

Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit

Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte

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Das Buch versammelt die Beiträge zur gleichnamigen Tagung am 7./8. April 2017 – veranstaltet von der AG Museum der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie (DGSKA) und dem Museum Fünf Kontinente, München. Herausgeberinnen und Autor_innen behandeln darin u.a. die Frage nach einer sinnvollen Systematisierung und Institutionalisierung von postkolonialer Provenienzforschung, nach internationaler Vernetzung, insbesondere zu den Herkunftsländern und -gesellschaften, und stellen aktuelle Forschungs- und Ausstellungsprojekte zum Thema vor.

The book collects the contributions to the conference of the same name that took place on 7th/8th April 2017, and was organised by the Working Group on Museums of the German Anthropological Association and the Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich. Editors and authors discuss issues such as meaningful systematization and institutionalization of postcolonial provenance research, international networking and collaboration, in particular with regards to source countries and communities, and present current research and exhibition projects on the subject.

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Historical Collections Research

Some Experiences from the Past Decades

Christian Feest

The following account is of necessity largely autobiographical, partly because space does not permit a more comprehensive treatment, and partly because in the 1960s the field was still in its infancy and in my early forays into historical collections research I was thus mostly left to my own devices (see also Feest 2014a: 14–20).

In November 1963, when I found myself working as a research assistant at the Museum of Ethnology Vienna (now: Weltmuseum Wien) I had little idea what all these objects meant and why they were preserved, although only three percent of them were on display. (I also did not anticipate staying at the museum for thirty years as curator of the North and Middle American collections.) As a student of anthropology I was beginning to do research on the historical ethnography of Virginia Algonquians in the seventeenth century, a subject in which I would be less disadvantaged when compared to my American colleagues who more easily could do fieldwork in contemporary Native American societies. This research, which included the study of ethnographic and archaeological objects, suggested to me that ethnological museums were archives of historically collected documents of material culture. In order to be documents, these artifacts needed to be securely tied to the historical and ethnographic milieu from which they had been collected, in other words, to be located in space and time. Since, contrary to a popular metaphor, artifacts do not speak to disclose their origin and meaning, a paper trail was needed – a viable bridge between their source and their present resting place in the museum's storage facilities. Walking over this bridge, one might also learn something about the

vagaries of fate encountered by these artifacts in their transformation from articles of daily use to material documents of a foreign past.¹

In 1964, the North American Indian hall of the museum in Vienna was taken down to make room for another exhibition, and I had the opportunity to reorganize the storage and to closely study the now archived material in preparation for a new installation some years later. A look at the literature on ethnographic objects from North America revealed that such artifacts in European museums were particularly important because they significantly predated similar collections in the United States and Canada.² It also revealed the mostly cavalier fashion in which dates and ethnic origins were attributed. In the resulting catalog (Feest 1968), the earliest documented dates for each object were given and qualified as to whether this date was the known year of production, of collecting, of accession by the museum, or some other verifiable point of time. In the accompanying exhibition, all objects were likewise dated – a practice still very uncommon for ethnographic objects at that time.

My search for documentary evidence began with a look at the museum's inventories, which provided the date of acquisition and the name of the previous owner of an object, its name (usually coinciding with its function), and a more or less specific or correct ethnic attribution. Some additional information could be gleaned from the collectors files, but before the 1970s, when I rescued a large stack of files of correspondence already destined for disposal as waste paper, the museum had no archive to speak of.³ Despite the wealth of historically significant collections from the Americas in Vienna, little research had been done on this material either by the Americanist curators of the past (all of whom had specialized on pre-Columbian Mexico), with the possible exception of the »Mexican treasures« of the sixteenth century, which since 1879 had been more the subject of speculation than of serious research.⁴

The important North American collections were still a *tabula rasa*, including the objects collected in 1778 on the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America by James Cook (see Feest 1995b) and two important missionary collections

1 See, e.g., Feest 1998 for an obviously much later illustration of the biography of things.

2 This ultimately led to systematic surveys of material from the Americas dating prior to 1750 in European museums and the history of their collecting (e.g., Feest 1985; 1992; 1995a), partly inspired by a comparable American survey of North American Indian items in North America before 1850 (Feder 1965).

