

# Duplicates in museums

## Becoming transparent about past curatorial practices

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Comb, Solomon Islands, 19th century production date, provenance unknown (2024,Q.143). © The Trustees of the British Museum

This doctoral project examines the historical practice of acquiring and dispersing so-called 'duplicates.' Such objects were not added to a museum's permanent collection as they were considered 'surplus.' Their unaccessioned 'duplicate' status enabled museums to exchange such objects or dispose of them in other ways.

'Duplicate, in the context of the collection, refers to double, surplus, repetitive, and excess.'

(Nichols, 2021: 180)



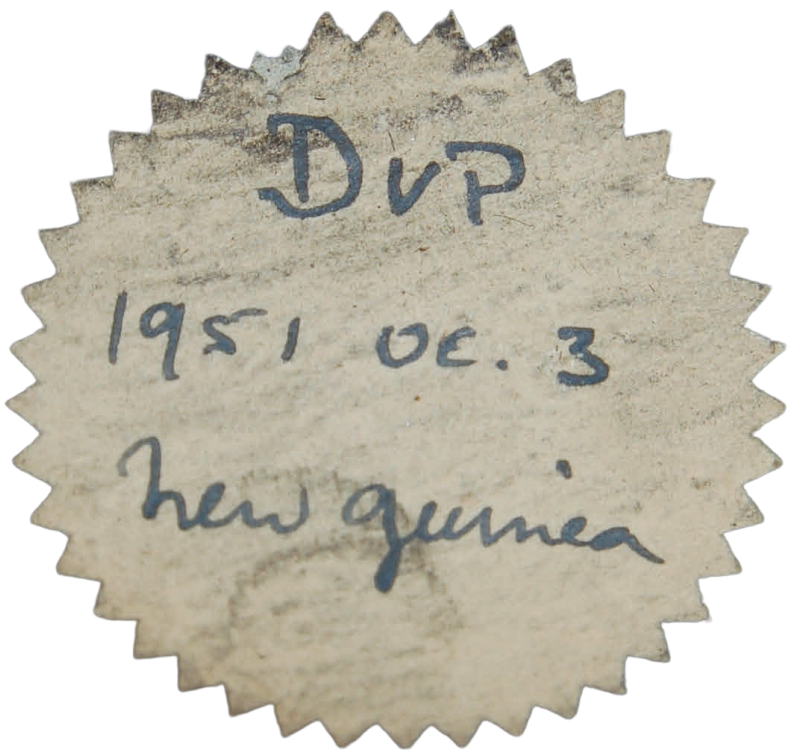
Archival documents relating to duplicate exchanges between the British Museum and the Wereldmuseum (Amsterdam and Leiden) in the 19th century. © The Trustees of the British Museum

By focusing on the British Museum, the project expands on duplicates research undertaken by scholars at Royal Botanical Gardens Kew, Ethnological Museum Berlin, the Smithsonian Institution and Queensland Museum. Research in this area has emphasised the ambiguity of duplicate designations, and the need to examine the historical and political context in which duplicate systems operated. Colonial collecting practices for example enabled museums to expand their collections to such an extent that 'duplicate' objects became available.

The circulation of 'duplicate' objects between institutions, collectors and commercial markets has resulted in the loss of provenance and object histories. Traces of duplicate practices in museum archives can be difficult to detect due to the largely undocumented state of these objects and transactions. The project uses provenance research to map exchange patterns and duplicate trends over longer periods and across collections at the British Museum. Data transparency between institutions with dispersed collections and digitised archives is also crucial.



Fish-hook, Tahiti, possibly 19th century production date, provenance unknown (2024,Q.87). © The Trustees of the British Museum



Becoming transparent and doing our research includes examining past curatorial practices and their impact on collections and access today. Research on duplicates challenges notions of museums as stable and fixed entities.

'The matter-of-factness of duplicates have led to their historiographical neglect.'

(Heumann, MacKinney and Buschmann, 2021: 261)