

The East Asian Gallery at MKG as a Venue of Transcultural Negotiation

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Profile

Wibke Schrape is Head of the East Asian Department at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg. She worked as assistant curator at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin (2015–17) and functioned as assistant professor for Japanese art at the Institute of Art History, Freie Universität Berlin (2008–12). In 2018, she completed her dissertation on *Ikedo Koson (1803–68) and the Order of Images: Artistic and Art Historical Constructions of Rinpa* at FU Berlin. Wibke Schrape is co-editor of *Inky Bytes: Traces of Ink in the Digital Era* (2018) and *Elegant Gathering in a Scholar's Garden: Studies in East Asian Art in Honor of Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch* (2015).

The Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (MKG) understands its East Asian galleries as a venue of transcultural negotiation. It serves as a space of encounter with historic as well as contemporary East Asian art for local and international audiences. Transculturality rejects the notion of closed and homogeneous cultures. Cultures underlie a constant process of negotiation and translation in contact with other cultures. Transcultural approaches therefore stress shared interests and common values across national borders. The result is not a single global culture, but a plurality of social groups that constantly negotiate their individual cultural identity. Transcultural research towards a global art history goes hand in hand with postcolonial studies and similar developments in historiography such as “histoire croisée”. However, looking at art in a global context often has a tendency to emphasize -isms of any kind. It is therefore important to reach beyond mere visual associations or histories of influence and cope with the complexity of cultural identity in regard to a specific subject within a clearly defined space and time frame.

In the special exhibition *Mobile Worlds or the Museum of our Transcultural Present* (April to October 2018), curators Roger M. Buergel (Johann Jacobs Museum, Zurich) and Sophia Prinz (European University Viadrina, Frankfurt Oder) questioned the Eurocentric order of Western museums. Rather than classify objects according to epochs, geographies, art and non-art, they focused on the global movement of objects, people, and ideas. For this exhibition, I teamed up with the twelve-year old thing researcher Leif Raeder (Erich-Kästner-Schule, Hamburg Framsen) to prepare a display of *tsuba*. The MKG's collection of sword fittings consists of approximately 2,000 *tsuba* and about 500 other objects of sword fittings. First, Leif Raeder selected more than 100 *tsuba* at the storage that we digitalized together. Then he organized these *tsuba* according to categories of his own choice. Finally, 80 *tsuba* at *Mobile Worlds* were displayed in the following categories: Openwork, Black, Glossy, Spiders, Colorful, Very Old, Samurai, Special Material, Gold. These categories do not fit into one system. Some refer to techniques, others to material, visual appearance or iconography and “very old” to an historical organization. But surprisingly, these diverse categories helped people without knowledge of *tsuba* to understand this fascinating art. Of course working with school children is not a solution to avoid Orientalism. In contrast, working with untrained local audiences

might seem like a danger to deepen biases. But in fact it is not. It is our task as curators and specialists to provide the knowledge necessary to overcome Orientalism and Eurocentrism while keeping the collection approachable.

For the special exhibition *Inky Bytes: Traces of Ink in the Digital Era* (09/2018–01/2019), the MKG invited contemporary artists to work with the historic collection. *Inky Bytes* was not a survey exhibition on current Chinese ink art, but reflected the artistic networks between artists active in Hamburg and artistic centers of China. The exhibition even stretched into the city when Zhang Xiaofeng, Wu Qiong and Li Jie from Hangzhou and artists based in Hamburg joined forces to make stone rubbings of Hamburg's sites of historic value. Participating locals and visitors were able to get a new impression of their hometown with the help of a more than 1,500 year old Chinese reproduction technique. When people entered the East Asian Gallery, they first met something familiar such as rubbings of Hamburg's flood marks next to rubbings from the West Lake scenery. *Inky Bytes* literally picked up visitors at their own doorstep and introduced them to East Asian art.

The upcoming exhibition *Pure Luxury: East Asian Lacquer* (February to May 2019) conveys to visitors, why and how objects from Japan ended up at a museum of arts and crafts in Hamburg. One section introduces the artworks in their acquisition context or in relation to their previous owners. With regard to displaying Japanese art in a global context, some sections will include historic and modern examples of European lacquer as well as modern Japanese design from the MKG collection. These dialogue partners show how Japanese lacquer influences European design and vice versa. The exhibition *Among Friends: Japanese Tea Ceramics* (June 2019 to February 2020) will highlight the relationship between the MKG's founding director Justus Brinckmann (1843–1915) and the art trader S. Bing (1838–1905) as two key figures in the promotion of Japanese art around 1900. Both exhibitions are part of a two-year project (funded by the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius) to research the collection history in order to analyze international networks of trading, collecting, and promoting Japanese art between 1873 and 1915. This glimpse backwards enables the MKG to move forward. The potter Jan Kollwitz (*1960) and the novelist Christoph Peters (*1966) are invited to co-curate the exhibition and revise the collection in a contemporary dialogue of friends.

All these examples of displaying Japanese or Chinese art in a global context nourish relations and multiply points of contact. As curators we should provide technical and practical knowledge to preserve, handle, research, and display art. But most of all, we should provide access to art. There is not one story behind one object, but many different possibilities to approach an object. We need to encourage people from local children to international scientists to approach Japanese art in exhibitions, storages and online collections. The more people engage with an object and the more stories an object is allowed to tell, the more agency it can unfold and act in a truly global context.