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The Collections of the Orient Museum (Fundação Oriente-Museu do Oriente): Polysemy and Metonymy

The Fundação Oriente and the Museu do Oriente in relation to China

The Fundação Oriente was founded in Lisbon in 1988, during which it installed one delegation in Macau, while this region was still under Portuguese rule. Its statutes affirm and nurture the historical and cultural relationships between Asian countries, with a particular emphasis on the contexts in which the Portuguese established a presence, such as China. It is not mere chance that the date of its founding contains the number “8” three times – 18 March 1988 – eight being the lucky number for the Chinese and foretelling of prosperity. While, on the one hand, this proximity with China lay at the heart of the Fundação Oriente, on the other hand, the underlying themes structuring its projects, most definitely as a cultural agent, arise from the first voyages of the maritime explorers of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries, beginning with India and then, in 1543, all the way to Japan. The Fundação Oriente therefore focuses on the idea of cultural encounters between Portugal and Asia, and the diversity of Asian cultures in its most varied artistic, narrative, performative and religious expressions.

The settlement of the Portuguese in Macau, beginning in the sixteenth century and lasting over four centuries, was crucial to establishing cultural, economic and political relationships with China. Such relations crystallised between the sixteenth and seventeenth century through the trading routes and Catholic missionary activities, while other European colonising countries were focusing their attention on South and Southeast Asia. Prior to the transfer of the administration of Macau to China, which took place in 1999, the Sino-Portuguese Declaration of 1987 defined a series of initiatives that sought to maintain and deepen the cultural and political bonds between Portugal and China, preserving the uniqueness of the cultural identity of Macau, promoting Portuguese language teaching, and thereby establishing the

scope for mutual understanding.

The Fundação Oriente replicated its educational, artistic, scientific and philanthropic projects through the establishment of three delegations in Asia – in the Special Autonomous Region of Macau (1988), in Goa (1995) and in Dili, East Timor (1999) – and later, in 2008, with the creation of the Museu do Oriente in Lisbon, a centre for encounters with Asian cultures. Its programme includes the presentation of its two key collections – Portuguese Presence in Asia (PPA) and Kwok On (KO) – both reflecting the proximity of the relationship with China, and paying particular attention in maintaining a meaningful representation of this country. The museum also promotes contemporary art exhibitions, performing arts, traditional practice in everyday life, scientific research extended to study grants and scholarships, a publishing house devoted to Asian cultures, alongside conferences and gatherings on political and economic themes.

Constitution and mission of Museu do Oriente, and its contexts

The choice of the name and the overarching theme of the museum, its mission and the establishment of its two core collections with their means of public presentation, their definition and uniqueness, are best understood on the basis of the input of both its founder and the President of the Foundation, Carlos Monjardino. The events on broader scales are equally echoed in the annual programmes of the museum, in the curatorial options for exhibitions and the activities delivered by the education service, as well as in workshops, concerts, conferences and publications.

The general public as well as the specialist public, particularly in areas such as the social sciences, have come to question the pertinence of national and international museums dedicated to themes around geographical explorations of the past, associated with the ideological hegemony of the West over the “Other”. Our attention is drawn onto the existence of

political discourses, according to which Western empires claim symbolic, geostrategic powers together with a collective imaginary that constantly reiterates, through different networks of sociability, the relevance of geographical *discovery* and the conquest of the “Other” as an affirmation of identity. However, while recognising this ideological context, at international and national level, a more detailed analysis leads us to verify the existence of different settings and to be aware of a far more complex reality, inside museums and organisations alike, with advances, setbacks and intermediate positions. As a consequence, the staff of Museu do Oriente is moving towards an effort to build bonds between cultures, unveiling Asia and its many facets to the Portuguese public and more broadly to Europe.

The building

The definition of the type of space to house the museum was no simple process and it may serve to illustrate the complex reality mentioned above. Among the various options was to construct a purpose-built museum on land acquired from Lisbon Municipal Council. However, the transaction was cancelled, due to administrative issues of the municipality. The need to find either space for construction or a building that could be adapted was made even more urgent by the donation of the Kwok On collection in 1999. The Foundation acquired a building from the 1940s (fig. 1), which was named after Pedro Álvares Cabral, the military explorer accredited with reaching Brazil, and constructed under the Estado Novo, the Portuguese dictatorial regime in power between 1933 and 1974. National-imperialist in political outlook, the regime defended



Fig. 1 Main façade, Orient Museum of Lisbon; building named *Pedro Álvares Cabral* (2008).

colonisation and fostered national pride, the idea of a heroic and adventurous Portuguese empire with a civilising, cosmopolitan and multicultural mission.

