

## **56. Contested Knowledge, Contested Objects: Positioning of Mesoamerican Studies regarding the History of the Discipline and Collections (Workshop)**

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The history of the collections from Mesoamerica in museums and research institutions closely relates to the history of Mesoamerican studies as discipline. Current public debates tend to generalize ethnographic and archaeological collections as consisting only of looted artifacts appropriated under relationships of coloniality. The opening of the Humboldt Forum has further stimulated this discourse regarding the collections from Mesoamerica. The practice of collecting artefacts and doing research in Mesoamerican studies has increasingly been called into question. To what degree do some topics and outcomes represent contested knowledge? Has the knowledge been shared sufficiently? More research on the history of the discipline and the collections is needed to provide a differentiated perspective that counters the simplified discourse of "looted artefacts". Against this background, we aim to deal with the following questions:

- To what degree are the criteria for ethnographic collections discussed by specialists and in the media applicable to the collections from Mesoamerica?
- What do we know about the genesis of the collections and the provenance of the artefacts?
- Which specific and typical contexts for illicit acquisition of artefacts can be identified?
- What do we know regarding how the artefacts of unknown origin are treated in museums, art trade and private collections?
- How was the practice of collecting artefacts legitimized in respective time periods?
- How can we improve knowledge transfer in Mesoamerican studies to promote the provenance research?
- How can the original owner respective the society of origin be involved in the production of knowledge and studies of the collections in a more intensive manner?

Identifying contested knowledge concerning the collections, this panel aims to develop common strategies to open up Mesoamerican studies for new questions and networks and stimulate a differentiated debate about the histories of the collections.

### **First theme: Looting and commercialization (90 min.)**

#### ***Keynote by Donna Yates , Maastricht University***

#### **Unlocking hidden knowledge in Mesoamerican provenance stories: a method, a case, and a call**

Recently Prof Shawn Graham and I started a project exploring an experimental method of predicting possible relationships between entities involved in the antiquities trade. We assumed that illicit networks are inherently difficult to detect, that crimes that occurred in the past are represented by different evidence than recent crimes, and that our own biases govern who and what we investigate. We represented the trade as a knowledge graph with multiple kinds of relationships that was transformed by a neural architecture to predict new hypotheses about relationships within the trade that we were unlikely to have considered on our own.

This talk presents research tipped off by that model focused on Mesoamerica. A suggestion by the model linking a controversial Mesoamerican antiquities dealer, Leonardo Patterson, to a museum launched a query into Patterson's dealings with public institutions in three countries. While Patterson's criminal convictions are well known, we are documenting an emerging picture related to his association with reputable museums. By donating small objects we believe Patterson may have laundered his reputation in advance of criminal fraud attempts. These comparatively insignificant objects, then, become controversial as they are tied to a larger web of transnational crime.

#### **Reinscribing commercial actors into the disciplinary history of Mesoamerican archaeology**

#### ***Martin E. Berger, Leiden University***

The overwhelming majority of Mesoamerican pieces on display in museums derives from undocumented archaeological contexts and was looted in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Though many countries in the region introduced legislation banning the export of archaeological material in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these laws did not effectively curb the illicit export of cultural material until well into the second half

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the introduction of the UNESCO 1970 Convention. Nevertheless, looting continues until this day.

Many of these pieces made their way into museum collections through networks of commercial dealers, who facilitated both their (illegal) export from the countries of origin and their (legal) acquisition by museums in Europe and the United States. Based on the study of the provenance of collections of Mesoamerican material in European museums, as well as pieces displayed in these same museums, this paper argues for reevaluating the role that commercial actors played in the development of our discipline, acknowledging the erasure of these actors that has taken place due to the divide between the commercial and the academic-museum world occasioned by the UNESCO 1970 Convention.

