

Foreword

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[1] It can hardly be disputed that the forming of art collections includes various elements of identity building: this holds true for the middle-class private collector, for local or municipal museums, and for large state institutions like national galleries; and it even holds true, to a certain degree, for the art or antiquities dealers whose stock can be said to indicate or represent their professional identities. Furthermore, the academic disciplines of art and archaeology, that came into being as institutionalized trajectories of inquiry in the 19th century, had been tasked with identity construction—in the sense that their mission, more often than not, explicitly entailed identification of a genuinely national cultural identity (at least in Europe, where many of these processes took place).

[2] The immediate corollary of these two observations (regarding the emergence of collections as well as the assignments associated with scholarly investigation) is that dealing with objects and collections inevitably touches on complex and sensitive issues of both individual or private, and institutional, collective or national identity. Against this background, it is no wonder that some research on collections is, in one way or another, not communicated but withheld. An element of “Thou shall not open your heart to a stranger” persists despite open-source software, easy access to digital repositories, museum online collections, and huge amounts of data available to everyone. Consequently, in the field of cultural heritage, and object collections in particular, the gathering, documentation and analysis of source material is at times impeded, and information is in any case concealed and not communicated—and this consciously and intentionally, not out of neglect or because the information does not exist or is not available. The quintessential example of this phenomenon is the museum label for a Renaissance painting stating “acquired in 1999”, or for an archaeological object “said to be from ...”, or for a colonial-era artifact “collected in 1895”, without any further data on the object’s provenance or any information on the circumstances or determining factors of the artifact’s translocation. Information about an object’s provenance is thus often confined within institutional or national borders.

[3] Any attempt to transgress these invisible boundaries or to mitigate the information asymmetry thus requires a certain amount of work “against the grain”, against the strong tendency to *not* share information (and definitely not *all* information). However, for a variety of reasons, the times are changing, at least in some places, environments, and contexts. Among the many laudable initiatives, the German/American Provenance Research Exchange Program (PREP) stands out as a transdisciplinary, and above all transnational effort to overcome the aforementioned limitations. As one of the six host institutions and PREP partners, the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte (ZI) is very proud to have been instrumental in the application for and then implementation of this three-year program (2017–2019). The ZI hosted the second reunion of professionals from museums, archives, and academe in Munich in October 2018, (following the first week-long meeting in February/March 2018 at the Getty Research Institute).

[4] It is thus entirely fitting and also emblematic that the Getty Research Institute and the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte are continuing their longstanding and fruitful cooperation with the publication of this joint special issue of *RIHA Journal*, the online journal of the International

Association of Research Institutes in the History of Art. RIHA was cofounded by the GRI and the ZI with numerous partners in 1998, and the journal was launched in 2010. To jointly publish a special issue in 2023 is thus a most organic endeavor, since international cooperation has been the genetic disposition of RIHA all along.

[5] It was precisely this spirit of fundamental and open-ended research into Nazi-era translocations and dispossessions of artifacts—in this case of Greek, Roman, and other antiquities—that inspired a sunny Wednesday afternoon in October 2018. The topic for this public colloquium had been proposed by Irene Bald Romano, and her bold initiative (only a few similar inquiries had taken place before, and none took shape in such an ostensibly transnational and inter-institutional mode) met with the unanimous support of the PREP steering committee. Indeed, the multiple dislocations to which antiquities were subjected, sometimes going back millennia, have already been studied a number of times. Comparable approaches, however, which focus especially on excavation and exploitation processes and the interfering covetousness of Fascist and Nazi protagonists (politicians, collectors, and military officers as well as dealers, museum curators, and directors) are hard to find.

[6] The contributions assembled here go beyond ordinary proceedings, as the guest editor solicited further papers from other specialists working in the field. In every regard, then, I feel that this is humanities research as it should be: jointly probing into both urgent and difficult or sensitive issues and expanding the limits of what we know and what we don't know. The volume thus provides another building block for a better understanding of the past and present. For enabling us to achieve this more nuanced assessment, I am most grateful to the editor and authors, to the editorial team at the Getty Research Institute, and to the institutional and legal framework that permits investigations and explorations of such critical nature.

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