

Presseinformation

Museum am Rothenbaum

Rothenbaumchaussee 64 | 20148 Hamburg Germany | markk-hamburg.de

Resonating Images from Peru

Wall texts chapters

Intimate portraits, everyday scenes and documentary images: the photographs and music recordings of Hans Heinrich Brüning (1848-1928) continue to resonate in Peru today, opening up new perspectives on identity and cultural self-determination. The German amateur researcher assembled a multimedia collection over five decades in the Lambayeque region, documenting local life and cultural history with great dedication. This collaboratively curated exhibition brings together reinterpretations by North Peruvian artists and cultural practitioners, who transform these colonially shaped documents into living archives. Afro-Peruvian and queer perspectives are as much a part of the dialogue as photo-ceramics, archaeological fictions, and embroidered interventions by contemporary artists. In the digital age, communities also engage with the historical images and music online, creating new forms of cultural participation. The exhibition highlights how Brüning's archive continues to echo through communities and connect people across generations and borders.

Brüning's Legacy and Muchik Identity

Northern Peru has a cultural history spanning thousands of years, yet it has long been overlooked. Hans Heinrich Brüning, a North German engineer and amateur researcher, was among the first to comprehensively document the archaeology, history, language, festivities and daily life of the Lambayeque region. While parts of his collection are held at the MARKK and in Berlin, the majority of the archaeological material was acquired by the Peruvian government in 1921 and now forms the core of the Brüning National Archaeological Museum in Lambayeque.

Since the 1980s, the region has gained increasing attention following major archaeological discoveries. At the same time, US anthropologist Richard Schaedel rediscovered Brüning's photographic collection at the MARKK and, together with local scholars, brought it back into the Peruvian public eye. This helped strengthen sociocultural and political movements in northern Peru aimed at reviving Muchik culture. Building on this agenda, various groups ranging from educational institutions to the tourism sector promote a shared regional Muchik identity.

Infinite Archives

Brüning's multimedia collections, comprising of diverse photographic media, sound recordings, archaeological and ethnographic objects, historical documents, field notes and correspondences, bring a wide range of materials into dialogue, connecting people, places and eras. Today, cultural practitioners and intellectuals in Lambayeque reactivate these archives to create self-determined narratives about their past.

Particularly in digital spaces and on social media, images and sounds circulate beyond the confines of established museums, where they are appropriated, reproduced and reconnected. This digital activation of the archive, through editing, coloring and annotating photographs, uses the images both as historical evidence of a rediscovered identity and as a starting point for aesthetic experimentation and reinterpretation. The embroidered and watercolor interventions by Peruvian artist Marystela Camacho likewise engage with inherent and actual materialities, highlighting the sensory richness and dignity of the images.

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Power and Exploitation

During Spanish colonial rule (1532–1824), communal lands belonging to the Native inhabitants of Peru's fertile northern coast were expropriated and converted into fields for growing sugarcane and cotton. After independence, scattered estates merged into large plantations and haciendas concentrated in the hands of a few influential families and companies, mostly of European or US origin. During the colonial period, enslaved people from Africa were the primary labor force. After the abolition of slavery in 1854, workers from China and the Peruvian highlands were recruited into debt bondage.

Hans Heinrich Brüning earned his living as an administrator and engineer on these large sugar cane haciendas. His photographs document the labor performed there, but also the unequal power structures that shaped it. As a white European man, he occupied a privileged position that granted him access to the highest social circles. In some cases, he also denounced exploitation, for example in

Ambivalent Gazes

A multitude of gazes converge in this exhibition space. Brüning's photographic perspective at times conveys openness and intimacy, yet it is also shaped by power asymmetries, colonial stereotypes and the practice of collecting ethnographic and racialized "human types". At the same time, the subjects look back into the camera, some with skepticism, others with curiosity and self-confidence. Their expressions raise unresolved questions about the social negotiations surrounding the creation of these photographs, and about the agency and intentions of those involved.

The photo-ceramics created for this exhibition by Peruvian artist Enzo Miguel Matute engage in a dialogue with precolonial portrait vessels of former Moche dignitaries. His works can be understood as a tribute to the individuality and dignity of the women portrayed and as a reminder of their important, yet often overlooked, social role.

And what do we, as viewers, see in these images?

