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“Outliving the Image”

A research and exhibition project
on the photographic collection Emma and
Felix von Luschan

Hidden in plain sight

On 3 December 1925, the assistant of Vienna's Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography noted down the arrival of a gift. “24 crates v. Luschan collection”, his entry reads, have been received from Berlin and added to the own collection.¹ Barely two years earlier, the Austrian-born Felix von Luschan (1854–1924), a founding figure of anthropology and ethnology in the German-speaking world and long regarded as a “giant” of his field even beyond,² had died. His widow Emma von Luschan (1864–1941) had tried in vain to keep in Berlin the private anthropological collection they had built up over 40 years of joint scientific activity, which, in addition to plaster casts, osteological specimens and hair samples, originally comprised over 6,500 photographs alone.³ Since Felix von Luschan's appointment to the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde* in Berlin in 1885, the Austrian researcher couple had been active in what was then the epicentre of the still new sciences of man. The Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory in particular offered an influential forum with far-reaching international contacts, thus placing the disciplines it represented in the global context of colonialism well before their academic anchoring.⁴ Eventually, Felix von Luschan held the first chaired position in anthropology at Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm University from 1909.

Their diverse repertoire of methods almost predestined Emma and Felix von Luschan for “generous and purposeful” anthropological collecting.⁵ To systematically expand the museum's collection and their own, they also engaged in “tireless” lobbying in colonial circles during their long years in Berlin.⁶ Under the maxim “knowledge is power”, Felix von Luschan also positioned his scientific field as indispensable for

a successful colonial policy.⁷ The fact that he profited from colonial power relations and played to them stands in fundamental contradiction to his actually liberal tenor, as it had still prevailed in early German anthropology.⁸ His concept of *Völkerkunde* as a “powerful unity” of physical anthropology, ethnology and prehistory⁹ also dates from this early period and involved a subordination of these fields to a natural science perspective. This was met with increasing resistance from the Berlin Faculty of Philosophy in a debate of natural sciences versus the humanities that had made the corresponding orientation of anthropology and ethnology its precedent.

Felix von Luschan’s ordinariness was consequently limited to the field of physical anthropology and to his person, without premises or endowment, and thus literally starved out.¹⁰ Forced to lecture in the crowded facilities of the museum under “simply desperate conditions”, he had to resort to their own private collection as teaching material. His offer to donate this collection, which he liked to refer to as “anthropological apparatus”, to the Friedrich Wilhelms University if it was set up in an own anthropological institute, was repeatedly rejected.¹¹ In his popular oeuvre *Völker, Rassen, Sprachen*, published after his retirement in 1922, Felix von Luschan emphatically positioned himself against the increasing anti-liberalism and anti-Semitism of his time. His conclusion that “all attempts to divide people into artificial groups according to the colour of their skin, the length or width of their brain capsules, the type of their hair, etc.” would lead completely astray,¹² indicates that he recognised the emerging political danger of his own discipline and knew how to distance himself accordingly.¹³ Felix von Luschan died in Berlin in February 1924 and was buried in his family’s grave in Carinthia, Austria.¹⁴

Emma and Felix von Luschan’s private anthropological collection made its way to Vienna quite fortuitously.¹⁵ Now widowed, Emma von Luschan had announced that, as Berlin had not met her late husband’s requirements, it would be handed over to one of his students.¹⁶ She negotiated with the Hamburg anthropologist and later Nazi racial ideologist Otto Reche (1879–1966), who finally took over the collection in 1925 for the University of Vienna during his short tenure there.¹⁷ Between 1924 and 1927, he held the Chair of Anthropology and Ethnography in succession to its founder, the Austrian physician and anthropologist Rudolf Pöck (1870–1921), who had also been a student of Felix von Luschan but had died before him. When Reche accepted a call to the University of Leipzig in 1927, the “anthropological apparatus” remained at the University of Vienna. In the year after Reche’s departure, yet another crate was to arrive from Berlin, again as a gift from Emma von Luschan. On 23 April 1928, over 2,000 *Lichtbilder* were received in addition to the 4,380 photographs from her 1925 donation.¹⁸ In the following year, the twin University Chair of Anthropology and Ethnography was finally divided.¹⁹



