

The Lives of a Collection

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I normally start a lecture on the Heinrich Siebold Collection in the MAK in Vienna with a short synopsis of Siebold's biography and end it with a survey of various collection groups.

Today, however, I would like to cast a different light on the collector Heinrich Siebold and his collection, or rather collections.

I would like to tell you how such a large collection came about – we're talking about over 10,000 objects! – how it disappeared from the mind of a museum for decades, and finally how it turned up again.

I also want to show you how lack of knowledge about the provenance of the objects was the cause of misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

And after all, we are commemorating the 100th anniversary of Heinrich Siebold's death, an occasion which should also make us ask: what are the prospects for the future lives of the Heinrich Siebold Collection?

In 1985 I took over the direction of the East Asia Collection of the MAK as third curator after Viktor Griessmayer and Herbert Fux. One day a colleague of mine from the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna, Alfred Janata, called by to visit me in the museum. I showed him some of my "discoveries". One piece – a hand bell – was such that he noted down the old inventory number of the Oriental Museum, because he suspected it came from the Heinrich Siebold Collection. When leaving, he turned round and said to me in his inimitable way – forceful but friendly – "Make sure you look after Siebold for me!" As he informed me a day later, the bell really did belong to the Heinrich Siebold Collection. And so, slowly but surely, piece by piece throughout the following years, the collection was to retrieve a part of its history.

But how could it have happened that such a huge collection fell into oblivion?

Several factors were involved, but let's take a short look first of all at **the first life – the creation of the collection.**

Heinrich von Siebold repeatedly sought contact and close relations to the Viennese museums, although it must be said that his "relationship" to the Museum of Art and Industry – today the MAK – must have been extremely disappointing for him – after all, he had supplied many objects

to this same museum on the occasion of the Vienna World Fair. In this role as sponsor, he suggested that the museum should put on an exhibition of objects from his personal collection; this did in fact take place in May of the same year. More than this, he even offered his entire collection so to speak as a permanent loan. The museum pointed out its needy financial situation – a constant excuse of Austrian museum directors that has lost none of its topicality – and rejected this “unreasonable” request. Nor was the director very helpful or active in supporting Heinrich Siebold’s wish to be elevated to the ranks of the minor nobility, which would have been associated with Austrian citizenship.

His wish was finally fulfilled in 1888 through his generous dedication to the Imperial Natural History Museum, which had not yet opened. Thus he was able to place a part of his collection at the very best address – in the truest sense of the word. More than 5000 objects formed a good part of the Japanese Collection of the anthropological-ethnographic department. Conceptually this could only have been second choice for Heinrich Siebold, because the obsolete museum concept of combining natural history and non-European culture under one roof contradicted all museum praxis of the time. Above all, his father Phillip Franz von Siebold had insisted in theory and practice on the equal status of world cultures for one thing, and for another on the distinct separation of natural product from artefact. The Museum of Art and Industry would have been the better location even then, but the ignorance prevailing there prevented this.

This “imperial planning blunder” was only corrected in 1928, with the founding of the Museum of Ethnology.

A point of reference for Heinrich Siebold in Vienna was Arthur von Scala. An energetic, intellectual “go-getter”, a cosmopolitan, who developed a strong love of Asia very early on.

As early as 1869 this 23-year-old textile engineer had already accompanied the “imperial and royal expedition to China, Siam and Japan” as a specialist consultant. It returned in 1871, bringing the first (few) objects with it from East Asia. Only a short time later – 1873 – Scala, not yet 30, belonged to the founding committee of the so-called “Circle Orientale” at the Vienna World Fair, whose primary aim was to promote economic contacts with Asian countries.

He will also have come in contact here with Heinrich Siebold, who was 6 years younger, a connection lasting until Siebold’s death in 1908.

His work for the Austrian Embassy in Tokyo, his translation services for the Japanese Delegation and his private connections to Japan made the 21-year-old Heinrich Siebold an ideal partner for Arthur von Scala.

We shouldn't forget in an appraisal of Heinrich Siebold that he must have grown up in a Japanese/Japanesque atmosphere; the inspiration and idealism of his father must have affected him and his brother. Both of them continued their father's work each in his own way.

After the Vienna World Fair, in 1874/75 an autonomous Oriental Museum/Trade Museum was established, which institutionalised the agenda of the Circle Orientale; Arthur von Scala was named director. He took the term "museum" seriously and started to build up a collection of art and decorative arts from Asia. Contemporaries came to say of it that there was nothing comparable anywhere on the continent.

And Heinrich Siebold became his supplier for Japanese artefacts.

After the disappointments with the Museum of Art and Industry – today the MAK – and the placement of a more ethnographic part of his collection in the Natural History Museum, he will probably have been quite pleased that his Japanese collection landed with Scala, together with other Asian collections. While the state had missed the chance of establishing an ethnographic museum, this is what the Oriental Museum now indeed became. With the driving force behind it – perhaps we should say the excuse! – of strengthening trade, it built up a comprehensive Asian collection. This was probably an ideal option for Siebold's collection, which found its way into this museum in 1892, together with the Chinese-oriented collection of Hermann Mandl.

Siebold's great hour struck at last when Arthur von Scala was nominated the director of the Museum of Art and Industry in 1897. He appeared to give all his backing to bringing the Trade Museum collection with him into the building on Stubenring. The largest Japan exhibition ever seen in Vienna – and I mean the largest, right up until today – was organised by Scala in 1905, with the assistance and advice of Heinrich Siebold. The whole building was cleared and transformed into a "Japanese theme park". Everything people associated with "Japanese" was conglomerated in over-abundant profusion. Unfortunately, we possess very few photos to document this opulent show.

Around 50% of the Japonica exhibited there came from the Siebold Collection, and the museum took this opportunity to purchase even more

from him: over 800 Japanese colour woodcuts – single prints and also in albums – were to become the foundation of the MAK's very comprehensive ukiyo-e collection.

So-called Japonisme was at its peak in 1905, the fascination for the new forms, colours and patterns held artists and craftsmen spellbound. The approach to Japan was not through history or even art history, but via the emotional level, the subjective astonishment of creative artists and museum officials, which is documented in the profusion of objects in the exhibition I mentioned before.

Arthur von Scala's efforts to take over the Trade Museum collections were finally crowned with success in 1907.

And this takeover initiated **the second life of the Siebold Collection: Oblivion.**

The collection was indeed incorporated with over 4000 new inventory numbers – but the provenances were not documented!! Nor were the old inventories handed over – they first cropped up again in the Museum of Ethnology founded in 1928. And the collection inventory was evidently kept in thorough detail here; whatever was not found in the Museum of Ethnology was crossed out as “missing”!

A further reason for the oblivion was the fact that Heinrich Siebold died in 1908 and Arthur von Scala shortly afterwards in 1909. Thus the main protagonists had left the scene and the collection was stored, more rough than ready, in the museum attics.

Heinrich Siebold's private collection was still quite extensive. It was not allotted to public collections in the German-speaking countries as he had planned, but – already six months after his death – was sold off in 1909 more or less at dumping prices by the Viennese dealer “Au Mikado”. A leaflet is the only record to document the wealth of the collection; any other traces disappeared into anonymity.

By a coincidence I was able in 2000/01 to track down something of the further fate of this important collection.

A collection compiled in the twenties was being offered for sale on the Viennese art market. Each sheet in it had been purchased at that time for only one Groschen, (about 0,1 Yen). Unfortunately, ukiyo-e dealers from the entire German speaking regions had snapped up this legacy, so that I could only view the sad remains, among them apparently unsalable silk

paintings – which turned out to be by Kawahara Keiga!! Who else but Heinrich Siebold could have owned a whole series by Kawahara Keiga? The remaining colour woodcuts also corresponded to the character of the Siebold Collection.

The loss of the documents meant that the museum also lost any option of evaluating of the objects. Extensive parts of the collection were felt to be a burden; those in charge would have preferred to get rid of them. When I was put in charge of the collection the collection of ink paintings for instance was referred to as “Japanese junk”; today they are constantly in demand as loans for exhibitions. Buddhist paintings were not judged to be good enough for exhibitions; only a book project with Kodansha, published in 1994, brought the qualities and in part also the provenance of individual objects to light once more.

Another factor complicated matters after 1910: Viennese art history began to turn its attention to Asian art; here, China clearly ranked before Japan.

Nothing could illustrate this better than a quote from a small exhibition catalogue of 1922: “... *this over-estimation of Japanese decorative arts of the last decade has quite obviously veered around in recent years in the opposite direction and people are now turning decisively away from the “Romans” towards the “Greeks” of the East. This is not in any way to denigrate Japan’s merits within East Asian art, far more, it only shifts it into the right light... But it should not stop us seeking the creative spirit in the mother country of East Asian art.*” To add insult to injury, the museum people were given another piece of information to chew over: “...*the motivation for this exhibition did not come from the Viennese museums, but from the University of Vienna. ...*”

It was to remain thus for decades, before cooperation between the university and the museum in the persons of Josef Kreiner and Alfred Janata enabled **the third life of the Heinrich Siebold Collection: the rediscovery of the collection.**

The university connection between the faculty of Japanese Studies and ethnology proved fruitful in that the Asian curator at the Museum of Ethnology had the university’s backing, thus expert knowledge, specialist advisory staff, and friendship-based cooperation.

As if it had been planned, the Institute of Japanese Studies became an autonomous faculty and Alfred Janata organised the major exhibition “The Profile of Japan” in the Museum of Ethnology in the same year, 1965. In a short history of the collection’s history, Janata sketched

Heinrich Siebold's biography. But far more important was the little "S" on the objects from the Siebold Collection! Thus people got a rough idea once more of what belonged in this collection.

