

NUMBER

1

## MUSEUM RIETBERG

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A DISCUSSION ON THE MUSEUM INSTITUTION  
AND ITS COLLECTION

WHO  
WHAT  
WHERE  
WHEN  
HOW

A Project for Museum Rietberg

EDITED BY

De Piccoli Léa, Yang Xiaoyu (Vivian), Alves Nunes Köppel Camilla,  
Oberholzer Laura, Rothstein Anna, Züst Romina



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**ZÜRICH**

**2023**



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## A NOTE ON THE BOOK

The last forty years have been a great success for museums and for museum architects. Never have so many of these institutions been constructed in so many different places. Their popularity reflects the global expansion of tourism and the pressure for cities and towns to develop their attractions. The financialization of art has meant that as collectors and their collections have immeasurably expanded, so too must the provision of museums.

In Zürich, the Rietberg Museum is one of the witnesses to this phenomenon, transformed and renovated by Grazioli and Krischanitz in 2007. Whilst museum extensions are always sold as being about making more of the collection accessible to a wider public, thanks to the support of generous benefactors. In reality, these generous benefactors often conceal a problem in the museum's neutrality and transparency about their exhibits, their funds, their underlying structures. Radical social change movements kept emerging around the globe those past years : Amnesty International, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Women's Rights Movements, Climate Strikes... Art and culture couldn't get past the critics and necessarily, also come under fire. In the last decade the critique of these platitudes has intensified.

While the museum has the power to change many things in our society, it seems incapable of doing so these days. Instead, it seems to be an institution that seeks to maintain the power system in place. Very often, the image of the museum as an inclusive cultural public space is fictitious, concealing a space dominated by the ongoing elitism of its employees and audience. Museums remain structures that bear witness to existing wealth disparities, mirrors of colonialism and the exclusion of historically marginalized groups. Their exhibitions are often racist and sexist, and the infamous origins of their collections do nothing to improve their image. Museums themselves have acknowledged that things must change. Museum Rietberg (unfortunately for the institution) is no exception to this complete rethinking and won't be able to avoid it if it wants to continue attracting audiences.

Why is this important to raise up those questions and problems ?

Protests hope to undo this system in place. An undoing and redoing process of those society structure, through cultural space and museums, would help them becoming better spaces for more people but would also map ways to make change

in society at large. There's something inherent in the act of protesting: taking a stand. In this sense, the neutral stance taken by museums and cultural space is not enough to move the system. We need to face this concealed and illusory neutrality. We believe that cultural spaces and museums should be spaces calling for diversity, equity, inclusion. Unfortunately, these unseen and unregistered structures (operations and governance, curatorial choices, treatment of staff) that privilege those of specific class, race, educational, and social backgrounds doesn't allow any diverts or equity. At the moment, the neutrality position that art spaces are taking towards their collections and exhibition, their refusal to take a clear political stand, doesn't allow this inclusion we're all seeking for.

So what can we do about a problem like museums ? What can Museum Rietberg do to solve the underlying problem of its collection ?

Blowing Rietberg up and start everything again wouldn't be a sustainable solution and probably wouldn't change the inherent problem of the institution and its structure. Confronting historical problems is always more productive than erasing them, especially since you can't erase them.

We also don't know, what is the perfect solution. It will probably take years to transform those institutions. We are non-art professionals, we are students, whose work is usually excluded or underrepresented in the officials words or art. We are people who would like to learn how difficult social uses can be investigated and presented through artistic means. We're not losing hope in the idea that things can still change and that art has enormous potential to shift society.

In this book, we're embarking on a major research program about Museum Rietberg, we closely engage with the museum, we participate as visitors in their exhibitions and programmes, take a closer look at their collection, the way they stage it, and talk to the people who run them. We'll be looking at how the Rietberg Museum operates today, but also at its past, in order to understand how the museum has developed and evolved over the years, and to pave the way for a transformation and restructuring of the institution.

Guided by past disruptors in the art world : Group Material (1979-96), and through different texts and references, our aim is to question how the museum and its collections could more closely reflect and engage with the societies that they are a part of - with the community of Zurich in 2023, and open a way to proposals to 'hack' both the organisation as well as the architecture of the museum, in order to make these spaces places of diversity, inclusion and diversity.



Group Material statement





**INSTITUTION**

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*not-for-profit, service of*  
*society researches, collects, conserves, interprets exhibits*  
*inclusive, heritage. public, accessible*  
*of communities, diversity sustainability. participation*  
*reflection knowledge sharing. education, enjoyment,*

Museum definition, ICOM, 2022

## INSTITUTION

To read, decipher and understand the museum is also to question its definition and role in society. In Prague, on 24 August 2022, the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM has approved the proposal for the new museum definition with 92,41% (For: 487, Against: 23, Abstention: 17). Following the adoption, the new ICOM museum definition is:

*A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.*

Who is museum Rietberg and who are its audience ? What is museum Rietberg's project ? Where is museum Rietberg ? When is museum Rietberg open ? Why was museum Rietberg organized ? How does museum Rietberg plan to implement its work ? What is museum Rietberg's society ? What do museum Rietberg researches, collects, interprets, exhibits ? Is museum Rietberg accessible, inclusive, diverse, sustainable ? Does museum Rietberg communicate ethically, professionally, with the participation of communities ? Does museum Rietberg provides experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing ?

We'll try to take a closer look at the Rietberg institution, the people working there, its audience, its project and its location. But also how does museum Rietberg implement its work nowadays. Museum Rietberg is composed of 2 directors, 1 executive board (7 people), 1 administration (6 people), 19 curators, 6 different departments (collection services, art & education, marketing and communication, events, design, facility management), 1 shop and 1 café. This public museum is located in Zürich's largest and most impressive public park, on the shores of the lake. The ensemble is composed of 3 historical villas, monumental architecture dating from the 19th century, a contemporary Emerald extension by Krischanitz/ Grazioli Architects, century-old trees and statues scattered in many places in the park. Museum Rietberg is open from tuesday till sunday, from 10am till 5pm, and exceptionally till 8pm on wednesdays. The ensemble seems rather idyllic and beautiful at first sight. As we enter the park and begin our ascent towards the museum, the arrangement of the trees is giving us a glimpse of a few statues and a piece of the building's facade. As we take the stairs, we gradually discover a

building with character, blending perfectly into the landscape. The relationship between architecture and garden seems perfectly mastered, with the Rietberg Museum helping to define the character of the park and our perception of it, and vice versa. This relationship is all the stronger when visitors arrive by the path, in front of the building's majestic southern façade. Rieter Park plays a big role in the public spaces of the city. It is the biggest park in Zürich with 70'000 square meters. Rather busy, it is a popular and pleasant place for the locals to visit, take a walk with your dog, read a book on a bench, admire the view of the lake, drink a coffee or eat in the museum's café, and it plays an important role for the museum's ensemble. Museum Rietberg was founded to promote cultural diversity, preserve art and heritage, and engage with both local and global communities through its exhibitions, educational programs, and cultural connections.

According to their website, the museum's mission is as follows :

*„The work of the Museum Rietberg is characterized by a high degree of professionalism, social inclusion, and diversity, and seeks to engage both a domestic and an international audience.*

*Testimony to the City of Zurich's links with the cultures of the world, the Museum aims to heighten awareness of the artistic achievements of individuals as well as of religious and social diversity. In so doing, it fulfills an important cultural mission in our increasingly globalized world.*

*The first-rate collections of international renown is the foundation for all the Museum's activities and accounts for the institution's reputation. The collections require expert care, continuous academic study, including provenance research, while being actively expanded and managed. The Museum ensures transparency with the results of its research that are largely to be made available online.*

*The Museum Rietberg has local and international connections with cultural institutions, collectors, and specialists in a variety of fields. In its interactions with countries of origin, it pursues a policy of long-term cooperation, for instance with Cameroon, India, Pakistan, and Peru.*

*Its greatest public impact is seen in large visitor numbers, an international reputation, and appeal as a tourist destination; these are achieved through the two or three in-depth exhibitions that it curates each year in addition to three or four smaller documentary exhibitions that draw on the museum's own holdings. Its temporary exhibitions are either organized in-house or in international*



Museum Rietberg, South Facade, 2023

*collaboration with institutions in the respective countries of origin. These exhibitions promote the status of non-European cultures and the concept of tolerance, and thus signal the cosmopolitan nature of Zurich.*

*The Museum's Art Education Department offers a wide range of year-round educational and leisure-time activities involving guided tours, lectures, workshops etc., for the general public (local residents, tourists), for groups (schools, courses) and for specialists, students, and teachers.*

*One of the Museum's duties is to maintain the unique and preservation-worthy Rietberg ensemble, which represents a blend of non-European art (exhibitions and museum), local history (Villa Wesendonck with outbuilding, Park-Villa Rieter, Villa Schönberg), contemporary architecture (Emerald extension by Krischanitz/Grazioli Architects, and Shigeru Ban's Summer Pavilion), and a park.*

*Other efficient features of the Museum include studios for children, adolescents, and adults, an original Japanese tearoom, a reference library, general public spaces, a café, a shop, a restoration workshop, and a photo lab."*



Museum Rietberg and Rieter Park entrance, 2023

On its website again, the museum provides the following information on the activities it offers and how it implements its work :

### *Collections*

The Museum Rietberg is Switzerland's only museum for non-European art. Its internationally renowned collections are home to important works from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Oceania. The Museum Rietberg has some 23,000 objects and 44,000 photographs in its collections. Most of the objects are on public display, either in the museum's galleries or in its open storeroom. Objects collected by Eduard von der Heydt form the heart of a collection that continues to grow thanks to long-standing contacts with notable collectors, and thanks also to foundations and patrons as well as through purchases, donations, and bequests. Among the museum's highlights are Chinese porcelain from the Meiyintang Collection, Indian miniature paintings from the Alice Boner Collection, and Himalayan Buddhist art from the Berti Aschmann collection.

