

## **„A bellyful of Communication!“**

The new permanent exhibition at the Museum of Communication Frankfurt

-Dr. Helmut Gold-

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“*A bellyful of Communication!*” cries out explicitly from the poster and flyer for the new permanent exhibition at the Museum of Communication Frankfurt

This slogan, together with its image of seven cake trowels (see illustration), alludes neither to a special gastronomic offer, nor to a supposed weariness of communication.

It characterises rather the central aim of the new exhibition, which was rearranged over an area of approximately 2,500 m<sup>2</sup> (square metres) in July 2004.

Through an increase in density of the objects displayed, considerably more treasures from the extensive museums collection can now be enjoyed.

Also, by means of the new design and arrangement of the themes, the visitor can easily recognise a clear exhibition structure.

In terms of content, the main purpose was to undertake a broad update, and to include the latest developments in telecommunications and media.

A further aspect was to express the new concept direction that took place with the change from the former Post Museum to the present Museum of Communication.

### **Architecture and exhibition design in harmony**

Important impulses for the new concept resulted from an extensive evaluation study from the Social Sciences Research Group in Bonn, who delivered advance findings regarding visitor profiles and interests.

The design was a challenge, and not only due to the limited budget:

The award winning architecture of the new building from Günter Behnisch is based on transparency and openness, with views through to all floor levels from the central atrium.

Ingeborg Flagge, director of the German Architecture Museum, described the building as one of the most beautiful museums in Frankfurt, certainly the most cheerful.

A main concern during the design phase was to retain this openness and friendly atmosphere, without giving up the goal of a stringent organization. This was lacking in the old permanent exhibition.

The design office of Andreas Heller from Hamburg was able to fulfil both of these requirements.

With their design for the exhibition, they also managed to accentuate the vigour and singularity of the architecture.

The atrium, as centre of the museum, became the hub of the new exhibition. It turned into a marketplace, with inviting benches and large illuminated photos.

These serve in equal measure as eye-catchers and navigation.

One notices, that the museum not only serves to present the history of communication, but is also a site for communication.

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The seven theme domains open up radially - like slices of pie - from the central atrium.

This gives rise to a clear organisation of space, which is further enhanced by the discrete yet clear graphic design and colour ways of our museums in-house designer, Andreas Haller.

The theme domains are:

1. Drawing / Text / Message
2. Letter and Parcel
3. Telegram
4. Telephone
5. Radio
6. Television
7. New Media and Broadcasting

### **Letter - trove from 1585 and the Titanic telegram, as introduction**

The so called „Intros“, specially designed opening scenarios, stand at the starting point of each theme domain / slice of pie.

For instance, a previously unopened packet of letters from 1585 is on show, which was discovered by chance in the Frankfurter law courts 150 years ago.

The documents arrived there as evidence, being lost by an imperial post courier on his way from northern Italy to Cologne and Antwerp - somewhere in the Hunsrück hills between Rheinhausen and Wöllstein.

A brazen hold-up had already taken place in this neighbourhood a few years before, as in broad daylight a post rider was “jumped on, thrown to the floor and robbed” by three armed riders near Eckweiler.

However, theft may not have been the sole motive:

Maybe competing city couriers, who were fighting for their privileges and existence, “confiscated” the letters.

But it could also be possible that the responsible Postmaster had refused to carry them further due to frustration over unpaid wages from the ruling “Taxis” post monopoly.

Many Postmasters – including those in Wöllstein – were “on strike” in 1585.

Not only has the speculation over the disappearance of the Letters proved exciting.

The Frankfurter manuscripts also offer a fascinating insight into the daily correspondence of early modern times, as organized post delivery was emerging.

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## **„Sinking, wants immediate assistance!“**

This equally short and dramatic radio message was proforma duly minuted at Marconi International Marine Communication offices (see illustration)

It dates from the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> of April 1912 from the deck of the then largest passenger steamship in the world: the “Titanic“.

For the over 1500 passengers and crew, however, the rescue came too late. “The sinking of the Titanic“ went down in history as one of the greatest tragedies ever.

What made it worse was that it occurred in the middle of an era of technical euphoria.

In many respects, the medium of radio played a decisive role:

Other ships were summoned to the scene by means of radio telegrams, and managed to save many human lives.

But the disaster could possibly have even been avoided, had not the radio set on the “Titanic“ been switched off late that evening.

Thus the urgent iceberg warnings from other ships were never received.

## **A new concept after 14 years**

The manuscripts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the spectacular series of exhibits from the Titanic telegrams are just two of the many highlights to be seen in the new permanent exhibition at the Frankfurt Museum of Communication.

If the main concern at the opening of the museum, on the occasion of the “500<sup>th</sup> Post Jubilee„ in 1990, was to depict the history of the Post Office, the emphasis today is to show the history of communication itself, and its significance for the present and future.

Communicating media skills means not only having the technical developments in view, but also the manner in which the medium is used, and the meaning of the messages conveyed.

Seen in this way, media tell both histories and storeys.

They are not always as spectacular as the Titanic telegram, or Orson Wells famous radio play “War of the Worlds“, which triggered off mass panic in the USA of the 30s; also to be heard in the new permanent exhibition.

But the media usage of everyday life also supplies plenty of additional exciting evidence of a world that is continually changing, due to the influence of new means of communication.

