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Johannes Beltz

Promote Cooperation!

Collecting, researching and collaborating in the
postcolonial, digital age

Translated by Matthew Partridge

Over the past decade, discussions on the history of European museums have been dominated by issues related to their colonial past. Ethnological museums in particular have been subject to scrutiny and have faced increased pressure to openly address their past and, if necessary, to return objects from their collections to the countries of origin. But even large universal museums such as the British Museum or the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) have come to the painful realisation that their view of themselves as humanist places of comprehensive collection and knowledge is increasingly being questioned. The establishment of Postcolonial Studies as a field of research has opened up new discursive spaces in the academic and media world, and the assumption that the museum equals enlightenment equals humanism equals science has been significantly challenged. In recent years, therefore, many European museums have made efforts to reinvent themselves. Programmatic names such as “world museum” or “museum of cultures” suggest dialogue and multivocality, and convey an intention to interact with the various “communities” involved (above all, the societies of origin) on an equal footing. These decolonising measures, however, have – often rightly – been dismissed as a purely cosmetic exercise or (empty) rhetoric.¹

This essay presents a model for museum practice in Switzerland that has largely remained outside the current debate and the media spotlight because the institution has only indirect links to colonialism and is more firmly located within the context of art. For these very reasons,

¹ Cf., among others, Kravagna, 2015.

it is interesting to take a look at this museum's initiatives and methods, as they offer important perspectives that could substantially expand the discussion in ethnological museums.² Swiss museums are not generally regarded as repositories of treasures from the colonial era. Switzerland did not have any colonies, nor did it seek to acquire such territories. One might think, therefore, that the subject of decolonisation has no relevance to the country,³ but closer inspection soon reveals that colonialism is indeed an issue for Swiss museums. Because although Switzerland did not have any colonies of its own, it was involved in the trading of colonial commodities and maintained trade offices in many parts of the world. Switzerland even played a key role in areas such as the silk and cotton trades, and as a strategic partner, it supported the European colonial powers in their expansionist efforts. The slave trade also falls within the scope of this topic.⁴

The focus of the following analysis is on the Museum Rietberg, which as a museum of non-European art was not founded until 1952. At first glance, therefore, it does not appear to be burdened with the problematic past of colonialism. However, large parts of the museum's collections date from the colonial era or were acquired during that period, often using profits derived from overseas trade.

² This article is also a review of and outlook for my years of work at the Museum Rietberg, where I am currently employed as Curator of South and South East Asian Art, but also chair the Curatorial Board, head the Department of Art Education, as well as serving as Deputy Director. My focus on South Asia and India stems from this professional specialisation. I would like to thank Annette Bhagwati, Peter Fux and Esther Tisa for the inspiring discussions on the subject of decolonisation that have informed this essay.

³ As the European colonies of the 19th and 20th centuries were unprecedented in terms of their claim to power and international dominance (colonisation as a historic process of an economic, political-territorial, religious and social nature), the term "decolonisation" is above all defined as the liberation from colonial structures in the wake of European colonial rule in the period 1880–1960.

⁴ For more on this topic, cf. Haller, 2016; Dejung, 2013; Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné, 2015.

1. THE MUSEUM RIETBERG: ORIGINS AND HISTORY

The Museum Rietberg has its origins in the collection of Eduard von der Heydt. During the 1920s and 1930s, von der Heydt bought numerous works of Asian, African, American and Oceanic art on the Western art market, with assets he had accumulated from various banking enterprises; he later donated his collection to the City of Zurich, which used it to found the Museum Rietberg in 1952.⁵

As far as South Asian art was concerned, von der Heydt above all purchased classic works of “religious” art such as Hindu bronzes and stone sculptures, as well as Buddhist and Jain sculptures.⁶ It is important to mention here that despite his universalist approach, von der Heydt did not acquire a single object from India that would today be termed “tribal art”, in contrast to his collection of African masks or South Seas sculptures, which are today very valuable iconic works of “tribal art”. This had less to do with the collector’s personal taste than with a lack of interest in such objects – and hence their limited availability – among the leading art dealers of the time. The international art market had not yet discovered “tribal” India.⁷

