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Austrian federal museums in colonial contexts: State Secretary for Arts and Culture Andrea Mayer establishes new expert committee

A high-level committee of experts will develop a guideline for a consistent approach to objects in a colonial context and demands for repatriation.

In order to establish a consistent approach to handling items in Austrian federal museums possibly acquired in colonial contexts, Andrea Mayer, Austrian State Secretary for Arts and Culture, has established a committee consisting of internationally recognised experts.

Under the chairmanship of Jonathan Fine, director of the Weltmuseum Wien, who is the secretary of the Benin Dialogue Group, this interdisciplinary committee will develop recommendations for cultural objects in museums which were acquired in colonial contexts and which are the subject of demands for repatriation, with a view, if necessary, to drafting new legislation. The committee will also include representatives from museums, legal experts and civil society initiatives.

“It is our goal to study the colonial heritage in Austrian federal museums in a focused scientific manner. It is not only a question of how to deal with colonial museum holdings, but also of postcolonial museology and the culture of memory. When it comes to this topic, it is important to me that we go into depth here, but also into breadth,” says State Secretary Mayer. “In particular, a broad-based approach in the committee’s work will be achieved through the involvement of diverse stakeholders in order to develop a contemporary and sensitive handling of collections from colonial contexts held in Austrian federal museums. I would like to thank the experts involved for their willingness to devote themselves to this trans-continently important issue.”

“The establishment of the committee is an important step towards Austrian participation in a global debate aimed at finding fair solutions through open discussion and the involvement of different groups, views and disciplines while avoiding relativist and simplistic approaches,” says Fine.

Several work meetings are planned for 2022. The committee’s schedule is divided into three phases: the first phase will focus on contextualisation, the second on receiving input and learning from civil society, legal experts and international stakeholders, and the third on defining and formulating written recommendations for dealing with demands for the repatriation of cultural objects. The results are expected to be published in 2023.

The committee’s members:

- Jonathan Fine, director, Weltmuseum Wien (chairman)
- Golda Ha-Eiros, head curator of the Anthropology Collection, National Museum of Namibia
- Emmanuel Kasarhérou, president, musée du quai-Branly, Paris, France
- Henrietta Lidchi, head curator, Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Netherlands
- Barbara Plankensteiner, director, Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK) Hamburg, Germany
- Walter Sauer, Department of Economic and Social History, University of Vienna
- Anna Schmid, director, Museum der Kulturen, Basel, Switzerland
- Katrin Vohland, director general and managing director, Naturhistorisches Museum Vienna
- Miloš Vec, Department of Legal and Constitutional History, University of Vienna

Postcolonial provenance research in Austria

Ethnography, natural history, technical and art museums are currently faced with an intensive discussion on how to approach objects in museum collections which were acquired in colonial contexts. The Austrian federal government has identified postcolonial provenance research and handling human remains as important areas of work and has stepped up its commitment to the development of provenance research.

In the past, Austrian efforts focused on researching the provenance of art and cultural objects expropriated by the Nazis. Thanks to the 1998 Art Restitution Act, the only law of this kind in the world, Austria has considerable experience in this related but not identical field. While Austria's specific responsibility for Nazi crimes must be kept in mind in the current debate, use can also be made of this wealth of experience in research and approaches to objects acquired in colonial contexts.

Austria's increased focus on postcolonial provenance research began with the highly acclaimed series of events "The museum in a colonial context" held in cooperation with ICOM Austria in 2019 and the publication on the current state of research that resulted from it. In 2020, the Austrian Ministry of Culture inaugurated and subsidised research projects in four federal museums (Museum of Applied Arts Vienna, Naturhistorisches Museum Vienna, Technisches Museum Vienna and Weltmuseum Wien). The results will be published in 2022, and further projects are being planned.

Specific demands for the repatriation of *human remains* – by Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2020 and by Hawaii in 2021 – have been resolved, although the physical return of the remains has been postponed by agreement with the countries of origin because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Although Austria is not regarded historically as a colonial power, current research has revealed the multiple involvement of the Habsburg monarchy in colonial affairs. The establishment of the new committee with national and international experts to devise a sustainable and transparent framework is therefore of great significance.

The Austrian Ministry of Culture attaches great importance to the creation of a solid framework for the science-based, transparent and sensitive handling of collections from colonial contexts in federal museums and hopes to make a relevant contribution to the international discussion with the expected recommendations.

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