

Florencia Rodríguez Giavarini

The Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental in Buenos Aires: From European Taste for Oriental Art to Genuine Interest in the East

Introduction

Oriental art pieces were highly valued and gathered by collectors since viceregal times in Río de la Plata. However, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that a specific institution devoted to collecting, preserving and divulging the arts of the Eastern world was in place. In this article, I will describe how Asian artworks and artefacts have been appropriated, valued and showcased through time in Argentina, and how their meanings shifted in the process of successive displacements, until the foundation of the MNAO provided an appropriate context where Oriental art and artefacts could be studied and displayed.

Except for rare and isolated items, any oriental artefacts currently displayed in the various museums of Buenos Aires made their way to a place so distant from their point of origin as the result of one of two kinds of systematic activity: scientific endeavour and expedition or collecting habits. In this paper, I will describe how Asian artworks and artefacts have been appropriated, valued and showcased through time in Argentina, and how their meanings shifted in the process of successive displacements.¹

Knowing the Other, constructing the Self

At the turn of the twentieth century, Argentina was a rich – but still young – nation striving for progress and to be recognised as part of the civilised modern world. The intellectual and ruling classes understood that achieving the status of a civilised nation along Western European lines was a key national priority. Thus, arts and culture were to be stimulated and made available to the wide public. The concern with developing knowledge in all fields and “shaping taste” was at the centre of the political project of a nation that was experiencing great economic prosperity and material progress as the result of farming and agricultural export policies.²

The most developed European nations, in particular France, were the measure against which Argentina hoped to be reputed as cultured and civilised. As a result of the “civilising effort”, scientific, philanthropic and cultural activities took shape mainly in Buenos Aires, some of which led to the formation of museum collections. Among those displayed for scientific purposes, two are especially worth mentioning. The first belongs to the Museo de La Plata – founded in the Province of Buenos Aires in 1884 – which was meant to disseminate knowledge of the East and enable research activities in the fields of natural history, anthropology, archaeology and fine arts, not restricted to the academic environment, but also intended for the education of the general public. A few years down the road, it also included departments concerned with geology, palaeontology and botany. The second collection belongs to the Museo Etnográfico Juan B. Ambrosetti, founded in 1904 with the aim of providing an environment within which anthropology could be studied as a specific field of knowledge, instead of just another area of natural sciences. It was soon absorbed by the Universidad de Buenos Aires, as it pursued purposes of academic research and development as well as the dissemination of knowledge among the general public.³ Its activities threw light on, and developed knowledge of, indigenous communities in Argentine territory that had not embraced the idea of progress and civilisation as experienced by the modern industrial society of which Buenos Aires and its surroundings were part.

The core of the national identity was displayed and explained in the Museo Histórico Nacional, which was founded in 1889, conceived as a kind of pantheon where relics of the founding fathers and wars of independence were kept and venerated. Relics and artefacts of the indigenous peoples had no place there. The implication was that those communities represented in the ethnographic

museum were conceived as *other* or *foreign* to the national history. In fact, the ethnographic collection was not restricted to exhibits produced by or related to “national others” (if such a category could exist) but also to “others” living very far away. Thus, Māori sculptures from New Zealand, *moai kavakava* from Easter Island, a Shinto temple and *samurai* armour from Japan, among many other artefacts of Asian, African and Oceanic origin, remain on display in the hall still named “Between exoticism and progress”. Almost none of those artefacts is dated earlier than the nineteenth century, as the whole endeavour was very much focused on understanding objects that were in use at that time, or very shortly before, that could help understand the people who used them. With such a view point in mind, the concepts of “otherness” and “exoticism” were key to shaping the perspective under which these artefacts were approached: they were curious pieces and considered absolutely estranged.

Collecting Asia

At the turn of the twentieth century, there seemed to be no limit to the purchasing power of rich *estancieros* (landowners) from the Pampas. As a result, an enormous amount of antiques, works of art and “curious” artefacts flowed to Buenos Aires. They came from all over the world but were mainly purchased in Europe. The Argentine *bourgeois* became familiar with the lavish life style of the European aristocrats with whom they did business and developed the habit of spending very long periods of time in European cities, especially Paris, where many kept a *hôtels particuliers* (grand townhouses). During their stays they came into contact with architects such as René Sergent, Paul Pater, Edouard Le Monnier, and Jules Dormal among others, whom they commissioned to design new residences to be built in Buenos Aires and the Argentine countryside. Once built, those residences needed to be furnished. Emulation of the European way of life necessarily implied “refining” taste and interest in the arts in general. In some cases the purchasing habits of these rich Argentines developed into art collecting.⁴ Eclecticism was the note which characterised all important Argentine collections at the time, as it was understood to be a sign of

cosmopolitanism and modernity, the unequivocal evidence of a mundane way of life free from prejudice, open to all artistic and cultural manifestations. Thus, along with European furniture, tapestries, lamps and other artworks and objects came carpets, lacquerware, ceramics and jades, among many other oriental artefacts, twice removed from their place of origin, as they were usually purchased in Europe and shipped from there to Buenos Aires.⁵

