

Editorial

Twelve issues ago, this journal set out to investigate the art market in its entire range and historic development. This approach included by definition the trade in all manner of objects. Art Market Studies can easily conjure up an image of buying, selling and collecting art which is part of the Western canon. As that canon starts to distinctly fray at the edges, our perspective also widens. “Art” is an acquired concept that emerged in the nineteenth century, together with the categorisation of public museums even now reflecting the worldview of the time in the West. Dealing in “items produced in a cultural context” is perhaps more accurate, if unwieldy.

In this issue, our guest editor Martin Berger investigates how museum collections of Latin American objects came into being. Much has been said about the commodification of “ethnographic” objects in the wake of the European avant-garde. A commodity demands and generates its own market to some extent, as becomes clear in the articles we assembled. The same strategies of buying, collecting, and selling applied and continue to apply to entirely different groups of cultural property. Museums bought and received donations from the same dealers and collectors who supplied them with avant-garde and Old Master paintings. The secret was decontextualization – offering objects with strong visual credentials which could be regarded as artworks irrespective of their original purpose.

The recent restitution campaign in Mexico under the header “Mi Patrimonio No Se Vende” – my heritage is not for sale – taps into a global sea change on who should own what cultural assets and why.¹ The articles in this issue reflect on earlier times and different, often condescending or just mercenary attitudes. In the 1960s, a looted item from Olmec could be advertised in New York and sell for a four-figure sum. Yet by law, all of the precolonial archaeology from Mexican territory belonged to the Mexican nation since the 1890s. At the very latest, the 1970 UNESCO convention (see Viola König’s article) should have protected this item from illegal trade.

1 See for example: Stone by Ancient Stone, Mexico Recovers Its Lost Treasures, in *The New York Times*, 23 October 2023.

What we refer to as ethnographic objects did not fall from the sky, nor were they rescued from certain destruction by researchers with a passion to preserve them. They were looted and exchanged, bought, sold, and donated. They changed hands in the same way that European paintings and sculpture did, and these hands were often the same. It makes sense to see the market structures and strategies as a whole, as the buyers' motivations are the same: Treasure. The wish to take possession of cultural emanations of any kind. A desire to display and demonstrate, glowingly. Admiration and appropriation.

A final afterthought: Should this issue prompt research and publications on collectors in Latin America who purchased European artefacts, we would of course be delighted.

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