Fig. 1 Felix von Luschan, *Sultana Codron*

Makri, Ottoman Empire (today Fethiye, Turkey), 1884

Cyanotype, 11,9 × 19,9 cm

Sultana Codron, a young woman from a thriving Sephardic community in what was then Ottoman Greece, was photographed by Felix von Luschan on his first own journey to Southwest Asia dedicated to “type” photography. She was among the individuals whose life histories were reconstructed during our research and exhibition project, and whose photographs were shared with their descendants.²⁴

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With the German ethnologist and Africanist Hermann Baumann (1902–1972), a National Socialist was appointed to the meanwhile separate Institute of Ethnology at the University of Vienna in 1940. Next to colonial revisionist activities, one of Baumann’s focal points was an expansion of the study collection for which he had over a thousand ethnographic objects transferred from the *Museum für Völkerkunde* in Berlin to Vienna.²⁰ These were supplemented by a permanent loan of around 1,800 photographs from the Anthropological Institute in Vienna, mostly from the Emma and Felix von Luschan collection. Since photographs were apparently not considered proper ethnographic objects at the time, there are no records of this process,²¹ and their original collection context was soon forgotten. After the remaining collection

boxes at the Anthropological Institute had emptied considerably after this loan, a start was made there on filling them up with other photographic holdings. However, this reorganisation was never completed and only rudimentary inventories were created.²² Here, too, any provenance became blurred, and the photographic collection Emma and Felix von Luschan fell into invisibility despite its size. In her later years, Emma von Luschan had increasingly retreated to the summer residence named after her late husband, the Villa Felicitas in Millstatt, Carinthia, and chose to commit suicide there in April 1941.²³

A flood of colonial images

The photographic collection Emma and Felix von Luschan was considered lost for decades, and it was only in the context of the present project that it became visible again in its entirety. Formerly orphaned in two different university archives in Vienna, its main part was rediscovered in 2017, still scattered among other photographic holdings at the Department of Evolutionary Anthropology. Its smaller part, going back to the Nazi era loan, was only identified in spring 2021 among uncatalogued photographs at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology.²⁴ These historic photographic prints were originally stored together in 76 linen boxes, whose scarce labelling provided the only overview of their contents.²⁵ Over time, the collection boxes had been reused, pasted over with new labels or lost altogether. When, during the move of the Department of Evolutionary Anthropology to a new university building in the summer of 2021, a loose print template for the original labelling of the boxes was rediscovered,²⁶ it was possible to identify, complete and physically rearrange the photographic collection in the order previously intended.

Sorted by continents,²⁷ the anthropological photographs assembled by Emma and Felix von Luschan between the 1880s and the 1920s are part of a flood of colonial imagery from around the world that is currently resurfacing, not least with increasing digital access to relevant archives. This intensive medialisation was largely contributed to by the emerging human sciences, which felt they were losing their field of research as Indigenous cultures were considered unable to survive in the face of European expansion. As “primitives” without history, they were taken for an earlier stage of mankind that would hold the key to reconstructing human development.²⁸ Under the paradigm of “Salvage” anthropology, a special moral urgency was invoked to comprehensively collect documents on the supposedly doomed, and by the end of the 19th century, the notion of “Salvage” for scientific posterity had become the driving force in the production and collection of photographs of anthropological interest.²⁹

The accomplished photographer Felix von Luschan, who had been introduced to the medium in the archaeological field by the Austrian expedition photographer Wilhelm Burger (1844–1920),³⁰ and his wife Emma von Luschan, who was considered a “photographic artist” from an early age,³¹ were able to draw on the first comprehensive standards for anthropological photography in the German-speaking world that had been defined a generation before them. The 1875 guidelines by the well-travelled German anatomist Gustav Fritsch (1838–1927) saw photography as a necessary “corrective to the subjective view of the traveller” and standardised the taking of physical “types” in unadorned frontal and profile views to be taken by the travelling scientist for detailed comparison. In addition, Gustav Fritsch recommended the purchase of popular “native types” from commercial local photo studios³² which artfully showcased the “authentic” cultural habitus of local groups that is otherwise difficult to capture while travelling. The directive to “photograph everything you cannot take with you”, as given by Felix von Luschan in 1914 in his own instructions for anthropological observation and collection,³³ already points to a comprehensive collecting focus that goes beyond material evidence and identifies photography as an integral part of fieldwork.³⁴

As much as photography’s inherent “dislocation of time and space” has first enabled the global comparisons of anthropology that have made it a full scientific discipline in the first place,³⁵ it also poses its interpretative dilemma today. While the taking of a photograph can be dated to a past point in time, its reception takes place in ever-recurring presences that are determined by different frameworks.³⁶ It is in this sense that we have to come to terms with the fact that colonial photographs do not have a genuine “message”³⁷ and therefore need a wider contextualisation as historical artefacts. While the perceived realism of an image corresponds to a preconception of reality,³⁸ it is by its circulation beyond the photographic encounter that colonial imagery experiences “reinterpretation and recharge”.³⁹ Photography’s fateful openness to interpretation as well as its abundance of visual information that has previously lent it to colonial propaganda and anthropological derivations, needs to be critically readdressed on the basis of the pictures themselves.⁴⁰

In a stroke of good fortune, the Photoinstitut Bonartes in Vienna, Austria’s only research institution dedicated to historical photography, has initiated, generously funded and accompanied the present research and exhibition project on the photographic Emma and Felix von Luschan collection.⁴¹ Their expertise in the scholarly development and dissemination of Central Europe’s historical photographic heritage⁴² has not only brought to light and to knowledge an eminent collection of anthropological photographs that has lain dormant, but above all has enabled its critical reappraisal from the perspective of photography. What the anthropological disciplines largely see as devalued and historically burdened photographs they don’t want to be

associated with,⁴³ has spurred a reconsideration of anthropological photography in its own right. Since around 1980, photography has been inquired as to its role in the creation of anthropological knowledge,⁴⁴ and early critical accounts have emphasised the medium’s colonial instrumentality and destructive effects on its Indigenous sitters, as exemplified in the haunting image of “the stolen shadow”.⁴⁵

This take has increasingly come under challenge, however, as it downplays Indigenous agency both in the ethno-photographic encounter⁴⁶ and in the local appropriation of the medium, such as in professional photography studios active globally since the 1860s.⁴⁷ In a photo-centric approach under the postcolonial premise of allowing “other ways of seeing” to emerge,⁴⁸ the identification of contexts that once authenticated these photographs as “scientific” allows for a reading that goes beyond or behind the photographer-anthropologists’ original intentions and instead provides access to historical traces of the people depicted.⁴⁹ Reuniting the subjects of formerly anonymous “type” photographs with their names and life histories ultimately rehumanises them, while the circulation of their portraits back to the communities of origin or even to descendants sets in motion collective processes of “reclaiming the shadow” today.⁵⁰

Outliving “Salvage” photography

But what has actually survived to this day in the remaining photographs of “Salvage” anthropology, long after their original production and collection intentions have vanished? The exhibition cum catalogue *Überleben im Bild* by the Photoinstitut Bonartes⁵¹ explores this question through an exemplary selection of photographic portraits from the Emma and Felix von Luschan collection. They were chosen to represent different collecting strategies between expedition, *Völkerschau* as well as their exchange among scholars, in which research contexts of the time, often destructive acquisition circumstances and the circulation of inappropriate abstractions become tangible. But above all, the exhibition looks beyond the anonymity of the anthropological “type” photographs in favour of a “skilled vision” of their shared and situated nature,⁵² and allows the traces of individual lives to flash up. The depicted can thus step out of the shadows of generic and traumatic stereotypes of their time and come back into view as historical individuals.

One life history researched for the exhibition is that of Soli, a nine-year-old boy from what is now Papua New Guinea, who was photographed by Felix von Luschan in 1892. Soli had been brought to Berlin for “education” that year by Fritz Rose (1855–1922), who had previously served as the first Imperial Commissioner of German

New Guinea.⁵³ His “mentor” Rose belonged to a circle of individual collectors in the colonies, whom Felix von Luschan was able to harness for the interests of the Royal Museum of Ethnology in Berlin. Fritz Rose, who bequeathed almost 100 collection objects from Oceania to the museum,⁵⁴ was presumably instructed accordingly in Felix von Luschan’s internship on anthropological documentation before his deployment as a colonial official. The “type” photograph of young Soli comes from this very course of study, for which Rose had in turn provided him as a living anthropological “model”.⁵⁵ Felix von Luschan also owed Soli a “multiple instruction” on various collection objects from New Guinea.⁵⁶ This already hints at Soli’s further biography,⁵⁷ for example from his surviving letters to the Rose family after his return home in 1894 or from later phonographic recordings.⁵⁸ Like his son after him, he remained active for the Neuendettelsau missionaries in Kaiser-Wilhelms-Land throughout his life, not least owing to his good knowledge of German – boldly shifting the borders between the colonial “civilising mission” and his own Indigenous culture. With the location of Soli’s descendants living today, his Berlin portraits, originally recorded as global “anthropological types”, could return to Papua New Guinea as individual testimonies to be reappropriated locally.⁵⁹

A reception history⁶⁰ traced in the exhibition begins with a camera that was mistakenly delivered to the East African field camp of the German colonial topographer Max Weiss (1874–1944) in 1904. Thus inspired to take self-taught anthropological photographs, he captured an impressive profile picture of the young ruler Kissilerobo in the midst of his people in the course of a border mapping expedition in what is now Uganda.⁶¹ The exhibition shows how this field photograph in its retouched version became an icon of a long-obsolete “Hamite thesis” that saw light-skinned immigrants from Asia as the conveyors of culture to a supposedly ahistorical Africa. Felix von Luschan, having collected the photographs of Max Weiss, contributed to the “construct” of this thesis⁶² by photographically comparing the striking portrait of the “Hamite” Kissilerobo with mummy portraits and suspecting his origin in ancient Egypt. By this derivation, Felix von Luschan reattributed cultural achievements to the African continent itself, even if he thus promoted a hierarchical view of its populations that ultimately served colonial administration.⁶³ Kissilerobo’s portrait, which Felix von Luschan had made appear from ancient Egyptian tombs, subsequently reappeared again and again as an iconic photographic “revenant” under various prevailing “Hamite concepts”.⁶⁴ During National Socialism, for example, it was oriented towards the ideal of the “Nordic race”, while its sculptural realisation in bronze as “beautiful Hamite”⁶⁵ remained on display at the Field Museum in Chicago until well into the post-war period.



Fig. 2 Emma von Luschan, *Felix von Luschan*
Berlin, German Empire (today Germany), 1900
Albumen print, 12,2 × 19,8 cm

Emma and Felix von Luschan's collecting activities did not stop at their own person. They systematically photographed and collected “type” photographs from distant parts of the world, but also documented the academic world of Europe to which they themselves belonged. In the process, they occasionally made themselves the object of their anthropological recording.
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Last but not least, the exhibition *Outliving the Image* takes a look at how Emma and Felix von Luschan have positioned themselves photographically within their discipline. Next to official working photographs which show them immersed in the study of museum objects or human remains,⁶⁶ their private collection reveals that the anthropologist couple had also anthropologically collected themselves – via standardised anthropological photographs, facial plaster casts and also their own hair samples.⁶⁷ In their only joint publication from 1914, they noted that it was not a particularly pleasant fact to be incomparably less informed about the anthropology of their “own tribes and fellow tribesmen” than, for example, about those from the “innermost parts of Africa”.⁶⁸ Felix von Luschan's will, drawn up jointly by the couple in 1922, even foresaw that his own skeleton should in due course be transferred to Berlin's

anthropological university collection.⁶⁹ It can be assumed, however, that Emma and Felix von Luschan were not just following a scientific systematics when they made themselves the object of their own photographic-anthropological recording. Rather, their “auto-anthropology”⁷⁰ seems to reverse the scientific gaze in an experimental and playful way. Whether they aimed at collapsing the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched ultimately remains an open question.

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Anmerkungen

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- 3 Katarina Matiassek, ed., *Überleben im Bild: “Rettungsanthropologie” in der fotografischen Sammlung Emma und Felix von Luschan (Introduction)* (Salzburg, 2021), 37–65, 61.
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- 6 Hans Virchow, “Gedächtnisrede auf Felix von Luschan (Obituary)”, in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie (Verhandlungen der BGAEU)*, 56 (1924), 112–17, 115.
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- 8 H. Glenn Penny, *In Humboldt’s Shadow – A Tragic History of German Ethnology* (Princeton, 2021), 94–95.
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- 11 See American Philosophical Society Philadelphia, Franz Boas Papers, *Letter by Felix von Luschan to Franz Boas*, 6 April 1920, np.
- 12 Felix von Luschan, *Völker, Rassen, Sprachen* (Berlin, 1922), 13.
- 13 Maria Six-Hohenbalken, “Felix von Luschans Beiträge zur Ethnologie – Zwischen imperialem Liberalismus und den Anfängen des Sozialdarwinismus”, in Ruggendorfer/Szemethy, eds., *Felix von Luschan*, 165–93, 186.
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- 16 Hans-Walter Schmuhl, *Grenzüberschreitungen: Das Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik, 1927–1945*, Geschichte der Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft im Nationalsozialismus 9 (Göttingen, 2005), 63.
- 17 Katja Geisenhainer, “*Rasse ist Schicksal*”: *Otto Reche (1879–1966) – ein Leben als Anthropologe und Völkerkundler* (Leipzig, 2002), 106.
- 18 See University of Vienna, Department of Evolutionary Anthropology, *Verzeichnis der Luschan Lichtbildersammlung, die im April 1928 dem Institut übergeben wurde (typescript)*, nd., 1–6.
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- 21 I would like to thank Igor Eberhard from the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Vienna, for this information.
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- 23 Lieselotte Knoll, *Felix von Luschan: Ergänzungen und Beiträge zu biographischen Daten eines Pioniers der Ethnologie* (Vienna, 2004), 90–91.
- 24 My thanks again go to Igor Eberhard, curator of the ethnographic collections there, who enabled me to browse these holdings.
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- 30 Hubert D. Szemethy, "Felix von Luschan – ein Forschungsreisender par excellence", in Ruggendorfer/Szemethy, eds., *Felix von Luschan*, 197–246, 210–11.
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- 33 Felix von Luschan/Bernhard Ankermann, *Anleitung zum ethnologischen Beobachten und Sammeln* (Berlin, 1914), 14.
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- 36 Elizabeth Edwards, ed., *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920 (Introduction)* (New Haven, 1992), 3–17, 7.
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- 39 Gesine Krüger, "Zirkulation, Umdeutung, Aufladung: Zur kolonialen Fotografie", in *NCCR Medi-ality Newsletter*, 9 (2013), 3–11, 5
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- 41 For this comprehensive commission and its enduring support, I gratefully thank Monika Faber, director of the Photoinstitut Bonartes, Vienna, and the Bonartes Foundation, Vaduz.
- 42 For previous projects at the special interface of photography and science, see the publication series *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Fotografie in Österreich*, edited by Monika Faber for the Photoinstitut Bonartes and by Walter Moser for the Photographic Collection Albertina, Vienna.

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- 56 Von Luschan, “Hr. Felix v. Luschan zeigt photographische Abbildungen”, 275.
- 57 See Katarina Matiassek, “Soli: Ein Papua-Knabe in Berlin”, in Matiassek, ed., *Überleben im Bild*, 144–55.
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- 67 See University of Vienna, Department of Evolutionary Anthropology, *Collection von Luschans*; State Library of Berlin, Manuscript Department, *Kunstwerk 218*.
- 68 Emma von Luschan/Felix von Luschan, “Anthropologische Messungen an 95 Engländern”, in: *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 46 (1914), 1, 58–80, 73.
- 69 Lothar Schott, “Zur Geschichte der Anthropologie an der Berliner Universität”, in *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, Mathematisch-Naturwissenschaftliche Reihe, 10 (1961) 1, 57–65, 63; with the withdrawal of their collection from Berlin, this last will remained unfulfilled.
- 70 See Christoph Rippe, “Fotografie und ‘Auto-Anthropologie’: Emma und Felix von Luschans Fremd- und Selbstinszenierungen”, in Matiassek, ed., *Überleben im Bild*, 156–67.