The founding director of the Museum Rietberg was Johannes Itten, a co-founder of the Bauhaus who also became the director of the Kunstgewerbeschule Zurich (Arts and Crafts School and Museum) and the city’s Kunstgewerbemuseum (Arts and Crafts Museum). In 1956 Itten was succeeded as director of the Rietberg by Elsy Leuzinger, who institutionalised the teaching of non-European art at the University of Zurich as a lecturer from 1960 onwards, then as a titular professor from 1968. As an ethnologist with a special interest in Africa,

⁵ Illner, 2013.

⁶ Among other objects, he bought the bronze Dancing Shiva, which was later to become the showpiece of the museum collection; cf. Beltz, 2008 and 2011.

⁷ The art historian Hermann Goetz, for example, mentions neither the tribal cultures of India nor the country’s contemporary art in his major survey of Indian art history, which was published in 1959; cf. Beltz, 2019, among others.

Leuzinger not only expanded the collection of West African art, but also and above all the collection of ancient American art. Alice Boner's collection of Indian sculptures also entered the museum under Leuzinger's tenure.⁸ In 1972, Eberhard Fischer, an art ethnologist and expert on West Africa and India, was appointed director of the Museum Rietberg. His arrival marked the beginning of the era of Indian painting at the Rietberg, as Fischer did more than any other director to strengthen this section of the collection. With generous funding from sponsors and patrons, he assembled a collection of Pahari paintings that is now one of the most important of its kind in the world. Collaboration with leading art historians of the time resulted in numerous publications and exhibitions. The Museum Rietberg established itself as a key site of collection and research into courtly painting in India, but Eberhard Fischer also paid close attention to the country's wide array of artistic traditions: in 1972, soon after taking up his post as director, he curated an exhibition on art from northern India and emphasised the many different but interconnected cultural traditions that exist side by side on the subcontinent.⁹ In a similar manner, Fischer mounted a groundbreaking exhibition in 1980 on the art and cultures of Odisha, in cooperation with colleagues from India.¹⁰ The presentation for the first time documented all the key forms of art being produced in this Indian state, including architecture, sculpture, painting, woodcarving and textiles, and explored the connections and mutual influences between them.

Albert Lutz was the director of the Museum Rietberg from 1998 to 2019. During his tenure, the museum was refurbished and extended, and was subsequently reopened in 2007. The expansion of the buildings made it possible for the museum to mount larger shows and also to present a number of special exhibitions concurrently. This paved the

⁸ This donation is particularly noteworthy as it came to the Museum Rietberg with official permission from the Indian government, and after the country had tightened its law on the protection of cultural property. India agreed to the move on condition that the Alice Boner Collection would be put on permanent public display in a museum; cf. Lindt, 1982.

⁹ Fischer, 1972.

¹⁰ Fischer et al., 1980.

way for an increase in visitor numbers and a stronger public presence, as the museum became known to more than just a small circle of connoisseurs and specialists. As a result, a number of successful international exhibitions travelled to the Museum Rietberg.

The museum collection grew significantly with support from the Rietberg Circle and numerous patrons, by way of gifts and new acquisitions. In 2009 Eberhard Fischer donated the entire collection of textiles he had amassed during his time in Ahmedabad (1965–1966 and 1968–1971) to the Museum Rietberg.¹¹ Besides the fact that these modern textiles brought a new type of object into the collection, they were also craft items that would previously not have been considered “art”. Many of the producers of these objects belonged to marginalised sections of Indian society, the Dalit or “untouchable” castes. To include this social group in the realm of fine arts was an important new development.

During this period, the museum made significant acquisitions of Indian “folk and tribal art”.¹² These acquisitions fundamentally altered the profile of the collection of Indian art, which had previously focussed on sculptures and paintings, and this change was also reflected in the exhibition programme.¹³ In late 2019 Annette Bhagwati was appointed the new director of the Museum Rietberg, and she will continue to consolidate the museum’s reputation as an international centre of expertise in the field of non-European art.

¹¹ Fischer, 2014.

¹² Between 2009 and 2019, more than 600 Indian ‘folk and tribal bronzes’ entered the museum collection; cf. Museum Rietberg Annual Report 2009, p. 67, and Annual Report 2011, pp. 52–55.

¹³ Cf. Beltz, 2009; Beltz and Mallebrein, 2012.

2. DECOLONISATION AND RESTITUTION

In recent years there have been increasing calls for collections from the colonial era to be immediately restituted to their countries of origin.¹⁴ Although Switzerland is not considered a colonial power in the traditional sense, the country and its museums came under media scrutiny. In addition, the demand for restitution was not only directed at ethnological collections, but also at dedicated art museums such as the Museum Rietberg. Media enquiries often culminated in the question of when the “stolen” artworks in the Rietberg collections would finally be returned to the countries of origin.

The Museum Rietberg responded to these enquiries with careful circumspection, pointing out that the examination of the collection history, legality and acquisition context of its artworks has always been integral to its curatorial practice, even if such appraisals were not conducted under the heading of “provenance research”. In the context of an exhibition on the museum’s iconic masterpiece – the Dancing Shiva – for example, the acquisition and reception history of this key object was researched and documented for the first time.¹⁵ And in an exhibition on precious ivory carvings that were produced in Sri Lanka for the Portuguese court during the Renaissance, the art historian Annemarie Jordan also investigated the acquisition history of these precious objects.¹⁶

In 2008 the Museum Rietberg created a provenance research position in order to address the museum’s own history – and above all the origins of the early holdings – in greater depth. The initial focus of this research was on Nazi-confiscated cultural property and the collection of Eduard von der Heydt.¹⁷

¹⁴ Savoy. 2018.

¹⁵ Beltz, 2008 and 2011.

¹⁶ Beltz and Jordan-Gschwend, 2010.

¹⁷ On this topic, see the exhibition *From Buddha to Picasso. The Collector Eduard von der Heydt*; Illner. 2013; Tisa Francini, 2012 and 2013.

In recent years, the Museum Rietberg has made the move into the digital age by introducing a database and publishing its collection online. This is an ongoing process that is becoming increasingly important, as digitisation is one of the major issues facing museums in the future. Transnational research is a pivotal aspect in this development. Established provenances are incorporated into the database and this is made available online. Digitisation will make it possible for the universal cultural legacy with its diverse, exciting and contradictory histories to be shared with a global audience. Scholarly exchange and research efforts will be networked and new virtual collections and exhibitions of artworks will be created. As a result, the question of where the original items are physically located may become less important in future.

The Museum Rietberg will continue to document and expand its collection in this sense. The current debates have naturally influenced the museum's acquisition policy; besides the changing market, above all the introduction of the Swiss Federal Act on the International Transfer of Cultural Property (CPTA) has contributed to this change.¹⁸ But already under our former director, Eberhard Fischer, the museum did not acquire any archaeological finds, sculptures, bronzes or terracotta works from presumably illicit excavations, or any other objects of questionable provenance, for the South Asian collection.¹⁹

The museum will also continue to examine and address the history of its collections, and will present these complex histories in exhibitions and on digital platforms. If justified demands for restitution were to be made, the museum would of course return the works concerned.

¹⁸ The Federal Act on the International Transfer of Cultural Property (CPTA) regulates the import and export of cultural property to and from Switzerland with regard to protecting and preserving cultural heritage and preventing the illicit import and export of cultural property; <https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/en/home/cultural-heritage/transfer-of-cultural-property.html> (accessed 7 May 2020).

