of local history founded 100 years ago. Leipzig itself is a German city of more than 500,000 inhabitants. The commonality of the holdings of all City museums worldwide, certainly, is their regional focus. So, our holdings show a wide spectrum, ranging from archaeology through art to the history of technology (as is typical for museums of local history). All those in the large general public who are interested, therefore, always find it quite difficult to take a guess / to know beforehand what the treasures of the museum may actually bear.

So, our museum owns about 500,000 objects, arranged into 10 collection subject groups. Among these many objects, there are items like a ringlet of Richard Wagner and a splinter of his conductor’s baton as well as the bobsleigh of East Germany’s Olympia winners of 1980 in Lake Placid in the US. And there are letters of Napoleon I. Napoleon in 1813 took his headquarters at Düben, a small town near Leipzig, from where he gave his orders for the deployment of his army in the battle of the nations near Leipzig.

The City Museum of Leipzig is digitizing its holdings now for more than 10 years. In summer of 2010, about 300,000 objects have their references in the data base of the museum, with 220.000 accompanied by a digital image.

Of the 27,000 autographs in our holdings, 10,000 have been registered in our database and have been given a short summary description. From May, 2009 until April, 2011 a further 6,000 will be documented in the framework of a project funding by the German Research Council (DFG). These 6,000 are centered around the topics “Napoleonic wars (1805-1813)” and “Musical history in Leipzig (18 to 20 century)”.

One of the most important events of the Napoleonic wars was the “Battle of nations” near Leipzig in October, 1813. This was the reason that, starting immediately after the Battle, objects related to the event were being collected which are nowadays in the custody of our museum. Our holdings “Battle of the nations” are comprised of about 2,000 autographs, among them some originating from Alexander I. of Russia, Franz I. of Austria, Frederick William III. of Prussia, Carl XIII of Sweden, or George III. of Great Britain.

Leipzig also was the place of activity of many important German musicians. The relevant part of our holdings is comprised of about 4,000 letters and sheets of music, among others from Johann Sebastian Bach, Richard Wagner, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Franz Liszt, Robert and Clara Schumann, Carl Maria von Weber, or Albert Lortzing. Also included is the contract by which he received the important and prominent post of the city’s major cantor (“Thomaskantor”), in the Thomas church.

These altogether about 6,000 autographs done, the remaining 11,000 have to be processed later, in subsequent steps. They are on the topics “Politics”, “Literature”, “Womens’ movement”, and others.

The first 10,000 autographs which I mentioned in the beginning can already be retrieved on the internet, first of all through our museum’s homepage www.stadtgeschichtliches-museum-leipzig.de. With this ((here)), our target group are all those who already know the museum and who, therefore, are doing their search very targeted directly in our online data base. For example those treating of the “battle of nations” in their school teaching will find the relevant Napoleon letter here.

The references to the autographs, specifically, are also fed into the “Kalliope” portal www.kalliope-portal.de, a specialized portal in Germany for reference to manuscripts and personal papers. This portal is run by the Berlin State Library. Through this channel, our target group is the mostly scientific audience who is doing scientific research with manuscripts and personal papers wherever they may be located worldwide. For example, international research institutions which are preparing complete editions with all letters of famous persons in the battle of nations will find this Napoleon letter, too.

As a third portal and a third channel of publicizing our museum holdings, we are delivering to the “BAM”-portal www.bam-portal.de (“BAM” in German means “Libraries, archives, and museums”), This is a German-language portal for joint search/retrieval in the holdings of libraries, archives, and museums together. The target group here are those who are doing search for German cultural heritage and overarching over the 3 different branches. If you would be preparing an exhibition in 2013 commemorating the battle of nations, the “bam-portal” would be your instrument and would allow to find these letters.

If you want to prepare an exhibition for the Bicentenary of the Battle of Nations in 2013 then you will find this letter in the BAM portal.

And finally, those of our objects which are already fully digitized are also fed into the Europe-wide cultural heritage portal “europeana” (www.europeana.eu). This channel and its audience are overarching the branches, too, involving many nations and a diversity of languages. In 2013, as mentioned, many activities will take place commemorating the “battle of nations” of 1813 – especially in the nations once involved like France, Sweden, Prussia, Austria. A Europe-wide portal like “europeana” is thus the obvious means to retrieve the relevant Napoleon letter.

The 6,000 autographs which we are presently documenting within our research grant project will be available over the internet in the same way. In particular, they will be presented through the “DFG Viewer”, a special software developed by the German Research Council and held obligatory for public display by projects financed through the Research Council DFG. Its aim and function is to give users a special browsing and reading feature for text-based files that allows to perform particular operations of addressing text bits, of sequencing them, etc.

This funded project for the documenting of 6,000 autographs will allow us not only to establish and make available the *references* to the documents but also to provide the full text/body of the documents themselves in digital images. It will thus greatly help

the use of the material for scientific research, and will also contribute a lot to the public dissemination and awareness of museum holdings which otherwise remain unknown and unsuspected to the large public. Public visibility on the internet benefits research and all those interested in coming to know and to use museum objects.

But we in the museum do benefit, too. We do receive feedback to the information on objects which we have placed online. This does increase our knowledge about our objects, and it does also help to correct mistakes we made during our object cataloguing. So, let me end with giving some examples of the many reactions we received. The research unit (Forschungsstelle) Robert Schumann in Düsseldorf upon searching the portals asked us to supply scans of 3 Schumann letters from our holdings. The research unit (Forschungsstelle) Max Reger in Karlsruhe who presently work on listing the Reger letters detected one they were missing so far. Yet another example is the great grandson of the composer Cyrill Kistler who found our museum through the "kalliope-portal" union catalogue and detected a letter of his ancestor to the municipal theatre in Bremen. And another user gave us a hint to a mistake in the dating of a Franz Liszt letter:

"I have been compiling a new type of biography of the composer Franz Liszt predominantly utilizing his correspondence and have been examining Liszt autograph worldwide. Recently I viewed the webpage for the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin (Kalliope) which included Liszt autographs at all German libraries and archives. I have examined the information given for Liszt letters in the collection of Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig. Allow me to point out a number of problems with the dates that caught my attention. Is it possible to re-examine the dates on the original autographs or can a link be provided that I might examine it? The letters in question are listed below. Could you please forward this to the appropriate individual or department. Liszt was in Budapest from February 4 to April 8. Could you please examine the date on the original autograph." (This letter reached us from the USA).

The Servais Society in Belgium retrieved in our digital presence "two letters by cellist-composer Adrien Francois Servais" and asked for copies for their archives.

All in all, we are very content about all this feedback. Though the request reaching us have become more, they are today more precise and can thus be answered much easier. And indeed, as I said, they help us receiving further and more information about our museum objects. Therefore, we will continue to make information available online about all our holdings.