



Collecting, Buying, and Dealing „pre-Columbian Art” in Europe. A Short History

Since the 1990s, questions of provenance have become central to museum practice. How was an object acquired? Who owned the object before it came to the museum? Under which circumstances did the object leave the possession of its original owner, creator, or community? Initially, these questions became prominent because of increased awareness around Nazi-looted art and its presence in prominent museums worldwide, as well as a growing number of requests for restitution of (highly valued) art pieces from museums in Europe and the USA. Following the so-called Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art of 1998,⁵⁹ this increased awareness translated into large-scale programs of provenance research, attempting to determine whether or not art objects were forcefully taken from Jewish individuals or families.

In recent years, this attention to provenance research has also expanded to include not only Nazi-looted art, but also objects collected in the context of European colonial expansion and rule. As a result, museums of ethnography and

archaeology have started to research the provenance of their collections more thoroughly⁶⁰. Prominent examples of Colonial looting and requests for repatriation, such as the Benin Bronzes⁶¹ or the Elgin/Parthenon Marbles, have increased public awareness of the issue of ownership in archaeological and ethnographic museums. As part of a larger movement aimed at ‘Decolonizing the Museum’, ethnographic museums globally are now investing in researching the history of their collections. In comparison to sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, Latin America has received scant attention in these research projects, primarily owing to the fact that most Latin American countries were independent by 1821.

Nonetheless, it is essential to ask these questions of provenance also of the large collections of archaeological material from Latin America that European museums hold today. While these may not have been forcibly removed from their original context during violent colonial expeditions, many of these pieces

59 [Https://www.state.gov/washington-conference-principles-on-nazi-confiscated-art/](https://www.state.gov/washington-conference-principles-on-nazi-confiscated-art/) [15.07.2024].

60 Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy: The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics, [Paris] 2018.

61 Dan Hicks: The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution, London [2020].

were looted from archaeological sites and exported illegally from their countries of origin. As a result, understanding the ‘biographies’ of these objects through provenance research is essential in building an ethical museum practice in the 21st century that acknowledges past injustices and works toward building equitable relationships with originating countries and source communities of the material cared for in museums. In this chapter, I will outline the history of collecting so-called ‘pre-Columbian art’ in Europe, starting with the first encounters between Europeans and Indigenous Americans in the early 1500s and moving to the 20th century, when a serious commercial market for this material developed. After this, I will sketch the impact that looting of archaeological sites in Latin America has on both communities of origin and the production of academic knowledge, followed by a concise review of the most prominent legal guidelines pertaining to the trading and traffic of antiquities. At the end of the article, I will briefly reflect on what the ‘Decolonial Turn’ in museums can mean for material like the Pelling-Zarnitz collection, and how we can build an ethical archaeological and museums practice in the 21st century.

A short note on terminology

Indigenous Latin American archaeological material is known under very many different names and categories. The most prominent of these is the term ‘pre-Columbian Art’, which is often used both in the description of objects in auction sales, and in museums. This designation stems from the arrival of Columbus in the Americas and separates material created before this moment from material created after 1492. Similarly, the term ‘prehispanic’, only common in the English language, refers to the Spanish appearance in the region. ‘Precolonial’, which is more common internationally, refers to the moment before colonization of the Americas. The appeal of this term is that, while some areas were colonized directly after the arrival of Europeans in the early 16th century, other parts of the Americas resisted colonization for centuries. As such, the term ‘precolonial’ is more flexible than ‘pre-Columbian’ and allows for a recognition of the resistance by Indigenous communities to the broader colonial project. Finally, the terms ‘tribal’ and ‘primitive’ were regularly used in the past to describe these objects. In the present day, primitive – carrying with it clear connotations of a lack of civilization

and sophistication – has fallen into disuse. ‘Tribal’, on the other hand, continues to be used in some circles to describe these objects under the category of ‘Tribal art’, which brings together pieces created by non-Western cultures from around the globe. In academic circles, however, the term ‘Tribal’ has long since been discredited as a marginally less problematic synonym of the term ‘primitive’.

