

Each Case Is Different

Anthropological Provenance Research at
the Museum der Kulturen Basel

Museum der
Kulturen Basel

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Edited by Anna Schmid
and Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB)

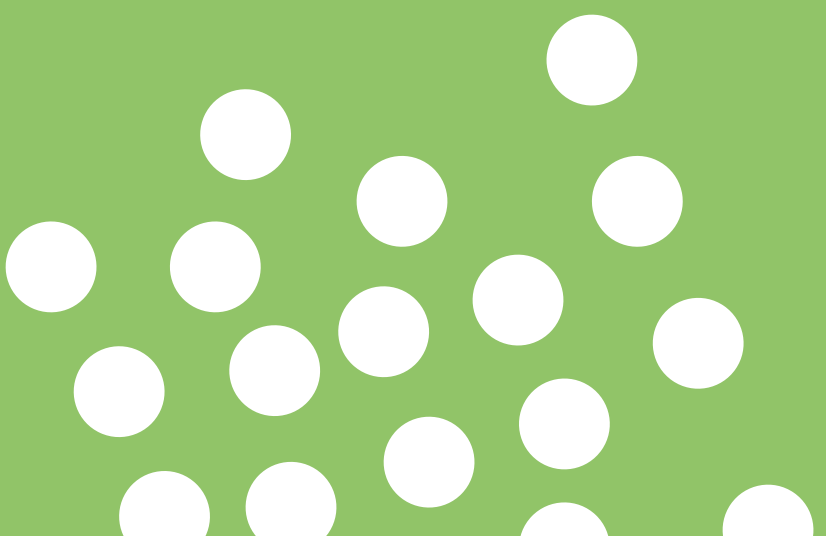
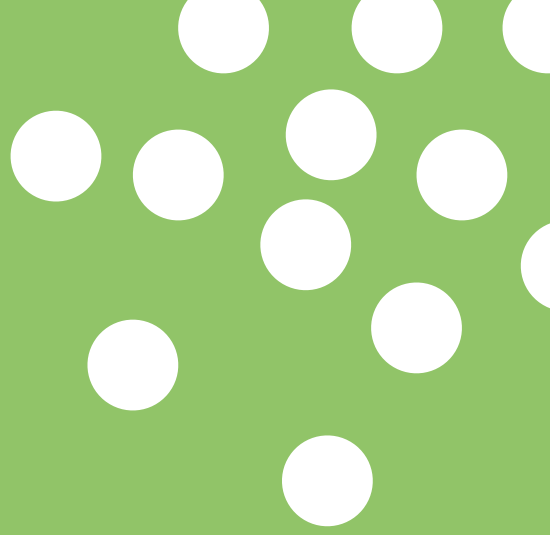
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7	Introduction
9	Coloniality and Current Relevance. Parameters of Anthropological Provenance Research Anna Schmid
31	Basics and Methodology
33	Sorting, Cataloguing, Classifying — A Structural History of the Museum Basil Bucher
60	The Museum's Archives as a Basis for Provenance Research Daniela Müller mit Isabella Bozsa, Basil Bucher, Silvia Greber, David Rentsch, Julia Singh
67	"Old Inventory" Basil Bucher
69	Not Catalogued Silvia Greber
71	An Old Inventory Number? Silvia Greber
74	More than a Source: Photographs in the Context of Provenance Research Aila Özvegyi
91	Actors and Their Roles — Clusters as a Method Silvia Greber, Julia Singh mit Isabella Bozsa, Basil Bucher, Daniela Müller, David Rentsch
107	Travelling and Collecting
109	A Trip around the World, 1872–1873 Silvia Greber
113	Alfred Sarasin in India Anna Schmid
120	Between the Front Lines — Ms Schmassmann in Algeria Basil Bucher
123	Acquisitions and Appropriation Practices
125	Searching for Antiquities with Baedeker, Palestine 1875 David Rentsch
130	How Paul Wirz Acquired Things in Northern India for the Collection Isabella Bozsa
139	Appropriation of a Shrine Basil Bucher
144	Fairs, Monks, Grazing Sheep: Max Kurt Forcart's Purchases in Egypt Daniela Müller
146	Buddha Heads from Thailand Basil Bucher
151	Trading Practices and Market Logics
153	Ethnographica as a Commodity — Business Partners and Trade Routes Daniela Müller
165	Cutlery from the Prison of Smyrna, 1895 David Rentsch
167	"From the Estate of the Reich Chancellor": Provenance Information or Sales Strategy? Isabella Bozsa
170	In Search of Money Julia Singh
173	"Fundraising Action": The Purchase of a Textile Collection Silvia Greber
179	Intermediaries and Counterparts
181	Five Daggers from "Unknown" Basil Bucher
182	Made by Children "to Pass the Time while Tending Water Buffalo" Silvia Greber
184	Bought Right off His Feet David Rentsch
187	Mohareb Toudros — An Egyptian Dynasty of Merchants in the Service of Diplomacy Daniela Müller
190	Haikanducht Tschachmatschjanz — "Good Angel" to the Swiss Caucasus Expedition of 1912 David Rentsch
197	Kaira: Spokesman for the Veddas Basil Bucher

203	Communities of Implication
205	A Buddha in Göschenen Basil Bucher
208	"A Sugar Cane Planter 'Honoured' Me with Them" Silvia Greber
211	Arnold Masarey — An Unwilling Ship's Doctor Julia Singh
215	I. G. Farben, Driessen and Iklé-Huber — A Textile Fragment Julia Singh
218	Uprooted — Knowledge about Efficacy Silvia Greber
220	On the Biography of a Painted Scroll from Nepal Isabella Bozsa
228	Gandharan Artefacts: Pre-Islamic Burden or National Cultural Heritage? Anna Schmid
237	Contexts of Violence
239	Violence in the Museum — Collections from the Congo Free State, 1885–1908 David Rentsch
254	A "Dervish Warrior's Tunic" Daniela Müller
258	Hunting Trophies — Spoils of War. Adam David's Collecting Activities Daniela Müller
260	Spoils from the Palaces of Chinese Emperors Isabella Bozsa
265	Voids and Gaps
267	Research in the European Collection: What Gaps Have to Tell Us Tabea Buri
273	The Gap in the Collection — Taiwan 1937/1958 David Rentsch
281	Current Relevance
283	Decolonial Practices as an Outcome of Provenance Research Beatrice Voirol
291	Restitution of a Ceremonial Arrow Basil Bucher
295	Mapping Philippine Material Culture Silvia Greber
298	The Significance of Paul Hinderling's Photographic and Film Material for the Mafa Tevodai Mambai
306	Exchanging Views on Basel's Cameroonian Collections Isabella Bozsa
312	Meeting with a Queen <i>kesa</i>, <i>tehekao</i>, <i>tsunan</i> in the Museum der Kulturen Basel Taloi Havini
319	Octopudian
321	Octopudian. Tentacularity of an <i>egungun</i> Mask Zainabu Jallo
333	Epilogue
335	Objects, Anthropology, Coloniality: Critical Detours George Paul Meiu
344	Acknowledgements
347	Appendices
349	Sources
353	References
365	Authors

Introduction



Coloniality and Current Relevance. Parameters of Anthropological Provenance Research

Anna Schmid

In a collection as extensive as that of the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB), surprises are almost inevitable every time one visits the storage rooms or examines an artefact. It can elicit enthusiastic excitement or curiosity, but also perplexity, disappointment, frustration, even consternation: Why did Paul Wirz return home from his journey to India with five small pieces of mortar in his luggage (see Fig. 1); what do the words “obtained by cutting off hand. Massive” on an index card for a bangle actually mean (see Fig. 59)? Or, what does a label spelling the word “Empire” on the reverse of a textile tell us (see cover illustration)? With each object, we face fragments of encounters and stories concerning acquisition and appropriation. Such initial indications found on objects are either confirmed, questioned or contradicted when sifting through the archival records. These historical dimensions are then joined by questions relating to the current relevance for a wide range of actors as well as to questions regarding emotionality.¹ This kind of complexity is the subject of provenance research which began at MKB in 2014 with a series of single projects² and which we have been pursuing as a major focus since 2022.

Provenance Research — An “Ongoing Task for All Museums”³

The fact that we at MKB have been able to intensify this kind of research is not least due to widespread public discussions regarding the colonial contexts of collections and the issue of restitution. Stirred by the debates on the provenances of single ethnographic



Fig. 1: Pieces of mortar from an old building; Srinagar, Cashmere, India; before 1938; mortar; Ø between 2 and 7 cm; consigned by Paul Wirz, purchased in 1939; Ila 490 © MKB, Corinne Kramer 2025

objects or entire collections, political decision-makers also felt the need to take action.⁴ Political bodies drafted statements, ministries issued guidelines, and in some countries, bills were introduced.⁵ In addition to initiatives launched by civil-society organizations and experts from the field of Anthropology and History which, however, have so far received little attention from the general public, the widely noted report by Sarr and Savoy of 2018 further fuelled the debate, resulting in an outpouring of publications on how to deal with collections acquired in the colonial era and the claims ensuing therefrom.⁶

In Switzerland, it took time for the realization of the country's entanglement with colonialism to sink in as, for many people, the idea of a "colonialism without colonies"⁷ was almost unthinkable for a long time. It was only a row of publications in the 2010s that revealed the complex involvement of not only individual protagonists that led to serious discussions on the topic.⁸ What people demanded was an open debate on post-colonial issues as well as a reassessment of Switzerland's colonial past, coupled with assurances that this was neither a pandering to the spirit of the times nor a moral judgement.⁹ Because, after all: "Colonialism also changed the country as such."¹⁰ The acknowledgment of the country's colonial involvement was by no means new. At the opening of the exhibition *colonial* at the Swiss National Museum in 2024, Federal Councillor Baume-Schneider quoted a statement uttered by Glarus cantonal archivist Eduard Vischer almost sixty years ago: "In the many wars and conflicts within and outside Europe, we [Switzerland] as a nation remained neutral, but as individuals many took part—e.g. as mercenaries—just as we, as merchants, went to great lengths wherever we could to partake in the distribution of the Earth's riches."¹¹ Determined statements like this also fed into parliamentary debates and motions; members of the National Council as well as the Council of States spoke out in favour of acknowledging Switzerland's involvement in colonialism and what this meant for the country, and called for accepting the ramifications; coming to terms with the past, they argued—and this included the presence of colonially tainted, ethnographic collections in museums—should be a matter of national significance.¹² In initial consultations, the Federal Council rejected these requests, pointing out that, although the concerns were justified, there was no immediate need for legislative action considering that the federal government was already providing sufficient funding¹³ in this respect and that it was prepared to act in an advisory capacity.¹⁴ In turn, the motion filed by National Councillor Jon Pult was accepted. On 9 December 2021, Pult demanded the appointment of an independent commission to deal not only with cultural property looted by Nazis before and during World War II, but also with "cultural assets stemming from other, specifically colonial contexts".¹⁵ In the same vein, the National Council's Science, Education and Culture Commission proposed on 24 February 2022 the setting up and coordination of a "web-portal in shape of a database for provenance research on cultural assets in collaboration with other partners".¹⁶ The phrasing of the Federal Council's response of 4 May 2022, in which it recommended acceptance of the motion, is interesting: "The purpose of provenance research is to address unresolved questions regarding the origin of cultural assets. It is an *ongoing task for all museums* [emphasis AS] both in relation to new acquisitions and existing collections. Improved accessibility regarding the results via a suitable platform enhances the quality as well as transparency of provenance research and facilitates networking among researchers".¹⁷

This attention economy — as the Basel historian Georg Kreis calls it¹⁸ — that is reflected in research and publications on "colonial heritage" and therefore also touches upon the provenance of collections assembled in colonial contexts, has not only caught the attention of political bodies at the national level, but also at the cantonal level.

Thus, it is probably no coincidence that, in its final phase, the discussions concerning the revision of Basel's museum law centred on whether provenance research should be explicitly referred to in the legislation. With its entry into force on 1 February 2025,¹⁹

provenance research is now firmly anchored in law; in its annual report for 2024, the government announced: “Basel-Stadt is the first canton that legally obliges museums to conduct provenance research, that is, to investigate the origins of the collections they hold”,²⁰ but — one should add — is not yet prepared to provide the necessary funding.

In order to be able to embark on the task nonetheless, the government requested and secured a framework budget allocation: the idea was to provide the five cantonal museums with 250,000 francs per year from 2023 to 2026 for provenance research. In view of the scale of the task, the parliament of Basel-Stadt raised the sum to 1 million francs per year. In doing so, both parliament and government expressed an exceptional interest in issues relating to the museums’ acquisition practices, for one thing probably because the canton feared the risk of losing reputation if it had not agreed, for the other, for fear of potential compensation payments resulting from respective claims in connection with critical collections. From a political perspective, provenance research should therefore be undertaken proactively on the one hand, and in acute problem cases on the other — all that remains is to safely embed this branch of research in daily practice, not least at MKB.

Parameters of Anthropological Provenance Research

In the political negotiations, the protagonists involved followed a logic that was largely derived from the handling of Nazi-looted art, according to which legal claims that might need to be honoured could be translated into financial demands. Recent examples from Switzerland have shown that the issue of Nazi plunder is yet far from resolved.²¹

An event organized by the five cantonal museums under the title “The Whole Story: Provenance Research at Basel’s Museums” in March 2025, revealed not only clear differences with regard to the various subject fields but also the historical complexity that each museum was facing in its own way.²² The presentations not only highlighted the differences between the various institutions in terms of self-perception, but also with regard as to the role switch from *gatekeeper* to *caretaker*.²³ This also implies differences in the approach to provenance research in each museum and in the parameters that need to be applied in research.

Thus, the analysis of ethnographic collections should not and cannot be reduced to the changes of hand in the Global North. These are undoubtedly of import — especially when they are founded on legal arguments and linked with financial claims — but as far as ethnographic objects are concerned, the really critical moment is the incident when an object passed from Indigenous to European hands for the first time, and under what circumstances the transfer occurred. It matters significantly whether weapons were confiscated after a military conflict — such as after the reconquest of the Mahdi empire in Sudan in 1898 (see Müller 256), the subjugation of the Chinese empire in 1860 (see Bozsa 260–261), or following the crushing of the Indian Mutiny in 1857 — whether people engaged in illegal excavations in order to secure a livelihood by selling the looted objects, or whether items were purchased on markets or bazaars — even though all mentioned circumstances are rooted in colonial contexts. When assessing provenance, analysing the historical context can provide critical information about the circumstances under which people parted with an artefact or were forced to do so. In such cases, strictly legal arguments are of little relevance simply because legal concepts in general and property concepts in particular differ considerably and often are even incompatible.²⁴ This was pointed out emphatically by Brian Martin²⁵ on the occasion of the return of the *dhulu* to the Gamilaaroy people in January 2024.²⁶ For the bodies that had to decide on whether the carved tree was to be returned to Australia or not, the question of ownership was paramount. The answer that the *dhulu* was to return to the land of the Gamilaaroy was evidently not satisfactory. It was only when Martin explained the Indigenous perspective that spelt “Not we own Country, Country owns us”,²⁷ that the responsible bodies were convinced and the tree was able to return (see Voirol 283–284).

Apart from the historical context, the above example also addresses the second, highly complex parameter, namely the current relevance for the communities concerned. On the one hand, this relevance arises from meanings and cultural values that are embedded in earlier practices and in the corresponding material objects. On the other, one has to take into account underlying imperatives that derive from genealogical principles, from the significance of ancestors, and from the status of the object as an independent subject. In the Global North, the *dhulu* might have been nothing more than a carved piece of wood, for the Gamilaaroy, however, it is a sentient subject, an embodiment of the ancestors that demands certain performances to warrant the community's wellbeing. This discrepancy highlights once again the instancy for museums to disclose what kind of objects their collections hold. Only then will it be possible for the makers and original users to be united again with their genuine possessions (see Havini 312–317). For researchers, this implies that their work on provenance can only be done in close collaboration with members of stakeholder groups.

Finally — and closely related to the previous point — a third parameter concerns the re-evaluation of objects in the museum context. Every time an Indigenous delegation visits the museum, we are made to feel how limited our knowledge of the things that MKB holds actually is. When, for example, Wannila Aththo, chief of chiefs of the Vedda people of Sri Lanka (see Bucher 291–294) was able to impart more factual *and* cultural knowledge about things from his community during a two-hour tour of the Veddah-collection than the museum had been able to gather in over 100 years, this not only casts light on possible shortcomings, structural deficiencies or the low priority given to research.²⁸ It also reminds us that collections cannot be frozen in time, instead, we distinctly need to focus more on their historical dimension. However, merely formulating exhibition texts and labels in the past tense is certainly not enough in this respect.²⁹ Moreover, it would require an ongoing exchange of knowledge and perspectives with source communities which, considering a holding of roughly 340,000 objects, is simply not possible for the museum. Nevertheless, a start has been made (see contributions on "Current Relevance" 283–317),³⁰ and with each new cooperation and the intensive exchange it engenders, re-contextualizations emerge which we try to convey to our audiences as directly as possible (see "In Full View" 21).

So much on the principal parameters of anthropological provenance research, for the time being — "for the time being" because each future collaboration will require a review of their significance and will undoubtedly result in adjustments, additions and/or clarifications.

From Coloniality to Decolonization

The fact that ethnographic collections and the anthropological museums that hold them are compelled to address and tackle colonial contexts and colonial heritage has now been generally accepted, after much discussion and heated controversies. Before we can engage with and work on MKB's collections, we must first consider the state of coloniality (as a result of colonialism) in relation to the process of decolonization. Key players in transcending this condition by transforming it into a process are, on the one hand, the so-called source communities, or communities of origin, and, on the other, "communities of implication", a term coined by Erika Lehrer in the debate concerning the social and ethical entanglement of museum objects (cf. Bozsa 306).³¹

Coloniality

By no means did colonialism³² end with formal decolonization. Rather, it gave way to what is now described as coloniality.³³ In very general terms, this means that structures and practices that emerged during the colonial era have become firmly entrenched, with lasting and profound impact. In the political and economic spheres, this is immediately

evident; for instance, just consider the colonial borders that were drawn arbitrarily by the colonial powers and without regard for reigning linguistic and cultural affiliations of resident populations;³⁴ the same goes for the many, often blatant economic dependencies. In social life and in the cultural sphere, the ramifications of colonialism are evident and have been scientifically documented many times over but frequently this does not stop people from denying the effects of colonial rule. These find expression in a wide range of forms, including racism, pictorial worlds, epistemologies, or patterns of thought.³⁵ To this day, societies are affected by the reverberations of colonialism in practically all spheres of life. This is also the case in Switzerland. Although it is often contended that Switzerland as a state was too weak to participate in the colonial race,³⁶ there is no way of getting around the evidence of "colonial complicity".³⁷ In their capacity as mercenaries, missionaries, merchants, diplomats, explorers, and scientists, Swiss men and women actively interacted with representatives of the colonial powers in political, economic, cultural as well as scientific contexts—and, among other things, all of these activities also resulted in collections for MKB. In the process, actors made the most of colonial structures and, in some cases, they also helped to establish them, either intentionally or unintentionally.³⁸

Societies of Origin and Communities of Implication

In debates on restitution, the question as to which groups are entitled to make claims towards museums is often discussed controversially.³⁹ A term that is rarely missing in this context is that of society of origin.⁴⁰ It refers to those groups from which works and artefacts in museums originated. As helpful as the term may appear at first glance, it can be misleading because it presupposes that the groups from which the objects were once acquired, or which produced them, continue to exist virtually unchanged to this day, in other words, they are denied any form of historicity. This kind of understanding not least rests on the assumption that cultures actually were static entities until the "dawn of modernity"⁴¹ and only then began to "develop". In an attempt to overcome this notion, I use the term "community of implication" introduced by the sociocultural anthropologist Erika Lehrer, by which she means all the relationships engendered by individual objects or collections in museums: "Their [the museums'] legacies of collecting, categorizing, displaying, and looking not only reflect but also continue to impact relations among groups of people, mediating differently-situated visitors' senses of connectedness to or distance from each other in the present day."⁴² In order to avoid reducing relationships between humans and artefacts to either universalistic or essentialist interpretive schemes that relate exclusively to the "physical manifestations of the world views of the groups that created the objects",⁴³ Lehrer develops an alternative concept based on an object category she calls "awkward objects".⁴⁴ What she is aiming at here are objects in which stories of violence and oppression are inscribed, and all those people who have in any form or another come into contact with them. We can only do justice to these awkward objects if we include ethical inspiration and empathy while unravelling their intricate stories.⁴⁵ It is essential that we face up to the painful pasts and include the communities that emerge therefrom, based on solidarity, mutual responsibility, and commitment. Lehrer thus argues for a museum practice that focuses on *communities of implication*, that is, relationships between people and things, in order to address and handle the diverse—and at times painful—meanings enshrined in the objects.⁴⁶ For her, this does not mean that the concept of source community is not a valid one. When restitution or other claims are raised, the society of origin notion can still come in useful. However, Lehrer doubts that restitution processes can truly do justice to the charged history of an object.

For ethnographic objects that have undergone an entangled trajectory between the cultural contexts for which they were intended and their eventual musealization, I

believe the concept of "communities of implication" can be applied in a productive and insightful way, not least because it forces us to take into account the artefacts' entwined nature and analyse the stories inscribed in them (see contributions on "Current Relevance" 283–317). In this respect, Jallo (321–331) has created a powerful image based on octopuses and their tentacles that almost seem to lead a life of their own in order to highlight the relation between independence and interconnectedness.

With this, the critical analysis of coloniality and the search for new, "just and fair",⁴⁷ but above all equal relationships between the actors involved has been established as a mainstay of postcolonial research and practice.⁴⁸ Furthermore, this concept helps to ensure that processes are not considered conclusive, because ever more implicated communities are constantly emerging and can therefore also be incorporated in the negotiation process (cf. contributions on "Communities of Implication" 205–235; Bozsa 306–311; Havini 312–317).

Decolonization Processes

How difficult the process of decolonization actually is, is borne out by statements voiced in many publications and by the demands placed on this process. One of the most far-reaching calls comes from Tuck and Yang who believe that decolonization should be viewed and treated in a way equivalent to the struggle for human rights in the USA of the 1960s.⁴⁹ Most of the efforts and experiments concerning decolonial practices in museums, they maintain, have been met with critical comments: sometimes the accusation is hypocrisy, at others simple co-optation or collaboration driven exclusively by power politics.⁵⁰ In an article titled *Situating decolonization: An Indigenous dilemma*, seven representatives of various Indigenous groups from Australia, New Zealand/Aotearoa, and Hawai'i express their far-reaching thoughts concerning the (im)possibilities of decolonizing the world. As these are all voices from the Global South with significant implications for MKB, I present the content of their contribution in more detail.

The authors link the charge of decolonizing history, literature, curricula, of thought in general, with the fragility that grows from the confrontation with the "colonial condition", and go on to ask: "What does decolonization mean for Indigenous peoples? Is decolonization an implied promise to squash the tropes of coloniality? Or is it a way for non-Indigenous people to create another paradigm or site for their own resistance or transgression of thinking? What are the roles of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in this space of educational potential, this curriculum called decolonization?"⁵¹ One of the first findings states that Indigenous perspectives cannot be homogenized or standardized because they are always bound to a specific place,⁵² meaning that with regard to every action, the community level each with its own set of ideas and practices needs to be heard and included. When attempting to compile their experiences, the authors were made to realize that in doing so they were merely perpetuating an old colonial practice, namely that of amalgamating local experiences into a single category of Indigeneity: "As we collectively explored the question of decolonizing education, it became clear that trying to blend together our experiences would risk continuing the colonizing practices and assumptions of traditional, Eurocentric research on Indigenous education. This lack of assimilability of our voices signals the limits of the category of 'the Indigenous'. One effect of the widespread acceptance of the category of 'the Indigenous' within scholarship is to generate a reified binary of Indigenous vs. Western/European knowledge, extended to people and culture."⁵³ Brian Martin, one of the authors, came to the conclusion that what was required to begin with was a decontamination of the terms used, not least because education is a colonial concept throughout. The attempt to integrate Indigenous knowledge into the Western educational canon is doomed to failure — so, Georgina Stewart, another of the seven authors in her contribution to the discussion — as this would distort Indigeneity: "The result is often cultural caricature: inert knowledge, shorn of its original contexts, webs of meaning, and corresponding fields of practice. Such incremen-

tal changes may make the curriculum more appealing but ought not be blithely elided with the paradoxical notion of a decolonizing curriculum."⁵⁴ Is there a way out of this dilemma? The authors leave the question as such unanswered but suggest that it needs countering by a partial decolonization of the inherent logics, thus at least contributing to its destabilization: "This act of 'temporary overturning' is open to the eternal dialectic of assertion/negation with origins in ancient Maori metaphysics. For example, colonization and destabilization grapple together to produce something novel which is then claimed by colonization, undermined by destabilization, and so on, ad infinitum."⁵⁵ All thoughts expressed in this article are transferable to processes within the museum context — however, it is crucial that any transfer must be adapted to the specific case at hand and avoid any kind of premature generalization.

With regard to new terms and their implications, too, and in the knowledge of coloniality that cannot be cast off and which permeates all spheres of life, the only road open to us is another shift or turn: there is no escaping of coloniality at present, not even in close collaboration with representatives of "other" cultures. But try we must all the same, for new paths or alternative procedures can only evolve if we give them a chance, even at the cost of failure.

What opportunities such attempts may provide for research in Switzerland is a question addressed by Randeria: "The networks of actors analysed so far along with institutional settings, cultural formations, and political strategies all point to the need to perceive the space understood as 'national' as a product of transnational interconnections,"⁵⁶ thus providing, Randeria continues, a view of European colonialism from its margins.⁵⁷ Although the present volume does not aim to analyse European colonialism from this viewpoint, it actually makes an important contribution to any such project by revealing the interconnections, interests, and entanglements of actors closely associated with institutional collections — in our case Basel's Museum der Kulturen or, as it once used to be called, the Museum of Ethnology.

The findings and thoughts outlined above are useful for our research in the sense that, time and again, we are thrown back onto, or encounter, "old" frames of mind when dealing with individual objects or entire collections. Being aware of this fact and creating space for ongoing reflection already constitutes a vital step in the right direction, with potential consequences with regard to practices relating to artefacts, such as how are they to be presented and contextualized fittingly, which spiritual backgrounds are significant, or which social dynamics need to be taken into account. Notwithstanding, we should not overlook the fact that objects in a museum are items in an abstract space; one implication being that the presence of artefacts should in no way mislead people into attempting to imitate any of the cultures.⁵⁸ Against this backdrop it becomes evident that museums face the challenge of reconciling claims resulting from provenance research with their spatial framework,⁵⁹ and, in doing so, incorporate the "entanglements of ongoing social, temporal and material trajectories and relationships, dislocations and relocations."⁶⁰

"Under Scrutiny": The Collection's Coloniality

In his famous treatise published in 1955, Aimé Césaire outlined what colonization meant for the colonized: "...what, fundamentally, is colonization? To agree on what it is not: neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. To admit once for all, without flinching at the consequences, that the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world

scale the competition of its antagonistic economies.”⁶¹ This characterization has lost none of its relevance; rather, it is to be extended to the state of coloniality. Césaire concludes that none of the promises have been kept, that no contact worthy of the name has taken place, that there is merely disregard for human values, and that even museums had nothing to contribute to improvement: “On the scales of knowledge all the museums in the world will never weigh so much as one spark of human empathy.”⁶² Nothing can be taken back, nothing undone. All that remains, therefore, is to try to inject museums with a grain of “human empathy” in the future, in the hope that it may grow.

The ethnographic museum is a product of the colonial age. Founded between the middle and the end of the 19th century, the programmes of these institutions were dictated, on the one hand, by the growth and diversification of scientific knowledge at the time, and, on the other, by the political agenda of the bodies that funded and promoted them; this, of course, also applies to the situation in Basel (see Bucher 34–42). Initially, the collection programme was geared to the ambition of representing all regions and continents in the world. The Basel museum soon found itself in a position where it felt sufficiently confident to define its own needs and aspirations, calling for not only the collection of physical objects but also for information concerning the objects’ provenance and contextual background. The men in charge at the museum used every opportunity and alleyway to expand their collection (cf. Bucher 38) — by way of donations offered by travellers, purchases of sought-after and unusual objects on the arts market (see contributions on “Acquisitions and Appropriation Practices” 125–150 and “Trading Practices and Market Logics” 153–177), through own research expeditions or by issuing appeals to the citizens of Basel. Every conceivable resource was exploited in the hope of “growing the collection to the best of our ability”,⁶³ a collection that need not shy comparison with other leading museums in Europe. It goes without saying that all those involved in the endeavour made use of colonial structures (cf. Bozsa 130–138), defended them (cf. Rentsch 239–253) or even reinforced them.

The examination of the MKB collection with regard to its coloniality was acknowledged, and against this background, the questions relevant to screening the collection were outlined. The most important preliminary work for the project “Under Scrutiny” included the research conducted by the first fellow at the MKB, Lukas Cladders, and the findings of the project “Who’s who in the collections of MKB”.⁶⁴ Cladders had already defined some of the key questions back in 2015, for example: “In what historical context did the appropriation processes occur? Under what circumstances were objects now held by MKB acquired and consigned to the museum?”⁶⁵ The focus of his work was on the history of collecting in connection with European colonial expansion and colonial wars along with the period between the two world wars. In the project “Who’s who”, main emphasis was on the actors responsible for the creation and growth of the collection and the networks they relied on: “Who were the people who consigned objects to the museum? What networks were they able to draw on? Under what circumstances and by what means did they acquire individual items or even whole assemblages — through purchase, finds, looting, exchange, gifts?”⁶⁶ Despite some overlaps with regard to the questions posed, the results were complementary and by no means repetitive. Neither project raised the claim of processing the entire MKB collection exhaustively.

This, in turn, is the objective of the current project “Under Scrutiny”, which began in 2023. Here, too, the focus is on the circumstances of acquisition, again applying an actor-centred approach, with the aim of examining the collection with regard to its coloniality, for the first time *systematically*. In order to cope with the sheer volume of around 340,000 objects, the research team had to come up with an analytically sound but still pragmatic approach to the task. Like most other anthropological museums, MKB is organized by region (see Müller et al. 60–66), that is, the collections are arranged according to continents or parts thereof. The same organization principle — problematic as it might be⁶⁷ — applies to the documentary body, that is, from acquisition ledgers to index cards,

annual reports, collection files and databases. Even if this structure were to be broken down, it would still have to be considered during a systematic review; thus, sticking to the old ordering principle seemed the only sensible mode of approach.

The first step—determining the number of consignments from a specific region or present-day nation state—is followed by a biographical review of the person and the objects he or she consigned to the museum. To illustrate the procedure, here an example: When, and for what reason, did Alice Keller, who held a PhD in economics and served as head of Roche's branch in Tokyo for a while, travel to Korea? In 1935 she took a holiday trip from Japan to Korea during which she visited Seoul and the Kungang Mountains where she acquired cloths, hats, toys and photographs which she later gifted to the museum. In how far this collection was influenced by Japanese colonial rule in Korea is a question for which further research would be required that also takes into account sources outside of MKB. Thus, it holds promise of becoming an extremely interesting enquiry into the question of coloniality in East Asia—in other words, it points to a potential research project in the future. At the same time, the example touches upon a number of topics covered by the current project:

1. The decision to rely primarily on the archival material held by the museum means that we will be able to systematically review the entire collection within the stipulated research period (2023–2026). However, this also means that we have to restrain ourselves in the sense that each time things get highly exciting we have to hold back on research and proceed to the next collection or consignor. Furthermore, to ensure that none of the knowledge gained in the ongoing research—this includes clues, ideas as well as reasonable caveats—gets lost, we needed to install a kind of electronic "record keeping system" that we can access whenever required. The above comments on Alice Keller are a reflection of this type of notation.

2. We do not base our research on a traffic-light system that would be unsuitable for ethnographic collections and which foregrounds criteria such as guilt, victim-perpetrator dichotomy or redemption. Rather, we examine all the collections acquired until 1970 with regard to colonial traces, including the collection assembled by Alice Keller, which might be only of limited relevance to European colonial history. Only by proceeding in this manner, can we gain an overview of the structure of the collection with all its implications.

3. As mentioned above, questions concerning the current relevance of individual objects or entire collections for the so-called societies of origin, or communities of implication, are far more important than an object's change of hands in the Global North. However, determining what this relevance implies is not something that we alone can offer or do. Moreover, our task is to present our findings in such a manner that the people for whom the objects bear relevance can easily access and work with them as they see fit. The first indications as to the interest of stakeholders in collections held by museums come in the shape of publications⁶⁸ or web portals (see Greber 295–297) which affected actors launch as a way of signaling their interest or need. For communities concerned, relevance can also refer to the religious or spiritual significance of a specific artefact and how it is "treated". An example of this is offered by Isabella Bozsa (see 306–311) in connection with a meeting with representatives of a Cameroonian delegation. As one member put it, even after a hundred years "in a museum setting" (Bozsa 309) a buffalo horn filled with medicines still has spiritual power that can be activated. Apart from the potential danger to the museum emanating from this force, it also raises the general question as to how to handle such sensitive things in a museum context. Many groups have extensive guidelines in this respect, above all concerning artefacts that fall under the category secret/sacred, which should not be exposed to the voyeuristic gaze of outsiders owing to their dangerous potential.⁶⁹

Another member of the Cameroonian delegation raised a second, different but equally important question, namely concerning the societies of origin: who today is to decide

whether an object labelled “Fang” belongs to the ethnic group of that name now spread across Gabon, Cameroon or Equatorial Africa. Which group is meant specifically and how does one sort this out? In the case of an ethnic group spread across several nation states with several million members, this is almost impossible to determine. Regardless of any problems, open questions or uncertainties that arise in the course of the research, once the collection has been processed up to 1970, the aim is to have at the end a report for each nation state or a region (e.g. Himalayan region) containing information concerning the classification criteria applied,⁷⁰ follow-up contacts and publications, possible questions relating to specific objects or collections as well as suggestions for future research projects.

In order to establish meaningful allocations, we assigned specific roles to consignors which resulted in eight distinguishing clusters (see Greber, Singh et al. 91–105). One of the most surprising findings to date⁷¹ is that people who stood directly in the service of a colonial power are less frequently represented among the consignors as expected whereas travelling collectors and scholarly researchers tend to be overrepresented (see *ibid.*). The source material used for the research included the objects themselves as well as records from MKB’s archives (see Müller et al. 60–66). The contributions to this volume bear witness to the insights to be gained from accession ledgers, index cards, collection files, letters, photographs, minutes of meetings, annual reports and entries in the museum’s own database.⁷²

To the best of my knowledge, no systematic analysis of this kind has been undertaken to date — alone the sheer scope of the venture is probably one of the reasons. Despite limitations in terms of content, the chosen approach has so far yielded astonishing results with regard to options for differentiation and analogies under completely different historical circumstances. The exchange of knowledge and ideas within the institution — the museum’s own oral tradition, so to speak — has also been of key significance in bringing together different areas of expertise, be it in deciphering manuscripts, providing contextual information on certain individuals, or sharing knowledge concerning the history or materiality of comparable collections.

“Under Scrutiny” in Dialogue with External Scholars

In the course of the project, we organized a total of five workshops with experts from different scholarly fields — for one thing, to reflect on the procedure and refine our methodological approach, for the other, to review preliminary findings. The meetings were held in some of MKB’s public spaces — for instance, in one of the exhibition rooms or on one occasion as part of the project series “In Full View” (see 21). Participants in the workshops included:

- Brian Martin, director of the Wominjeka Djeembana Indigenous Research Lab at Monash University’s Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture
- Corey Ross, director of the Institute for European Global Studies at the University of Basel together with Glenn Penny, an American historian at the University of California, Los Angeles
- Bernhard Tschofen, cultural studies scholar at the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies of the University of Zurich
- Anna-Maria Brandstetter, long-standing research associate at the Institute of Ethnology and African Studies, and curator of the Ethnographic Collection of the University of Mainz
- Monica Juneja, art historian and spokeswoman for the Advisory Board for Provenance Research on Collections from Colonial Contexts at the German Lost Art Foundation.⁷³

The talks and discussions were extremely productive, with each of the five meetings following a slightly different trajectory. All participants expressed great respect for the immense task of systematically examining a collection of this size and analysing it with regard to its coloniality — “too difficult to deal with” was one of the comments made.

Right at the beginning of the workshop, Brian Martin pointed out that he did not know what to make of the archival materials, in fact he could not even read them. By this he was not merely referring to a language problem (mostly German) or illegible handwriting in the archival material but rather to the fact that it was research from the museum's own vantage point which came with its very own, institutional "culture of writing". Ultimately, Brian Martin was expressing what we already knew at the outset of the project, namely that the undertaking of provenance research in the sense of a systematic *screening* of the collection remained, despite critical reflection, an *ethnocentric* venture as long as the questions and perspectives of the individuals and groups who originally produced and used the artefacts were not an integral part, if not even the starting point, of the project. No matter how critically we read the archival records — "along or against the grain"⁷⁴ (cf. Bozsa 130) — the findings always reflect the viewpoint of those who had composed the letters, index cards and entries in journals — even if the archives did contain ambiguities and a multiplicity of voices.⁷⁵ Too many voices were missing — Martin went on — and our gaze was focussed too strongly on the objects as such instead of appreciating them from the perspective of making including all the sensory implications which that entailed. This was further reinforced by the project's actor-centred approach in the sense that the people who acquired the objects and compiled the collections became elevated (almost) to the status of an author, suggesting that these individuals played a greater part than merely being involved in the collection's emergence. Monica Juneja voiced similar concerns when she rightly demanded that the "Others", or counterparts, should be involved when it comes to formulating the project's basic questions. In order to ensure that the venture did not come over as a mere *whitewashing*, both sides needed to be given the chance to voice their concerns and become involved in the process. Negotiating the terms and taking into account each side's demands should be an intrinsic part of the venture.

Corey Ross referred to the potential for further research projects applying the actor-based approach, for instance with regard to the colonial hill stations as trading places or the structure of Swiss scientific and business networks. For Glenn Penny it is a concern not to draw parallels between the findings of past generations of scholars and historical events and to judge them against this backdrop. Rather, one should acknowledge and appreciate the "fugitive knowledge" of these scholarly predecessors (among them a few females). Assessing or even condemning their achievements without a thorough examination of the scientific thinking behind, bears the danger of all too easily falling prey to intellectual self-complacency and failing to critically question one's own assumptions and prejudices.⁷⁶

The discussion with Anna-Maria Brandstetter led to a more precise conceptualization of the cluster system and a better definition of the roles that we had assigned to the actors, with less emphasis on the individual and more attention on their position within the colonial setting and structures. Bernhard Tschofen outlined some of the possibilities of resolving the dilemma of provenance research: this branch of research is regarded by many as a solution to pressing problems rather than as an independent form of research with immense potential — not least in distinction to investigations into Nazi-looted art. As he sees it, our project could be a first step towards tapping into a huge potential once the results are shared with a wider audience and the findings are channelled into further research, critical debates, and action.

Other topics that were mentioned more in passing by the participants and which are presently not part of the project include incompatibilities between different legal systems or concepts of time of those involved in research and circulation as well as restitution processes, the potential problem of essentializing terminology — as, for instance, in society of origin — as well as the issue of emotionality, an aspect that is regularly overlooked in negotiations. Statements and arguments from the workshops fed into our de-

liberations, particularly with regard to the methodological approach, and helped to sharpen our critical view once more (Greber, Singh et al. 91–105).

Potentials and Limitations

Time and again, the reproach of Eurocentrism has been raised by various parties — not least by the members of the research team themselves. I would advocate employing the term ethnocentrism instead, simply because we as human beings inevitably speak and act from our own personal viewpoint. What comes into play here is that, depending on the situation, we tend to identify with specific groups, for instance, as Swiss, as a person from Basel, as a member of a kin group bearing a particular name — but rarely ever as Europeans.⁷⁷ What is important is to reflect on the viewpoint we hold, only then can we recognize and overcome any prejudice. This means that neither we nor anyone else is immune to ignoring overtones, taking interpretations too far or failing to do justice to the archival material. Scholarly research is a tricky business that only produces truths until they are refuted.

Placing actors at the centre of the research project does indeed carry the risk of focussing on individual mistakes or failings, despite all due care, thus overlooking systemic or structural regimes. Our focus on roles and their assignment to different clusters shifts the structural level and coloniality to the centre of attention. Still, we should never forget that we are dealing with the actions of people in settings that always include a counterpart, imagined or real, endowed with agency and an agenda of their own.

The greatest limitation comes from prioritizing our own archival material with all its gaps, omissions, and withholdings. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that even the most comprehensive archive only contains extracts from the events that occurred.⁷⁸ Moreover, in connection with ethnographic collections, oral traditions will always assume a key role; however, oral traditions are a genre of source that is often neglected in archives for the simple reason that they are difficult to integrate into archival conventions.⁷⁹ A further limitation concerns the (provisionally) bounded period with regard to the accessions to the collection under scrutiny, that is, from the beginning of the Ethnographic Collection in the 19th century (Bucher 38–39) to the year 1970. This time frame was chosen for pragmatic reasons and takes into account the paradigm shift in the legal landscape, namely the UNESCO “Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property”.⁸⁰ Irrespective of these limitations, and beyond the present volume, the findings of the research will be made publicly available in the near future. Hopefully they will open up new topics for research and provide reference points for future projects.

The risk of replicating colonial structures and the focus on knowledge produced in the existing academic system of the Global North will remain as long as, in the words of Kavita Singh, “the ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ values derived ultimately from the Enlightenment become displaced within the ethnographic museum. No longer a universal, the Enlightenment itself becomes the relic of a cultural particular.”⁸¹

The strengths of the project lie in the openness of its approach. By relying on the notions of role and cluster as methodological tools it does not close itself off to new avenues of enquiry, instead it opens up a whole new range of debates and research topics (see Meiu 335–341). In doing so, it offers a comprehensive and solid analysis of the museum’s holdings with regard to their coloniality. The next major step in this extensive project is to not only share the analysis with the respective societies of origin and communities of implication but, founded on it, to enter into new cooperations in which all participants are equally represented from the start. Then, possibly it will be the communities of implication that determine the agenda and thus redefine the *modus operandi* completely. Given this, it might even occur that the West’s exclusive interpretive authority is relinquished and that the epistemologies of the Global South are granted equal status to

Western academic approaches, allowing a relational ethics to develop that impacts all processes relating to provenance, the circulation of objects, and the tasks of museums in general. Our endeavour is to create the conditions by making the results of our research accessible to all as well as through project series such as "In Full View".

In Full View

In this project series, launched in 2024, MKB presents ongoing research and shows the steps that objects go through before they are returned, or on loan, to their communities or in other modes of circulation. Among other things, the process involves presenting to the general public the findings of our provenance research including the respective source material along with publications, photographs and film footage. So far, this has involved the Vedda collections from Sri Lanka, which were returned in 2024 [see Bucher 291–294]; secondly, the collection from Hiva Oa, French Polynesia, which is to be shown on a loan basis in a cultural centre in Hiva Oa [Voirel 284–285]; thirdly, the bronzes from Benin, Nigeria, which were investigated in a three-year project in collaboration with seven other Swiss museums to establish their origin from the sacking of the royal palace in 1897 by the British;⁸² and fourthly, a number of artefacts from Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, which Felix Speiser brought with him from his expedition in 1929/30 and which were recently examined by a fellow to the MKB, the Indigenous artist and curator Taloi Havini at the museum. Central to Havini's work is the figure of a queen, *kesa*, which is of primary significance to the self-understanding of the people of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville [see Havini 312–317]. Her aim is to capture the iconographic and decorative elements featured on the artefacts and digitally return the images to the islands of Buka and Bougainville. Whether she will be inspired to engage in further artistic work in this respect remains to be seen.⁸³ Finally, in 2025, members of the provenance research team compiled an assemblage of objects under the heading "In Full View: Basel, colonial", some of which are analysed in this volume. In addition, they also selected artefacts with unusual histories or such that are connected with eminent personalities associated with the museum.

Each episode of the series "In Full View" creates a special meeting space at MKB. During opening hours, a member of the team is always on site to engage with visitors, discuss what provenance research is all about, describe the role of conservation and preservation, elaborate on the significance of photography, and answer any questions or concerns visitors may have. It is this personal level of communication without having to rely on labels and written texts that distinguishes the series from a conventional exhibition. Dialogue as a principle not only facilitates direct, open exchange on controversial topics, it also reflects MKB's position on these matters and imparts knowledge without claiming exclusive interpretive authority. So far, the experiment has shown that our approach to provenance research, both as far as content and method are concerned, is understood and endorsed by our audiences. In addition, the at times rather abstract concept of provenance research, which only a small number of visitors concretely grasp, becomes tangible — beyond legal stipulations, changes of ownership or making moral judgements.

Topics of the Volume

For the overall project, the publication of this volume is a further step into the public eye.⁸⁴ It shows how the research is progressing, reveals the richness of the collections, and provides insight into the complexity of how they evolved in the first place. To provide some context, the opening chapter deals with the museum's structural history. In it, Basil Bucher [33–59] describes how the museum developed in structural terms, its changing parameters, and the issue of personnel. It is in this setting that the newly acquired objects and collections were entered, arranged, and regrouped. The structure of the in-

stitution and the collection were mutually interdependent — adjustments to circumstances due to new acquisitions, procedures for handling them, lack of space and funding, decisions concerning how the funds should be spent, networks and power struggles in the context of expanding the collections — all these are issues that impacted on the importance of the institution and its significance for the city of Basel and beyond.

Daniela Müller and the provenance research team (60–73) introduce the in-house sources in all their diversity including a few *trouvailles* and what they have to tell us. On the one hand, this brings to light the museum's internal pool of sources, on which most of the articles in this volume are founded, making them available to all interested parties. On the other hand, it reveals the perspectives from which the contributions were written. To illustrate the different types of sources, three examples demonstrate specific features of the classification system: this includes the category "old inventory"; secondly, a record in the files indicating that, for reasons unknown, certain objects were not catalogued; thirdly, traces of multiple labels on an object that point to the practice of exchanging items with other museums. Photography constitutes a further, independent type of source. In her contribution on this subject, Aila Özvegyi (74–90) argues that images should not be viewed exclusively as tools for researching provenance, but rather interpreted and utilized in all their complexity: "Photographs have meaning as images and as material objects and in their combination of a photographic support and pictorial content" (Özvegyi 74). In her contribution, the author explores the intricacies of this complexity.