Marginalized Voices

The focus on Muchik culture in Brüning's photographs has long overshadowed representations of other, often marginalized groups in northern Peru. Brüning's archive also contains many images of descendants of formerly enslaved Africans, as well as people of Chinese descent. Like their ancestors, many lived and worked on and near the large sugarcane haciendas, such as Hacienda Pomalca, where Brüning was employed as a manager.

In conversations for this exhibition, Luis Rocca, director of the Afro-Peruvian Museum in Zaña, northern Peru, and an advocate for the recognition of Afro-Peruvian cultural history, emphasized the significance of these photographs as testimony to the diversity of local community life that continues to this day. Despite their inherent colonial gaze, he acknowledged the individual portraits of Afro-Peruvian people in Brüning's collection and pointed to the important role of rivers as social spaces and lifelines for both local communities and the operation of the haciendas.

Queering Brüning's Archive

Historical photographs and documents often contain many silenced or invisible histories. One way of tracing missing stories, particularly those of marginalized groups, is to ask archives critical questions and imagine speculative answers.

In his research, Peruvian sociologist and activist Roland Álvarez focuses on reconstructing potentially queer spaces and practices in the country's culture and history. For this section of the exhibition, he has engaged closely with Brüning's photographs and documents, examining them through queer perspectives. His questions and potential scenarios draw in part on his auto-ethnographic field research in *chicherías* in northern Peru, places where *chicha*, a traditional corn beer, is sold and consumed. In some areas, they have become

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spaces for queer encounters. These alternative readings of the archive open up possibilities for rethinking perceptions of both past and present.

Sounding Images

As an engineer, Brüning viewed the camera and phonograph as unique tools for ethnographic documentation. Between 1910 and 1925, he recorded the last speakers of the Muchik language as well as musical performances on wax cylinders. As part of his intellectual exchange with Erich von Hornbostel, then director of the Berlin Phonogram Archive, Brüning sent him several recordings. Today, only the music cylinders survive and have since been digitized.

Following the recommendations of the Phonogram Archive, Brüning also photographed the musician Manuel Quesñay, who played pipe and tabor for him. These photographs became key to establishing contact with his descendants, building a bridge between the archive and the present. Today, his grandson, Guillermo Quesñay, is one of the last custodians of this musical tradition, which is under threat in Lambayeque.

Brüning's recordings also inspired the music group Tierra Adentro and continue to serve as a source for artistic reinterpretation and reflection on the value and future of this musical heritage.

Archaeological Fictions

Northern Peru was home to many important cultures, including the Moche/Mochica, Lambayeque/Sicán, Chimú and Chimú-Inca, whose remains in the form of adobe pyramids (*huacas*), tombs and settlements continue to shape the region's landscape today. Ever since the colonial era, however, these sites have been repeatedly looted by foreign collectors and local *huaqueros* (grave robbers). Brüning, too, collected archaeological pieces on a large scale and worked with *huaqueros*. At the same time, he was among the first to advocate for the protection and preservation of archaeological sites and objects.

The ceramic "archaeological fictions" by Peruvian artist Enzo Miguel Matute address this complex and colonial history with irony. Referencing Brüning's photographs, Matute incorporates Brüning as an excavator into a fictional funerary vessel that might be unearthed in an improbable future. With "Huaco 28296", he cites the number of the Peruvian law protecting cultural heritage, which remains threatened by looting, commercial sale and dispersal to this day.

Vibrant Alliances

Hans Heinrich Brüning's archives remain alive, resonating across countries, communities and institutions. Nowhere is this more tangible than in Lambayeque. It was here that Brüning lived and worked, formed friendships, became a godfather and took part in the social and emotional relationships reflected in his photographs. When Muchik intellectuals and anthropologists rediscovered his collections in the 1980s, new transnational networks emerged, providing strong momentum for the revival of regional culture and identity. To this day, these archives remain spaces of connection, encounter and alliance. They build bridges between those who once stood before Brüning's camera and those who today claim their cultural heritage for the future. The research of Peruvian cultural anthropologists Gisela Cánepa and Walther Maradiegue marks another chapter in this process. Since 2021, they have been working with local partners to explore the present-day relevance of these collections in Peru. This collaboratively curated exhibition is itself a continuation of these ever-expanding resonances.

9th Triennial of Photography Hamburg 2026

The exhibition is part of the 9th Triennial of Photography Hamburg 2026, titled "Alliance, Infinity, Love - in the Face of the Other" (June 5-September 22, 2026). Sponsored by the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, Department of Culture and Media.

Weitere Medieninformationen und Bildmaterial:

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