



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Otto Gerdau Collection

NMAH.AC.0363

Craig A. Orr

1998

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Otto Gerdau Collection
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0363
Date:	1876-1900
Extent:	0.15 Cubic feet
Creator:	Gerdau, Otto Orr, Craig
Language:	English Some materials in German. Collection is in English.
Summary:	The collection documents the ivory importing firm of Heinrich Adolf Meyer, of Hamburg, Germany.
Digital Content:	Image(s): Otto Gerdau Collection

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Collection donated by Joan Rogers, January 1, 1990.

Provenance

The bulk of the material was accumulated by Otto Gerdau during the course of his business and was donated to the Archives Center in January 1990 by his daughter. The original of the photostatic copy of the 1876 catalog is in the Warshaw Collection of Business America (AC0060), in the subject category Ivory. The two photoprints of Heinrich Ad. Meyer's exhibit at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition are copies of originals in the Centennial Photo Collection, Prints and Pictures Department, Free Library of Philadelphia. The two photographs circa 1900 taken from an unknown book were donated in 1990 by the donor of the E.D. Moore Collection (AC0321), Edith Sibley.

Processing Information

Processed by Craig A. Orr, archivist.

Preferred Citation

Otto Gerdau Collection, 1876-1900, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

Reproduction fees for commercial use. Contact repository for details.

Biographical / Historical

Otto Gerdau was the New York agent for the German firm of Heinrich Adolf Meyer. The firm was co-founded in Hamburg, Germany, in 1818 by Heinrich Adolf Meyer and his father Heinrich Christian Meyer. The firm specialized in the import and export of ivory and its various substitutes, in both raw and finished form. The company's first factory was built in 1836; a new, larger factory was built in 1864. After his father's death in 1848, Heinrich Adolf Meyer ran the company alone. Meyer was a prominent man in Hamburg. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Kiel in 1865 and was elected to the German Reichstag in 1877. It was through his influence that the Hamburg Aquarium was built.

Gerdau was a native of Hamburg, Germany. After emigrating to the United States, he founded the Otto Gerdau Company in New York in 1872. As the American agent for Heinrich Adolf Meyer, Gerdau imported ivory from Germany. Following Otto's death in 1920, his two sons, Carl and Allan, ran the company. Allan gradually assumed more responsibility for running the company's import lines which included rattan, mother of pearl, rugs from India, and marble furniture from Italy, in addition to ivory. After Allan died in 1986, the company was left in trust to three New York religious institutions who were to benefit from the company's profits. In 1989 the company was sold to a Florida industrialist and there is no longer any involvement in the company by the Gerdau Family.

Scope and Contents

Documents relating to the ivory importing firm of Heinrich Adolf Meyer, of Hamburg, Germany. It contains a booklet on "Ivory" published by the firm in 1889, a photographic album on ivory published around the same time, one black and white photograph showing the largest and thickest tusks on record, two photographs showing the firm's factory, a photostatic copy of the firm's 1876 US Centennial Exhibition catalog, and photostatic copies of notices of the awards it won at the Exhibition. Also included are photoprints from the photographic album and two copies of photoprints showing the company's exhibit at the Centennial. There is also one letter in the collection.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Ivory
Ivory industry

Container Listing

Box 1, Folder 1	Photo album, undated
Box 1, Folder 1	Ivory booklet, 1889 - 1889
Box 1, Folder 1	Catalog, 1876 - 1876
Box 1, Folder 2	Letter, 1887 - 1887
Box 1, Folder 2	Photographs, 1900 - 1900
Box 1, Folder 3	Photoprints, US Centennial Exhibition catalog, 1876 - 1876 Image(s)