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Documenting Coloniality

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

Ethnographic collecting in the late 19th and early 20th century was a method of colonial knowledge production and served the narrative of European cultural and scientific dominance. We understand ethnographic museums themselves as colonial archives. Although they are always incomplete and biased, as such, they are promising historical sources for the investigation of certain persons' and institutions' roles in concrete colonial moments of collecting. Furthermore, they shed light on the processes of colonial knowledge production on the base of the acquired materials.

As an archive, the museum consists of collections of material objects and accompanying immaterial knowledge. The knowledge is compiled in collection archives, catalogues, and databases, where information is not only documented and preserved but also constantly added and altered. Provenance research results, for instance, eventually re-enter into the databases and the catalogues and thereby transform the archive. Documenting the findings of provenance research, therefore, has the potential to either reproduce or to question the coloniality inherent to objects in said collections.

Provenance research is more than mere ownership history. It ought to enable the critical reconstruction of the moments wherein objects changed hands and thereby doing justice to the agency of everyone involved in these moments. We suggest that, ideally, in provenance research the following four elements of a moment of acquisition are considered: objects exchanged (what), people involved (who), way of acquisition (how) and historical context (when and where).

When looking into the acquisition history of ethnographic collections from the late

19th or early 20th century, in tendency, some information is highly dominant while other is often missing. The farther you go back in an object's history, the less a museum usually knows about the 'who', the 'when', and the 'how' of their objects changing hands. Hence, documenting the coloniality of an object's provenance means dealing with scarce and blurry information and making entirely absent information visible. It also means to take into consideration that museum documentation never is a neutral tool.

Below, we present several questions and suggestions from the research results of the project „Spuren kolonialer Provenienz", which investigated the moments of acquisition of selected parts of the ethnographic collection at Bernisches Historisches Museum. For this purpose, we developed and used a "provenance" interface in the museum database, in which every dataset represents one change of hands.

'Who?' – Documenting unknown identities

The most documented persons in the museum archives are male European collectors. Non-European persons involved in an acquisition moment are quite systematically misrepresented or totally neglected. Information regarding their identities and agencies are scarce and very often entirely lacking. For the historical reconstruction of the colonial moments of acquisition, however, their biographies, ideas and practices are essential.

In the archives, most colonized people do not figure with their real name, apart from a few exceptions of people with high social status. Otherwise, non-European persons are identified in relation to a racial, ethnical, or geographical ascription to underline the authenticity of the acquisition.

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To avoid reproducing these ascriptions, the unknown individuals must be documented anyway. The questions that arise are thus: how do we document missing names and identities? How do we make unknown people known again? How do we document i.e. a “Nubierkind” [Nubian child] who was forced by their begging mother in Abu Simbel to hand over her/his doll to the Swiss tourist Armin Kellersberger in 1927 in exchange for a little money?

In our project, we decided to make a dataset for the change of hands of the unknown but surely existing person who possessed an object before it came into European hands. These many unknown individuals share the same person’s dataset in the database, which is frustrating. However, although we thereby reproduce the namelessness, we at least make the quantity of unknown previous owners visible.

One task of provenance research documentation, therefore, is to identify and highlight the many processes of invisibilisation of colonized people in museums. Further, postcolonial documentation requires to document those people not mentioned in the archive. Here, the limits of the museum as an archive are reached. To fill in the gaps, provenance research needs to go beyond institutional documentation and has to include other sources, particularly non-European ones.

‘How?’ – Documenting unknown ways of acquisition

Usually, the inventory books of museums quite accurately account for the ways of acquisition by the museum itself. Thus, museums often know from whom and when they have received an object and whether it was donated, deposited, or purchased. The ways of acquisition of the previous owners, however, are much less known, especially in cases of colonial moments of acquisition. So, we generally do not know how an object came into European hands.

There are a few exceptions: from a letter of the collector Kellersberger to the museum, we know for example that he bought a toy from a woman in Abu Simbel. In

this case, if we simply call this acquisition a purchase and document it as such, we neglect the coloniality of the moment of acquisition, for which the unequal economic power relation is decisive. Knowing the exact way of acquisition does not equal understanding the colonial moment of the change of hands.