In the ensuing contribution titled "Actors and Their Roles — Cluster as Method", Silvia Greber and Julia Singh together with the project team (91–105) summarize how they meticulously developed the system of roles and their assignment to specific clusters, illustrate the procedure with examples and thus underline the significance of the methodological approach. Finally, they outline the results of the team's internal discussions regarding the risks that come with their approach such as essentialization, the scant source material or the danger of reproducing colonial thought patterns, matters that demand careful and constant attention.

This introductory part is followed by thematic blocks dealing with acquisition and appropriation modes, trading practices and market logics, intermediaries and counterparts, communities of implication, contexts of violence, the emergence of gaps in the collection, and examples of the current relevance for various stakeholders. All contributions relate to objects or assemblages held by MKB, and each contribution offers new insights and background information on how the items were acquired. At times, the focus is on the collections as such, sometimes on the circumstances under which they were assembled, and sometimes on how they entered the museum. Although each of the over 40 contributions focuses on the thematic block it is assigned to, they also touch upon topics from other sections, revealing how each addition to the museum's collection is steeped in complexity. In addition, many contributions address "crosscutting issues", including so-called salvage anthropology,⁸⁵ the complicity of collectors with colonial authorities and missions, and — at least implicitly — ethical matters.

In the three contributions under the heading *Travelling and Collecting*, the authors address the wanderlust shown by various individuals in different eras and circumstances and how the museum benefited from their "spoils". Following the Zahn brothers' world tour in 1872–1873 (Greber 109–112), which resulted in around 100 items for the museum, Alfred Sarasin travelled to India with a friend in 1890 (Schmid 113–119) and subsequently gifted 125 objects to the museum over time. Like the Zahn brothers before him, Sarasin was in contact with colonial officers, missionaries, and staff from a range of colonial institutions at different stages of his journey. What initially looks like a completely different mode of travel — world trip versus travel in a single country — turns out to be merely a matter of degree: the two journeys lasted about the same length of time — something over eight months in the case of the Zahn brothers, a little less than seven months in Sarasin's

case — and both parties usually stayed only a few days at each of the places they visited. What distinguishes them is that while the Zahn brothers mostly stopped off in large cities in North America, Asia, and the Middle East, Sarasin focused exclusively on Egypt and India. The third empirical example concerns Clara Schmassmann's "adventure travels" (Bucher 120–121), which also took her to Algeria. Her trip differed from the first two not only in terms of when it took place but also with regard to personal circumstances, financial means, and objects consigned to the museum: Schmassmann was neither well situated nor well educated; she often changed jobs and had made a public name for herself as a strike leader. Her journey to Algeria, from which she consigned a few objects to the museum, was all the more significant in the sense that individuals like Schmassmann were — as Basil Bucher points out — often "muted out"⁸⁶ in the records owing to the fact that she was female, of low status, yet determined and probably also quite self-confident.

David Rentsch's contribution on Baedeker's travel guide to Palestine segues into the section titled *Acquisitions and Appropriation Practices*. For the production of this guide, the publishers turned to the Basel orientalist Albert Socin, who not only knew the area like the back of his hand but was also well versed in the practices of collecting and trading from own experience, as borne out by his donation of self-collected, antique objects to the museum. In the travel guide, Socin offers tips as to what kind of objects are worth collecting, where they are to be found, and what people should look out for: he cautions against forgeries and excessive prices, emphasizes the importance of recording where objects were found, points out individuals and groups of people who could be trusted as professional guides, intermediaries, and vendors, and draws attention to the problem of exporting cultural heritage items. According to Rentsch (128), Socin's Baedeker offers "valuable insights into the collecting practices of travellers to Palestine in the 19th century".

By exploring the semantic field of the term "acquire" in connection with objects, Isabella Bozsa traces the modalities of appropriation mentioned by Paul Wirz on his journey through Northern India: apart from "acquire", Wirz uses terms like "fetch", "take along", "get hold of", "find" or "salvage" to describe how artefacts were acquired or changed hands. On the one hand, Wirz provides clues as to his self-image as a collector, on the other, he points to situations which he considers problematic — especially such instances where he was unable to influence either the process or the outcome. Bozsa concludes that the differing terms for denoting a change of hands reflect the wide scope of forms of acquisition: "from gifts to theft", whereby "lines between legitimate purchase, deception, coercion and theft were frequently fluid", to say the least. Basil Bucher centres on the question of whether the "appropriation of a shrine" (139) was nothing less than a case of theft and how one should handle such a sacred object today. Daniela Müller's article focuses on collections from Egypt donated by Max Kurt Forcart, a practising physician in Cairo. Forcart purchased things from traders at local fairs and even "bought tools right out of the hands of local people who were using them" (Müller 144). According to his own account, he once even snatched an amulet from a grazing sheep. In the last contribution to this section, Basil Bucher (146–150) describes the acquisition of ethnographic items from Thailand through the Eisenhofer brothers in Munich. After lengthy negotiations, the museum finally purchased twelve objects originally collected by Emil Eisenhofer during his time working as a railway engineer for the Thai state railway company. Based on his position as engineer, he had taken advantage of the historical sites along the railway line and presumably also the local labourers working on the construction of tunnels to acquire objects of interest. Later, he was able to make use of the expertise he had gained in Thailand to sell the items on the European ethnographica market.

The contributions above illustrate specific circumstances regarding acquisition and appropriation in colonial contexts in which local actors were exploited, taken advantage of or simply ignored.

In the section *Trading Practices and Market Logics*, the focus shifts to economic relationships. In "Ethnographica as a Commodity", Daniela Müller (153–164) takes a look at the circulation histories of ethnographic artefacts in order to trace their local and transnational commercial value, their commodification, and changes in the trade system — for example, due to rising demand. She explores the role of local dealers, using the example of Phocion Tano from Cairo and his long-standing relationship with the Basel museum, and sheds light on the production for a growing market as well as to the way collectors critically reacted to such developments. After reviewing the trade practices of travelling collectors such as Boris Malkin and of representatives of the trade with ethnographica like the Hamburg company Umlauff, Müller goes on to analyse strategies for increasing an item's market value: rarity and exceptional qualities of an object were just as much part of bargaining reasoning as were difficulties in procurement or a brief reference to the "last chance" of obtaining a certain item.⁸⁷ The museum was intent on presenting arguments against an excessive purchasing price; however, once the objects were in the museum, it used the same arguments to justify their inclusion in the collection and thus enhance the museum's general reputation. As an example of a global economic system, David Rentsch (165–166) cites the production — or perhaps merely the finishing — of cutlery in a prison in Smyrna in 1895. Prison labour was officially described as a rehabilitation measure but, of course, the "low or often virtually non-existent pay" ensured that the goods were competitive on the market. Isabella Bozsa (167–169) offers two interpretations regarding a ritual object from Tibetan Buddhism which the museum purchased from the dealer Julius Konietzko at a handsome price. The reference to the previous owner, Reich Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, was either an argument to justify the high purchasing price or simply used as a sales strategy.

Apart from the fact that the museum too had to conform to market logic, it was also dependent on outside financial support. This required skills at relationship management and inventiveness. In one case (Singh 170–172) it appears that an anonymous donation was solicited specifically for the purchase of a "Jivaro trophy".⁸⁸ In a second case, the museum launched a "fundraising action" (Greber 173–177) to obtain the necessary financial means to purchase a valuable collection of Indonesian textiles from the Langewis brothers. For this purpose, all members of the Museum Commission mobilized their social networks. In the end, 42 contributions were submitted, primarily from companies but also from private individuals. The shortfall was offset gradually by contributions from the canton of Basel-Stadt. Since then, neither the arguments nor the procedures for acquisitions and the procurement of financial resources have changed fundamentally. However, today MKB rarely relies on the professional trade with ethnographica to grow its collection.

As regards the majority of objects in the MKB collections, little to nothing is known about who the counterparties in the transactions were. Nevertheless, in painstaking detective work we have been able to identify at least some of the individuals involved. The contributions in the section *Intermediaries and Counterparts* cover cases where we have clues as to who was involved on the other side, occasionally even their names and function. As far as the consignment of the "five daggers" from North African countries is concerned (Bucher 181), we are given the name of the intermediary and details about some of the previous owners. Considering how go-getting Leopold Rütimeyer was otherwise, it is astonishing that he did not do everything in his power to meet the people in Basel who were involved in this consignment. This leaves room for speculation, just as in the case of the Javanese, grass-plaited *wayang* shadow play figures (Greber 182–183), in which children are collectively described as both the makers and consignors of the objects to the petroleum geologist Justus Krebs. In the case of the fur shoes (Rentsch 184–186), actually no names could be ascertained but instead a photograph of the previous owner wearing them, before they were literally "bought straight from his feet".⁸⁹ Decidedly more tangible is the Coptic antiquities dealer Mohareb Toudros (Müller 187–189), who worked in Lux-

or as a German consular agent which provided him with excellent contacts and a far-reaching network for acquiring objects of interest, which he then could resell. Regular customers also included employees from the museum in Basel. Another person to be given a clearer profile, this time a woman, is Haikanducht Tschachmatschjanz, who held a PhD in Zoology and worked as an intermediary and interpreter for the Swiss Caucasus expedition in 1912 (Rentsch 190–196). Originally hired as a travel interpreter, she then also took on tasks such as negotiating, hiring local staff, and making purchases — including items that were later consigned to the museum. Finally, Basil Bucher (197–201) renders a portrait of Kaira, member of the Vedda community in Sri Lanka and intermediary for many scholarly ventures that took an interest in the Vedda people from the end of the 19th century onwards. From the different records of these undertakings, we gradually gain a picture of this spokesman, based on “moments of encounter”. What is so fascinating is to see how this significant go-between positions himself between the demands of his own group and the demands placed on him from outside.

All contributions evoke the agency of the respective counterpart, but it rarely goes beyond hints due to the scarcity of sources. The position of standing in between, in particular, requires the intermediary to make decisions in which a simple dichotomy of “one side against the other” cannot do justice to the complexity of the encounter.

As explained above, far more people are directly affected by coloniality in connection with collections and museums than the reference to “societies of origin” would suggest. The concept of “communities of implication” takes into account both the bypassing of stakeholder groups and the overlooking of participants. In “A Buddha in Göschenen”, Basil Bucher (205–207) traces a complex web of relationships centred around a Buddha statue in 1901. As a result of the interaction between various individuals linked to different settings, the Buddha found its way to the museum’s collection. With regard to other interconnections that resulted in objects being consigned to the museum (Greber 208–210, 218–219; Singh 211–217; Bozsa 220–227; Schmid 228–235), the areas and settings of the respective events are different, so are the meanings attributed to the objects as well as the individuals and institutions involved. Entangled in the textile fragment from Peru (Singh 215–217), for example, is not only the textile merchant, expert and collector Fritz Iklé-Huber, a certain Mr Driesen, I.G. Farben, and museums that hold comparable fragments, but also other communities with very different backgrounds, making them highly relevant in terms of the piece’s provenance.

In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron publicly stated in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, that colonialism was a crime against humanity. In the same year, art historian Bénédicte Savoy resigned from the Humboldt Forum’s expert advisory board, demanding to know how much blood was on the objects held in Berlin. Since these incidents, at the latest, it has become more than evident that violence in various forms and manifestations constitutes an integral part of museum collections. The contributions in the section *Contexts of Violence* shed light on the tacit complicity in the use of violence against colonized and subjugated societies. David Rentsch (239–253) examines objects from the period of the Congo Free State (1885–1908) to show how official representatives of the colonial state not only legitimized the use of violence, but also ruthlessly participated in it themselves; the armet mentioned at the outset bears testimony to this. In the wake of colonial wars — such as the so-called Mahdi Revolt involving Sudanese-Mahdi forces and the Anglo-Egyptian army — trophies bearing a direct connection to specific historical events were much sought-after collector’s items: for example, the *jibba*, originally a Sufi garment which then turned into a type of military tunic (Müller 254–257), or weapons, which the big-game hunter Adam David was able to purchase cheaply following several armed conflicts with the British colonial army and consign to the museum (Müller 258–259). Another example involves Chinese artefacts that were looted or seized as spoils of war during the two Opium Wars and the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion (Bozsa 260–264).