Over time, and in different locations, the meanings and relevance of the objects mutated. An interesting example of displacement and mutation of Asian objects is the case of the *commode* commissioned by the English man of letters Horace Walpole (1717-1797) for his residence at Strawberry Hill in Twickenham (fig. 1). It was made in 1763 in England and is currently on display at the Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo in Buenos Aires.⁶



Fig. 1 Commode; Pierre Eloy Langlois, 1763; Chinese lacquer, English japanning, various woods, ormolu mounts, verd antique marble veneer top; courtesy Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo, Buenos Aires.

Walpole described how he supplied French cabinet maker Pierre Langlois (1738-1805), who became established in England catering for British aristocrats, with fine Asian panels in his property, which, according to his handwritten annotated version of *A Description of the Villa of Strawberry Hill*, printed in 1774, “cost a fortune to bend”.⁷ The resulting *commode* “engulfed” the Asian screen and reduced it to an “ingredient” like the European japanned panels on the sides. The original significance of the palatial scenes depicted on the front panels – which had once been part of the screen that Walpole supplied to Langlois – was lost, and they relate very poorly to the

peasant scenes depicted in the japanned panels on the sides. This lack of coherence was overlooked as the general appearance of the piece was “entirely Oriental”, and very pleasing to the English taste of the second half of the 18th century. Though, of course, no Chinese cabinet ever resembled this *commode*.

The furnishings of Strawberry Hill House were initially dispersed in 1842, following the auction carried out by George Robins.⁸ In 1913 the *commode* was purchased by the rich diplomat Matías Errázuriz Ortúzar from the late Eugène Kraemer’s collection, whose estate was being auctioned by Galerie Georges Petit in Paris.⁹ It was immediately shipped to Buenos Aires, to furnish the residence that French architect René Sargent had designed for the Errázuriz family. At this point in time, the commode made with Walpole’s screen said less about the Orient, and more about eighteenth-century English taste and fashion, and was particularly eloquent with regard to the purchasing habits that characterised the Argentine elite at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo

In 1937 Matías Errázuriz Ortúzar’s residence, along with many of its furnishings, including paintings, sculptures, luminaries, porcelain, tapestries, etc., became the Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo (MNAD), which continued to receive donations from different collectors, including Asian decorative arts. Many of these are on display but have become functional to the conveying of a Western conception of the Oriental. In some cases their original meaning is completely obliterated, as they are presented as part of a “European-like” setting, as can be seen in the following three images of Matías Errázuriz Alvear’s *boudoir* (figs. 2, 3, 4). The son of Matías Errázuriz Ortúzar, he was eighteen years old in 1916, when his parents allowed him to reject the intended Louis XVI decoration, and commissioned Spanish artist Josep María Sert (1876-1945) to decorate his *boudoir* in a manner that would reflect his preference for the twentieth-century vanguards he had become familiar with in Paris, over any *Ancien Régime* flavour. Sert opted for an *Art Deco* ambiance that complemented four panels of his making, which represent scenes from Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine*. While various Asian objects are on display throughout the room, there is

less of Asia and more of Europe to be appreciated. Such was also the case for countless pieces of furniture, porcelain, tapestries, paintings, sculptures, etc. which were part of other important art collections. Among them are some very fine exponents of the Asian genius, but when mingled with other European decorative arts, their literary, religious, and historic meanings are blurred.



Fig. 2 Matías Errázuriz Alvear’s *boudoir*, view 1; Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo; courtesy Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo, Buenos Aires.

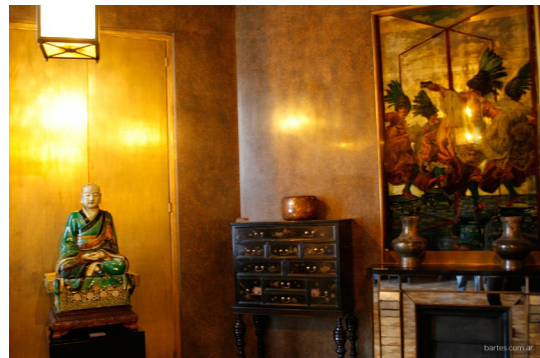


Fig. 3 Matías Errázuriz Alvear’s *boudoir*, view 2; Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo; courtesy Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo, Buenos Aires.



