

The future of the museum is not only digital

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Although this symposium is about the future cooperation of cultural institutions, for a start I would like to take a look at past and present examples of cooperation – let's say in a rough comparison – between Japan and Europe.

I have been working in one and the same museum now for more than thirty years, so I have had an unusual career – such continuity is an exception in running a very large collection – the MAK Asia Collection has more than 25,000 objects.

My first major exhibition – which also gave me my “life's topic” – was in 1990, “Japonisme in Vienna around 1900”. This brought me my first contacts with the Japanese Embassy and the Japan Foundation, but also introduced me to colleagues who showed an interest in this theme. **1** One of them was Akiko Mabuchi, known to everyone here; she was to be of key significance for my future contacts with Japan. The exhibition was a great success. It was followed by a Japan Foundation fellowship, one of the first for museum curators. **2** In 1994/95 “Japonisme in Vienna” toured five Japanese cities. I was an associate in the major exhibition “200 Years of the Siebold Collection” in the Edo-Tokyo Museum in 1996. **3** The “rediscovered” Viennese collection of Heinrich Siebold was shown in Japan for the first time; **4** it was directed by Josef Kreiner, then the director of the Siebold Institute in Tokyo. During the run-up to the exhibition I was invited to the Nichibunken in Kyoto to prepare a joint project on ukiyo-e.

So Akiko Mabuchi and Josef Kreiner are my two important “anchors” in Japan; Japonisme and the Heinrich Siebold Collection are the two major topics which I've had the luck to be part of many times in exhibitions and symposia.

A database on the collection of our museum was started in 1991; we began with digital images in 1997, at the same time we started to classify the comprehensive ukiyo-e collection according to aspects of conservation and academic research. The ukiyo-e collection was the first database to go online in 2006, in German, English and romaji – kanji wasn't compliant for transcribing the program; **5 und 6** this is being worked on at present by a native speaker and completion is planned by the end of 2016. **7**

The collection of three-dimensional objects has gone online, as yet with only 1000 objects; an intensive digitalising project, currently underway, will make the MAK Asia Collection and its approximately 15,000 objects accessible in the online database. **8**

I must mention that the Tobunken – National Research Institute for Cultural Properties in Tokyo has given us great support in restoration projects and the training of our restorers and conservators.

More and more information is reaching Japan via the digital route, more and more objects are – digitally speaking – “returning home”

The museum database triggered a growth of interest in our work from overlapping databases – we might also say: collections of objects – and we also took part in international projects.

One of these international projects that extends beyond Japan in theme is the **9** Virtual Collection of Asian Masterpieces (VCM) by the Asia-Europe Museum Network ASEMUS; a more specialised project is the participation in the database “JBAE – Japanese-Buddhist Art in European Collections”, **10** a cooperation between the Research Center of International Japanese Studies of the Hosei University and the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies of the University of Zurich. 46 museums from twenty countries are contributors, the project is up and running and by no means completed. A further cooperation with a museum in Tokyo related to the Heinrich Siebold Collection is in the cradle stage.

A quite outstanding international project is the meta-database [www.ukiyo-e.org](http://www.ukiyo-e.org), which links together multiple online databases. **11 und 12** We haven't contributed anything apart from allowing it to use our data. Ukiyo-e.org is a private initiative which at present seems to be receiving special sponsorship from the Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. I don't think there is any better or more useful database in the entire field of art history; it can be used intuitively by all and places our collection holdings at their disposal. John Resig, the initiator, is a true ambassador of Japanese popular culture!

With the digitalisation of our collections we are building up a second new level for museums: art will be experienced in the original on site, but also augmented digitally and independent of geography with all available information. Networked museums will increasingly become the great sources of historical information.

The cooperation and link-ups of our archives and our knowledge yield great opportunities for the growth of powerful sources of information. The global input of educational and cultural institutions into the possibilities of digital information makes us “big players” on the world wide web.

Making sources of information available through the media is a part of our work that is becoming more and more important. But, for a European curator, one question is always in the foreground: what image of Japan am I communicating? And what am I using to communicate it?

Museum visitors who come to us look for objects that are so to speak ambassadors of faraway countries and their cultures. Many come into the galleries with preconceived notions of Japan and then wonder why the exhibits don't correspond to their ideas. **13** Many people would like to see the famous Fuji by Hokusai, but we are showing different ink paintings, and ask the question "Is it typically Japanese?". The Japanese tea ceremony is also popular; but we show the history of the tea bowl and tell people: "The Japanese tea bowl originated in Korea." So what matters is to give scope to another, unknown Japan and to make it known.

If we question the term "typical" in our work as curators, we find we can hardly classify art according to concepts of nations, and this applies especially to contemporary art. "Typically Japanese" is no longer recognisable to lovers of art. This also has to do with the fact that artists are increasingly rejecting geographical and political labelling. So we try to link up historical art with contemporary, because connecting tradition with the present day makes "art history" recognisable again. **14 bis 16** Since 2014, the MAK Asia Gallery has had an installation on show by the artist Tadashi Kawamata; he claims he is a citizen of the world – he lives in Paris and works all over the world – yet his work does indeed communicate a feeling for space and aesthetics that impress us as Japanese. This installation has proved successful and has meanwhile won awards – a short time ago we were awarded from "International Design Communications Award" the second prize in the category "BEST SCENOGRAPHY FOR A PERMANENT COLLECTION".

The attitude to the idea of "own culture – foreign culture" has changed in Europe with the growth of the European Union, and you can also see this in the history of the contacts I talked about before. Until the year 2000 the relationship between Austria and Japan formed the framework of our activities; meanwhile, our field of vision has expanded. We no longer investigate and display the relationships between cultures, it is far more a question of the image of ONE culture with multiple variants. There are no longer any borders; what matters now is to take gradations and transitions into account. This also corresponds to the European reality of life, with a proportion of foreigners in Austria of more than 12%, in Vienna 25%. This might not be clearly evident to Japanese awareness; perhaps because here the proportion of foreigners is a mere 2%.

Thus the focus on Japan has changed as well. We no longer see Japan as an isolated island east of the Asian continent, but as an individual part of a more global cultural concept. This is clearly reflected in the way we display the objects in our collections, for instance tea bowls/chawan from Korea and Japan are placed next to each other, which, seen historically, is a logical thing to do. This was taken further by exhibiting a Japanese screen with pictures on the Heike-monogatori together with European tapestries and paintings from the Court of the Mogul ruler Akbar the Great in North India (in the exhibition *global:lab - Asia and Europe 1500-1700* 2009 in Vienna). **17**

- How are we dealing with this attitude to cooperative projects – which is sometimes still new for us as well? How do we remodel bilateral networks into multi-lateral networks?

- How do we use digital options in order to image new realities and ways of seeing things?

- And how can we intensify contacts between cultural institutions on the scholarly and academic level for the benefit of the public who are responsive to art and culture?

These, I think, are the questions that must preoccupy us in our further plans.

By working together, we shall be able to manage the (digital) processing and updating of the collections better; thanks to digital aids we can exchange information so that it establishes a better understanding on all sides.

I think that here the *ukiyo-e.org* project can set a prime example.

We have to remember that ongoing knowledge sharing is separated by 8000 km or at least 12 flying hours – can we counteract this by a regular digital platform, blog, video conferences, etc.?

But the new media aren't always enough.

We are constantly visited by Japanese colleagues who would like to do research in our collections. There is often little time left for this because travel schedules are densely packed. Wouldn't it be better if we developed collective projects we could work on for an extended period here, and there? Not so much works on this level, more would be desirable – this is where those personal contacts come into play that I have already mentioned. It's always such an inspiration for me to work together with colleagues from Japan, and the results always make for an

improvement. Whether Japanese students who work temporarily in our collection: whether artists like Tadashi Kawamata or art historians and Japanologists like Akiko Mabuchi for instance, who contribute their points of view and interpretations and give a new boost to our exhibitions. I name names intentionally to stress that only people can form networks.

If we think that far more than 90% of our collections languish in depots, thus inaccessible to our visitors, shouldn't we think about temporary, long-term exchange of objects? Artefacts are owned by this or that institution, but when they remain hidden for decades in the no-man's land of our depots they are of little use to their owners as well. Couldn't long-term loans in both geographical directions increase the number of people visiting the collections and foster public interest? We might have different stories to tell then.

Similar efforts are or were seen in projects like the one between the Morse Collection and the Edo-Tokyo Museum; there should be more partnerships of this nature. **18 bis 20**

Such long-term arrangements are important as well because exhibition practices are already changing radically. On the other hand, we can observe the strong interest Japanese museums are taking in European art, on the other, we see large-scale but far fewer exhibitions on Japanese art taking place in Europe. Loans from East Asia for a few months are practically unaffordable to us and to many other museums and galleries. So the "magic word" is: exchange: Exchange of information, exchange of people and exchange of objects.

In conclusion there is of course the big question: how do we want to manage and finance this and get our daily work done at the same time? Plans about contents and concepts mustn't always be reduced to economic issues, because then nothing at all would happen. Nor can Europe rely on Japan's subsidies and finances; those days are over. In partnerships, the assets also have to be evenly distributed. In order to reach the goals stated before, museums must use workflow, means and assets to make intensive cooperation possible – so much so that it is taken for granted.

If we define contents and practical planning, and jointly sound out subsidies and trans-national sponsoring, we shall be taking the first steps in forming international networks between Europe and Japan.