

ABSTRACT

Belkov P. L. Essays on a history of the early oceanic collections in MAE

The book reports on the early history of oceanic collections at the Peter the Great Museum for Anthropology and Ethnography of Russian Academy of Sciences (in short MAE). From this point of view, the main task of the research was to find a number of written records (“documentary evidence”) concerning origins of the collections under consideration. The main objects were two classical museum highlights: collection 505 (“Cook Collection”, 1780) and collection 736 (“Admiralty Museum Collection”, 1828).

Now, oceanic collections of the late 18th and early 19th centuries held in MAE became well-documented after author’s ten years sitting at the desk in the archives in S.-Petersburg. All that apart, the present study couldn’t be accomplished without applying results obtained by previous generations of Russian scientists, because the “use of documents in identifying ethnographic specimens” in MAE dates from the mids of 19th century. The first reconstruction of Cook–Behm collection by F. Russow and E. Petri at the turn of the 19th century is a clear proof of the fact.

Hence information on the provenance and especially movements of these collections might be considered rather complete, we can start a development. The issue is following: although we seem to know all about the content of acquisitions from accompanying lists and old catalogues at the Imperial Kunstkamera (1747–1803) and the Imperial Academy of Sciences Museum (1803–1836), we are not yet to begin revealing objects housed in MAE one by one without having them match some catalogue entries. The hit-and-miss method is a good implement only in very rare cases when it comes to the most simple “equations”. Actually, we need much more information to correspond ethnographical specimens to their places in the old lists. As it is known, such data may be extracted from labels connected with particular objects. Unfortunately, in all aged European museums only a small percentage of old labels persists to the present day. MAE represents a kind of exception in two ways: (1) a frequency of saved labels and (2) practical continuity of covering of set of the museum materials in terms of written records (“quellen” or “sources”). This allows us to build rows of labels. The last strike would be to use the elimination method which means checking individual items against the whole “text” of MAE collections.