Therefore, for provenance research – and provenance research documentation – it is imperative to think farther than simply in terms of "ways of acquisition". In both cases, regardless of whether the mode of acquisition is known or not, the whole historical context in which the change of hands took place must be considered and documented.

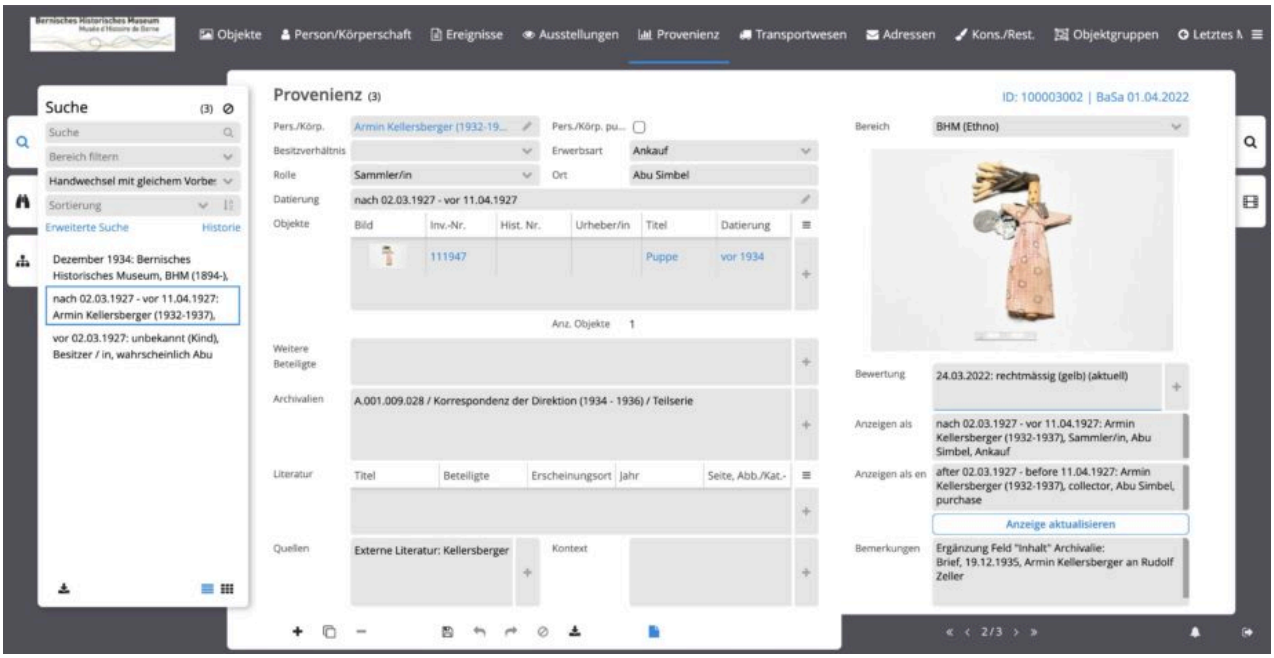

Fig.1: Entry for the doll from Abu Simbel in the museum database. © Bernisches Historisches Museum

'Where and when?' – Documenting the historical context

Knowing the 'who' and 'how' is not sufficient in order to understand a colonial moment of acquisition. Moreover, mere temporal and geographical data of a

historical event are also meaningless if not combined with each other and in relation to specific biographical and contextual information.

Returning to the child's doll, we do not only know that Armin Kellersberger purchased it from its mother in Abu Simbel in 1927. We also know that Kellersberger was a participant in a guided tour through the ancient Egyptian site. Thus, he was an early tourist who could afford to travel privately. We also know that the mother, who begged for money, obviously was in a precarious situation. The unequal economic power relation, common to many colonial situations, led her to sell her child's toy in order not to starve.

Considering all these aspects enables us to better understand the coloniality of the moment, which must be part of contemporary museum documentation. The normativity of our research, which can never be entirely neutral or objective, is another challenge for us. In the workshop as well as in our paper, we would like to self-critically discuss this as well. For the presentation, we also intend to share the interface of the database, in order to shed light on the very technicalities of the instrument we mentioned above.

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