



MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

# GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

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## GLOBAL CURIOSITY

INTERCULTURAL COLLECTING AND ART STUDIES WORLDWIDE

Wilfried van Damme

Among artists, scholars, and other curious people across the globe, there have always been those who collected and examined objects originating from beyond their immediate surroundings in time and space. These individuals were drawn to scrutinizing artefacts from history, specimens from distant lands, even relics from foreign pasts. The farmer's plough, ships, camels, and pilgrims were among the agents that brought these objects to inquisitive persons' attention. Artistic or otherwise, such artefacts raised their interest, provoked their questioning, and fired their imagination. Indeed, there were times when such objects were a major source of people's 'global imagination' – how they imagined the world to be. Arresting artefacts from afar and from the past also came to inquiring individuals' attention because collections of such objects had been made by other people and for other reasons – nobility seeking to affirm and heighten their status, parvenues looking for prestige, military in need of trophies, and so on. These latter collectors and their motivations have raised considerable academic interest, especially collectors belonging to the Western tradition.

As for more curiosity-driven and scholarly cases of collecting, we are quite well informed about the ways in which Westerners have assembled and studied objects from their own history. European intellectual interest in artefacts from the West's past has been documented and analyzed in, for example, various histories of archaeology, art history, and museology. See also Jori Zijlmans' essay.

We know less, however, of the history of Westerners' dealings with objects from beyond their own space and cultural traditions. It is true that the collecting of artefacts within the framework of European colonialism has received much attention of late (1). Postcolonial studies have emphasized the conditions of unequal power relations and imperial expansion under which colonizing nations appropriated cultural products from outside Europe.

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However, Western dealings with objects from other cultures in pre- and extra-colonial contexts – not only their collecting but their study – is an issue that has only recently started to be explored in earnest. These explorations remind us, for example, of the work of the hypercurious seventeenth-century scholar Athanasius Kircher. He was not only an avid intercultural collector who is sometimes credited with having established the first museum, but his broad scholarly interests included monumental architecture worldwide, ranging from Mesopotamia and Egypt to China to Meso-America. (2)

Transnational scholarship knows even less about the interests that cultural traditions outside the West have displayed in objects from their own history. This applies all the more to these traditions' dealings with artefacts from what to them are foreign cultures. Fortunately, these issues have lately become the object of investigation, and the results of these studies are now becoming available.

## WORLD ANTIQUARIANISM

A case in point is an edited volume titled *World Antiquarianism*, published in 2014 (3). The many essays in this volume examine the collection and study of objects from the past, and sometimes also from abroad, in a wide variety of cultures across space and time. The project reflects the growing globalization in scholarship, in terms not only of its scope – the worldwide coverage of the topics it tackles – but also its international group of contributors. In demonstrating how ubiquitous the interest in ancient and foreign objects in world history is, the authors focus on human made objects, or artificialia, rather than the natural objects, or naturalia, that have also been assembled and studied across the globe. Indeed, fossil remains were collected already in palaeolithic times – fossils much older than the layers of human occupation in which they were found have been discovered in European caves that were inhabited some 15,000 years ago.

It appears that virtually every culture from the past that we know in some detail engaged with what to them were ancient artefacts, and at times also objects from distant cultures. Pharaonic Egypt in the second millennium BCE had its specialized scholars in charge of discovering ancient monuments and studying their inscriptions; objects from foreign lands were collected and examined as well. Neo-Babylonians in the first millennium BCE undertook excavations in search

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of their Mesopotamian past. They were looking especially for inscribed clay tablets, figurative sculptures, and other artefacts that might generate ritual knowledge and religious political power. On the other side of the world, the Mexica (Aztecs) in the fifteenth century CE took a keen interest in the ruins and other relics of previous civilizations, such as those of the Olmec and Toltec and in the ancient city of Teotihuacan. They variously incorporated these remains into their culture, also drawing inspiration from them for their own architecture and visual arts.

These and other examples that could be given (ranging from India to Persia to the Abbasids in the Near East and from Polynesian islands to West African cultures) raise many interesting questions. In addition to such queries as which objects were preferably collected and why, it may be asked, for example, how such artefacts were analyzed, interpreted, and at times re-employed, within which intellectual frameworks and for what purposes.

## GEWU: THE VIRTUE OF ARTEFACT COLLECTING AND STUDY IN IMPERIAL CHINA

Outside Europe, we are presently best informed about the assembling and analysis of ancient and exotic objects in the history of Chinese culture. In China, ancient artefacts such as jade objects are known to have been collected from at least the second millennium BCE onwards (Shang period). The continuing Chinese interest in material remains from the past, also including bronze vessels, paintings, and calligraphy, culminated in the Northern Song period (960-1127) with the establishment of *jinshixue*, literally 'the study of metal and stone'. This form of antiquarianism included the collection, examination, and cataloguing of, for example, ancient ritual bronzes and stone-carved inscriptions (rubblings of such inscriptions had already been made, circulated, and studied during the Tang period of previous centuries). With these practices, individuals responded to the Confucian imperative to 'investigate things', *gewu*, an activity considered to make a person more virtuous. In later centuries, the collection of ancient artefacts was increasingly motivated as well by aesthetic concerns.<sup>(4)</sup>

With the arrival of Buddhism in the first millennium CE, the Chinese were also introduced to objects originating in India. Buddhist monks and artists travelled from India to China, and Chinese pilgrims made the reverse journey to visit sacred places and collect scrolls and other religious

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objects. Chinese monasteries not only preserved and examined these artefacts but also exhibited them to the public. Foreign objects came to the attention of Chinese intellectuals as well, for example, through envois presenting gifts to the imperial court. In the Early Modern period, contacts with Europe led to the establishment among the Chinese elite of collections of objects from this part of the world.(5)

## RANGAKU AND THE COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN ART IN JAPAN

In Japan, too, the spread of Buddhism was instrumental in the influx of foreign objects, both into the treasuries of monasteries and beyond. Collectively known as karamono, or 'Chinese things', artefacts from the Asian mainland were amassed and displayed from at least the eighth century on. In time, these collections, as well as assemblages of artefacts from Japan's past, including paintings and sculptures, would lead to connoisseurship and a diverse body of scholarly writing in Japan.

Of special importance to Japan's dealings with foreign art, and a variety of other objects, are the contacts with the Dutch in the Edo period (1603-1868). During this era, the Dutch were the only Westerners allowed access to Japan, through the artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki's harbour. Especially from the early eighteenth century on, it was the assorted artefacts collected from the Dutch, including illustrated books, that enabled the Japanese to become acquainted with the latest developments in the European arts and sciences. The study of 'all things European' became known as rangaku, literally 'Dutch studies' and by extension 'European studies'.

The various Dutch or European art forms that ended up in Japanese collections would lead local artists to adopt new artistic techniques and pictorial devices, and to explore novel approaches to representation more generally. The illustrations in Dutch books, for example, introduced the Japanese to copper plate engraving. In addition to the visual examples that had become available, Japanese artists learned the art of etching also from detailed descriptions of this technique in manuals and books (hundreds of Japanese scholars learned Dutch in the Edo period and translated numerous works). Most notable among the newly adopted pictorial devices were linear perspective and shading, with linear perspective becoming a regular feature of Japan's famous

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popular prints in the nineteenth century. (6) The acquaintance with examples of European art also led to new artistic approaches, resulting in naturalism becoming more dominant in Japanese visual arts. Newly introduced art forms also included oil paintings, which were, for example, presented as gifts to the Shogun at the annual 'court journey' of Dutch merchants to Edo. Having analyzed their material, techniques, and styles, some Japanese artists started producing oil paintings themselves. Incidentally, the Japanese term for canvas, *zukku*, derives from the Dutch word *doek*.

