

The Collection of the Museum Rietberg in a Global Context: History and Transparency, Multiperspectivity and Cooperation

As a museum for non-European art, the Museum Rietberg is a forum for art created around the world, and a place where people can make contact with cultures from beyond Europe and engage in an exchange with them. In the context of the *global turn*, it is a matter of importance to the museum not to tell the story of art history solely from the perspective of the West. The work and ideas of artists from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas are the focus of attention at the Museum Rietberg, an institution that can look back on a long tradition of cooperation with the countries of origin of the items in its collection. Exchange over many years and dialogue on equal terms have become all the more significant in the light of the current debate surrounding issues of restitution and collections that originated in the colonial era.

In its approach to its history, research, knowledge, and collection, the Museum Rietberg pursues an active and cooperative strategy with the following key points:

Transparency and Openness

- Some 60,000 objects and photographs in the Museum's collection have been inventoried and recorded in its MuseumPlus **database**. External academics or other interested parties can access the German-language database at any time.
- Details about the objects in the Museum's collection are also published in the **Online-Collection** with images, standardized details, and provenances, if already recorded. Currently around 50% of the Museum's holdings are listed; the remainder will follow over the next few years. Digital access to the details about the collection is especially important for countries of origin.
- Since 2007, the Museum has displayed a large part of the items in its collection in the **open storeroom**. For conservation reasons, the collections of textiles, graphic arts, and paintings are available to view only upon request. Portions of extensive collections and large items are stored at an external location that is also open for specific research purposes.

History of the Collection and Provenance Research

- **Provenance Research** is an integral part of the work of the Museum that in 2008 established a post dedicated to that end. Working with the curators, the post holder is tasked with documenting and researching the history of the collection. On the basis of the 1998 Washington Principles, the initial focus lay on the Nazi era.
- Following the major exhibition in 2013 about the museum's founding collection endowed by Eduard von der Heydt, provenance research began to focus on the circum-

stances of the acquisition of objects in their countries of origin, as well as on the international art market for non-European works, with special consideration given to the **colonial era**. Collaborative provenance research is growing in importance: joint projects are undertaken with countries of origin to ensure that the contexts in which objects were acquired are examined more closely from every angle.

- Regular **research trips** to countries of origin and long-term relations with local scholars, artists, and other interested parties are regarded as essential. From 2018 to 2022, for instance, the Swiss National Science Foundation is funding a research project titled *Hans Himmelheber – African art and entangled knowledge production*. Jointly undertaken by the Museum Rietberg and the University of Zurich, this project focuses on the art anthropologist Hans Himmelheber, who researched and collected in Africa between 1933 and 1976; it involves cooperation with research partners and museums.
- The Museum Rietberg investigates the provenance of its **current acquisitions**. As stated in its public-domain collection policy, it complies with the ICOM code of ethics for museums as well as with Switzerland's Cultural Property Transfer Act (KGTG) of 2005.

Restitution Claims and Restitution

- As a matter of principle, the Museum Rietberg is **willing to consider** the restitution of works of art if their rightful owners, or their heirs, request their return.
- To date, however, the Museum Rietberg has received **no such request** from any country of origin.
- In connection with the Nazi era, the Museum in 2010 **actively** sought out the heirs of Jewish owners, and negotiated compensation with them. The Washington Principles as ratified by 44 states in 1998 provided the basis for settlement.
- The works of art within the **African collection** are being assessed to establish whether their acquisition was the result of the use of force. In the case of three items, a connection with the punitive expedition to Benin City by British colonial forces in 1897 is strongly suspected. The possibility that British forces confiscated a further nine objects from the Kingdom of Benin cannot yet be ruled out; research into their provenance is still in progress. Current research findings are made public (Museum website, exhibitions, annual report).
- Other museum departments also investigate and publish the circumstances in which their objects were purchased and traded.
- Where a transfer of ownership of an object appears problematic, contact with representatives of the country of origin is actively sought. The **process of negotiation** about how to treat such an object in future is viewed by the Museum as an opportunity. Restitution is a possibility, not a certainty; other potential outcomes include

such an object being loaned, a financial settlement, or a joint research and exhibition project. Ideally, a long-term relationship can be established with the museum in question, and a new approach found in relation to shared historical heritage. In terms of the Kingdom of Benin, all Swiss museums with problematic holdings are devising a national blueprint for dialogue with the Nigerian government.