Faced with independence movements and pressure from the United Nations over decolonisation, the Estado Novo justified its international policy based on the notion of a cosmopolitan Portuguese character, fostering racial interaction and intercultural dialogue. Such a discourse was to prevail in the post-colonial context, over the course of successive democratic governments, and came to integrate the idea of Portugal’s role as a precursor of cultural globalisation.¹ In 1986, the Portuguese state set up the *Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries* and, in 1998, hosted the last universal exposition of the century in Lisbon, Expo 98, under the theme of “The Oceans”, exalting Portugal’s national maritime history and *discoveries*, and demanding recognition of their internal and external geostrategic value.

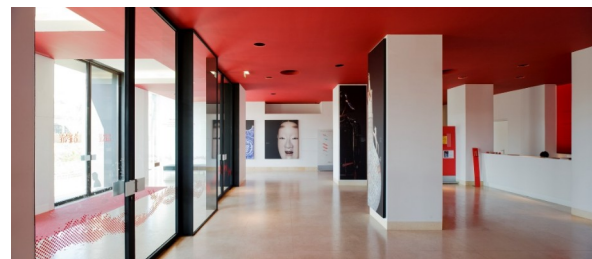


Fig. 2 Main entrance, Orient Museum.

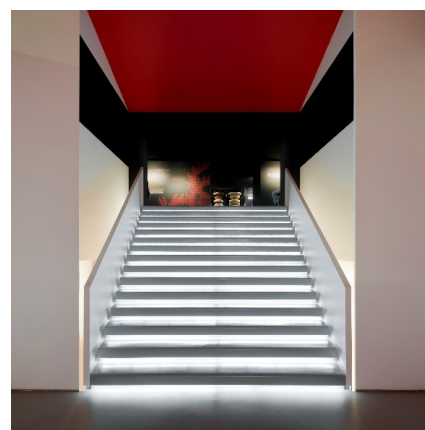


Fig. 3 Access to the 1st floor of the Orient Museum.

The building, a former refrigerated warehouse for cod and fruit, represents a fine example of modern port architecture, simple and austere. It can be

typified as a symbol of the dictatorship and its imperialist discourse. However, we would also note, the building, situated along the river Tagus, provides an ideal and appealing location and was the only facility that at the time provided the height, scale and other conditions necessary for conversion into a museum.² What might at first sight seem an option with ideological roots turns out to be nothing more than random chance (figs. 2-3).

The collections, founders and biographies

The project leading to the creation of the Museu do Oriente is bound up with the trajectories of two personal lives that led to the founding of the two collections. In particular, the idea to found the museum came from the president of the Foundation, Carlos Monjardino, a former banker and member of the Macau Government (1986-87). At the same time, he was also instrumental in the replication of the Fundação Oriente project, including the PPA collection, the museum and the institution, through its three delegations in Asia. With his taste for art, Monjardino supported the systematic and sustained acquisition of works of art in national and international auctions even prior to the museum's existence. The PPA collection of works of art was thus the result of an arduous searching for private collections that still held relevant pieces. In addition to those already featured in national and international museums, the search included scouring through national museums with reserve collections that might be loaned to the Museu do Oriente for exhibitions. The subsequent integration of the Kwok On collection within the Museu do Oriente also arose from Monjardino's intuition and determination (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Namban folding screen; Japan, Edo period (1615-1868); wood, paper, pigments and gold leaf; 176 x 381 cm; PPA Collection, FO.633; © Fundação Oriente-Museu do Oriente.

The opportunity to acquire the Kwok On collection resulted from swift decision-making following a chance meeting between Carlos Monjardino and the French sinologist Jacques Pimpaneau, director of the Musée Kwok On in Paris and of the Association des Arts et Traditions de l'Asie. Pimpaneau complained about the inadequacy of the building housing the collection of popular Asian artefacts, and the French government's lack of interest in coming up with a solution for the rehousing and suitable presentation of the collection. The donation was negotiated within a few hours and the collection was to arrive in Lisbon in 1999. The incorporation of the Kwok On collection brought in the personal life trajectory of its collector Pimpaneau and his wife Sylvie Pimpaneau: their choices on the constitution of the collection, as well as their options for future exhibitions and acquisitions. The KO collection, built up through the gathering of objects from their places of origin, around the theme of Asian popular material culture, performing arts and religious practices, together with associated narrative heritage, is different in theme and mode from the PPA collection, while complementary on different Asian realities and identities (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Teyyam ritual performance; costume for Karim Kuttichathan; India, Kerala, Cannanore or Kannur; 20th century; textiles, wood, cowrie; 200 x 180 x 40 cm; Kwok On Collection, 5.1IN46; © Fundação Oriente-Museu do Oriente.

Pimpaneau, a specialist in Chinese literature and culture, set about building the collection from an anthropological perspective. Although the Kwok On collection contains some objects dated to the eighteenth century, the overwhelming majority belong

to the twentieth century. Its mainly contemporary nature has never played in its favour and since its inception in France, the collection has suffered from the stigmatisation of being an assemblage of popular and not erudite artefacts.

