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This book (an English title might be ‘*Found and Lost: Arthur Speyer, the Thirties and the Losses of the South Seas Collection of the Ethnological Museum Berlin*’) describes the sale and exchange of objects from the Berlin Museum’s South Seas Collection into the international art market during the early 20th century. The book introduces to a wide audience the practice, so common in museums around the world during that period, of identifying particular ethnographic objects as “duplicates” and selling or trading them with other museums or professional art dealers. While providing a thorough overview of the Berlin Museum’s dealings in these activities from the 1900s and into the 1940s, this book has a focus on the interactions of one particular dealer (Arthur Speyer) with the Museum’s South Sea Collection during the 1930s.

The book contains six chapters. The first three chapters (“The Duplicates”, “The Twenties”, “The Thirties”) provide a useful understanding of the contexts in which the losses to the Museum’s collections could occur. These chapters introduce key players at the Museum, as well as collectors and trade networks, sketch out the various paths that objects took out of the Museum, and the reasons that led to this large-scale “sellout” (p. 16). These rationales ranged from the practical (minimising pressures on space by scaling down collections) and the pecuniary (supporting the construction or renovation of buildings, allowing for new purchases, etc.) to political motivations (colonial revanchism, an increased interest in European collections driven by Nazi ideology, etc.). What is remarkable is that there is a striking consistency in the poor quality or outright lack of documentation of these transactions throughout this period, suggesting a conscious attempt to conceal details of these activities by those involved. The fact that “numerous large-scale objects left the Museum without them having been signed out of the inventory books” (p. 70) meant that the losses suffered by the collections during the interwar period are not only many but literally immeasurable.

The fourth chapter (“The Speyer Collection”) is the most substantial of the chapters in this book. It represents the cornerstone of the publication, as it is the case study around which all materials in the book revolve: the collections of Arthur Speyer (1894-1958) and his interactions with the Berlin Museum. This private collector is perhaps the most fascinating individual to trade with the Museum, as an uncountable number of objects flowed through him from the Museum to the international art market. Schindlbeck tells the story of Arthur Speyer, who started collecting ethnographic objects in 1921, in a gripping and colourful manner. Much of the information comes directly from Speyer’s son who was interviewed by Schindlbeck. These first-hand accounts are augmented by archival information. Seen together, these sources create a detailed picture of the kinds of objects sold to Speyer, the circumstances of their sales, and the paths they took to other dealers and institutions after Speyer had acquired them. Schindlbeck’s
portrayal of Speyer as a person whose love and appreciation of the material culture of the South Pacific (and other parts of the world) was genuine and heart-felt is rather positive but the author does not shy away from criticism. He points out repeatedly, for example, that Speyer exploited an emergency situation at the Museum and that his actions “resulted in […] large losses in the collections” (p. 104).

Although brief, the final two chapters (“The Losses of the Berlin South Seas Collection” and “Closing”) offer some important conclusions on the issues raised throughout this volume. Perhaps most important among those is that Schindlbeck’s work strongly suggests that the tendency of museums, particularly in Germany, to label missing objects in their collections as “war losses” (p. 209) is perhaps not accurate. Indeed, as he concludes, “museums were not always custodians of their treasure” (p. 215) and the sales of significant numbers of objects in their care to dealers are all too often kept quiet. Interestingly, he argues, due to their sheer size, these sales supported, shaped and even created an international market in ethnographic art that could not have existed otherwise, a dynamic that so far has gone understudied.

The final 45 pages of the book contain a sizeable appendix of archival materials from the Museum and elsewhere, and a detailed inventory of known objects that left the Museum’s South Sea Collection until the 1940s. The book is beautifully illustrated throughout: 130 b/w plates and 20 colour plates, some specifically produced for this volume.

Unfortunately, the volume suffers from some problems with copy editing, and the numerous typographical, grammatical and factual errors and inconsistencies—combined with the sometimes choppy flow of the text—can be distracting. The volume is also primarily descriptive and lamentably does not provide much analysis or many firm conclusions. However, this book is a significant first step. By sharing his considerable inside knowledge of the history of the Berlin Museum, Schindlbeck provides a much-needed reference point to an eminent collection and lays a foundation for future research on it and collecting practices of this time more broadly. Indeed, his work should and surely will serve as a catalyst for further investigations into the interplay of museums and the ethnographic art market, both on a documentary as well as a theoretical level.

Finally, Schindlbeck’s work can also be read as a timely cautionary tale. Set against the backdrop of a time not unlike today, when public finances are strained and museums are scrambling to make ends meet, this book serves as a reminder that one of the core functions of the museum is as a guardian of the objects kept inside its walls and the histories, values and knowledge these objects embody. Schindlbeck sums this up poignantly in his last sentence to the book: “[The] transformation of a collected figure, ceramic, bark cloth painting, and so forth into an arbitrary article of exchange… is an attack on the self-respect of any curator or collector of ethnographic materials” (p. 220).