

VII.

## Hidden Objects – Sensitive and Restricted Objects in Museum Collections

Issues Surrounding their Storage, Access, Consultations,  
and Potential Repatriation

*Objets cachés – Objets sensibles et à usage restreint  
dans les collections de musées*

*Enjeux relatifs à leur stockage, à leur accès, à leur consultation  
et à leur rapatriement éventuel*

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## Introduction

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## Introduction

Mareike Späth

Museum collections were often put together with the intention to tell stories about the places and people where they come from to the people they were brought to. They were meant to be seen, looked at. Until today, exhibiting tangible and intangible heritage for the purposes of education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing is one of the museums' key tasks according to the definition by the International Council of Museums.<sup>1</sup>

A small group of objects in museum collections, however, are categorised as sensitive because access to them is heavily restricted in the communities where they originate from. These objects must only be viewed, consulted, or used following a certain protocol. This may include being accessed by authorised persons only (due to their age, their gender, their profession, their status, or their being initiated into a certain group), exclusively at a certain time of the year or month or day, or only after necessary rituals have been performed that allow access to the objects. These restrictions may even extend to the knowledge about the origin, existence, or the correct way of using these objects being heavily restricted and strictly managed in the communities of origin. As a result, knowledge and documentation details associated with such objects and contained in museum records must be considered as sensitive, too.

Some of these objects have been collected precisely because of their sensitive quality. The aura of secrecy and restriction sparked special interest by collectors

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and researchers who wished to venture into the realm of the secret, the sacred, the forbidden, and the rare. It is safe to say that the nature of ethnographic curiosity and collecting itself has resulted in the fact that museum collections hold objects that are categorised as sensitive or restricted. In other cases, it is only through cooperation and consultation in the context of provenance research that collection curators become aware of the secret and sacred character of objects and learn about their restrictive nature and specific needs.

From the 1980s onwards, and after an increasing number of requests for information on the whereabouts of restricted objects were formulated by communities in search for their belongings, awareness of ethical and moral considerations regarding such sensitivities in a post-colonial museum environment has increased. A growing number of museums are now willing to respect and apply the communities of origin's rules of restriction and treat these collections accordingly. This has resulted in some objects being removed from exhibitions and public access. But how will museums manage such hidden objects in the future?

In a post-colonial museum framework, dealing with such collections and knowledge poses challenges for museum staff and provenance researchers. The objects require to be handled (stored, accessed, digitised, published, exhibited, researched) with special care while in the collection, but sometimes a lack of resources render it difficult to effectively accommodate and implement instructions on the collections' needs in a museum environment. More so, the current call for transparency and publication of inventories and collection information is diametrically opposed to the demands for restriction of some objects.

Provenance researchers are committed to identifying the exact community or family to which an object rightfully belongs. But it can be tricky to identify authoritative custodians with traditional rights to the restricted objects and knowledge, particularly where knowledge restrictions involve political implications, or where different stakeholders express opposing demands. European institutions must decide whether a person making a request for access to restricted objects is entitled to do so, and to decide whose advice or demands to accept or to decline. It is likely that institutions lack the relevant information to distinguish legitimate requests from illegitimate ones. Traditional custodians, once identified, must be effectively consulted about restricted matters and meaningful dialogue between them and the museum must be established and maintained, a task that is sometimes difficult to

accomplish, despite strong intentions by individuals involved on both sides. It is yet to be seen whether museums can commit to effectively share and transfer control of such collections, and to processes related to their repatriation, restitution, or return.

This section therefore addresses the issues surrounding the management of restricted objects and knowledge in museum collections. Both chapters discuss examples of powerful objects that are, due to their secret and sacred nature, subject to restrictions in their respective cultures and access to them is meant to be strictly regulated. While answers to the above questions always depend on the specific requirements of the distinct secret or sacred context of an object or group of objects, some overarching aspects may apply to all objects classified as restricted. Michael Pickering and Victor Ngitir will discuss important issues surrounding the future management of restricted objects and knowledge in museum collections against the background of their expertise with restricted collections from Australia and Cameroon.<sup>2</sup>

Both authors not only have an academic background in related fields, but also actively engage in museum and heritage practices. Hence, their writings combine theoretical approaches with practice and experience.