Similarly, one can wonder whether the objects in the Pelling Zarnitz collection should indeed be called objects. Many Indigenous communities in the Americas consider archaeological material sacred and part of their ancestral culture. As a result, suggestions have recently been made to no longer refer to this material as ‘objects’ but rather to call these ‘belongings’, as this stresses the close relationships that Indigenous communities continue to have with these pieces. In a similar vein, the designation of these pieces as ‘art’ can be debated. Most of these pieces were not made to be art in the contemporary (Western) sense of the word. That is to say, what is on display now in museums, was originally intended by the creator to be an object of use, an offering to the deceased ancestors,

or part of a temple or monument. ‘Art’ as we know it is a modern concept, that does not cover the intentions of the original creators of these ‘objects’. In the end, standards on how to refer to these objects differ between languages, academic disciplines, and countries. What is important to acknowledge, is that the naming conventions we choose to use, directly reflect the different histories that are attached to these objects and their transfer from an original context to a museum in the 21st century.

Collecting the Americas in Europe

“I saw the things which have been brought to the King from the new land of gold: a sun all of gold a whole fathom broad, and a moon all of silver of the same size, also two rooms full of armor of the people there, and all manner of wondrous weapons of theirs, harness and darts, very strange clothing, beds, and all kinds of wonderful objects of human use [...] All the days of my life I have seen nothing that rejoiced my heart so much as these things, for I saw amongst them wonderful works of art, and I marveled at the subtle Ingenia of men in foreign lands.”⁶²

⁶² Albrecht Dürer: *Diary of his journey to the Netherlands, 1520–1521; Introduction by Jan-Albert Goris, Georges Marlier, Greenwich, Conn. 1971*, p. 53 f.

On the 27th of August, 1520, Albrecht Dürer saw the objects sent to Emperor Charles V by the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, as they were displayed in the townhall of the city of Brussels. These objects originated from what is now Mexico and were part of a gift given by the Aztec emperor Motecuhzoma II during the first encounter between representatives of the two empires on different sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Dürer was not the only European entranced by these objects. From the earliest moments of colonization, large quantities of Indigenous art, religious objects, and items of everyday use were collected in the Americas by European soldiers, missionaries, Colonial administrators, and travelers.

While some of these collections were voluntarily gifted or traded in the early days of European colonization, most of these interactions were fraught with violence or dispossession, within the framework of the larger European Colonial project. As part of their missionary drive to convert the local population and eradicate ‘idolatry’, European clerics de-



Abb. 1

Burning of Idols, drawn by an unidentified Indigenous artist, to accompany Diego Muñoz Camargo. *Historia de Tlaxcala*, c. 1584–1585, fol. 242r. Glasgow University Library, Scotland; Sign. GB 247 Ms. Hunter 242

stroyed (Abb. 1) temples, statues, masks, and other religious objects, and burned Indigenous manuscripts and books, leading to massive loss and destruction of Indigenous cultural heritage.

At the same time other groups of clerics, primarily Dominicans, collected large quantities of material, bringing them to Italy and the Vatican to become integrated in the *Wunderkammer* and cabinets of curiosity of famous collectors and collecting dynasties such as the Medici family in Florence.⁶³ Over time, these objects from early collections, many of

⁶³ Davide Domenici, Laura Laurencich Minelli: Domingo de Betanzos' gifts to Pope Clement VII in 1532–1533: tracking the Early History of some Mexican Objects and Codices in Italy, in: *Estudios de cultura náhuatl* 48, 2014, S. 169–209; Davide Domenici: Missionary gift records of Mexican objects in early modern Italy, in: Elizabeth Horodowich (ed.): *The New World in Early Modern Italy, 1492–1750*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 86–102.



Abb. 2

Friedrich Georg Weitsch: *Humboldt and his fellow scientist Aimé Bonpland near the foot of the Chimborazo volcano, 1810.*

Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten

which originally arrived in Italy, were spread across Europe to become some of the most famous and appreciated pieces of ‘pre-Columbian art’ in European museums.

Despite their fame, these 16th century pieces represent a minimal part of the hundreds of thousands of Indigenous Latin American archaeological objects held in European museums today. Serious collecting by Europeans of this material began in the 19th century, after the independence from Spain of most Latin American countries in 1821. The most famous of these early collectors is undoubtedly Alexander von Humboldt

(1769–1859, Abb. 2), who collected archaeological objects during his extensive travels in Latin America, before the independence of the region (1799–1804). While some of the Humboldt objects were lost during World War II, three objects from his collections are still kept in the Forum named after him in Berlin. It should be noted, however, that Humboldt’s appreciation of these objects differed significantly from that of Dürer some 300 years earlier. Humboldt repeatedly remarked negatively on the aesthetic qualities of these objects, calling them ‘industry’ rather than ‘art’, and it seems he collected these pieces primarily out of interests for their mate-

rials, rather than their cultural or artistic value.⁶⁴

Humboldt was not the only important German collector of this material of the 19th century. In fact, much of the ‘pre-Columbian collecting world’ centered around the ethnographic museums that were founded in the second half of the 19th century in cities like Hamburg, Berlin, Leipzig, Stuttgart, München and others. There was a bustling academic atmosphere in late-19th century and early 20th-century Germany, as many individuals travelled to Latin America and amassed enormous collections of archaeological material in the region⁶⁵. Some of these collectors were scholars who travelled to the region to research the cultures of the past and the present, as part of the newly-forming academic disciplines of anthropology and archaeology. Arguably the most important of these was Eduard Seler (1849–1922, Abb. 3) who, together with his spouse Caecilie Seler-Sachs (1855–1935, Abb. 3), lay the foundation for what would become ‘Altamerikanische Studien’.

⁶⁴ Leonardo López Luján: Ciriaco González Carvajal and Archaeological Collectionism in Late Bourbon New Spain, in: Andrew D. Turner, Megan E. O’Neil (eds.): *Collecting Mesoamerican Art before 1940: a new world of Latin American antiquities*, Los Angeles 2024, pp. 57–85.

⁶⁵ H. Glenn Penny: *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*, Chapel Hill [e.a.]: 2002.



Abb. 3
Eduard Seler and Caecilie Seler-Sachs.
Globus 72, 1897, p. 85

While Seler was a scholar, drawn to the Americas because of his academic research, other collectors came into contact with pre-Columbian cultures and archaeology in a more coincidental way. Many of these important collectors came from merchant families and were sent to Mexico or Peru to work in trade or manufacturing businesses. Hermann Strelitz (1834–1914), for example, travelled to Mexico to work in a factory with his brother. While there, he developed

an interest in malacology and archaeology, staying in Mexico for decades and collecting thousands of objects, before returning to Germany and working at the Natural History Museum in Hamburg. Similarly, Eduard Gaffron (1861–1931)⁶⁶ was an eye doctor who travelled to Lima in Peru following his older brother who worked there as a merchant. In Lima, Gaffron was the director of the ‘Club Germania’ a society of German expats that was central to building his collecting network. Eventually, Gaffron collected tens of thousands of pre-Columbian objects, which made their way to museums in both Europe and the United States after his death. Similar to Seler, Strebel, and Gaffron, important collectors like Carl Adolf Uhde, Wilhelm Gretzer, Karl Sutorius, and others created massive collections of archaeological objects, ranging from a few thousand to more than 40,000 pieces in some cases. All of these objects now reside in museums around the world, primarily in Germany, but also more broadly in Europe and even the United States of America.

⁶⁶ Claudia Schmitz: Die peruanische Sammlung von Eduard Gaffron im Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig und ihre forschungsgeschichtliche Bedeutung, in: *Jahrbuch der Staatlichen Ethnographischen Sammlungen Sachsen* 43, 2007, pp. 111–127.

⁶⁷ Jane McLaren Walsh, Brett Topping: *The Man Who Invented Aztec Crystal Skulls: The Adventures of Eugène Boban*, New York, Oxford 2018, doi:10.2307/j.ctvwo4kt2; Pascal Riviale: Eugène Boban ou les aventures d'un antiquaire au pays des Américanistes, in: *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 87, 2001, pp. 351–362, doi:10.4000/jsa.1855.

