

REOPENING OF THE WORLDMUSEUM VIENNA, AUSTRIA: EXPANDING THE ROLE OF MOUNTS IN THE PRESERVATION AND INTERPRETATION OF ARTEFACTS.

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Worldmuseum Vienna: project background.

In October 2017 a new permanent exhibition was opened to the public at the Worldmuseum Vienna. The museum's roots go back to 1806 when the Imperial and Royal Ethnographic Collection was established as part of the Imperial Natural History Cabinet after the partial acquisition of the Cook Collection. The museum has been housed in the Neue Burg wing of the Hofburg Palace since 1928. The project began in 2013 with the decision to create a new permanent exhibition (10+years). The deinstallation of the previous display began in 1997. In the interim, the museum held temporary exhibitions and was actively loaning the collection to institutions in Austria and abroad. Following an international open competition, Ralph Appelbaum Associates in collaboration with Hoskins Architects were appointed to redevelop exhibition and visitor facilities. The 7,500m² redevelopment includes 2,400m² permanent exhibition and 1,400m² temporary exhibition spaces. More than 3000 artefacts were selected to represent the collection in 14 galleries. The museum presents itself as 'a venue for connecting cultures and people... the museum is dedicated to the cultural diversity of humankind and strives to document the diverse historical ties between Austria and the world in its collections from all around the globe' (Fig. 1-4).

The conservation team previously focused on short-term exhibitions, loans, and redevelopment of storage. A project of such scale required a new approach.

Display Cases: refurbished 19th century cases and new.

The original steel frame display cases were supplied in 1928 by the renowned Dresden based company August Kühnscherf und Söhne. Praised in their heyday for being air and pest tight, the cases had to undergo a major refurbishment to comply with the safety and collection preservation requirements of today. This included VSG glass, new pedestal with compartment for silica gel, replacement of rear panels, integration of the external top-mounted LED lighting system. Additional new cases were commissioned to complement historic cases.

The challenges:

1. High density of artefacts on display, artefacts arranged in tiers, and with overlapping layers of depth of mounting; 2. the height of display cases 324cm, varying depth 76-90 cm; 3. design intent based on invisible mounts, secured predominantly using wall-mounted rods, except one gallery mounted with a Reutlinger suspension system; 4. compression of the overall exhibition schedule (Fig 5-13).

