



Call for Papers

Provenance research: debating a practical science

International Symposium, Wednesday / Thursday, 4 / 5 November 2020

Venue: SIK-ISEA, Zollikerstrasse 32, 8032 Zurich

If measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic do not permit this symposium to be held in early November, it will be postponed into 2021.

The Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA) in partnership with the Swiss Association for Provenance Research

Management and organisation:

SIK-ISEA

PD Dr. Roger Fayet, director

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Swiss Association for Provenance Research

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Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW/ASSH)

Works of art, especially in traditional categories such as painting, printing, drawing and sculpture, tend to be movable objects that can be transported from one situation to another. The history of these transfers, a kind of biography of the object, is as much a part of its significance as its materiality and colour, its conditions of production and interpretation, and the content it represents.

This reconstruction of the history of artefacts, drawing on both physical marks and sources, has evolved from an auxiliary science serving museum departments, auction houses and basic art history research to emerge around the turn of the millennium as a discipline in its own right: provenance research. This evolution was significantly encouraged by the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets in December 1998, which adopted a declaration urging museums to screen their collections for works confiscated by the Nazis in an effort to bring transparency to the associated issues and to



seek fair and just solutions. The focus at the time was entirely on the despicable looting of art in Nazi Germany, but provenance research has since shifted its attention towards the colonial expropriation of cultural heritage and the looting triggered by wars and occupations.

In Germany, morally motivated voluntary pledges in response to history have been a major factor in the growing professionalisation of provenance research since the 2000s. In Switzerland, which signed the Washington Declaration in 1998, there has been no comparable development, although an independent expert commission was set up in 1996 to consider Switzerland and the Second World War, partly with a remit to examine issues around the confiscation of property and the assets of refugees, and the Federal Office of Culture checked through public collections and established a contact point for looted art. Moreover, some public and private museums like the Museum Rietberg and the Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection undertook extensive provenance research of their own. However, not until the Cornelius Gurlitt bequest arrived at the Museum of Fine Arts in Bern did the challenges result in a heightened public awareness of the issue and trigger broader debate. This has had an impact on research practice in museums and universities. Currently a number of institutions, some with federal funding, are investigating the provenance of their holdings, while exhibitions such as “Gurlitt: Status Report” at the Kunstmuseum in Bern (2017–2018) are making the findings available to the general public. In higher education, students can now take courses in provenance research and the subject has gained a foothold in professional development. Academic exchange between provenance researchers in Switzerland has been boosted by the recent creation of the Swiss Association for Provenance Research.

The discussion gained considerable traction from the expert report by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr on the restitution of African cultural heritage (2018), which was commissioned by the President of France, Emmanuel Macron. The report itself and Macron’s announcement that he intended to tackle restitutions forthwith have shone the light increasingly on holdings from colonial contexts. This has also injected a new critical point of reference into the debate around provenance research, insofar as Savoy and Sarr look upon this branch of science more as a means to hinder swift, straightforward restitutions than as a key to establishing justice.

With this conference, the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA) hopes to contribute to the debate around the role of provenance research, given that investigating the origins



of art works has been one of the Institute's core activities ever since it first opened its doors in the 1950s: both the expertise provided by SIK-ISEA and the basic research it invests in compiling its detailed *catalogues raisonnés* call for meticulous provenance tracing. The proposed conference, to be hosted in partnership with the Swiss Association for Provenance Research, will bring together a variety of stakeholders in provenance research and stimulate exchange around significant themes and methodological issues.

Topics of interest include:

- Provenance research – What is its purpose? Academic and political demands
- Know-how – Research practices and tools
- The legal aspects and implications of provenance research
- Interplay between provenance research and institutional profiles
- Ethical questions – How research, morality and politics intertwine
- Provenance research and restitution
- Case studies: examples from practice
- Exhibiting the findings: methods, formats, challenges

30 minutes will be allotted for each paper. The conference languages are German, French and English, and participants should have a least **passive knowledge of all three languages**. The organisers will reimburse the cost of board & lodging and travel (2nd class / economy) expenses upon submission of receipts. Please e-mail your proposal (max. 1 page) in German, French or English together with a short C. V. to Regula Krähenbühl at SIK-ISEA (regula.kraehenbuehl@sik-isea.ch) by the end of June 2020.