



The Non-European Collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – General Policy of the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz on Management and on Provenance Research

The proper approach to handling non-European objects and their history has been a matter of public debate for some years now. In the course of the preparations for the Humboldt Forum, the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) has formulated its general policy on this issue.

- The non-European collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin), in particular the collections of the former Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (Royal Museum of Ethnography), were assembled by generations of scientists, travelers, missionaries, colonial officials, military men, and private individuals with the aim of documenting and studying societies outside Europe.
- To this day, the collections have provided an important basis for research and for conveying the insights gained thereby to the public. In addition, they are a valuable source of knowledge for the communities of origin. The views taken of the ethnological collections have changed continually over the last hundred years. It is therefore essential for the SPK to continue developing its own work in dialogue with stakeholders from the societies of origin, artists, scholars, scientists, and members of the public. It is not only scientific research and museum practice that are undergoing a process of constant change, but also attitudes in the societies of origin. The collections are therefore regularly and repeatedly reassessed, which can result in new or different attributions of significance. With this in mind, the General Policy formulated below will also have to be reviewed and refined on a regular basis.
- One of the most important international benchmarks for the SPK in the management of its collections is the Code of Ethics adopted by the International Council of Museums, ICOM. The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* is its statutory statement of professional ethics for museums, reflecting principles that are generally accepted by the international museum community. It is presented as a series of principles, supported by guidelines for desirable professional practice.
http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Codes/code_ethics2013_eng.pdf
- As part of their scholarly mission, all of the SPK's institutions are committed to investigating the genesis and origin of their collections as well as the individual collections and object groups contained in them. Of course, this also applies to the extensive and diverse collections that do not come from a European context. However, information is not available on all of these objects. For example, the circumstances of acquisition may not have been comprehensively recorded, or the corresponding documents may not have been archived, at every stage of the collection's history, because the motives for creating collections and the scientific methods used have changed over the decades. Furthermore, historical events such as the First and Second World Wars have resulted in a great loss of information in

respect of the documentation of German museums and collections.

Owing to the great number and variety of the objects in the collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, it is not possible to investigate and clarify all of the provenance paths comprehensively in a short time. The histories of the objects to be presented in the Humboldt Forum from 2019 onwards are therefore being given priority. In researching these exhibits, the aim is to illuminate the various historical and social conditions under which they became part of the collections. This applies to relations within Europe and to relations between Europe and the regions of origin, and last but not least to local relations within the regions of origin. The results of this research will continue to be made accessible in publications (such as exhibition catalogs and scholarly journals) as well as online. In addition, it is intended to examine whether particular objects are suitable for illustrating problematic historical relationships, especially those from the colonial era.

- The exchange of knowledge and opinions with representatives of the societies of origin is a permanent and indispensable part of the work and the ethos of the curators at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. It is important to get into conversation so that any work done in connection with the objects can permanently incorporate the significance of the objects to the societies of origin and what their members know about them. As far as the handling of the objects and their presentation in the public sphere are concerned, the aim is to discuss options in an open dialogue and jointly develop solutions that will remain viable in the long term. It is of primary importance to find, by mutual agreement, means of allowing these objects to remain accessible to scholarship in a way that also serves the public interest, so that they can contribute to mutual awareness and understanding.

In line with the concept of shared heritage, particular care is taken to ensure that the prerogative of interpretation is not exercised unilaterally by European scholars. Even in dialog with members of a society of origin, however, it is not always possible to achieve a result that is satisfactory to all of the stakeholders – a situation that may be connected, for example, with the issue of authorizing representatives. In this respect, it is important to develop new ideas and models of cooperation.

In some cases, it may be advisable to agree the return of certain objects.

- Each object has an individual significance and history, which must be considered in order to do justice to the object and to the society from which it comes. History is understood as an open-ended, ongoing process of interpreting the past. The SPK and the staff working with the non-European collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin aim to take a differentiated approach to the collections and their particular histories in order to contribute to mutual appreciation in the interaction between different societies.

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