- The Museum Rietberg supports the call for an **international agreement** in respect of the colonial era; to be drawn up in concert with the nations of the Global South, it would be comparable to the Washington Principles in respect of the Nazi era.

Cooperation and Exchange on Equal Terms

- As a museum for art from around the world, the Museum Rietberg since its inception has been characterized by cooperation and dialogue with artists and cultural practitioners from the countries of origin of the items in its collection. The Museum Rietberg maintains **long-term partnerships** with museums and cultural institutions in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.
- **Current** collaborative projects include the restoration and preservation of cultural heritage (e.g. in cooperation with Cameroon and Peru), joint excavations (SLSA) as well as the sponsorship of art centres and cultural institutions (Côte d'Ivoire, India). The Museum has also had a long-standing agreement with the Alice Boner Institute in Varanasi and its art historian Harsha Vinay. In 2015, the Museum Rietberg's collection of lutes prompted close cooperation with the Santal ethnic group and the National Museum in Delhi. Close cooperation with Indian academics has also led to joint exhibitions and publications (see below). The Museum Rietberg offers regular *artists in residence* programmes (e.g. in the forthcoming exhibition about the Congo in 2019).
- On 4 July 2019, a conference on collaborative projects between museums in Europa and Africa took place in Yaoundé (Cameroon), initiated by the Museum Rietberg in joint partnership with the palace museum in Fombran, and organized by the Swiss Embassy in Cameroon. The main presentations dealt with issues such as conservation-restoration, training, capacity building, research, history of the collections, and restitution.
- Cooperative and networking activities with Korea and artists from Pakistan are also currently being pursued in the fields of conservation and restoration.
- Members of staff at the Museum Rietberg have received various foreign honours in recognition of their achievements: the Government of India in 2012 awarded Eberhard Fischer the "Padma Shri" for services to Literature and Education; Côte d'Ivoire in 2015 awarded Eberhard Fischer and Lorenz Homberger its "décoration au grade d'officier de l'ordre du Mérite ivoirien"; and Johannes Beltz was named a "Friendship Ambassador" at a ceremony in the Swiss Embassy in Delhi in 2018).

Exhibitions, Publications and Art Education

- Looking beyond what is commonly a European-influenced canon of non-European cultures, the Museum Rietberg hosts exhibitions that regularly focus on art and **artists** from the countries of origin of the objects in its collection. Artworks are thus examined in the light of local theories of art and aesthetics. Some of its exhibitions are today considered to be pioneering in the field of art history (e.g. *The Way of the Master – The Great Artists of India* in 2011, *African Masters – Art from the Ivory Coast* in 2014), and the monographic exhibitions on Hasegawa Tohaku in 2001, Luo Ping in 2009, Sengai in 2014 and Rosetsu in 2018.
- Numerous exhibitions and publications have been produced **jointly** with academics and museum specialists in countries of origin (e.g. *Kunsttraditionen in Nordindien* in collaboration with Haku Shah, 1972; *The Way of the Master* in collaboration with B. Goswamy in 2011; *African Masters* in 2014; *Nazca* in 2018), and shown in the countries of origin (e.g. *Alice Boner* in 2017, *Chavin* in 2013, *Nazca* in 2018), have presented works by contemporary artists (*Fascination of Persia*, 2013; *Chinese Calligraphy*, 2016; *Pakistan*, 2019; *Congo*, 2019), and/or address the topic of entangled transcultural history (*Blue and White Porcelain from Asia and Europe*, 2006; *Ivories from Ceylon*, 2010; *Fascination of Persia*, 2013).
- Particular collectors have been the focus of several exhibitions with an accompanying catalogue (e.g. *Eduard von der Heydt* in 2013, *Han Coray in Dada Africa* in 2016, *Alice and Georgette Boner* in 1994 and 2018, respectively). In 2018/2019, the **history** of the collection was the subject of an exhibition called “*Die Frage der Provenienz – Einblicke in die Sammlungsgeschichte*” (The Question of Provenance: Insight into the History of the Collection).
- The journal *Artibus Asiae* was founded in 1925, and has been published by the Museum Rietberg since 1991. It presents the findings of high-quality research into the arts and archaeology of Asia.
- The Museum Rietberg sees itself as a **place of encounter** and cross-cultural exchange. Its programme for schools called “*Understanding Religion through Art*” reflects this. The Museum’s events listings and art education classes regularly include music, dance, and theatre with performers from India, China, Japan, South America, and West and Central Africa; members of the respective diasporas resident in Switzerland are regularly involved in the activities of the Museum Rietberg.

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