

## Call for Papers

### **Sensitive, problematic, contested? Challenges and opportunities in dealing with cultural heritage in museums**

International conference, Wednesday–Friday, 20–22 November 2024

A collaboration between *Kunsthaus Zurich*, *Swiss National Museum* and *Museum Rietberg*

The handling of cultural heritage in museums has become the focus of public debate in recent years. At the centre is a critical examination of collection histories and object biographies, as well as institutional and museum practices. Numerous workshops and conferences deal with topics that are orientated towards the specifics of different types of museums. We believe that a transdisciplinary approach, i.e. between museums that differ in their museum history and discursive embedding, but which face the same questions, offers a distinct opportunity in fertilising each other in their approaches and experiences. This is where the conference comes in. For the first time, a conference is being held in Zurich, jointly organised by the Kunsthaus Zürich with its focus on modern and contemporary art, the Swiss National Museum which specialises in cultural history and the Museum Rietberg with its collections of arts from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. The three museums have been exploring the topic in their exhibitions and collection research for several years.

The three-day international conference is primarily aimed at experts and practitioners. The focus is on the exchange of experiences from practice in dealing with objects, testimonies and stories that are considered "sensitive, problematic or contested". The aim is a lively, open exchange on topics, methodological, strategic and programmatic considerations from a wide range of perspectives. The conference is orientated towards the major practical fields of museum work and includes but is not limited to the following questions: How do museums communicate the history of objects, collections and protagonists? How do they collect, preserve, research and present collections and cultural heritage that are linked to controversial or difficult historical experiences, unequal power relations, social debates and contexts of violence and injustice – including colonialism, the Second World War and other conflicts and power inequalities? Are there "best practices" and what can we learn from the experiences of other institutions? What does a new approach mean for the change of structures, practices and the identity of an institution?

As Switzerland holds the fifth largest share of the global art market and it counts the highest density of museums in the world, the three museums consider these questions not only as necessary, but as a chance to critically examine, challenge, revise established museum practices. The conference will explore assumptions, methodologies and practices of dealing with sensitive, problematic or contested cultural heritage through key lectures, presentations of case studies, panel discussions, exhibition tours and break-out sessions. We welcome abstracts from (museum) professionals from Switzerland and worldwide. Their contributions should be based on case studies.

**Topics of case studies include, but are not limited to:**

New approaches and practices of research; collaborative approaches and multi-perspectivity; new perspectives on museum collections and collecting; legal and ethical questions of collecting; dilemmas of and reasons for collecting, preserving and conserving; shared heritage and responsibilities to society, communities and stakeholders; digital strategies, accessibility and transparency; displaying, contextualising, mediating, handling and speaking about objects, testimonials and histories in exhibitions.

15 minutes/approx. 2200 words will be allotted for each paper. The conference language is English. The organisers will reimburse the cost of board & lodging and travel (2nd class / economy) expenses upon submission of receipts. Please upload your proposal (max. 1 page) in English together with a short C. V. at <https://www.kunsthhaus.ch/callforpapers2024> by the end of April 2024.

The findings of the conference will be documented and made accessible in the longer term.

Venues: Kunsthhaus Zürich, Heimplatz 5, 8001 Zurich; Swiss National Museum, Landesmuseum Zürich, Museumsstrasse 2, 8001 Zurich; Museum Rietberg, Gablerstrasse 15, 8002 Zurich, Switzerland.

Programme and organisation:

[Kunsthhaus Zurich](#)

Ann Demeester, director  
Joachim Sieber, head of provenance research  
Ioana Jimborean, research associate  
Kim Stengl, project and research assistant

[Swiss National Museum, Zurich](#)

Denise Tonella, director  
Heidi Amrein, chief curator

[Museum Rietberg, Zurich](#)

Annette Bhagwati, director  
Esther Tisa Francini, head of provenance research and archive

Supported by:

