READER

RESISTANCES: ON DEALING WITH RACISM IN BERN

These texts were written for ‘Resistances. On Dealing with Racism in Bern’, the exhibition by the collective ‘Das Wandbild muss weg!’

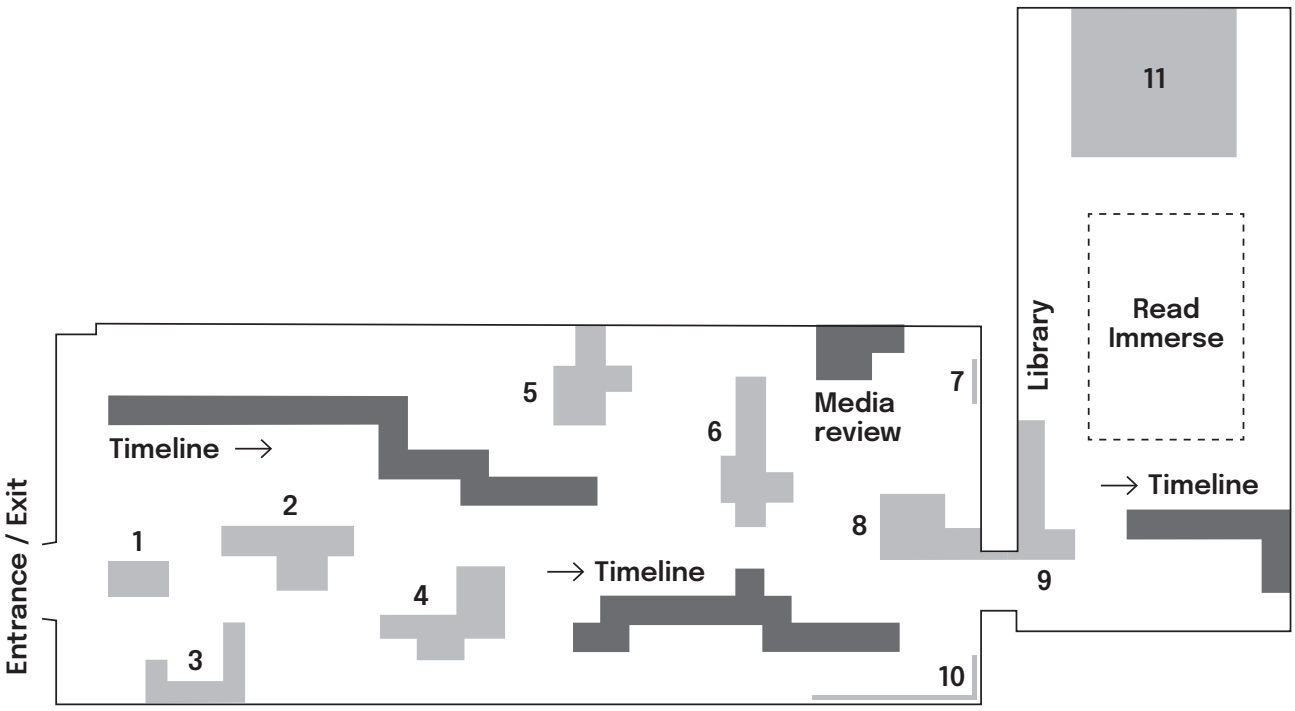
25.4.2024–1.6.2025
Bernisches Historisches Museum
bhm.ch/resistances

The texts refer to the glossary for the exhibition, jointly written by Jovita dos Santos Pinto and Emanuel Haab.

The short version of the glossary can be found here:
bhm.ch/en/glossary

A full-length version (only available in German) can be found here:
histnoire.ch/glossar
glossar.aboutpower.net

FLOOR PLAN



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Timeline

In 2019, a mural in a Bern primary school sparked a controversial debate on racism and the city's colonial legacy, which intensified in the summer of 2020 as Black Lives Matter protests swept the globe. Local authorities, the media, education and cultural institutions, as well as individuals, were at odds as to whose interpretation mattered and what should be done about the mural's racist imagery. Following an open competition, the city of Bern announced that they would adopt the proposal made by the "Das Wandbild muss weg!" association, who called for the mural to be removed from the school and put in a museum. This would enable a broader audience to engage with the conversation on racism in Bern – both past and present. Four years later, the mural has become part of Bernisches Historisches Museum's collection.

In this exhibition, the donation of Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden's mural to the Bernisches Historisches Museum is seized as an opportunity to further engage with the history and ongoing relevance of racism (see Glossary #37: racism) and colonialism (see Glossary #11: colonialism) in Bern.
The exhibition also draws attention to the resistance (see Glossary #40: resistance) that has always accompanied the colonial project from the very beginning. We, 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' association, have been invited by the museum to curate this exhibition.

Using a timeline that runs throughout the space, we focus on the controversies that were fuelled by the mural and its removal from Bern's Wylergut School. This illustrates the breadth of the debate surrounding the mural. Key events are shown on yellow boards. Selected quotations offer an overview of the discussion.
Independent contributions by researchers, journalists, activists and cultural workers – all of them have long dedicated their expertise to campaigning for an anti-racist (see Glossary #07: anti-racism) present and future – encourage reflection. Far from aiming to resolve the issues they address, these contributions focus on initiating further discussion. The wall texts in red provide additional context on the individual contributions.
Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden's mural is embedded in a space for learning and reflection. That area allows visitors to relate with the mural, acquire and deepen knowledge about the history of colonialism and reflect on the world views (see Glossary #47: world view) that have shaped one's own perceptions of the present (see Glossary #15: culture(s) of remembrance, #13: coming along).

The ways we think, see and listen are influenced by colonial world views. This exhibition seeks to disrupt internalized ways of speaking, listening and seeing and to create space for a multitude of perspectives. Racist images and objects are not reproduced without explanation, and racist terms are not written out in full. We also ask you to navigate this space respectfully and of be mindful of a non-discriminatory use of language. The glossary provided in the exhibition booklet offers guidance on getting familiar with terms and their usage. Mediators are present at all times to discuss questions related to the exhibition and they are happy to have conversations.

‘Das Wandbild muss weg!’ association
Izabel Barros, Fatima Moumouni, Esther Poppe, Vera Ryser, Bernhard C. Schär, Angela Wittwer

THE WYLERGUT MURAL: ENABLING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACISM

THE ASSOCIATION
'DAS WANDBILD MUSS WEG!'
IZABEL BARROS
FATIMA MOUMOUNI
ESTHER POPPE
VERA RYSER
BERNHARD C. SCHÄR
ANGELA WITTWER

In 1949, two socially critical artists – Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden – were commissioned by the city of Bern to paint an alphabet mural on the wall of the Wylergut School, with each letter depicted by an image. Three of these letters divide humans into different 'races' that are supposedly distinguished by their physical characteristics (see Glossary #37: racism). The letters refer to non-European people: C stands for Chinese, I for Indigenous Americans and N for a Black person (see Glossary #03: anti-Asian racism, #05: anti-Indigenous racism, #04: anti-Black racism). The separation of people into 'races' and the terminology used, as well as the artists' decision to equate non-*white* (see Glossary #46: *white* / *white* supremacy) people with plants and animals, convey a colonial world view and a racist concept of humanity, as Patricia Purtschert explains in the following text.

For seventy years, the mural went largely unnoticed. But in 2019, an article was published in *Der Bund* newspaper which drew calls for a critical re-examination of the artwork from various anti-racist collectives and activists. How could it be, they asked, that a post-war era mural depicting racist imagery was still on display in a Swiss primary school?

That same year, the city of Bern announced an open call for projects to contextualise the mural, inviting proposals for what could be done with the work. In the summer of 2020, shortly after Black Lives Matter protests reached Europe and Switzerland and while submissions were still being made, the letters C, I and N were daubed in black paint by unknown activists.

The proposal that we submitted as 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' comprised three stages: first, the mural was to be removed from the school; second, it would be donated to the Bernisches Historisches Museum; and third, the empty school wall would become the site of a temporary art installation to commemorate the pain associated with the mural.

We argued that in its current location in the school, the mural violated basic democratic rights, such as equal opportunity and the principle of non-discrimination, both of which are enshrined in the Swiss constitution. For those pupils who are not part of the *white*-majority society, having to encounter this mural daily is discrimination. Education cannot be accessed equally in an environment where these students are devalued because of their skin colour or ethnicity. It is also unsettling for *white* pupils to be taught in a setting that so visibly conveys the idea of *white* superiority and degrades their BIPoC classmates (see Glossary #09: BIPoC). The fact that the mural remained in the school for such a long time illustrates the pressing need for

critical engagement with Bern's colonial legacy. But in order for this to happen, the controversial object must be removed from the school and transferred to an institution designed to educate the public about history, such as Bern's history museum.

Our proposal was then put forward by 'Das Wandbild muss weg!', an association created in the process, and won the city's open call in March 2021.

After lengthy negotiations between the involved institutions, public bodies and individuals – the cultural service of the city of Bern (Kultur Stadt Bern), the Bernisches Historisches Museum, the Conservation and Restoration Division of the Bern University of the Arts, the heirs of the artists Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden, as well as the mural's restorer – the proposal could finally go ahead. In 2023, the mural was carefully removed from the school wall by specialists and donated to the Bernisches Historisches Museum. The mural became part of the museum's historical collection in spring 2024.

The Bernisches Historisches Museum has added the mural to its collection, along with the activists' black overpaintings. It is therefore the first item in the museum's collection that serves both as an example of 19th- and 20th-century colonial culture and documents an act of anti-racist resistance (see Glossary #07: anti-racism, #40: resistance) against the continued impact of this colonial culture in the 21st century.

By proposing that the city of Bern donate the mural to the Bernisches Historisches Museum, we invited the museum to explore the issue of colonialism and racism (see Glossary #11: colonialism) and in this way contribute to the current social debate. The museum's management welcomed our suggestion as it aligned with processes already in place at the museum to address the city's and the institution's own colonial entanglements. We agreed that we as an association would curate an exhibition around the mural, which would comprise three sections.

In the first section, we explore the breadth of the debate surrounding the mural. Using a timeline that runs throughout the exhibition, we document criticism of the mural as well as the subsequent responses elicited by that criticism. The first complaints came from individual teachers and parents as far back as the 1980s. And in the 1990s, the school internally began considering ways to tackle the racist imagery. But the outcry only came in 2019. The debate shifted from inside the school to society and the media. The mural's eventual removal was met with fierce opposition from defenders of the artwork and the status quo. But there was equally strong approval from the project's supporters.

For the second part of the exhibition, we used our guest curatorship to invite contributions from others – researchers, journalists, activists and artists – who have long dedicated their expertise to campaigning for an anti-racist present and future. Their independent contributions offer different perspectives on the mural and explore colonial cultural heritage and attitudes towards racism both historically and today. These pieces illustrate how world views (see Glossary #47: world view) influence the way we think, see and listen, and they disrupt learned forms of speaking, listening and seeing. They also encourage us to challenge outdated historical perceptions and to play our part in shaping narratives that better reflect the world we wish to see. These contributions are displayed inside, on, around and under cabinets and pedestals that are arranged into free-standing formations. They are designed to encourage reflection and stand as fragments, as fragmentary expressions that, far from aiming to resolve the issues they address, focus on inspiring further discussion.

The third part is located in the far section of the L-shaped exhibition space, where visitors will encounter Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden's restored mural. It is embedded within a learning, reflection and event space that allows visitors to engage with the mural in different ways: reading silently (or aloud), immersing themselves in the provided material, and participating in spontaneous discussions and interactions or workshops and events. Visitors can relate to the mural and the content of the exhibition, acquire knowledge about the history of colonialism and reflect on the worldviews that characterise their own perception of the present (see Glossary #15: culture(s) of remembrance , #13: coming along). Those looking at the original mural here will have learned about its creation and how its influence changed over time in the previous room or will have entered into a dialogue with with one of the mediators present. But the exhibition does not end here. Visitors are offered yet another perspective on the themes explored as they make their way out.

Neither the mural nor its creators – Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden – are the prime focus of this exhibition. Instead, the mural and the surrounding controversy become a lens through which we can see just how much Bern society has been shaped by colonialism. They also document how this society is attempting to deal with ongoing racism in the present.

Moving the mural from the school to the museum has fundamentally altered its function. In the school, its discriminatory nature made it difficult for children to receive education in a democratic and equal

environment. But in the museum, it can enable social learning outside of the classroom setting. Our project is therefore part of a wider social process that extends far beyond Bern and Switzerland. With their criticism of monuments, street names and other examples of colonial culture in public spaces, decolonial and anti-racist initiatives in recent years have urged authorities, cultural and educational institutions around the world to stop ignoring the colonial past (see Glossary #2: amnesia) and its present legacies. No one can ignore this process. We must all acknowledge – even if we do so in different ways – that only by enabling a discussion on racism and the repercussions of colonialism can we chart a new course towards a more just future.

ON THE ABCs OF DE-/COLONISATION. OR: WYLERGUT'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

PATRICIA PURTSCHERT

When a mural is transferred from a school to a history museum, it not only changes location. Physically moving the artwork offers fresh insight and brings previously unseen perspectives to light. We are all involved in the creation and exploration of this new work – you and I and countless actors both past and present, who are now converging around this image and retelling its story.

As a key feature of the area's primary school, the mural was part of everyday life in Bern's Wylergut community for several decades. Measuring 360 x 420 cm, it was both a silent and imposing presence in the school building. Children and adults probably only glanced in passing at the familiar paintings arranged above the stairwell and rarely stopped to contemplate the individual images. But architecture influences our everyday lives. Over the course of several decades, the mural subtly conveyed an idea of the notions that form the basis of our knowledge.

