

Introduction to thematic block 5¹: The institutionalisation and networking of provenance research from different historical contexts

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While the German discourse on “postcolonial provenance research” in ethnological museums is indeed relatively new (see the introduction to this conference anthology²), for some time now systematic provenance research on National Socialist (Nazi-era) contexts, i.e. the transaction and accession period 1933 – 1945,³ has been carried out in many German museums, both large and small.⁴ Ethnological museums and collections are no exception, and have likewise established projects addressing Nazi-era provenance research in the last few years. In Göttingen, for example, researchers have studied collection holdings which had been translocated in 1942 from the municipal Museum of Ethnography in Łódź, via Leipzig, to the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Göttingen (Herrmann 2018) – and which have since been restituted to Łódź. Researchers at Bremen’s Übersee-Museum are currently reappraising the collection of the former Lüderitz Museum, which was privately founded in Bremen in 1940, having made its acquisitions – including some ethnographica – during the course of colonial revisionist aspirations in the 1930s and 1940s (see the chapter by Wiebke Ahrndt in this anthology).⁵

Nazi-era provenance research can now look back on a 20-year history of establishment, systematisation and institutionalisation in Germany. Since the Washington Declaration of 1998, progress has been made in small and large increments, sustained not only by institutions but also to a remarkable extent by the initiative and engagement of the provenance researchers themselves – expedited in no small part by the Gurlitt case. The German federal government, federal states and municipalities have created support instruments, concept

¹ This is the translation of a German article extracted from the anthology of contributions to the conference “*Provenienzforschung in ethnologischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*” [Provenance research on ethnographic collections from the colonial era] held on 7–8 April, 2017, organised by the Working Group on Museums of the German Anthropological Association and the Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich; cf. Förster et al. 2018.

² All references to “this publication”, “this anthology” and to specific chapters, sections and articles pertain to the conference anthology, cf. n. 1.

³ The usage of the term “transaction or accession period 1933–1945” is intended to make clear that Nazi-era provenance research is not confined only to objects accessioned by museums between 1933 and 1945, but studies all objects which either changed hands or changed legal ownership in the period 1933–1945, in which case the circumstances of this change of physical or legal owner must be examined thoroughly. This applies regardless of the – possibly very much later – date on which the object in question became part of a museum collection. Similar considerations apply to postcolonial provenance research, which scrutinises changes of physical or legal owners in situ in the colonised territories.

⁴ For an overview, see the publications of the earlier *Koordinierungsstelle für Kulturgutverluste* – Magdeburg Coordination Center for Lost Cultural Assets; volumes 1–9, 2001–2012), and the “*Provenienz und Forschung*” [Provenance and research] series of the *Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste* – German Lost Art Foundation. For a statistical survey: <https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Webs/DE/Forschungsfoerderung/Projektstatistiken/Index.html> (retrieved 1.10.2017).

⁵ Further projects exist(ed) at the following museums: the *Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde* in Leipzig, the *Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum* in St. Gallen, the *Landesmuseum Hannover*, the *Linden-Museum Stuttgart*, the *Museum Fünf Kontinente* in Munich, the *Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe* in Hamburg, the *Museum Rietberg* in Zürich, the *Übersee-Museum* in Bremen and the *Weltmuseum Wien* in Vienna.

papers, guidance documents, structures and positions for the development and coordination of provenance research projects. Academics involved in provenance research have developed and refined methods of investigation and interpretation, have established networks of individuals, institutions and content, and have organised themselves into a working group which also communicates the necessities and challenges of provenance research covering the period 1933–1945 to a wider, external audience.