**Contrasting interests and diverse practices in dealing with prehispanic material: About looting, collecting, and selling, and the desire for restitution in Hopelchen, Mexico**

***Yannick Dreessen, Universität Bonn***

This presentation addresses diverse ways of dealing with pre-Columbian material in contemporary Hopelchen and the value of things and places to indigenous and other stakeholders. To do so, I refer to field research I conducted from September to November 2022, which made apparent the great diversity of practices. While some places with pre-Hispanic vestiges were regularly looted and the material was sold, one community had initiated protection efforts motivated by the possibility of negative consequences for the village. This was based on the belief that destroying "sacred sites" (sitios sagrados) and removing certain stone objects would bring catastrophes to the village. Furthermore, a local desire for restitution is shared by many, but there is disagreement about the right way to deal with it and the extent to which government institutions are part of the solution or the problem. I also tackle the heterogeneity of provenance, its research, and the reconstruction of looting and trade networks of pre-Columbian objects based on oral history.

**Second theme: Debates on repatriation and practice of decolonization (90 min.)**

**Collections from Mesoamerica in European Museums and the Restitution Debate. Political claims and activism versus academic knowledge and indigenous expectations.**

***Viola König, Freie Universität Berlin***

Restitution, especially when it involves objects from state-owned collections, is nowadays considered a political act. In the past, it was a matter of a few well-researched individual cases. The media only paid marginal attention. However, this has changed fundamentally, not least due to the preoccupation with the German colonial period in Africa and the presentation of the Ethnologisches Museum's collections, which are regarded as highly problematic, in the new Humboldt Forum in Berlin-Mitte.

But what about restitution claims regarding the archaeological and colonial collections from Mesoamerica? What claims have been made and by whom? Are they justified and what is the state of scientific evidence? What do demands on the part of nation-states imply and what is the attitude of the descendants of the original owners? Is the contemporary perspective at the time of leaving Mesoamerica taken into account and what to do if it cannot be reconstructed? Voluntary donations or sales can thus be interpreted hundreds of years later as contexts of injustice pushing those involved into the role of victims or traitors. Some particularly well-known works from Mexico illustrate this situation. The absolute claim of the nation state to a "Patrimonio Cultural" is critically challenged.

**Human remains from Mesoamerica in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin**

***Ilja Labischinski, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin***

Provenance research on human remains in ethnological museum collections is of particular importance. After all, these are also bones that came to Germany in the context of racist collecting and scientific practice. Thus, the so-called key points paper on the handling of collections from colonial contexts and the guidelines of the German Museums Association consider provenance research on human remains as a special priority and see it as the basis for the return of these remains. Human remains from Mesoamerica are still exhibited in German museums and used for research without sufficient clarification of the circumstances of acquisition or consideration of the ideas and wishes of the communities of origin. Until today, hundreds of human bones from Mesoamerica are in Berlin.

The paper will give an overview of the holdings in the Ethnologisches Museum and an insight into the contexts of appropriation. Based on the history of three skulls sent to the Ethnologisches Museum by Karl Sapper, Eduard Seler, and Hermann Strebel from Guatemala and Mexico, the questions will be explored to what extent the criterion of colonial contexts can be applied to human remains from Mesoamerica and which particularities arise in the context of Mesoamerica?

### **Looking back into the future – A possible location of Mesoamerican collection objects in digital decolonisation practice**

***Romy Köhler, Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek***

In the frame of the transparency requirement the German government has issued for collections from colonial and postcolonial contexts in German knowledge institutions, Mesoamerican Studies are also faced with the question of the historical relationships between collection practice, first locations of conservation and the inception of the subject area.

According to the guidelines on “Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts” of the *Deutsche Museumsbund* (German Museums Association), the Mesoamerican collections in Germany do not belong to case group 1 (colonial activities of the German Reich). As I will discuss in this presentation, this, first, raises the question whether the objects are to be assigned to case group 2 (collections from informal colonial structures) and should therefore be accessible via the subportal “Collections from colonial contexts” (CCC) of the German Digital Library. In a second step, I will outline the extent to which the newly developed criteria for provenance designation in the CCC-subportal of the German Digital Library offers an alternative to the established acquisition narratives that distinguish between “collecting” and “finding” archaeological and ethnological objects. My third and final focus of attention is on the potential and challenges of the Mesoamerican collections for the digital decolonisation of indigenous semantics.