### *Conservation and restauration*

The collections at the Museum Rietberg comprise works of very diverse materials, some of them thousands of years old. Preserving them and preparing them for display in the museum or for national and international loans, is one of key tasks of the The work on collection pieces and new acquisitions aims at preserving a work's substance while, at the same time, ensuring its readability and saving information on the object. Special attention is given to what is called preventive

conservation. Here the task is to identify and minimize risks through suitable measures. Providing a stable and save environment during display and in the storage spaces is of primary significance. In connection with temporary exhibitions, the staff of the Conservation & Restoration Department is charged with providing optimal protection for the exhibits, constructing suitable mounts for display, and guaranteeing safe transport for the objects; this includes the conservational care of loans from all over the world. Last but not least, in the context of international cooperation projects the curatorial board relies on the expertise of the museum's conservation and restoration specialists in the respective works' country of origin in terms of knowledge exchange and the building of mutual trust.

### *Education*

The Museum Rietberg offers lots of opportunities for schools, kindergartens, day-care centres, and teachers to learn about the cultures of countries and regions beyond Europe. The museum's varied educational programme combines learning and adventure.

### *Research*

The study of the world's artists and their works sharpens our understanding of the specific cultural and historical contexts in which art is produced. Provenance research and projects such as that on the German art anthropologist Hans Himmelheber address the history of collecting and acquisitions. The museum is also involved in archaeological research undertaken abroad by SLSA as well as through publication of its journal on the art of Asia, *Artibus Asiae*.

### *Library*

Far from the hustle and bustle of the city, the Villa Schönberg houses the library of the Museum Rietberg. Set in a tranquil park surrounded by magnificent old trees, the library's holdings take users on a journey through time to distant cultures and allows them to enhance their knowledge acquired in the museum's exhibitions and events.

### *Connected*

Cooperation and face-to-face communication with partners in the countries where the museum's collections originate are essential for a museum of non-European art. The Museum Rietberg has a long history of cooperating with cultural institutions and specialists at home and abroad. Among its activities are projects to ensure the preservation of cultural heritage in Cameroon and Peru; the provision of funds for art and cultural centres in Côte d'Ivoire and India; and networking with Pakistan. The museum promotes exchange in the education and leisure sectors with a project called 'Understanding Religion through Art'.

### *Membership*

Fond of the arts? Enjoy travelling? Interested in the cultures of other parts of the world? Then a membership of the Rietberg Society is just the thing for you! We help you discover art from other parts of the world in a way no other museum can. By becoming a member, you will be supporting the museum's work, and can enjoy exclusive benefits such as seeing what goes on behind the scenes, and having access to our events at reduced rates.

### *Travel*

As a member of the Rietberg Society, you can register to join a Rietberg tour. Either a day-long excursion or a trip with a cultural focus over several days, a Rietberg tour offers you an in-depth look at select topics featured in our exhibitions. These tours are planned and accompanied by our curators in collaboration with professional tour operators. Previous tours have visited Peru to examine Nazca culture; Varanasi in India on the trail of the Swiss artist Alice Boner; and China with a focus on its Buddhist art. The number of places on each tour is limited. Early booking is therefore recommended as places are allocated in order of receipt of registrations. For details about each itinerary and how to register, please phone our office on: +41 44 415 31 23.

Looking at the museum's activities as presented on their website, it seems that the Rietberg Museum is a place that claims to be rather open to the public, be it locals, tourists, specialists or students. It also seems to be fulfilling its curatorial and research role, having recently initiated discussions on the origins of its collection and presenting it in a "transparent" way via its "Pathways of Art, How Objects Get to the Museum" exhibition. But when it comes to museums, as we mentioned it before, it seems inevitable that this vision and this information should be put back on the table.

Who frequents the park, who frequents the café and who frequents the museum? Who runs the museum, who work in the museum? Who runs the café and who work in the café? Are Rieterpark and the Rietberg Museum really accessible to everyone? Are the Zurich residents who visit the flea market at Bäckeranlage or the Zentral Wäscherei the same people who visit Rieter Park and the Rietberg Museum? How diverse and inclusive is the Rietberg Museum? How transparent is the museum concerning its collection and finally how is this exhibition „Pathways of Art“ structured?

We think it's important not to stop at the facade, but to try and understand the





Museum Rietberg, café entrance and terrace, 2023

invisible, hidden inner structures of the institution, which we were talking about earlier. So it seems essential to us not to take a naive, but rather a critical look at the situation of the museum, its accessibility today, and its organization. That's why we're going to look at the question of inclusion, diversity and neutrality.

































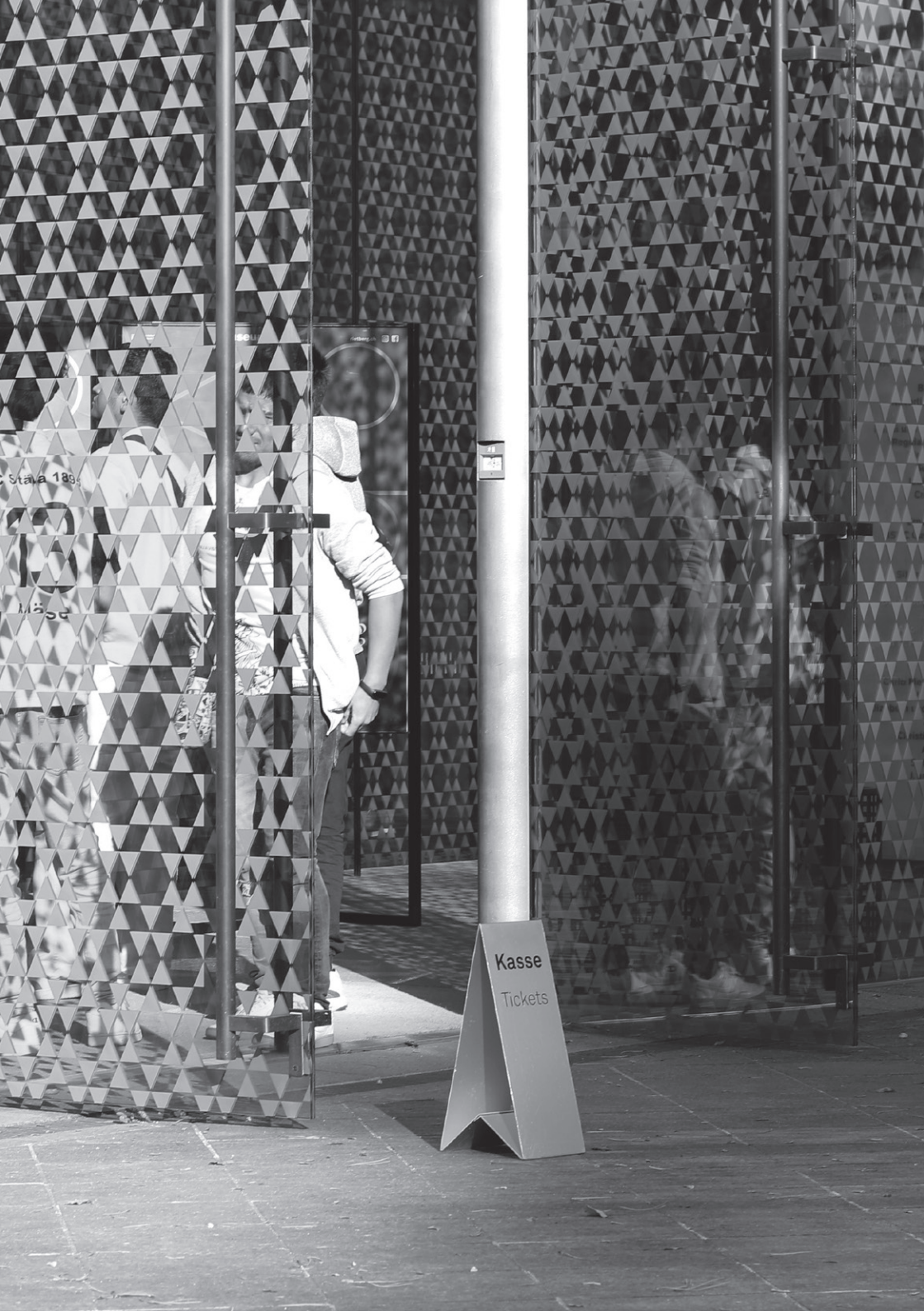












Stava 1896

10  
Masse

1896

Kasse  
Tickets











Haben Sie Lust auf eine Weltreise, die Sie aus der Enge in Zürich wie der Blitz nach Abidjan, Kuala Lumpur und an den Gelben Fluss entführt? Sind Sie fasziniert vom gleichmütigen Lächeln des Buddha? Lieben Sie es, an einem tristen Wintertag mit Ihren Augen durch die alten Vergnügungsviertel von Tokyo zu schlendern? Interessiert es Sie, weshalb der göttliche Tänzer Shiva die Welt erschafft und zugleich zerstört? Macht es Ihnen Vergnügen, einmal etwas Spezielles zu unternehmen, z. B. einen Vortrag einer Professorin aus Oxford über den Humor in der indischen Kunst zu besuchen? Wollten Sie nicht schon lange wieder einmal im schönsten Park von Zürich spazieren, einen Tee im hellen Wintergarten der Villa Wesendonck trinken und Ihrem Lieblingskunstwerk Guten Tag sagen? **Werden Sie Mitglied der Rietberg-Gesellschaft.** Verschaffen Sie sich freien Eintritt zur Weltkunst.

**Museum Rietberg Zürich**

## DIVERSITY, INCLUSION

*However, there are many structures, from operations and governance, to curatorial choices, and the treatment of staff, that undergird these selections, and the ways in which they are presented and interpreted by the museum, that are directly oppositional to any desire for diversity and inclusion. The problem lies in the fact that these structures are unseen and unregistered, and that they undeniably privilege those of specific class, race, educational, and social backgrounds. If we truly want to undo barriers to inclusion, we must face this false neutrality and dismantle it.*

*Over the past several years, protests have erupted regularly around how museums are funded, how they are organized, what they show and how, who holds power within their structures, and how they reflect, or fail to reflect, a whole diversity of identities.*

*I believe we must be able to identify the biases of our museums, to understand the worldviews they both promote and marginalize, and to interrogate these ways of being, working, organizing, and making culture.*

Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest*, 2021

We have drawn on a number of texts, including Laura Raicovich's work *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest*. Until early 2018, she served as President and Executive Director of the Queens Museum where she oversaw an inviting and vital commons for art, ideas, and engagement. Her book, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* addresses the ways in which museums and cultural institutions can become better spaces for more people.

