

Foreword

“Come, aware wordsmith, beautify a tale.”
(from the *Hamzanama*)

Working with “(hi)stories”

Brigitte Moser, Angela Völker, Johannes Wieninger

An exhibition “restricted” to two long-past centuries and the relations between two continents stimulates thoughts that tend more towards the general aspects of the work of the museum and its curators with the objects—here the result of 150 years of collecting. The priority for us is not the function of an object; we are also concerned with its “(hi)story” (*Geschichte* = “history” as well as “story” in German). This often involves bridging temporal gaps that transcend the human sense of time. Historical awareness needs supporting constructs, a grid of coordinates as it were, in which we can mobilize our ideas. Can the museum object create historical awareness by becoming part of our “historicising” grid of ideas? How far does the creator of a work of art think ahead? And how far does the owner or curator of a work of art think back? Works of art decay, are conscientiously conserved, but destroyed equally so, or may disappear from our minds for other reasons. They pervade history pictures, generate myths and realities, leave locations and cause time shifts, are sometimes scattered across the whole globe. The artist has to abandon his works to their fate. Should works of art also be messages to the future? If so, what do the messages say? What do we understand of them? How do we treat them? “The medium is the message” was Marshall McLuhan’s conviction; forget the content—what counts is presence! Does this mean that the only thing that counts is our perspective, that original intentions and contexts are unnecessary ballast? Does the historical object conceal a message from faraway times and unknown regions and domains, or is it first and foremost an object and takes effect out of its own presence and presentation? Heinz Forster puts us to right in the name of the school of radical constructivism: the message is not what is being said, but what is being understood!

The questions concern observers and “curators/editors”, educators, agents, intermediaries and dealers, art lovers (collectors) of museum objects, and so forth: what do we want to see in the object? How do we interpret it? Here we hark back to prefabricated thought structures, to systems we have learned and accepted; we are so to speak “conditioned” observers, administrators, owners and describers. As

specialists in history, we take on an active role. Can we bridge the gaps of history by researching collections and archives in partnership with academic experts from other faculties, specialists on Iran, China, theologians, conservators and so forth? Is this a way of giving the object its place back in history? Does this affect how we work with the things in the museum and might we say: they don't belong to anyone, but have become part of our life? Does "our" treatment of historical objects in museums restrict the role of the observer to that of the voyeur?

In the MAK, as in other collections, contributors and staff with the most diverse interests have for generations gathered together works whose compilation or combination in a building or in a presentation was never intended, either by commissioning client or maker. They provide an example showing that historical objects can be exposed to continuous changes in interpretation caused by museums and visitors. The classification of the objects is subject to constant scrutiny, evaluations are frequently modified; as time goes by this results in appropriate, ever-changing "views" of the work of art, lending it new—or merely altered—values and purposes, perhaps even discovering hidden ones.

The *Hamzanama* is a heroic epic illustrated in India around 1570. It forms the center of our exhibition, an illustrative and exemplary key work of an epoch in which ideas of boundaries and accessibility were in a continual state of flux.

GLOBAL:LAB tells of a time in which the concept of "culture" did not yet exist in the modern sense and received knowledge was constantly put to the question and scrutinized. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries set the scene for scientific and geographical discoveries of a world growing at breakneck speed and changing into something diametrically opposed to what had gone before, thus they seem to embody the final turning point into "a new age". Medicinal and artistic investigation of the human body, new concepts about the cosmos, the discovery of new continents and countries through maritime exploration, trade and politics are all part of this, and above all the recognition of alternatives to the predominant ethos and patterns of life.

What we see surviving from these fluctuating, now scarcely retrievable identities are volatile and fragmentary artefacts, which we try to puzzle out into histories, the stories they can tell (*Geschichten*). The grand narrative of history—the "big picture"—is documented only fragmentarily, so we approach it by compiling or relating short "(hi)stories" to each other with the help of historical objects. They occasionally seem new and indeed fantastical, but we still regard them as true.

Sixty folios of the *Hamzanama* are kept—well locked up—in the drawers of the MAK depot thirty feet under the museum garden. Created 450 years ago, only 200 in total of the original 1400 folios have been preserved in various collections across the globe. The story of its destruction and scattering lies in the mists of the past. When there is no basis for knowledge, myths start to thrive. Such an extraordinary and monumental work must have a fitting story; it was imagined that insignia and works of an emperor were dethroned and dragged through the mud like the emperor himself. Thus the story goes that remnants of the *Hamzanama* were only good for stuffing holes in windows, and, what is more, in a poverty-stricken and inaccessible hut. It was only through doughty travellers and museum curators that the abused folios were recognized, torn from the hands of ignorant barbarians, and rescued as trophies for the halls of cultures: a story that was invented, unprovable, but swallowed whole.

The history of the Vienna convolute sounds less romantic: the *Hamzanama*—thus the myth—belonged to the insignia of the Moguls, forming an imperial triad in combination with the peacock throne and the koh-i-noor. Unlike throne and diamond, which were both lost, the paintings pleased generations of princess and princes—until 1873, 300 years after their creation, when they cropped up once more in a World Exhibition to bear witness to the fabulous wealth of the cultures of Persia and India. Restored and rebound in saffron leather volumes, the 60 folios of the *Hamzanama* were proudly presented at the Vienna World Exhibition as the treasure of a Persian prince and through purchase passed into the keeping of the library of the imperial and royal Museum of Art and Industry (today the MAK, Austrian Museum of Applied Arts) in Vienna.

The “Vienna” Hamza folios have accompanied the history of the museum since 1873. They have wandered through depots and exhibition rooms and are today in their fully air-conditioned “final disposal site”. The relationship of the museum staff to this costly, “exotic” bundle of folios was ambivalent. It was always seen as an exceptional treasure of the collection, but museum people were also unsure of how to treat them. In 1897, 39 folios were put on show along with other graphics within the context of the permanent exhibition. They were never published until 1925. In 1969, the museum held an exhibition with a small catalogue. ADEVA (Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt—Academic Printing and Publishing Institute)—Graz printed a facsimile album in 1979. Between 1979 and 1986, various Hamza folios were put on show at

irregular intervals alongside a selection of the unique collection of Oriental carpets.

The impulse towards a more intensive and comprehensive programme of research into the *Hamzanama* came from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington: 86 of the folios scattered throughout the world were conserved and shown in 2002/2003 in four venues - Washington D.C., New York, London and Zurich. United again after almost 450 years, all these fabulous pictures with the thrills, splendor and even tragedy of their stories now hung on the walls of famous museums. No comic, no Manga, no science fiction film no matter how mind-blowing can vie with their intensity of narrative, their intoxication of colors. Displayed in dense arrangement in each of the exhibitions, it was at once a breathtaking yet exhausting experience. How fortunate in contrast was once the young Akbar; he was shown only one folio at a time and had the leisure—guided through the picture by the narrator—to give full rein to the heady steed of his imagination. Today the work's fragmentary survival bars us from a full enjoyment of the heroic epic in continuity—barely fifteen per cent of the original is preserved (in the MAK less than five per cent). Our exhibition attempts to provide a broader framework for the breathtaking profusion of the Hamza pictures, to place objects next to the large-format “miniatures” which will open up new dimensions.

The fantastic tales of the *Hamzanama* inspired Salman Rushdie to continue the narrative: his last novel “The Enchantress of Florence” is a fictional feat of the imagination linking the princely court of the Mogul ruler Akbar with the Florence of the Medicis. In connection with this novel he gave a lecture at the Emory University in Atlanta in February 2007 including references to and detail descriptions of the folios in the MAK collection. This is being published for the first time in a printed version in this catalogue. Barbara Frischmuth uses all her knowledge of history and literature to let her thoughts roam around a Persian courtly jacket from the MAK collection, hazarding a blithe and witty interpretation that in the end is completely persuasive, though concentrating more on powers of expression than detailed historical or theoretical analyses. The articles by the catalogue authors and the comments on the objects in the exhibition also tell their “stories” from a contemporary point of view. They testify to the opinion of their authors and formulate new theories, inspired by objects that are brought together for the first time in this exhibition.

The exhibition revolves around the concept of “princely prestige”, its nucleus formed by the 60 folios of the *Hamzanama* and surrounded by European tapestries and screens from Japan and China. The Mogul court considered itself the centrepiece of the world and cultivated

connections in all directions; it was interested both in the neighboring East and in the far West. India was the pivot of international contacts.

Grouped around this centre are three themes with sections of varying size and scope: at the start we have the discoveries of new geographic and cosmic realities. Artists were at the forefront in addressing the various investigations into the composition of heaven and earth. In their works—clocks, books, paintings—we can experience today observations and knowledge that at the time were new and pointed towards the future, spurring human beings to overstep boundaries, arousing interest in foreign things. Geographic distances and borders do not necessarily have to divide countries; they arouse curiosity and are also seen as a possibility of contact and exchange. But how far do we let our field of vision range? Where do we draw the line? Where and how far away is the point at which we no longer recognize ourselves?

As it continues, the exhibition shows that not only the exchange of goods was of pivotal importance between the continents, but also the transfer of art and knowledge. The attitude of artists to the exchange was selectively positive: they took and used from the other what they valued, as long as it served their own imagination and ideas. Art became the material of transfer; its influence on the form and content of the thing being exchanged played a major role. Although trade, art and knowledge exchange were felt to be positive, prejudice often led to an oppositional confrontation with “foreignness”. Attempts to understand “foreign” art and its forms of expression mostly ended up in integrating them into “one’s own”. At the same time, a preoccupation with the foreign, an interest in the exotic, was regarded as a sign of universality, elegance and erudition. Documenting this self-awareness in microcosm are the art and curiosity cabinets, the *Kunstkammer*, in which the freedom of art and the disciplines of science and academe are juxtaposed as “equals”.

In the last major thematic section, *GLOBAL:LAB* documents how works of art can create identity. Cultivation of one’s own tradition and the ability to open up to others belong together in art. Art is not exclusive. The requirements and claims made on art and crafts are different in time and space; when seen together, we recognize in each the attributes and elements constituting art. The exhibition shows the creative characteristics of the various cultures and addresses issues all of which manifest their various forms of expression: the preoccupation with the individual, with the physicality of the human being and the ideal of Antiquity as one of the perennial themes of European identity; the question of the interplay of ornament and narrative illustration dominating what we call the Islamic world, while the artistic creation of East Asia is

not fixed on “realities” but passes on ideals and images from generation to generation. Each cultural sphere has its own idiom and art, which stand value-free alongside those of other cultures, each fascinating the other.

“Orientalism” in the sense of Edward Said and the epithet “exotic” imply the superiority of one’s own—European—culture; they have their equivalents in Asian countries, but bear unfamiliar names. The concept of “Yoroppa fu” emerging for western trends in nineteenth-century Japan can be translated poetically by “wind from Europe”. This is interpreted more prosaically as “European style”. If we were to confront this with the idea of “wind from Asia”, this would mean, figuratively speaking: winds blow from every direction and carry new stories around the world.

“The pearl-weigher of this pleasant tale
Thus narrates from the old storyteller.”
(from the *Hamzanama*)