

Provenance Research at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum – Cultures of the World (RJM)

When carrying out provenance research, museums and other institutions dedicate themselves to the fullest possible validation of the origins of their objects from their creation to their present location. Clarification of the provenance of collections has gained significantly in importance since the signing of the so-called Washington Principles in 1998. The signatories pledged to identify works of art that were expropriated during the Nazi period and together with the rightful owners to find solutions of how to handle the works. In 2008 the Coordination Office for Provenance Research was founded in Germany to provide financial and content-related support for provenance research in individual museums. In 2015 it became the “German Lost Art Foundation” supported by the federal government, federal states and communes and now functions as the central point of contact for unlawfully seized cultural property.

Because of the great relevance of the topic, the City of Cologne created a position for provenance research in the Department for Art and Culture in 2007. Apart from processing concrete applications for restitution, it is also meant to guarantee a systematic and coordinated research in the city’s museums. As in other cities the emphasis of the work initially lay with investigating the origins of works of visual arts.

In the meantime a further emphasis for systematic provenance research has been added in many cities. It was recognised that apart from art looted by the Nazis, there were also ethnographic collections which could have a colonial background or wrongful context and they also needed to be investigated. The aim is to clarify under which legal, political, cultural and epistemological circumstances objects arrived at a museum. Validating an object’s provenance can demonstrate that it found its way lawfully and morally into a collection. Equally this can uncover if an object was questionably acquired and possibly be the first step in returning an object. Over and above that, provenance research can also generate overall knowledge about the history of ethnology and ethnographic collections.

However, reconstructing the journey of an object on its way into a collection is no easy matter. The situation with data is often difficult since collectors, traders and even museums did not keep an eye on documenting the actors in the past. Thus in museum archives there is often only rudimentary information available such as the region where it came from or a short description of the object. In cases such as these there is also little record of collectors or previous owners or indeed about how it was acquired. Moreover, reviewing the existing data and also researching further in external archives or libraries is very time-consuming. The lack of capacities is particularly a hurdle when systematically investigating provenances.

At the RJM investigations into provenances are being performed continuously by the curators. Among other things, earlier results were also integrated into the museum’s permanent exhibition as well as the accompanying catalogue. The first part of the theme-based exhibition “People in their Worlds” shows in which historical context large parts of ethnographic collections were compiled. Using the RJM holdings from the Massim area, Oceania, as an example it is furthermore shown how objects also say something about the circumstances surrounding their acquisition as well as about the collecting policies of museums.

Once the depot had been moved from the old building on Ubierring to the building at Neu- markt, the RJM did a complete inventory of its collections. On the basis of this, concepts for systematic provenance research can now be developed and so create transparency throughout all the areas of the collection. The special exhibition “Crime Scene Cambodia? Tracking Down a Fake” represented the start to further investigations into the collection of Khmer objects in the RJM’s collection. Taking place in the refurbished *Viewpoint in the RJM* from 2 June to 6 August, the exhibition looked at the question of how a fake Khmer sculpture, which has certificates of authenticity and provenance, can make its way onto the art market. Investigations were able to completely verify the fake.

Furthermore, the RJM’s curators are currently part of all kinds of projects that are also concerned with investigating the provenance of objects:

Africa Accessioned:

The curators of the Historical Photo Archive and the Africa Collection are members in the *Africa Accessioned Working Group*. *Africa Accessioned* is a project initiated by the *International Committee of Museums of Ethnography* (ICME) in collaboration with the *Southern African Development Community Heritage Association* (SADCHA). Colleagues in the working group from German, Namibian and Botswanan museums are sharing their knowledge about their collections from Namibia and Botswana and initiating bi-national research and exhibition projects.

Invisible Inventories:

Both curators are also involved in the project *Invisible Inventories* which will lead to an exhibition in Nairobi and Cologne at the end of 2019/beginning of 2020. The 85 objects from Kenya which are part of the RJM collection will form the hub and framework of the project. The RJM curators, together with the deputy director of the *National Museum of Kenya* and a group of Kenyan and German artists, will approach this shared colonial heritage. By use of free artistic expression, the exhibition project will look into the question of how these objects, which are stored in an archive in Germany, can be experienced again by Kenyan society.

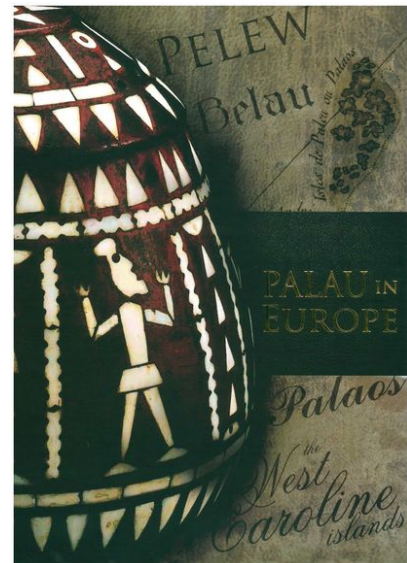
Pacific Presences:

Under the title *Pacific Presences*, scholars from various disciplines as well as artists and representatives from origin groups are researching Oceanic collections in Europe. The project is being supported by European funds and is under the direction of the Cambridge Museum for Archaeology and Anthropology as well as the University of Cambridge. The RJM has part of the collection from the H.M.S. *Royalist* (1890-93) expedition under Admiral Davis. The objects for *Pacific Presences* were photographed, combined with artefacts from other museums and handed over to representatives of the Pacific state of Kiribati. Additionally, works are being produced that will be shown at the *9th Asia Pacific Triennial* in Brisbane, Australia, and which will create a connection from yesterday to today.

Palau in Europe:

An extensive catalogue of Palauan artefacts in Europe was created through the collaboration of 15 European museums, including the RJM. Most of the objects do not exist any more today on the Palauan Islands and the knowledge of how they were produced has been forgotten. Apart from the materials and production techniques, the research has also highlighted who the collectors were and the circumstances under which the objects were acquired. As it turns out, the Palauan objects were not spoils of war from the German colonial period nor were they acquired violently. The influence of various anthropologists, civil servants and traders on Palauan society also becomes clear.

Etpison, Mandy Thijssen and Constanze Dupont (eds.).
2017. *Palau in Europe*. Palau: Etpison Museum.



Current Restitution:

Under the *Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme* the *Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa* is coordinating the repatriation of human remains from international institutions to the relevant Māori-Tribes (*iwi*). During the years 1969-1975 the RJM published material about a mummified and tattooed human head (*toi moko*) in its own collection and in 1969 lent it to the Nagoya City Art Museum in Japan for their exhibition on “Art of the Peoples of the World”. In April 2017 the *Te Papa* Museum contacted the RJM about this *toi moko*. In May, colleagues from both museums discussed the next steps for a possible repatriation of the head.

(Last revised: 2017)