The question is : Is Museum Rietberg a space of inclusion, diversity ? Just take a look at the website and its membership section, and you'll see that the museum world is still reserved for a certain segment of the population. What's more, the term "The Rietberg's Society" seems more exclusive than inclusive. The price of membership is still very high, and so are the activities on offer, such as trips. It seems quite clear that the museum is not an inclusive place, accessible to everyone. Especially when the price of their next trip in Japan is 11'200.-. In the next chapter, we'll look closer at how the Rietberg Museum was founded, and who provided the works it contains. As Laura Raicovich explains, the creation of museums is closely linked to a policy of colonial capitalism: *From these very early days, the franchise*

*of the museum, as well as its reliance on entrance fees and the need to attract a broad swath of the (largely white, educated) populace, marked its relationship to capitalism. In reality, the idea of making available to the public an experience of education, relaxation, reflection and the sharing of knowledge, is only possible for people who can afford to pay admission.*

For the question of inclusion, we can also look at the European way of dealing with works of art and the way in which the point of view of the oppressed people, from whom the objects were often acquired, is recognized or shown. In fact, a museum that seems inclusive to our Swiss vision, is not at all so to someone whose objects belong to their country of origin. This question of universality is closely linked to the issue of neutrality, which we'll be developing shortly.

# RIETBERG SOCIETY

The Museum Rietberg's association of friends is open to everyone interested in art and culture. Network with over 4,000 members and see what goes on behind the scenes in the museum. In exclusive events, you will be the first to see new exhibitions and experience them in the company of their curators. Membership offers a host of other benefits.

Sign up for a 2024 membership now and we'll give you the remaining months of the current year for free.

**Life membership**  
CHF 2,000 (single payment)  
**Supporting member**  
CHF 150 (annual fee)  
**Membership for two**  
CHF 120 (annual fee)  
**Regular membership**  
CHF 80 (annual fee)  
**Junior membership (25 and under)**  
CHF 10 (annual fee)

## Membership Rietberg Society

Fond of the arts? Enjoy travelling? Interested in the cultures of other parts of the world? Then a membership of the Rietberg Society is just the thing for you! We help you discover art from other parts of the world in a way no other museum can. By becoming a member, you will be supporting the museum's work, and can enjoy exclusive benefits such as seeing what goes on behind the scenes, and having access to our events at reduced rates.

































WURL

INSERT  
Ball Battery  
Singer  
Rover  
Wurlitzer

ABCDEF  
GHI



- Where did you get all this stuff?





- Oh, here and there.





WURLITZ



- You stole them ?





- Heavens, no. Stealing implies ownership.





WURLITZER





- God, if they ever find this place...





- I suspect if they do, a few bits of art will be the least of my worries.





- You mean, after what you've done.

*Authority allows two roles: the torturer and the tortured. Twists people into joyless mannequins that fear and hate, while culture plunges into the abyss.*

*V for Vendetta, 2006*

The reference may seem a little ironic, but what's it all about? "V for Vendetta" was released in 2005 and directed by James McTeigue. The movie is set in a dystopian future where the United Kingdom has become a totalitarian state known as Norsefire. The government has imposed strict control over its citizens, including surveillance, censorship, and the suppression of any dissenting voices. The story follows a masked and enigmatic vigilante known as "V" (played by Hugo Weaving), who wears a Guy Fawkes mask and is determined to bring down the oppressive regime. V's actions are centered around acts of terrorism and symbolic acts of rebellion against the government. His signature move is blowing up the Old Bailey, an iconic London landmark, and he plans to culminate his campaign on November 5th, the date of the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605, in which Guy Fawkes attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament. Evey Hammond (played by Natalie Portman) is a young woman who crosses paths with V and becomes involved in his campaign. Evey undergoes a transformation as she experiences life under the oppressive regime and learns about V's motivations and ideals.

The film explores themes of totalitarianism, fascism, political oppression, and the power of symbols and ideas. It also delves into questions about the ethics of political violence and the idea that an individual can inspire a revolution through acts of defiance. In the film, V is portrayed more as a hero fighting for freedom and justice. Its iconic use of the Guy Fawkes mask as a symbol of resistance.

In this scene, Evey wakes up in V's apartment and discovers the place where he lives: "The Shadow Gallery". Shadow Gallery is the vast secret lair established by V from which he coordinates his campaign against the government. Pushing open the door, she finds herself in a room filled with works of art from different origins and probably different eras. During her discussion with V, she asks him where these objects come from. It seems obvious that these objects have been stolen.

V then takes a position that seems interesting when talking about museums : Stealing implies ownership. If this cinematic reference is a little sarcastic, we have almost the same experience and reaction when we arrive in the open storeroom. The room is dark, the lights come on automatically as soon as you approach the door, and as you move through the room, you discover an infinite collection of objects

behind the glass. Ultimately, it's a concept linked to the problem of neutrality in museums, and particularly in the Rietberg Museum and the origin of its objects. Most of the objects in "Pathways of Art : How Objects Get to the Museum" have been donated and collected over the years by the institution. However, as we shall see, these objects have a provenance and a history that is not neutral. Indeed, they bear witness to Switzerland's colonial history and the role of colonization in non-European art collections. After all, these few works of art don't amount to much, if you put them in the context of all the horrors that colonizing countries have done in their colonies. That's almost the least of their worries, and this is all the more obvious when we look at the exhibition and the way the museum attempts to provide information on the provenance of the objects it holds.

*Stealing implies ownership.*

SWITZERLAND IS  
NOT INNOCENT  
IN RELATION TO  
KOLONIALISM &  
II WORLD WAR,  
RACISM IS STILL  
STRONG NOWADAYS.  
fax! facts

Museum Rietberg's visitors reaction, Pathways of Art : Pathways of Art : How Objects Get to the Museum, 2023



## NEUTRALITY

To go further, we can return to the question of the museum and its definition according to ICOM:

*A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.*

It's true that the Rietberg Museum meets all the criteria of this definition. However, we feel it is important to understand why the art world has been so criticized in recent years. We think it's important to consider not only the question of non-profit status, but also what this status implies for museums and their political positioning in society, particularly the question of their neutrality. Indeed, the Rietberg Museum uses words such as: social inclusion, diversity, transparency, international renown, provenance research, cosmopolitan nature of Zurich, general public, students, unique, preservation-worthy. However, we don't think these terms are sufficient to really understand the museum's problems and we feel that this is hardly representative of reality. In her text, Laura Raicovich takes an interesting look at the institution and position of museums :

*I believed that as a cultural space reflecting our collective values that we could not remain "neutral," especially as the very foundations of democracy seemed to be crumbling around us. Neutrality, in fact, is not at all neutral; rather, to paraphrase the South African anti-apartheid leader Desmond Tutu, it is a position in and of itself that supports the status quo. And given how the museum had always knew the realities that confronted us could not be met with indifference.*

What is neutrality ?

### ***neutrality***

1. the state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict, disagreement, etc.; impartiality.
2. absence of decided views, expression, or strong feeling.

Why are museum neutral ?

Laura Raicovich believes that one of the keys to understanding the problem of museum neutrality lies in their status as non-for-profit institutions :

*And even still, there is a common misperception of what non-profit, tax-exempt status means, particularly as it pertains to remaining “neutral”; it is consistently held, by trustees and staff alike, that there are limits on what kinds of opinions institutions might express in order to protect their tax-exempt status. (Raicovich, 2023)*

*In fact, there are only two things that by statute non-profits may not do without jeopardizing their status: 1) they may not campaign or lobby for or against an individual candidate for office, and 2) they may not campaign for or against a particular piece of legislation. (Raicovich, 2023)*

Now, when we look at the Rietberg, it seems rather obvious that the question of neutrality comes into play. Indeed, the museum seems to be opening up an interesting avenue on the question of the origin of its works and restitution. But when we delve into the exhibition „Pathways of Art, How Objects Get to the Museum“ and the texts, the museum’s point of view seems rather neutral. We learn very little about the origins of the various works of art. Access to the Schaudapot doesn’t seem to tell us much either, especially as the information QR codes don’t work.

*Further, the problem with neutrality as a claim for a museum is that it fundamentally neutralizes any criticism, dissent, or alternate history that it might present, which contradicts its very claims to education and free and open exchanges of ideas, as we will see enacted in forthcoming chapters. (Raicovich, 2023)*

The issue is rather complex, as it seems easy enough to blame the museum for its exhibition and position, while it seems to be taking a step towards opening up discussion. This was already the case in 2018-2019, during the exhibition The Question of Provenance, Unwrapping Collection History. The museum declared: *In 1998, 44 states adopted the ‘Washington Principles’. These formulate ‘just and fair solutions’ for the return of artworks stolen or Introduction 7 sold under coercion during the Nazi rule of 1933 to 1945. Ten years ago, the Museum Rietberg initiated a project that aimed to examine more precisely the various provenances of the collection of Eduard von der Heydt, founder of the museum’s collection.*

*Among the 1,600 objects, four were identified as having been auctioned off by the Jewish owners as a result of Nazi persecution. [...] No doubt, the current discourse around the world's cultural heritage has properly got underway due to new media and technologies: the internet, digitalisation and communication capabilities. However, behind this lie the great themes of decolonisation, decentralisation and globalisation. As a result, museum collections have attracted public attention. In order to understand this discourse, we need insight into the complex contexts whereby cultural goods were transferred historically, as well as sensitivity towards the various interpretations of the law, and an awareness of the prevailing issues of cultural identity. Historical justice can be promoted through the telling of objects' stories, through a culture of memory and transparent teaching. This intervention in the collection contributes to this process.*

Admittedly, with these steps taken over several years, the museum is opening a door to the debate on provenance and restitution. But why does it seem to justify itself when it talks about Eduard von der Heydt, founder of the museum's collection? The expression of a "unique art linking all cultures and peoples" or the result of an opportunist's fortune?

We visited the exhibition several times, and also read the texts presenting the various objects. We note the effort made to explain the history of the objects a little better, but this remains very much on the surface. The explanations are simply descriptions. Here is for example the kind of sentences we can read in the exhibition's booklet :

*„The art dealer Emil Storrer shaped the museum's Africa collection like no other. He sat on its acquisitions committee for three decades and arranged for more than 120 artworks, including now iconic pieces, to come to the museum. His annual buying trips to the Côte d'Ivoire were the source for his collection and the holdings of his gallery. From Zurich, he sold to international clients, including other galleries such as the renowned gallery of Charles Ratton as well as to private art collectors in the United States such as Nelson A. Rockefeller.“*

*„When the Nigerian ambassador spoke at the opening of the 1989 exhibition Benin at the Museum Rietberg, he emphasized the Swiss alliance with Nigeria resulting from economic, social, and cultural connections. He also addressed the history of the kingdom, mentioning the centuries of peaceful relations with Portugal, the Dutch, and the French which lasted until the Africa conference in Berlin in 1885 restricted the kingdom's independence, and it ultimately became a British colony.“*

We learn a few things, but not that many. Nor is the question of the ambiguity surrounding objects collected in a colonial context, and therefore in the context of relations of domination benefiting Western collectors, avoided. While the exhibition does not seek to provide a single answer, it does set out the terms of the debate for its visitors, and suggests a number of avenues for reflection, notably through collaborative projects such as the Benin-Switzerland Initiative. What's more, notions of colonialism are barely mentioned. And if we go back to the notion of neutrality :

1. the state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict, disagreement
2. absence of decided views, expression, or strong feeling.

We can only confirm Laura Raicovich's words. The Museum Rietberg is not taking a clear stand. We can only confirm Laura Raicovich's words. As we'll see shortly, these surface visions and descriptions of the origins of objects make the history of these objects universal, when in fact they are not. Universality is at the root of neutrality, and this is maintained at the Rietberg Museum.





Protest Black Lives Matter, Geneva, Switzerland, 2020

Colonialism has shaped our understanding of non-European cultures. European concept of art influences how we interpret these art pieces. To truly understand these cultures, recognition of this colonial bias has to happen.

Museum Rietberg's visitors reaction, Pathways of Art : Pathways of Art : How Objects Get to the Museum, 2023

## UNIVERSALITY

*In fact, the Enlightenment idea of universal man, and subsequent reification via modernism, lies at the core of the emergence of the myth of neutrality in museums.*

Laura Raicovich, Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest, 2021

When it comes to neutrality, it seems impossible to ignore the question of universality. Another interesting issue in the idea of diversity and inclusion, particularly at the Rietberg Museum, is the question of the universality of art, which poses a major problem. This notion of universality, which can be traced back to the Enlightenment, is also linked to the problem of museum neutrality, as we'll see later. The vision of art we have in our museums is often, in fact, a white supremacist vision, European power, Euro-American power, that's being enacted there in the name of the universal. The objects we look at at the Rietberg are objects that are in a country to which they don't belong :

*This can be identified in many institutions via the physical installation of the works, the histories of their acquisition, and why and how they came to be sited within a particular museum. This is where histories of colonization and exploitation become part of the present lived experience of a visitor in the gallery. Realizations about which side of the exploitation equation your personal history lands on will often surface big realities; suddenly the museum doesn't seem quite so universal anymore. Or, perhaps more poignantly: this definition of the universal does not include you. When this moment occurs, that universality reveals itself as a mirage. Esche observes: "The museum is built on a lie. It's built on a universality that comes from a highly specific identity that is white, male, heterosexual, ableist, highly educated, wealthy, and so on." (Raicovich, 2023)*

In fact, it seems that this question of universality in discourse poses a problem, because we're trying to put together two different histories, which in fact have not been experienced in the same way by everyone. In all their discourse, museums use the "we", but who is this "we"? Museums claim to be inclusive and universal places, they use the "we", but the "we" has always been this vision of the West. Oppressed people and minorities have never been part of the discours, and today we're pretending to include them. Universality has the destructing power to reduce all history to something identical for everyone. As if the way museums tell the story and the provenance of objects were the truth. In reality, it's a lie: it's simply the way we see the subject. We don't know what other people's vision is,

we just explain it vaguely. In a way, to keep these objects and pass on their history through this spectre of universality and neutrality is to maintain part of the history of colonialism. It means leaving aside the experience of oppressed peoples. It's keeping alive the ghosts of colonial history. Not to take a stand is to support the status quo. This question of universality leads us directly to the history of the Rietberg Museum, the "ars-una", its past and how it mirrors the institution it is today.



*If in the 'our', 'we' and 'together', the museum Institution is also including the non-white people, there is a fundamental problem with 'moving ahead' from our 'colonial baggage'. If the museum Institution wants non-white people to see beyond the 'ghosts' of the colonial past. I must say, for the ghosts to appear colonialism must die first. It might have died in the west, but not for me, not for the millions of people like me spread across the globe who are dealing with an 'alive' colonial monster in our lived experiences with museum Institutions.*

Debasish Borah - lie to me like one of your French museums



**MIRROR**

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I must say the exhibition  
got me thinking more  
about the origin of art  
and how a museum comes  
to own a piece. I think  
most collectors are indeed  
white rich men who belong  
to the colonizers country.  
ART SHOULD BE WHERE IT WAS  
BORN

Museum Rietberg's visitors reaction, Pathways of Art : Pathways of Art : How Objects Get to the Museum, 2023



## MIRROR

### *Mirror*

A person or thing embodying a feature or characteristic deserving imitation; a pattern; an exemplar.

Museum Rietberg currently houses approximately 23,000 objects and 44,000 photographs from all over the world in its collection. The presence of the cultural objects in a museum in Zürich brings forth a lot of questions: where did they come from? How did they end up in Museum Rietberg? What are the stories behind these objects?

Most of the artefacts currently housed in Museum Rietberg come from the continents of Asia and Africa. Many of these objects hold important cultural value and are significant to the cultural heritage of the countries and regions of origin. Unfortunately, most of these objects are likely to have been taken from the people to which they belonged by force through atrocities throughout history. Many European countries have a long history with colonialism; they have committed despicable crimes in many countries and kept their cultural objects as trophies of their conquests. They not only took important cultural relics and artworks, but also objects from the daily lives of the people so that they can dehumanise their existences and display their lives as something to ogle. It has taken European countries a long time to admit their faults: it took over 100 years for the Federal Republic of Germany to accept and apologize to the Hereros, people from the South-West of Africa (present-day Namibia) who were victims of a genocide by poisoning, deportations, enforced labour, and even death through resisting the German Colonial Law of 1904 (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). Italy has finally apologised in 2008 to Libya for inflicting “deep wounds” on the people during the years between 1911-1943 after 40 years of bitter relations. Recently, on 7 June 2023 the Dutch king openly apologised for the Netherlands’ role in slavery. However we are still not even close to settling Europe’s colonial past. Many countries still have a hard time facing the pain that they have inflicted on people. Belgium still has not apologised for its exploitation of the Congo between 1884 and 1908, which led to the death of millions of people. In some cases apologies might not even be possible as the victims were eradicated and do not exist anymore.

But how is the topic of colonialism linked to Museum Rietberg? Regarding Museum Rietberg, most of its collection was donated by patrons and Switzerland has never had any colonies of their own. Does that mean that the history of the

artefacts and colonialism are separate from the history of Switzerland? Are they merely a part of the debate as ‘outsiders’? Although at surface level Switzerland did not directly contribute to colonialism, the fact that these objects are found in vast quantities in Switzerland tell a completely different story.

A fascinating article titled “Switzerland and ‘Colonialism without Colonies’” by Patricia Purtschert, Francesca Falk & Barbara Lüthi (2015) takes a deeper look into the presence of colonial structures and power relations in a country such as Switzerland, that has never been regarded as or understood itself as an official colonial power. In the article Purtschert et al. (2015) state for example that many Swiss actors have been involved in the transatlantic slave and colonial trades, which obviously benefitted them. Switzerland had put itself in between the colonies and the former colonial powers, in a very profitable position. In the 1930s, Richard Fritz Behrendt, a German sociologist, claimed that Switzerland reaped the benefits of colonial constellations without having to shoulder military responsibility. On the surface, Switzerland seems like an ‘outsider’ to colonialism but in reality they have been supporting imperial powers for personal gain. Even during the Second World War, Switzerland has maintained its supposed neutrality, being spared from war damages, and therefore having an enormous economic upswing after the end of the war. Neutrality is an important way in which Switzerland has been able to sustain its reputation throughout history. Through the various art collectors who are rich and have many powerful connections, most being questionable at best, there was a great influx of colonial goods in Switzerland starting from the beginning of the 20th century. Switzerland has never been truly neutral and neither has Museum Rietberg.

Museum Rietberg is a mirror. It reflects the tragic pasts of the objects it houses. It displays the ties that Switzerland has with colonialism and reveals the truth about the art collectors and patrons they proudly represent. The museum, albeit unintentionally, shows the issues it does not want to show through their collection, just like a hidden object you only notice when looking in a mirror.





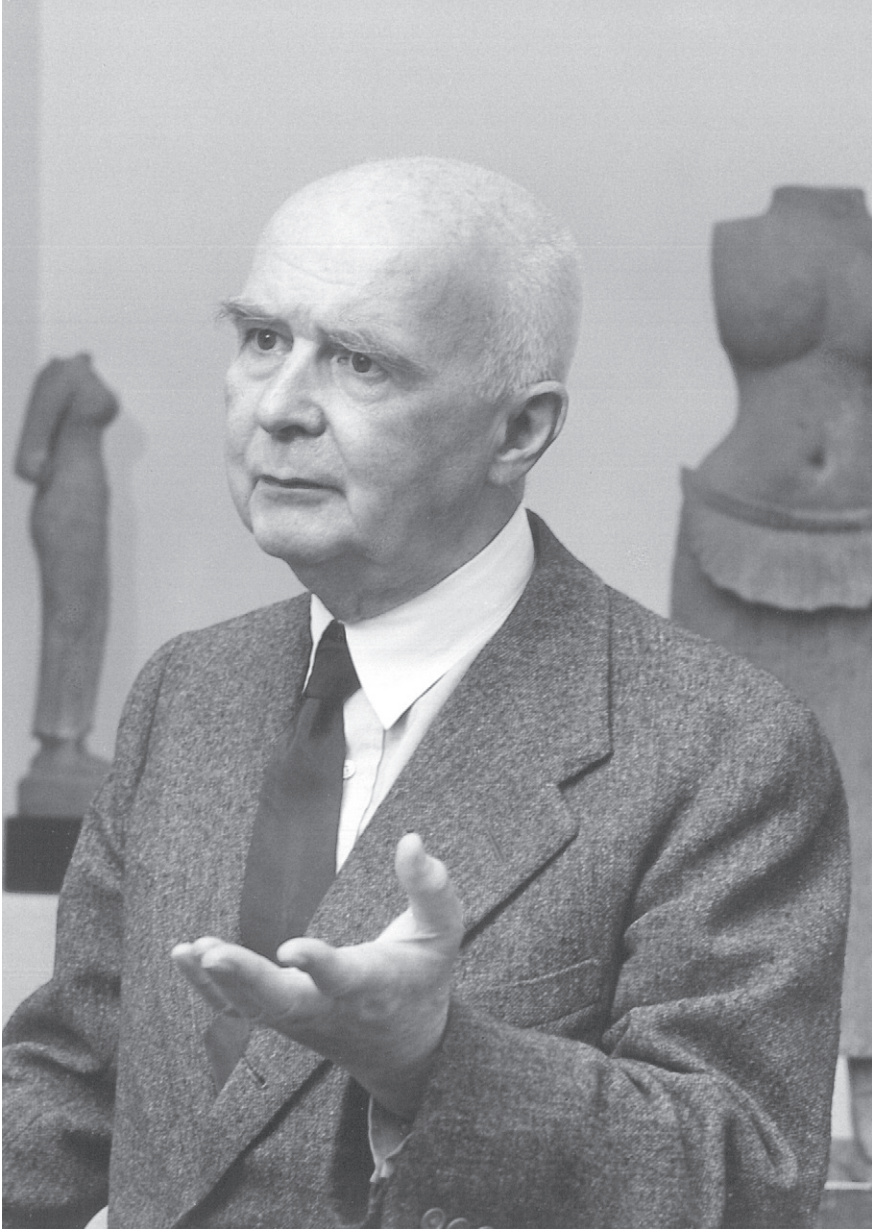












Eduard von der Heydt (1884-1964)



## PATRONS

The patrons of Museum Rietberg are extremely relevant in the discussion about the origin of the artefacts. Museum Rietberg exists in its current form due to German and Swiss banker, art collector and patron Eduard von der Heydt (1884-1964). After World War II, Eduard von der Heydt gifted his collection of non-European art to the city of Zurich. As a response to his donation, Museum Rietberg was founded in 1952 to house his collection. Von der Heydt remained a great patron of the museum up until his death in 1964 and his name can still be found everywhere in the museum; there is even a written book about him for sale in the museum shop titled “Eduard von der Heydt: Kunstsammler, Bankier, Mäzen”. The museum’s philosophy till this day is still based on the beliefs of Von der Heydt. He thoroughly believed in the concept of ‘Ars Una’, which translates into “there is only one art”. He possessed an universalistic view of art as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon. All art was one art, regardless of where it comes from or what its original intent was.

Von der Heydt is painted as this generous man who wanted to educate the world and share art. Similarly to how Eduard von der Heydt donated his non-European collection to Zürich, he donated his European collection to his hometown Wuppertal. They are currently to be seen in the Von der Heydt Museum. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, the question has been brought up in the city of Wuppertal whether it is still appropriate for the museum and a corresponding cultural award to be named after him. Why would they do that?

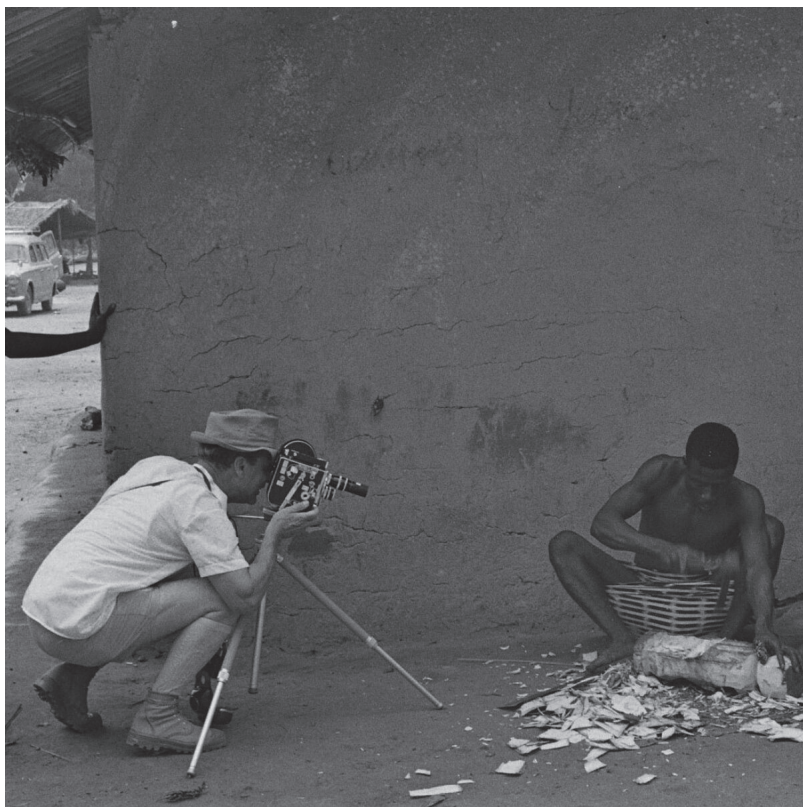
Well, conveniently, a lot about his life is left out of the biography they have published on the website of Museum Rietberg. Mr. von der Heydt, the good-hearted patron of arts, has been proven to have made financial transfers for the German Wehrmacht’s counterintelligence operations during the time of National Socialism and the Second World War. He sent more than a million Swiss francs to German agents around the world. He even got taken into custody for violating Switzerland’s neutrality in 1946 but was acquitted in 1948 due to lack of evidence. In 2008 Francesco Welti published a book titled “Der Baron, die Kunst und das Nazigold” documenting the relations between Von der Heydt and the NSDAP, whom he was a member of between 1933 until 1937. After leaving, he became a member of the Swiss “Association of Loyal Confederates of the National Socialist World View”. He also did not shy away from expressing antisemitic sentiments throughout his life. Museum Rietberg even discovered that four Chinese pieces acquired by Von der Heydt in 1935 were confiscated during the Nazi period.

With all of this in mind his concept of ‘Ars Una’ also takes a turn. He showed a great interest in non-European art, but by viewing all art equally, he neglects the tragic context of many objects in his collection. It is no wonder that a rich privileged white man believes in ‘Ars Una’. Another important issue is that Von der Heydt has never travelled to the countries of origin of his non-European art works. Whilst his European collection has art pieces from the most prominent artists in European history, his non-European collection shows daily objects of different cultures and treats them as if they were only meant to be looked at. That could also be caused by his lack of knowledge about their cultures, due to him never actually having been there before. A larger issue is correlated with this point: art collectors determine what art is, what has value and what doesn’t. In the case of Museum Rietberg that is evident as well, as the foundation of the museum was based on the collection of one man. It is essential to rid the museum of these preconceptions decided by men that died more than half a century ago. Doing so is also a form of decolonisation.

Another notable patron of the museum is Hans Himmelheber (1908-2003), art ethnologist, dealer and collector. Contrary to Von der Heydt, Hans Himmelheber has made thirteen trips to Central and West Africa. Himmelheber was one of the few people of his time who was interested in the African artists, and not merely the art. He talked to male artists about their work and documented their artistic process. He was actually able to see that African artists cultivated individual styles. He especially admired the Liberian artist Sra, whom Himmelheber described as the “greatest artist of the country”. Many of Sra’s masks are currently displayed in the Rietberg Museum.

Although he was able to appreciate African art forms and the artists behind it, he paid very little attention to women’s artistic work. He mostly dismissed the art of women as a mere ‘craft’, whilst openly praising many male artists. He also repeatedly used paternalistic and racist language, despite his so-called appreciation.

Furthermore, Himmelheber clearly benefited from the colonial structures in which he found himself and the power imbalance that resulted from them. To illustrate, he was able to finance his life as a freelance scientist by continuing to sell African art objects to Western museums and collectors. At the end of the day, he still viewed African art as a commodity to sell off to the West for his own profit.



Hans Himmelheber (1908-2003)

## LIST OF PATRONS

Private individuals and collectors who have donated or bequeathed items from the museum's collections.