In order to fathom the possibilities and limitations of establishing and practising systematic postcolonial provenance research, it therefore seems worthwhile to look back at the experience gained in the systematisation and institutionalisation of Nazi-era provenance research. This gives rise to such questions as the following: how have provenance researchers, in a field laden with cultural policy issues and influenced by actors from very different realms (academia, politics, the art market, the law), managed to pursue and follow through their interests in the long term? Are the instruments, mechanisms and strategies that led to systematisation and institutionalisation in Nazi-era provenance research wholly or partially transferable to colonial provenance research?⁶ What opportunities for cooperation does this bring to light? And what perspectives and objectives for the networking of provenance research from different historical contexts can be developed as a result – especially bearing in mind the very germane issue of disparate baseline situations?

Colleagues from the field of Nazi-era provenance research addressed these and other questions at the conference and, accordingly, in this anthology. Johanna Poltermann gives a résumé of developments in Nazi-era provenance research from the perspective of the committee of the Provenance Research Association (*Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V.*). Founded in 2000 by academics working in provenance research and formalised as an association in 2014, this working group has driven forward the development of scientific standards and methods for Nazi-era provenance research. It is a forum for the discussion, with reference to case examples, of successes, challenges, desiderata and omissions in the field of Nazi-era provenance research, not least with a view to establishing provenance research as an academic discipline.

Claudia Andratschke demonstrates with reference to the Network for Provenance Research in Lower Saxony (*Netzwerk Provenienzforschung in Niedersachsen*) how provenance research can purposefully be coordinated throughout a region, laying foundations that enable a network for colonial era provenance research to be developed. In the case of the Landesmuseum Hannover, a designated member of staff now holds responsibility for the coordination of Nazi-era and colonial provenance research. Such an amalgamation is otherwise only found at the Museum Rietberg in Zürich, where a fixed-term project focusing on the accession period 1933–1945 led to the creation of a post for provenance research with a remit covering both historical contexts.⁷

Finally, Gilbert Lupfer brings into focus a theme that has hitherto been entirely neglected in the public discourse: the problematic accession contexts that arose in the Soviet Occupation Zone and in the German Democratic Republic; for example, due to the expropriation of privately owned real estate or the repression of private collectors. Here once again, a research field is opening up which has yet to be structured and organised and for which methods and systematisation strategies need to be developed.⁸

The thought of bringing together different historical domains of work in provenance research was the subject of surprisingly contentious discussion, both immediately after the panel and during the subsequent conference proceedings.⁹ Several arguments were advanced against any rapprochement between Nazi-era and colonial provenance research.

First, the “newness” of systematic colonial provenance research was called into question by some representatives of that subject area, particularly from an older generation (also see the introduction to this

⁶ On this aspect, see also Förster 2016.

⁷ I am grateful to Esther Tisa-Francini for important pointers during the writing of this section.

⁸ On this aspect, cf. also the conference on “*Provenienzforschung zur SBZ/DDR*” [Provenance research on the SOZ/GDR], 27.11.2017, Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin.

⁹ Cf. Schasiepen 2017; Rein 2017: 27; Wonisch 2017.

anthology). Ethnological collections have indeed carried out lot-based research into the acquisition histories and biographies of objects for many decades, and some participants considered this to be sufficient. In contrast, the subsequent presentation of systematic provenance research projects on collections from Africa convincingly showed that even the most obvious systematisation of historical accession research on colonial era collections, namely a concerted reappraisal of collections from former German colonies, had not been performed by any museum to date. Existing approaches must therefore continue to evolve as a matter of urgency.