Fig. 4 Matías Errázuriz Alvear’s *boudoir*, view 3; Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo, courtesy Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo, Buenos Aires.

As stated above, the most important art collections included Oriental artworks, which complemented an eclectic whole. Some art collectors, however, were especially interested in the East and gathered very fine collections of Oriental art. Although no public repository or exhibition space was specifically devoted to Oriental art in Buenos Aires until the second half of the twentieth century, the *Exposición de Arte Retrospectivo*, a major art exhibition organised with charitable purposes in 1915, showcased a section devoted to Eastern art which included numerous Chinese hardstone carvings and Ming and Qing dynasty (Qianlong and Kangxi era) porcelain pieces among other decorative arts.¹⁰ By 1949, when the *Sociedad Amigos del Arte Oriental* organised an exhibition exclusively devoted to the arts of the Eastern world titled *Exposición de Arte Oriental*, their presence in local art collections had increased significantly. More than six hundred and fifty artefacts from China, Japan, India, Siam, Tibet, Java, Bali, Cambodia and the Middle East, including Persia and Syria, were showcased.¹¹ The exhibition presented paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts belonging to different art collections, including the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, the national fine arts museum.¹² It was eloquent proof that interest and appreciation for the art of the East was clearly established among Argentine art collectors.

The Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental

In 1965, efforts to make the culture and art of the Eastern world more accessible resulted in the establishment of the Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental (MNAO). Its founding documents stated that the creation of this Museum by the National Government responded to the necessity of the public to “acquire knowledge of such important cultural areas as Asia, Africa and Oceania, and to promote international understanding”. A series of art shows including not only the display of artefacts (figs. 5, 6) but also dance and music was offered, along with films, courses, workshops, conferences, guided tours and various other activities.

A number of important donations followed, from private collectors and also from the governments of China, India, Turkey and the Museum of Taipei. Argentine embassies in Thailand, Indonesia and

Malaysia were also generous donors. Today, the MNAO’s collections mostly include the arts of China, Japan, Korea, India, Egypt, Turkey, Armenia, Persia, Tibet, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Due to economic constraints, among other reasons, since 2001 the MNAO has lost its premises. Its operations have been confined to two rooms



Fig. 5 Display at the Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental: Buddhist artefacts; courtesy of Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental, Buenos Aires.

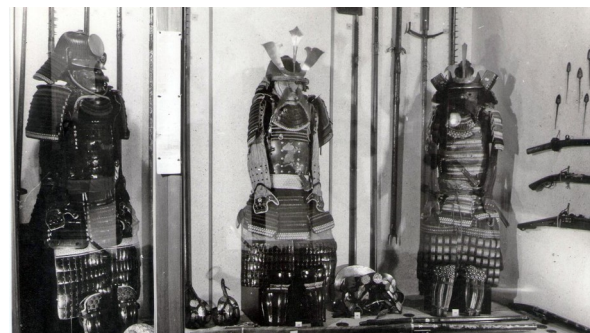


Fig. 6 Display at the Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental: Japanese armours and weapons; courtesy of Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental, Buenos Aires.

within the MNAD. MNAO’s management keeps up its work and mission by showcasing small exhibitions in borrowed spaces, mostly in the MNAD, but said efforts are often regarded as initiatives of the host museum. A survey I conducted in May 2018 among students of art history and students of Oriental studies at the Universidad del Salvador in the city of Buenos Aires, shows that 70% of those students did not even know that the MNAO existed, until they began their studies.

Conclusion

Artworks and artefacts are dependent upon, or distorted by, how they are contextualised, and how

they relate to neighbouring artefacts and the environments in which they are displayed. The lack of a physical space to provide an adequate environment in which art of the Eastern world can be displayed, not only deprives audiences of the possibility of appreciating a rich cultural heritage but also hinders the chances that students and researchers will approach this valuable heritage for further questioning and appreciation, so long as it remains hidden. The MNAO and its collection has a unique potential to facilitate understanding of Asian identities and to enable constructive reflections on their history, culture, current state of affairs, and relationships with cultural others. When museums like the MNAO have the space to offer this specificity, they can help build bridges and connections cross-culturally and transnationally. Depriving the MNAO of its premises has destroyed one such bridge and hindered a much-needed intercultural dialogue.