On the other side of the Ringstrasse in the Museum of Applied Arts, there was by no means such clear awareness of the collection's history. There were indeed exhibitions relating to Japan, but the "Japan at the Vienna World Fair 1873" exhibition was the first one about Japan to show the museum's own holdings. In a short history of the Japanese Collection of the MAK today, the name of Siebold is conspicuous for its absence.

And even in 1978 when the two Viennese Asian collections jointly held the major exhibition "4000 Years of East Asian Art" (in Krems/D), you would have looked in vain for pointers to the Siebold Collection, whereas other collectors were in fact named.

So the third life in the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna thus began on that Sunday afternoon I mentioned before, with Alfred Janata's visit.

When the Museum of Applied Arts was renovated in 1989 - 1993, we moved the complete collection into the newly constructed depot and at the same time created a database. Thus the various sorting options made it relatively easy to take over the entries of the old inventory in the Museum of Ethnology into the MAK catalogue of holdings. Every day brought new surprises!

Meanwhile, thanks to a fellowship of the Japan Foundation in Tokyo 1990/91, I was able to track down the true history of the Tokugawa Mausoleum from Shiba and I also researched the provenance of the katagami collection.

In 1995, during a short but intensive period of research at the Nichibunken in Kyoto, I was able to determine the provenance of a group of religious paintings from a certain temple.

And it experienced its highest point yet in the exhibition "200 Years of Siebold – the Japanese Collection of Philipp Franz and Heinrich von Siebold" in 1996 in Tokyo and Osaka. This was due to the initiative of Prof. Josef Kreiner and its success was so to speak the catalyst for the Viennese exhibition "Japan Yesterday - Traces and Objects of the Siebold Journeys", which was already shown in the MAK the next year, 1997. It was conceived, organised and contributed to jointly by both Viennese collections. Both exhibitions were committed to showing the

continuity of father and son, and yet the individual touch of each as well, since each was conditioned by the age in which they collected. And, in conclusion, this symposium in Tokyo in honour of Heinrich Siebold must also be described as the culminating highlight of the third life of the collection.

And now we are faced with the question of the **fourth life**, this time from the point of view of an art historian, a friend of Japan, and a passionate museum curator: **the future of the Siebold Collection**.

We are confronted with several issues:

How do we see the Heinrich Siebold Collection? As a random accumulation of objects, or in their totality as a document of the social changes in Japan before 1900?

Thus thousands upon thousands of katagami / dyers' stencils were in fact nothing other than waste paper, the old tradition was cast off like an old kimono and swapped for western clothing. In Europe they were and are a source of inspiration for artists and designers! The same applies to the great quantity of ink paintings: worthless at the time, today unsurpassed witnesses of a lost iconography.

Heinrich Siebold was able to send the remains of a Tokugawa mausoleum from Shiba to Europe like a tourist souvenir – similarly, twenty years ago, Lenin statues were transported to the USA from Moscow.

The holistic view will gain more and more in significance as time goes by. And it will be even more important for Japan than for the West. Japanese researchers who visit our depots already have something about them of "Raiders of the Lost Ark".

What status and value does the individual object have in the collection? In the context of a museum I don't have to show a tea bowl any more to demonstrate how people drink tea in Japan; you can go round the corner to the next sushi restaurant and drink green tea out of a practically identical bowl. So almost all objects from the Siebold Collection are freed of such functions. The message of the object has changed because the general options within cultural exchange and contact have radically altered.

Instead, other aspects can move to the fore. For instance the aesthetic qualities of the design.

Are objects aged a hundred and two hundred years just nostalgic souvenirs, or can they also be reference points for design and formation, without indulging in fond ideas of the "good old days"

Here I only have to recall the exhibition "Japan and the West" which has just finished in the Kunsthalle Wolfsburg. This showed a relatively large quantity of objects from the Heinrich Siebold Collection alongside Western modern art. Similar projects are in planning, in Europe and in Japan. The main thing about these exhibitions is no longer which artist used which object as model or inspiration. What is far more important is the demonstration of parallels or – let's say – spiritual affinity. In contemporary art we are experiencing similar trends to what was going on around 1900. But Japan no longer has a monopoly today; it has joined in as a leading player in the global cultural concert.

And this gives rise to the next set of issues: Japan's contribution to world culture.

Does it still make sense to think and act in national categories today? This might not be so urgent for the island country of Japan, with a single language spoken within its boundaries. But for a European this problem is a burning issue! Establishing international and inter-cultural relations opens up new ways of seeing things. "No man is an island" – with this realisation, we have arrived once more at the Siebold museum concept: when different cultures act alongside and along with each other, it throws up new questions and new answers – thus benefits can be drawn from historic collections like that of Heinrich Siebold which will continue to be effective long into the future.