

Museums, dealers and hunters: acquisition networks of scientific specimens between Brazil and Europe, c.1890–1914

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, the major European science museums had significant collections of animals, plants, minerals, and ethnographic artifacts from overseas. Many of these collections were obtained through large expeditions. However, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, we notice other acquisition strategies: suppliers and go-betweens settle in different parts of the world and start to systematically send specimens to Europe. The aim of this presentation is to analyze the role of suppliers and go-betweens by discussing a specific case. We examine the relationships between three actors: Hermann von Ihering (1850–1930), a German zoologist who resided in Brazil and was director of the Museu Paulista (São Paulo State Museum) from 1894 to 1916; Ferdinand Schwanda (1856–1913), a hunter who settled in northeastern Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century; and William Rosenberg (1868–1957), a specimen dealer based in London. The main source of this study is the correspondence between Ihering and the other two agents, available in the archives of the Museu Paulista. By examining the letters, we discuss how Ihering supported the work of Schwanda and intermediated his business relations with European dealers. We also address the integration of these agents into a global network and the development of a market for scientific specimens on a global scale. We aim, with this microanalysis, to approach the history of museums and collections from a transnational perspective. To gather collections, produce knowledge, and hold exhibitions, the Museu Paulista, through its director, maintained exchange relationships with leading museums and scientists in Europe and Latin America. Besides these exchanges, the Museu Paulista relied on a market for natural history specimens, which sustained itself only through the presence of buyers in Europe. On the other side, European museums interested in neotropical nature benefited from the creation of a museum in São Paulo, which played the role of intermediary and promoter in this market.