Eduard von der Heyd	Ann et Reinhold Schuepp
Johannes Itten	Marina und Willy Staehelin
Julius Mueller	Ernst et Lily Gamper
J.F.H Menten	Familie Rücker-Emden
Willy Boller	Ernst Winkle
Robert Akeret	Wera Esslinger
Mary Mantel-Hess	Endre et Elda Ungar
Reinhard J.C. Hoeppli	Berti Aschmann
Regina et Julius Böhler	Elsa Maria Luchsinger
Luzia J. Bühler	Andreas ReinhartHans Vontobel
Elsy Leuzinger	Regula Brunner
Gret Hasler	Catharina Dohrn
Charlotte Holliger-Hasler	Helen Denzler
Emma Streicher	Yvonne Lang
Heinz Brasch	Ruth Rahn
Alice Boner	Dominik et Madeleine Keller
Georgette Boner	Gilbert et Stephanie Zuellig
Herbert Ginsberg	Horst Metzger
Rudolf Schmidt	Konrad et Eva Seitz
Charles A. Drenowatz	Martha Wirz-Oeler und Ursula Wirz
Lucy Rudolph	Toni Gerber
Camille Graeser	Dorothea und Jean-Pierre Zehnder
Alice et Pierre Uldry	Heidi et Hans Kaufmann
Monica et Fritz von Schulthess	Gabriele Louise Aino Schnetzer
Nanni et Balthasar Reinhart	Elena Probs
Marcelle Reinhart-Bühler	Thomas Schmidheiny
Lisa et Ivan Vajda	
Ursula Dohrn	
Barbara und Eberhard Fischer	Les membres du Cercle Rietberg







































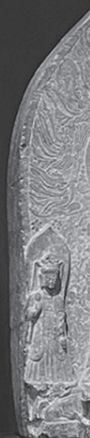








Steinrelief mit einer Darstellung  
des Buddha, der Bodhisattvas und  
Mönche, umgeben von einem  
dichten Schmuckwerk. Die  
Darstellung ist eine typische  
Darstellung des Buddha und  
seiner Begleiter.



Steinrelief mit einer Darstellung  
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Darstellung ist eine typische  
Darstellung des Buddha und  
seiner Begleiter.













**Shiva dancing**

Marble, South India, British Raj  
Chola Dynasty, 11th c.

Source:

Encyclopædia Britannica, 11th ed., 1911.

—

**Shiva dancing, the dancing Shiva**

India, Tamil Nadu, Pallava dynasty, Chola Empire, 10th century













I must say the exhibition got me thinking more about the origin of art and how a museum comes to own a piece. I think most collectors are indeed white rich men who belong to the colonizers country. ART SHOULD BE WHERE IT WAS BORN

Museum Rietberg's visitors reaction, Pathways of Art : Pathways of Art : How Objects Get to the Museum, 2023

*The western museum is lying that the object is sent back to its place of origin, you don't know what the place of origin is, your allies at the former colonies don't know the place of origin, it is untraceable.*

Debasish Borah - lie to me like one of your French museums



## ORIGIN OF ARTEFACTS

What about the actual origins of the artefacts? Where did they come from? What are their stories?

Firstly, as stated by Debasish Borah in ‘Lie to me like one of your French museums’: the western museum is lying that the object is sent back to its place of origin, you don’t know what the place of origin is, your allies at the former colonies don’t know the place of origin, it is untraceable. Colonialism has had a great toll on many ethnic groups in colonised areas, many of which have been eradicated and do not exist anymore. Therefore, finding the precise origins of the cultural objects may be hard and at times impossible and all the documentation that does exist of the acquisition of items were compiled by biased colonial officials or Western collectors. That does not mean that that should be used as an excuse to not delve as deep as you can in the histories of these items.

The historical context behind some artefacts however are clearly traceable. Among the greatest problems of the museum is that it hails itself as an educational institution whilst providing little to no information on each specific artefact. Often each artefact is only described by its country of origin and a vague description of its function such as ‘religious relic’. What practices correspond with the different objects? How were they used and by whom? When entering the Chinese exhibitions, the dynasties of the artefacts are noted, but what are the characteristics of the dynasties and what did that mean for the style in which the artefacts were made? What do the Purnaka Raksha masks symbolise and in which performances and rituals are they worn? What about the Japanese Noh masks? Who were the Dan people and what rituals were the recognizable dark hardwood masks correlated with? Although the visitors could search up the information online, most people will just glance at the plaques with little information and walk by. If the museum could inform itself and its visitors about the specific practices and regions in which they were found, would it not make the museum more comparable to an educational institution? Just the lack of maps and timelines, which both present information presented in a simple visual manner, indicate the lack of effort from Museum Rietberg. What about a video showing how specific objects are actually just a part of the daily lives of people and not just objects for display? Rid the museum of the ideas of old white collectors, who believed that their perceived artistic value of objects are more important than the actual functions and contexts in which they are made and used. At this moment, although filled with tens of thousands of objects, Museum Rietberg feels empty. It does not feel like a place

of education and it does not try to learn more about the objects it houses and the cultures that are undoubtedly linked to them.

### Benin Initiative Switzerland (BIS)

There is one part of the museum that addresses the origins of the art pieces more extensively. Those exhibitions are linked to the Benin collection in Museum Rietberg. Three of the sixteen artworks from Benin in the Museum Rietberg can be traced back to the looting of the royal palace in Benin City - what is known as “punitive expedition”. As a result, eight Swiss museums, including the Rietberg Museum, started the ‘Benin Initiative Switzerland’, a collaborative provenance research and cooperation with Nigeria on the Benin collections. The most important parts of the research is communicating with Nigerian partners and discussing the topic of restitution. In the museum there are documentaries and texts dedicated to exploring the history of their Benin objects and what their history could be. It is one of the few places that the individual objects are discussed in more detail. More information on the Benin collections in European museums can be found on the digital platform of [digitalbenin.org](http://digitalbenin.org).

However, the topic of restitution in regards to the Benin bronzes may be more complex than it seems, as will be elaborated on further in the next chapter.

William D. Webster							Johann Friederich Gustav Umlauff		
Eduard von der Heydt	William Ohly	Arthur Speyer II	F.W. Reichert	La Reine Margot	Ernst Ascher	Rolf Schenk			
	Ulrike Schenk	Baron Maurice de Rotschild	Sofia Podgorska	Ernst F. Rohrer	René Gardi	Elisabeth Zink-Niehus	Emil Storrer	Ernst Winizki	
		Jacques Germain	Susanne Verité	Paul Eluard	Charles Rotton	Paul Guillaume	Gallery Menist	Frank Paulig	
Hans Ernst Barth	Hans W. Kopp		Consul Eduard Schmidt	Eckart von Sydow	Hans Meyer	Ernst Heinrich	Gotthelf Kuhn	Unknown trader Globus	
		Fritz Real							
Ernst Vischer-Wadler	Paul Wyss	Leod & Mia Van Bussel	Ludwig Glenk Firma	Sir Ralph Moor	Whitaker	Davey Family	Ellen Davey	Arnold Ridyard	
		Leod & Mia Van Bussel	Erwin Stiefel	Caspar A. V. Blad	George William Neville	Sybille Heinrich	G. Berthoud	August R Lindt	
	Maria Wyss	Edgar Beer	O. Lindenmann	Leopold Rüttimeyer	Kenneth John Hewett	Chief Inneh	Annie Wolff-Knize	Hans Lachmann Mose	
Eva Cutter	Hans Coray	Pierre Verité	Franz H. Rolle	Annemarie Vischer-Wadler	Admiral Harry Rawson	Friedrich Wolff-Knize	Alphonse Kann	Brummer Brothers	

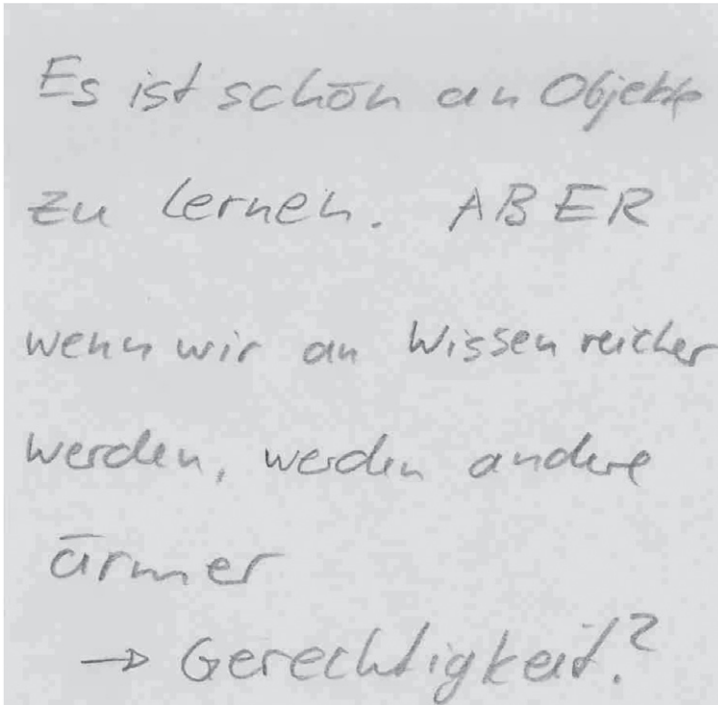
Tree map of provenance actors, each cell proportionate to the number of objects associated with the person.





**LIBRARY**

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Es ist schön an Objekten  
zu lernen. ABER  
Wenn wir an Wissen reicher  
werden, werden andere  
ärmer  
→ Gerechtigkeit?

Museum Rietberg's visitors reaction, Pathways of Art : Pathways of Art : How Objects Get to the Museum, 2023

*Programming conceived with these priorities and levels of engagement in mind draws a person into the library as a space of collective public knowledge – not only as a reader, but as an author as well.*

Laura Raicovich, Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest, 2021

# LIBRARY

What is a library?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines a library as ‘a building, room, or organization that has a collection of books, documents, music, and sometimes things such as tools or artwork, for people to borrow, usually without payment’. However, a contemporary library is also a place for relaxation, an accessible place for different communities and a place of education. Although initially meant for those privileged enough to have access to knowledge and sponsored by the rich, today the library opens its doors to everyone and can be funded through many different ways.

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) is known for famously making libraries publicly accessible. When he was a boy, he was unable to pay the \$2 subscription necessary to use the local library. He educated himself by borrowing books from Colonel James Anderson, a wealthy man who opened his private library to the community’s young workers. After becoming a steel magnate and one of the richest men of his time, Carnegie has actively occupied himself with philanthropy, proven by his funding 2,811 libraries around the world. He knows how it feels to not have access to information and how difficult that was on him. He writes: “It was from my own early experience that I decided there was no use to which money could be applied so productive ... as the founding of a public library in a community which is willing to support it as a municipal institution.”