The examples briefly surveyed in this contribution testify to human curiosity and the enduring worldwide interest in collecting and studying art forms of the past and from other cultures. They give a taste also of the varied analyses of intercultural dealings with visual expression that scholars might undertake within the field of World Art Studies. Through what channels did objects from afar and from the past become available for collection and inspection? In what climate of opinion were these artefacts received by scholars, artists, and other interested individuals? Did they influence local artistic production, and if so, how? In what manner did these objects and their analysis contribute to indigenous knowledge systems? Indeed, how did artefacts from the past and from abroad nourish people's global imaginations?

1. See, for example: Wilfried van Damme, *Good to Think: The Historiography of Intercultural Art Studies*, *World Art* 1 (1), 2011, pp. 43-57; Ulrich Pfisterer, *Die Entdeckung der Welt-Kunst in der Frühen Neuzeit: Bildphantasien und Bilderproduktion der Vier Erdteile*, in 'Die Frühe Neuzeit. Revisionen einer Epoche', ed. Andreas Höfele, Jan-Dirk Müller, Wulf Oesterreicher, pp. 163-99. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013.
2. Athanasius Kircher: *The Last man Who Knew Everything*, ed. Paula Findler. New York: Routledge. 2004.
3. *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Alain Schnapp, with Lothar von Falkenhausen, Peter N. Miller, Tim Murray. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2014.
4. Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Antiquarianism in East Asia*, in 'World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives', pp. 35-66.
5. Anna Katharina Grasskamp, *Cultivated Curiosities: A Comparative Study of Chinese Artifacts in European Kunstkammern and European Objects in Chinese Elite Collections*, PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2013.

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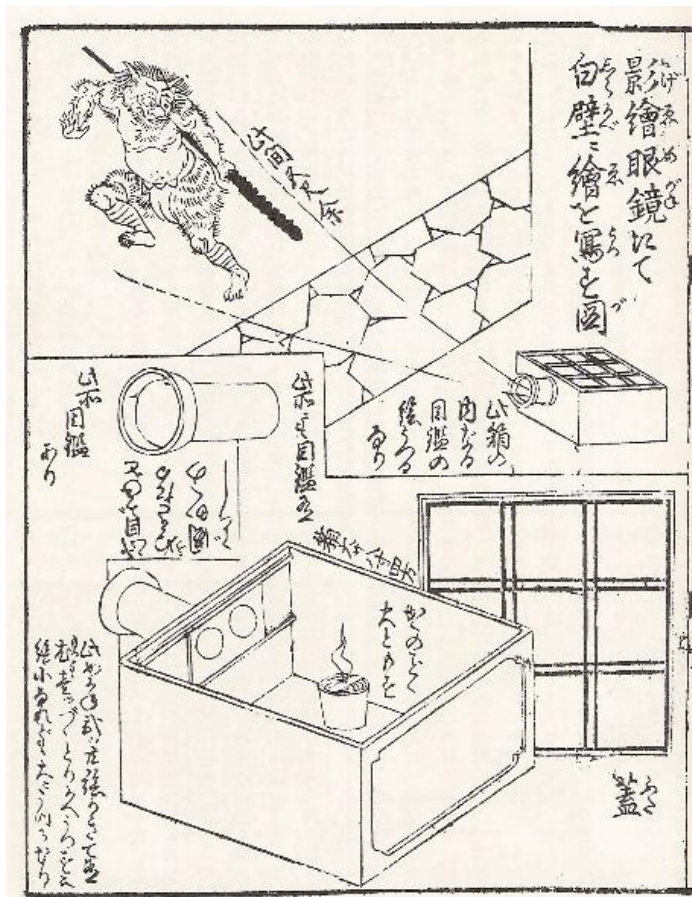


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6. Matthi Forrer, From Optical Prints to Ukie to Ukiyoe: The Adoption and Adaptation of Western Linear Perspective in Japan, in 'Mediating Netherlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia', ed. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Michael North, pp. 245-66. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015.



THE MECHANISM OF A EUROPEAN 'MAGIC LANTERN' EXPLAINED IN A JAPANESE TEXT, 1779

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