Endnotes

1. "Oriental" is a loaded term, especially in English, and this was highlighted in the interesting discussions during the panel "Museums of Asian Arts outside Asia", where this paper was delivered in the context of the conference *Art, Materiality and Representation* (London, June 2018). However, in this article, I use the terms "Oriental", "Eastern" and "Asian" art as synonyms to indicate any artworks and artefacts produced in an Asian geographical context.
2. With regard to the concern with "shaping taste" and promoting culture and its connection to notions of progress and civilisation in Argentina towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, see Laura Malosetti Costa, *Palabras y gestos para una modernidad. La crítica de arte en la década de 1880 en Buenos Aires* and Miguel Angel Muñoz, *Un campo para el arte argentino. Modernidad artística y nacionalismo en torno al Centenario*, in: *Desde la otra vereda. Momentos en el debate por un arte moderno en la Argentina (1880-1960)*, ed. Diana Wechsler, Buenos Aires, 1998, p. 17-42, 43-82. Also by Malosetti Costa *Las artes plásticas entre el ochenta y el centenario*, in: *Nueva Historia Argentina. Arte, sociedad y política*, vol. I, ed. José E. Burucúa, Buenos Aires, 1990, p. 161-216.
3. Both of these public museums benefited from significant donations from private collections. See Marcelo Pacheco, *Coleccionismo artístico en Buenos Aires del Virreinato al Centenario*, Buenos Aires, 2011, p. 68.
4. Different approaches have justified dating the origin of *coleccionismo* in Argentina differently. Art historian Marcelo Pacheco indicates that the habit of gathering art pieces and curious artefacts can be traced back to viceregal times in the seventeenth century, but collecting as a systematic activity began around 1820, when at least fifty collectors were active in the field. (See Pacheco 2011, *Coleccionismo artístico en Buenos Aires*, p. 68-69). However, art historian María Isabel Baldasarre, while recognising the presence of a few collections in the early nineteenth century, signals the origins of art collections in the second half of the nineteenth century. (See María Isabel Baldasarre, *Los dueños del arte. Coleccionismo y consumo cultural en Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires, 2006).
5. The lavish lifestyle of rich Argentines at the turn of the twentieth century implied extensive travelling, in some cases way beyond Europe. Some travellers became especially interested in the art of the Eastern world, as was the case for Pastor Obligado, whose interest in Egyptology led him to gather an interesting collection of artefacts resulting from his encounter with the renowned Egyptologist Gastón Maspero and archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, from whom he acquired remains from Troy, which were later donated to the public museum in Buenos Aires. See Pacheco 2011, *Coleccionismo artístico en Buenos Aires*, p. 68-70.
6. Walpole's commission included four *encoignures*, whose current location is not known, and two *commodes*, one of which is currently in the Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo in Buenos Aires, herein discussed, and the other in the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco (Legion of Honour).
7. Bending the panels was necessary as Langlois was working in the French manner to achieve the bulbous forms of the *bombé commodes*, which came into fashion in France when the Louis XIV style had been displaced by Régency and later Louis XV styles. The copy of *A Description of the Villa of Strawberry Hill*, printed in 1774, annotated by Horace Walpole, which I quote, is currently kept in the Lewis Walpole Library (call number 49 2422Ao), Yale University. I thank Cindy Roman, Curator of Prints at the Lewis Walpole Library for this information and Kristen McDonald, Library Services Assistant, for facilitating a digital copy. For further details on Walpole's furnishings of Strawberry Hill see Michael Snodin, *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill*, New Haven, 2009.
8. "Strawberry Hill, the renowned seat of Horace Walpole: Mr. George Robins is honoured by having been selected by the Earl of Waldegrave, to sell by public competition, the valuable contents of Strawberry Hill, and it may fearlessly be proclaimed as the most distinguished gem that has ever adorned the annals of auctions. It is definitely fixed for Monday, the 25th day of April, 1842, and twenty-three following days [...]" (Sales catalogue, London, 1842). https://archive.org/details/strawberryhillre00robi/page/n10_03-03-2020.
9. Catalogue des tableaux anciens, écoles anglaise et française du XVIIIe siècle, objets d'art et d'ameublement, dont la vente [aura lieu] par suite du décès de M. Eugène Kraemer [...], <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k12500587.textelimage>, 03-03-2020.
10. For more details on the *Exposición de Arte Retrospectivo* see Marcelo Pacheco, *Coleccionismo de Arte en Buenos Aires 1924-1942*, Buenos Aires, 2013, p. 12.
11. See Pacheco 2011, *Coleccionismo artístico en Buenos Aires*, p. 157-158.
12. The Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes was founded in 1895. The first Eastern pieces to enter its collection were donated by Delfina L. de Viglione, before its first director Eduardo Schiaffino's departure from the institution in 1910.

Bibliography

María Isabel Baldasarre, *Los dueños del arte.*

Coleccionismo y consumo cultural en Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, 2006.

Arte, sociedad y política, vol. I, ed. José E. Burucúa, Buenos Aires, 1990.

Laura Malosetti Costa, *Las artes plásticas entre el ochenta y el centenario*, in: *Nueva Historia Argentina. Arte, sociedad y política*, vol. I, ed. José E. Burucúa, Buenos Aires, 1990, p. 161-216.

Laura Malosetti Costa, *Palabras y gestos para una modernidad. La crítica de arte en la década de 1880 en Buenos Aires*, in: *Desde la otra vereda. Momentos en el debate por un arte moderno en la Argentina (1880-1960)*, ed. Diana Wechsler, Buenos Aires, 1998, p. 17-42.

Galerie Georges Petit, *Catalogue des tableaux anciens, écoles anglaise et française du XVIIIe siècle, objets d'art et d'ameublement, dont la vente [aura lieu] par suite du décès de M. Eugène Kraemer [...]*,

Paris, 1912,
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k12500587.textelImage>, 03-03-2020.

Miguel Angel Muñoz, *Un campo para el arte argentino. Modernidad artística y nacionalismo en torno al Centenario*, in: *Desde la otra vereda. Momentos en el debate por un arte moderno en la Argentina (1880-1960)*, ed. Diana Wechsler, Buenos Aires, 1998, p. 43-82.

Marcelo Pacheco, *Coleccionismo artístico en Buenos Aires del Virreinato al Centenario*, Buenos Aires, 2011.

Marcelo Pacheco, *Coleccionismo de Arte en Buenos Aires 1924-1942*, Buenos Aires, 2013.

George Henry Robins et al., *Strawberry Hill, the renowned seat of Horace Walpole*, Sales catalogue, London, 1842,
<https://archive.org/details/strawberryhillre00robi/page/n10>, 03-03-2020.

Michael Snodin, *Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill*, New Haven, 2009.

Horace Walpole, *A Description of the Villa of Horace Walpole Youngest Son of Sir Robert Walpole Earl of Orford, at Strawberry Hill near Twickenham, with an inventory of the Furniture, Pictures, Curiosities, Etc.*, Strawberry Hill, 1774.

Desde la otra vereda. Momentos en el debate por un arte moderno en la Argentina (1880-1960), ed. Diana Wechsler, Buenos Aires, 1998.

Picture credits

Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 courtesy of the Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo, Buenos Aires.

Figs. 5, 6 courtesy of the Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental, Buenos Aires.

Summary

The Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental (MNAO) in Buenos Aires was founded in 1965 by the then Secretary of Culture of the Argentine State. It was the first museum in South America devoted to Eastern art and culture. Its declared purpose is to preserve and promote knowledge of the material productions of Asia, Africa and Oceania as well as encourage international understanding between different parts of the world. Today Tibeto-Chinese and Japanese pieces form seventy percent of the museum's collection, but Thailand, Persia, Korea, Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, Armenia and Myanmar are also represented by pieces dating from 500 B.C. to the

twentieth century. Economic constraints among other factors resulted in the loss of its premises in 2001, and since then, the museum has been operating inside the building of the Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo (MNAD) which also holds an interesting collection of Oriental art pieces. Such closeness between the two institutions becomes increasingly dangerous as the MNAO's collections on display tend to be perceived by the public as a complement, and secondary, to European decorative arts.

Author

Florencia Rodríguez Giavarini graduated as a lawyer from Universidad Católica Argentina. She completed her B.A. in Art History (Summa cum Laude) from Florida International University in the United States and holds a post graduate certificate in Cultural Management from Universitat Operta de Catalunya in Spain. She was Head of the Art History Department at Universidad del Salvador in Buenos Aires until 2017, where she now teaches History of the Decorative Arts. She has conducted research on furniture and other decorative arts for the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes and Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas, in Buenos Aires. Her interests include Decorative Arts, Furniture and Book history in particular, as well as all manifestations of the encounter between Europe and non-European cultures.

Title

Florencia Rodríguez Giavarini, The Museo Nacional de Arte Oriental in Buenos Aires: From European Taste for Oriental Art to Genuine Interest in the East, in: *Asia Collections outside Asia: Questioning Artefacts, Cultures and Identities in the Museum*, eds. Iside Carbone and Helen Wang, kunsttexte.de/Transcultural Perspectives, no. 4, 2020 (6 p.), www.kunsttexte.de.