¹⁹ In 2003 the museum returned a group of Gandhara sculptures to an art dealer when he refused to disclose the actual provenance of the objects; cf. Museum Rietberg Annual Report 2003, p. 36.

Of greater importance, however, is a sustained, long-term approach to these issues, which are also and increasingly being raised by the countries of origin. Not restitution, but rather *collaboration* with the countries of origin is the key strategic objective. These collaborative efforts on the part of the Museum Rietberg are not about making amends for alleged wrongdoing. On the contrary: the transparency in the museum's approach to its own collection, the transnational research it conducts and the exhibitions that come about as a result are a reflection of the Rietberg's conception of itself. International collaboration is, therefore, not a gesture of apology or a form of moral justification; rather, it is intrinsically linked to the museum's core tasks, which involve conducting research into objects, their origin and production; carrying out fieldwork in situ; undertaking archival work; preserving, conserving, communicating and exhibiting the objects in the collection. In the digital age, transnational cooperation via online platforms and databases will thereby become increasingly important.

3. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: THE CORE OF THE MUSEUM'S PRACTICE

As the only museum in Switzerland dedicated to non-European art, the Museum Rietberg has been collaborating with scholars and specialists from the countries of origin in the areas of research, exhibition-making, excavation and conservation for several decades.

In all of his major exhibition projects on Indian art, our former director Eberhard Fischer worked closely with Indian experts such as B. N. Goswamy, Dinanath Pathy and Sitakant Mahapatra.²⁰ Fischer was convinced that field research, excavations and building the museum collection could only be done in collaboration with partners in the countries of origin. The best example of this kind of partnership is the 2011 exhibition *The Way of the Master. The Great Artists of India, 1100–1900*, a highly regarded display that was subsequently shown at

²⁰ Fischer et al., 1980.

the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.²¹ The Museum Rietberg presented the crème de la crème of Indian painting and brought artworks from leading international museums to Zurich: the most magnificent works from the legendary album kept in the Golestan Palace in Tehran, paintings from the Royal Collection in Great Britain, and treasures from the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in St Petersburg – to name just three of the 42 lenders involved. This project was only possible through collaboration between the leading art historians B. N. Goswamy, Milo Beach and Eberhard Fischer.²²

3.1 Cooperation in the area of special exhibitions

Large-scale special exhibitions such as the “Indian Masters” invariably rely on collaboration to secure international loans. In recent years, however, the Museum Rietberg has expanded this common museum practice. An important change in the museum’s curatorial strategy was – where possible – to organise special exhibitions on themes of Indian art with partners in India and then also to show these exhibitions in India, or to bring exhibitions from India to the Museum Rietberg. One such project was *Indian Colours: Materials and Techniques of Pigment Painting in Rajasthan*, which was organised in 2004 in collaboration with the Indian artists Desmond Lazaro and Shammi Sharma.²³

One truly pioneering project was a travelling exhibition on the Swiss artist Alice Boner (1889–1981), which was shown in three venues in India before it came to the Museum Rietberg.²⁴ The exhibition opened in Mumbai in 2014, travelled to the National Museum in New Delhi in 2016, to Bharat Kala Bhavan in Varanasi in 2017, and was finally presented in Zurich in 2018.²⁵ Alice Boner not only gifted her collection of Indian art to the Museum Rietberg; following her death, the

²¹ The exhibition in New York was titled *Wonder of the Age: Master Painters of India, 1100–1900*.

²² Beach et al., 2011.

²³ Beltz et al., 2004.

²⁴ Beltz and Kuratli, 2014.

