

Pressemitteilung**Technische Universität Berlin****Stefanie Terp**

07.10.2020

<http://idw-online.de/de/news755506>Forschungsprojekte, Kooperationen
Geschichte / Archäologie, Kulturwissenschaften, Kunst / Design
überregional**TU Berlin: Restitution of Knowledge - Joint German-UK-project to rethink plunder and robbery in ethnological collections****Restoring knowledge about stolen and looted art Oxford-Berlin: Start of German-UK research project on the provenance of European cultural treasures**

Restoring lost knowledge regarding the true provenance of European cultural treasures and making this accessible: This is the goal of a new German-UK research project "The Restitution of Knowledge". Over the next two-and-a-half years, art historians at TU Berlin and the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum will be researching exactly how the world's art and cultural assets came to be in the major museums of Europe. More precisely, the project focuses on the restitution of knowledge, stolen colonial artifacts, the spoils of war and the displacement of cultural assets, particularly from Africa. The researchers will be focusing on the period between 1850 and 1939. The project is funded with 700,000 euros within a new type of transnational program for financing research developed by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The bi-national team will also receive seed funding from the Berlin University Alliance.

Theft, brutal raids and bloody struggles

"The objects and ethnological collections that we gaze upon in awe in museums conceal many untold stories – often stories of plunder, of brutal attacks and bloody struggles, of slavery and theft. It is these stories we are looking to reveal. By narrating and documenting these stories, we are seeking to contribute to a new interpretation of the storerooms of European anthropological museums and their archives as a unique ensemble," explains Professor Bénédicte Savoy, head of the Chair of Modern Art History at TU Berlin. The German research team of the "The Restitution of Knowledge - Artefacts as Archives in the (Post) Colonial Museum 1850-1839" project is located within the chair's "translocations" research cluster. Leading the UK team is Professor Dr. Dan Hicks, archaeologist at Oxford University and curator of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum. Hicks explains the other goals of the project: "The aim is to develop innovative, comparative resources, including within social media, to document acts of colonial plunder and facilitate their identification and research. These should then serve as a source for a new dialogue with civil society. They are intended to enable a more contemporary approach to collections and exhibitions, not only here in Europe, but also in the Global South.

Little research has been conducted into museums as sources of colonial history

Bénédicte Savoy and Dan Hick have driven debates on the neglect of provenance research in recent years, particularly in Germany, France and the UK. In addition to highlighting the lack of research into European anthropological museums as sources of colonial history, their publications have also sparked a ubiquitous discussion within the museum landscape and expressed a strong determination that the history of the appropriation of artifacts no longer be suppressed. Bénédicte Savoy is delighted by the readiness of many museums in Germany and elsewhere in Europe to participate in the Berlin-Oxford project.

“The fact that we are bringing together a range of areas of research and expertise within this partnership – such as the history of collections, the displacement of cultural assets, or provenance studies – enables us to pose very specific questions,” Savoy explains. “For example, how do direct expropriations differ from collections assembled as a result of scientific expeditions? How can we locate and realistically evaluate documents relating to purchases, gifts or finder’s fees? Examples of such documents include letters, accession books, inscriptions on the objects themselves or references to historical documents which have not survived or which were actively destroyed.”

There was often only a thin line between military and scientific expeditions

Only a small part of today’s collections of non-Western artifacts date from the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. Most European anthropological museums were established throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries as a result of military colonialism. While some trophies and souvenirs made their way into military museums, the majority of artifacts originating from “punitive expeditions” were brought home by military and naval officers or colonial administrators. “Research is also urgently required into this area,” says Savoy. “Military and scientific expeditions and their frequent violent methods and coercive measures of collecting were often only separated by a thin line.”

The project will develop methods for the formalization and systematic research of the provenance of ethnographic collections within the context of colonial expropriation. The research teams will also be developing appropriate tools and comparative methods to facilitate the exchange of knowledge. As such, the project lends a new dimension to the current debates taking place in Europe, Africa and the rest of the world regarding cultural restitution. The researchers are aiming to create a sound basis for contemporary public, academic and political debate as well as for the restitution of property and a revivification of knowledge concerning violence and the memory of cultural losses.

