

Press Release

from 18th May 2023

Behaim Globe as oldest Globe of the World included in the “UNESCO - Memory of the World”-programme

Martin Behaim’s Globe, made between 1492 and 1494, is one of the oldest depictions of the Earth in spherical form, and one of the highlights in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg. Today, the executive council of the world heritage organization in Paris voted to inscribe this unique evidence of a past understanding of the world on the international “UNESCO - Memory of the World”-register. The globe shows Europe, Africa and Asia with the group of Japanese islands. The continent Columbus reached as the Behaim Globe was being produced, later called America, is not depicted.

As soon as it was completed, then, the globe was already out-of-date. But that is exactly what makes it so interesting today. The world-famous globe is not just a pioneering work of cartography and scientific instrument making, it also bears witness to an image of the world undergoing rapid and fundamental change on the cusp of the modern era. It is therefore regarded as one of the most important cultural artifacts in the history of geography.

“The Behaim Globe marks a decisive turning point in European history,” says Prof. Dr. Daniel Hess, Director-General of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum. “It is testament to the thirst for knowledge and the spirit of discovery as well as the desire to broaden one’s own horizon. At the same time, it reminds us of how much the emergence of our modern world owes to the appropriation and exploitation of raw materials. Thus today, the Behaim Globe is a highly relevant document of our conflicted European cultural heritage.”

In addition to the Behaim Globe, 63 other documents were inscribed on “UNESCO’s - Memory of the World”-register. These include, from Germany, the Codex Manesse in Heidelberg University Library and documents relating to the history of the Hanseatic League, which are located in Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland, as well as the Archive of the Hanseatic City of Lübeck. Manuscripts from the Court School of Charlemagne held by Trier City Library, the Vatican Library in Rome and libraries in France, the United Kingdom, Austria and Romania were also inscribed on the register.

Kontakt

Dr. Sonja Mißfeldt
Leiterin des Referats
Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit

Telefon
09 11 13 31-103
Telefax
09 11 13 31-234
E-Mail
presse@gnm.de

Germanisches Nationalmuseum
Eingang: Kartäusergasse 1

Postanschrift
Kornmarkt 1
90402 Nürnberg
www.gnm.de

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The Germanisches Nationalmuseum is delighted for all those included in the programme and warmly congratulates the colleagues in Heidelberg, Lübeck and Trier.

The Behaim Globe

The Behaim Globe marks two decisive turning points in the European view of the world: While it was being produced, between 1492 and 1494, Europe still knew nothing of the existence of the American continent. Columbus's expedition heralds the beginning of what, from a European perspective, is regarded as modern globalisation – a seismic shift and a considerable deepening of our understanding of the world. For a long time, it stood for the success story of European “discoveries”. Fantastical ideas of far-off countries began to give way to knowledge based on exploration.

Today, we take a different, more critical look back on history and see the globe as a central document embodying the beginnings of European colonialism. In the 15th century, the intention was not merely to circumnavigate Africa in the search for India, but to profit economically from it. The Behaim Globe clearly shows the extent to which the creation of our modern world is due not only to expanding horizons but also to the violent acquisition of raw materials, to the slave trade and a plantation economy. It is thus now a document of our conflicted cultural heritage, which remembers the European conquests but is, at the same time, a memorial to African slaves, who played a decisive role in the emergence of our modern world.

Why a Globe?

We can only speculate as to why Martin Behaim ordered the production of a globe funded by the City of Nuremberg. It seems likely that the goal was to win financial backers for global trade: along with cities, rivers, information about foreign peoples, exotic animals and locations of sacred history, the globe above all pinpoints reserves of raw materials such as spices, gold and precious stones. Inscriptions highlight the potential for profit, and the hope was to encourage direct imports.

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09 11 13 31-103
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At the end of the 15th century, the search for a sea route to India was also a foremost concern. This was the purpose – in addition to the tapping of African resources – of Portuguese expeditions along the west coast of Africa, which Behaim probably took part in. Until the Cape of Good Hope was rounded in 1488, there was no alternative to the western route, and India appeared temptingly close because the circumference of the earth had been underestimated. Christopher Columbus also fell victim to this widespread misconception when calculating the route to “Asia”.

Who was Martin Behaim?

Martin Behaim (1459–1507) was born into a Nuremberg patrician family. As a young man, he left his home town and, after a cloth merchant apprenticeship in the Netherlands, lived the eventful life of a travelling tradesman. In the 1480s, Behaim stopped at the Portuguese court in Lisbon and took part in explorations along the coast of Africa. He had maps made recording the knowledge he acquired on these journeys, and probably purchased other cartographic material in Portugal.

At the start of the 1490s, Behaim returned to Nuremberg for a few years, presumably with numerous maps in his luggage. Shortly afterwards, Nuremberg City Council commissioned a globe, the design and production of which it handed over to Behaim. The City of Nuremberg paid for what was at that time an exceptional object and initially took possession of it. It was first exhibited in the Nuremberg *Regimentsstube*, centre of the administration of the imperial city. In addition to Behaim, numerous craftsmen were involved in the production, as evidenced by invoices that have been preserved: a bell-maker produced the clay moulds for the spherical shells, the precision mechanic Ruprecht Kolberger shaped the sphere, the miniatures and inscriptions on the globe were made by illuminator Georg Glockendon the Elder, painter Hans Storch and scribe Petrus Gagenhart, a carpenter built a wooden globe stand, which has since been lost, and a metal-worker wrought the iron hoops for the rotary mechanism.

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