

Critical Museum Guide

Advanced

- [Museums in Dresden](#), Germany.
- [Metropolitan Museum](#), New York City / USA.
- [Württemberg State Museum](#) (Landesmuseum Württemberg) , Stuttgart, Germany
 - [General description](#)
 - [Special Exhibition](#) Dedicated to the "Celts of the First Millennium BC"; 2012/13
 - [Special Exhibition](#) "Faszination Schwert" (Fascination Sword) from Oct. 13th, 2018 - April 28th, 2019
- [Museums in Copenhagen](#), Denmark,
- [Museums in Istanbul](#), Turkey
- [Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum](#), Hildesheim, Germany
- [Archaeological Museum in Heraklion \(Crete\)](#); Greece
(**Minoan Culture**)
- [Schleswig-Holstein Landesmuseum](#), (Gottorf castle) Schleswig, Germany.
- [Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte](#), Berlin
"The Vikings"; Oct. 2014 - Jan. 2015 (Martin-Gropius-Bau)
- [Moesgaard Museum](#), Aarhus; Denmark
- [Neues Museum](#), Berlin, Germany
- [Germanisches Nationalmuseum](#), Nürnberg, Germany
- [Cyprus Museum](#), Nikosia (Lefkosia), Greek part, Cyprus
- [Athens Museums](#)
- [Museums in Rome](#)
- [Israel Museum](#) in Jerusalem
- [Museums in Florence](#)
- [Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte in Halle; Germany](#)

I'd like to chide the professional ranks, myself included, for failing to promote real archaeology as successfully! Competently written accounts of our passion, the study of prehistory, should be out there for public consumption! The professional ranks fail to present an effective public counterpoint to archaeo-illogic. Our efforts have improved in the past ten years, but our publications still lag behind those of non-specialist authors. Some of this is due to the nature of our data; they are fragile and require careful analysis and documentation, something that casual authors clearly can put aside, along with meeting standards of scientific evidence. Some of this is due to the reward structure of academic life, which tends to stress preaching to other specialists rather than expanding our public support base. But some of this is due to having our heads, in addition to our trowels, in the sand; this we are trying to change.

Doug Weller on his Doug's Archaeology site. (<http://www.ramtops.co.uk>)

I agree

Metals in Museum

▶ Gourmets (or is it gourmands?) go to special restaurants for particularly good and rare food. They never eat everything that is offered (that's where the difference to the gourmand starts, by the way) but only some choice selection from what's available. A small industry exists to help them: all those restaurant testers that grade the efforts of the eateries, e.g. by assigning stars.

Amazingly enough, no such thing exists with respect to museums. In the western world we were raised to believe that museums are good without exception. Visiting them would always be edifying for you. As far as any distinction goes, it's either the size that counts or the knowledge that the museum holds some particularly well know precious objects. In Berlin they have the Nefertiti bust, the Louvre in Paris holds Mona Lisa, and so on. The hundred thousand or so other objects in these museums are almost negligible.

No museum anywhere is famous for holding an object of iron or steel. The reason is simply that there is no old object of this kind that is pretty to look at. This is easy to prove. Try to find a picture of [King Tut's iron dagger](#), his most valuable possession. Until a few years ago it was practically impossible and even nowadays it is far more difficult to find than his (useless) gold dagger or anything else made from gold and put in his grave. Or go to the (otherwise fabulous) archeological museum in Istanbul. According to common (and possibly not quite correct knowledge), iron was "invented" by the [Hittites in Anatolia](#). It is thus reasonable to expect that the central Turkish archeological museum in Istanbul would have something to offer. They do. Here is the complete exhibit:



● The space given to the "Early Iron Age (Finds from Saröy)" can only be expressed in ppm relative to the size of the museum. To add injury to insult, *all* objects shown are made from copper or bronze. They are just prettier than those rusty stuff somewhere in the basement, and who cares anyhow.

▸ It appears that as far as museum curators are concerned, all metals are the same - not only in Istanbul but everywhere. That's the impression I got when visiting museums, something I love to do. When I do that, I'm not just looking for iron, metal objects or swords but also, for example, for good pictures or sculptures of naked woman in general, and [Leda](#) doing her thing with the swan in particular. In what follows I will concentrate on metals only, however.

Now let's generalize a bit. When I started to get interested in old metals in general and old swords in particular, I looked more closely at suitable objects displayed in museums. What I found, besides a lot of fascinating things, were sometimes substantial shortcomings in presenting the objects or, not to put too fine a point to it, major **BS** on occasion. Mostly the information given is too short or only understandable if you already know a lot about the topic. Finding completely wrong information about the artifact on display was not all that rare either.

The reason for the problems might be categorized as follows:

● 1. The exhibitions, and in particular the always very short explanations given next to the objects, are mostly rather old and might simply be out of date.

Today (2013) we simply may know a lot more about the topic, it's just that nobody has bothered to change the exhibit. That is quite understandable. Changing a complete exhibition (a "gallery" as the Metropolitan calls it) takes a lot of time and money and museums typically are neither awash with money nor do they have experts on their staff for all kinds of things. Keeping up with changing views and interpretations of the past thus is difficult or impossible. That is particularly true for the history of metals, where our point of view changes quite a bit [right now](#). We also shouldn't forget that many museums spend a lot of time and money to produce Internet sites. You just can't do everything. The Internet pages of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, for example, provide far better explanations of the objects than the exhibition itself; [this link](#) gives examples.

● 2. Whoever arranged the display and wrote the explanations usually has his or her roots in the classical humanities (classical archeologist, art history person, ...). The necessary science and technology background needed for understanding the more technical part of some objects is not available and thus neglected. Typical mistakes made are:

- [Confusing smelting](#) and [melting](#). This seems to be especially tempting to Germans, since the English "smelting" looks a lot like the German "schmelzen" = melting. Well, that actually *is* the root of that word! Nevertheless, "smelting" and "melting" have the same relation as [romanic](#) and [romantic](#) or [silicon](#) and [silicone](#): none at all!
- Focussing on the important people (the King who wields a sword) and not on the technology (the iron and steel technology that makes the King).
- Never reporting *negative* results, e.g. that so far no [hollow copper drill bit](#) of the ancient Egyptians, postulated in plenty of books and so on, has been found.
- Not pointing out the origin of the materials used, and the technique employed for making the object, e.g.

casting vs. forging.

- "Killing" the object by the way it was preserved. In the old times people didn't always know better but there is no excuse today for polishing old wootz swords to a high sheen (look up "Dresden"!).
- Simply giving wrong or even idiotic information when it would have been easy to give the correct one (look up Dresden or Stuttgart).

What would I like to learn when contemplating a metal object from ancient times? Ideally some information concerning the following points:

- Origin of the metal: elemental gold / copper / silver or from smelting? Local stuff or imported?
- Directly produced metal or made by intentional alloying of separately made metals? Did some "arsenic bronze" result because the copper ore was contaminated with an arsenic source or was arsenic added intentionally?
- Method of smelting as far as it can be know. This is especially important and of interest for iron / steel.
- Making of the artifact. Cold working, possibly after hammer-welding, casting, one piece, or several pieces, method of joining.

I know that those data often are not available or not very interesting to others. So I will not insist that they all must be provided with the artifact. I will insist, however, that *some* data are provided and in particular that they are correct!

So I will be your first **museum critic**! I only refrain from handing out stars at present.