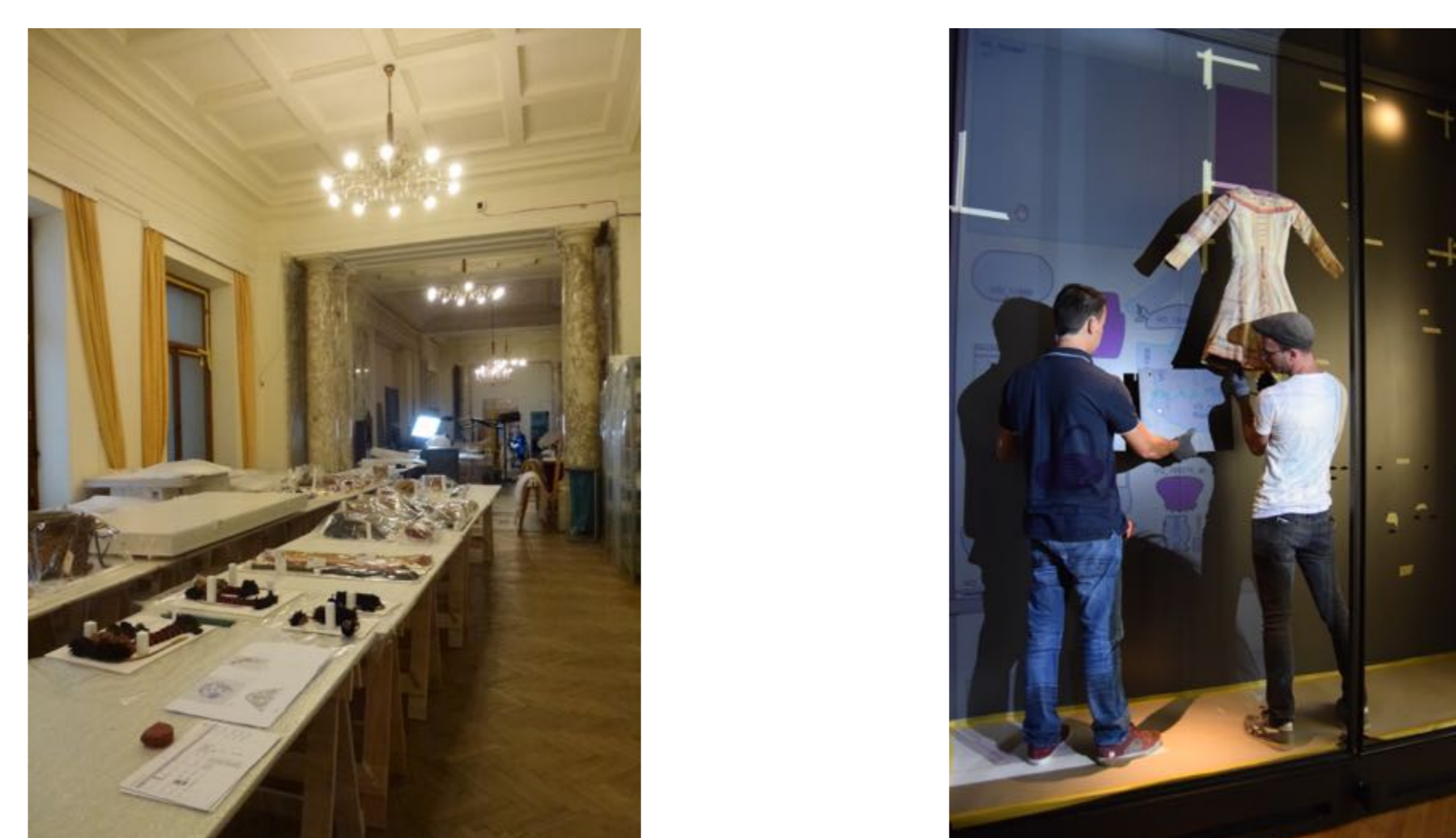


Fig. 5. Collection survey taking place in the historic Marble Hall.

Fig. 6. Preparations for installing the gallery 'Into a New World'. Image credit Vienna Arthandling/VAH.

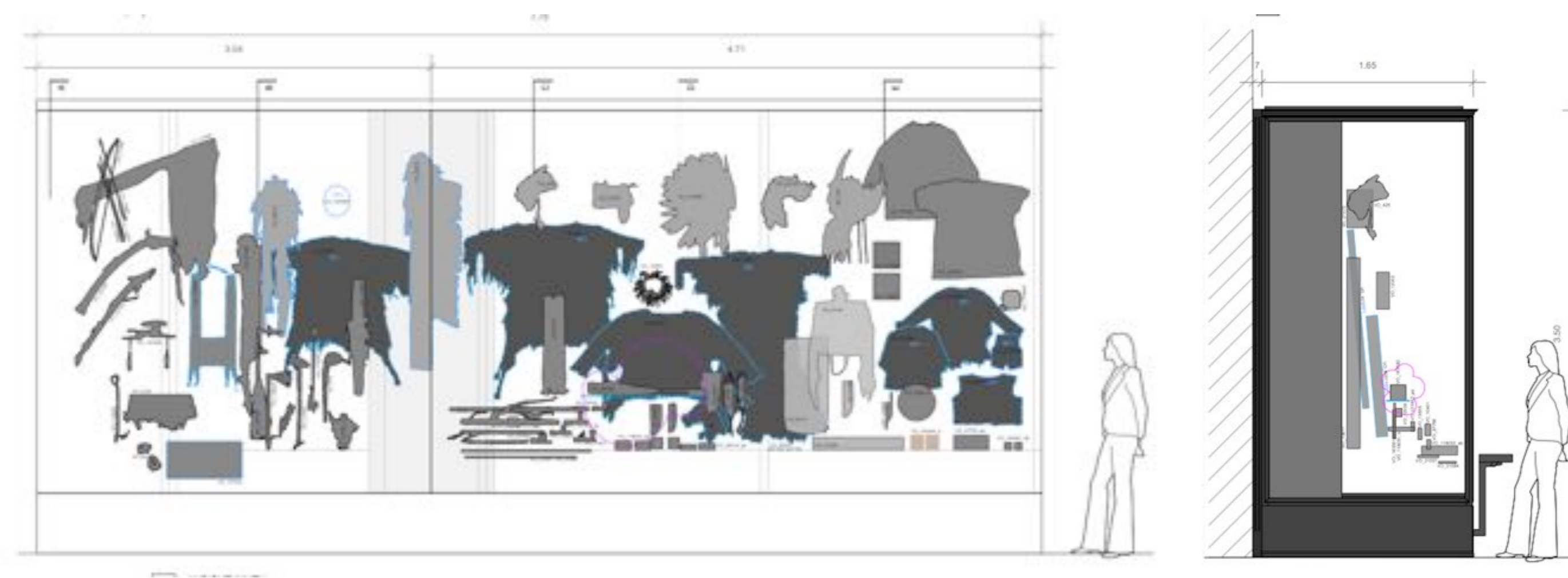


Fig. 7: Design renderings of one of the display cases and one of its sections, gallery 'Into a New World', ©ARGE Ralph Appelbaum Associates.

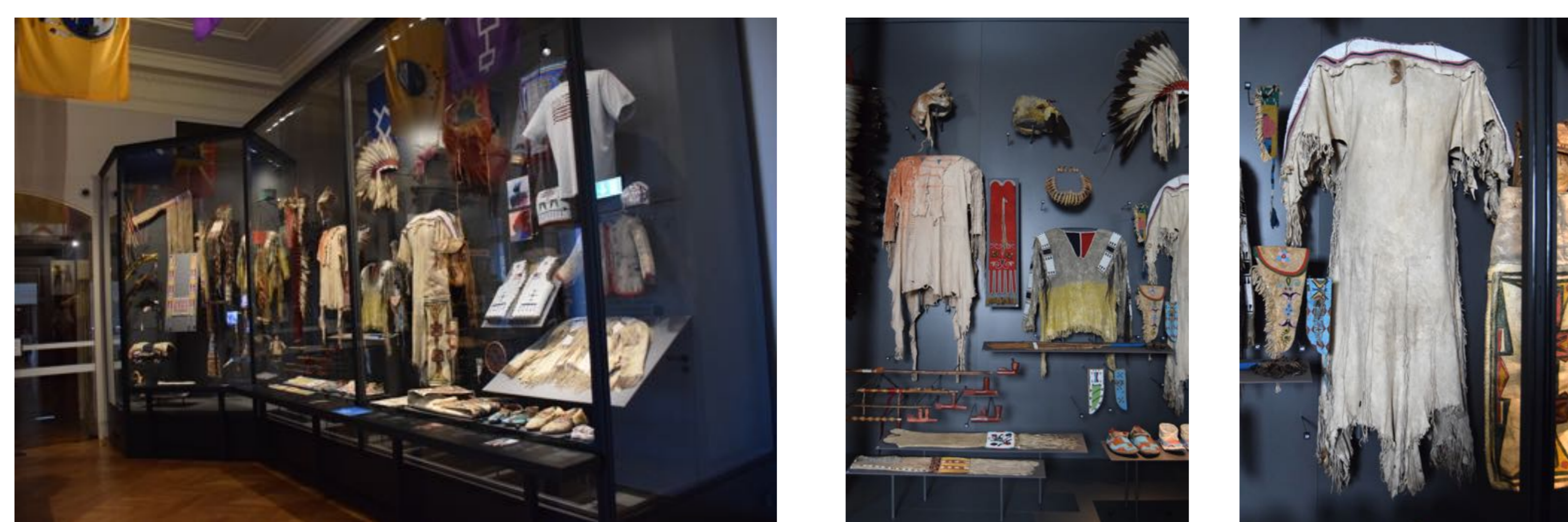


Fig. 8-10. One of the display cases in the gallery 'Into a New World'; shirts VO_89311, VO_431, dress VO_13671.



Fig. 11-13. View of the gallery 'South Seas: Encounters with Paradise Lost', Maori cloaks, VO_42460 & VO_42458.

Changing approach to mountmaking

Mountmaking is part of preventive conservation.

There was a need to overcome a problem of seeing mount design and production as separate and additional processes to those concerned with conserving/restoring and interpreting artefacts. The initial collection survey was carried out in 2014 with the aim to evaluate the artefacts' condition, light sensitivity, environmental and conservation needs. This survey fell short linking individual artefact's condition with mount design and with curatorial narratives. This predominantly but not exclusively concerned important artefacts, accessories and garments from the galleries 'Into a New World-North America' and 'South Seas: Encounters with Paradise Lost'. The two-dimensional and vertical design rendering and the proposed mounting were unsuitable from both, the preservation and the interpretation points of view. This problem became apparent at a late project stage and the team had to go back to the design board. At such a late stage changes (to already approved solutions and budgets) had to be justified, and designs redrawn and approved. For the garments representing the Native American peoples and for the Maori cloaks, where their preservation condition allowed, the team implemented a significant conceptual change to mounting the garments on custom-made body forms, presenting them 'as if worn'.

Project Management approach: from individual tasks to a team workflow.

Four lead conservators took responsibility for the 14 galleries to ensure the conservation workflow and deadlines were efficient and integrated into the overall exhibition schedule. One lead conservator represented the conservation team acting as a main liaison with architects, vendors and management. The project had four overlapping phases: 1 collection survey, 2 conservation treatments, 3 mount assessment and mount making, 4 display cases and installation. The mount design/mount making phase was organised by grouping objects by gallery/display case, taking into account the exhibition context, the object's condition, and the anticipated design intent. Mounts were produced in collaboration with Vienna Arthandling.

In conclusion

1. This project demonstrates that mountmaking is an integral part of preventive conservation.
2. Changing displays required rethinking the legacy of 2-dimensional and abstract representations of historic garments, and a collaborative and agile approach to exhibition development.

References

The new Weltmuseum Wien will reopen on 25 October 2017 [https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/fileadmin/user_upload/PT_WMW_Eroeffnungsfest_Heller_Engl.pdf]
R. Riedler & L. Nurse. Reopening of the Weltmuseum Wien: Time between the past and the future. *ICOM CC Objects from Indigenous and World Cultures: Conservation Newsletter July 2017*.

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