In a similar time period, John Cotton Dana (1856-1929), an American library and museum director, is known for radically shifting the ways in which libraries were used at the beginning of the twentieth century. He aimed to bring these cultural institutions into the daily lives of people. By doing so, he reinvented the library to be a place of education and acceptance, a place where everyone could enter and spend their time on a daily basis. He contributed to form the library as we know it today.

So, a library fulfils an important function in society and has developed for the better throughout history, but what does that have to do with Museum Rietberg?

To understand what the link is between the two, it is essential to refer to “Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest”, in which Laura Raicovich makes a comparison between museums and libraries. Both institutions have strong

relationships to education and literacy and originated via similar patronage models, with their collections mainly coming from wealthy collectors of books and art objects, sometimes affiliated with institutions of higher learning.

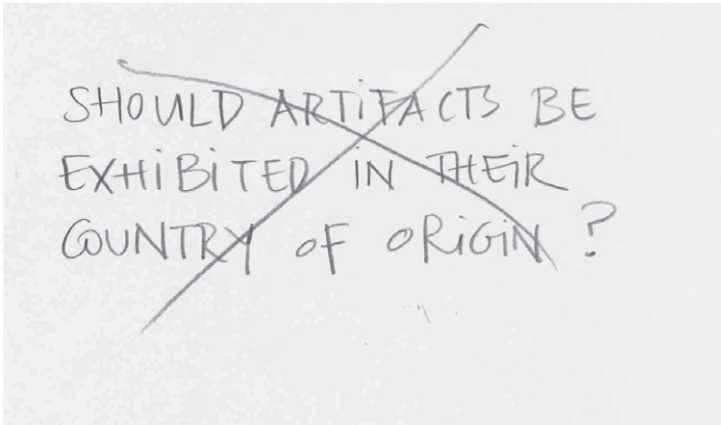
Raicovich refers to external literature, including “The Gloom of the Museum”, written by John Cotton Dana. The problems of the early twentieth-century museum described by Dana are still very relevant to current museums of the twenty-first-century. Firstly, the private collections which entered into museums were assembled by men of wealth and education who have specific views on beauty and art. They therefore decided what was important and what wasn’t and those decisions remain present in present-day museums. Further, the architecture of museums in Europe is often made to resemble temples and palaces. As a result, the appearance of the building often has nothing to do with the collection or the people visiting it. He goes as far to say that “a great department store, easily reached, open at all hours, is more like a good museum of art than any of the museums we have yet established.” That sentence alone already points out so many reasons why museums have not been able to become as widely utilised as a source of knowledge: they are not open at all hours, it costs money to enter many of them and some are quite remote.

Furthermore, there are fundamental differences in the way books are displayed in a library and how cultural objects are shown in Museum Rietberg. Typically, the author and the content are the most relevant information of a book, and therefore they are categorised in that way in a library. It often does not matter who has donated specific books; that information is generally not of importance and therefore not highlighted in a library. On the other hand, Museum Rietberg writes under each object in the museum the name of the person who has gifted the object to them. The museum therefore implies that the information about the identity of the art collector has an equal amount of value as the country of origin and the use of the object. It is a fascinating choice, to say the least. Referring back to the topic of neutrality, the desire to respect the art collectors and not publicly doubt their methods of acquisition plays a big role in the way that Museum Rietberg presents itself. If Museum Rietberg wants to shield its patrons and art collectors from criticism, no real change will be possible. A systematic shift has to happen.

Since the Rietberg museum has such a large collection of artefacts from Africa, Asia and South America, they have the opportunity to mean something for the respective communities in Switzerland. However, museum Rietberg has yet to fully take advantage of the potential it has to become an educational and accepting



space. Due to the disreputable acquisition of the art pieces and the questionable history of its patrons, museum Rietberg has to undergo a drastic transformation to become a place that resembles the modern library.



Museum Rietberg's visitors reaction, Pathways of Art : Pathways of Art : How Objects Get to the Museum, 2023

## RESTITUTION

The most spoken about solution to museum Rietberg's issue is restitution. Should Museum Rietberg retribute all of its artefacts that have been dubiously acquired to the countries of origin?

The topic of restitution has been a widely discussed topic all over Europe regarding the objects that have come to Europe through the colonial system. Restitution does not merely mean exploring the past and returning objects, it also opens the possibilities to establish new and better relations going forward.

As stated in "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics" by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, over 90% of the material cultural legacy of sub-Saharan Africa is located outside of the African continent. The young people, which make up 60% of the population of Africa, don't have access to a large part of their cultural identity. Whilst European youth have the choice to head over to a museum in a nearby city to appreciate significant works of art from their country of origin, that is simply not the case for the youth in Africa. They should also have the right to their cultural and artistic heritage.

Restitution does not only mean the physical return of artefacts, but also the acknowledgement of the colonial ties that the countries in which they are housed has. Take Switzerland for example; they never had any official colonies, however through the different art collectors, tradesmen and amiable relations with many countries with colonies, a vast collection of (looted) artefacts are currently situated in Swiss museums, in particular Museum Rietberg. The topic of restitution is therefore even more complex for a country such as Switzerland, known for its neutrality, since they did not actively steal anything. However, that does not mean that they can fly under the radar when it comes to restitution. The objects they possess still have a dark and tragic past that is not visible in their display cases with LED lighting.

Does that mean that the museums will be completely empty? That depends on each individual case, even when ownership is returned back to the countries of origin, the pieces could be loaned out to European museums, but that would be the decision of the countries involved.

Of course, a closer look at restitution reveals drawbacks as well. Restitution could be seen as an act of "soft power" that aims to repaint the European countries in a better light. They are therefore trying to use restitution as a means to absolve

themselves from the crimes they have committed throughout history.

Debasish Borah, a PhD researcher at ETH Zürich also created an extremely powerful zine titled “lie to me like one of your French museums”. A country or in a majority of the cases, a contemporary nation-state is itself a colonial production. The established nation states still resemble the countries of the colonisers. He states the following: “the western museum institutions are restituting or intend to reconstitute cultural objects to their own photocopied museums which happen to be geographically located in the global south, controlled by elite upper case-class nexus, basically a neo-colonial institution which still consider marginal spaces as uncivilised.” Further, most objects displayed in these museums were not supposed to be in museums to begin with. The people who made them did not regard them as ‘art’, they were objects from their daily lives, their spirituality, something to be used and remade when the earlier version wears out. It was never meant to be something to gawk at. It was taken from the people and shown as trophies of conquests by the colonisers.

Another very important point that Borah names is that many communities to which these cultural objects belonged don’t exist anymore. The Benin bronzes were created by the Edo people of the pre-colonial kingdom of Benin but the Edo state was annexed by British colonisers. The bronzes from Germany were returned to the National Museum of Nigeria in Lagos in 2021: the objects of the Edo people were returned to the Lagos region, inhabited by Yoruba people. Returning the objects to the countries of origin doesn’t mean neglecting the existence of the multiple ethnic groups. An extremely memorable passage in the zine is: “I think you should keep the objects with yourself, suspend them inside your glass boxes, hang your head in shame each time you see them as trophies of your violent colonial conquests.”

However, at the end of the day, many countries and regions all over the world are demanding the restitution of their cultural heritage, and their demands should not be neglected. In an interview with Museum Rietberg’s curator Esther Tisa, from January 31, 2023, she claims that the Rietberg Museum has never had a request for restitution. However, Abba Tijani, director general of Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments was sitting in the museum just a month later in February requesting for the restitution of the Benin bronzes stored in the museum.

At this moment, transparency is essential. Museums should display the atrocious history behind the objects and be confronted with it. They should not wait till they



receive restitution claims, but actively seek to contact the countries of origin and discuss what the best course of action is for each specific piece. Don't wait until you have to, show that you want to.







L'INTE

LA ROUTE

DE LA SOIE









LA CHINE







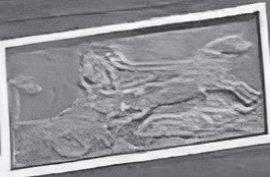
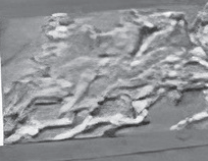






















LA BARUFFE

LA BARUFFE

LINE LA MOSE

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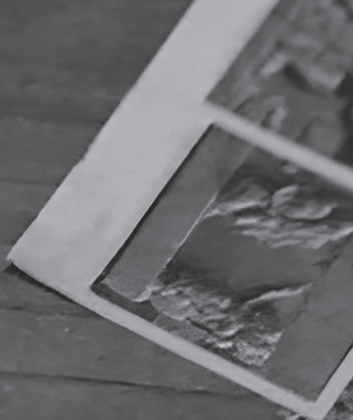














*André Malraux, Maurice Jarnoux pour Paris Match, 1950*

«Le musée imaginaire» is a concept that reflects Malraux's ideas about the nature and value of art. It is not a physical museum but rather a mental or conceptual museum that exists in the minds of individuals. Malraux believed that art is not confined to physical museums and galleries but is a universal and timeless phenomenon that can be experienced and appreciated through the images and reproductions of artworks. Malraux emphasized the importance of reproductions, such as photographs, prints, and books, as vehicles for bringing art to a wider audience. He believed that these reproductions allowed people to experience and appreciate artworks without having to visit the actual physical locations where they were housed.

According to Malraux, art is a universal language that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. He believed that people from different cultures and time periods could connect with and understand the emotional and intellectual power of great artworks. In the imaginary museum, individuals have the freedom to curate their own collections of artworks, selecting pieces from various periods, styles, and cultures. This democratization of art appreciation allows people to create their own personal and meaningful connections to art. Malraux argued that the true value of art lies in the aesthetic experience it offers, rather than its historical or cultural context. He believed that individuals could have profound aesthetic experiences through encounters with reproductions of artworks.

The concept of the imaginary museum promotes the idea that art has the power to enrich the human spirit and foster a sense of shared humanity. «Le musée imaginaire» concept encourages people to engage with art on a personal and intellectual level, transcending the constraints of physical space and time. It celebrates the idea that art is a vital and universal part of human culture that can be appreciated and understood by people from all walks of life.