After all, this is a mural depicting the alphabet and (almost) every letter is combined with an image. For the children, who spend a considerable amount of their time in the school, it conveys the very foundation of their education – their ABCs – and a corresponding world order, one that is not neutral and timeless but embedded within a specific cultural and historical context. (Even if this, like any system, inherently seems somewhat random and at times surprising: for instance, the animal pictures include a calf and a lamb, which form a subset comprising various species, as well as a ship, which is at odds with the images from the 'natural world'.) We might read the mural's implicit message as follows: 'In this school, pupils learn the Latin alphabet. It is a classification system that reflects our modern, Eurocentric idea of knowledge. It is a system you will see on display in museums. You will learn about it in your schoolbooks. You will use it when categorising stones, shells, dried plants and animal figures. The alphabet allows you to read, understand and command the world from our European perspective.'

However, the set of images also includes human beings. Among animals and plants, located between a pelican, a quince and a flower, we see three faces each assigned respectively to the letters C, I and N. All three words play an important role in the world of colonialism (see Glossary #11: colonialism). The corresponding pictures show exoticised male faces whose exaggerated skin colour – yellow, red and black – and their stereotypical facial features align with racist notions of non-*white* people. The alphabetical order is also a colonial order. By placing human beings alongside animals and plants, the mural incorporates discriminatory theories of 'race' which argue that

non-Europeans are closer to the natural world than Europeans. We are also being shown a patriarchal system that offers a *white* male perspective of other, racialised (see Glossary #36: racialisation) men. Women and other genders are absent; they are neither the viewer nor the viewed, neither subject nor object of this knowledge.

The decision to move this mural to a museum removes it from the sphere of accepted knowledge and from its architectural immutability. What seems to be the unchanging way of the world in a school becomes in a *museum* the subject of examination: do these images really form the basis of our knowledge? How do power and knowledge combine in these depictions? A *history* museum also gives the mural a dimension of temporality: where do these ideas come from? How did they appear and when? And what previous concepts did they eclipse?

What did the world look like around 1949 when the artists Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden were working on the wall of this Bern school? It was in this year that Kwame Nkrumah founded the Convention People's Party in West Africa's Gold Coast, a few years before he became the first prime minister of newly independent Ghana in 1957. After a short period of Japanese occupation and four years of armed struggle against Dutch colonial rule, the Republic of Indonesia won its battle for independence in 1949. India had been independent since 1947, and Switzerland was one of the first nations to secure economic ties to the country by signing a 'Friendship Treaty' in 1948. Literature enthusiasts were reading the work of Chilean writer Gabriela Mistral, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1945. In the same year, jurist Marie Boehlen led a campaign in Bern calling for women to have the right to vote in local elections, collecting 50,218 signatures in what was then the canton's largest ever petition (although the issue was never addressed by Bern's Executive Council). Also in 1945, the Fifth Pan-African Congress took place in Manchester, calling for all colonised peoples to have the right to self-rule. In one session, as reported by the historian and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, Jamaican representatives Amy Ashwood Garvey and Alma La Badie called for the situation and problems facing Black (see Glossary #10: Black) women to be dealt with as a separate issue. A few months later, 850 women from 40 countries, including Switzerland, met in Paris to set up the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), which campaigned for gender equality and democracy as well as against war. In its final resolution, all democratic women's organisations were called upon to support women in colonies in their struggle for economic and political rights. In the United States, the government was grappling with demands for an end to segregation

after Black Americans had announced a walk on Washington in 1941. The civil rights movement had the support of well-known artist Josephine Baker, who was living in France at the time and occasionally performed in Switzerland.

Why, during a period such as this, was a mural painted in Bern depicting non-Westerners as objects that we look at as we would animals or plants? (It is important to add that the objectifying and exploitative use of not only people but animals, plants and objects presents numerous problems that we are currently facing, especially in light of the climate crisis. But that is another story and a subject worthy of its own exhibition.) In 1949, the world was still reeling from the aftermath of National Socialism and fascism, whose policies of annihilation were largely driven by racist ideology. At the same time, decolonisation movements (see Glossary #16: decolonising) in many parts of the world were about to cast off the yoke of colonialism. Why, then, did Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden include faces in their alphabet that perpetuated racist European perceptions of non-Europeans?

This is where a different history comes to light. At the time when the two artists were working on the mural, everyday life in Switzerland had long been permeated by a culture of colonialism. The Swiss attended human exhibits with sensationalist, racist titles that often took place in zoos or circuses. They bought exotic (see Glossary #20: exoticisation) fare in colonial goods shops and donated money to missionary societies to convert the 'heathens'. During Swiss Carnival, they would paint their children's faces brown, yellow, red or black and dress them in bizarre costumes which they would wear as they imitated non-Europeans. On Saturdays, these same children would go to the scouts, where they would celebrate the movement's founder, Lord Baden-Powell, a man who served in the British Army during colonial times and fought in several wars, including against the Ashanti in West Africa. Children, especially boys, identified with the (almost exclusively male) colonial heroes they read about in the Globi cartoons, Switzerland's SJW publications for children and the works of Karl May. Pilot Walter Mittelholzer portrayed himself as Switzerland's daring adventurer, whose films and books took the Swiss public on journeys to explore the world by air and by land. Meanwhile, 'Hilfswerk für die Kinder der Landstrasse', a project set up by Swiss foundation Pro Juventute, was forcibly removing large numbers of Yenish children from their families, supposedly to establish a sedentary lifestyle among the itinerant Yenish people. This racist practice continued until the 1970s. In 1949, professors at the University of Zurich's science and medicine faculties successfully

secured the continuation of racial anthropology research at the university. And in 1948, the year before the mural's completion, the apartheid regime was introduced in South Africa. Switzerland was one of the country's most important trading partners and the European nation rejected the international sanctions that were imposed on the regime until apartheid was abolished in the early 1990s.

If we examine the Wylergut mural within this historical context, the depictions seem less anachronistic. Although they were created in an era of global emancipation, they belong to a Switzerland that had happily aligned itself with a colonial world view (see Glossary #47: world view). And they depict a national self-image that remains intact to this day: the notion that there exists a basic colonial order that we never place under scrutiny.

But that is not the whole story. For the ABCs of decolonisation have always existed as well: proposals, demands, analyses and actions that have challenged the colonial order and tried to bring about an end to colonial violence. In recent years, scholars have drawn on the knowledge gathered by these resistance movements to compile a considerable body of evidence to prove that Swiss companies, missionary societies, education and research institutions, politicians, mercenaries, researchers, cities, communities and the Swiss federal state had colonial ties. These findings are changing long-held ideas about Switzerland and its history. This exhibition is also a space for us to confront our past. It shows that realities so familiar to us, like the stairwells of our primary schools, contain colonial dimensions.

This exhibition helps us to see a Switzerland freed from its cocoon of amnesia (see Glossary #02: amnesia) and places our nation within the context of global history, which is also a history of colonialism, decolonisation and the post-colonial (see Glossary #34: post-colonialism) present. That a Bern school can serve as the starting point of this global story is no coincidence; it is a revealing aspect, in part because it enables us to shine a light on the unease and pain that the parents, cleaning staff, caretakers, pupils and teachers, many of them migrants and BIPoC (see Glossary #09: BIPoC), have experienced as they encountered this colonial alphabet. How can we trace the development of the criticism and resistance they offered in response – either individually, in dialogue with others or through collective action? There are some clues. Holes in the N square, for instance, suggest that the human face displayed here was temporarily covered with the image of an animal. In the school, the mural depicted a supposedly natural colonial order,

but in its new location in the Bernisches Historisches Museum, the mural is able to tell these stories instead. Some of them deal with the potency of a Swiss colonialism without colonies but mainly, they examine the transformative power of anti-racist resistance (see Glossary #07: anti-racism, #40: resistance), which stands against dehumanisation and for more just ways of living together. These stories are only just beginning to be told. They will be continued: in this exhibition, before our eyes, here and now.

IT'S OBVIOUS

FATIMA MOUMOUNI

How can we as a society address racism and discrimination together? Whose views need to change and how? Fatima Moumouni decided to create this intervention, which features sound design by Li Tavor, after seeing how the people of Bern and the Swiss media responded to the mural's removal from Wylergut School. During the debate, there were more questions asked about whether racism was an issue than there were opportunities taken to have a meaningful conversation about what racism is and how it affects the different lived realities of Swiss people. This defensive attitude is symptomatic of the current discussion on racism in Switzerland (see Glossary #17: distancing behaviour, #39: resetting the debate).

Fatima Moumouni uses poems and questions to imagine a discourse shaped by understanding, self-empowerment and assumed responsibility – and by the desire to address social inequalities. Moumouni also harnesses the power of poetry to challenge the expectation to be 'led by the hand' (see Glossary #01: addressing the wider public) by BIPoC (see Glossary #9: BIPoc) when it comes to issues of racism. The loudspeakers have been deliberately placed so that Moumouni's piece can be heard differently well depending where the listener stands. This requires visitors to literally 'shift their position' if they want to listen properly (see Glossary #26: listening) , making them aware that every perception is influenced by who is occupying a given space and how.

Fatima Moumouni's piece is in the tradition of spoken word, where the motto is: 'If you don't understand it, feel it!' No manuscript or translation has therefore been made available for this work.

DESIGN, CONTEXTUALISE AND FORGET: HOW THE MURAL WAS CREATED AND PERCEIVED OVER TIME

ETIENNE WISMER

Etienne Wismer uses archive material, reproductions and originals to examine Eugen Jordi's (1894–1983) and Emil Zbinden's (1908–1991) artistic output and social activism. The two artists were commissioned by the city of Bern to create the mural in Wylergut School in 1949. Through his research, Etienne Wismer has discovered that this illustrated alphabet mural is more of a side note than a prime example of Eugen Jordi's and Emil Zbinden's body of work. There are other pieces which much better demonstrate their interest in social issues. In these works, their depictions of people – often the working class – consider social and economic contexts, much in contrast to the mural, which remains reductive and stereotypical (see Glossary #42: stereotyping). Yet their work on the mural is characterised by an artistic practice that was innovative and remains so to this day: they preferred to work collectively and create collective structures. Emil Zbinden's atelier in Bern's old town, for instance, was open to fellow artists who wished to sketch together. Wismer also explores a question: Would Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden have painted the mural the same way today?

Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden were socially active, leftist artists living in Bern. Both had trained in design and worked as illustrators, e.g. for book publications. In 1934, Eugen Jordi designed the first stamps to depict Swiss landscapes, and between 1941 and 1972, he created almost every cover for a series of local history books about Bern, the Berner Heimatbücher. From 1936, Emil Zbinden worked for the Büchergilde Gutenberg, a German-language book club that allowed workers access to education by offering affordable books. For the 16 volumes of Jeremias Gotthelf's work, he created over 900 wood engravings.

Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden began work on the mural from 1948. Upon its completion, Emil Zbinden wrote: 'Even though the frescoes are not astonishing masterpieces, I still think the work can stand the test of time.' [1] Even left-wing daily newspaper Berner Tagwacht praised Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden for taking a 'positive path out of the artistic misery [of the war years]'. [2]

Emil Zbinden felt his images were contributing to the fight against fascism and countering a 'blood and soil' ideology in Switzerland. Eugen Jordi had long eschewed painting, considering the practice bourgeois. Despite their leftist, anti-fascist activism, Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden reproduced racist and colonial stereotypes in their mural. In the last 75 years, awareness of such stereotypes (see Glossary #42: stereotyping) has grown considerably. But what would the artists say about their mural today? Emil Zbinden himself wrote: 'I believe [...] in people's will to create a more just order. It is a long and difficult process [...]. Until now, no power in this world, no violence, nothing, has resulted in [people's] acceptance of oppression as something inevitable.' [3]

Footnotes:
[1] Emil Zbinden, handwritten, autobiographical notes, created in 1982, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Collection. [Translation from German by Nivene Raafat].
[2] Berner Tagwacht, 22 November 1949, no page reference.
[3] Emil Zbinden, Selbstzeugnisse und Bilddokumente, Zurich: Limmat Verlag, 2008, pp. 153.

After the Second World War, Central Europe suffered an electricity shortage. Switzerland constructed several hydroelectric dams in response. For their work on the mural, Eugen Jordi, Emil Zbinden and Rudolf Mumprecht (1918–2019) – the latter had also worked on Wylergut School's exterior façade – were paid 10,000 Swiss francs (around 50,000 Swiss francs in today's money). The artists used

these funds to travel to the colossal construction sites that had appeared in the mountains. They wanted to get ‘away from the rural world, closer to the technological present’. [1]

The Oberaar site lay 2,300 m above sea level and was, at the time, the world’s second-highest dam. It had the highest reservoir in the Alps and was also the first power station in Switzerland to be built entirely below ground. For a few months in the summer of 1951, it became the artists’ home and studio. They lived alongside the anonymous Italian guest workers who made the creation of these dams in the Bernese Oberland and the cantons of Valais and Grisons possible. Like any other team of labourers working in industry or on building sites, where engineers, technicians and assistants work side by side, Eugen Jordi, Rudolf Mumprecht and Emil Zbinden wanted to create art that was born through collaboration.

Footnotes:
[1] Martin Bieri, ‘Wie schön kann ein Staudamm sein?’, in NZZ Magazin, October 2023.

Eugen Jordi ‘[painted] what people already had to see every day’ [1], i.e. packed third-class train carriages travelling through Bern’s urban sprawl. Emil Zbinden also didn’t travel far to find inspiration for his images. His book illustrations – designs that were often also associated with individual letters – gave a face to the workers and the poverty of Switzerland’s rural population. Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden drew instantly recognisable characters, such as a farm hand or a woman living in the city. Their accurate depictions of local people and places showed a keen eye for the many different social groups that existed and for people’s individual characteristics. By comparison, the people depicted in the mural are merely stereotypes. One example is the yellow used to paint the face of the person shown next to the letter C: the ‘Chinese’ figure. This same yellow is used on this pedestal. Stereotypical (see Glossary #42: stereotyping) traits that were constructed in the context of colonialism, such as skin tone, serve as proof for the supposed existence of human ‘races’ that could be divided into a hierarchy based on physical characteristics (see Glossary #37: racism). The person shown alongside the letter C is thus identified as ‘other’ (see Glossary #03: anti-Asian racism). This figure has no individuality nor does it belong to any social group; it simply illustrates the letter assigned to the depiction and the term that is implied. The artists adopted this didactic and reductive approach for the entire mural. The design for the letter B shows a climbing plant, whose features – leaves and flowers – are meant to symbolise all flowers.

Footnotes:
[1] Andreas Jordi/Peter Killer, Eugen Jordi, Bern: Haupt 1990, p. 8.

Research into the mural's creation brings to light several gaps and raises many questions: how did these socially critical artists end up being the lucky recipients of a public contract? Who chose the location, the size and content of the mural? No detailed documentation was left by either the builders or the artists. All that is known is that a Social Democrat-run local council was involved in awarding the contract and that Emil Zbinden was in contact with the first Social Democrat member of the Swiss Federal Council, Ernst Nobs.

What does this lack of information tell us? Were decisions made on site and thus not written down? Does this lack of documentation point to the seeming lack of importance afforded to a public artwork project in the immediate aftermath of war? The mural was Eugen Jordi's and Emil Zbinden's first and only (and thus an important) public commission. Yet, within their respective bodies of work, the mural only appears to be marginally important. In more than 1,800 pages of literature on their output, it is mentioned in only one paragraph.

We can see today that an unequal amount of material is available on the mural's respective artists. While many sources have been taken from Emil Zbinden's archive, Eugen Jordi left no actual artwork in his estate and almost no autobiographical notes. He did, however, collect newspaper clippings that mentioned his pieces in a separate folder, thus creating his own approach to remembering his artwork.

Just less than twenty years after it was created, the mural was displayed in the Kunsthalle Bern in 1968 – as a photograph since it obviously couldn't be moved. It was the same year the New Left emerged, and with decolonisation (see Glossary #16: decolonising) taking place around the globe, neither the authorities nor the Kunsthalle's curator, Harald Szeemann, were interested in the subject of the piece. The exhibition '20 Years of Cultivating Art in the City of Bern: 1947–1968' served to boost Bern's image as a city of culture. In the foreword to the exhibition, Bern's mayor Reynold Tschäppät wrote: 'A political community such as that of our city may exist on economic foundations, but it cannot thrive on them alone. For it to truly prosper, culture is essential.' [1]

In 1991, the mural was added to the city's building inventory by its monument preservation team. The authorities categorised it as being worthy of preservation. However, this categorisation refers to the entire structural design of the Wylergut School and not the mural specifically.

The more recent history of responses to the mural features the term 'protection'. Does 'protection' mean preserving the mural in situ? How can new concepts be developed that do not erase but sustain the conversation around colonial legacy? Could an artwork that contains colonial elements provide precisely the impetus needed for these questions to be discussed?

Footnotes:
[1] Reynold Tschäppät in the foreword to '20 Jahre Kunstpflege der Stadt Bern, 1947–1968' (20 Years of Cultivating Art in the City of Bern: 1947–1968), featured in the catalogue for the exhibition of the same name held at the Kunsthalle Bern between 5 and 27 October 1968.

A CHANGING WORLD – ‘SAME OLD, SAME OLD’ IN BERN?

IZABEL BARROS
CLAIRE LOUISE BLASER
MARTIN ROTH
BERNHARD C. SCHÄR

The mural that Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden painted in Wylergut School depicted a colonial world view and a racist concept of humanity at a time when decolonisation (see Glossary #16: decolonising) was well underway. In other words, it was already out of step with the times in 1949. For generations, decolonisation had gone hand in hand with the fight against racism, not only in the colonies but also in Europe, in Switzerland and even in Bern. Yet the popularity of racist caricatures made it difficult for *white*-majority societies to recognise the monumental changes that were taking place. For years, Swiss recollections of the past failed to acknowledge these significant shifts (see Glossary #02: amnesia). This contribution by Izabel Barros, Claire Louise Blaser, Martin Roth and Bernhard C. Schär remembers contemporaries of Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden who brought the global fight against racism and imperialism to Switzerland and to Bern.

One of the most important Swiss cities in the fight against colonialism (see Glossary #11: colonialism) was Geneva. In 1923, Levi General submitted a petition to the League of Nations. As spokesperson for the Haudenosaunee, General – who was better known as Deskaheh – demanded an end to the violence against the Indigenous (see Glossary #24: Indigeneity) peoples of North America and that the sovereignty of the Haudenosaunee be recognised. Deskaheh was supported by the Bureau international pour la Défense des Indigènes (International Bureau for the Defence of Indigenous Peoples). Ignored by the League of Nations, however, Deskaheh decided to take a different approach. For 18 months, he travelled throughout Switzerland, giving speeches and trying to win people over to his cause. In a letter to his lawyer in Canada, he wrote that in Bern he had held one of the largest gatherings the city had ever seen [1]. Neither the Swiss press nor the country’s authorities took Deskaheh seriously. They failed to see past their wonder and exoticism. Shortly after returning to North America, Deskaheh died in 1925. He presumably caught pneumonia while in Europe and succumbed to the disease.

In 1936, Geneva’s League of Nations was once again the stage for an anti-colonial liberation struggle. The emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I, gave an impassioned speech denouncing the ongoing genocide being perpetrated by Italian colonisers in his country. He called for the condemnation of the use of chemical weapons and of Italy’s invasion, which was in breach of international law. Until that point, Ethiopia had been the only African country never to have been colonised. The state itself stretches back millennia, and the nation’s cultural scene inspired pan-African anti-imperialists around the globe as well as Jamaica’s anti-colonial Rastafari movement.

Another contemporary of Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden was Hoo Chi-Tsai. He also came to Switzerland to visit the League of Nations, where he represented the interests of the Chinese Republic. His mission in Geneva was to seek international support to counter Japan’s imperialist threat and combat the colonial powers’ opium trafficking in China. He was not successful. When World War II broke out in 1939, the League of Nations lost its influence. Following its defeat in 1945, Japan withdrew from China. In its place, the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong took over. It was in 1949, the year that the Wylergut mural was painted, that the Communist Party came to power in China, which rules the country to this day.

Footnotes:
[1] Deskaheh to Decker, 3 November 1923, Decker MSS., SJFC. As quoted by: Laurence M. Hauptman: Seven Generations of Iroquois Leadership (The Iroquois and Their Neighbors), Syracuse University Press, Kindle Edition, p. 135.

Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden’s mural depicts colonised people from Asia, Africa and the Americas as part of ‘nature’, as devoid of any history or culture. Reflecting a 19th-century colonial world view (see Glossary #47: world view), one could say the mural was an anachronism right from the start. For generations, people the world over had not only resisted colonial oppression and racial prejudice (see Glossary #42: resistance), but millions of soldiers from the colonies and female workers on the home front had also fought in two world wars for the freedom of imperial Europe. By the end of 1947, two of the world’s largest colonies – India and Indonesia – had achieved independence. Many more would soon follow. 1949 was also the year of China’s communist revolution. Yet many in Bern struggled to see the far-reaching changes that were taking place. Racist depictions had become so deeply ingrained in their everyday lives: not only were they in murals but in school and children’s books, in films, at circuses and in adverts. Publicity for the Salzmann colonial goods shop on Bern’s Waisenhausplatz – visible here on the store front in this image from 1948 – illustrates how popular colonial world views were at the time. For decades, the mural in Wylergut School was thus a typical expression of everyday Swiss culture.

In 1928 and 1929, African-American performer Josephine Baker came to Switzerland as part of a European tour with her husband Pepito Abatino. She performed at Bern’s Variété-Theater Kapitol for four nights. News announcing the ‘sensational guest performance’ (see Glossary #20: exoticisation) appeared in Der Bund newspaper. The accompanying image shows the couple on Bern’s Münsterplattform. Josephine Baker’s surprise visit to the city’s Chikito Club made headlines.

In the US, Baker refused to perform in segregated venues. She used her performances to show a mostly *white* (see Glossary #46: *white* / *white* supremacy) audience just how deep their prejudice ran. Baker was known for her subtle mockery, which she used to undermine racist and sexist bias. During the Second World War, she joined forces with the Allies and worked for French intelligence. When, in 1973, she was asked why she had helped France during the war, she responded: ‘[A]n overriding consideration, the thing that drove me as strongly

as did patriotism, was my violent hatred of discrimination in any form. The Nazis were racist. They were bigots. I despised that sort of thing and was determined that they must be defeated.’ [1]

> **‘The highlight was seeing this incomparable woman dancing just like any normal person right alongside all the locals, while they craned their necks until they ached to enjoy the spectacle of a dancer in full flow. The presence of such an unusual guest created an absolute buzz. It reached fever pitch as Josephine Baker moved from table to table signing countless photographs of herself. She generously gave the donations she received (288 Swiss francs and 15 cents) to Der Bund newspaper to forward the sum to initiatives caring for Bern’s infants.’**
>
> **Der Bund, 28. April 1929.**
>
> **288 Swiss francs in 1929 is equivalent to roughly 2,000 Swiss francs in today’s money.**

Footnotes:
[1] Josephine Baker in an interview in Ebony magazine, XXIX/2 (1973), p. 176.

As England’s most important colony, India was pivotal in shaping Swiss perceptions of the Orient (see Glossary #31: Orientalism) in the 20th century. Exoticised (see Glossary #20: exoticisation) depictions of India as a ‘wonderland’ with ‘despotic’ maharajas and ‘mystical’ fakirs were widespread. But this changed around 1930, when Mahatma Gandhi and thus India’s independence movement also came to global prominence.

One Swiss author who portrayed India in a different light was Frieda Hauswirth (1886–1974), a contemporary of Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden from Gstaad in the Bernese Oberland. While studying in the United States, she met students from India who sparked her interest in anti-colonialism. In 1914, she was in Zurich when the anti-colonial International Pro-India Committee was formed on the initiative of Chempakaraman Pillai, an Indian student at Zurich’s Federal Institute of Technology. She later married Indian agricultural engineer Sarangadhar Das in the US, who would go on to become a socialist politician, and spent almost ten years of her life in India. Frieda Hauswirth’s books, which were first published in the US and England before being translated into German, influenced Swiss perceptions of India in the 1930s and 40s. Frieda Hauswirth had close ties to

India’s independence and women’s movements. As a writer, she tried to help bring Indian activists’ concerns to a western readership. But the Swiss seemed more interested in Frieda Hauswirth’s interracial marriage and reports on the private lives of Indian women than in her political message.

Alongside Geneva, Zurich was another important location for the anti-imperialist movement. It was here that Sam Ratulangi, who would go on to campaign for Indonesian independence, founded the Swiss Association of Asian Students in 1918, together with the Korean student Kwan Yong Lee. They joined forces with other anti-colonial intellectuals from Thailand, Sri Lanka, China and the Philippines. Their goal was to foster pan-Asian awareness and develop strategies for anti-colonial revolution. The network reached out to people such as Jawaharlal Nehru, who would go on to become prime minister of India, and the feminist Ligue internationale des femmes pour la paix et la liberté (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom). The Swiss authorities and press usually met these organisations with suspicion and outright racism (see Glossary #37: racism).

During the First and Second World Wars, millions of soldiers from the colonies served in the armies of the colonial powers. When the French army capitulated in June 1940, some of its units fled to Switzerland where they were detained. Of the roughly five hundred French soldiers that were detained in Triengen in the canton of Lucerne in 1940, around thirty were soldiers from North African colonies. They were called Spahis. Three can be seen on the displayed image. The interned Spahis came into contact with Triengen’s locals, in some cases forming friendships that outlasted the war.

This Usego coffee tin from the 1950s illustrates the popularity of colonialist world views (see Glossary #47: world view) at the time when the mural was painted. But it also shows how Swiss consumers were economically involved in colonial exploitation. Until the late 1800s, drinks that remain popular to this day, such as coffee, tea and cocoa, were produced by enslaved people on plantations in Asia, Africa and the Americas, as was the sugar used to sweeten their taste. Exploitation continues in many of these places. Advertising on tins and packaging not only concealed the violence behind colonial commodities. It also conveyed dehumanising images (see Glossary #14: controlling images) of colonised and exploited people.

The famous Vichy pattern originated in a municipality neighbouring the French town of Vichy. During the 19th century, cotton, which was grown by enslaved people on plantations in the southern states of the US, replaced hemp in Vichy fabric production. Vichy and other cotton fabrics were as widely used then as they are today. Their popularity is a testimony to the intense trade in colonial goods. In the 19th century, Swiss trading companies helped to massively expand the export of raw cotton from the colonies, while Swiss factories supplied the whole world with cotton textiles.

‘THERE ARE A HECK OF A LOT OF US’: BERN STORIES OF RESISTANCE

CARLOS HANIMANN

Carlos Hanimann portrays people and collectives whose political, journalistic, artistic and socio-political resistance (see Glossary #40: resistance) has helped shine a light and enable conversations on racism in Switzerland: In his essay *Stranger in the Village*, James Baldwin describes his experience of racism in the Swiss town of Leukerbad in the 1950s. Tilo Frey was the first Black (see Glossary #10: Black) woman to be elected to Swiss parliament, where she served from 1971 until 1975. Her presence on the political stage allowed Frey to offer a vital dissenting voice in the country’s *white*-majority society (see Glossary #46: *white* / *white* supremacy). In the 1990s, the association Colours created one of the first self-organised lobbies for racialised people (see Glossary #36: racialisation) living in Bern. And media platform baba news has been offering coverage produced by and for a post-migrant (see Glossary #35: post-migrant) community since 2018. These four audio portraits read by Carlos Hanimann make palpable what life has been like for BIPoC in Switzerland and their fight for visibility since the 1950s. This contribution is accompanied by the music video to the song ‘Noir’ by Bern rapper Nativ. In powerful language and imagery, the artist conveys his fury over the repeated pain of experiencing racism in his own country and the dream of a fair society.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN ABOUT THE WORLD: SELF AND OTHER FROM THE 1930S TO THE 1960S

ANDREAS FANNIN
VERA SPERISEN

Children's literature and teaching materials from the 1930s to 1960s reveal how deeply racism was embedded in cultural output and how it continues to have an impact in Swiss schools to this day. This contribution by Andreas Fannin and Vera Sperisen demonstrates how the Swiss discourse of Spiritual National Defence, which was dominant at that time, romanticised 'Swissness' and the 'self' as a rural idyll and as an ideal characterised by strength and independence – in opposition to fascism, national socialism and communism. By contrast, the 'other' was presented as poor, backward and needy (see Glossary #32: othering). A 'civilised' belief in progress was constructed against the backdrop of the supposedly 'uncivilised' colonised territories. The asymmetrical portrayal of the self and the other found in teaching materials and children's books can also be seen in the human figures that Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden chose to include in their mural. It reflects a world view (see Glossary #47: world view) that was common in Switzerland around 1950.

The discourse on Spiritual National Defence was a defining force in Switzerland that shaped the country's policies and everyday culture between the 1930s and 1960s. As a national education programme, it aimed to strengthen values that were perceived as Swiss. Primarily, it is to be regarded in opposition to Fascism, National Socialism and Communism. In 1938, Switzerland's Federal Council made Spiritual National Defence a principle of government policy. Seen positively, the principle can be called an 'anti-totalitarian compromise'; a more critical interpretation would be 'Helvetic Totalitarianism'. The focus was not on democracy and freedom of opinion, but rather on the idealisation of peasant life, with an emphasis on the nuclear family or the ethnic community. The soldierly man, characterised by bravery, strength, self-command, discipline and obedience, was promoted as a model for Swiss society. The only role envisaged for women was that of caring mother and wife. Schools, too, were used in the service of the Spiritual National Defence ideology. In teachers' journals, the idea of the family as the nucleus of the state was translated into pedagogical concepts. School murals, produced for Swiss classrooms from 1936 onwards, romanticised Swiss culture and the rural idyll. Poverty and migration were omitted altogether. Forming a contrast to the harmonious homeland was the 'other', who was denigrated and seen as uncivilised (see Glossary #48: xenoracism). Later, during the Cold War, the focus shifted to Communism as the main target.

In 1931, Schweizerisches Jugendschriftenwerk (SJW) was established 'to defend against indecent domestic and foreign Schund literature' that threatened to deprave readers.[1] The magazines published by SJW were, and still are, intended to stimulate children to read and to convey educational content. In the 1930s to 1960s, this content primarily consisted of local history topics, technical innovations, fairy tales and travel accounts. The travel accounts told of nurses, diplomats, naturalists and adventurers setting off from 'here' to explore far-flung places. The tales painted a self-portrait of open-minded, smart Europeans who were interested in the wider world and who stood beside the supposedly poor and backward people of the world, sometimes with an iron fist, and sometimes with a helping hand. For instance, a Swiss missionary nurse, known as 'the wonder woman of Africa', reported in SJW issue 692: 'I immediately gave everyone present instructions on wound treatment, but instructions usually go in one ear and out the other.' This compassionate racism was deeply rooted in Christian missionary logic and had a lasting impact, particularly on Swiss perceptions of Africa. The mission collection box symbolises this asymmetrical relationship between compassionate donors and gratefully nodding recipients. Collection figures like these were also used in religious education classes in Bern schools in the 1950s.

Footnotes:
[1] Schweizerisches Jugendschriftenwerk, anniversary publication 'Ein Werk des guten Willens' (A labour of goodwill) (1951).

Racist narratives have not disappeared from children's books and teaching materials since the 1950s. They continue to be reproduced in subtle and sometimes obvious ways, for example when Africa is presented as a continent of suffering or of uncivilised exoticism (see Glossary #20: exoticisation). Or when current Swiss teaching materials show Indigenous (see Glossary #24: Indigeneity) people of the Arctic as communities who are close to nature, who have lost their connection with the traditional way of life and have never quite connected with modern life. At the same time, the colonial history of the Arctic and its people is not addressed.

Racist narratives in children's books and school books have been the subject of public criticism for fifty years. In 1975, a Swiss NGO called Erklärung von Bern (now Public Eye) started publishing a brochure entitled Dritte Welt: Empfehlenswerte Kinder- und Jugendbücher (Third world: Recommended books for children and teenagers). It explains racist stereotypes (see Glossary #42: stereotyping) and showcases recommended books. Among those who developed the brochure was a woman called Katharina Zbinden-Bärtschi, the daughter-in-law of Emil Zbinden, one of the artists behind the mural.

Nowadays, much greater importance is attached to diversity and sensitive treatment of problematic concepts in teaching materials. What is still missing, though, is an explicit engagement with structural racism and a comprehensive post-colonial perspective on historic and current inequalities (see Glossary #34: post-colonialism).

In 1955, the Swiss teachers' journal Schweizerische Lehrerzeitung recommended the primer Schwarzohr und die andern for children aged eight and over, describing it as 'simple and easy to understand, yet good for the imagination' [1]. The readers' imagination was spurred by three characters who corresponded to the educational theory of that time concerning people from distant continents: 'Schwarzohr' (Black-Ear) from Africa, 'Kirschblüte' (Cherry-Blossom) from Asia and 'Schlafauge' (Sleeping-Eye) from North America. They make up an 'alien' triad of 'others', while the characters 'Hänschen', 'Heinrich' and 'Marianne' personify everything considered to be genuinely European, civilised and *white* (see Glossary #46: *white* / *white* supremacy).

The same alien figures appear in the illustrations for the letters C, I and N of the mural by Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden and in history teaching materials of that time. This classification is no accident. It aligns with race theories drawn up by European naturalists in the 18th century, which are regarded as the basis of modern racism. These placed people in a hierarchy according to intellectual, moral and cultural clichés (see Glossary #36: racialisation). In order for Europeanness to appear as the norm, it needed to set itself apart from the 'other' (see Glossary #32: othering). As the citation from the secondary-school history teaching resource Welt- und Schweizergeschichte (History of the World and Switzerland) (1963) shows, the same classification was used in connection with Cold War reasoning: the various invented 'human typologies' were used to differentiate between the 'self' and the communist 'other', who was perceived as a threat.

> **'But China has never become a satellite of Russia. Today it is competing with that country in the spread of communism. The Chinese have an advantage that should not be underestimated: they are a coloured people. Their "Communism of the poor" is understood better by Asians, N___ and South-American I____ than the Russian version.'**
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> **Hakios/Rutsch, Welt- und Schweizergeschichte (Volume 2), p. 201 (1963). Secondary-school teaching materials in the canton of Zurich.**

(see Glossary #03: anti-Asian racism, #04: anti-Black racism , #05: anti-Indigenous racism)

Footnotes:
[1] Jugendschriftenkommission des Schweizerischen Lehrervereins (Ed.): 'Das Jugendbuch. Mitteilungen über Jugend und Volksschriften', supplement to Schweizerische Lehrerzeitung, December 1955, No. 7.

The advocates of Spiritual National Defence drew on a deep-rooted belief among the Swiss that their country was a 'special case' to show how it stood apart from its neighbours with their totalitarian ideologies. Nevertheless, Switzerland still saw itself as part of Western Europe. This contradictory relationship persists to this day: Switzerland is viewed by some as an island, free from any colonial past or racism (see Glossary #02: amnesia). At the same time, it is perceived as belonging self-evidently to a European narrative

of progress, described with some irony as reaching ‘from Plato to NATO’. This narrative is still found today in history teaching materials and goes like this: the ancient, advanced civilisations of Greece and Rome and the start of the Christian calendar in year zero were followed by the dark Middle Ages, which made the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment appear all the brighter. The French Revolution and industrialisation cemented Europe’s self-perception as progressive and civilised – a perception which relies on setting itself apart from an ‘other’, who by definition must therefore be ‘uncivilised’ and from the colonised territories (see Glossary #32: othering). This narrative continues to unite Europe today.

ANTI-RACISM IN SCHOOLS

DANIELLE ISLER
ALBINA MUHTARI
MERITA SHABANI

The term *Whitened* Spaces was developed by Danielle Isler together with Katharina Schramm. It describes the social practices, norms and processes that lead to spaces being perceived as *white* (see Glossary #46: *white* / *white* supremacy) and the effect these spaces have on BIPoC (see Glossary #09: BIPoC). In Switzerland, schools tend to be such spaces. In two separate texts, Danielle Isler looks at the derivation of the term and outlines the impact of whitened spaces, particularly on BIPoC.

Albina Muhtari and Merita Shabani from baba news, the online platform for 'Swiss people with roots from everywhere', have been giving workshops on tackling racism and hate speech in Bern since 2018. In three video interviews, they reflect on what motivated them to launch their own initiative to combat prejudice. They are joined by two experts on anti-racism education: Rahel El-Maawi (co-founder of the network Bla*Sh) and Mona-Lisa Kole (co-founder of café révolution, a Bern collective). How big is the knowledge gap that they encounter in Bern's schools and institutions? What do workshops achieve in the long run? And what is it like to work in this field as a racialised person (see Glossary #36: racialisation)?

How do BIPoC know that they are not welcome in a particular social space? And how do they know that they must adapt in a *whitened* space, for instance by changing the pitch of their voice or their accent, by not raising certain topics, by being particularly polite, not drawing attention to themselves or by (not) expressing certain views?

There doesn't necessarily need to be a sign saying 'You're not welcome here' or even '*whites* only' for someone to feel excluded in a space. In many cases, this form of exclusion takes place implicitly and subtly, meaning that it is often only the person being excluded who notices and senses it with their entire body.

BIPoC recognise the specific, unwritten norms of a whitened space, know what is expected of them, and develop strategies to navigate such a space. Their knowledge of these forms of exclusion and the expectations connected to certain spaces is linked to multiple experiences, memories and traumas. For those who do not have to face this reality, the power these exclusions have is often difficult or impossible to comprehend.

The mural in Wylergut School serves as an example of how a single element can transform a room into a *whitened* space. It conveys the message that those who are Asian, Indigenous and Black belong in the same category as animals. Every day, BIPoC children at the school had to navigate a space that implicitly and explicitly communicated the idea that people like them are second-class citizens. Every day, they had to contend with a space that told them, via the mural, that they did not belong. A space that conveyed the idea that racist exonyms and their use is acceptable, if not the norm (see Glossary #27: marginalisation). Wylergut School is no exception. Most schools in Switzerland can be considered *whitened* spaces. They are therefore often not safe spaces for BIPoC but 'spaces of exclusion'.

School as a *whitened* space

***Whitened* spaces are social spaces.**
***Whitened* spaces are racialised spaces.**
A feature of *whitened* spaces is that they re/produce certain social norms, practices and processes that are associated with forms of *whiteness* (see Glossary #46: *white* / *white* supremacy).
***Whitened* spaces can also be social spaces that are mostly occupied by people who are read as *white*.**
***Whitened* spaces have exclusionary features.**

These might be the exclusion of social norms, practices and processes that are not associated with forms of *whiteness*.
As well as the exclusion of people who are not read as *white*.
This exclusion can cause discomfort for BIPoC (see Glossary #09: BIPoC).
This exclusion can cause BIPoC to feel anxious.
This exclusion can cause BIPoC to feel nervous.
This exclusion can cause BIPoC to feel shame.
This exclusion can cause trauma for BIPoC.
This exclusion can result in a BIPoC wanting to assimilate.
This exclusion can cause a BIPoC to feel forced to assimilate.
But this assimilation can never be fully realised by BIPoC because their non-*whiteness* is the very reason they are being excluded.
This exclusion means that *whitened* spaces tend to make BIPoC feel insecure.
Educational institutions are generally considered to be *whitened* spaces.
Schools are generally considered to be *whitened* spaces.

WE NEED TO TALK!
DISCUSSING THE MURAL DEBATE

BERNER RASSISMUS STAMMTISCH

Shortly before a newspaper article in March 2019 drew public attention to the mural in the Wylergut School, the Berner Rassismus Stammtisch had turned its attention to the issue. The collective recognised that a debate on the mural could tie in with a broader issue: to deal with colonial legacy in the city of Bern (see Glossary #15: culture(s) of remembrance, #34: post-colonialism). But there were different opinions within the group of how to go about it. How exactly should the city's authorities deal with the mural? Would an open call for proposals be the right option? Could activism bring about long-term change within established institutions? And if so, how?

In this video, five members of the collective – Izabel Barros, Anisha Imhasly, Rohit Jain, Mira Koch and Halua Pinto de Magalhães – look back at the mural debate and reflect it from the perspective of their long-standing anti-racist (see Glossary #07: anti-racism) engagement. The group discusses how criticism of the mural provoked (occasionally fierce) public backlash and presented new challenges to local authorities, politicians, the media and educational institutions. The conversation eventually turns to the current exhibition and invites visitors to become part of a democratic, pluralistic debate – one which is built on responsibility and solidarity instead of exclusion and guilt.

THERE IS NO PLACE WITHOUT A COLONIAL CONTEXT

ANNA-PIERINA GODENZI
ALINE MINDER
JUDIT PECHR
MIRA SHAH

Bernisches Historisches Museum was established at the end of the 19th century and has been shaped by the colonial entanglements of that time. Already 1889 the deed of foundation records that the museum was to set up an ethnographic collection alongside a historic and an archaeological collection. The purpose of including an ethnographic collection was to 'enable a comparison with the cultural history of foreign peoples' (see Glossary #32: othering, #20: exoticisation). The museum profited from colonial expeditions – during which cultural property was sometimes seized by violent force – and from donations made by widely-travelled citizens of Bern. What these objects have in common is that they were collected and archived from a European perspective. For a long time, the violence, racism and colonial thinking inherent in such collections were disregarded and normalised (see Glossary #02: amnesia). Today, the focus is increasingly on questions concerning the provenance of objects and the circumstances surrounding their arrival in the collection.

As an institution, a museum is a repository of knowledge: a place where knowledge and meaning are preserved. How can a museum talk about these contexts, despite being mired in colonial inequality itself? How can it grapple with the complex histories inscribed in these objects? Prompted by the mural and its addition to the collection, a working group at Bernisches Historisches Museum is investigating a selection of objects from a fresh perspective. The aim is to shed light on findings that relate to the coloniality of the museum and the violent global entanglements present in parts of its collections.

The mural is an object of contradictions: on the one hand, it reflects racist thinking and images; on the other, the paint daubed on some of its panels is evidence of anti-racist resistance. This is the kind of ambivalence that cultural studies scholar Aleida Assmann also ascribes to museums and their collections: on the one hand, museums convey how a socially dominant minority sees itself and how it sees the world. On the other, new cultural knowledge can be created by reinterrogating collections or by attaching new knowledge to objects.

If we take seriously the contradictory nature and ambiguity of some objects, they can show us the way to numerous new insights into the coloniality of the museum and the global entanglements of past societies, which persist to this day. Both as a recipient of colonial cultural artefacts and as a client paying for the often violent appropriation of ethnographic objects, the museum profited from European colonial policy and its expeditions. A critical look at the ideological context that accompanied these activities allows disregarded histories to surface and brings background aspects to the fore. In this way, collections and their objects help shape the present and pave the way for a more diverse and inclusive society.

> **‘Storage memory […] is a fundamental resource for all cultural renewal and change. […] Without […] drawing upon [storage memory as] a reservoir of unused possibilities, alternatives, contradictions, criticisms, and unremembered incidents, change would be excluded […] [It] needs to be supported by institutions that preserve, conserve, organize, open up and circulate cultural knowledge.’**
>
> **Aleida Assmann: Cultural Memory and Western Civilization (2011).**

Colonial entanglements penetrated into the living rooms of Bern’s families. Although these objects were a fixture of everyday life for many people, much of their history remained invisible.

From the 18th to the 20th century, a middle-class home would have included furniture made from tropical wood. Dark mahogany from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Australia was particularly sought after. The harm caused by mahogany plantations in the colonies continues to have an impact today. Interventions in the forest ecosystem, the reshaping of landscapes by an exploitative forestry industry and the displacement of Indigenous (see Glossary #24: Indigeneity)

communities are just a few of the lasting impacts. Doll's house furniture like these pieces imitate the dark tropical wood. This shows how characteristic and commonplace colonial goods and materials were in the trappings of a 'bourgeois lifestyle' and the attitudes associated with it. The provenance of these goods and the conditions in which they were made played only a subordinate role.

Toys can help teach social norms and world views. These tin figures are an example of how children can be taught to glorify war and internalise colonial thinking from a young age. Tin figures like these were widespread in middle-class homes from the 18th to the 20th century and are still popular among collectors today.

Many tin figures in our collection convey a one-sided historical narrative that glorifies violence. The set of tin figures representing the 'Boxer Rebellion' shows the violent defeat of the Chinese uprising against European influence in China from 1899 to 1901 as a fierce battle. In the People's Republic of China and in Taiwan, these events are still remembered as experiences of colonial trauma, especially because they were accompanied by the targeted destruction and plundering of cultural goods by the European powers involved. Many objects in museums and collections, including some in Switzerland and in Bernisches Historisches Museum, can be traced back to this violence in China, which followed the style of colonial punitive expeditions.

The stories told about objects often conformed to the one-sided perspective of European collectors and curators and thus disseminated a limited world view (see Glossary #47: world view). We can explore this relationship through this container, a souvenir from the first world fair, the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851.

This container gives us an idea of how Europe perceived itself. The world fairs celebrated the conviction that Europe was at the forefront of human development. They conveyed this self-image in a number of different ways: by displaying miniature versions of the world from a European perspective, by exhibiting technology and architectural innovations and by presenting the 'self' and the 'other' in 'human zoos'. This souvenir is a clear illustration of Eurocentrism (see Glossary #19: Eurocentrism). The background shows the Crystal Palace, which dominated the Great Exhibition in London and was seen as a symbol of technological progress. These kinds of structures underpinned Europe's self-image as the centre of the world.

This self-image is repeated in the way the figures are grouped, with the European in the centre and the representatives of other continents gathered around him. The arrangement also reveals the dominant colonial interests in 1851: Africa, India and South America in the foreground; China and the 'Orient' in the background.

Through their staging of European domination, world fairs continue to reverberate into the present. That is why this container was acquired for the museum's historic collection in 1996 – more than a hundred years after it was made – as evidence of the Eurocentric world view.

There are some cultural artefacts that would not have ended up in Bern were it not for the museum's integration in a colonial economic system. And then there are some objects that would not exist at all without those colonial ties. One example of the latter is this pendant. It consists of three reales de a ocho (also known as hard pesos, or pieces of eight). Without the Spanish Empire, which spanned the entire world from the 16th to the 18th century, these coins would not exist. The Spanish Empire's wealth came largely from silver mines in modern-day Mexico, Peru and Bolivia. The silver was struck hurriedly and crudely on location, so that it could be brought into circulation as currency quickly. Since the coins were transported to Europe and other Spanish colonies by ship, they were known in German as 'Schiffspesos' (ship pesos) and in English as 'cob'.

In this way, colonial silver produced the first currency of modern times and enabled global trade. This global context is also reflected in the design: two globes stand for the 'old' and 'new' worlds being brought together by the Spanish colonial power.

The coins displayed here were struck in 1752 when the Spanish Empire was shrinking because of competition from other colonial powers and successful independence struggles in the colonies. The pendant was probably created in the 19th century in what is now Guatemala. Today, it forms part of the museum's ethnographic collection as a piece of 'South American jewellery'.

A Swiss weapons collector donated this powder flask to the museum in 1899. Since then, it has been viewed and displayed primarily as a 'curiosity'. However, if we take a closer look at the material it is made from, we uncover a story about the global entanglement of colonialism and imperialism.

There is not much information about this object in the museum archive but, with a short detour into zoology, we can establish an amazingly detailed historical context. The Indian star tortoise from which the powder flask is made occurs only in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. At the time the object was made, these countries were part of the British Empire. For a long time, British colonial power in this part of the world was exercised by one of the largest global trading companies: the East India Company. The East India Company's agricultural and trading practices were often violent. Among other things, the company was responsible for the 1769–1773 famine in Bengal, in which around ten million people died. As a result of the anti-colonial Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British government nationalised the company, and the territories it controlled became a formal Crown colony.

More than 120 years ago, the powder flask was added to the collection because of its unusual appearance, and it remains an example of European exoticism to this day. However, new or different perspectives highlight the object's potential role as a repository of history and a product of colonial times.

THE MURAL IS COMING!

ANNA-PIERINA GODENZI
ALINE MINDER
JUDIT PECHR
MIRA SHAH

By adding the mural to its collection, Bernisches Historisches Museum is acquiring an exhibit that is also the subject of and a reflection of a contentious social debate. What does the arrival of the mural mean for the museum? What responsibility is the museum taking on as a result? How can the inclusion of the mural reflect civic engagement and social change? How can these inform museum practice? These are the kinds of questions that Bernisches Historisches Museum is exploring. This contribution outlines an exhibition and collection practice that grapples with colonial entanglements and social inequalities.

How representative is the collection? This question has been accompanying our work at the museum for years. In attempting to answer it, we engage with the history of the building and of the people who work in it and visit it – but we also think about what kind of museum we want to be in the future.
The collection owes much to private collectors who had the means to acquire cultural objects and donate them to the museum or offer them for sale. But the curators themselves also contributed to the collections, for instance by taking part in archaeological research digs, or by placing orders for ethnographic objects with travelling collectors.

When it opened in 1894, the museum aimed to 'provide as complete as possible a picture of the cultural and artistic development of Switzerland' from prehistory onwards and to enable a comparison with the 'cultural history of foreign peoples (see Glossary #20: exoticisation, #32: othering)'.[1] Consequently, the museum has a historic collection, an archaeological collection and an ethnographic collection. Only towards the end of the 20th century did the preservation of 'the present' become important. At the same time, culture should no longer be regarded as a 'privilege for the few'. The idea now was to 'bring forth the culture of our age, our social systems and our present time', to make it accessible and so to democratise the museum.[2]
The museum continues to follow this objective today, taking into account the transformation that has taken place since then. The museum is changing – partly as a result of the people who work here: it is becoming more female and more diverse. That influences the collecting activity and also the expectation of what the museum is supposed to achieve.
In recent years, provenance research has become an important area of activity within the museum: who acquired the objects when, how and where? This context leads to postcolonial questions, such as whether certain objects should still be exhibited or whether they should be given back to the descendants of those they once belonged to.

Who collects?
How do they collect?
What role does societal change play?
Who works in the museum?
Who visits the museum?

Footnotes:
[1] Bernisches Historisches Museum: 100 Jahre Bernisches Historisches Museum 1894–1994 (100 years of Bernisches Historisches Museum 1894–1994). Bern 1994, pp. 258.

[2] Kurt Kipfer: ‘Bern 1750–1850 – Ein Kanton im Wandel’ (Bern 1750–1850: A canton in transition). Speech given by Bern headteacher Dr Kurt Kipfer on the occasion of the official opening of the exhibition train in Bern on 13 December 1982. In: Bernisches Historisches Museum: Jahresbericht 1982/1983 (Annual report 1982/1983). Bern 1984, pp. 92–96, here p. 92.

The mural can tell two stories: one concerns the depiction of racist world views. The other highlights the resistance (see Glossary #40: resistance) to this lingering coloniality, which led to the three panels being painted over. This visible resistance documents a current social debate. The mural is, therefore, no longer simply evidence of colonial thinking, but also illustrates anti-racist (see Glossary #07: anti-racism) discourse in society and activist protest against holding onto colonial world views.

In this way, the mural fills a gap: it is the first and only object in the collection of Bernisches Historisches Museum to be visibly inscribed with resistance to the colonial paradigm.

The mural from Wylergut school is joining the collection of Bernisches Historisches Museum. This transforms the mural from a work of art into a museum object. Bernisches Historisches Museum has been collecting objects since it opened in 1894, but its collecting activity has changed over the years. Around 1900 there was a genuine collecting frenzy. Since 2015, by contrast, there has been a general moratorium on collecting – partly because of a lack of space in the storage facilities, and in preparation for comprehensive inventory, which was completed in 2022. But even when a collecting moratorium is in place, exceptions can be made if they are clearly justified and approved by the director. The argument in favour of accepting the mural is that it documents an important social debate of the 20th and 21st centuries. Other arguments that might justify a new acquisition are its historical importance or strong links to Bern. Objects enter the museum in a number of different ways: some are offered by private individuals and institutions, others are suggested by our curators. In view of the collecting moratorium, the arrival of the mural is an exception, but not an isolated incident. There have been new additions in all areas of the collection in recent years.

The mural is a special case: it is rare for an addition to the collection to spark a public debate before it has even been accepted, registered and taken into storage. Moreover, its removal, handover and display form part of a process of artistic activism. This means that the mural is also bringing current social issues and debates into the museum. The addition of the mural to the collection is intensifying processes and discussions that were already taking place and is giving fresh momentum to the search for new approaches in museum work.

While this exhibition was being developed, the members of 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' association spent several days at Bernisches Historisches Museum. Various members and groups from the association and the museum took part in interviews and discussions, and the museum team subsequently continued to discuss the topics that arose. One recurring question was: does the mural change the way in which we work in the museum? In this film, museum employees consider their field of work and look for answers.

> **'The museum itself cannot be as diverse as society.'**
>
> **Statement made by a member of the museum team in conversation with 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' association.**

ANTI-COLONIAL MOVEMENTS AND BERN

MOSES MÄRZ

Displayed on the wall is a map drawn by Moses März. It links elements of this exhibition with anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles and movements around the world (see Glossary #07: anti-racism, #40: resistance). The work offers fresh insight and places the history of Bern's 1949 mural within the context of global movements taking place at the time. With an experimental approach to cartography that is based on drawing by hand, Moses März creates a design that visually captures the interconnected nature of knowledge. By doing so, he allows us to comprehend and discuss the idea of history as a powerful construct. Aiming to deconstruct the genre of cartography, he avoids creating linear, hierarchical or direct access to knowledge, instead mapping out complex information in a way that is associative, ramified and open-ended. His interest in mapmaking grew from years studying Édouard Glissant's philosophy of relation and his editorial work for the *Chimurenga Chronic*, a pan-African literary magazine based in South Africa.

ILLUSTRATED ALPHABET MURAL

EUGEN JORDI
EMIL ZBINDEN

In 1949, Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden were commissioned by the city of Bern to paint an 'illustrated alphabet mural' in the stairwell of Wylergut School. Twenty-four of the mural's squares feature a letter of the alphabet alongside an image. The word for each image begins with the respective letter: A for Affe (ape), B for Blume (flower), Z for Ziege (goat). In the school, the mural served as a teaching aid to help pupils learn the alphabet.

The sequence of painted plants, animals and objects also includes letters – C, I and N – that are depicted by images of non-*white* (see Glossary #46: *white / white* supremacy) people. Because the mural equates non-*white* people with plants, animals and objects, it conveys an explicitly racist world view (see Glossary #47: world view). This world view stretches back to the 19th century and colonial times. It was not invented by the two artists, who were lifelong anti-fascists and social critics.

In the 1990s, the teaching staff at Wylergut School tried to tackle the implied racist terminology by covering the letter N with the image of a rhinoceros ['Nashorn' in German]. Drill holes at the top of the square are evidence of this. In the summer of 2020, as Black Lives Matter protests were being held across Europe, unknown activists daubed the letters C, I and N in black paint. The decision to preserve these interventions in the mural make it a testimony to its time. The desire for change and anti-racist resistance (see Glossary #07: anti-racism) are inscribed in it. In 2023, the mural was conservationally removed from the Wylergut School wall by a team of restorers. For this purpose, the mural was cut into 24 separate pieces: one for each image. The mural became part of the Bernisches Historisches Museum's historical collection in 2024.

Why the mural is racist:

The mural was an educational aid designed to help children learn the alphabet and pairs each letter with an image: A for Affe (ape), B for Blume (flower), Z for Ziege (goat). But the mural not only taught children their ABCs. It also confronted them with a colonial world view and a racist concept of humanity. Depictions of non-Europeans can be seen alongside plants and animals: C stands for Chinese, I for an Indigenous American and N for a Black person. These three figures are shown in an exoticized (see Glossary #20: exoticisation), stereotypical (see Glossary #42: stereotyping) manner, and the accompanying letters invoke racist terms.

During the colonial era, *white* Europeans invented the theory of 'race' whereby people were divided into a hierarchy of 'racial groups' based on their skin tone and ethnicity. While the *white* 'race' was at the top, the others were placed lower down and considered to be closer to 'the natural world' (see Glossary #37: racism). The mural reflects this world view (see Glossary #47: world view). The depictions of the three non-*white* people are seamlessly integrated into the plant and animal kingdom. Meanwhile, the supposedly superior *white* 'race' does not feature in the mural as, according to this ideology, this group does not belong to the 'natural world' but seemingly learns about it at school through basic skills such as reading. While non-*white* people are part of 'nature' because of their supposed lack of history, culture and civilisation, *white* children have the ability to be educated and are thus associated with 'culture'. Even if it is not what the two artists intended, their vast mural conveys a racist world view.

TIMELINE

VERA RYSER
ANGELA WITTWER

Using a timeline that runs through the exhibition the breath of the debate surrounding the mural is presented. The timeline documents criticism of the mural as well as the subsequent responses elicited by that criticism. The first complaints came from individual teachers and parents as far back as the 1980s. And in the 1990s, the school internally began considering ways to tackle the racist imagery. But the outcry only came in 2019. The debate shifted from inside the school to society and the media. The mural's eventual removal was met with fierce opposition from defenders of the artwork and the status quo. But there was equally strong approval from the project's supporters.

1949–2019

The illustrated alphabet wall mural created by Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden has been situated on the staircase in Wylergut School since 1949. It has been part of everyday life at the school for decades. Within the predominantly *white* (see Glossary #46: *white / white* supremacy) district of Wylergut, the mural has met with little criticism. In the mid-1980s, the racist imagery within the mural began to generate a sense of unease but, for a long time, nothing was done about it. It was only after the school was contacted by a Black (see Glossary #26: Black) mother in the 1990s that the image representing the letter N was covered with a picture of a rhinoceros ['Nashorn' in German].

How the mural was perceived in the school and in the Wylergut district between the 1950s and 1980s

In around 1985, Thomas Zingg, who at that time was a teacher at Wylergut School, feels uneasy about the illustration of the letter N on the mural and raises the issue with other teaching staff. No further action is taken, however. There is no further discussion about the mural for a long time and, when interviewed, teaching staff and former students speak of it as 'simply being there'. Many appreciate the work's artistic qualities.

Covering up of the image representing the letter N with the image of a rhinoceros ['Nashorn' in German] in the 1990s

In the 1990s, the mother of a Black (see Glossary #26: Black) child lodges a complaint about the mural. She is appalled by the racist imagery representing the letter N. In response to this, the teachers launch a competition among the students to come up with a new image to represent the letter N. The winning image is that of a rhinoceros ['Nashorn' in German], which is hung on a panel covering the mural image. Two small holes drilled into the wall testify to the changes made to the mural classified as 'worthy of preservation'. The panel is later replaced with a drawing on packing paper, which students habitually rip off again. Individual teachers answer questions from pupils about the mural and aim to incorporate it into their lessons. Teacher Regine Schenk uses it with her first graders to prompt discussion about nature, people and the environment on the topics of 'Society and me', 'Tolerance' and 'Living together'.

Criticism from pupils and teachers in the 2010s

Former pupils who attended Wylergut School in the 2010s are increasingly aware of the imagery within the mural but cannot remember it being used as a topic of discussion in lessons. In 2012, the mural is restored as part of a partial renovation of the school building. In 2018, a substitute teacher is bothered by the image and, together with teacher Regine Schenk, she forms a working group. They draw up a proposal for how the school might deal with the mural in the future. The idea is to cover the racist images with an installation that can be opened. At the same time, news of the mural reaches journalist Simon Gsteiger. The day the proposal is presented to the teaching staff, Simon Gsteiger's article is published in the local newspaper, Der Bund. Regine Schenk later takes part in a meeting with city representatives as to how to proceed, but she feels ignored and refrains from further involvement in the process. The teaching staff at Wylergut School decide not to take a stance on or express opinions on the mural either in their capacity as teachers or as private individuals while the project is underway.

2019–2020

In March 2019, a newspaper article is published on the colonial (see Glossary #11: colonialism) and racist (see Glossary #37: racism) imagery within the mural. 70 years after its creation, the mural finds itself in the focus of a public debate. The article triggers some strong reactions. As the owner of the mural, the city of Bern feels it necessary to take immediate action. The city of Bern's Commission for Art in Public Space launches a public competition. In summer 2020, while the competition is still going on, anonymous activists paint over the images representing the letters C, I and N with black paint.

Initiating the public debate

Even before Simon Gsteiger's article is published in Der Bund, the Berner Rassismus Stammtisch and other anti-racism collectives in Bern hear about the mural. The city's authorities are notified as well. The city's works of Art in Architecture have not yet been inventoried at this point, so this is the first time the cultural service of the city of Bern, learns about the mural's existence. The cultural service of the city of Bern speaks to the school's principal, a migration researcher at Bern University of Teacher Education, the Monument Preservation Service and what at the time is the Integration Competence Centre. The cultural service of the city of Bern commissions Etienne Wismer, art historian and

president of the Emil Zbinden association, to carry out research into the history of the mural's artistic creation. The study reveals gaps in knowledge about the context of the mural's origins. One can only reconstruct a few details of how the two artists – Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden – came to be commissioned by the city of Bern and what the requirements were at the time. However, the research bears witness to the artists' critique of society and their antifascist involvement.

Call for proposals

Bern's Commission for Art in Public Space (KiöR) wants to use the mural as a learning opportunity and, on 8 May 2019, decides to announce a public competition on what to do with the mural. The committee assembles a judging panel consisting of the principal of Wylergut School, the KiöR committee, and individuals with proven expertise in anti-racism: Rohit Jain, racism researcher and cultural activist; Jürg Lädrach: Lorraine/Wylergut School principal; Kathrin Oester, visual anthropologist and migration researcher, professor emerita of the Bern University of Teacher Education; Yvonne Wilhelm, artist and professor at the Zurich University of the Arts; Stanislas Zimmermann, architect and KiöR committee member. The call for proposals is published in August 2019.

Proposals submitted

In November 2019, the competition's judging panel decides to shortlist five of the applications. The public presentations have to be postponed on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. In August and September 2020, the five teams publicly present their proposals for how to deal with the mural: 'z.B. Wylergut' would like to replace the mural with a mirrored surface; 'N wie Neu' wants to cover the mural with a frame for replaceable hidden object pictures; 'Störung im Dorf' suggests a multimedia disruption of Wylergut's tranquil ambience, while 'Wylerbet statt Alphabet' proposes a town map and post-colonial tours in the town with the mural as the starting point. Finally, 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' advocates that the mural be preserved and presented to the Bernisches Historisches Museum, and a temporary art installation installed in the blank space at Wylergut School.

June 2020

At the start of June 2020, while the competition is well underway, anonymous activists gain access to Wylergut School and daub black paint over the racist images representing letters C, I and N. The Black Lives Matter movement arrives in Bern at around the same time. In their letter of

confession, the activists hold the city of Bern responsible for taking a clear position against racism. The Executive Council of the City of Bern decides not to press charges. The City Council explains its decision in a press release by highlighting the crucial nature of the anti-racism debate and of global protests. The competition teams are asked to take the black overpainting as an expression of protest into account in their proposals.

Concrete steps are drawn up

In the meeting of 9 September 2020, the competition judging panel unanimously votes for the proposal 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' to be implemented. The project team is commissioned following a preliminary project that runs from January to March 2021. As part of this, the project team clarifies and fleshes out the plan's viability. During the preliminary project, Alicia Ledergerber, then a student at the Conservation and Restoration Division of the Bern University of the Arts, commences her Master's thesis on the mural. She determines the method that will be used to remove it, a technique known as stacco. The Bernisches Historisches Museum signs a statement of intent to take charge of the mural. Bern's Commission for Art in Public Space then unanimously approves the competition judging panel's recommendation. The association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!', which is set up in the interim, ensures that the costs for the removal will be covered and launches a large-scale fundraising campaign with foundations as well as municipal, cantonal and federal funding bodies. At Wylergut School, a teacher and pupils cover the images representing the letters N and I that have been painted over in black with painted posters of the letters. The illustration for letter C, which has also been painted over in black paint, remains uncovered.

On 26 February 2021, the cultural service of the city of Bern, and 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' sign a performance agreement to bring the project to life. This marks the start of lengthy negotiations between the city of Bern, the Bernisches Historisches Museum and the family of Emil Zbinden. The descendants of Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden own the copyrights and image rights to the mural.

2021–2022

The recommendation of the competition judging panel paves the way for the mural's removal. In March 2021, 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' is named the winning proposal. Various city authorities approve the removal of the mural. The project team had previously checked the feasibility of restoring

and removing the mural and had secured third-party funding to do so. The decision is controversially discussed in the online comment columns, on blogs and in a range of publications.

The winner is announced

On 19 March 2021, the Mayor's Office of the city of Bern issues a press release announcing the winner of the competition, following the recommendation made by the judging panel on 9 September 2020. The 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' project team presents the project to the public as part of the Action Week Against Racism. In the same month, drilling takes place to find out more about the substructure of the wall underneath the mural. It becomes clear that the contours of the mural were scratched into the wet plaster using a fresco technique, after which a layer of paint was applied.

City Council's decision

Following a further concretisation phase and successful fundraising by the association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!', the time has come: On 30 March 2022, Bern's City Council accepts the proposal to donate the mural by artists Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden to the Bernisches Historisches Museum. The council prioritises the public interest in non-discriminatory education over the preservation of the historical mural at its original location; the building inventory is adjusted accordingly. The City Council authorises the Mayor's Office to draw up a donation agreement. Following the decision by the judging panel and the positive assessment by the Commission for Art in Public Space, the project thus also receives the green light to remove the mural from Bern's highest executive authority. The cultural service of the city of Bern, the Bernisches Historisches Museum and the descendants of Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden subsequently negotiate a donation agreement. By signing, the families agree that the mural can be removed from the wall for restoration and divided into separate image fields for this purpose. In a separate agreement, the families, the association and the museum set out the way in which the mural will be displayed as part of the planned exhibition at the museum.

Media response, opposition to the removal

The announcement of the winning proposal generates a significant media response. The project meets with both approval and strong criticism in the comment columns of the online editions of Bern's media – polemical, false and racist statements are made against the project and against individual members

of the association. The association holds an event to respond to some of the arguments put forward by the critics. At the same time, in autumn 2021, the association starts documenting the media response and the project's progress on the project website www.daswandbildmussweg.ch.

Negotiations

In spring 2022, the association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' and the Bernisches Historisches Museum clarify the scope of their collaboration: the association is granted guest curatorship for the planned exhibition on racism, Bern's colonial past and present. Restorer Ekkehard Fritz is commissioned to remove the mural, aided by students at Bern University of the Arts. The University offers its expertise to assist with the restoration and removal of the mural. The Conservation and Restoration Division, led by Christel Meyer-Wilmes, also coordinates another student project by Daria Jermann focussing on the framing technique to be used for the individual images within the mural. Bern University of the Arts and the Bernisches Historisches Museum work together with the city of Bern to determine the conditions for storing and reconditioning the mural.

2022–2023

The negotiations with all parties draw to a close. In summer 2022, a test is carried out to remove two of the images. The plan to remove the mural sparks a fundamental debate within the restorer and conservator community on dealing with the discriminatory aspects of monuments and historical relics in public spaces (see Glossary #15: culture(s) of remembrance).

Committee opposed to the mural's removal

The 'Wandbild Komitee' is founded in 2022 as an expression of determined resistance to the mural's removal. The committee – consisting of Christoph Reichenau, journalist; Willi Egloff, lawyer; Enrico Riva, solicitor, emeritus professor; and Bernard Schlup, graphic designer, former art teacher – attempts to prevent the agreed removal from going ahead by holding discussions with the mayor, the director and the chair of the board of trustees of the Bernisches Historisches Museum. The group also tries to win over the public, placing a paid advertisement in the Anzeiger Region Bern and posting articles on the online platform Journal B. The committee makes no attempt to contact the association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!', however.

Press conference

On 11 April 2023, following the conclusion of the negotiations, Bern's cultural department, the Conservation and Restoration Department of the Bern University of the Arts, the Bernisches Historisches Museum and the association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' hold a press conference in front of the mural to inform about the status of the project. The media response is considerable once again and generates fierce reaction. The articles in the Der Bund and 20 Minuten newspapers quickly receive over a hundred comments, many of them in breach of anti-racism laws. On 12 April 2023, Der Bund finds itself forced, for the first time, to close the comments section for an online article due to the number of racist and offensive entries. Director of the Culture and Society department, Regula Fuchs, offers an articulate response in the editorial of the following weekend edition of the paper.

March 2023

On 29 March 2023, journalist Christoph Reichenau posts on the Journal B online platform about a complaint by a Bernese lawyer made to the municipal building inspectorate regarding the removal of the mural, which had already begun. Once the building inspection report is received, work to remove the mural from Wylergut School is immediately halted. The complaint is initially rejected by the building inspectorate of the city of Bern and, in May 2023, also by the building and traffic directorate of the canton of Bern. In summer 2023, work to remove and restore the mural begins. In consultation with the complainant, the complaint cannot be made public as part of the exhibition.

Work to remove the mural begins

Removal of the mural begins in July 2023 during the school holidays. The restorers, Ekkehard Fritz, Alicia Ledergerber and Tonja van Rooij, work for several months to expertly excavate the mural from the wall. They use the stacco technique, in which the painting is protected from the front, carefully undercut and transferred to a new carrier material. The removal takes place with the support of and in collaboration with the Conservation and Restoration Division of the Bern University of the Arts, where the individual images are prepared and stored before being transferred to the Bernisches Historisches Museum. By the end of October 2023, the work at the school is complete.

Discussing culture(s) of remembrance

The mural's removal makes waves in the community of restorers and conservators and calls into question the very principles of restoration. Can a historical relict that exhibits discriminatory attributes, but which is not substantially endangered by external conditions, be removed from its architectural context? Bern's cultural heritage body, Berner Heimatschutz, hosts a panel talk in June 2023 on 'Dealing with offensive monuments and artworks,' at which the mural is discussed. Bern University of the Arts likewise recognises the need for discussion. In October 2023, together with the association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!', the University organises a colloquium and debates the project as an avant-garde example of approaches to racist cultural heritage and of what contemporary memory politics can look like.

Dealing with the mural's removal in Wylergut district

In August 2023, the artist Eva de Souza, committed local residents and allies celebrate the removal of the mural. The celebrations include workshops for children and parents on responding to racism and the association provides an update on the project. Only few of the predominantly *white* local residents and the teachers at Wylergut School are there.
Also in summer 2023, the association initiates research into the effect and perception of the mural in the school and the local Wylergut area. Julia Suter and Djamila Peter conduct interviews with local residents, former teachers and pupils. They discover that the mural provoked criticism even as early as the 1980s.
In September 2023, representatives from the association and the lead restorer Ekkehard Fritz give the pupils at Wylergut School an insight into the mural project. Through age-appropriate workshops, the primary school pupils learn about the removal of the mural and what might replace it on the wall. The team answer the pupils' questions and facilitate conversations about racism and stereotypical imagery.

2024

In spring 2024, all restoration work on the individual images of the mural is completed. In March 2024, the 24 images are transferred from the University of the Arts to the Bernisches Historisches Museum, where the exhibition opens to the public on 24 April 2024. Most of the images were successfully

removed without damage using the stacco technique, although there was some damage to six of the images. This damage was restored by the students at the Conservation and Restoration Division of the University.

Discussions at Bernisches Historisches Museum

The museum's express wishes are that the mural should retain the black overpainting by the activists. Joining the museum's collection, the mural therefore becomes a means of portraying anti-racist resistance and demonstrates a way of raising awareness of racism in society. The association has been in discussion with employees at the Bernisches Historisches Museum since spring 2023 regarding whether and how including the mural in its collection alters the museum's documentary, archival and mediatory practices. It opens up a space where fundamental questions of institutional museum activity can be discussed: How can the museum respond to societal change? How can it further advance its own critical engagement with the colonial history of the building and its collections?

Retouching the mural; transfer to Bernisches Historisches Museum

In January 2024, Joel Keller and Sarah Allmendinger, BA students of conservation and restoration, present the work they completed in the autumn semester 2023/2024 at Bern University of the Arts. Joel Keller developed a concept and method for framing the images. Sarah Allmendinger developed techniques for filling and retouching the damaged areas caused during the removal process. Over the months that follow, they use their new-found expertise to individually frame all the images and to fill and retouch the damaged areas of the mural. The retouching is carried out using a reversible method. The time-consuming process involves the students, the team at the Conservation and Restoration Division of the University and restorer Ekkehard Fritz. In March 2024, the mural is transferred to the Bernisches Historisches Museum. The team responsible for the collection takes charge of the 24 separate images.

April 2024 – today

The controversy over the mural doesn't end here. The discussions about racism (see Glossary #37: racism) in all its forms, the coming to terms with Switzerland's colonial entanglements (see Glossary #11: colonialism), and societal debates on how to deal with colonial, racist, cultural artefacts (see Glossary #15: culture(s) of remembrance) are only just beginning.

The space here serves to depict the events around the mural during the exhibition. Together with the exhibition's mediators, the association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' continues the process of documenting events right up to the present day.

Exhibition opening

On 24 April 2024, this exhibition opens with a very well-attended vernissage. Nelly Fonje, grammar school teacher and anti-racism expert; Anna-Pierina Godenzi, production manager of the exhibition; Mayor Alec von Graffenried; journalist Carlos Hanimann and Luc Mentha, President of the Foundation Board of the Bernisches Historisches Museum; and two representatives of the association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!': Bernhard C. Schär and Angela Wittwer, discuss the exhibition at a panel moderated by Hannan Salamat at the Yehudi Menuhin Forum Bern. The exhibition is favourably reviewed in the media. Shortly after the opening of the exhibition, the museum receives a complaint from a contractual partner that a contractual agreement has not been honoured. It criticises that a reproduction of the mural in its original state is difficult to view – a staging that the guest curatorship deliberately chose to avoid showing the colonial-racist images unobstructedly (see Glossary #13: coming along). The reproduction is then shifted by a few centimetres, making it easier to view. In August and September 2024, an evening series on the exhibition takes place, curated by the artist Giuliana Beya Dridi. It expands and deepens the contents of the exhibition with guests from the fields of dance, music, science and education. The first evening with philosopher and professor of gender studies Patricia Purtschert is broadcasted live by Radio RaBe.

New work by Shirana Shahbazi for the Wylergut school building

In November 2024, the city of Bern announces to the media that the Wylergut school building would receive a new art work by artist Shirana Shahbazi. Her composition of coloured ceramic panels will bring a new energy to the school building and will accentuate the existing architecture. The work will initially leave a blank space, reminiscent of the controversial historical mural on this site. The void will be filled in over time, initiating a 'process of unlearning' in which the pupils will also participate.
The collaboration between the Commission for Art in Public Space and the artist Shirana Shahbazi was initiated by the association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!'. The work is expected to be completed in spring 2025. The participatory 'process of unlearning' in the Wylergut School is carried out in collaboration with the association and underlines the need to continuously address racism in everyday school life.

First team of mediators in the exhibition

In this exhibition, one person from a team of mediators is available to visitors at all times. The mediators were selected through an application process and received an introduction to the exhibition concept and materials. They are employed as interns at the Bernisches Historisches Museum and advised by the association ‘Das Wandbild muss weg!’. For the duration of the exhibition, two teams of mediators are on duty: Aina Rea Aliotta, Nimal Bourloud, Vera Lou Mauerhofer and Djamila Peter until November 2024, and Lene Bachmann, Jathursani Gunatharan and Dina Mezic starting from December 2024. In the first series, the team developed different educational programmes for school classes in Cycle 3 and Secondary II. For each school class visit, they advised the teachers in advance on the most suitable programme. The activities ranged from a set of questions designed for the content of the exhibition to active listening sessions and workshops in the exhibition. Their experiences are in turn incorporated into the exhibition.

Voices in the mural debate

Thomas Zingg
Teacher at Wylergut School 1985–1987

I began teaching at Wylergut School in about 1985. I noticed the mural straightaway and asked my colleague if it was a bad joke. He said he'd never thought about it and it had never been the subject of any discussion at the school. Later on, I spoke about it with a younger colleague who also found it slightly disconcerting. We never did anything about it though.

Extract from a conversation on 20 August 2023

René Heinzelmann
Pupil at Wylergut School from 1949–1952

When I was at school, nobody was bothered by the image and we didn›t pay much attention to it. In all honesty, we just thought it looked bright and appealing. I can't even remember if the mural was ever used in lessons. If anything, I was impressed by the pictures outdoors – they showed big, 'foreign' animals like elephants and giraffes. We found this more interesting than the pictures of cows and suchlike on the mural inside.

Extract from a conversation on 12 August 2023

Leonhard Blank
Pupil at Wylergut School from 1949–1952

I didn't find the mural discriminatory either as a student or, later, as a father. The conversations about the different human stereotypes only began much later on. In my religious education lessons in Breitenrain in the 1950s, there was still a collection box featuring a 'n', where one could donate money for 'Africa'. One didn't do it because one looked down on them; one did it because they were poor. The idea was to bring them up to our standards through development aid.

Extract from a conversation on 18 August 2023

Jolanda Kägi
Teacher at Wylergut School from 1991–2014

For a long time, we [teachers] walked past this image unperturbed because we saw it as a historical document. Then children of a different skin colour started to attend the school. One day, the mother of a child with dark skin approached us and explained that it was deeply upsetting having to send her son to a school in which a picture like this was displayed. The teaching staff therefore decided to take action.

Extract from a conversation on 28 August 2023

Regine Schenk
Teacher at Wylergut School from 2008–2021

I treasured the mural. It shows how the world and society develop and I used it as a visual aid when broaching the topics of racism and integration. I always sat on the step in front of the mural together with the youngest children and spoke with them about ‘Society and me’, ‘Tolerance’ and ‘Living together’. It was always very stimulating. When it came to discussing the letter N, we would talk about Nigerians.

Extract from a conversation on 19 October 2023

Luis Gomes
Pupil at Wylergut School from 2006–2012

Jokes were made about the mural, which made me uncomfortable – I didn’t want to talk about it. The teachers intervened, but we never spoke about it in class. At some point, a picture of a rhinoceros (Nashorn in German) was hung over the image representing the letter N. I found it strange that the other images of people were not similarly obscured. There were students who found it funny to keep pulling off the rhino picture.

Extract from a conversation on 4 September 2023

A.
Mother of two children who attended Wylergut School after 2012

My boys discussed the image at school. They came home scandalised and asked me if I knew that the N in the alphabet in their school stood for ‘n___’. It was good for my boys to see that their classmates were just as appalled and that they weren’t alone. The children wanted the image to be removed straightaway. They were shocked to learn that you can’t simply erase the image – or react more quickly.

Extract from a conversation on 16 August 2023

Jürg Lädrach
School principal of the Lorraine /Wylergut site since 2012

As things proceeded, it became clear that the way the debate was being conducted had no place in a primary school. It jars. What was also clear was that leaving the mural where it was and doing something with it would mean making the school feel like a museum. I didn’t want that. People would always be coming and going, and the mural would cause restlessness. If you take both of these aspects together, it doesn’t really leave you with that many options.

Résumé d’un entretien du 28 août 2023

S.
Pupil at Wylergut School from 2006–2013

The illustration for the letter N made no sense to me. For a long time, I didn’t know what it stood for. The image was then covered with a drawing of a rhinoceros (Nashorn in German) with no explanation. Pupils repeatedly threw their slippers at the picture to knock it off. When it fell down, the teachers would hang it up again without saying anything. Today, I find it astonishing that my school displayed this blatantly racist, stereotypical imagery and that there was no outlet to talk about it.

Extract from a conversation on 5 August 2023

Simon Gsteiger
Journalist

Racist symbols in a school in the heart of red-green Bern holding preservation status. This is a delicate situation for a city that has just announced its ninth annual 'Action Week Against Racism'.

Der Bund, 14 March 2019

Rohit Jain
Racism researcher and cultural activist

The problem is that the discussions often only take place based on individual cases, meaning that the overarching debate is completely forgotten. How do we solve the structural issue that promotes racism?

Der Bund, 14 March 2019

Claudia Brunner Buckson

Protecting objects of historical interest may be honourable, but wanting to establish a monument to racism in public is merely a testament to I as in ignorance. [...] My suggestion: modern technology allows us to photograph the 'preservation-worthy' alphabet mural in Wylergut School. We can then display an enlarged version to judicious visitors to the Bernisches Historisches Museum within the section dedicated to racism in Switzerland, enabling our cheeks to burn with shame for a long time to come.

Reader's letter, Der Bund, 23 March 2019

Peter Füglister

The visualisation of the alphabet using memorable images to represent the letters was a methodological innovation in literacy education at the primary school at the time. Our primary school teacher also made use of this visual aid with the n___ representing the letter N. For us little ones, the figure of the M__ was no bogeyman but a familiar figure we could identify. The obliging servant actually deserved greater recognition rather than suffering the indignation of his image being erased, and he should be remembered for posterity. Even though or rather especially because he can no longer be called a n___ or vilified as a M__.

Reader's letter, Der Bund, 19 March 2019

The anonymous activists who painted over the mural

We must decolonise our thinking, acting and living. We live in a racist world and that means we have to fight against it every day and not look away. Such images and words hurt. Why is this protected by the preservation of historical monuments? Why is the work of two deceased white artists more important than the countless voices of BIPoC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color), that have to witness their oppressions being celebrated by these monuments every day?

barrikade.info, 17 June 2020

Bern city council

[The City Council] is likewise critical of the mural and can understand the impatience and anger behind the protest. At the same time, the City Council does not agree with the form the protest took. Such actions are inappropriate for achieving lasting change. Nonetheless, given the importance of the debate, the City Council is not looking to press criminal charges.

Press release Executive Council of the City of Bern, 17 June 2020

Simon Kyburz

The fact is that an ‘artwork’ of this kind, which overwhelmingly features images of animals along with three human types, should have been viewed critically already at the time it was created – and even more so today. There has been plenty of time to act. It is now becoming clear that open and concealed racism continues to be trivialised.

Online comment, Tages-Anzeiger, 16 June 2020

Samuel Zbinden
Grandson and executor of the artwork of Emil Zbinden

The fact that these three images can no longer be shown from a contemporary perspective is completely in line with our world-view and political stance as a family; however, we were worried Emil Zbinden would be portrayed as racist. When it became apparent that the only way to preserve the mural would be to transfer it to the museum, we finally agreed to the move. If he were alive today, my grandfather would agree that we cannot display these images representing the letters N, C and I nowadays.

Edited extract from a radio broadcast by SRF Regional Bern Freiburg Wallis, dated 12 October 2023

Franziska Burkhardt
Head of the cultural service of the city of Bern

The association’s proposal will ensure the mural is protected; this is not destruction but the opposite. We knew that this approach could be perceived as an insult. The mural does not have to disappear from societal debate, from memory or from appreciation for the artists, but a primary school is not the right place for this debate. Children are not responsible for the stereotypes that exist in the minds of their parents and grandparents, and older generations must grapple with this prejudice.

Edited Extract from a radio broadcast by SRF Regional Bern, Freiburg, Wallis, dated 2 October 2023

Fatima Moumouni
Member of the association 'Das Wandbild muss weg!'

As far as I'm concerned, you could just paint a new picture over it – but that would offend some people. We've therefore chosen the crazier yet more sustainable way, which is to take the debate to the museum, where antiquated objects belong. This enables us to talk simultaneously about art, racist stereotypes and what is worth preserving, without burdening the children further and, most of all, without teaching them their ABC using the N-word.

Surprise street magazine, 7 May 2021

Hans Witschi
Journalist

For whom do the members of 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' speak? For the self-righteous and, in their opinion, the rightly outraged? For the general public? Instead of stopping them, this association is allowed to be set up and given public funding – 'working capital', in a manner of speaking. The legitimacy of their actions is confirmed to them by including them in an official forum for discussion. This is a scandal.

Der Bund, 2 April 2021

Christoph Reichenau
Journalist

To be blunt, the true act of colonialism is not the image (a product of the Zeitgeist at the time or of the artists' intention of openness) but the judging panel and committee's treatment of the school and the Wylergut district, the Wylerdörfli. They have had something taken away from them, even though they had found a constructive way to deal with it. [...] We need neither those with pre-conceived ideas and zero self-doubt, nor specialists who think they know everything.

Journal B, 27 March 2021

Martin Bieri
Journalist

Why does the mural have to be moved to the museum? Images preserve injustice – sometimes they reproduce it. This is the case for the mural by artists Eugen Jordi and Emil Zbinden, especially for a school that has long taught children from different backgrounds and where highly vulnerable people are confronted with it. In a way, this result even acknowledges the power of art, which cannot simply be overlooked.

Der Kleine Bund, 20 March 2021

Richard Fonje

N. I noticed early on that the word somehow related to me. [...] You shilly-shally around and keep complaining though; I'm just happy that no children (especially those who, like me, had to hear the word, but all other children as well) will have to pass by this 'artwork' and interpret it through insufficient explanations, embarrassing revelations and conflicting statements.

Online comment, Der Bund, 3 April 2021

Marianne Krampe

In my view, it goes without saying that any statement, no matter how 'special' it may be, should always be based on respect for the other person. Despite their stereotypical character, I think the images that have been criticised show respect for their subject. As much as any type of racism and colonialism should be rejected, judging people who lived in a different era by modern standards is both arrogant and deeply unfair.

Reader's letter, Der Bund, 7 April 2021

Christoph Reichenau, Willi Egloff, Enrico Riva, Bernard Schlup

We propose leaving the mural as it is and where it is. Let's leave it to the school, teachers and students. The children helped redesign the mural, adding a fun, cheeky touch, and they will continue to do so if it stays in the school. If the children or teachers think it's better to temporarily cover the picture or to restore it to its original state, then that should and can be done.

Advert in the Anzeiger Region Bern, 5 July 2023

Willi Egloff
Lawyer

It's clear that the mural images by Jordi, Mumprecht and Zbinden in Wylergut School need to remain. On closer inspection, the project 'Das Wandbild muss weg!' is a mistake, both in terms of art history and preservation. We need to settle on another, better way of responding to the colonial and racist stereotypes shown within the work.

Journal B, 30 March 2023

Regula Fuchs
Director of Culture and Society, Der Bund

[T]he vehemence of the reactions was a surprise – there was talk of censorship, iconoclasm, of bans on free speech; comparisons were made to the darkest chapters of recent history. Over the past few years, this newspaper had reported several times on the mural at Wylergut School – we had never encountered such a torrent of aggressive, grossly offensive comments that couldn't be published because they occasionally crossed the line into illegality.

Der Bund, 14 April 2023

Hannah Burger
Upper senior school pupil

As an upper senior school pupil, I think it's important that these kinds of racist teaching aids are not on display in primary schools, because they influence how pupils think. I also believe it's good that the mural is not simply being erased from the world. It's an artwork from another time that we can (and should) discuss. Maybe it's an opportunity to speak openly about racism.

Der Bund, 12 April 2023

Izabel Barros
Member of 'Das Wandbild muss weg!'

The mural not only shows the values of *white* society at the time of painting but also the reaction of those who view it today, and these are worth holding on to.

Zitiert in Der Bund, 13. April 2023

Vera Ryser
Member of 'Das Wandbild muss weg!'

Children have the right to an education free from racism. When discussing the mural, people often forget that it's not just *white* children who attend the school but also children who are forced to contend with the exonyms in the mural.

Quoted in Der Bund, 13 April 2023

Legal and staff office building inspectorate of the city of Bern

The wall panels [sic] may play a decisive role for those in the school, however a wall painting does not shape the space. Even the mention of the mural panel on the inventory sheet does not change the fact that these panels are therefore not considered monuments, nor protected under building regulations. […] The owner […], i.e. the city of Bern, is therefore free (in terms of building regulations) to decide what should happen to these mural images.

Position statement and response to the complaint, 26 April 2023

Christel Meyer-Wilmes
Director of the Specialisation in Architecture and Furnishings AA, Master's Programme Director Conservation and Restoration KuR, Lecturer

Social values relative to the work have shifted. The decision to accept the loss of architectural context and the possible damage to the material during removal in favour of recontextualisation in the museum is a significant one. I've found it easier to take a stance since the reasons for removing it became justifiable for me. It's important to have an opinion on the subject.

Expanded extract from a conversation on 9 October 2023

Ekkehard Fritz
Lead restorer in charge of removal

The process made me think about how I approach conservation and restoration. As part of my training, I was taught to retain, preserve and protect objects and to only remove them from their original context if absolutely necessary. I can now understand the other side of the argument and appreciate that removal may be a valid approach – provided that discriminatory materials are critically examined through a public discourse.

Extract from a conversation on 9 October 2023

Annina Zimmermann
Specialist at the Commission for Art in Public Space, Bern's cultural department

The project has facilitated cross-connections. It has forced everyone – the education authority, the office for migration and racism issues, the city's real estate department, the City Council and local authorities, the Monument Preservation Service, the building inspectorate, the City Chancellery and the cultural service of the city of Bern – to come to terms with the mural. However, the consensus that leaving it in situ would take away the school's ability to be a discrimination-free environment has only emerged over time.

Extract from a conversation on 12 August 2023

Eva de Souza
Artist and activist

The celebrations took place over two days and included moments for children, parents and other interested parties. It was important to me to include lots of Black residents from the local area, the city and the cultural setting in this. The objective was to get them to make a statement on site in front of the mural. To show that we are here. We are present. We are bringing this picture to life. We are talking about it. We are for removing the mural.

Extract from a conversation on 20 October

Julia Suter
Special Educational Needs teacher, aspiring educational researcher, Kindergarten teacher at the Tellstrasse kindergarten from 1994–2014

The young people who went to the school a few years ago described feeling speechless, and the teachers, too, were clearly lost for words. Nobody knew how to talk about this painting. It's difficult to talk about something that's been there a long time, that might be there for ever – and that depicts something that is wrong. Why is something there if it's wrong? That's hard to explain to young children.

Extract from a conversation on 20 October 2023

Thomas Pauli-Gabi
Director, Bernisches Historisches Museum

The fact we are allowed to exhibit the mural aligns with our purpose. We can help to objectify the heated debate and neutralize the polarised positions somewhat so people can talk about the mural without immediately becoming red-faced.

Interview with Isabelle Jacobi, Der Bund, 29 July 2023

Noah Pilloud
Editor

Mourning a mural that features racist imagery while thousands of Indigenous artefacts lie in storage in European museums and non-Western artists gain attention primarily when they reference the Western canon seems misguided and incomprehensible to me. This is especially given that the artwork will be preserved and the project will give it a further dimension that will increase its historical value.

Journal B, 31 March 2023

Annette Kniep
Curator, Early Modern Era, Bernisches Historisches Museum

What is special about the mural is that the painting over of the three images manifests a critical examination of the Eurocentric view, i.e. the idea that Europe is the centre and that we look out at the world, measuring, naming and categorising it. We don't have this advantage with many of the items in the collection that date from the early modern era. They lack this critical commentary – not just in terms of the item itself but also, occasionally, when it comes to the exhibitions.

Extract from a conversation on 18 April 2023

Silvia Süess
Journalist

Finally, it can be seen in the back room: the mural, its individual letters arranged in the same way as they were in the school building. It hasn't disappeared, but has finally arrived where it belongs: contextualised in a publicly accessible space. The debates surrounding racism that this process has sparked, both in public and within municipal institutions, show: it is a good start.

WOZ, 25 April 2024

Michael Feller
Journalist and deputy head of the culture department, Der Bund

How can the topic be illustrated appropriately? […] Just as the N-word is no longer used today because it is racist, racist images and symbols too should not be memorialised by constantly presenting them. […] That's why no photo of the mural is visible in its unsmeared state. Although it is actually hidden in one place. You have to bend and twist to see it. The labouriousness of the subject is almost physically palpable in the exhibition.

Der Bund, 24 April 2024

Felix Uhlmann
Professor of Constitutional and Administrative Law at the University of Zurich and President of the Art Commission of the Kunstmuseum Basel

Highly incriminating, clearly racist issues and depictions must certainly be removed more likely than others that do not contain such [racism].

Quoted from a radio report by SRF Echo der Zeit on 25 April 2024

Sara Stocker Steinke
Art historian, museologist, founder of INKLUSEUM

The Bernisches Historisches Museum is showing courage by handing over the curation of an exhibition on dealing with racism and colonialism in Bern to an external organisation. [...] On the other hand [...] the design of the exhibition is anything but accessible, which deserves special attention in view of this sensitive topic. [...] The form of the presentation can be discriminatory if it excludes certain visitors from the discussion.

LinkedIn post from June 2024

Shirana Shahbazi
Artist

This project is of particular importance and urgency to me. With my work, I first want to enable the memory of the removed mural and its removal. In the next step, the work will gradually detach itself from this history and take on a life of its own in a dynamic process. This should create new energy and a contemporary space in the school building. It is important to me to signal openness and not to emphasise the artistic gesture.

Statement of 27 November 2024 for the exhibition

Nimal Bourloud
Mediator of the exhibition

Visitors in the exhibition: standing or sitting, gesticulating in agreement or with crossed arms. Sometimes the outrage is already visible on their foreheads, sometimes the questions only slowly roll off their tongues in conversation. It is most exciting in front of the mural. Here, the social discourse is no longer just depicted and encapsulated, but is staged anew every day in the interaction between visitors and mediators and practised in many voices.

Statement of 17 November 2024 for the exhibition

Djamila Peter
Mediator of the exhibition

My work in the exhibition is a mixture of my own experiences and collective observations on the subject of racism. The concept of the exhibition and its messages are used as tools to reach the audience. I am constantly observing the direction in which the discussions go or should go. Sometimes there is resistance, aha moments or people who contradict everything. I often ask myself whether I am being too cautious or too provocative with the content.

Statement of 17 November 2024 for the exhibition

Aina Rea Aliotta und Vera Lou Mauerhofer
Mediators of the exhibition

Through our constant presence, we are the knowledge repositories of the interactions between the exhibition and the visitors. We take care of the material as well as the interpersonal space. We are not only available, sometimes we also disturb. We don’t just answer questions, we also ask them. We are not only there for conversations, we also initiate and provoke them. We set conditions and also take the liberty of withdrawing from availability.

Statement of 17 November 2024 for the exhibition