3 On archives and the surprising lack of historical consciousness in ethnological museums until the fairly recent past, see Feest in press.

4 Nowotny (1960), my predecessor as curator at the museum and one of the idols of my student years, was one of the major exceptions. For a summary of this research, see Feest 1990 and 2010.

from the Great Lakes region from the period 1820–1850. One of the latter had come from the estate of Johann Georg Schwarz, a Vienna furrier, who was the first American consul in Vienna and secretary of the Leopoldinen-Stiftung, an organization devoted to the support of evangelization in the Americas (Kasprzycki 2007); the other one had served as a traveling exhibition to raise money for the missions and had been assembled by Martin Pitzer, a painter from Bavaria, who had been sent in 1851 by the Ludwigs-Missionsverein in Munich to the same missions also supported by the Austrians (Pitzer 1854). The search for data to Schwarz led me to the archives of the Archdiocese of Vienna, where I found a wealth of ethnographic information contained in the printed and unprinted reports by missionaries preserved in the papers of the Leopoldinen-Stiftung. The detective work of two of my students later led to the discovery that a substantial part of the Schwarz collection had been assembled prior to 1837 by Frédéric Résé (Friedrich Rese), the first Bishop of Detroit (Kasprzycki and Krpata 1988).

In 1966, I began to visit other ethnological museums in Europe and took an interest in the history of their North American collections. Apart from the comparative interest of this material, it turned out that in a number of cases, collections had been divided before being placed in different museums, where additional relevant documentary information could be found.

Since 1965, my endeavors to develop a systematic approach were promoted by exchanges with William C. Sturtevant, a curator in the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution, whose research on old collections from the Americas at home and abroad had helped to shape his thinking about the role of museums as »archives« or »data banks« (Sturtevant 1969, 1973). He quoted two tongue-in-cheek observations made in a review of the Arthur Speyer collection (Feest 1968: 154) as »Feest's Laws of Museum Documentation« (Sturtevant 1973: 45), both of which have passed the test of time.

The first »law« relates to the practice of attributing provenience, especially in the process of the transformation of ethnographic objects into works of indigenous art: »If it looks good we can always find a label for it« describes the widespread preference of »connoisseurship« over solid historical research.⁵ One of the most notorious examples of this practice was found in the venerable

5 In the formulation of this law I may have been in part guided by the observation of Wilcomb E. Washburn, a Smithsonian Institution historian who had introduced me to Sturtevant, that exhibition labels are frequently not based on research-based knowledge and that the "rigid concern with seeing that the written record of our past ... should be an example to curators of those companion keys to the past – manufactures" (Washburn 1964: 250).

Museum of the American Indian – Heye Foundation (MAI) in New York, where the ethnic origin of objects was attributed on the basis of opinions developed by the staff even in the face of contradicting documents. William N. Fenton, a leading figure in Iroquois studies and one of the people Sturtevant had put me in touch with, once related how he had donated part of his own collection to the MAI; his offer to supply detailed information on the origin of the specimens was countered with the remark: »Don't worry, we know how to call these things.« In 2015, I did research on the Native American collection of the Kemper Art Museum of Washington University in St. Louis. It turned out that a substantial part of the collection, acquired in 1909 for \$5,000, had in 1960 been bought by the MAI for \$1,250 on the condition of anonymity of the seller. Although extensive information on the provenience of the objects was available, none of this was acknowledged by the MAI, obviously because the new owner »could always find a label for it«.⁶

The practice was widespread in Germany as well. In the 1920s and again in the 1960s, there were circles of curators and collectors (Hans Plischke from Göttingen, Patty Frank from Radebeul, and Arthur Speyer sen. from Berlin before World War II; Fritz Jäger from Stuttgart, Karl H. Henking from Berne, and Arthur Speyer sen. and jr. after the war) who at the beer table would share and mutually reinforce their ideas about the origin of certain Native American artifact types. At the same time, collectors like the Speyers generally honored the condition of anonymity of their partners in exchanges with museums, making the reconstruction of the pedigree of objects that passed through their collection a major effort (Sturtevant 2001).