The “translocations” research cluster at TU Berlin

The “translocations” research cluster focuses on art theft (also as organized by the state) and art loot, particularly during the colonial period. The cluster conducts research on the displacement of cultural assets during the period of colonialism, both as a result of scientific expeditions and seizure and nationalization. The cluster also examines the role of the global art trade and the huge creation of private property during periods of both war and peace. “translocations” is located within the Chair of Modern Art History at TU Berlin and was made possible by the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize, the most prestigious and lucrative academic accolade in Germany, presented to art historian and head of chair Professor Dr. Bénédicte Savoy in recognition of her work as one of the most respected and most innovative art historians in Germany and France. <http://www.translocations.net/>

About: Bénédicte Savoy

Professor Dr. Bénédicte Savoy is both art historian at TU Berlin and professor for cultural history of artistic heritage in Europe, 18th - 20th century at the Collège de France in Paris. Based on her research interests in art and cultural transfer in Europe, museum history, and art theft and looted art, she has campaigned for intensive provenance research for a number of years as well as for information regarding provenance to be included in European museums and exhibitions and for the restitution of cultural assets, particularly those taken from Africa. In 2018, she was commissioned by president of France Emmanuel Macron to conduct research together with the Senegalese professor of economics Dr. Felwine Sarr into how art and cultural treasures from European colonies made their way into French museums. This research produced the high-profile report “Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle”, which recommended the immediate return of the majority of objects. <http://restitutionreport2018.com/>
www.tu-berlin.de/?169137 (the awarding of the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize to Bénédicte Savoy)

About: Dan Hicks

Dr. Dan Hicks is professor of contemporary archeology at the University of Oxford's School of Archaeology and a fellow of St. Cross College. He is also curator of World Archaeology at the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum. He is an accredited member of the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (MCifA), one of the highest recognitions of expertise and experience in the UK. In 2017, he was awarded the Royal Anthropological Institute's Rivers Memorial Medal, one of the highest accolades in anthropology and archeology. His research focuses in particular on the provenance of material culture. In the UK, he is regarded as the initiator of the debate on art plundered throughout the history of the British Empire. His most recent book *The Brutish Museums. The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Resitution* describes the theft of the famous Benin Bronzes during a British marine operation in 1897. The Benin Bronzes are a collection of thousands of brass plaques and ivory carvings depicting the history of the royal court of the Obas, the traditional rulers of Benin City, Nigeria, which were passed on to the private collection of Queen Victoria, the British Museum and countless private collectors.
<https://www.danhicks.uk/>

Joint research: Berlin-Oxford

The memorandum of understanding concluded in December 2017 to create a partnership between the four institutions of the Berlin University Alliance (Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin and Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin) and the University of Oxford has now developed into the firmly established OX-BER partnership. Research exchange and scientific cooperation between the partner institutions were strengthened in 2020 by the establishment of the Centre for Advanced Studies. More than 1000 researchers and students have already benefited from this cooperation and taken part in programs run by the partnership. The joint research project led by Bénédicte Savoy and Dan Hicks has also benefited from BUA seed funding.

Joint funding through the German Research Foundation and the UK's AHRC

The new bilateral research project, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), was established in 2019 for the purpose of bringing together art historians and social scientists from Germany and the UK. In the future, funding will be provided each year to a number of German and UK academics working in outstanding joint research projects. Projects will be selected for funding on the basis of a competitive peer review procedure. The "Restitution of Knowledge" is among the first 19 projects to be funded within this program.

Further information can be obtained from:

Prof. Dr. Bénédicte Savoy
Technische Universität Berlin
Faculty I Humanities and Educational Sciences
Institute for Art History and Historical Urban Studies
Chair of Modern Art History
Email: goulko@tu-berlin.de
Phone: 030/314-25014