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A Human Skull for Sale: Is this possible?

On Oct. 18, 2018, under a title that translates as “Someone who buys something like this must be a bit crazy”, the Süddeutsche Zeitung published an interview with the business manager of the auction house Lempertz, Prof. Henrik Hanstein. The talk, conducted by Jörg Häntzschel, addressed an auction held on Oct. 24 in Lempertz’s Brussels branch, at which human remains (a shrunken head from the Jívaro, who live in the Amazon Basin near the border between Ecuador and Peru, and several ancestors’ skulls from Oceania) along with objects of clear colonial provenance were sold. Lempertz’s homepage showed the catalog and openly depicted all the items up for auction. Particularly considering the discussion of the colonial legacy conducted on almost all levels in recent years, not only the auction house’s plans, but also many of the statements made in the interview led to consternation in specialist circles as well as among a broader public.

Hanstein speaks with seeming incomprehension about possible buyers’ interest in human remains and, in this context, emphasizes that he himself would not have put them on offer, but that he knew nothing about it in advance. At the same time, he underscores that one could regard shrunken heads and ancestor skulls, of all things, as works of art and for this reason, he insinuates, they repeatedly appear at auctions. However, he said, the mood in Belgium and France was a different one: reservations about the trade in human skulls or, in general, in sensitive objects were more a German attitude. (Belgium and France dealt more openly with their colonial past; by comparison, Germany was a colonial power for only a very short time.)

The last statement, at any rate, is not correct: the announcement by France’s President Macron that he wants to return objects of colonial provenance to Africa and to found a corresponding council of experts recently led to a corresponding

Sarah Fründt
Oliver Lueb

debate in the francophone parliament (COCOF) in Brussels. It is hard to say whether Belgium and France really deal more openly with their colonial past; in any case, neither speaks for a greater degree of "relaxedness" regarding controversial objects. Apart from that, it is impossible to treat these issues solely on the basis of one's own national attitude: these are always also reactions to requests and initiatives from countries outside the European continent. An example of this is the great controversy that developed in the context of the auction of kachina masks of the North American Hopi, planned for 2013 and 2015. Both times, by the way, a Parisian auction house was involved, the Hôtel Drouot. Despite public protests from the Hopi that, with the support of the US government and celebrities like the actor Robert Redford, ultimately even led to court proceedings in France, the objects were sold in 2013 (AP 2013, Ciric 2014). The protests had no success in 2015, either (Adamson 2015).

Asked about the unambiguous colonial provenience of a mask (it came from an officer in the German colony of Cameroon who was killed there in 1908), Hanstein once again entangled himself in discrepancies that expose a frequently encountered ambiguity in dealing with Germany's colonial past: on the one hand, he emphasized the role that colonialism played in assembling such collections ("The researchers came there through colonization in the first place") and mentions German colonial crimes in what are now Namibia and Cameroon, but on the other hand he also underscores the positive meaning of a colonial provenance as a sign of authenticity – while he claims: "The things in the museums have a different origin from what we have in trade [...] After all, it was not the collectors who killed people in Africa, but the government."

When the interviewing journalist Häntzschel interjects that the aforementioned Hans Glauning was a high officer who oversaw the subjugation of African tribes, so that it can very well be presumed that he killed people, the business manager of Lempertz expresses himself as follows: "Mmh. Well, in the South Seas we cut a super

figure." This utterance, too, not only testifies to a large dose of ignorance about the German colonies and colonial subjugation strategies in Oceania, ultimately it also stands for a distorted image of Germany's colonial past that, despite the excited discussions in expert circles, still stubbornly survives in the German public sphere.

The interview is conducted and published at a moment not only when most ethnological museums are not exhibiting human remains anymore, but also when many institutions are concentratedly starting to research the provenance and processes of musealization of relevant parts of their collections, also considering returning them to their respective regions of origin. For about ten years, these questions have been increasingly discussed in the public realm, as well; in the last two years, politics, too, has become interested in the colonial backgrounds of many museum collections in general and in the collection of human remains in particular. A cursory review of the media debates last year testifies to this.

In the following talk, we will attempt to discuss some of the topics addressed in the interview and to flesh them out with content from museum practice. For although some sections of the interview seem almost grotesque, it also contains a number of themes that arise frequently in the debate. Ultimately at issue are both the question of the appropriate way to deal with human remains and the question of what possibilities there actually are to work through the (colonial) past. There are many answers to each of these questions – but overgeneralization or exaggerated black-and-white depictions are hardly helpful. For this reason, we plead for more pragmatism – and for keeping both feet on firm ground.

Sarah Fründt: In the interview, Hanstein propounds, among other things, the view that shrunken heads can be regarded as works of art. Do you see it similarly?

Oliver Lueb: No, not for me personally; for me, they are the skulls of the dead whom I can clearly recognize as human beings, parts of human bodies. But it is not that simple to answer this. If one understands "work of art" in the sense of a work for the

art market, then the question arises whether that cannot include a shrunken human head. Cases are known in which heads were "produced" precisely for this market. At the latest since Kopytoff and Appadurai's "The Cultural Biography of Things", we know that the status of objects (among which one can also count a skull) can change. Many smart people have published on these categorizations. As an ethnologist, I try to learn about the indigenous viewpoint on things and to orient myself toward it. In the greater region of Oceania, my field of interest, the perspectives precisely on human remains are quite divergent. Whereas for interlocutors from Papua-New Guinea or the Solomon Islands it is often unimportant whether a skull attributed to one of their societies is in a collection beyond their access or is even exhibited, the Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand have a completely different way of dealing with human remains.

SF: That might apply, then, to the ancestor skull in the auction (according to the catalog, from the Asmat, Dayak, and generally from Papua New Guinea). At least in the case of the Jívaro, I have actually heard little about indigenous protests against an exhibition, in principle. New Zealand is a very interesting example of these complexities. Amber Aranui, who works for the repatriation team of the Te Papa Museum in Wellington, recently published a very interesting article on this. In it, she reflects on an exhibition in New Zealand that displays no Toi Moko (mummified, tattooed heads), but pictures of them, which has actually always been a taboo in New Zealand in recent years. In the article, she speaks about various views within the country, but also about her own uneasiness and her own attitude. And finally, she considers that these reproductions could also be seen as "a tohu, a harbinger, for myself and others to talk about them, their history, their trade, and their more recent travels home". How, then, does the Rautenstrauch Joest Museum in Cologne deal with human remains?

OL: Precisely here, we follow the indigenous perspectives to the degree that we can gain information. Along with a few skulls, we have in our historical collection a few

Sarah Fründt
Oliver Lueb

South American mummies, skull cups, skull drums, and bone trumpets, daggers, arrowheads, spear points, and jewelry made from fragments of human bones, teeth, or hair. On the latter human remains, we are usually not aware of any indigenous demands not to show them or to make them accessible only to certain groups of people. Since we do not know much, we generally forego exhibiting such ancestor mementos, war trophies, or artifacts. In the case of human remains from Oceania, for example Hawai'i and Aotearoa New Zealand, we see impressively how our knowledge changes over time. We, too, had such a Toi Moko in our collection until recently. At the beginning of the 20th century, then Museum Director Willy Foy bought it from William Oldman, a British collector of and dealer in ethnographica, and it was exhibited as part of the permanent exhibition in the 1970s at the latest. In 1969, the Toi Moko was even sent as a loan to Nagoya in Japan. After the exhibition was renovated, however, it was no longer shown, because in the context of the exhibition "Te Māori. Te Hokinga mai. The return home", which was shown in various museums in the United States from 1984 to 1986, indigenous voices were raised demanding a different approach to certain artifacts and human remains. My predecessor Burkhard Fenner already took precisely these debates as his theme in 1988/89 in the exhibition "Der Flug des Bumerang – 40.000 Jahre Australier" (the flight of the boomerang – 40,000 years of Australians) in our institution, in which he showed an empty wall and pointed out that, from the indigenous perspective, so-called secret-sacred artifacts must not be shown to uninitiated people. In the past 30 years, the exchange of knowledge on an equal basis with many societies has intensified, so that in some cases today, we are familiar with indigenous ideas and we can and must consider them more than we did in the past.

SF: You said a Toi Moko was in your collection until recently. What happened?

OL: Since the loan, our exhibition, and the connected publications, employees of Te Papa have been aware of its existence. My predecessor was in sporadic contact with the museum for a long time, especially to learn more about the possible provenance

Sarah Fründt
Oliver Lueb

of the Toi Moko that went beyond the purchase documents we have. With the beginning of the government-sponsored restitution program “Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme” in 2003, we were aware that we would have to act at some point. After finishing moving our depot in Cologne in the spring of this year, I wanted to actively approach this theme and, after the return of the Übersee-Museum Bremen in June 2017, I had already made contact with the New Zealand Māori delegation and signaled that we were prepared to get the process going. At our institution, our unanimous aim was to return the Toi Moko. After talks with the Cultural Department, the provenance research agency, and the legal office of the city of Cologne, it became clear that there was no legal basis, but our ethical considerations led us to directly recommend to the art and culture commission and then to the Cologne City Council that it be returned. No opposing voices were heard in a single session, so that the recommendation was followed on every level and I was quickly able to inform the repatriation commissioner in Wellington. I worked out the procedure and the handover ceremony with Māori representatives and the coordinator appointed by the Museum Te Papa, Te Herekiekie Herewini. On June 26, i.e., four months ago, the handover was made in a small group, but officially through the Governing Mayor of the City of Cologne, Ms. Henriette Reker. I believe all those present were deeply moved at how, by addressing it and singing, the delegation took the Toi Moko back into their midst as their deceased and prepared for the long journey and the return.

SF: I definitely thought it was a very successful ceremony. I was also very pleased that, in the afternoon, there was another, less emotionally charged presentation by the delegation where a broad public was able to pose questions about the process, for example also the further procedure after the return of the Toi Moko. I can imagine that this also increases acceptance of the measure in the population. After all, a museum is a public institution – and so I think it is good when such processes are not held behind closed doors. I also think it is good in the current debate and it is important to show that German museums do not just all stonewall. Were there any

Sarah Fründt
Oliver Lueb

later reactions to the return, any counter-voices from visitors?

OL: No, there were no counter-voices, quite the contrary. Because of the positive press voices about the return and the enormously broad reporting about our museum, some of the members of our support association addressed me personally and endorsed our return. Artists also chimed in, offering to artistically accompany future returns. I met the Governing Mayor the next day, who was very thankful for the ceremony and happy about the return.

SF: Now, with a Toi Moko it is clear, that it comes from New Zealand, and so at least the general recipient for the return is uncontroversial. Did you previously also research the exact provenance? Do you think it is true that, as Hanstein says, 99% of what is found in museum collection has no proof of origin? Or that trade draws its objects from sources that differ from those of the museums?

OL: To the best of my knowledge, in the 1990s, Burkhard Fenner had one or two visits by Māori representatives who examined the Toi Moko. Along with the purchase documents, there were only these representatives' personal assessments of the tattoos. It had been hoped that it could be possible to attribute it to a certain Iwi, or region. Today we know that there were also tattoo masters who travelled throughout the country and whose renown led to many commissions for them and who may have added style elements of their own, so that definite attribution becomes even more difficult. I hope that the colleagues at Te Papa can find out more. After all, they have been professionally involved with this for years. I would claim that our collection has proof of origin for far more than 1% of it. In part, we have primary sources from the colonial period, like diaries and correspondence; more recent additions to our collection from the last 50 years have documentation that is even more complete; in Papua New-Guinea, for example, ethnologists documented meticulously what they collected in the context of their field research. In conceiving and designing our permanent exhibition more than ten years ago, we already worked together in some areas with representatives from the original

societies. But it is certainly right that we still have far too little information. In my opinion, trade and museums often had the same sources when they acquired the artifacts: crucial seafaring and trade enterprises, members of the military, the whole colonial apparatus with its stationary workers, missions, research journeys, and adventurers or artists. And “our” Toi Moko came into our museum through trade, as well.

