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The study of the market for precolonial Latin American material (or ‘pre-Columbian art’) has grown slowly but steadily over the past three decades . These studies have largely focused on the main centers of collecting and dealing in this material: France, Germany, and the United States. Less attention has been paid to how these larger market centers influenced collecting in more peripheral locations in Europe.

This article studies the formation of precolonial Latin American collections of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. Through a numerical and statistical analysis of the acquisition of these objects, I aim to provide insight into how these collections were formed, when the main periods of collecting occurred, and how this maps onto patterns seen in other countries, trying to ascertain to what extent these museums were embedded in a global market for this material. Ultimately, this data-driven history of collecting should not only enhance our understanding of the historical processes affecting acquisition, but also give an indication of the extent to which these collections are based on strategic and calculated notions of value employed by museum staff in the acquisition of objects.

Conceptually, I suggest that looking at the provenance of this material through the lens of Howard Becker’s concept of ‘Art Worlds’ (2008[1983]) can open up new fields of research that focus on understanding not just the biographies/itineraries of objects, but the wider socio-historical conjunctures that created the collections we have today. Finally, I propose testing out a set of novel data-driven methodologies (including network analysis and knowledge graph embedding) to study these processes at an unprecedented scale.

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