The question raised by Malraux is an interesting one, since he emphasizes that reproductions enable art to be transmitted to a larger number of people. However, it can be argued that the visual experience in its original physical form is different from that of seeing a reproduction.

We might also point out that Malraux's concept of "art as a universal language that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries" is a little reductive. This is precisely what this concept of universalism is all about. The context of an artwork's creation is crucial for a deeper appreciation of its meaning and significance. This could lead to an homogenization of diverse artistic traditions and a diminution of the unique



qualities and contributions of each culture.

Malraux's idea of freely curating art from various cultures and time periods could also be criticized for potentially encouraging cultural appropriation. Without a deep understanding of the cultural and historical significance of certain artworks, there is a risk of misrepresentation or insensitivity. This is precisely what could happen at the Rietberg Museum, if we imagine a reduction of the objects to images. On the other hand, isn't owning these objects already an act of cultural appropriation?

Another interesting point, especially in this day and age when the role of the Internet is not negligible, is the problem posed by reducing works of art to photographs. Indeed, in a way, this facilitates the commercialization of art, and the fact that works can be reduced to images that are bought, sold and consumed.

Finally, the freedom to curate one's "imaginary museum" also means that individuals can choose what they include or exclude. This selectivity might lead to a limited and biased representation of art, reinforcing existing biases and preferences.

André Malraux's concept of "Le musée imaginaire" has been influential and has contributed to the democratization of art appreciation, it is not without its critics. However, it's essential to recognize that Malraux's ideas have also opened up new avenues for engaging with art and have sparked valuable discussions about its accessibility and interpretation.

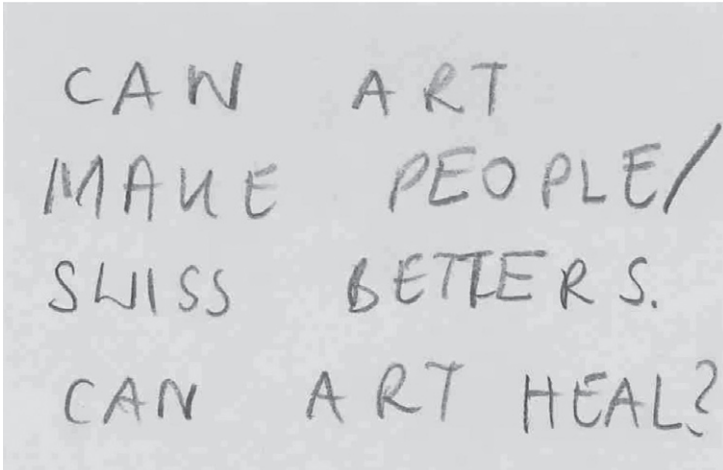
Could an imaginary museum, a museum with no walls, be the future of our museums ?

*«Right foot forward Hindu  
Left foot back Buddhist  
The old Egyptian side shuffle  
Jane Fonda's lower body solution»*

*Malraux's Shoes, Dennis Adams, 2012*

*«An art book is a museum without walls.»*

*André Malraux, Promenades imaginaires dans Florence, 1950*



Museum Rietberg's visitors reaction, Pathways of Art : Pathways of Art : How Objects Get to the Museum, 2023



## A NEW FUTURE

Can museums follow the same path that libraries have taken at the turn of the twentieth century? Will museum Rietberg be able to become an accessible and educational space in the future?

After opening up all the discussions about restitution, the Rietberg Museum has the potential to redefine what it means to be a museum. Could it become a museum without objects? Can it be the first museum that is fully transparent about the context behind the objects it houses in its glass displays?

Museum Rietberg is trying. Recently, Museum Rietberg has taken significant steps in confronting the origins of their artefacts. Most notably, the Benin Initiative Switzerland (BIS), a collaboration between Nigeria and eight Swiss museums, including Rietberg, conducting research on the Benin collections, has been efficient. They show video documentation of their collaboration in the museum and therefore attempt to inform people about the measures the museum has taken to address the problematic acquisition of many of the objects displayed in the museum.

Moreover, they host talks about the collections in Park-Villa Rieter, which are freely accessible. These talks can offer new perspectives and work towards informing and educating the visitors of the museum.

Furthermore the catalogue published by the museum in collaboration with Scheidegger & Spiess titled “Pathways of Art – How Objects Get to the Museum” aims to inform the public about the history of a few artefacts for the ‘affordable’ price of CHF 39.00. The depth of the knowledge in the book is another topic of discussion.

Although the museum is showing that it is opening up conversations on the historical context of its collection, it still does not address everything in a fully transparent way; the documentary of the Benin Initiative Switzerland is hidden behind a wall in the museum and the book costs a significant amount of money. The history and the uses of the artefacts are not clearly displayed in the museum. The only information that can be found on the plaques are the country of origin and the art collector who donated or sold the piece. It is up to Museum Rietberg if they choose to emphasise the origins and context or the name of the art collector.

André Malraux’s “le musée imaginaire” reflects the concept that art is not bound

to its physical form, but can also be expressed through reproductions such as photographs, prints and books. Individuals have the freedom to curate their own collections based on their own personal interpretations of art. He also argues that its historical and cultural context is less important than the aesthetic experience it offers. The latter is unfortunately not applicable to stolen artefacts. Those would not be here in European museums without the historical and cultural context being of importance and that is essential to understand. It is also interesting noting that Malraux often used Asian characters and settings as a mere background for his novels about white male protagonists, which demonstrates how he views 'the other'. But admittedly, at the end of the day, André Malraux had an inspiring idea which could be relevant to Museum Rietberg. Is it possible for Museum Rietberg to become an imaginary museum of sorts? Would there be an appeal for that on a larger scale?

Currently the park and the café function more similarly to the library than the museum does; people visit the park and the café frequently, they read books and study whilst enjoying the environment, the spaces are accessible and attract people of all ages. It has been able to become a part of the daily lives of individuals. Maybe one day Museum Rietberg will become as important to the community as a public library is.

Maybe it will become a place of knowledge and understanding.

*What is the future of museums ?*





## **GLOSSARY**

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**A****accessibility***noun*

the quality of being able to be reached or entered.

**accessible***adjective*

1. (of a place) able to be reached or entered.
2. easily understood or appreciated.

**archive***noun*

1. a collection of historical records relating to a place, organization, or family
2. a place where historical records are kept

**art***noun*

1. the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.
2. the various branches of creative activity, such as painting, music, literature, and dance.

**artifact***noun*

1. an object made by a human being, typically one of cultural or historical interest.
2. something observed in a scientific investigation or experiment that is not naturally present but occurs as a result of the preparative or investigative procedure.

**Ars Una**

“there is only one art” (cf. Rietberg). This maxim testifies to a universalist conception of art as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon.

**B****borow***verb*

take and use with the intention of returning it.

## C

### **capitalism**

*noun*

an economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit.

### **colonialism**

*noun*

the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.

### **culture**

*noun*

1. the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.
2. the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society.

## D

### **diversity**

*noun*

1. the state of being diverse; variety.
2. the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc.

## E

### **education**

*noun*

the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university.

## F

### **future**

*noun*

1. a period of time following the moment of speaking or writing; time regarded as still to come.
2. contracts for assets (commodities or shares) bought at agreed prices but

delivered and paid for later.

*adjective*

at a later time; going or likely to happen or exist.

## **G**

**gift**

*noun*

1. a thing given willingly to someone without payment; a present.
2. a natural ability or talent.

*verb*

give (something) as a gift, especially formally or as a donation or bequest.

**glossary**

*noun*

an alphabetical list of words relating to a specific subject, text, or dialect, with explanations; a brief dictionary.

## **H**

**heritage**

*noun*

property that is or may be inherited; an inheritance.

## **I**

**inclusion**

*noun*

1. the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure.
2. the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or intellectual disabilities and members of other minority groups.

**institution**

*noun*

1. an organization founded for a religious, educational, professional, or social



- purpose.
2. an established law or practice.

## L

### **library**

*noun*

1. a building or room containing collections of books, periodicals, and sometimes films and recorded music for use or borrowing by the public or the members of an institution.

a collection of books and periodicals held in a library.

a room in a private house where books are kept.

## M

### **mirror**

*noun*

a surface, typically of glass coated with a metal amalgam, which reflects a clear image.

*verb*

1. (of a surface) show a reflection of.
2. correspond or be similar to (another thing).

### **monumental**

*adjective*

1. great in importance, extent, or size.
2. of or serving as a monument.

### **museum**

*noun*

a building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited.

*A museum is not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education,*

*enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.*

(ICOM, 24 August 2022)

## N

### **neutrality**

*noun*

1. the state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict, disagreement, etc.; impartiality.
2. absence of decided views, expression, or strong feeling.

## O

### **object**

*noun*

1. a material thing that can be seen and touched.
2. a person or thing to which a specified action or feeling is directed.

*verb*

say something to express one's opposition to or disagreement with something.

### **origin**

*noun*

the point or place where something begins, arises, or is derived.

## P

### **past**

*adjective*

gone by in time and no longer existing.

*noun*

1. the time before the moment of speaking or writing.
2. a past tense or form of a verb.

### **present**

*adjective*

1. in a particular place.
2. existing or occurring now.

*noun*

1. the period of time now occurring.
2. a present tense.

**provenance**

*noun*

the place of origin or earliest known history of something.

**R**

**restitution**

*noun*

1. the restoration of something lost or stolen to its proper owner.
2. recompense for injury or loss.

**S**

**souvenir**

*noun*

1. a thing that is kept as a reminder of a person, place, or event.

*verb*

2. take as a memento.

**steal**

*verb*

1. take (another person's property) without permission or legal right and without intending to return it.
2. move somewhere quietly or surreptitiously.

**U**

**universality**

*noun*

1. the quality of involving or being shared by all people or things in the world or in a particular group.
2. the quality of being true in or appropriate for all situations.

## W

### **western**

#### *adjective*

1. situated in the west, or directed towards or facing the west.
2. living in or originating from the West, in particular Europe or the United States.

#### *noun*

a film, television drama, or novel about cowboys in western North America, set especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.







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