

Visitor information

Display Window Archive: Sidney's South Seas Souvenirs

13th August to 10th December 2023

Years before Sidney W. Brown (1865-1941) joined the BBC in Baden, he sought his fortune overseas. The cabinet exhibition *Schaufenster Archiv* accompanies the young engineer through original letters, documents, photos and objects on his 14-month journey to colonies of the time. From Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Australia, Sidney W. Brown did not bring back the hoped-for mineral resources to Switzerland in 1889, but he did bring back a box of enigmatic artifacts that were to form the cornerstone of his exotic collection.

The collection of impressionist paintings created by Sidney and Jenny Brown in the early 20th century is known far beyond the country's borders. Less well known, however, are the **objects of oceanic origin** that Sidney W. Brown, who later became head of the household, brought back from his great voyage in 1889. Hardly ever exhibited in the family's living quarters during his lifetime, the **spears, ceremonial paddles, daggers and belts** eked out an existence in the villa's basement until 1965, when the middle son, John Alfred Brown, donated eleven of the Melanesian artifacts to the **Museum Rietberg** in Zurich. Another part of the collection was later donated to the private gardener family Schneider, who had been in the Browns' service for six decades. In the end, just under a dozen of the objects from the South Seas remained in the Langmatt.

How did Sidney W. Brown get the exotic objects? Where did they come from and what was their original function? The **motives** of Sidney W. Brown's journey as well as the route actually taken and the acquaintances made along the way remained largely in the dark, as did the more precise **circumstances of the acquisition** of the artifacts. It was only through the **archive** of the Brown family in the Museum Langmatt, which was systematically opened up to a

large extent between 2017 and 2018, that targeted **research** became possible at all.

A first evaluation of preserved letters and documents is owed to the Museum Rietberg, which for its exhibition "Wege der Kunst. Wie die Objekte ins Museum kommen" (June 17, 2022 to March 24, 2024), sought to reconstruct the **provenance chains** of selected parts of its collections. The results in relation to Brown's donation were published in a scholarly article in the accompanying publication.¹

The *Schaufenster Archiv (Display Window Archive)* sheds light on Sidney W. Brown's journey using the original documents and objects available at Langmatt and relates the new **research findings** to the history of the family and the collection. Sidney's **letters** provide sometimes detailed information about encounters, observations, experiences, and travel plans, and do not spare humorous episodes. In the course of the journey, however, Sidney's expressed **criticism** of the exploitative nature of **colonial occupation** by competing Western powers also grew – even as he himself sought to gain **wealth** through the opportunities that opened up.

Sidney W. Brown grew up as one of six children of Charles and Eugénie Brown-Pfau in Winterthur and graduated from the Higher Technical Institute. The family moved to Naples in 1885, where his father, a highly successful engineer, was building a government **arms and naval workshop** in nearby Pozzuoli on behalf of the British firm Armstrong, Mitchell & Co. Sidney also worked for the company, by which he was entrusted with the installation of artillery and hydraulic equipment on two Italian warships.

Sidney boarded a sailing steamer in **February 1888** that would take him to Colombo in **Ceylon** (now Sri Lanka), which was then under British colonial rule. Accompanying him on the voyage was **Eugen von Petersen** (1834-1893), a Russian-German engineer who had worked for the German Zoological Station in Naples from 1877 to early 1888. Sidney always calls him "Papa Petersen" in his **correspondence with his mother**, which is maintained throughout.

After several weeks in Ceylon, Sidney and Petersen traveled on to **Australia** – via Melbourne to Sydney. For the onward journey they had to improvise again and again. Thus, they did not reach Tahiti or New Guinea next, as had been planned in the meantime, but via Cooktown to **Batavia** in the Dutch East Indies (today Jakarta in Indonesia). Shortly after their arrival

¹ Sarah Csernay: «Wilde Dinge» in der Villa. Die Ozeanien-sammlung von Sidney W. Brown, in: Esther Tisa Francini (Hrsg.),

unter Mitarbeit von Sarah Csernay: Wege der Kunst. Wie die Objekte ins Museum kommen, Zürich 2022, S. 97-112.

in June 1888, Petersen embarked on an **exploratory voyage** to Celebes (now Sulawesi), while Sidney remained behind on Java. In his letter of July 30, 1888, Sidney tells his mother in some detail about the great project that had led them to this part of the world in the first place: the search for land to open a **gold mine**. But hardscrabble forays and difficult negotiations for mining rights with local rajas and the colonial government dragged the matter out. By January 1889, Sidney and Petersen were back in **Sydney** to raise capital for their venture. When potential investors continued to hesitate – too much money had already been lost in such adventures – Sydney doubted success and made the **trip home** in **March 1889** without Petersen. With him he carried a box of oceanic objects that Petersen had asked him to deliver to a naval officer named Felice Buono in **Naples**.

What was it about these **oceanic artifacts**?

In the spring of 1888, Sidney and Petersen had met the curator **Edward Pierson Ramsay** at the Australian Museum in Sydney, who had acquired about 7,500 ethnological artifacts for the museum within a few years. The **central source of supply** for these objects, which originated in particular from the **Solomon Islands** and the **Bismarck Archipelago**, were a few private individuals who traded in objects from the South Pacific island region between about 1881 and 1909: the Samoan-American entrepreneur and plantation owner **Emma Forsayth**, her partner **Thomas Farrell**, and the German **Richard Parkinson**, who was married to Emma's sister **Phebe Coe**. Not all of the oceanic objects on offer were actually purchased by the museum – yet they were left behind by the dealers. It is suspected that the artifacts that eventually made their way to Switzerland via Sidney W. Brown came from this **convolute**, which had not found its way into the Australian Museum's collection. According to his account, Petersen received the objects as a **gift** from the museum.

Back in Naples, for unknown reasons, Sidney did not hand over the oceanic artifacts he had brought for Petersen. Instead, they eventually made their way to Baden, where Sidney joined the BBC in its founding year, 1891. **Petersen returned** to Naples in 1892, a year before his death. In one of his last letters, he reported having received the mining concession he longed for, "it has cost me much trouble and strain."

Sidney came to his handsome fortune not through the operation of **gold mines**, but through the unprecedented **success of the electrical engineering company** Brown Boveri & Cie. (today ABB), which had been founded in 1891 by his brother Charles and Walter Boveri.

Sidney never returned to East Asia, but remained fascinated by the **foreign** throughout his life. Hand-craft objects from distant lands collected over decades – Oriental carpets, **East Asian ceramics** or furniture made of tropical woods – still adorn the rooms of his former villa. Objects, that would yet have many stories of their own to tell.

LANGMATT

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