An even earlier and especially telling example of the lack of distinction between documentation and connoisseurship is supplied in connection with the acquisition of the historically significant collection from North America of Maximilian Prince of Wied by the later Linden-Museum in Stuttgart. When in 1905, a year after the acquisition, the German-American artist Frederick Weygold encouraged Count Karl von Linden to do historical research on the collection and at the same time offered some guesses about the possible attributions of certain objects, Count Linden added Weygold's attributions to the original acquisition list. Later researchers were thus led to believe that these designations had originally come with the collection (Feest and Corum 2017: 30–31, 224).

6 The documentary evidence has since been communicated to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington (the MAI's successor), where it was gratefully received as an important contribution to the museum's effort to redocument its collections.

The fact of the matter is that attributions made without the benefit of documentary evidence have gained respectability through publication in exhibition catalogs. Connoisseurship dominates in the market for »indigenous arts,« where buyers, dealers, and their experts are connoisseurs, and where certain labels for objects have become markers of market value. Historical collections research can demonstrate that often the »evidence« for such attributions is merely based upon an educated guess by someone considered to be an authority, which in the course of uncritical repetition has become an unquestioned reality. Thus, for example, the misidentification of unique sixteenth-century Mexican feather headdress as the »headdress of Moctezuma« by Zelia Nuttall in 1887 transformed this object in the 1930s in the context of the indigenist ideology of post-revolutionary Mexico into an icon of Mexico's indigenous roots, which has since become an indisputable part of the national consciousness (Feest and Rivero Weber 2013).

The second law states that »the uncertainty of an attribution increases with the square of the distance from the collector's statements«, and it was offered as an antidote to connoisseurship. Its corollary, »provenances supplied by the collector, even if wrong, will lead closer to the truth (through questions such as why they were wrong and what were the reasons for the specificity of their error) than even the most ingenious secondary attributions,« has proven to be a useful tool of historical collections research. For example, a »slit pouch« from the Prairies region of North America is listed in the inventory of the Ethnographic Collection of the City of Winterthur as »Spanish«. What at first appears to be an absurd misidentification nevertheless points into the right direction, since research has shown that this type of pouch was apparently introduced to North America from the Basque country in the sixteenth or seventeenth century (Feest 2006).

Further reinforcement of my approach to historical collections came from Adrienne L. Kaepler, who since the 1960s had done research on Cook voyage collections in general and on the Leverian Museum in particular, which in the late eighteenth century was the major repository of Cook's »official« collections (Kaepler 1978). Since the Vienna Cook collection had come from the Leverian Museum, we began to collaborate on this subject in 1971. This collaboration culminated in the publication of her monumental work of a lifetime on the Leverian Museum, when I was director of the museum in Vienna (Kaepler 2011).

In the 1980s, I began to teach courses on ethnographic collections on the basis of badly documented material held by the University of Vienna and by the Museum of Ethnology. As a method of »redocumenting« collections I suggest-

ed to my students the use of the phone book. Apart from his name, little was known about Karl Kauba (1865–1922), from whose estate the museum had acquired in 1928 a collection attributed to the Omaha of Nebraska. After a few phone calls to some of the twenty Kaubas in the Vienna phone book, his descendants were located, who identified the collector as a sculptor who had produced busts of »Indian chiefs«, which can now be found in American museums. The »Omaha« attribution was explained by the fact that Kauba had used photographs taken in 1898 by Frank Rinehart at the Trans-Mississippi and International Exhibition in Omaha as models for his sculptures – another example of the validity of »Feest’s second law«.

Today, the internet offers endless possibilities for historical collections research far beyond the use of a phone book. A cradleboard in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem has traditionally been attributed to the »Eastern Sioux« or Dakota of Minnesota, even though some supporters of this attribution had suggested that it had been collected by William Boutwell, a missionary among the Leech Lake Ojibwa of Minnesota. Collection records in Salem show that the cradleboard had been collected and donated to the Maine Historical Society by George Goodwin, about whom nothing was known. A search for George Goodwin in the net revealed that he was born in 1825 in Maine and had prior to 1860 moved to Minnesota, where he married an Ojibwa woman on the White Earth Reservation, where he died in 1905. A provenience of the cradleboard from the Ojibwa is thus more likely than one from the Dakota, who moreover had been expelled from Minnesota in 1862.