Programming

The scientific and cultural programme of the museum draws upon a technical team specialising in different areas and selected by the Portuguese museologist and professor of museology at the Lisbon Faculty of Fine Arts, Fernando Baptista Pereira. The vision of the board of the Fundação Oriente, which had defined the acquisition policy for the PPA works of art and had received the KO donation, then deployed the scientific character and solutions of museology to define a coherent discourse for the exhibited contents. The programme followed a fundamental axis that, from the outset, would reduce the distinction between the collections: that of cross-referencing the fields of the history of art and anthropology for the study and valuation of witness accounts whether of the Portuguese Presence in Asia or of Asian cultures, and thus presenting to the public a global perspective on the artistic and cultural heterogeneity of Asia.

This axis seeks to highlight the points of convergence among the collections, where artistic production and cultural and social practices coincide in context and, on occasion, also temporally. However, the collections are perceived, even in the discourses of the technical team, as separate in terms of the canons distinguishing between erudite and popular arts. The ideological distinction is somehow reinforced by the individuality of each collection, at the most pragmatic and organisational levels. Beyond the idiosyncratic ways and means of acquisition, the collections arrived with independent inventory databases, with their own classifications and inventory numbers, as devised in Paris at the Musée Kwok On, and by two curators of history and anthropology, respectively. The collections were then allocated two distinct and defined exhibition spaces, on two floors with each spanning 1,500 square metres, divided into three wings. The PPA constitutes a permanent exhibition while the KO is presented in long term temporary exhibitions (up to three years) in the areas permanently dedicated to each collection.

The PPA collection

This collection contains a wide range of decorative arts with three thousand artworks and documents witnessing the historic heritage of the Portuguese presence in Asia. The generating concept is the construction of an oriental utopia by the Portuguese. The collection includes different types of objects from the Neolithic period to the twentieth century, from India, China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Korea and East Timor: furniture, ceramics, paintings, ivories, sculpture, textiles, armours, silverware and graphic arts. The first part of the visiting route is dedicated to Macau. The highlights in this wing are Chinese folding screens, including an extremely rare seventeenth-century example depicting the cities of Canton and Macau. In the following wing, there are pieces of furniture, textiles, jewellery, silvers, paintings and ivories, maps and scale models that represent the establishment and expansion of the Portuguese Asian Empire, structured around Goa (fig. 6). In this space the objects in focus are an eighteenth-century Goan treatise on Hindu gentilism and Namban art pieces dating to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including a folding screen and a helmet.



Fig. 6 Casket; India, Gujarat; 17th century; teak wood, mother-of-pearl; 16.5 x 23.5 x 13 cm; PPA Collection, FO.1230; © Fundação Oriente-Museu do Oriente.

In the third gallery, among antique Chinese, Japanese and Korean pieces, there is a set of Timorese objects for both daily and ceremonial usage and two sections dedicated to two Portuguese private collectors whose fascination for the local culture and aesthetics of Japan and China led them to acquire

artistic works outside the mainstream of western orientalism: the politician, free thinker and writer Manuel Teixeira Gomes (1860-1941) and the poet Camilo Pessanha (1867-1926). Teixeira Gomes resigned from the office of President of the Republic in 1925 to devote himself to his literary and travel writings. In his typological section, there are Chinese snuff bottles (eighteenth century), Japanese sword guards or tsuba (fourteenth century onwards), netsuke supports (sixteenth century onwards) and inro boxes from the Edo period (1615-1868) of Japan. Camilo Pessanha lived his last three decades in Macau and was a pioneer in aesthetically valuing the three Chinese perfections – painting, calligraphy and poetry – which feature in this exhibition area (fig. 7). In 1924, his collection was declared inappropriate for display by the then director of the National Museum of Ancient Art and was also rejected two years later by the National Museum of Ethnology. The objects might have been dismissed as a set of objects from the colony, yet, in reality, they convey artistic and erudite expressions of Buddhism and Taoism.



Fig. 7 Hanging scroll; Chen Zhenji; China; Qing dynasty, Daoguang period (1821-1850); silk scroll; 65.5 x 98 cm; Camilo Pessanha Collection, Deposit National Museum of Machado Castro, 5138P800; PPA Collection; © Fundação Oriente-Museu do Oriente.