*Michael Pickering* has a long experience in handling and repatriating sensitive objects from the Australian context in museum collections and he has published extensively, not only on cases of restitution, but also on how increasing knowledge about secrecy and sacredness affects practices inside the institution.<sup>3</sup> He knows from experience that while collection managers may have close relationships with certain communities that have been the subject of their personal research or prior collaborations, they often have little detailed knowledge of other cultures, communities, and contexts. As a result, he observes, they are often at a loss to know where to start and what to watch out for when working on a repatriation issue. In his chapter he describes the general methodologies applied in the repatriation of central Australian secret/sacred objects as applied by the National Museum of Australia, which shall serve as an introductory guide to other collecting institutions seeking to initiate repatriation.

*Victor Bayena Ngitir* introduces restricted objects in the Cameroon Grassfields to the discussion. As cultural entrepreneur and heritage project expert, he has carried out extensive ethnographic research on grassland's palace museums in Cameroon and their power objects.<sup>4</sup> Access to them is limited to

initiates, their exposure closely tied to taboos and their functions religious. He argues that their alienation by colonial agents and appropriation by Western museums have created multiple ruptures both at the place of origin and destination. What Victor Bayena Ngitir calls “the crusade for their restitution” has so far remained fruitless. He elaborates on the methodology he applies when researching the contexts of these sensitive objects, addresses the alienation of Grassfields power objects, the obstacles to their public exhibition, and finally calls for their restitution to living collections to restore the objects’ function.

The conference was also attended by Shaun Angelis. As an Arrernte man from Ayampe in the Central Desert of Australia, he is experienced in working with secret sacred objects, audio-visual material and archival records relating to numerous language groups across Central Australia, focussing on the return of cultural heritage material from international collecting institutions.<sup>5</sup> He shared his experiences with the repatriation of sensitive and restricted men’s objects to seven Aboriginal communities across central and northern Australia from overseas collecting institutions, and about the continuing work with some of those Senior Men who continue to request the return of their belongings from overseas collecting institutions. In his talk at the PAESE conference he argued that these objects must come back to Australia and elaborated on the impact this has on custodians when they come home.<sup>6</sup>

All contributors agree on the urgent need for special care and handling of restricted objects. The importance of consultation with authorised representatives of the communities of origin is crucial, as is the adequate resourcing of these often protracted and costly consultation processes. The examples raised in the following chapters show that the restrictions can differ according to whether objects are still active while in collections, or whether they need to be ceremonially reactivated or re-sacralised before their return or reuse. However, the latter case certainly does not diminish the object’s importance for the community it belongs to. The contributors agree on the need to return powerful objects. Solutions about how restricted objects return to their rightful owners and in which way they can be accommodated in the future should always be negotiated with authorised representatives of the communities that once owned, and still own, these objects currently hidden in museum collections. The determination to care for the objects’ requirements and to respect the meaning they embody today shall be the common ground for all future procedures.

- 1 ICOM, Museum definition, Version of 2022. See <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, accessed 27 May 2023.
- 2 I am grateful to Olaf Geerken who has proposed this topic for the conference and invited the distinguished contributors. His research in the PAESE-project “Provenances of Tjurungas at the Landesmuseum Hanover and the Hermannsburg collection” (see <https://www.postcolonial-provenance-research.com/provenienzen-von-tjurunga/?lang=en>, accessed 27 May 2023) initiated a decision-making process about how to handle *tjurungas* and other sensitive parts of the collection while they reside with the museum’s collection and about their future whereabouts.
- 3 See e.g., Pickering, Michael (2020): “The Supernatural and Sensitive Indigenous Materials: A Workplace Health and Safety Issue?”, in: *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Vol. 35, no. 5, pp. 532–550, on workplace health and safety related to supernatural and sensitive Indigenous materials or Pickering, Michael (2018): “Up Close and Personal: The Management of Sensitive Indigenous Objects at the National Museum of Australia”, in: Anna-Maria Brandstetter; Vera Vierholzer (Eds): *Nicht nur Raubkunst! Sensible Dinge in Museen und universitären Sammlungen*, Göttingen, pp. 273–290, on the management of sensitive Indigenous objects at the National Museum of Australia.
- 4 See Ngitir, Victor Bayena; Rene Ngek Monteh (2021): “The Survival of Community Museums in Cameroon”, in: *Himalayan Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 31–40, and Ngitir, Victor Bayena (2017): “Bamenda Grassfields Living Museums: A Colonial Heritage”, in: *Cameroon Journal of Studies in the Commonwealth*, Vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 44–67.
- 5 See Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2020): *Return of Cultural Heritage Project 2018–20*, Canberra.
- 6 See <https://www.postcolonial-provenance-research.com/conference/pprc21-johnson-angelis/>, accessed 29 May 2023. The contribution by Shaun Angelis was unfortunately not elaborated in writing and is therefore not available in this volume.