Towards a Global History of Provenance Research (Paris, 22-23 Jun 26)

Paris, École du Louvre, Jun 22–23, 2026
Deadline: Apr 30, 2026

Margot Renard

International Inaugural Conference of the UNESCO Chair–École du Louvre Provenance Research, Sensitive Objects and International Issues.

Towards a Global History of Provenance Research —
Historical, Methodological, Legal, Political and Philosophical Dimensions.

The inaugural conference of the UNESCO Chair at the École du Louvre aims to cast a retrospective gaze upon the conditions that gave rise to provenance research and upon the reasons why it has become an indispensable practice today — in the management of museum collections, in art-historical and archaeological research, and in international relations alike.
Far from being a recent invention or the product of a linear and steady expansion, the current imperative to establish the full biographical history of museum and library collections is, in fact, an ancient criterion of the historiography of arts and cultures. Its trajectory of use, and its place within the hierarchy of scientific methods of inquiry, has been marked by threshold moments in which art history intersected with the fields of politics, international relations, and law. External conditions — such as geopolitical shifts or developments in legislation and jurisprudence — have at times fostered its development; conversely, the strengthening of provenance research methodologies has given rise to conceptual innovations in adjacent fields of art history. Thus, from the 1970s onwards, notions such as professional ethics (the ICOM Code of Ethics), and more recently relational ethics (Sarr, Savoy, 2019) or the pluriversal (Diagne, Amselle, 2018) have been elaborated in order to reexamine intercultural relations from a decentred perspective.
At a time when training programmes and scholarly initiatives mobilising provenance research are multiplying, this international conference aims to interrogate the historiographical foundations of a global history of provenance research — taking the European and north-American contexts as its point of departure — and to document its key chronological stages and the intellectual and scholarly fields it has engaged. The formalisation of this knowledge can only serve, ultimately, to inform in a measured and critical manner the enterprise of historical justice and global ethics now embraced by the international museum community. This objective will be developed within the framework of the UNESCO Chair – École du Louvre across several international conferences, which will subsequently extend their scope to non-European contexts.
The guiding question of the conference consists in examining the writing of a global history of Provenance Research as a scholarly practice, institutional apparatus and professional culture, by articulating multiple genealogies (art history and archaeology, museums, the art market, institutions), methodologies (object biography, sources and databases, descriptive standards, objec-

tives), legal regimes and doctrines (due diligence, good faith, prescription, immunities, restitutions), philosophical and ethical frameworks (human rights, professional ethics, restorative justice, epistemology of proof, transparency, accountability) and the international context within which these theories and practices were formulated.
The operational objectives of the conference are to map national and transnational practices and their points of friction, to compare institutional models (provenance units in museums, commissions) and to establish a shared foundation of vocabulary and best practices, with a view to contributing to the four-year programme of the UNESCO Chair – École du Louvre.

Thematic Strands

Contributions must fall within one of the following thematic strands:

Historical Strand

The historical strand will encompass the full range of scientific, political, administrative, and institutional histories that have, across Europe, motivated the key events and milestone dates in the structuring of Provenance Research. Contributions may address, without limitation, the following themes:
• Provenance research in art history: the trajectory of an investigative method;
• Provenance research in archaeology: trafficking, excavation contexts, dispersal;
• Provenance research in information sciences : description, taxonomy;
• Provenance research and illicit trafficking: from war spoils to international terrorism;
• Missions concerned with spoliated property 1933–1945 in Europe: Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Switzerland…;
• The Washington Principles: the context of their formulation and their reception in Europe;
• The recognition of indigenous peoples' rights: history and reception in Europe;
• The commissioning of reports in France: Report Restituer le patrimoine africain, F. Sarr, B. Savoy, 2018; Rapport Biens culturels spoliés pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, D. Zivie, 2018 ; Améliorer la sécurisation des acquisitions des musées nationaux, C. Giacomotto, M-C. Labourdette, A. Oseredczuk, 2022; Patrimoine partagé : universalité, restitutions et circulation des œuvres d'art, J-L. Martinez, 2023;
• The establishment of provenance research units in Europe: Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Switzerland…;
• The museology of provenance research: a history of presentation frameworks.

