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Invisible.

Female Collectors in colonial and postcolonial North and Central America



Illustration: Elizabeth Theodora Natalie Karoline von Wrangell de Rossillon (1810-1854) and Odille Morison (1855-1933), lower left.

Ethnographic collections from the 19th and early 20th centuries were evidently almost exclusively made by men. But what about women? Were they not involved, or were they just not explicitly mentioned in the inventories? In fact, women created their own collections. However, the inventories do not necessarily reflect their names, even less their specific roles. I will discuss selected biographies of women who collected in North and Central America in the 19th century. The circumstances of collecting differed from men's, although men always played an important role and made collecting possible in the first place. Only in the course of the 20th century women started collecting as a separate enterprise. For the 19th century, the situation can be described as follows:

– It was not considered important to mention female collectors by name;

– Women collected through their husbands' professional positions, or they collected for their male clients;

– Nevertheless, women developed their own criteria and methods of collecting, taking into account ethical reservations;

– A higher number of unreported cases of female collectors can be assumed.

Examples for collecting women include Elisabeth von Wrangel, Cäcilie Seler Sachs, and Elly von Kuhlmann, three women who accompanied their husbands, the German governor of the Russian Colony of Alaska, the famous scholar and founder of the German 'Altamerikanistik' and the German ambassador to Guatemala. Two other women, Odille Morison, who was a Tshimsian-Canadian from British Columbia, and Estefánia de Broner, who was a wealthy Totonac mestiza from Veracruz, Mexico, collected for German clients: Franz Boas and Hermann Strebel. For the workshop

discussion, I will focus on two women from the American Northwest Coast.

Elisabeth von Wrangel, née Baroness Rossillon (1810–1853)

The Baltic German Baron Ferdinand von Wrangell (1796-1870) was appointed governor of the colony of Russian America in 1829. During the five years of his administration at the capital New Archangelsk or Sitka, Alaska, he conducted extensive scientific research in the area and implemented many important reforms. The 20-year-old Baroness Elisabeth was the first wife of a governor to accompany her husband to Sitka, travelling for 18 months through Siberia on horseback, giving birth to a baby daughter in Irkutsk. Elisabeth's biographer Alix O'Grady states:

"The Wrangells' new progressive attitudes toward the Native Peoples .... had stabilizing effects on racial tensions which had formerly run high". Elisabeth was "unique in her routine visits to Creoles and Native Tlingit". She established friendships with Tlingit women and "became very popular with all classes of the town's population".[1]

Even though the collection is usually attributed to Ferdinand, I believe that the Wrangell collection goes back to Elisabeth, who probably received gifts from her new friends. She had sent her collection back home to Reval (Tallinn) to the hands of her father Baron Wilhelm von Rossillon. Even before the couple returned to Russia in 1835, Elizabeth's father, who was born at Marburg, Hessen, donated one part, 51 objects of the Wrangell collection to the Senckenbergische Gesellschaft at Frankfurt Main. Apparently, the baron had received approval from his daughter for such a donation, which shows her to be the collector and owner. Elisabeth died in March 1853. The collection is housed today in the Frankfurt Museum der Weltkulturen.

Odille Morison (1855-1933)

Three decades after the Wrangels had returned to Europe, Odille Morison was born hundreds of miles south at a Tsimshian big house in Fort Simpson, located on the Northwest Coast of British Columbia. The Tsimhians are neighbors of the Tlingit, both groups share a matrilinear social structure. Odille's mother Mary belonged to the Killerwhale lineage. Odille's father François Quintal Dubois was a French-Canadian fur trade employee at the Hudson's Bay Company. Odille was educated at the Metlakatla mission village in the Christian faith and later became a teacher herself but continued the Tsimshian cultural practices and traditions. She acted as a translator, interpreter and community correspondent in English and Tsmishian. In 1872, Odille was married to Charles Morison, the HBC manager at Fort Simpson. Like Elizabeth, Odille lost her first three babies. Both women had more surviving children later. The Morison's welcomed international guests in their open house.

However, Odille became best known for her close collaboration with the anthropologist Franz Boas, whom she met at Port Essington in 1888 for the first time. Her biographer Maureen Atkinson states that contrary to the assumption that only white male colonizers took an active part in wheeling and dealing of ceremonial and cultural objects, Odille's reputation as an established cultural expert and as a translator sets her apart from the majority of other collectors of artifacts.[2] Franz Boas had hired her as a linguist, but when he found out about Odille's cultural network and knowledge, he assigned her with a special task. In 1891, he offered money for "a good collection of implements formerly used by the Tsimshian", and a "full explanation as to their use and meaning". Boas needed the objects for the Chicago World Fair where he acted as a curator for the ethnography exhibits. With the help of her extended Tsimshian family, Odille collected over 140 artifacts including totem poles and the text "Legends and Traditions of the Origin of the Zimshian tribes of Indian N. W. Coast British Columbia". Today, her collection is housed at the Chicago Field Museum under the name of Franz Boas. Odille Morison

had moved between the Tsimshian and Anglo-Christian cultures throughout her life, and she died in 1933.

I found more cases in Mexico and Central America. Undoubtedly, the yield of the scholar Eduard Seler would have been much smaller without the empathic and patient commitment of his wife Caecilie (1855-1935). Hermann Strebel benefited from the enthusiasm of Estefania de Broner (ca. 1850-1907) to learn more about her own Totonac heritage, but also from her systematic archaeological excavations, being probably the first female archaeologist of Mexico. As the wives of government officials, Wrangell and Kuhlmann (1892-1964) were tied into the loyalties of their husbands, but they both managed to get involved and empathize with their indigenous environment. Their independent activities, including collecting, were certainly based on the fact that all of these women had happy marriages. This was by no means self-evident in the 19th century. Women were married at the request of their future husbands, sometimes against their will. It was not at all appropriate for married women to maintain a close working relationship with male clients like Estefania and Odille, tolerated by their husbands. Morison was well aware of the dangers that collecting for foreign white clients posed for her own cultural heritage, and took it into account in the method of her collecting and dissemination of information. For example, she respected that totem poles were the property of the lineages and did not offer an original one to Boas. Instead, she ordered a pole including a mix of different Tsimshian crests which was not considered as “genuine” by later critiques.[3]

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Bremen (1999).

About the DCNtR Debate #1: It has long been accepted that colonialism had a distinctive epistemic dimension, which was upheld by disciplines such as social anthropology and other knowledge-making projects. Under this colonial episteme, people and human experiences were hierarchically classified according to racial categories and ethnography and ethnographic collecting were key components in these processes. However, the colonial regime did not only rely on race as an organising category, but also on gender. The first debate in the DCNtR Debates series tackles this question with seven contributions from around the world which explore the relationship between the gender of the collector, the gender of those collected from and consequences of these gendered practices of collecting for the epistemic practices of display in today's museums.

Footnotes

[1] O'Grady-Raeder, Alix. The Baltic Connection in Russian America. Jahrbuc̈her fuï Geschichte Osteuropas , 1994, Neue Folge, Bd. 42, H. 3 (1994), pp. 331-332.

[2] Atkinson, Maureen. The "Accomplished" Odille Quintal Morison: Tsimshian Cultural Intermediary of Metlakatla, British Columbia. In: Recollecting: Lives of Aboriginal Women of the Canadian Northwest and Borderlands. Hg. Sarah Carter, Patricia und Alice McCormack. 2011, S. 153-154

[3] Atkinson, Ibid.