²⁵ Cf. <https://www.dfae.admin.ch/countries/india/en/home/news/agenda.html>

museum also received her artistic estate, writings, library and photographic archive. The Rietberg thus holds virtually the entire estate of this extraordinary woman, who spent almost 40 years of her life in Varanasi. Boner was a particularly interesting subject for an Indo-Swiss exhibition project due to the fact that she was a mediator between India and the West at a time when India was reinventing itself. As an artist, collector, patron and scholar, she made a major contribution to a new understanding of Indian art in the first half of the 20th century. Among her many achievements, she founded the Alice Boner Institute in Varanasi, which remains a place of intercultural exchange and dialogue to this day.²⁶

The Museum Rietberg took a similar approach in 2013 when it was gifted a large collection of Indian musical instruments. The exhibition *Sculpted Sounds* in 2014 marked the beginning of several years of collaboration with a number of Indian museums and partners.²⁷ Marie Eve Celio-Scheurer, who at that time was an assistant curator at the Museum Rietberg, initiated a cooperative project with the Crafts Museum in New Delhi. New emphasis was placed on conducting systematic ethnological fieldwork in India and viewing historical archival materials, as very little information was available on the significance, use and production of sculptural banams (stringed instruments played by the Santal people). This collaboration led to a further exhibition project: in 2015 the exhibition *Cadence and Counterpoint: Documenting Santal Musical Traditions* was presented at the National Museum in New Delhi.²⁸ What made this exhibition particularly noteworthy was

countries/india/en/meta/agenda-swiss-indien-friendship/2017/september/exhibition--alice-boner-in-india--a-life-for-art (accessed 7 May 2020).

²⁶ Cf. https://rietberg.ch/en/linked/aliceboner_en (accessed 7 May 2020).

²⁷ Beltz and Celio-Scheurer, 2014.

²⁸ The project was generously supported by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (BAK), the Embassy of Switzerland in India, UNESCO, the Accentus Foundation (Elena Probst Fonds) and the Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all the sponsors and donors for their support; cf. Beltz et al., 2015; Beltz and Celio-Scheurer, 2019.

the fact that it was shown in India's most important museum, which had not previously paid much attention to this "marginal" theme – the cultural traditions of India's indigenous peoples.²⁹ The exhibition was all the more significant because around the same time, New Delhi's Crafts Museum was closed down as a permanent and prominent exhibition space devoted to this type of art.³⁰

Two other important cooperative projects should also be mentioned here. In 2018 the Museum Rietberg was the first museum in the world to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Archaeology and Museums in Pakistan. As a first gesture of friendship, the Peshawar Museum sent a monumental Buddha on loan to Zurich. Before this, the sculpture had never been allowed to leave the museum in Peshawar, let alone the country.³¹ This new partnership led the Museum Rietberg to turn its attention to a previously neglected art region, and the first successful initiative was soon followed by another project: in winter 2019, the Rietberg opened an exhibition with young Pakistani artists, who were invited to focus on and respond to works from the Swiss museum's collections. The exhibition was originally meant to be shown in Karachi too, but this proved impossible due to a delay in reimporting the works to Pakistan.³²

This list of initiatives concludes with a project that has not yet been implemented. In an exhibition scheduled to open in autumn 2020, the Museum Rietberg will present Japanese woodblock prints from its collection at the Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh. This is the first time the Rietberg is lending precious original artworks

²⁹ Cf. Khurana Suanshu, "Sacred Record. A collaborative project between Zurich's Museum Rietberg and Delhi's Crafts Museum documents the rare and distinctive musical traditions of the Santals", *The Indian Express*, 26 April 2015. <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/sacred-record/>.

³⁰ The exhibition was published online by the Google Cultural Institute as part of Google Arts & Culture, and is now accessible to all; see www.google.com/culturalinstitute (accessed 7 May 2020).

³¹ Cf. <https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/news/news.html/content/deza/en/meta/news-deza/2018/12/buddha-ausstellung> (accessed 7 May 2020).

