

Adding Value: Recent Trends in Museum Exhibitions of Asian-Pacific Artifacts

Guest Editor's Introduction

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Focusing empirically on transcultural phenomena in-and-out of China, South Korea, and Indonesia, the three papers in this special section of *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* interrogate important aspects of transcultural circulations and exhibitions of objects between Euro-America and the Asia-Pacific, both historically and currently.

The three papers are a selection of contributions to the conference Changing Global Hierarchies of Value? Museums, Artifacts, Frames, and Flows, which I co-hosted at the University of Copenhagen and the National Museum of Denmark in the summer of 2018 as part of the research project “Global Europe: Constituting Europe from the Outside In through Artifacts.” The conference provided an opportunity for museum experts and researchers across social/science and humanities disciplines to discuss hierarchies and processes of valuation and categorization in art, museums, and material culture. We asked: How does such a global hierarchy express itself spatially and materially in the world of museums, exhibitions, ethnographic and art categories, and in collecting and curatorial principles? And, more acutely, we asked if recent socio-economic changes and developments around the world in fact challenge or solidify the erstwhile Euro-American hierarchical domination.

In the first paper in this selection, Susan Eberhard traces the recent emergence and valuation of nineteenth-century Chinese export silverware as an object of large-scale exhibition and collection in Mainland China and Hong Kong. Eberhard places the surging domestic interest in Chinese-manufactured Western-style silver objects within the socio-political framework of a current post-socialist paradigm in China. She argues that export silver has undergone a symbolic transformation from being seen as a token of Western domination and humiliation to a feat of native craftsmanship and entrepreneurial design.

Then follows Park Ji Young's paper on two displays of Korean *sarangbang* architecture in the British Museum and the National Museum of Denmark. Through a semiotic reading of the two state-sponsored museum spaces,

Park problematizes efforts by the South Korean government to promote a certain image of Korean culture overseas by closely connecting traditional artifacts and Confucian culture in museum displays. At the same time, Park argues, the *sarangbang* displays effectively integrate knowledge of Korea within the extant Eurocentric value system of the universal museum.

Finally, in the third paper, Roberto Costa presents an ethnographic inquiry into the contemporary conditions of traditional Asmat woodcarvers. Based on fieldwork in Asmat communities in southern New Guinea and in a Jakarta edutainment park featuring displays of Asmat objects, Costa describes the challenges and dilemmas facing Asmat *wowipitsj* as the traditional ethos underlying their woodcarving practice is confronted with increasing commodification and global-market adaptation of Asmat material culture.

All three papers bring to the fore global structures and hierarchical categories that Herzfeld identified with his famous concept of the “global hierarchy of value.”¹ In his 2004 monograph *The Body Impolitic*, Herzfeld analyzes the effects of a ubiquitous yet vaguely articulated set of cultural and ethical norms dominating the local and professional practices of artisans in Crete, norms which reflect a globally operating hierarchy of the proper and appropriate. Herzfeld explains “The increasingly homogenous language of culture and ethics constitutes a *global hierarchy of value*. This hierarchy, which clearly succeeds to the values promulgated worldwide by the erstwhile colonial powers of Europe [...] represents the most comprehensive and globally ramified form of common sense – the ultimate expression of cultural authority.”² The global value hierarchy thus echoes the geopolitical structures of domination instituted around the world in the Age of Imperialism. Herzfeld’s point is that everywhere a similar hierarchical indexing of cultural practices takes place (albeit with local characteristics), and that initially Euro-American values now operate globally, intertwined to the point of misrecognition and inseparability with locally embodied ideas and traditional practices.

In transcultural flows and circulations, local characteristics emerge through shifting translations and interpretations accompanying the material object, idea, image, or technology being produced and circulated.³ Two of the studies in this section are thematically related to Herzfeld’s study of Cretan artisans.

1 Michael Herzfeld, *The Body Impolitic: Artisans and Artifice in the Global Hierarchy of Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

2 Herzfeld, *The Body Impolitic*, 2–3. Emphasis in original.

3 Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 385–397; Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, “Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 191–213; Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Costa's paper investigates the ways in which Asmat woodcarvers seek to adapt their traditional practices to better meet current market demands and accelerate the outbound flow of objects. Similarly, as Eberhard explains in her contribution, a nineteenth-century silver retailer in Guangzhou would stamp a Western-style teapot with a mark resembling that of a famous American maker, leading to centuries of misunderstood and mislabeled provenance of such objects in US museums.

Symbolic meanings and value ascriptions change and fluctuate over time. Images and objects on display relate to shifting ideological and state-sponsored notions of the Self or to previously dominant identity narratives. Objects mean, and are made to express and represent, many different things in museums and exhibitions.⁴ Objects can lose previous meaning and sever relations to formerly powerful narratives, undergoing reinterpretation to emerge as signifiers of new notions of the national character, past and present. Such powerful notions find dissemination in museums across the Asia-Pacific, but also in rearranged ethnographic exhibitions of the region in Western museums, increasingly on the basis of financial and practical backing from Asian agents.