Methodological Strand

The methodological strand will cover the history of the development of methods, standards and vocabulary employed by institutions and provenance researchers, as well as the training programmes that have emerged over recent decades. Contributions may address, without limitation, the following themes:
• ICOM international and the dissemination of the Code of Ethics within museum practice;
• Object biographies & network mapping: macro and micro levels;
• Questions of vocabulary: definition and evolution;
• Quantitative and qualitative methods;
• Provenance research: the systematisation of a practice;

• Digital databases and data banks: construction, use, evolution;
• Digital technology in provenance research: open data, artificial intelligence;
• Training models: initial and continuing education.

Legal Strand

The legal strand will cover the history, in Europe and North America, of the construction of the principal legal instruments motivating provenance research in both public and private law, as well as the modalities of their application from national or comparative perspectives on legal regimes and doctrines. Contributions may address, without limitation, the following themes:
• The principle of inalienability: history of a French legal concept;
• The construction of the French legislative framework: from ad hoc legislation to framework laws;
• Legislative frameworks in Europe: Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Switzerland…;
• Judicial practice: application of legislation, case law;
• Legislative frameworks in north-America: Canada, USA
• NAGPRA and its evolution;
• Case studies in the application of legal regimes and doctrines;
• The strengths and limitations of legal instruments.

Philosophy and Ethics Strand

The philosophy and ethics strand will cover the history of the texts and norms that have led to the introduction of a moral dimension into the mechanisms governing the transfer and circulation of works, as well as an examination of more recent conceptual innovations indicating the coexistence — at times divergent — of legal norms, professional practices and ethical standards. Contributions may address, without limitation, the following themes:
• The founding texts of a principle of professional ethics and deontology (Letters to Miranda, etc.);
• New conceptual frameworks: relational ethics, counter-investigation, lateral universalism, the pluriversal;
• What is restorative justice ?
• New acquisition practices in museums;
• Epistemology: what constitutes proof of provenance? Degrees of uncertainty;
• Transparency of sources vs. data security and confidentiality risks;
• Applied ethics: dilemmas and decision-making;
• The art market: regulation and ethics.

Political History and International Relations Strand

The political history and international relations strand will cover the geopolitical context in which provenance research emerged, as well as the new forms and modalities of international relations that have reinforced its scholarly relevance. Contributions may address, without limitation, the following themes:
• The end of the Cold War and access to sources and archives;
• The historiography of the Shoah and its extensions into provenance research;
• The question of colonial property in European foreign policies;

• The UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Return or Restitution of Cultural Property: history, role and prospects;
• The elaboration of international frameworks and instruments: the 1970 Convention, UNIDROIT, the Washington Principles;
• The European Union and the Terezín Declaration of 2009;
• Anglo-Saxon approaches (USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand) to indigenous peoples' rights and their global dissemination;
• Restitutions : new diplomatic practices ?
• United Nations resolutions and the fight against the financing of terrorism;
• The role of civil society: new public expectations?

Proposals (500 words), in English or in French, accompanied by a brief curriculum vitae (5 lines), should be submitted no later than 30 April 2026 by email to Margot Renard (margot.renard@ecoledulouvre.fr) and Isabelle Anatole-Gabriel (isabelle.anatole-gabriel@ecoledulouvre.fr).
Selected contributors will be notified no later than 15 May 2026 and will receive further details regarding the modalities of their participation.
The international conference will be held in English and French in a hybrid format.

Conference under the direction of Isabelle Anatole-Gabriel, Research Centre of the École du Louvre
Scientific Committee:
Claire Barbillon
Clémentine Bories
Catherine Chevillot
Anne-Solène Rolland
David Zivie
Véronique Chankowski
Rosemary Joyce

Reference:
CFP: Towards a Global History of Provenance Research (Paris, 22-23 Jun 26). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 9, 2026 (accessed Nov 17, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/51919>.