SF: The interview fields the idea that a colonial provenance is, in a certain way, also a form of proof of authenticity. Objects collected later are generally “airport art”. Can you follow that?

OL: From the perspective of the auctioneer? Yes. But the art market attributes an “authenticity” to ethnographica if, for example, it was in the possession of a renowned artist or collector or also a museum. As an ethnologist, I cannot follow that. What does “authentic” mean, when, and for whom? Trade, war waging, and migration have always existed, and that means authenticity or change is only a question of the time span of the respective view. As I see it, precisely those artifacts are especially fascinating that convey precisely these processes. By “airport art”, I understand more a mass commodity recently produced in (semi-)automation exclusively for sale.

SF: When it comes to returning objects, especially to the African continent, one often encounters the same arguments that Hanstein mentions: that corruption there is too great and that the objects are not secured, plus that there are no museums and/or no true appreciation of the art works, and sooner or later they would end up on the art market again or in the hands of private collectors. How do you see that?

OL: Oh dear, as I see it, these are the excuses first resorted to when one wants to underpin traditional claims to possession and to block away all responsibility for history. Surely something like that can and will come about. But to adduce that as a reason not to sit down together and think about how we can manage to make

especially relevant artifacts accessible to the broad public of the societies of origin authorial societies – I think that falls short, overgeneralizes, and does not do justice to the matter.

SF: What do you say to Hanstein's last suggestion, that the European Union should build a museum in Africa (wherever specifically) that Europe and Africa would then jointly own?

OL: The basic idea of working together, of sharing, and of exchange, as I see it, is the only practicable path to take. There are already internationally composed groups, for example the Benin Dialogue Group, that work on diverse concepts. It is good that the discussions are finally beginning and that politics are increasingly accepting responsibility. Aside from the collections of human remains and sensitive "objects" (see Australia), I think the point is usually less the mere approach to artifacts – those are proxy debates. Rather, the point is the economic empowering of the countries of the global South, real participation as equals, the relinquishing of hegemonic power over interpretation.

Epilog

In the meantime, the results of the auction can be accessed. In point of fact, all the discussed objects were sold, almost all of them for markedly higher bids than the reserve prices. At the same time, the human remains fetched high prices, but not the highest within the entire auction. Of course, we can only speculate about the motivations of the purchasers. Did they really regard the heads as works of art? Or was a role played by a certain fascination with the fact that these are human remains and the result of seemingly "exotic practices"? It is also interesting that the colonial provenance of the Ekoi mask – as announced by Hanstein – quite obviously had a positive effect: with reserve prices of 4,000-6,000€ in the catalog, they ultimately went to a new owners for something over 10,000€... an important indication that, in the current debate, the trade in ethnographica and the art market must not be

forgotten.

The persons

Sarah Fründt, *M.A. is a social and biological anthropologist and has been interested in "sensitive objects" in museums and in national and international debates about repatriation since 2010. In 2011, she published a study ("Die Menschen-Sammler" – the human collectors) on the question of how museums deal with human remains. Since then, several publications have followed, dealing with various aspects of the topic.*

Dr. Oliver Lueb *is an expert on Oceania and the Deputy Director of the Rautenstrauch Joest Museum – World Cultures (RJM) in Cologne. He initiated the return of the Toi Moko from the Cologne collection. In 2013, together with Peter Mesenhöller, he published "Made in Oceania: Tapa – Kunst und Lebenswelten" (art and life worlds) and, in 2018, "Die Macht der Artefakte" (the power of artifacts). An essay on the approach to human remains in the RJM's depot, among other things, will appear in the coming year.*

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Sarah Fründt
Oliver Lueb

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