It is mechanisms such as these that allow Asmat woodcarvings to illustrate new developments in Indonesian state ideology, as Costa argues in his analysis of the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah edutainment park. Today, the park presents Asmat carvings as paragons of creative fusion in a postmodern setting celebrating commodification and innovation. It is also precisely these mechanisms that give rise to new museum interpretations of Chinese export silverware. As Eberhard tells us, Chinese exhibitions today have reimagined what used to be understood ideologically as an era of national humiliation as a period of technical and aesthetic flowering of traditional Chinese handicraft.

Such local or national reinterpretations of historical and cultural artifacts invite a wider reconsideration of the ideals and notions of universalism which historically underlie the Euro-American museum institution.⁵ Not only do museums in the Asia-Pacific region reconfigure and recontextualize their objects and collections in tandem with domestic ideological developments on the state level, but economically powerful states and corporate actors have now also taken various steps to intervene directly in the way their

4 Neil G. W. Curtis, "Universal Museums, Museum Objects and Repatriation: The Tangled Stories of Things," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006): 117–27.

5 Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995); Susan Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995); Jens Sejrup, "Unrealizations: The Making and Unmaking of Two Japanese-Designed Extensions to European Museums," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 6 (November 2019): 823–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877919857390>.

respective cultures are represented in prominent museums in Euro-America. Especially in recent decades, newly powerful economies in the international system of culture, art, and exhibitions have affected the claims and narrative logic of exhibitions across Europe.⁶ But how do such interventions by Asian-Pacific agents impact a global value hierarchy and the European Enlightenment tradition of the universal museum?

In Park's paper, precisely such issues take center stage as she unravels the South Korean government's motivation for facilitating and financing the establishment of *sarangbang* architectural structures and museum displays overseas. Park underlines the central role of such government activities for state efforts to engage in value-adding "nation-branding" and the cultural promotion of (South) Korea through objects meant to signify the Confucian tradition as state ideology. In that process, Park argues, Korean state agents effectively affirm the universal values and institutional dispositions enacted in museum practice.

A preoccupation with issues of authenticity and appropriation of objects as acts of value addition and accumulation runs across the contributions to this special section. As Costa's paper reveals, a logic of hyperreality and simulacra permeates the production and exhibition of Asmat woodcarvings in Indonesia today. What happens to authenticity and object valuation when personalized trinkets and souvenirs in a theme-park gift store sell for higher prices than the exhibited traditional archetypes to which they refer? The label "Asmat" is increasingly commoditized, Costa argues, generating objects made with traditional techniques but catering to global demands. This process effectively bends customary practice to churn out value-added commodities referring to traditional objects rather than representing social life and local functions in increasingly disadvantaged Asmat communities.

Similarly, as Eberhard explains, demand for export silver has surged among wealthy Chinese collectors eager to "repatriate" abducted tokens of Chinese material culture. And so, at auctions today, Chinese-produced silver items may fetch much higher prices than the Western models to which they refer precisely because they resemble them so well. Under the current post-socialist paradigm in China, the very fact that locally produced silver objects were able to confuse Western museums and collectors about their true provenance validates them as specimens of Chinese technical ingenuity and sophistication. The Chinese silver artifact accumulates exchange value *as a Chinese object* because it looks so European that even the Europeans for long did not realize it was made in China. Again, as in the Jakarta edutainment park,

6 Jens Sejrup, "Japanese Dreams: Kurokawa Kishō's Annex to the Van Gogh Museum and Its Later Re-Appropriation," *Museum History Journal* 11, no. 1 (2018): 76–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2018.1427344>.

the price and value of a derivative object can be seen to overtake those of its referent objects. Relatedly, in Park's paper, the exhibited Korean architectural structures are not exact copies of any particular historical building. Rather, they are replicated forms referring to an abstract generative principle (traditional Korean palatial architecture), objects appropriated and divorced from their historical and social context to convey a certain desirable image of Korean cultural tradition.

These papers collectively sketch out implications for museums and artifacts of an economic development over the past few decades that has empowered and capacitated state and corporate actors across the region far beyond their previous scope. Now Asian agents acquire or repatriate objects of heritage or sentimental value to their own societies, heavily influence auction prices and exchange values of art and ethnographica, actively and strongly engage Western collectors and collections, and directly influence the presentation and public dissemination of their indigenous cultures at top-level ethnographic and art museums across Euro-America. Recent economic and political developments in the Asia-Pacific have magnified the role of Euro-America as validator and value-adding matrix for local objects, artifacts, art, and traditions. Despite undeniable ruptures on its surface due to new accumulations of capital and capacities elsewhere, the global hierarchy of value with Euro-America at its apex remains largely in place. As these papers evidence, the cultural "far" and "near" are relative notions in a complex transcultural relationship. In terms of value accumulation and significance, local cultural artifacts still tend to benefit from an association with Europe and North America; they add value and prestige to their site of production and return from the West improved, valued, and symbolically uplifted.