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### **A selection from 600 000 objects**

At each of the seven theme domains, after the respective opening scenario, the world of objects opens up:

The museum in Frankfurt owns over 17 000 m<sup>2</sup> of depot area, housing probably the largest collection of communication history in Germany, if not Europe. Only a fraction can be exhibited at any one time.

The oldest exhibit shown is a clay tablet from the 21<sup>st</sup> century B.C., the youngest an advertising poster for the share launch of the Post Bank.

There are exhibits like an electrically driven parcel lorry, the first post bus in Germany from 1905, post coaches, as well as numerous delivery vehicles.

From Heinkel motor scooters, to the million fold deployed VW Beetle, up to the modern Renault Kangoo – all these document the history of post transport.

And these are eminently well complemented by a modern letter sorting system that can also be demonstrated live.

One of the particular strengths of the Frankfurter museum is the collection of historical telegraph machines.

Whilst we can only witness optical telegraphy through means of models and original maps, the needle telegraph from Cooke and Wheatstone from 1837, as well as one equipped with a piano keyboard, fascinate not only technically, but also aesthetically.

At the same time the economic significance of the telegraph is picked out as a central theme.

For example: the up-and-coming news agencies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, important agency and stock exchange news, or the connection of the continents with transatlantic cable, or later, the wireless telegraph.

Also unique are the original telephones of Philip Reis from Friedrichsdorf, as well as the first Bell telephone, brought to Germany as a demonstration model, which illustrate the beginnings of the telephone era.

The bandwidth of the telephone realm spans from everyday life with the telephone, over devices and rituals, up to modern mobile telephony.

A fully functioning switchboard system from 1916, which can be operated by the visitors, lets one guess what for technical and logistical achievements stand behind the replacement of the “switchboard operator” and her manually connected calls.

Likewise interactive are the numerous Audio and TV sets, which play the highlights of radio and television history, such as:

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- „From handyman to listener“,
- “Melodies for millions”,
- “The “Fuehrer” speaks”,
- “Allied sundries”,
- “At home in the home”, and
- “Video kills the radio star”

These are some of the meaningful titles of the new exhibition area for radio, which, like that for television, commands a much larger space than before in the new permanent exhibition.

Also on show is Hi-Fi equipment, with nicknames like „Snow Whites Coffin“ from Braun which was showered with design prizes, or the "Cuban Comet" from 1960, which documents the development of electrical engineering and design.

Further themes are listening and viewing habits, whose changes precipitated into statistics over daily radio and television consumption, also finding expression in the ever growing variety of (private) programmes.

### **Art and communication**

The origins of the art collection go back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the initiative of Heinrich von Stephan.

If the focus of his interest was chiefly artworks with a direct reference to post history, the works from the 20<sup>th</sup> century are marked by a shift towards critical reflection and artistic alienation from modern technology and media.

The collection includes paintings from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, sculptures, objects and multiples up to the present, fine art photography and art from the new media.

In this collection one can find outstanding works from such artists as Karl Spitzweg, Max Ernst, Franz Radziwill, Salvador Dali und Joseph Beuys.

The hanging illustrates the structure and history of the collection by means of selected categories of works.

### **From Post Museum to Museum of Communication**

The history of the Museum of Communication in Frankfurt reaches back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the “Reichspostmuseum” was founded in Berlin from Heinrich von Stephan.

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, the museum, which was located in the eastern part of Berlin, became the "Post Museum of the German Democratic Republic".

The West German equivalent was inaugurated in 1958 in a villa purchased for the purpose on the “Shaumainkai”, on the south bank of the river Main in Frankfurt.

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After the addition of the new building, the villa today accommodates the library, administration, public relations and the museum executive.

The new building and the villa are connected at lower ground floor level, which serves as an exhibition space.

Since 1995 the building in Frankfurt, like the sister museums in Berlin, Nuremberg and Hamburg, belongs to a foundation which is sponsored by the firms Deutsche Post and Deutsche Telecom, in a unique public/private commitment.

The change from being a museum of a former national institution - from Post Museum to Museum of Communication - meant not only organisational changes, but above all a paradigm shift with regard to content.

In recent years, more than any other factor, it has been the numerous special exhibitions which have highlighted the wide spectrum and attractiveness of the theme communication.

Temporary exhibitions like:

- “Pigeonholed! – anti-Semitic postcards”,
- “Top Secret! – The world of encoded communication”,
- “WonderulWinningWorld of Advertising – Brands, Go-Getters, Mechanisms”,
- “The Net – Sense and sensuality of Networked Systems”, or recently
- “love.com – Messages from the Heart”, and the current
- “Top or Flop”,

have attracted, and will continue to attract, a great amount of media and visitor interest.

Together with a consistently visitor-orientated choice of exhibitions, particularly for families and children, with over 150 000 visitors in 2003, the Museum of Communication achieved the ranking of third amongst the favourite museums of Frankfurt.

With the modernisation of the café area on the ground floor,

- together with its newly created garden terrace in 2002,
- and the join-in workshop in 1999, plus the forum on the first floor in 2001,
- along with the new offers of a children’s stamp cabinet, and the new media area in 2000 & 2001,
- coupled with the reorganisation of the 2 500 m<sup>2</sup> lower ground floor exhibition,

the complete renewal of the museum, which was inaugurated in 1990, is now completed.

For the time being, at any rate, then hardly any other theme is subjected to such a dynamic and change as that of communication...