

## What our museums don't tell us

In the eighteenth century, the English language acquired the term 'traceability'. Composed of the concepts of trace and ability, it refers to an object's suitability to being traced back, based on available evidence. The German term is Rückverfolgbarkeit, and the German Institute for Standardization provides both a DIN standard and a standard-conforming definition: "Traceability: the possibility of following the history, the use or the location of an object." Since the EU enacted the statutory traceability requirement for foodstuffs about ten years ago, certification and software companies vie with each other in the development of clever locating and labelling systems that document origin and path. By now, every serial number in a supermarket represents an extensive history. The codes tell of places of origin both near and far, transport border crossings, processing factories and fully automated abattoirs. Industry 4.0 has long recognized the potential of historical transparency and meticulousness: they define the relationship between the market, morality and consumerism. They minimize damage and incidentally contribute to good flavour. But what about spiritual nourishment, if we explicitly want to adopt a distinctly Christian-European metaphor? Gräffe's book on the Socratic Method of 1798 explains that "When we buy food, we may ask if we should eat it, but when we buy spiritual nourishment, we can only take it away in our souls." The concept of regarding art and culture as nourishment for the soul seems as old-fashioned as a village school. The temples of education of the twenty-first century have moved away from such rhetoric. After all, nobody would compare the Louvre's *Winged Victory of Samothrace* with a steak on a European's plate. Yet the issue of traceability is more pressing than ever in today's museums, even with, or perhaps because of, the ubiquitous demands of culture marketing. Many institutions have still not established provenance research, and certainly not a clear and public presentation of such provenance histories. And yet the path of an object can say so much more about Europe and the world than the item as such. Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote about the meaning of education for a human being: "The more he transforms manifold diversity into unity, the more he will be rich, alive, strong and fertile. Manifold diversity will be provided by the influence of diverse relationships." In a museum, documenting provenance contributes to this diversity by anchoring each artefact within a complex framework of space and history, being and time, aesthetics and politics. Today, provenance research in museums is usually seen in the context of restitution, but traceability is not primarily about morality. It is also about the collective understanding of our past, current and future relationship with the world. Of course museums are above all archives of human creativity and spirituality, and they speak about the cultures of the world. But they are also their own archives and those of European history. How and where do we find out about the path of a delicate portrait of a child by the French

painter Antoine Watteau in the Berlin Gemäldegalerie? That it was Hitler's favourite painting, the purchase of which he had ordered for his Führermuseum in Linz, and that it is on display today as a "Loan of the Federal Republic of Germany", allowing a glimpse into the dreamy French eighteenth century in the centre of today's Berlin? What do we know about the path of the oldest Koran manuscripts in the world that are kept in storage in the great state libraries of Paris, London and Berlin? What about the acquisition of Ethiopian magic scrolls, or Mesopotamian, early Egyptian, Greek or African goddesses? After centuries, are such objects actually still traceable? Who best to reconstruct their life stories, generating and attaching codes? At the beginning of the twenty-first century, such questions finally need to be asked and answered with seriousness, not least vis-a-vis the biggest museum construction site in Europe right in the beating heart of Berlin. The issue is not about replacing the aesthetic or ethnological dimension of museum objects with an interest in "how they came to us." It is about additional information and discovery. We do want to know. We need to know. Since the late 1990s, provenance (deriving from the Latin *provenire* = coming from) in Europe has been mainly connected with the history of art works changing hands during the Nazi era. They typically passed through the art trade into public museum collections in Europe or America, while their owners were driven into exile or murdered. In this context, provenance research is also focused on finding "just and fair solutions" for those concerned and their heirs, as suggested in the Washington Declaration of 1998.

### The biographies of objects

But provenance research is not restricted to twentieth century history, and it is not automatically also about restitution. In the economy, traceability does not inevitably mean buyback, or recalling a product. Reconstructing Napoleon's art theft in Germany is provenance research, or tracing the more or less meandering paths leading to the nineteenth century import of large quantities of East Asian artefacts to Europe. Research about scientific expeditions, divisions of archaeological findings, ethnological field studies and colonial practices all help in better assessing the content of collections. Incidentally, in many cases provenance has long been thoroughly researched, and there are countless curators who are enormously committed to documenting the history of their collections. What is sorely missing is a willingness on the part of most museums to tell these stories to the public in an open and comprehensible manner: while I know perfectly well where the steak on my plate comes from, I am not telling you. Provenance research and restitution are not clearly distinguished, neither in the public debate nor in the heads of many museum officials who worry about their collections. But it cannot be said too often that these are two entirely different things. Provenance research is historical academic research. It studies the past,

and for museums it is the equivalent of what Dresdner Bank or Daimler achieved through the study of their respective company histories during the Third Reich: an acceptance of historical responsibility, a liberation from all too comfortable myths, and an act of decency towards the victims and beneficiaries of their collection policies. By contrast, restitutions are of a legal and symbolic nature. They enquire into possible recompense for injustice and an effective compensation for the disadvantage suffered. When provenance research is equated with restitution, free academic enquiry into historical sources is hindered or prevented. When provenance research is conducted too narrowly, too legalistically, and not sufficiently in the context of cultural history, it becomes a missed opportunity every time. Museums have to adhere by the principle of, firstly, conducting or commissioning systematic provenance research and displaying the results. Secondly, at some later stage, museums (or governments) need to consider what the return of individual objects or groups can and should effect symbolically, politically or diplomatically. Most museums seem unable to cope with provenance questions, be it staff-wise, intellectually or methodically. But which institutions are really in a position today to investigate the origin of millions of objects, when decades or centuries have often passed since their acquisition? Museums? Independent historians? Academically trained, professional provenance researchers? What is certain is that object-related expertise will only go so far. If you want to delve into the whereabouts of a Picasso painting seized in Nazi-occupied Paris, you do not have to be a Picasso specialist, but you do need to know your way around the Paris police archives. If you want to reconstruct how the bust of Nefertiti came to Berlin in 1913 from Tell el-Amarna, you do not strictly need to be an Egyptologist, but you do need to have expert knowledge of Franco-British administration structures in Egypt before the First World War. If you want to trace the dispersion and uprooting of African art since the nineteenth century, you need less knowledge about African rites and more about the history of ethnology as a discipline, and European military and missionary history. Provenance research can take place in museums, but it does not have to. It requires free access to many archives dispersed all over the world, as well as team spirit and methodical transparency, a grounding in universities, and a willingness to cooperate across borders. Traceability of art requires far, far more than rummaging in the files of the institution one is employed by. "Scoring through traceability" is a marketing slogan used in the glossy brochure of a leading German service provider. Each object in circulation would have "a comprehensive log, leaving nothing to be desired." For the client, this would prevent a potential "exponential increase" in subsequent costs. The subsequent costs for a non-transparent handling of provenance information in museums cannot be measured in dollars or euros. When a society cannot or will not deal with its past, the costs are societal and political. Investigating and disclosing the acquisition circumstances of art works from all over the world must become standard practice at every

single museum. This is the minimal courtesy that Europe must pay the people and the places where these objects came from.

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