

Debates: provenance, deficits and governance

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The cultural institutions of Basel have not been spared controversy. The most important debates of the past two decades concern provenance. Part H discussed the Kunstmuseum's 1939 purchases and the claim of the heirs of Curt Glaser, which was settled in 2020.¹ The best-known Swiss controversy of recent years, concerning the Bührle collection in Zurich, did not involve Basel. It has nevertheless raised expectations for all Swiss museums with regard to provenance research, transparency and the treatment of works sold under persecution.² The Museum der Kulturen faces analogous questions about objects acquired in colonial contexts. At the federal level, the Confederation has supported research and a national commission on cultural heritage with a problematic past.³

A second debate concerns money and management. In 2023 and 2024 the Kunstmuseum Basel reported a significant operating deficit, which led to political criticism, an external review and changes in its management and governance. A new director took office during this period, with the restructuring of the museum's finances among the first tasks.⁴ The episode illustrates a general problem of large museums, whose costs for buildings, security, insurance and loans rise faster than public budgets. For a city that relies on its museums as a location factor, the financial stability of its flagship is a matter of economic as well as cultural policy.

A third debate concerns the relationship between private patrons and public institutions. When a museum depends on loans and gifts from a small number of families and foundations, those families acquire influence over its programme. Their withdrawal can leave gaps that public budgets cannot fill. The withdrawal of the Staechelin loans showed this risk. Governance codes for museums and foundations, such as those published by SwissFoundations and the international museum organisations, address it through rules on conflicts of interest, deaccessioning and the terms of long-term loans.⁵ For the families themselves, a written agreement on the

terms of a loan is as much a part of wealth planning as the deed of the foundation that holds the works.

1 Notes

1. On the provenance cases of the Kunstmuseum Basel, see Part H, Chapter V. To be verified. ↩
2. On the debate on the Emil Bührle collection at the Kunsthaus Zürich and the independent review of its provenance research (report published 2024), see the publications of the Kunsthaus Zürich and the city of Zurich. Status to be verified. ↩
3. On the federal initiatives on cultural heritage from colonial contexts and the establishment of an independent federal commission for cultural heritage with a problematic past, see the publications of the Federal Office of Culture. Status to be verified. ↩
4. On the deficit of the Kunstmuseum Basel reported for 2023, the subsequent review of its finances and governance and the changes of director and commercial management in 2024 and 2025, see the press releases of the Präsidialdepartement Basel-Stadt and the Kunstmuseum Basel. Status to be verified. ↩
5. On governance standards for foundations and museums, including the Swiss Foundation Code of SwissFoundations and the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, see the publications of these organisations. To be verified. ↩

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