

# COLLECTING ASIAN ART IN PRAGUE: CULTURAL POLITICS AND TRANSCONTINENTAL NETWORKS IN 20th-CENTURY CENTRAL EUROPE

Organised by the Collection of Asian Art at the National Gallery Prague  
and the Austrian Science Fund's (FWF) research project  
"Patterns of Transregional Trails" (P29536-G26)

**17–18/6 2021**

**NATIONAL GALLERY PRAGUE**

**SALM PALACE AT HRADČANSKÉ SQUARE**

## SYMPOSIUM CONVENORS

**Markéta Hánová**, Director of the Collection of Asian Art, National Gallery Prague

**Yuka Kadoi**, Project Leader, Institute of Art History, University of Vienna and Austrian Science Fund (FWF)

**Zdenka Klimtová**, Curator of the Collection of Asian Art, National Gallery Prague

**Simone Wille**, Project Leader, Institute of Art History, University of Innsbruck and Austrian Science Fund (FWF)

To attend the conference online please visit

<https://www.ngprague.cz/en/event/3092/collecting-asian-art-in-prague-conference>

# PROGRAMME

**17/6 2021**

**Day 1**

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**WELCOME & INTRODUCTION**

10.00–10.10

by **Alicja Knast**, Director General, National Gallery Prague

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**PANEL 1**

10.10–11.00

**ENTANGLED HISTORIES OF CULTURAL POLITICS**

Moderator Simone Wille

**Markéta Hánová**, National Gallery Prague

**THE BIRTH OF THE ASIAN ART COLLECTION AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY IN PRAGUE AND CULTURAL POLITICS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

A new-born Department of Oriental Art at the National Gallery in Prague (NGP), officially established by *a decree of the Ministry of Education, Science and Arts* on 16 November 1951, came under the programme of the centralisation of private property enforced by the new communist Czech government. Nonetheless, its conception would not have arisen without the interest in Asian art promoted by cultural politics and private collectors in the interwar period. During the era of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938), owing to the direction of international trade and cultural politics, the countries of the Far East were also coming to the forefront of interest. Lubor Hájek (1921–2000) arrived on the stage in 1952 as the first head of the new collection of Asian art at the NGP. He managed to bring together Asian artworks housed at the NGP and other state collections, such as the Oriental Institute, since the interwar period under the umbrella of the new department. Moreover, he saved the past heritage of mostly private collections after the communist confiscation. His effort was highlighted by the first permanent exposition of Chinese art at the chateau in Benešov nad Ploučnicí in Northern Bohemia which opened in spring 1961. In spite of heavy damage to the old Asian art collection caused by the fire at the chateau in 1969, the collection is celebrating its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

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**BREAK**

11.00–11.30

**PANEL 2**

11.30–12.30

**IN ACTIVE DIALOGUE WITH ASIA**

Moderator Markéta Hánová

**Yuka Kadoi**, Institute of Art History, University of Vienna, Austrian Science Fund (FWF)

**THE IDEALS OF THE EAST: ASIAN ART AND THE CRISIS OF VISUAL EXPRESSION  
ACROSS THE GLOBE, CA. 1900**

“The Ideals of the East: with Special Reference to the Art of Japan”, written by the Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzo (Okakura Tenshin, 1863–1913), is often considered a milestone in his intellectual life. Published on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War and written in English, “The Ideals of the East” made a significant impact not only on the Euro-American world but also on British colonies in Asia. While “The Ideals of the East” tends to be analysed from a perspective of Pan-Asianism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, I would like to look afresh at this study as the crisis point in representation across the globe.

**Tomáš Winter**, Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences

**PICASSO’S MEETING WITH BUDDHA**

In 1913, the Group of Fine Artists organized its third exhibition in Prague. It had a very special conception. Instead of works made by members of the Group the paintings exhibited were from “French” Cubists (Pablo Picasso, George Braque, André Derain) together with Czech folk art and Asian and African art. These artworks were lent from private collectors, and mostly came from Prague. I would like to explain the reason for such a strange mix of various works in the broader context of the appropriation, collecting, exhibiting and manipulation of Asian Art around 1913.

**LUNCH BREAK**

12.30–14.00

**PANEL 3**

14.00–15.00

**CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIC RE-ORIENTATION – PART 1**

Moderator Yuka Kadoi

**Johannes Wieninger**, former curator of the Asia collection, MAK – Museum of Applied Arts

**COLLECTING – SEARCHING – SHOWING**

**ASIAN ART IN CENTRAL EUROPE. COMPETING AND NETWORKING DURING  
THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY.**

Over the course of the economic “opening” of Japan, numerous collections of East Asian art, applied arts and ethnographic objects were created in Europe. The collectors were technicians and economists, traders and adventurers who created a network across Europe that still lives on today through their gifts to public museums. After the First World War, museums and universities in search of art turned their gaze to China, and a multiple race began: on the one hand, collections of Chinese art were brought together through purchase opportunities, on the other hand, museums all over Europe competed to carry out archaeological research, especially in China – and bring the corresponding objects home. Visible only after a long period of

consolidation new networks emerged. Beginning in the early 1970s international exhibitions brought the collections back together. The exhibition *Weltkulturen und moderne Kunst* (World Cultures and Modern Art) on the occasion of the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972 is of particular importance as a network builder.

**Uta Rahman Steinert**, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

### **BIG GIFTS TO KEEP FRIENDSHIP WARM**

In 1959, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the GDR and the People's Republic of China, the Chinese government donated 251 arts and crafts objects to the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) which were to complement the exhibitions of the Ostasiatische Sammlung (East Asian Collection), newly founded in 1952. The unusual donation came about on the basis of an agreement between the ministries of culture of the two countries. Accompanied by a small catalogue and celebrated as a testimony to the friendly relations and a contribution to a better understanding of China's history and culture, the state gift was promptly exhibited at the Pergamon Museum. But where did the pieces come from, who had selected them and according to what criteria? These questions have not been satisfactorily answered to this day. The paper aims to shed more light on the circumstances of the donation and how this important acquisition was integrated into the exhibition concepts of the newly founded museum. In doing so, the conditions on the German side will be examined first, which is, however, just a first step towards researching the donation.

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## **BREAK**

15.00–15.30

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## **PANEL 4**

15.30–16.30

### **CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIC RE-ORIENTATION – PART 2**

Moderator Michaela Pejčochová

**Agnieszka Kluczevska-Wójcik**, Vice-President, Polish Institute of World Art Studies Warsaw

### **“I HAVE SHOWN YOU JAPAN...” FELIKS JASIEŃSKI AND JAPANESE ART COLLECTIONS IN POLAND**

The first ever exhibition of Japanese art in Poland opened on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 1901 at the Warsaw Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts. Feliks Jasieński, author of *Manghha. Les promenades à travers l'art, le monde et les idées* (Paris 1901) and writer at the *Chimera Review* presented his Paris-born collection to a shocked public. The exhibition and its accompanying fiery debate in the press, which prompted the collector to relocate to Kraków, was a typical example of *succès du scandale*: provocation meant to bring the public's attention to a new artistic phenomenon which would have otherwise had no chance of existing in the mind of an average spectator. Jasieński's private museum, opened in 1903 at his Kraków apartment, became the epicentre of Polish Japonism and gathered a circle of amateurs of Japanese art. Further collections were created in the wake of this new interest, yet none matched the size or importance of the over thousand objects within Jasieński's own, which he donated to the National Museum in Kraków in 1920. A renaissance of interest in Japanese art in Poland came only with the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was once again related to Jasieński. 1994 saw the

opening of the Manggha Centre (now Museum) of Art and Technology in Kraków where his collection was deposited.

**Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik**, Associate Professor, Department of Asian Studies, University of Ljubljana

**COLLECTING EAST ASIAN ART IN SLOVENIA: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE VAZ PROJECT**

With a large database of East Asian material from Slovenian museums and institutions, the VAZ website (<https://vazcollections.si/>) connects various objects of East Asian origin on the national level and makes them accessible to the general public for the first time. Using virtual methods, it breathes new life into a number of interesting and inspiring objects, as well as reveals their stories and the identities of their owners, who over the last two centuries have either travelled to East Asia themselves for a reason or acquired them in some other ways. Most of the objects of East Asian origin were left behind as legacies by various individuals who travelled to China or Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a result of the newly established diplomatic relationships of Austro-Hungary with East Asia. This opened the seas for increasing number of Austro-Hungarian merchant and military ships, on board of which were also people from the Slovene ethnic territory.

**18/6 2021**

**Day 2**

**PANEL 5**

**10.00–11.00**

**CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND PROPAGANDA, PRIVATE AND  
Institutional Collecting**

Moderator Markéta Hánová

**Michaela Pejčochová**, National Gallery Prague

**EMISSARY FROM THE FAR EAST: VOJTĚCH CHYTL AND HIS SIGNIFICANCE FOR  
THE BUILDING OF THE COLLECTIONS OF ASIAN ART IN CENTRAL EUROPE**

The paper will introduce the career and activities of the painter, teacher and collector Vojtěch Chytil (1896–1936) and his exhibitions of Asian art in the Central European region. As a teacher of Western painting at the Beijing Fine Arts College in the Republican Period, Chytil had a unique opportunity to acquire artworks by famous as well as lesser known modern Chinese painters. He can be credited with introducing to Europe a number of masters of Chinese modern ink painting and his collection of Chinese, Tibetan and Japanese artworks was among the most extensive of his time. The talk will highlight significant objects from Chytil's collection and show their importance to the development of Asian art collections in our region.

**Beatrix Mecsi**, Art Historian, Associate Professor, ELTE Institute of East Asian Studies

**HOW DID AN ANCIENT TOMB FROM NORTH KOREA APPEAR IN HUNGARY?  
THE ANAK 3 TOMB'S MURAL COPIES IN CONTEXT**

In the collection of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asian Art (Budapest), there is a group of life size copies of the wall paintings of the Anak 3 tomb from Goguryeo, commissioned by a Hungarian diplomat in North Korea in the 1950s from contemporary North Korean painters. These copies are almost exact replicas of the original murals, attempting to represent even the damage to the wall, and realistic enough that in 2004 an exhibition was able to create a simulation of the tomb within the museum walls, as convincing as if the visitor had entered the tomb itself. Why were such paintings made? What was their role and function? How did they end up in a far-away country like Hungary? These are the questions the paper attempts to answer, discussing the intellectual background history, and placing the phenomenon in its context.

**BREAK**

**11.00–11.30**

**MODERNISM BETWEEN SOLIDARITIES, FRIENDSHIPS AND INTELLECTUAL EXCHANGES**

Moderator Simone Wille

**Zdenka Klimtová**, National Gallery Prague

**LUBOR HÁJEK AND INDIAN MODERNIST ART**

This year the National Gallery Prague's Asian Art Collection is celebrating two anniversaries: 70 years have passed since it was first established and it is 100 years since the birth of its founder, Lubor Hájek, who headed the collection from 1951 to 1986. He is best known for his work in the field of Chinese and Japanese art, and his findings remain valid and continue to be cited to this day. This paper, however, focuses on Hájek's activities associated with contemporary Indian art from the 1950s to the 1980s, specifically within the context of the international and cultural relations that existed between India and what was then Czechoslovakia. Lubor Hájek played an important role in organising these contacts and he can be credited with – amongst other things – starting the National Gallery Prague's collection of Indian Modernist art, which includes works by individuals such as M. F. Husain, Bhattacharya Chittaprasad, Ram Kumar, Ajit Chakravarti, and V. S. Gaitonde.

**Sanjukta Sunderason**, Assistant Professor, Art History, University of Amsterdam

**FREEDOMS IN MOTION: TRANSITS OF MODERN INDIAN ARTISTS IN CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE 1950S**

In this paper I will reflect on an initial set of ideas from the archives of artists from developing nations travelling to Central and Eastern Europe during the critical decades of decolonization and Cold War in the 1950s–1970s. My focus will be on the Indian artist Bhabesh Sanyal – who, along with many others during these years – travelled extensively to Central and Eastern Europe, and countries within the Socialist Bloc. Artists like Sanyal are examples of a new genre of artists from the newly independent countries in Asia/Africa, who were becoming artist-pedagogues, and artist-bureaucrats, and as such travelled as part of diplomatic missions, and government funding bodies/commissions. Such artists were represented not only at the new biennales of the South, but also nation-state driven transits of artists and artworks. My work on Sanyal is part of a larger project on three such artist/pedagogues/bureaucrats, the other two being Shakir Ali in Lahore, Pakistan, and Zainul Abedin in Dhaka, East Pakistan (Bangladesh after liberation war of 1971). All three artists travelled to countries in the Socialist Bloc as well as across the United States and Western Europe, and engaged with aesthetic pedagogies within the contexts of the places they travelled to. This reflected their own critical location in South Asia, where they were institution-builders. The uniqueness connecting them is also that each of them *migrated* to their new contexts (Sanyal, from Lahore to Delhi; Abedin from Calcutta to Dhaka; and Ali from Prague to Lahore) through the late-1940s, triggered by partition and new geopolitical shifts in the region along the path of the retreating British colonial empire. By exploring Sanyal's journeys – in the 1950s to eastern Europe – I will try to unpack the mutual understanding *between* the regions that are reflected via artists in transit. A critical question to explore will be: how did an artist/pedagogue/bureaucrat like Sanyal understand the question of "freedom"? And how did his journeys in socialist Europe shape his understanding of artistic modernity as a postcolonial artist?

**LUNCH BREAK**

12.30–14.00

**PANEL 7**

14.00–15.00

**TRANS-MODERNIST ROUTES BEYOND WESTERN EUROPE**

Moderator Jana Ryndová

**Simone Wille**, Art Historian, University of Innsbruck, Austrian Science Fund (FWF)  
**M. F. HUSAIN'S DRAWINGS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY  
PRAGUE. ARTISTIC FORM BEYOND NATIONAL REPRESENTATION.**

M. F. Husain (1915–2011) is considered to be one of India's most important modernist artists. As such, he gave form to Indian postcolonial modernist art with a commitment to the nation paired with an international and cosmopolitan agenda. He thus travelled extensively throughout his life showing his works in countries around the world. In 1952 he travelled to China as a delegate to the 1952 World Peace Congress in Beijing, in 1953 he visited Egypt and in 1955 he travelled to Czechoslovakia, showing his work in Prague. Further trips to Prague along with exhibitions of his works followed. His journey through the Czech lands is documented in an artist's book made of twenty-three original drawings in 1976. These drawings are with the National Gallery Prague and they document his interaction with several people and places from a transcultural perspective. Together with an earlier set of drawings that he made in Prague in 1956 and 1957 and the film *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities*, directed by the artist in 2004, in which Prague is featured as one of three cities, these works are discussed in connection with post-war artistic mobility and the artist's very personal connection with Central Europe.

**Jan Wollner**, Academy of Art, Architecture and Design, Prague

**CENTRAL EUROPEAN ARTISTS IN BAGHDAD**

Abstract watercolours by Sergio Núñez do not fit into any national art historical narrative. They were painted in Iraq in the early 1960s by the Czechoslovak artist of Chilean origin who was sent to Baghdad to teach at Tahreer College. They represent just one example of many artworks made in Iraq (and other Asian countries as well) by Central European artists who travelled there for various reasons – as members of official delegations, as tourists, or as teachers like Núñez. Speaking of "collecting Asian art", what is missing in such collections is also worth mentioning. The artworks made by Núñez and other Central European artists in Iraq remained in most cases in private archives and the stories of their creators are remembered just by their children as exotic chapters of family histories. I will try to examine the methodological conditions under which we could transfer the aforementioned artworks from private archives to public collections, from private family histories to the narratives of global art history.

**BREAK**

15.00–15.30

**Asian Art in Central Europe: Past, Present and Future**

Moderator Yuka Kadoi

**Matthew Rampley**, Research Fellow, Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences / ERC Principal Investigator, Continuity / Rupture: Art and Architecture in Central Europe 1918–1939, Masaryk University in Brno

**Asian Art, Czech Museums and the Manifesto of Decolonization**

In September 2020 a group of young scholars published the *Manifesto of Decolonization* (MANIFEST DEKOLONIZACE, <https://dekolonizace.cz/>). It was a mistake, they claimed, to assume that Central Europe was not touched by the wider postcolonial critique of art and culture; Austria-Hungary and, after it, Czechoslovakia, may not have had colonies in Africa, Asia or the Pacific region, but the Czech lands are still located in the heart of Europe and many Czechs still entertain a colonial imagination. One of the prominent areas where postcolonial criticisms have been mounted has been that of museum collecting. The museums of Europe (and North America) are packed with artefacts that were obtained under conditions ranging from colonial plunder to commercial exploitation. To what extent are such criticisms relevant to institutions in the Czech lands? Given that institutions such as the Moravian Gallery in Brno as well as the Náprstek Museum and the Museum of Applied Arts in Prague have substantial collections of Asian art, what sort of questions need to be asked about their histories and the means by which objects from outside of Europe ended up in their collections? What is the meaning of the Manifesto of Decolonization for museums in Brno, Prague and elsewhere in the Czech Republic?

**Partha Mitter**, Professor Emeritus, University of Sussex

**Decolonising Modernism**

The talk takes colonisation in a broader sense: even though a few regions such as India were formally colonised, western modernism exerted its cultural hegemony around the globe, creating an asymmetrical relationship between the centre and the periphery; the metropolis created the “originary” avant-garde discourse, and regions outside the centre suffer from the problem of derivativeness and time-lag. Within the global colonial order, Asia, Africa and Latin America were represented as being on the margins. Though less evident, there were margins within the centre as exemplified by Eastern and Central Europe. The talk will consider ways of decentring this unbalanced global situation by taking the case study of Indian art.

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