³² Beltz et al., 2019.

to a museum in India. It is also the very first exhibition of Japanese Surimono art in India, and for this reason the show is attracting a lot of attention and media coverage in the country. This project represents a new step and it sends out a message that resonates far beyond the restitution debate, because it is about sharing and communicating our cultural heritage globally.³³

3.2 Cooperation in the area of professional training

The surimono exhibition will also be a pioneering project in terms of a new form of cooperation. As part of the project in Chandigarh, Martin Sollberger, the exhibition designer at the Museum Rietberg, will give an introductory course on exhibition design for a group of around 25 participants. The two museums are therefore taking this exhibition as an opportunity to launch a long-term training programme.

An exchange programme for assistant curators and interns is also among our objectives for the coming years. The Museum Rietberg gained first experience of this with the internship of Amrita Lahiri, who worked on the exhibition *Shiva Nataraja: The Cosmic Dancer* in 2008. Lahiri not only made her own artistic contribution to the exhibition; she also organised and looked after works presented by other participants. A large network has now been established in this area, and our aim is to extend this further. For several years, the Museum Rietberg has been working with the Alice Boner Institute in Varanasi, a place where scholars and artists from all over the world come together to work and enter into dialogue with local partners. I would also like to mention our collaboration with the company Green Barbet, whose director, Harsha Vinay, not only wrote an essay for the catalogue of the 2019 exhibition *Mirrors: The Reflected Self* at the Museum Rietberg, but also produced three documentary films that have gone on

³³ The announcement of the upcoming exhibition has drawn considerable media attention; cf. ‘Exhibition featuring Japanese woodblock prints in the works’, *Hindustan Times*, 30 October 2019; Gurnaaz Kaur, ‘Tale of two museums and few Japanese prints’, *Tribune*, 5 November 2019.

to achieve international success. These have been screened in Zurich, Mumbai, New Delhi and Heidelberg.

Desirable future developments include the regular and systematic exchange of specialists, as well as the provision of further education and training for experts. And, as outlined above, this should definitely to be understood as a two-way process. The massive reduction in professorships in Indology (in connection with chairs in Indian art history) that has taken place in Europe has led to a deplorable shortage of professionals in these fields. For this reason alone, future research must be transnational. Long-term exchange programmes for curators, scholars, art educators and art restorer-conservators have a lasting effect in both directions and will therefore play an important role for both sides.

3.3 Cooperation in the area of conservation

Collaboration also takes place in the context of measures to preserve cultural property. In connection with the spectacular loan of the Buddha sculpture from Peshawar, a workshop on stone conservation was organised in Islamabad, with valuable support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC); the workshop was led by the Swiss stone conservator Tobias Hotz, and representatives from museums all over Pakistan were invited to take part.³⁴ Although we at the Museum Rietberg have up to now mainly focussed on South Asia and India, our aim is to broaden our horizons. Since 2010, for example, we have maintained a cooperative relationship with the Palace Museum in Fumban, Cameroon, which is also concerned with the restoration and preservation of the royal collection.³⁵

I would, however, like to highlight the exemplary, long-standing cooperation that exists between the Museum Rietberg and Peru. Because it

³⁴ The SDC is Switzerland's international cooperation agency within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); cf. <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/dfa/dfa/organisation-dfa/directorates-divisions/sdc.html> (accessed 7 May 2020).

³⁵ Cf. Oberhofer, 2018 and https://rietberg.ch/en/linked/fumban_en (accessed 7 May 2020).

was in Peru that a collaborative project was set up to conserve the temple sculptures at Chavín de Huántar (a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985), in connection with the special exhibition *Chavín. Peru's Mysterious Temple in the Andes* at the Museum Rietberg. This was the world's first museum exhibition devoted to the "mother culture" of the Central Andes, and it was also shown at the Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI) in 2015, where it became a popular success. Rather than paying a lending fee to the Ministry of Culture of Peru, an agreement was reached whereby a conservation project in Peru would be implemented and funded for several years. This endeavour was funded in equal parts by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (BAK) and the Museum Rietberg. Between 2011 and 2015, this resulted not only in the full installation of a conservation and restoration workshop at the Museo Nacional de Chavín, but also in the expert conservation of numerous sculptures. As a fitting finale, the Tello Obelisk – an approximately two-metre-high sculpture of great national and international importance – was conserved in collaboration with Peruvian specialists and mounted on a new base. The Tello Obelisk is now the centrepiece of the permanent exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Chavín.³⁶

