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Guest Editorial

On 13 and 14 October 2017 a workshop took place in the Berlin Museum for Asian Art which to a large extent ventured into new territory. In an exemplary cooperation between academia and museums, the organisers Christine Howald (TU Berlin, Institute for Art History and Urban Science) and Alexander Hofmann (Museum for Asian Art, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) focused on “provenance research into East Asian art”, its “challenges and desiderata”.

At the workshop, researchers from different areas came together who do not typically work in close cooperation: provenance researchers who specialise in National Socialist art looting, art market researchers, museum staff, and others. In such a blend, there is always a hazard of talking at cross-purposes and misunderstandings, but in the case of this workshop, the result was persuasive: all participants were open to learning from each other, ready to discover connections and cross-references, and to identify methodical common ground as well as differences. As a result, the general view was that while there needed to be some differentiation, the markets for East Asian and “Western” art at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century needed to be considered in tandem.

A selection of contributions from the workshop is now available in this journal issue, combined with several others expanding the subject. In a conclusion which is perhaps simplistic but nevertheless accurate, it appears that East Asian art occupies a special and distinct position in the wide range of research into provenance, art transfer and translocations.

On the one hand, East Asian art was the target of Nazi art agents, enablers and looters to an extent which has in no way been fully explored yet, both in Germany and in German-occupied regions. At the turn of the century, Jewish collectors followed the trend of

their time and acquired Old Master paintings and those of – from today’s perspective – classical Modernism alongside East Asian art.

On the other hand, East Asian art can also be affected by what is referred to as “colonial context”, that is the acquisition of artefacts and other objects under circumstances of disparate power relationships. Without question, one example is China during the plunder of the Old Summer Palace in 1860 or during the so-called Boxer war in 1900.

At the same time – and in a substantial difference to Africa or the Pacific region –, there were phases of an open art transfer which was not characterised by relationships of unequal power or even military might. The “porcelain mania” of European princes during the Baroque period is a case in point.

The subject of provenance of East Asian art requires researchers to have profound knowledge and finesse; it is neither suitable for black and white role assignments, nor can it be confined to the ivory tower of pure specialist expertise. Rather, this is a field which is especially pertinent for the exploration of how to deal with with (art) objects and their translocations over the centuries in an appropriate, modern, and open manner. To this end, the present issue of the Journal for Art Market Studies can provide important references with regard to both content and methods.

Translation: Susanne Meyer-Abich