When Rentsch ⁽²⁵²⁾ states in summary that power relations and collecting activities at different times and in different areas were not only closely linked, but also revealed various dimensions of colonial violence, he is not only referencing physical violence but also pointing at structural and epistemic violence that is ingrained in all forms of colonial relationships.

The section *Voids and Gaps* is not about the long-cherished chimera of completeness, so frequently encountered in museums. Rather, one case centres on the scope for action in museums ^(Buri 267–272), while the other concerns a failed transaction ^(Rentsch 273–279). In her contribution, Tabea Buri outlines what she calls voids or “missing things” in the European collection. In addition to names of individuals involved in the genesis of a collection that were deliberately omitted, concealed or simply not recorded, she also addresses reasons for turning down things offered to the museum, the desperate search for objects that were not available, and how artefacts were dealt with that ran counter to the ideas intended by their former owners. Of course, “missing things” also include the category of “things that were once there”. Thus, for instance, “criminal folklore studies” was meant to become a separate collection area after a presiding judge at Basel’s criminal court had donated a “smuggler’s vest” to the museum in 1922. However, all efforts in this direction failed, and the vest remained a solitary object so that, in the end, it was given away. Genuine gaps in the collection are also caused by objects that are expected but never arrive, as was the case with an attempt to acquire a rare snake vessel from Taiwan ^(see Rentsch *ibid.*).

The final section includes contributions that address the *Current Relevance* of single items or whole collections. How this relevance finds expression, what it implies, and what kind of debates and activities it entails is the subject of Beatrice Voirol’s article ^(283–290). In it, the author traces some of MKB’s procedures and experiences in recent years, drawing on five examples: the return of the *dhulu* to Australia, the development of an exhibition in collaboration with residents of Hiva Oa, two restitution processes regarding ancestral remains, one to Australia, the other to Aotearoa/New Zealand, and, finally, a digital project with a focus on Vanuatu. All these projects are the result of collaboration — sometimes initiated by MKB, on other occasions by representatives of communities in the Global South.

The return of a collection once gathered from the Vedda community of Sri Lanka to Dambana in Sri Lanka now allows the local culture centre run by this group to conduct rituals using the right paraphernalia — in this case an arrow ^(Bucher 291–294). Occasionally, web portals provide initial clues as to where certain artefacts are held, thereby enabling stakeholders access to their cultural heritage ^(Greber 295–297). Collaboration with the “Mapping Philippine Material Culture” project led to the upload of several artefacts from MKB’s Philippine collection. As a fellow of MKB, Tevodai Mambai ^(298–305) was able to work with materials that stem from his own community in northern Cameroon. On his last visit to the area, he showed various groups photos and film footage from MKB’s archives in order to gauge their interest and sound their expectations. The visit by a delegation from Cameroon ^(Bozsa 306–311) was the incentive for a full provenance research project with the aim to analyse over 3,500 objects from different regions of Cameroon with regard to their coloniality. With her research on the *kesa*, the representation of a queen from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, Taloi Havini ^(312–317) aims to reconnect her community with their queen. At present, her main concern is to report back on her experiences with the Basel *kesa* and present photographic material to her people at home — in other words, a kind of digital restitution.

In her contribution, Zainabu Jallo ^(321–331) reflects on and shares her experiences with *egungun* masks from the Republic of Benin. In so doing, the author merges theoretical considerations with historical facts, cultural issues, and spiritual threads of meaning. In their capacity as “diasporic objects”, the masks become “visual ventriloquists” for their

communities. By using the metaphor of the octopus with its tentacles that kind of lead a life of their own, Jallo succeeds in bringing together the fragmentary which she sees not as being pitted against each other in terms of experience and meaning but as an additive opportunity of profitable coexistence, even as a generative principle.

In his epilogue, George Meiu reflects on the contributions to this volume and the potential of fusing them with various new anthropological approaches, before suggesting ways of further developing pertinent research questions, methodological approaches and/or theoretical linkages. He points to methodological detours — or *critical detours* as he calls them — that anthropological provenance research needs to take in order to gain from the dialectics between imagination and empiricism unforeseen insights into the artefacts, which research needs to focus on alongside the human actors involved.

So, let us return to the questions raised at the beginning. Why Wirz consigned these rather nondescript pieces of mortar (Fig. 1) to the museum remains a mystery, even after consulting the corresponding index card (Fig. 2) along with other archival materials. The bangle from the Congo Free State bears witness not only to the physical, but also to the structural and epistemic violence of colonial rule in general (Rentsch 252).

The label "Empire" on the reverse of a Basel carnival costume (see cover illustration) raised the question of whether Switzerland — or at least Basel — actually had such an obvious or evident connection to the (presumably) British empire. In this case, the search for clues came up with three interpretations. A first clue came from the *Schweizerische Handelsblatt* of 1928 where we gather that the British government had issued an ordinance⁹⁰ requiring that "certain imported goods" were to be labelled with information concerning

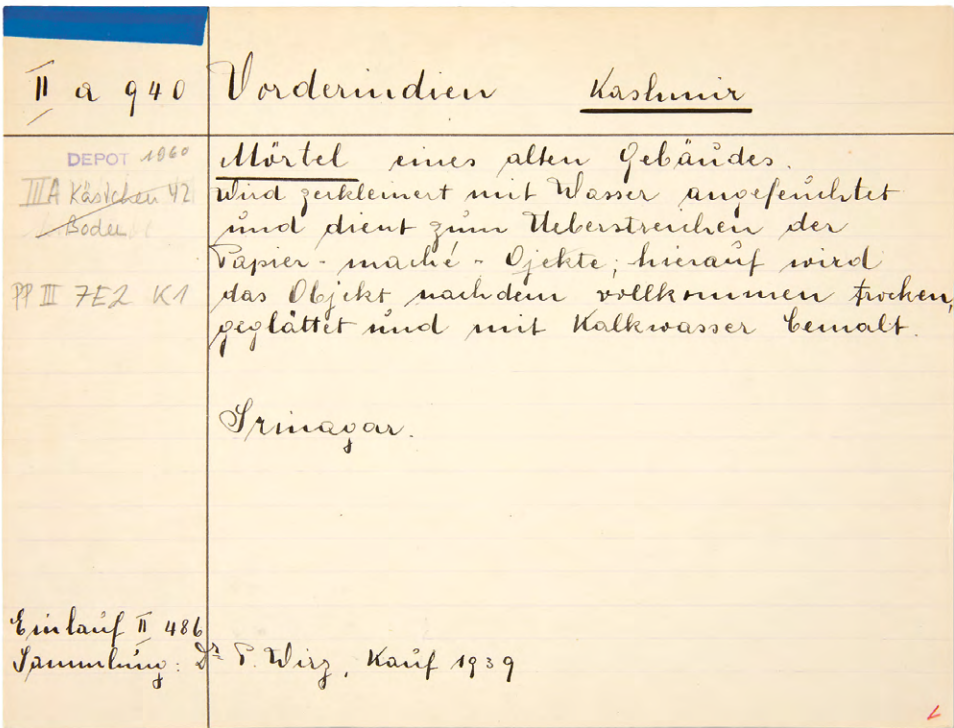


Fig. 2: MKB index card IIa 940.

their place of origin. The designation of origin must consist, at the discretion of the person responsible for placing it, either with the word "Foreign" or "Empire", depending on whether the goods were produced or manufactured in a foreign country or in a part of the British Empire outside of the United Kingdom."⁹¹ However, textiles were not listed in the details of the regulation, so such a label would be unusual as a corollary to the British order. Earlier research⁹² had revealed that the interior decorator Peter Hanauer was the former owner of the carnival costume. A search of the Basel directories for Peter Hanauer and for businesses in Basel bearing his name and/or with "Empire" as the company name showed that both existed—but as separate entities with different addresses: on the one hand, we have "Innendekoration Empire AG", on the other, "Tapezierer- u. Dekorateurgeschäft" owned by Werner Hanauer.

In the end, the third clue proved the most likely: "The fabric pieces come from sample collections that customers used to select materials for their interior design projects. The fonts and formats suggest that we are dealing with samples from different suppliers. One of them relied on fancy French names for his materials: 'Ble d'or' for fabrics bearing a metallic cord pattern, 'Minerve' for shimmering fabrics in shades of blue-grey, 'Orphee' and 'Falconnet' for modest, simple fabrics, and 'Empire' for opulent brocade fabrics, echoing the pompous style of French Empire furniture."⁹³ The case shows how provenance research has to deal with a multitude of facets and offshoots and that interpretations need re-questioning time and again—simply because many questions remain unanswered. Where did the fabrics come from? How did they get to Basel? Who produced them and under what conditions? Who was involved in each of the subsequent work steps? And finally, what levels of meaning are embedded in this one object, on top of each other or side by side?

Reflecting on these issues merges the agency of the actors involved with the agency of the things in question. The resulting multiplicity of single objects or of entire collections in past as well as present contexts and in conjunction with anthropological questions as, for instance, raised by George Meiu (335–341) will have to serve as the starting point of anthropological provenance research in the future. Collaboration with different communities from/in the Global South in a wide variety of constellations will be central to this endeavour, not least because each case is different.

1 On emotionality in anthropology, see Ahmed 2000; on emotionality and museums, see Tolia-Kelly 2016; on the renewed significance of emotionality in historical studies, see Pernau 2021 and 2025.

2 See Annual Report 2014, 55; cf. <https://www.mkb.ch/de/museum/forschung/fellowship.html> (13.06.2025).

3 Cf. <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefft?AffairId=20223023> (07.06.2025).

4 This was the case in the Netherlands, France, Germany and Austria, for example. In the United Kingdom, the discussion began earlier; the Netherlands took proactive action. Museums in France found themselves under pressure after President Emmanuel Macron's speech in November 2017: "He's really landed us in it", was the comment made by a French colleague on the sideline during a conference.

5 For example, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport convened an advisory committee, of which I was a member, to develop a framework for action on holdings from colonial contexts in Austrian federal museums. The recommendations were presented to the press in 2023, but to the best of my knowledge, they have not yet been converted into law; cf. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000175452/empehlungen-fuer-gesetz-zurueckgaben-kolonialer-kulturguetolgen> (10.06.2025).

For the Netherlands, see van Burden 2011, and the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on the Return of Cultural Objects from Colonial Context, which the Secretary of State for Culture and Media refers to in its decision to return objects to Indonesia and Sri Lanka in 2023;

<https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2023/07/06/colonial-collections-to-be-returned-to-indonesia-and-sri-lanka> (10.06.2025); For Germany, see, for example, Deutscher Museumsbund 2021, Hackmack; Kaleck 2021, or von Bose 2024, 204.

6 See, for example, Förster et al. 2017, Bechhaus-Gerst 2018, Zimmermann; Geissler 2019, Schölnberger 2021, Andraschke et al. 2023, Kreis 2023, Bozza (in preparation).

7 Purtschert et al. 2012 use this formula in their subtitle.

8 See, for example, Purtschert et al. 2012, Purtschert; Fischer-Tiné 2015; Museum der Kulturen Basel 2015.

9 Purtschert et al. 2012, 51–52.

10 Beck; Zangger 2023, <https://www.ekr.admin.ch/d911.html> (07.06.2025).

11 For speech, see <https://www.edi.admin.ch/de/reden-elisabeth-baume-schneider> (06.06.2025); the excerpt is also available at <https://www.ekr.admin.ch/d911.html> (07.06.2025).