In 2017 a follow-up exhibition entitled *NASCA. PERU – Searching for Traces in the Desert* was shown in Zurich. This exhibition was part of a large-scale archaeological project in the desert plains between Nazca and Palpa on the south coast of Peru, in the context of which extensive restoration and conservation work was again carried out: from 1997 to 2006, the Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation for Archaeological Research Abroad (SLSA) funded a major archaeological research project on the Nazca Lines – a world-famous series of geoglyphs (ground drawings) – and their cultural significance.³⁷ This commitment led not only to the establishment of a first-rate local history museum in the small town of Palpa in 2004, with funding from Switzerland, but also to the most comprehensive international museum exhibition on Nasca to date: *NASCA. PERU – Searching for Traces in the Desert* was first shown

³⁶ Fux, 2012 and 2015.

³⁷ Cf. <http://www.slsa.ch/abgeschlossene-projekte/nasca-palpa/>

in 2017 at the Museo de Arte de Lima, and was attended by just under 90,000 visitors, setting a new record for the museum.³⁸

This list would not be complete, however, without two very different examples of projects where the Museum Rietberg was itself the recipient of conservation services. In the first case, an early Buddhist silk painting in the collection of the Museum Rietberg was restored with funding from the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, which is supported by the Japanese government.³⁹ The painting was taken to a Japanese workshop certified for the restoration of cultural treasures, where it was conserved and remounted over a period of two years (2006–2008). The cost of transporting the work to and from Japan was borne by the Museum Rietberg as the cooperation partner. Japan sees its role as protecting national cultural properties, irrespective of their location and current owner. The second example of an admirable cultural policy was the restoration of a painting: from 2017 to 2019, a 19th-century Korean Buddhist portrait of a priest was inspected and restored by experts in the workshop of the National Museum of Korea in Seoul.⁴⁰

3.4 Cooperation with diaspora communities

The role played by diaspora communities is frequently alluded to in the current debates on decolonisation and restitution. The argument is put forward that immigrants from the countries in which the collection holdings originated should be more directly addressed and invited to become partners in joint projects. This, too, is not exactly a new idea. Back in 2003, the Museum Rietberg was already collaborating with members of the Indian diaspora in Switzerland. As part of the exhibi-

³⁸ See Fux, 2011 and 2017.

³⁹ Amida Buddha with the bodhisattvas Seishi and Kannon, unknown artist, Japan, Muromachi period, mid 14th century, hanging scroll; ink, colour and gold on silk, Inv.-Nr. RJP 401.

⁴⁰ Portrait of the Zen Master Chupadang, unknown artist, Korea, Joseon dynasty, 19th century, Inv.-Nr. RKO 1; cf. Museum Rietberg Annual Report 2019.

tion *Ganesha: The god with an elephant's head*, the museum invited Hindus from all over Switzerland to celebrate the Ganesh Chaturthi festival on the museum grounds. A spectacular highlight of this event was the immersion of a Ganesha idol in Lake Zurich during the Long Night of the Zurich Museums. This first systematic contact was built upon in the large-scale exhibition *Hindu Zurich*, which was shown at the city's town hall. The involvement of Hindus living in Zurich was the guiding principle of this exhibition, and they contributed to a presentation of their religious community that included interviews, films, photographs and a selection of objects. An exhibition “about” Hindus in Zurich thus became an exhibition developed “with” representatives of the Zurich diaspora. The culmination of this project was undoubtedly the celebration of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, which was attended by hundreds of Hindus from all over Switzerland.⁴¹

This was not the only instance of this type of cooperation. In 2018, Swiss Buddhists were invited to collaborate with the Museum Rietberg on the exhibition *Next Stop Nirvana: Approaches to Buddhism*, and the 2019 exhibition *Congo as Fiction* was also a cooperative project involving young artists from Congo.⁴² The list could be continued with further opportunities for partnerships, for example with universities, but the intention here is not to simply outline or praise the Museum Rietberg's policy of cooperation. These specific examples have been provided in order to add a new aspect to the debate on decolonisation.