A second objection concerned the “otherness” of museum-based ethnological provenance research, which is an important topic in current ethnological debates (cf. also Förster 2017). A particular desideratum or postulate of *ethnological* provenance research is cooperation with societies of origin – ideally from an early stage in the development of a research project. Indeed, this practice might allow methods that have only seldom been brought to bear in other areas of provenance research, such as oral history research, to become constitutive for a project. Other differences between colonial and Nazi-era provenance research, pertaining for example to the nature of the objects, the goals of the research as well as concomitant difficulties in the research process, often prove to be less sizeable than was assumed at first glance. In the first place, Nazi-era provenance research similarly deals with everyday objects like books and utensils. Another similarity in Nazi-era provenance research is that after larger collections have been sifted through, sometimes only a very small portion is treated as “Nazi-confiscated art” (one need only think of the Gurlitt case), and not every object identified as tainted is eventually restituted. At the same time, as this research area is broadened and deepened, assessments of objects and distinctions between tainted and non-tainted objects are being refined. And a final similarity with research on the transaction period 1933–1945 is that critical analysis of the respective collecting institution’s history and the historical dealings of its patrons is an important motivation. Therefore, and this was the fundamental idea of the panel, the difficult questions being dealt with by provenance researchers for the period 1933–45 can help to hone awareness for the classification and treatment of colonial acquisition contexts: academics from the two fields can learn from one another’s experiences.¹⁰

A further argument voiced by the critics related to the question of the transferability of approaches from Nazi-era provenance research to colonial era provenance research in ethnographic collections (cf. the article by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin in this anthology). The moral and ethical underpinning of Nazi-era provenance research, it was argued, exerts certain prejudicial effects when it comes to the study of colonial contexts, and impedes objective research into the diversity of colonial accession contexts. These remarks suggested an astonishing disregard of the (European) collecting sciences’ entanglement in the colonial project, long diagnosed by historians and widely considered to be the consolidated state of research,¹¹ and ultimately of the shared responsibility of ethnological museums in the reappraisal of German colonial history.

Finally, the heavy referencing of legal discourses and processes within Nazi-era provenance research was criticised. The objection to this is that both countries and communities of origin as well as museums – most recently the President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (*Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*)¹² – have repeatedly expressed a desire for coordinated handling of provenance and restitution issues, underpinned by multilateral conventions like those created for Nazi-era material in the form of the Washington Principles and the so-called Joint Declaration (*Gemeinsame Erklärung*), the latter being specific to the Federal Republic of Germany. Instead of focusing on the legal hurdles, attention should be directed instead – according to a

¹⁰ In this connection, interested parties are recommended to participate in the meetings of the *Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung*, which have meanwhile also been looking at technical, ethnographic, natural history and other collections, cf.: <http://arbeitskreis-provenienzforschung.org/index.php?id=arbeitskreistreffen> (retrieved 1.10.2017).

¹¹ On this aspect, cf. most recently: Deutsches Historisches Museum 2016, and, moreover, the relevant research on this theme published by Douglas Cole, Carsten Gräbel, Glenn Penny and Matti Bunzl, Holger Stoecker, Jürgen Zimmerer, and Andrew Zimmerman, to name but a few.

¹² On this aspect, see “*Hermann Parzinger fordert internationale Vereinbarung zu kolonialem Erbe*” [Hermann Parzinger calls for international agreement on colonial heritage], in: *Tagesspiegel*, 2.1.2018.

suggestion from the ranks of the critics – to the “horizon of possibilities” (Wayne Modest),¹³ the social processes that provenance research can set in train: processes of communication, reconciliation and exchange between institutions and heirs. Even if the search for a “fair and just solution”, as recommended in the Washington Principles, consists of exactly these kinds of processes, a field does appear to be identified here which would merit discussion in more detail at future conferences: the field of possible cooperations and collaborations. For the two areas of provenance research probably do differ in the scope that exists for the interaction of researchers and curators with actual, potential and presumed heirs and communities of heirs. This might ultimately prompt reflection on the question of how differences in the framing conditions – of a political and legal nature, for example – contribute to different modi and focuses, points of emphasis and blind spots in the investigation of collections and of transaction and accession contexts.

The heated discussion at the conference, to which the committee of the Provenance Research Association responds with a comment in this publication (see the article by Johanna Poltermann), testifies to the necessity for a continuing exchange of views about commonalities and differences, potential synergies and essential distinctions and divergences.

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¹³ Cf. Schasiapen 2017, commenting on the input to the conference discussion by Wayne Modest, Research Center for Material Culture, Leiden.