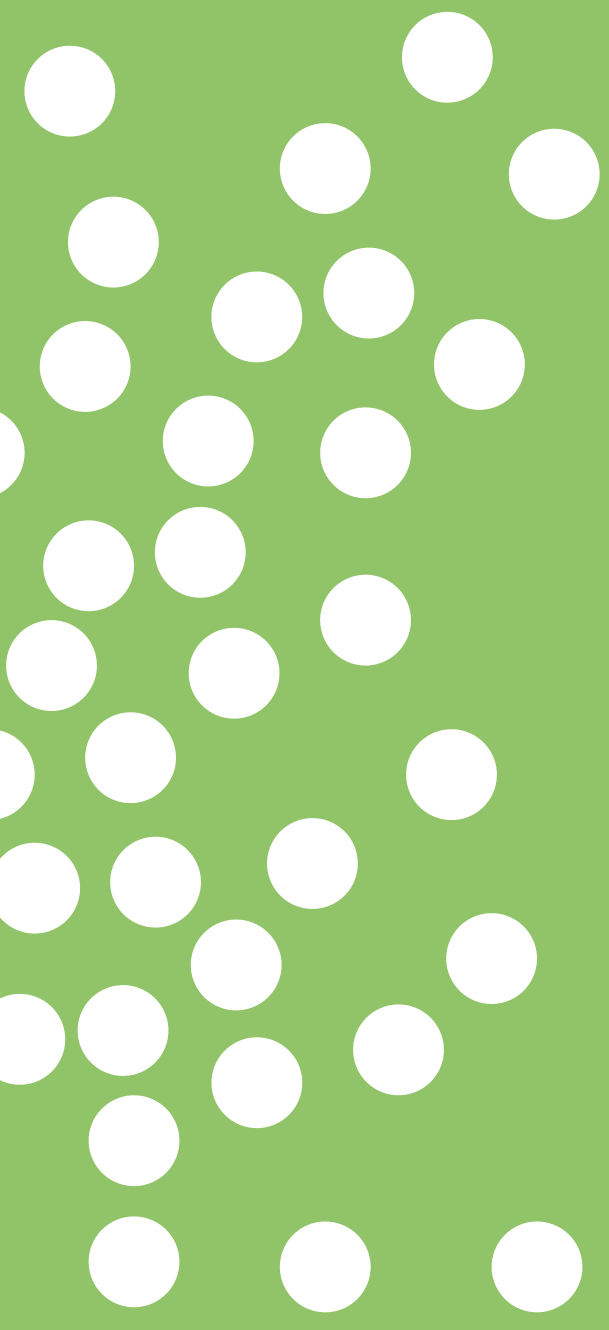
12 This was stated by National Councillor Cédric Wermuth in his motion "Joint strategy on provenance research and restitution of cultural property from European colonialism" of 13 December 2018, as did Council of States member Carlo Sommaruga in a question regarding the "Restitution of the Benin Bronzes" on 14 December 2018 and in his motion on the "Participation of Swiss museums in the return of cultural property seized during the colonial era. Establishment of a federal procedure" on 18 June 2020.

13 Since the 2020s, the Federal Office of Culture has also been providing funding for projects involving anthropological provenance research; see <https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/>

- de/home/kulturerbe/kulturgueter-aus-koloniale-kontext/provenienzforschung-in-der-schweiz.html (09.06.2025). Under the heading "Provenance research in Switzerland", the Office states: "Provenance research is an important part of their [the museums'] work: by researching the origin of the objects in their collections, they can identify possible links to Nazi-looted art, to *looted art from a colonial context* [emphasis AS] or to looted excavations." <https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/de/home/kulturerbe/raubkunst/provenienzforschung-in-der-schweiz.html> (09.06.2025).
- 14 For reasoning, see <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaef?AffairId=20203754> (07.06.2025) with reference to previous motions submitted in this matter.
- 15 See <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaef?AffairId=20214403> (07.06.2025).
- 16 <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaef?AffairId=20223023> (13.06.2025).
- 17 <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaef?AffairId=20223023> (07.06.2025).
- 18 2023, 19.
- 19 On this, see https://www.gesetzessammlung.bs.ch/app/de/texts_of_law/451.100 (09.06.2025).
- 20 Kanton Basel-Stadt 2025, 12.
- 21 This is shown by the Glaser case at the Kunstmuseum Basel, see <https://kunstmuseumbasel.ch/de/forschung/provenienzforschung/curtglaser> (09.06.2025), or by the presentation of the Bührlé Collection in the Chipperfield building of the Kunsthau Zurich, which opened in 2021.
- 22 For purposes of comparison, see also the statements on the respective websites: https://www.antikenmuseumbasel.ch/_Resources/Persistent/e9be2f374fa532d9dd9464aa976d42fc2f3c30a6/2_Strategie%20Provenienzforschung%20AMB.pdf (13.06.2025); <https://www.hmb.ch/museen/sammlungsobjekte/provenienzforschung/> (12.06.2025); <https://kunstmuseumbasel.ch/de/forschung/provenienzforschung> (22.03.2025); <https://www.nmbs.ch/de/sammlung-forschung/forschung/forschung-geowissenschaft/provinienz-forschung.html> (20.03.2025).
- 23 The redefinition of a museum adopted by ICOM 2022 in Prague also refers to the need for museums to open up to different stakeholders, i.e. to transform their self-image from that of a *gatekeeper* to that of a *caretaker*.
- 24 See Sandkühler et al. 2021, 20. Attempting to achieve regulation through legislation is problematic insofar as the respective legislator dictates the procedure on the basis of its own law. Once again, it would be the Global North that would determine the procedure and thus continue to dictate terms. Furthermore, this would frustrate opportunities for negotiation in dialogues and the consideration of needs beyond legal considerations. However, negotiation processes and dialogues are all the more urgent because they are the only way to clarify how the parties involved can shape their cooperation, repatriation or other forms of circulation.
- 25 Brian Martin is himself a member of the Gamilaroy people, an artist and director of the Wominjeka Djeembana Indigenous Research Lab at Monash University's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture. He initiated the process of restituting the *dhulu* and remained a partner throughout the process; see Voirol in this volume.
- 26 In fact, our Australian colleagues spoke of "deep listening". For more information on the repatriation, see media reports and the MKB blog posts, including <https://www.mkb.ch/de/services/blog/2024/oktober-dezember/dhulu.html> (13.06.2025).
- 27 Personal communication from Brian Martin, 31.08.2023.
- 28 Cf. Habermas 2021, 99: "You have the objects, we have the knowledge."
- 29 On this, see in particular Fabian 2018 and the ongoing discussions that his criticism of allochroism has triggered.
- 30 MKB's annual reports of recent years regularly mention collaborations – in projects, conferences, and the processing of collections. For the years from 2013 onwards, see <https://www.mkb.ch/de/museum/ueber-uns.html> (13.06.2025).
- 31 Lehrer 2018, 2020. Lehrer refers to Michael Rothberg's concept of the "implicated subject"; see Rothberg 2019 and Lehrer; Wawrzyniak 2023 (01.07.2025).
- 32 Etemad summarises colonialism as "the domination of an entire society by foreigners belonging to a different culture", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/026457/2024-09-18/> (08.06.2025). The author added to this basic definition of territorial expansion for European colonialism three additional characteristics: "Firstly, it was a relationship of domination in which the European powers dominated distant regions in their own, mostly economic, interests. Secondly, colonial rulers and colonized peoples remained strangers to each other." Unlike in earlier colonization, they did not assimilate and therefore did not merge with the Indigenous population. Moreover, this separation led to the establishment of a hierarchy between "races" in the 19th century. "Thirdly, from the 16th century onwards, European colonialism developed into a civilizing mission according to which Europe, on the basis of its alleged technical and cultural superiority [...], not only had the right but also the duty to 'civilize' societies considered inferior." The author further specifies: "Accordingly, Christianity became the only source of salvation, free trade the engine of material progress, and Western knowledge the objective truth. This civilization discourse justified colonial expansion by reinterpreting it as philanthropy and rationalizing its violence" (ibid.).
- 33 See, for example, Bauriedl; Carstensen-Egwuom 2023 or Purtschert 2019.
- 34 Not only on the African continent, but also in Asia, these borders continue to result in wars and armed conflicts to this day, for example, in Kashmir since the partition of India in 1947.
- 35 See Purtschert 2012, Purtschert 2019 or, with regard to visual imagery, Juneja 2023, 145–162.
- 36 Zangger 2024, 125.
- 37 Purtschert 2019, 50 ff.
- 38 On this, cf. Schär 2015, 150–151.
- 39 The collections from Benin City, Nigeria, are paradigmatic examples of this; see, among others, Habermas 2017, Plankensteiner 2022, Hertzog; Uzébu-Imariagbe 2023, Müller 2024.
- 40 Alternative terms include "communities of origin", "originator societies", and "source communities".
- 41 See, among others, Habermas 2021.
- 42 Lehrer 2020, 289.
- 43 Ibid., 290.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 When Lehrer speaks of "ethical inspiration", she is referring to the intuitive activation of values that arises, for example, in response to a specific situation. We experience this time and again when visitors suddenly encounter *their* objects in a museum setting, and respond to them, cf. Voirol 283–290 or Bozsa 306–311.
- 46 Lehrer 2020, 290.
- 47 Thus the wording of the 1998 Washington Agreement.
- 48 For examples of conceptualisation of the relational in regard to collections, negotiations, or modes of circulation, see Sarr; Savoy 2018, Sculthorpe et al. 2021, Dilger et al. 2025, or Brian Martin's speech on the occasion of the handover of the *dhulu* in November 2024.
- 49 On this point, see Abu-Lughod's critique (2025), which strongly advocates an *indigenous* turn but nevertheless wishes to adhere to the scientific principles of the Global North. She also argues that ethical responsibility should be made a guiding principle of research rather than neutral distance.
- 50 Cf. Kassim 2017, Schmid 2017, Taylor 2020.
- 51 Martin et al. 2019, 1.
- 52 On the significance of *country* in Australia or *land* in Bougainville, as representative for many regions in Oceania, see Martin; Webb; Priestley 2023 or Havini in this volume.
- 53 Martin et al. 2019, 2.
- 54 Ibid., 3.
- 55 Ibid., 8.
- 56 Randeria 2012, 7–8.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Schmid 2009, 2011a, 15–16.
- 59 On this, cf. ibid., 16–22.
- 60 Basu 2017, 2.
- 61 Césaire 1955, 334.

