

Dealing with non-European objects: Transcultural Cooperation and Postcolonial Provenance Research at the Humboldt Forum

The collections of the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst date back to the time of the Royal Kunstkammer. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the holdings were substantially expanded. A large part of the objects on display at the Humboldt Forum came to Berlin at the time of European expansion and colonization. The question of how to deal with this heritage in a respectful and just manner, with descendants of the originators and other stakeholders having their say, is one of the central and controversial topics at the Humboldt Forum. In recent years, the SPK has developed a basic institutional approach to this issue. This forms the starting point for a change in the two museums towards more openness and transparency. In our view, it is indispensable for good museum practice to deal with the acquisition histories and the meanings of the objects, in transcultural cooperation and with respect for non-European perspectives and concerns. A Curator for Transcultural Collaboration networks, supports, and coordinates the numerous projects of both collections on these topics and initiates new projects. Since the beginning of 2019, the collections have also been researched more intensively by four specially employed provenance researchers from the Zentralarchiv of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, who also initiate and carry out transcultural projects.

For Additional Information

www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/priorities/provenance-research-and-issues-of-ownership/managing-non-european-objects.html

Transcultural Cooperation

In their programmatic work, the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) make a point of emphasizing transcultural cooperation. In addition to cooperating with an international community of museums and academic specialists, in which both museums are involved, the Ethnologisches Museum is increasingly pursuing contact and exchange with members of the societies of origin (of museum objects), while the Museum für Asiatische Kunst is

putting an emphasis on collaboration with contemporary artists as a key part of its international partnerships. Cooperation is thus leading to new interpretations of the historical collections, stories are perpetuated. The collection objects themselves represent, in material form, relationships between the museums and societies of origin. This potential is now being tapped, with the objective of forming relationships that are active, equitable and meaningful, in the interest of all those involved.

For the Ethnologisches Museum, the term “societies of origin” means the creators, users and prior owners of the objects held at the museum, as well as their ancestors and other people linked to the collections through their history and cultural practices. Members of societies of origin are already included in processes of knowledge production and dissemination, and in exhibition practice, storage and conservation in the framework of existing projects (with partners from the Amazon, Nagaland, Namibia, North America, the Syrian diaspora and Tanzania, et al.). One important goal of the museum is to strengthen and institutionalize relationships that have so far been mainly project-based in many cases. The Ethnologisches Museum is also currently extending its varied forms of cooperation to other regions and to new partnerships. These collaborations are changing the museum. So far, the Western and, above all, academic view of the objects has been the dominant one. This is a result of disparate power relations, considering that the museums appropriated a large part of the objects under colonial conditions and structures and subjected them to Western knowledge practices. It is therefore inevitable that the prerogatives of interpretation and the rights to control the objects will have to be renegotiated, and the Ethnologisches Museum is proactively pursuing these negotiations.

By facilitating the sharing of information and knowledge, for example, cooperation in the field of ethnological collections makes it possible to reconstruct the former significance and function of objects, and to include up-to-date interpretations and perspectives in museum activities. Horizontal cooperation includes promoting pedagogic work and other activities defined by the partners in the regions from which the collections originated.

In its practices for collection, presentation, storage and outreach, the Museum für Asiatische Kunst takes due account of the artistic and academic traditions, theories and standards of value in effect in the cultures of origin. In this case, the focus is always on visual cultures and arts. Contemporary artistic input makes a decisive and often critical contribution toward rounding out the collections and subjecting them to critical examination. In its cooperation with artists, the Museum für Asiatische Kunst puts an

emphasis on practitioners from the cultures of origin, but it also opens its collections to other people with a legitimate interest in the subjects of the museum and the objects stored there.

Cooperation deepens our appreciation of the complexity of global interconnections and makes it possible for us to handle the objects in a way that is both up to date and forward-looking. This entails intensive processes of negotiation that involve differing interests, diverse epistemic practices and global imbalances, and which do not shy away from the possibility of returns or repatriations.

Projects:

www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/research/

www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/collection-research/research/

Current on the Pacific Region:

www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/the-outrigger-boat-from-the-island-of-luf/

Postcolonial Provenance Research

Research on collection and object histories has long been part of museum working practice in ethnological and non-European art historical collections. In recent years, however, the demands in this area have changed and increased. The collections of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst are an important starting point for the discussion of new forms of global knowledge production and the process of recognizing unequal historical distributions of power that continue to have an impact today. Provenance research is an enduring and sustainable task for museums and will play a significant role in determining how collections are treated in the future.

The provenance research team on collection items from colonial contexts at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin is unique both nationally and internationally and sets important standards not only for the research of the museums' own collection holdings.

There are some important differences between research on intra-European contexts of injustice and postcolonial provenance research. For example, beyond provenance

research, alternative concepts of ownership and legal systems that prevailed in the respective regions of origin at the time of acquisition or appropriation must be included. In close cooperation with experts from those regions, contemporary attributions of meanings to the objects must also be researched. In close dialogue, questions of restitution, shared narration of history, or shared curatorship will also be addressed. The provenance research team is currently addressing all of these questions in collaborative projects with partners from Tanzania, Namibia, and China, among others.

Communicating Provenance Research at the Humboldt Forum

For visitors to the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst at the Humboldt Forum, there are numerous in-depth offers to convey the provenance of the objects.

An **accompanying booklet** uses selected collection contexts and objects to introduce the diversity and challenges of provenance research on collectibles from colonial contexts and explains how to proceed. The booklet explains the terminology of postcolonial provenance research, gives an overview of German colonies and colonial wars, and presents the translocation history of various objects on display: For example, that of the Mandu Yenu, the royal throne from Cameroon, that of a Chinese officer's portrait, the Chibinda Ilunga from Angola, and the outrigger boat from Luf Island. Historical events such as the royal campaign of the British against the Kingdom of Benin and the German naval expedition in the Pacific are also represented.:

www.smb.museum/provenienz-hufo

In **guided tours**, visitors are led through the house by the provenance researchers and have the opportunity to enter into a direct conversation about possible problematic provenances.