3.5 *Cooperation means taking and maintaining a firm stance*

The core message of this article is an appeal to museum directors, curators, art educators and restorer-conservators all over the world to initiate more projects with partner museums. Beyond the great debates and political negotiations on reparation, museums can communicate with one another in a relatively uncomplicated manner. They can face up to their past and try to shape a new, different future with new international partners. This does not even require bilateral agreements; above

⁴¹ Beltz, 2005.

⁴² Oberhofer and Guyer, 2019.

all, it requires highly motivated museum professionals on both sides. The question of who owns artworks is thereby less important than the questions of how we can better document all of our artworks and how we can share our knowledge – irrespective of geographical, cultural and linguistic borders.

4. LOOKING AHEAD

The arguments presented in this article can be summarised as follows:

1. While Swiss museums do not have their own colonial history, they nevertheless have close ties to the colonial era. Demands for decolonisation relate not only to ethnological museums, but also to museums of art and natural history. For the Museum Rietberg, decolonisation involves examining the history of its own collections, making this history transparent and highlighting possible links to colonialism.
2. In the same way that colonisation was a lengthy and far-reaching process, decolonisation did not end with liberation from foreign rule and the creation of nation states in the 20th century. This raises the question of whether – and to what extent – “colonial” categories, epistemologies and power imbalances can be overcome within the scope of museum practice. For one thing, museums are the result of the history of science and scholarship in the West; their categories and ordering principles are therefore inseparably linked to Western epistemology. For another, access to collections, research, publications, prestigious jobs and financial resources is still firmly in the hands of Western educational establishments. Although all of the major European and North American museums today consider themselves to be universal museums and global agents, the question remains as to whether the exhibitions they produce – in other words, the value created and the knowledge generated – are actually “postcolonial”. Decolonisation above all relates to political processes and the redistribution of resources and profits. How can we prevent “cooperation” and “decolonisation” from becoming nothing but empty phrases? The current debate on the colonial context of collections and provenance research in European

museums seems to be largely self-referential and tends to avoid radical criticism of current asymmetries of power.⁴³

3. Above all, therefore, decolonisation in museums means implementing sustained international cooperative programmes and initiatives between European museums and the countries of origin. This still seems to be the area with the greatest need for improvement and action. Long-term funding and resources must be generated with the aid of foundations and sponsors in order to initiate cooperative projects, but also to maintain them. Low-threshold access to these funds is required, as cooperative projects in smaller museums can fail due to a lack of resources and the associated administrative requirements.

4. A rethink is urgently required on the part of museum directors, who must orient their institutions towards the urgent need for cooperation. The occupational profile of curators and art educators must also be adapted accordingly. Finally, the (unfortunately often weak) national museum associations, and first and foremost ICOM, must commit to this objective. Otherwise there is a risk that the concept of cooperation is limited to a purely academic debate on the postcolonial museum, restitution and communities, and ends up being a neocolonial metaphor.

To reiterate: the Museum Rietberg is committed to cooperating with the countries of origin (but also with other interest groups) because it sees itself as a museum of non-European art. Cooperation is thus firmly anchored in the museum's programmatic strategy, and is not an attempt to make reparation to third parties or agents. Even if the idea of a universal cultural heritage remains utopian, we feel a responsibility to uphold and promote this stance.

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⁴³ Weber-Sinn and Ivanov, 2020, pp. 73–76.

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