



Position Paper Issued by the Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin on Dealing with Its Archaeological Collections and Their Provenance Histories

Preamble

The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, which is overseen by the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, conserves, investigates and exhibits many archaeological artefacts, as well as educating the general public about these holdings. In the past, its primary focus was on expanding both the collections and the museums, and on conducting foundational research, allowing the museums to make a significant contribution to humanity's collective knowledge regarding its transnational cultural history. Given the plural nature of contemporary human societies and the extent to which they are shaped by migration flows, and in light of current global changes, we are witnessing the emergence of a new series of challenges in terms of how archaeological collections should be handled and researched. It is for this reason that we chose to shift our focus to education and outreach, as well as to facilitating broader access to both the collections and their complex history. In principle, museums view the act of collecting archaeological artefacts in a positive light. Culture has always been transnational; with objects and knowledge circulating throughout the world for millennia.

1. Archaeological Collections at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

The following branches of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin hold archaeological objects in their collections:

- Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung (Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection)
- Antikensammlung (Collection of Classical Antiques)
- Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum)
- Münzkabinett (Numismatic Collection)
- Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum)
- Museum für Byzantinische Kunst (Museum for Byzantine Art)
- Museum für Islamische Kunst (Museum for Islamic Art)
- Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte (Museum of Prehistory and Early History)
- Vorderasiatisches Museum (Museum of the Ancient Near East)

In their sheer diversity and scope, the archaeological collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin are home to an internationally unparalleled collection of objects that have been amassed since the 16th century. The artefacts' periods of origin stretch chronologically from the Palaeolithic Period to the recent past. In terms of their geographical origins, the objects come from all of the world's continents.

Historically speaking, there have been a number of factors that have motivated people and institutions to collect such objects. In the beginning, these included satisfying the aesthetic interests of the



nobility and clergy, for whom they served as status symbols. In later years, the list of motivating factors was expanded to include the ideals of an educated middle class, the pursuit of scientific knowledge, the formation of national identity, and efforts to achieve global renown.

The majority of the archaeological objects held in the collections were discovered in archaeological digs. Their accession was a direct result of the museums' own excavation and surveying endeavours, or of those conducted by other institutions and private individuals. They were sourced directly from archaeological digs, or were added to the collections as gifts, transfers, or in exchange for other items or services; they were purchased on the art market or as a direct consequence of armed conflicts, or were transferred to the museums in the wake of confiscations and the expropriation of privately owned property.

Today, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin only acquires archaeological objects whose provenance is neither legally nor ethically suspect.

2. Provenance Research

When the very first objects were introduced into the collections of the Electorate of Brandenburg in the 16th century, the discipline of archaeology did not yet exist as a science in its own right. It was not until the 19th century that lines of scholarly enquiry, scientific methods and specialisations were finally developed, in a process that has continued unabated to the present day. There were occasional instances that attest to an early awareness that details pertaining to an object's provenance contain invaluable information about the object's history.

Research conducted into the seizures of artworks perpetrated under the Nazi dictatorship has engendered a greater level of awareness in Germany with regard to issues of provenance and to the need to establish a separate branch of research to explore this topic. Since that period, the extensive investigation conducted into the biographies of archaeological objects, their provenance details, and modes of acquisition have gained importance – not only in the interest of acquiring and expanding scientific knowledge, but also as a means of clarifying legal and ethical concerns.

Every object has its own individual history. Today, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin considers it one of their primary tasks to determine both the context of origin of their archaeological collections and the circumstances in which they were acquired. In order to achieve this objective, the museums are undertaking a cross-collection evaluation of primary sources, including information on the objects themselves, acquisition logs, excavation documentation, archival records in both their own and external archives, auction catalogues and photographs, and also research literature. The goal is to trace the trajectory of each and every archaeological collection item from the date it was found to when it was entered into the museums' collections. This is not, however, possible in all cases, due to the sources cited being either incomplete or impossible to clearly interpret. The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin strives to be as thorough as possible in its investigation of these objects in order to bring to light as much information as possible.

Research conducted into the circumstances in which artefacts were acquired, which individuals and institutions were involved, their networks, motives and methods all contributes to fostering a more profound understanding not only of the objects themselves, but also of the museums' own acquisition policies and institutional history.



3. Questions of Legality and Ethical Evaluation

Previous research has revealed that the archaeological collections held by the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin contain certain sets of objects or individual items that ought to be viewed critically in terms of their provenance or the circumstances in which they were acquired.

One essential factor that should be taken into consideration when analysing an object's history is what laws were in place in the country of origin at the time of acquisition – a question to which provenance research accordingly devotes a considerable degree of attention. Political and economic circumstances are also incorporated into the contemporary evaluation of artefacts, as are certain ethical considerations. These assessment criteria have changed frequently, especially when compared to how the acquisition context has been historically framed. The research and evaluation being undertaken also incorporates contemporary perspectives from sources external to the SMB. As such, we work together with external partners and institutions from the countries of origin, with members of civil society at both a national and international level, and with the scholarly community.

In addition to the questions that should always be addressed when undertaking provenance research, there are also certain circumstances that need to be kept in mind when conducting research into archaeological objects. The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin considers the following issues to be a matter of priority in our research: excavations carried out beyond Germany's historical borders in violation of contemporaneous regulations or agreements with politicians or institutions in the countries of origin; and artefacts purchased on the art market and transfers of ownership that were carried out after the introduction of the UNESCO 1970 Convention, without any review of their legality.

4. Perspectives

The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin is conscious of the fact that institutions like museums have historically benefitted (and continue to do so) from inequalities in terms of economic and political power, which have engendered an asymmetrical distribution of resources. We are actively confronting this past and using it to inform our activities for both the present and future. Today, museums are responding to these inequalities by introducing education and training opportunities, by promoting and developing international, accessible knowledge networks made up of researchers, specialists and activists, especially in the field of archaeological cultural heritage preservation. We are accepting responsibility for the collections in the individual museums that have been amassed throughout history and consider it our duty to critically address the behaviour of the parties involved in the acquisition process – and in some cases the problematic legacy they have left behind.

The aim is to foster a modern, responsible approach to archaeological collections. Museums conserve and display objects and impart and foster awareness of humanity's cultural heritage. This entails sharing as much existing knowledge as possible in museums and ensuring the transparency of the provenance of archaeological artefacts. Accordingly, smaller groupings of objects within collections are actively being researched as part of projects conducted in collaboration with the artefacts' respective countries of origin.

In instances of problematic provenance, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz contacts the relevant countries of origin and works together to devise an appropriate solution, which may well involve the restitution of the object(s) in question.



The museums endeavour not only to showcase the findings of their research, but also to expose their working methods and involve the public in the process of generating and acquiring knowledge. They plan to raise awareness among the general public with regard to the role and significance of the collections in terms of the diversity and complexity of the contexts of origin and acquisition, and to actively involve the public in the discussions. Furthermore, any new findings on the artefacts will be published in cooperation with international academics, researchers and project partners. The collections will be digitally indexed as cultural archives and made available to an international audience. They will be actively employed as a tool in the quest to reconstruct lost contexts of knowledge.

The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin is keenly aware that the position outlined here with regard to the management of archaeological collections and their provenances is a reflection of a specific historical moment and, moving forward, will need to be continually reassessed.

Berlin, May 2023