The rise of a market

While some of the collectors listed above did eventually sell their collections for substantial amounts of money, their primary motive for collecting was mostly not commercial. In contrast, the second half of the 19th century saw the rise of large-scale commercial dealing of this material in Europe. One of the most (in)famous and influential actors in developing this trade was the French dealer-collector Eugène Boban (1834–1908).⁶⁷ Born in Paris, Boban moved to Mexico in his twenties and was able to establish himself as an antiquities merchant in Mexico-City. Boban's business fared and he eventually became the official ‘antiquaire de l'empereur Maximilien’ during the short-lived occupation of Mexico by the French between 1863 and 1867. As a member of the ‘Commission scientifique du Mexique’, Boban was an important and influential member of French-Mexican intellectual society, supplying objects for the 1867 ‘Exposition Universelle’ in Paris.



Abb. 4
Eugène Boban: The Crystal Skull, before 1881.
British Museum, London,
Museum Number Am1898C3.1

At the same time, Boban cleverly exploited this status in advertisements for his gallery printed in newspapers, in which he used his role as ‘the Emperor’s antiquarian’ to establish himself as the foremost dealer in this material. Similarly, his participation in the Exposition Universelle provided Boban with an excellent opportunity to market his wares to an incredibly large audience and establish pre-Columbian archaeology as a collectable commodity. In 1886, Boban left Mexico, possibly because of the fall-out of a falsification scandal he was involved in the year before when trying to sell a crystal skull to Mexico’s National Museum. These crystal skulls (Abb. 4), housed today in institutions like

the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Smithsonian, were long seen as preeminent examples of pre-Columbian art in popular culture, most notably the movie Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (2008). However, research has shown that all of these are 19th century falsifications, many of which Boban was likely involved in.

From artefact to art

In contrast to Dürer’s aesthetic appreciation of Aztec art material in the 16th century, most of the pieces collected during the 19th century were collected as *artefact*. That is to say: the primary value attributed to these objects was scholarly. These pieces were acquired because of their cultural significance and ability to elucidate the religion, life, and culture of past peoples and civilizations. This focus on the cultural significance of objects shifted during the first decades of the twentieth century, when modernist artists such as Henri Moore, Alberto Giacometti, and Paul Gauguin started to appreciate what was now called ‘pre-Columbian art’ as inspirations for their own work.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Barbara Braun: Pre-Columbian art and the post-Columbian world: ancient American sources of modern art, New York 1993.



Abb. 5

Frida Kahlo: *Self Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States of America*, 1932.
Colección María y Manuel Reyero, New York

The early twentieth century artists that were most engaged in this reevaluation of archaeological objects were undoubtedly Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, who amassed a massive private collection of pre-Columbian art in their homes. The 59,400 pieces collected by Rivera are still administered and partially on display at the Museo Anahuacalli, the ‘temple’ inspired by Mesoamerican architecture that Rivera designed and

built for his collections.⁶⁹ Apart from collecting pre-Columbian Art, both Kahlo and Rivera incorporated depictions of these pieces and their creators in their artworks. Rivera did so most famously in the murals that he painted, especially in Mexico’s presidential palace. In his work, Rivera depicted archaeological sites and material together with Indigenous folk culture, in order to place these at the center of the new Mexican national

69 Barbara Braun: Diego Rivera’s Collection: pre-Columbian art as a political and artistic legacy, in: Elizabeth Hill Boone (ed.): *Collecting the pre-Columbian past* (symposium 1990), Washington, DC 1993, pp. 251–270.

identity, that was being formed after the Mexican Revolution between 1910 and 1920. Likewise, Kahlo used pre-Columbian art extensively in her paintings (Abb. 5), both in constructing her own identity and in referencing the deep Indigenous roots of the 20th century Mexican nation.

