



PAUL BASU LECTURE

# Museum conservation and the *forensis* of provenance

Mar 31, 2025 02:00 PM Pacific Time  
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The last decade has seen the renewed politicisation of museums, museum collections and museum practice. This is especially true in the context of ethnographic or world cultures museums, which are often perceived to be the most inextricably entangled in colonial histories, ideologies and power relations. In efforts to decolonise, the work of restitution, repair and relationship-building has become a priority for many such museums, and provenance research has taken on a heightened role in rewriting the biographies of objects, with especial attention paid to establishing the circumstances of collection, informing ethical deliberations in the present. Documentation of collections is, however, often very limited and, more often than not, conventional approaches to provenance research are unable to provide certainty regarding the acquisition of collections. Provenance researchers, too, soon reach the ‘constitutive limits’ of the colonial archive, forced to confront its absences and silences.

In this presentation, Paul Basu draws upon various case studies to rethink provenance research, shifting our attention from the forensic investigation into the origins and chains of ownership of objects to a relational process, which brings together a community of stakeholders and perspectives. (The adjective ‘forensic’, we might note, derives from the Latin *forensis*, meaning ‘of the forum’.) On the one hand, this shift decentres museum-based expertise; on the other hand, however, it opens up possibilities for contemporary conservation practice to contribute in new ways to ethical reflection, not least in destabilising our understanding of what an object is, where it comes from, and fostering communities of care.

BIO

Paul Basu is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oxford and a Curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum. He is also currently President of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association and Chair of the Scientific Board of the Museo delle Culture in Milan. Specializing in critical heritage, museum and material culture studies in transcultural contexts, Basu draws upon a wide range of ethnographic, historical and participatory methods to explore how pasts are differently materialized and mediated in the present, and how they shape futures. His research explores the complex ways in which natural as well as cultural heritage is entangled in shifting regimes of value and geopolitical configurations. His work has often involved re-engagements with colonial archives and collections relating to West Africa, exploring their ambiguous status as both sites of epistemic violence and, potentially, resources for communities to recover cultural histories, memories and alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Before becoming an anthropologist, Basu trained in film and television production, and he continues to use audio-visual, as well as other multimodal and participatory approaches, in his research. He has designed and curated numerous exhibitions and museum spaces.

Lecture will be followed by a panel discussion with Erica P. Jones, Senior Curator of African Arts and Manager of Curatorial Affairs at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, and Glenn Wharton, Professor of Art History and Conservation of Material Culture, Chair of the UCLA/ Getty Interdepartmental Program in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage.