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Collections, Archives, Repositories. Thoughts about Terminology from a Peripheral Ethnological Collection

DCNtR Debate #2. Thinking About the Archive & Provenance Research

As Brian M. Watson recently argued, the “archive” should not “refer to, well, just about anything”. Apart from muddying the waters and confusing what an actual archive is and what the people working there, archivists, do, it is of particular importance for the emerging re-engagement with ethnological museum collections in the context of provenance research.

Collections are collected by collectors. Who are they? Why and for what do they collect? How are these collections acquired by museums? Museums maintain depots and archives, equally acquired, and managed by individuals who are never merely derivative of the structures they move in, but actors, who have choices and make decisions. Furthermore, museums curate and exhibit, thus relaying images and messages of their own holdings with different target audiences and purposes in mind. The transmission of a world view (or an excerpt of that world) or the staging of an irritant to an epistemology – e.g. imperial, national, regional, religious or secular – as a way of educating or discussing with a mostly educated bourgeois population in mind is a central part of what museums have been doing.

Between archive and museum, different modes of engagement are employed and different goals are pursued. In investigating the provenances of its ethnological collections, the Lippisches Landesmuseum in peripheral Detmold thinks together different thought systems and research approaches. There is the object in its materiality, which has its own object history, from the production of the object, its

use, allocation and staging; its appropriation by the collector as purchased or looted goods, gifts, barter objects, etc.; its way into the museum; its use and interpretation and re-embedding at the German periphery of Lippe, restorations and ultimately up to our involvement as investigators with it today. The object exists in connection with museum documentation and ideally with a concrete collector, his/her professional career, intention, and the political, socio-economic context of the act of collecting. External sources found in varying archives, libraries, the comparison of these sources with ethnological and other secondary resources and, significantly, the discussion with scholars and other people from the objects' places of origin form an additional frame of documentation and allow for further academic interpretation – and societal discussion.

Archives, museum collections, libraries, and other repositories of written and material sources and testimonies of the past, with their own goal orientations should be understood as institutions with their own goal orientations but interrogated and analysed together. Moving beyond the traditionally text-immanent approach to the study of modern history by focussing on material collections in their entanglements promises opening interdisciplinary modes of engagements between history, art history, museology, and cultural studies. For the study of history, but also for other disciplines, this should spark new approaches and research questions. By bringing together these different repositories and thought systems, a new body of knowledge emerges that has until now not existed in this form. Clarity of terms is required to systematise this flood of approaches and materials into theoretical and methodological frameworks and to detect the cracks through which the "subaltern speaks" and the agency of coloniser and colonised becomes apparent.

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Photos clockwise: Moroccan dignitaries display at Lippisches Landesmuseum; museum documentation; Friedrich Rosen's memoirs; German foreign ministry files on Morrocan. © Amir Theilhaber, CC-BY-ND.

Currently, the Lippisches Landesmuseum exhibits parts of its ethnological collections from Morocco. Two adjacent vitrines exhibit a magnificent saddle and several ceramics, metallic and wooden household items of average artistic-material value. The objects from Morocco and other regions around the world are exhibited without any detailed engagement with their provenances, what their usages were before they were collected, why they were collected, by whom and under what circumstances. How the objects made their way into the museum and how they were portrayed for people in Lippe in the past is equally absent. The presentation largely aims to broadly portray cultures through artefacts without further historical contextualisation.

An in-depth analysis of the objects, based on a wide array of sources, breaks this view of seemingly self-contained and stable "exotic" cultures. In the arrangement of the Moroccan vitrines, a richly ornamented shelf is a central element of display. The

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Moroccan objects were donated by Friedrich Rosen, an Orientalist scholar focussing on poetry and diplomat of the German empire and the early Weimar Republic. Rosen donated the collection to the museum in 1921, shortly before he became German foreign minister. The ceramics and metallic objects were collected by Friedrich Rosen's wife Nina, who was a British born artist and, like Rosen, well-versed in Persian and Arabic. In their nearly twenty years of diplomatic residence in countries then considered Oriental in Germany, the Rosens were particularly interested in the cultural productions of "the common people", as they perceived this to be a central element for the "organic" development of the countries they lived in. As Friedrich Rosen posited in the introduction to a translation of Jalal ed-Din Rumi's *Mathnawi* in 1913, European intervention was detrimental for the development of these countries.

On display is an ornamented wooden shelf that Rosen acquired on a market in Tangier. It had been in the possession of Mualy Ahmed er-Raisuni, who was a powerful governor of the province around Tangier. Raisuni was widely known in Europe and the US as the bandit Raisuli. Despite such contacts being frowned upon by other Europeans, particularly French diplomats, Rosen entertained good relations with Raisuni as the German envoy to Morocco from 1905 onwards. German policy in Morocco was to prevent or delay the French-Spanish takeover of Morocco to upset the Franco-British entente cordiale. German policy aligned with the goals of the Moroccan court and various actors across the country – including Raisuni. Moroccan government officials saw in the Germans, who had repeatedly proclaimed an Islamophilic foreign policy, a way to shore up their power. The magnificent *green* saddle was a diplomatic gift presented to Rosen, as part of the Moroccan courts attempts to leverage German power in its favour. When the French threatened to land a military policing mission to establish order and subdue what the European press scandalised as widespread banditry, Rosen counselled the Moroccan court to set up a police mission itself to remove governor Raisuni and prevent losing the policing monopoly to the French. Moroccan troops chased Raisuni from his castle in the mountains near Tangier and plundered his belongings. Part of the plunder landed

on the market in Tangier, where Rosen purchased the shelf, which is now on display in Detmold.

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