The ‘discovery’ of pre-Columbian art by modernist artists meant that these objects became increasingly popular on the international art market. From the 1930s onwards, affluent private collectors entered the market and started building large private collections, especially in the United States, France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. This market really took flight after the Second World War when private collectors, museums, and art dealers all vied for the best pieces at increasingly high price. Whereas, at the end of the 19th century, Eugene Boban was one of the very few actors actively dealing in pre-Columbian material on a large scale, after 1945 a significant number of specialized professional art dealers started selling archaeological objects from Latin America. At the same time, large auction houses like Christie’s and Sotheby’s organized high-impact sales of this material which was now appreciated primarily on aesthetic, rather than cultural or scholarly grounds.

Attempts to end the market

The explosion of interest in pre-Columbian art meant that more and more material was needed to satisfy the demands of the market. As a result, the looting of archaeological sites in Mesoamerica increased exponentially in the 1950s and 1960s. Many countries in the region already introduced legislation to protect their cultural heritage in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These laws prohibited the export of archaeological material without a government permit, but were generally evaded on a large scale, both by local exporters and by international dealers and buyers (as well as museums).

The growth of this international market occasioned a disastrous loss of archaeological heritage in the countries of origin and, at the same time, eliminated the possibility for archaeologists to study the tombs, palaces, and temples that were being looted in the process. This loss of archaeological context means that we understand only a fraction of what we could possibly know about these pieces if they had been excavated by professional archaeologists. At the same time, this looting deprived Indigenous communities of the material created by their ancestors, while



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Abb. 6

UNESCO, Executive Board, 85th, Paris, 1970, p. 1; later also called: *The 1970 Convention*



Abb. 7 a und 7 b

UNESCO, Culture & development stop the illicit traffic of cultural property, 2013.

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also occasionally endangering their lives because of the close links that existed (and continue to exist) between some looters of archaeological sites and organized crime. As a result, during the 1960s, archaeologists, heritage organizations, governments of source countries, and indigenous communities demanded action against the destruction of archaeological and ancestral heritage sites.

These protests resulted in the adoption of the landmark UNESCO 1970 Convention (Abb. 6) on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.⁷⁰ This Convention, which has so far been ratified by 146 states, outlines the responsibilities that states party have to not only protect their own heritage, but also cooperate with other states in order to protect, safeguard,

and return stolen heritage from across the globe. Importantly, many nations in Europe only ratified the Convention in the 21st century. This includes Germany, which ratified the Convention in 2007. As a result, for decades, it was illegal to export cultural material from countries in Latin America (Abb. 7), but it was legal to import and own these pieces in most of Western and Central Europe.

All objects in the Pelling-Zarnitz collection were acquired legally from European and North American dealers. However, under cultural patrimony laws in the countries of origin, both their excavation and their export were illicit. In recent years, some Latin American countries have started to request the repatriation of these kinds of objects (Abb. 8), which has resulted in the return of hundreds of pieces of pre-Columbian art to countries

⁷⁰ Resolutions and decisions adopted by the Executive Board at its 85th session, Paris, 21 September–10 November 1970, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000113198?posInSet=2&queryId=b38a7df7-87a3-4e51-boe6-1e327244c95e>; <https://www.unesco.org/en/fight-illicit-trafficking/about> [25.08.2024].



Abb. 8

UNESCO, Culture & development stop the illicit traffic of cultural property, 2013, page 48 f.

of origin. On the back of broader calls to ‘Decolonize the Museum’, discussions have been raging globally about who cultural heritage objects belong to, where they should be safeguarded, and who should have access to these pieces.

Moving into the 21st century, these conversations will only intensify as museums, governments, and indigenous communities in formerly colonized countries increasingly lay claim to their cultural patrimony. However, this development should not lead museums (or their publics)

to fear that ‘all European museums will be empty’. On the contrary, calls for more access and ownership of heritage by originating communities can create new and exciting opportunities for collaboration between museums in Europe and communities around the world, working towards a shared and ethical museum practice that allows individuals around the world to equally and equitably enjoy, admire, and study this ancestral heritage.⁷¹

⁷¹ This research was funded by the European Union (ERC StG, BECACO, 101117234). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.