

Provenance Research: a touchy subject?

As part of a course about Ethics in Provenance research, I held a semi-structured Interview with a museum curator. In the course, we developed questions about provenance research and how to consider these ethically. As these questions and considerations were mostly theoretical, our teacher appointed us to hold interviews with someone working in the museum world. My interest led me to the Rietberg Museum in Zurich, which has a collection of art from Africa, Asia, America, and Oceania. The Museum Rietberg is part of the *Swiss Benin Initiative*, which was founded to look into the provenance of Benin objects transparently. The museum also has a researcher solely for provenance research: Esther Tisa Francini. It is clear that Rietberg engages with dialogues regarding provenance and aims to move provenance research forward.

I was interested in what ways provenance research bleeds into other parts of the museum and how it is perceived or handled. Thus, I have asked Dr. Axel Langer to talk about provenance research with me. He is the head curator of the near and middle eastern collection in the Rietberg Museum and was responsible for the latest exhibition in the Rietberg Museum “Im Namen des Bildes – Das Bild zwischen Kult und Verbot in Islam und Christentum”. What follows is a structured summary of the discussion we had.

At the time of the interview, Axel Langer and others in the Rietberg were doing extensive provenance research for an exhibition called “Wege der Kunst – Wie die Objekte ins Museum kommen” starting on the 17th of June. Concerning this, he explained that in his and the museums understanding an object’s provenance starts with its production and continues until it arrives in the museum.¹ He stressed that we also have to keep in mind that provenance research is never completed, there is always a possibility of a resurfacing document or text that is part of the object’s biography. He remarked that objects from the middle eastern collection were stolen, but that happened already 200 years ago making it *Raubkunst*.² There is one Iranian object that he suspects consists of a stolen Indian miniature while the bordure is Iranian. Also, there is a medicinal compendium that was stolen at the end

¹ Freely translated by Laura Hutter from German: “Provenienz verstehen wir wirklich von Anfang an, so wirklich von der Produktion des Objektes, bis es ins Museum kommt.”

² Freely translated by Laura Hutter from German: “Und wir [Abteilung ‘Naher und Mittlerer Osten’] haben natürlich Objekte, die dazwischen mal gestohlen wurden, also Raubkunst waren, die dann, aber Raubkunst waren schon vor 200 Jahren.”

of the 17th century by the Mogul invasion into South India and was integrated into a library. The way of the medicinal compendium can be traced thanks to library stamps. But the older an object is, the more difficult it is to reconstruct its history. Axel Langer stated that studying the object's provenance brings forth certain patterns that can be recognized. He talked about Indian miniature paintings as an example which were always used as trading goods and were part of the art market in India from as early as the 18th century.

Another important aspect regarding the provenance of objects is political turmoil or war. Art often appears in these contexts and is relocated either because people flee, take their heritage with them and it gets stolen, or they need money and have to sell it. The problem with such complex exchanges according to Axel Langer is that these objects need extensive research. Back in the middle of the 20th century, no one was asking questions about the background of an object.

The annexation of new objects for the collection was something I was interested in as well. I suspected that there are not as many questionable objects in the middle and near eastern collections, as for example, in the African collection. Archaeological objects were the only ones raising questions about their provenance. On my thoughts, Axel Langer stated instantly that he does not purchase archeological objects exactly for the high risk of them being illicitly trafficked. Every curator is responsible for buying new pieces for their collection and there are possible loopholes, but he emphasized that he will not buy any antiquities. Even though it is his responsibility, such a decision is also discussed in a committee. Axel Langer recounted that usually, his colleague Esther Tisa Francini from provenance research would intervene and firstly ask: "What do we know about the provenance of the piece?". Axel Langer expressed that the difficulty with information about the provenance is that the art market will not reveal such information directly. It is usually necessary to ask about it via mail or Phone call. He found that ultimately the exchange with other researchers becomes immensely important to finding answers in provenance research.

An important step in terms of provenance research is the publication of that information for the wider public. Axel Langer referred to an example of an Iranian miniature that was commissioned by a British official who sold the piece in Europe to an English philanthrope who in turn inherited his riches accumulated by slave work. The provenance reveals the twisted history of the piece and the immoral actions of the people involved, but

there is no one to hold accountable for it. Even though there is no opportunity to make amends, Axel Langer emphasizes how important it is to tell those stories because it shows the complexity behind those artworks, and it reflects our Western richness which is a product of colonialism.

The examples given by Axel Langer and his insight into the daily routine of a museum helped me see another side of provenance research which is more passive but still accompanies many aspects of museum work. I want to thank Axel Langer for taking the time to talk to me!