

IV.

Transdisciplinary Provenance Research
on Objects from Colonial Contexts

*Recherche de provenance transdisciplinaire
sur des objets de contextes coloniaux*

Introduction

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Sabine Lang

“Mehrspartenmuseen” – museums covering several disciplines – have their roots in the Chambers of Art and Wonders (*Kunst- und Wunderkammern*) that emerged with European expansion in the 16th century when explorers, naturalists, missionaries and adventurers began to bring the most varied “exotic” objects to Europe.¹ The Chambers presented ethnographic objects along with antique and contemporary art, unusual natural history specimens such as two-headed animals or narwhale tusks believed to be the horns of unicorns,² local archaeological objects, books, and scientific measuring instruments. Museums as an institution accessible to a general public emerged from the late 18th century onward. Today’s multidisciplinary museums have their origins not only in Chambers of Arts and Wonders but also in courtly collections as well as in collections compiled by bourgeois urban elites and educational societies (*Bildungsvereine*). In Germany, they include the museums represented in the PAESE project: the Lower Saxony State Museum (*Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum*) in Hanover, the Brunswick Municipal Museum (*Städtisches Museum*), the State Museum *Natur und Mensch* in Oldenburg, and the *Roemer- und Pelizaemus Museum* in Hildesheim. In other cases, the differentiation of various scientific and scholarly disciplines in the last third of the 19th century led to a specialization of museums in single disciplines such as art, zoology, antiquities, or ethnology.

Collectors tended to be multidisciplinary as well. This is not only true for famous explorers such as James Cook (1728–1779) and Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), but also for humbler collectors in the colonies including participants in official scientific expeditions and members of colonial armies, many of whom collected both ethnographic objects and specimens from the realms of zoology, botany, and geology. This means that ethnographic objects represent only a fraction of the museums' inventories from colonial contexts.

Upon arriving from the colonies, collections consisting of ethnographic and natural history specimens were taken apart. They were either distributed among several museums according to the latter's respective specializations (as was the case in Berlin, the capital of imperial Germany) or ended up in different departments of "Mehrspartenmuseen". This is why the transdisciplinary character of colonial collecting practices becomes particularly evident in multidisciplinary museums.

So far, the focus of provenance research has been mainly on ethnographic objects, but the perspective is increasingly shifting to include approaches to natural history collections. Only a transdisciplinary approach, beyond the dividing lines of today's disciplines and museum departments, reveals the entire range of colonial collecting. This also enables researchers to identify not only collectors represented in several or many museums but also networks, dealer structures, or transport routes of objects.

The following contributions address specific issues and challenges in research using transdisciplinary approaches. What are the implications of the above observations for post- and decolonial practices in dealing with these holdings? And how can research projects on natural history specimens and ethnological objects be combined so as to achieve synergy effects?

- 1 See Noack, Karoline (2019): "Die Welt im Kasten. Zur Geschichte der Institution 'Völkerkundemuseum' im deutschsprachigen Raum", in: Edenheiser, Iris; Förster, Larissa (Eds): *Museumsethnologie. Eine Einführung*, Berlin, pp. 30–47; Hoffmann, Beatrix (2012): *Das Museumsobjekt als Tausch- und Handelsgegenstand*, Berlin, pp. 8–14.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 10, Fn. 7.