- 62 Ibid., 336.
- 63 Sarasin 1897, 27.
- 64 Cf. Bucher et al. 2022; <https://www.mkb.ch/de/museum/forschung/provenienzforschung.html> (11.06.2025).
- 65 Cladders 2015, 2.
- 66 Bucher et al. 2022, 4.
- 67 Schmid 2011a, 15.
- 68 See, for example, Sculthorpe et al. 2021, Markides; Forsythe 2019, Havini 2021, 2023.
- 69 Cf. Konrad 2020.
- 70 Criteria include 1. Collector + biographical information; 2. Time of acquisition; 3. Place of acquisition; 4. Colonial territory/political status at the time of acquisition; 5. Historical events in the surrounding context; 6. Religious/spiritual significance of the object at the time of acquisition; 7. Current relevance of the object to the society of origin; 8. Scholarly relevance; 9. Change of ownership; 10. Additional information; 11. Further procedure.
- 71 Asia took top priority in our research, followed by the African continent, and, at the same time, we began working on the Americas. There are several smaller projects on Oceania (cf. Voirol in this volume), and Buri has recently published a comprehensive work on Europe (cf. Buri 2024 and Buri in this volume).
- 72 We were able to draw on biographical sketches of around 800 people from the "Who's who" project, as well as entries containing information concerning acquisition conditions and modalities, changes of ownership, and coloniality in general.
- 73 I wish to take the occasion here to thank all participants in these workshops once again for their expertise, for the exchange of ideas, and also for taking time to listen and contributing their thoughts.
- 74 Cf. Stoler 2009.
- 75 Cf. Kraft et al. 2010, 14.
- 76 Cf. Penny, n.d. "Fugitive Knowledge and (Un)salvaged Anthropologists". Unpublished manuscript.
- 77 Kim Sanggil in the entrance area shows the museum's stance on this; cf. Schmid 2011a, 34.
- 78 On this, cf. Stoler 2009, Arondekar 2009, Chakkalakal 2024, 25–29.
- 79 Of course, there are audio and video recordings of oral literature, but much is lost in these recordings simply because such performances require an audience, and therefore a different form of source critique. See, for example, Mills 1991.
- 80 The Convention was passed on 14 November 1970 at the 16th session of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris.
- 81 Singh 2013, 5, <https://leading-edge.iac.gatech.edu/aaproceedings/files/2015/10/The-Future-of-the-Museum-is-Ethnographic.pdf> (11.06.2025).
- 82 Habermas 2017, Hertzog; Uzébu-Imarhiagbe 2023, Müller 2024.
- 83 For Taloi Havini's artistic work, see her website www.taloihavini.com.
- 84 Apart from the project series "In Full View", <https://www.mkb.ch/de/veranstaltungen/vor-aller-augen.html> (30.06.2025), other steps included Provenance Research Day and various blog posts, see <https://www.mkb.ch/de/services/blog.html> (20.06.2025).
- 85 See Habermas 2021, in which the author examines the emergence and spread of the concept of salvage in connection with collecting and preservation. She shows that this was by no means limited to non-European objects or to anthropology.
- 86 Habermas 2017, 330, 346–350. See also Buri 2024, 105–130.
- 87 On salvage anthropology, see Habermas 2021.
- 88 Singh 170–172.
- 89 This situation is reminiscent of the circumstances described by Michel Leiris with regard to the Dakar-Djibouti expedition: "The little black bag containing the money — our miracle bag — is opened and closed several times. We haven't yet bought all of anyone's clothes and left them standing naked by the roadside, but that day will surely come", Leiris 1980 [1934], 104.
- 90 Schweizerisches Handelsblatt of 17.10.1928, 46/244, 1993.
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Cf. Roth 2022, 61.
- 93 Email from Tabea Buri dated 18 March 2025; I would like to thank her for her research and sharing this information generously.

Basics and Methodology



Sorting, Cataloguing, Classifying — A Structural History of the Museum

Basil Bucher

In the 1835 report on the public natural history collections, it is noted that the zoological collection included, apart from reptiles, birds, fish, and mammals “an Egyptian mummy, a gift from the Messrs. Geigy brothers”.¹ This mummy and the sarcophagus that came with it are the oldest known holdings of the present-day Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB). The mummy belongs to the MKB collection, but has been on loan to the Natural History Museum in Basel since 2005, similar to the sarcophagus, which has been on loan to the Basel Antikenmuseum since 2004. The shrouds, in turn, have remained at the Museum der Kulturen. This pattern of distribution is an indicator of the structural changes that the museum has undergone over the years. The mummy has experienced many of the museum’s developments; it was on display in several exhibitions, moved around and handled by dozens of people, and therefore appears time and again at significant milestones in the museum’s history.

Early Legislation: 1821–1836

The beginnings of the public collections of Canton Basel-Stadt trace back to the Amerbach Cabinet, which was acquired by the city and the university in 1661 and shown from 1671 onwards in the public library which was located in the House zur Mücke. When the University of Basel underwent reorganization in 1818, the natural history collection was removed from the library and reassigned to the newly created Chair of Natural History located in the Falkensteinerhof in 1821. For the first time, a special museum bill was drafted for this new Museum of Natural History and approved by the university’s governing body in 1822. The new law regulated the operation of the museum, the composition of the governing commission, and the relationship between the collections and public institutions. It also specified that the Museum Commission was authorized to sell parts of the collection.² The division of the canton of Basel into the cantons Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft required a new bill concerning the university’s holdings which was passed by the Basel government in 1836. The separation agreement of 1833 stipulated that two thirds of the university’s assets, being part of the state’s assets, should be transferred to Basel-Landschaft in proportion to the size of the population. Consequently, the city had to draw up an inventory of all the university’s assets—including the collections³—and either cede the corresponding share to Basel-Landschaft or pay compensation.⁴ Notably, the mummy remained in Basel. In view of a potential financial loss, the new law firmly tied the university’s assets to the location of the city of Basel which is why the historian Flavio Häner speaks of a *de facto* nationalization of the collection.⁵ From this moment on, all collections came under the authority of the city’s Board of Education; this meant that any decision regarding their use required the government’s approval. The University of Basel’s governing body was responsible for overseeing the collections and appointed a commission with the duty of reporting annually on their condition and any development.⁶

A Civic Project: 1836–1849

One of the ramifications of the cantonal split was that the people of the city of Basel became much more aware of the collections’ significance. The years to come saw the establishment of the Historical Society (1836), the Art Association (1839), and the Antiquarian Society (1842).⁷ With the holdings growing, the increasing lack of space made it clear that, sooner or later, a new museum would be needed. In 1841, a commission was

established to push ahead with the new museum project. The initiators, all members of Basel's wealthy bourgeoisie, were socially and politically well connected and usually active in scholarly and cultural societies.⁸ In one of the daily newspapers, they called for the "building of a new museum."⁹ Their plan was to bring together collections, a library, and lecture halls in a single building on the site of the former Augustinian monastery, and make it a "temple of science and art".¹⁰ The contract for the construction of the new building was awarded to the architect Melchior Berri (1801–1854), who found inspiration in the classicist museum buildings in Berlin. The old Augustinian monastery was torn down in 1843, and the foundation stone laid down a year later. Construction was completed in 1848, and the Universal Museum was ceremoniously inaugurated in November 1849. The aim was to firmly embed the new museum in Basel by engaging the members of the city's progressive, commercial, and industrial bourgeoisie and making the new "temple of science and art" a part of Basel's cultural identity.

The top floor housed art collections and antiquities. In addition to galleries featuring ancient coins and medals, paintings, drawings, and engravings as well as a room for displaying plaster casts, it also hosted a "Mexican cabinet", which is probably also where the mummy and the sarcophagus were exhibited.¹¹ The new museum was also mentioned in Karl Baedeker's travel guide of 1854, but the collections failed to generate much enthusiasm: "Apart from Holbein's paintings, there is little of interest in the Basel gallery for those familiar with the major collections in German cities. An adjacent room holds ancient Mexican idols, amongst other things. The collections of coins, copperplate engravings, and rarities along with the ethnographic and natural history sections are of little significance."¹²

Part of the Universal Museum: 1849–1878

The "Mexican cabinet" featured the collection of Lukas Vischer (1780–1840). The Basel silk ribbon merchant lived in the USA from 1823 to 1828 and then in Mexico until 1837. During his stay there, he assembled a significant collection. His heirs donated a part of the collection to the university in 1844, upon which it was put on display in the museum in Augustinergasse. This pre-Colombian collection was to become the foundation of the ethnographic collection; it was managed¹³ by the Commission for Antiquarian Collections.¹⁴

The people of Basel became frequent visitors to the new Universal Museum, with the result that evermore citizens began to donate items to the museum.¹⁵ The growth of the ethnographic collection had a lot to do with local patriotism, but also with global developments. From the 1850s onwards, ethnographic museums began to spring up in major European cities, which, on the one hand, led to the emergence of a new scholarly discipline and, on the other, to a growing interest for such collections on the part of the general public.¹⁶ The spread of European imperialism provided access to new markets, not least for Swiss entrepreneurs. Technological developments in shipping, the building of the Suez Canal along with the emergence of travel agencies enabled wealthy Basel citizens to travel the world with more ease, allowing them to bring back items which they then donated to the museum (see Greber 109–112). The establishment of the Basel Mission in 1815 created even more links to distant colonies, from where missionaries also brought items home to Basel.¹⁷

Establishing an Ethnographic Collection (Ethnographische Sammlung): 1878–1893

It was through the physician and natural scientist Carl Gustav Bernoulli (1834–1878) that the so-called Tikal lintels came to the museum. Featuring Mayan glyphs and dating back to the 8th-century city of Tikal, they made Basel's ethnographic collection known beyond the city limits.¹⁸ Although the collection kept on growing and had, at least to a certain extent, gained international acclaim through the Tikal lintels, it still played only

a subordinate role in the eyes of the Commission for Antiquarian Collections. Two events changed this appreciation significantly: for one thing, a collection assembled by Johann Rudolf Geigy-Schlumberger (1862–1943) and his cousin during their travels around the world, which they bequeathed to the museum in 1888; for the other, the collections compiled by Fritz and Paul Sarasin (1859–1942 and 1856–1929, respectively) which also entered the museum, with the result that, by the end of the 1880s, the ethnographic collection had attained a size which even the Commission for Antiquarian Collections could no longer ignore. In 1888, the Commission entrusted their new member, the geographer Rudolf Hotz (1852–1917), with the task of overseeing the collection.¹⁹ For one thing, Hotz demanded, similar to the Antiquarian and Natural History societies, the establishment of an Ethnographic Society, and, for the other, that more attention should be paid to the ethnographic collection. The Commission rejected the first request²⁰ but agreed to the second insofar as Hotz was allocated a budget of two to three hundred Swiss francs for the purchase of further ethnographic objects.²¹

Despite the initiative and new financial means, Hotz had little influence on the Commission and the collection in the years that followed.²² It was only when the old Barfüsser Church was converted into a historical museum, which also provided a new home for the antiquarian collection, that a new thinking regarding the future of the ethnographic collection and how to manage it set in.²³ In November 1892, the university's governing body finally set up an independent Ethnographic Commission. The Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Germanic collections as well as items from the Middle Ages and the modern period went to the Historical Museum, while the ancient Egyptian collection (including the mummy), items from the Lake Dwelling Period, as well as non-European artefacts were allocated to the new ethnographic collection.²⁴

Cataloguing the Collection: 1893–1896

In January 1893, the Commission of the Ethnographic Collection gathered for its first meeting which is also why the year 1893 is regarded as the founding year of today's Museum der Kulturen Basel (Fig. 3). The senate, the university's governing body, appointed Julius Kollmann (1834–1918) as president.²⁵ The professor of Anatomy at the University of Basel also concerned himself with anthropological questions and was particularly interested in the history of human development.²⁶ Next to him, the senate elected Rudolf Hotz, Adolf Krayer-Förster (1834–1900), who had lived and worked as a silk merchant in China in the 1860s, the wide-travelled Basel merchant Alfred Stähelin-Gruner (1853–1941) as well as the physician Leopold Rütimeyer (1856–1932) to the commission. The new body appointed Rudolf Hotz as curator²⁷ and decided to have the entire collection catalogued.²⁸ Based on the model of the Königliche Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin,²⁹ they created accession ledgers (originally called entry journals), book catalogues (no longer in use today), and card catalogues (index cards) (see Müller et al. 60–66). A key element of the new system concerned regional classification, which meant that each world region was assigned a Roman numeral. In addition, separate photography and duplicate sections were established as well as a section called *Incerta*, that is, a department for items that could not be classified.³⁰ The Commission practised cataloguing together in the ensuing meetings.³¹ Krayer-Förster began listing the collection which he himself had donated to the museum, while Rütimeyer compiled an inventory of the Egyptian objects he had collected in 1889 on a joint trip with Paul and Fritz Sarasin.³² When cataloguing older holdings, some of which had entered the museum on Augustinergasse more than forty years ago, the Commission sought help from the original donors and their descendants, respectively.³³ In the case of the mummy, they addressed the grandson of Carl Geigy-Buxtorf (1798–1861), who replied: "In reply to your kind letter of yesterday, I am pleased to inform you that the mummy in question was acquired by my grandfather, the honourable Councillor Carl