Pathways of Art – How Objects Get to the Museum
From 17 June 2022 to 25 June 2023

For the first time, this exhibition provides insight into the museum's collection history and invites viewers to learn about how works of art got to the museum by way of object biographies, that is, the histories of the objects and the people who were involved in their journey to the museum. In doing so, the Museum Rietberg focuses on the provenance of the works, thus extending the link to various ongoing research and collaboration projects. The exhibition seeks to inspire visitors to explore the collections from a new, differentiated perspective regarding questions that arise from the way the artworks are presented and from what they experienced on their often convoluted journey from the country of origin to the museum in Zurich.

The collections of the Museum Rietberg are known to many. Some people actually have favourite pieces which they come to view and appreciate time and again. The stories told in Pathways of Art energize the objects in a new and different way, place them in a tangible context, and throw a light on them from different angles including their creation, their acquisition, and finally their display at the museum.

The exhibition Pathways of Art, which will run for a whole year, invites the audience to rediscover the museum’s collections comprehensively by addressing and answering a number of questions with the aid of selected case studies, for example, by which routes did the artworks travel to the museum? Where are they from originally, what have they experienced in their lifetime, and what transformations did they undergo in the course of their journey?

With very few exceptions, none of the objects held in the Rietberg collections were originally created for display in a museum; instead, they were enacted in religious ceremonies and ritual practices, others were created for private pleasure or decorative purposes, yet others for the sake of prestigious ostentation or scholarly study. On their journey to the museum, the objects underwent a change in meaning and understanding. The tour through the exhibition recounts the stories of the objects' transfer and transformation, thus opening up new perspectives on the works. In doing so, Pathways of Art addresses the little-known processes that underlie the "musealization" of artworks.

In this exhibition, the Museum Rietberg invites viewers to a tour through its collection spaces. There, 22 stations invite visitors to engage with the stories behind the works and their backgrounds. Each station reveals a story and the respective backgrounds of the presentation of the artworks in the museum. The stations are designed like collections of history. The tour includes all departments and object categories: from textiles, stone sculptures, bronze and ceramic objects to carvings, paintings, woodcuts, photographs along with books and various papers. In this case, the objects are not presented as solitary displays but embedded in a rich context together with the pertinent stories as well as with the necessary documentary evidence including letters, photographs, invoices, catalogues, filing cards, and inventory
books. Through this form of complementary display, art and its contexts are made accessible in a comprehensive way.

By looking at the collections in a differentiated way, *Pathways of Art* picks up on current political and scholarly debates. Through experiencing the artworks in multiple contexts and from different perspectives, the exhibition changes our perception of them. By tracing the stories of origin, the show makes an important contribution to the current debates on provenance and restitution; at the same time, it provides the groundwork for addressing key questions such as what kinds of stories are stored away in museums and what does this mean in terms of the future of collections.

When the Museum Rietberg engaged with its own founding history and began research on the banker and collector Eduard von der Heydt, the focus turned to the man’s complex biography and the acquisitions made during the National Socialist era in the 1930s and 40s. The findings of the project fed into the major exhibition *From Buddha to Picasso. The Collector Eduard von der Heydt* in 2013. Most recently, in 2018/2019, the collection intervention *The Question of Provenance* offered further insights into the history of the Rietberg collections.

In 2008, the Museum established a position for provenance research, the first of its kind in Switzerland, which has since then addressed the issue of ownership and unlawful appropriation and critically reviewed the history of the museum and its collections. Appropriations facilitated by colonial structures and spoils acquired in the context of military campaigns are anything else but uncommon in the history of the acquisition of art, especially as far as museums that hold non-European collections are concerned. It thus goes without saying that ethical and legal questions regarding the history of objects also feed into the exhibition and stand to discussion with the audience, the diaspora, and scholars in the respective countries of origin in a spirit of joint and shared history.

Provenance research is one of the focal points of the Museum Rietberg's engagement with its collections. One example is the Swiss Benin Initiative in which eight museums in Switzerland, under the lead of the Museum Rietberg, have signed up to a close collaboration for the purpose of researching the provenance of artworks from the Kingdom of Benin. Another example is a research project that focuses on clarifying the provenance of the works held in the Charles A. Drenowatz collection at the Rietberg. Both projects are being funded by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (FOC) and are included in the *Pathways* exhibition.

The tour of the exhibition starts in our historical building, the Villa Wesendonck, and takes visitors through the various collection rooms. The tour takes its cue from questions that are grouped into four areas: *Collecting, Displaying, Dealing,* and *Knowing.* The various aspects are dealt with in four so-called focus rooms, which serve as the exhibition’s switch points. Further stations are spread across the various collection spaces and are colour-coded according to the theme being addressed. In addition, repeatedly collectors and art dealers who played a key part in connection with the objects on display are portrayed.

The exhibition features **400 exhibits** that provide insight into the history of the collection. They include highlight pieces as well as works stowed away in storage rooms, documents from the museum’s archives but also from private collections along with catalogues from the library,
photographs and postcards. Together, they shed light on how the various works reached the museum.

**Multimedia stations** – including interactive touchscreens, listening stations as well as video projections – allow visitors to track the objects’ itineraries in a clear but also playful way. In addition to the opportunity to explore individual object stories in greater depth, viewers get the chance to survey the pathways of art for themselves in a number of crossover stations. One interactive station, for example, allows viewers to trace the expansion of the collections on a timeline covering the museum’s seventy-year history; another option allows visitors to digitally experiment with their own conceptions of display. In addition, viewers get the opportunity to assign objects to their corresponding context in a game of Memory, while another app allows them to express their personal view on what interests them most about an individual work of art.

For our younger visitors we have a special **children’s trail**: equipped with a toolset consisting of pencil, beeswax and folding paper, kids between five and ten set off on their own journey through the exhibition where they get the chance to explore selected objects at five different stations.

The extensive and illustrated **catalogue**, published by Scheidegger & Spiess in English and German, in which twenty authors explore the museum’s collections from different perspectives serves as a reader to the exhibition. Ed. Esther Tisa Francini, with the collaboration of Sarah Csernay, paperback, approx. 440 pages, 200 colour and 50 b/w illustrations, CHF 39, available on site and via shop.rietberg.ch

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