It would be a mistake to assume from what has been said so far that my goals as a museum curator were exclusively focused on the past. As far as collections development was concerned I was not much interested in old and badly documented objects, of which the museum already had enough. My priority was collecting the present (necessarily the past of the future), which offered the opportunity to avoid the mistakes of the past as far as the documentation of collections was concerned, while recognizing that the standards for collecting suggested by Sturtevant (1967) could hardly ever be met.

The other point of which I became convinced is that as stewards of historical museum collections we do have a responsibility to reconcile the past embodied in collections with the present attitudes of our visitors as well as of the source communities, both of whom hold views of the past largely determined by their present values and attitudes. In this sense, my colleague Alfred Janata and I began in the late 1970s to search for the owners (or their descendants) of collections placed on loan with the museum between 1933 and 1945. With the help of a card file kept by an Austrian restitution organization, we were able to

return nearly all the loans to their rightful owners, acquire them, or receive them as gifts.

I also attempted to alert source communities about the presence in our collections of material that I began to consider as shared heritage, an idea that much later formed the basis for an Austrian-Mexican project on the historical study and conservation of the feather headdress from ancient Mexico in Vienna (Feest and Rivero Weber 2013; see also Feest 2014b). Back in 1983 and 1984, however, an agreement was reached to take a large part of the Schwarz and Pitzer collections, which together represent the earliest substantial material record of the culture of the Odawa of Michigan, to the Andrew J. Blackbird Museum in Harbor Springs, the heart of Odawa country (Harbor Springs Historical Commission 1983, 1984). In recent years I have been involved in research identifying collections from the Bororo and Kadiwéu existing outside Brazil, for the benefit both of the source communities and for my own historical ethnographic research (e.g., Feest 2014c).

As keepers of a substantial portion of the material cultural heritage of the peoples of the world, ethnological museums have a special responsibility not only in preserving these objects, but also to make them available to the descendants of their makers and/or users. The sense of guilt, which provoked a Swiss museum in the 1980s to restitute without questions or formalities to a visiting Lakota a pipe he claimed to be his (or his people's) »sacred pipe« that was in fact a pipe obtained by a missionary from the Menominee in Wisconsin in the 1860s, is no excuse for the mismanagement of what was the Menominee's unclaimed cultural heritage (Feest 1995c: 38–39).

Cultural heritage is the claim of a more or less exclusive collective possession or even property of cultural capital transmitted from the past and thought to be central for the construction of a group's identity. While this claim is universally encountered, societies differ in the manner in which such capital as a link between the past and present is accumulated and managed: be it as a living and constantly changing tradition, be it through the preservation of enduring documents in which the past is reified – or by the parallel practice of both strategies. It is the archiving of the past, which often leads source communities to the painful recognition of the changes between then and now (which in turn is considered a threat to their claim of the unchanging persistence of their traditions) and to sorrow about the loss sustained. The archiving of the past, however, is also the basis for our own claim that the preservation of documents of cultural diversity of the world and the appreciation expressed by it is not the most abominable part of our own cultural heritage, which we would also like to preserve.

Looking back at the developments of more than half a century, one can recognize a growing awareness in ethnological museums of the historicity of their collections and the need to study their documentary history for a better understanding of their role and significance in their original social and cultural environment. The »biography of things« has become an established genre to investigate the transformation of meanings objects undergo when placed into different contexts. The need for provenance research in connection with both the seizure of property under NS rule and the claims for the restitution of cultural heritage by the victims of colonialism have certainly promoted archival research relating to ethnographic collections, although in these cases the focus has been primarily focused on questions of the legality of ownership. By and large, however, museums of ethnology as repositories of material historical documents have still to recognize the fact that museum anthropology is first and foremost a specialized branch of ethnohistory and historical ethnography, which calls for extensive and more sophisticated historical collections research.

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