The KO collection

In 1971, Jacques Pimpaneau was in Hong Kong and met Kwok On, a Chinese banker with a passion for diverse aspects of Chinese theatre, and collecting and creating theatrical musical instruments and puppets. He also enjoyed organising gatherings of

friends to stage Canton opera librettos and puppet performances. Kwok On was to donate the first 600 objects to the collection that has since carried his name. Currently, there are around 15,000 pieces of different types, such as musical instruments, puppets, costumes, paintings, engravings, statues and ritual objects.³ These pieces have been brought together with the objective of depicting the material facets of the diverse performing arts that bear witness to and are expressions of traditional ceremonies and narratives, such as: Turkish, Greek, Malay and Thai shadow theatre; Balinese sacred dances, the wayang golek (rod puppets), wayang klitik (flat, wooden puppets), wayang orang (unmasked human puppets), wayang topeng (masked human puppets) and wayang beber (storytelling with painted scrolls) in Indonesia; the Ta'zieh ritual theatre of Iran; puppets from various regions of India, Burma and Vietnam; the Indian koodiyattam and kathakali theatrical performances; Japanese noh and kabuki performing arts and bunraku puppet theatre; the khon theatre of Thailand; Chinese opera; and domestic altars and masks of various origins. Given the scope of its geographic coverage, this collection is deemed the leading example in its field at a European level (figs. 8-9).



Fig. 8 Mask of Shiva as Kirat; performance Chhau of Purulia; India, Bengal, Purulia; peacock feathers, papier-maché; 94 x 158 x 18 cm; Kwok On Collection, 71N30; © Fundação Oriente-Museu do Oriente.



Fig. 9 Rod puppets for Taoist priest; China, Guangdong; 19th century; wood; 200 x 180 x 40 cm; Kwok On Collection, 2.2C 88, 89; © Fundação Oriente-Museu do Oriente.

Among the numerous national and international exhibitions held in relation to the Kwok On collection, particular mention should be made of “Popular Chinese Religion”, the first exhibition of its kind in Portugal, in 1999, at the National Palace of Ajuda, and “Chinese Opera”, currently on display at the Museu do Oriente. Both challenge their audiences with a different perspective on Chinese culture focusing on popular beliefs, rituals, the diverse pantheon of gods, the socio-cultural practices in general through the heterogeneity of the themes and objects on display. “Chinese opera”, which includes 280 different pieces (figs. 10-11), provides a wide reaching vision over the universe of this Chinese performing art. It presents scenes from major narratives; biographies of leading actors and directors; the types of characters, costumes, makeup, wigs and hairpieces; period ceramics, paintings and engravings; musical instruments, librettos and photographs; statues of divinised personalities; puppets and masks; the nuoxi and dixi exorcist operas; propitious dances; and the opera during the Cultural Revolution. All this offers a kaleidoscope of the meanings and functions of opera in Chinese culture and society: critiques of the costumes worn, exaltation of military and moral virtues, fear of the gods, transmission of ancestral wisdom, and the state of the art in recent history, including the attempt to deploy the genre at the service of the political regime of the Cultural Revolution.



Fig. 10 *Mang* costume, Chinese opera; China, Sichuan; ca. 1970; textile; 162 x 197 cm; Kwok On Collection, 5.1C19; © Fundação Oriente- Museu do Oriente.



Fig. 11 Hammered dulcimer or yangqin; China, Guangdong; 1925; wood, ivory and metal; 10.5 x 71.8 x 24 cm; Kwok On Collection, 1.2C14; © Fundação Oriente-Museu do Oriente.

Polysemy and Metonymy

When museum collections are analysed, it is not only the objects that undergo a process of identification according to a usually unilateral standard. The institutions themselves are frequently subject to the same partial examination. Similarly, just as we rarely address the stories associated with the objects, neither do we usually discuss and take into account the individual stories of their museums and staff. We should therefore approach polysemy and metonymy in a more ambivalent fashion. Just as the objects do not exist disassociated from the subject matter and the contexts of their usage, museums are a set of personal and institutional contexts that should equally be understood according to their specific social and

cultural settings, which define all of their diverse functions and meanings.

Despite the weighting of the positivist vision on the objectivity of the knowledge produced, museums are in reality dependent on a universe of choices that influence and shape the representation of the "Other." A myriad of questions arise daily in the tasks of identifying, labelling and writing legitimate information about "Others" that we not always intimately know, and too rarely call upon to express their own voices. The objects tend to be displaced and isolated from the contexts in which they were used. We classify them into categories that only with difficulty span their multi-functional natures before presenting them as scenic constructions, under spotlights, in glass cases, alone or accompanied, thereby reducing their local polysemy, their diverse meanings and usages. Given the lack of information and the ambiguity, we have to resort, with less than a clear awareness, to the metonymies that transfigure and appropriate them, representing the whole by its part.

This reality becomes even more expressive when applied to the exhibition of cultures and the collection of popular or ethnographic art, which most blatantly display the need to reach deeper, and for profound knowledge of the cultural practices and their languages. When material culture is displayed outside of its context, its time and space, from the outset it loses the local functions for which it was created and with them part of its plethora of meanings. In the case of the Kwok On collection, in addition to this alteration in function there is a lack of information about the context into which the objects were incorporated. And it is not always possible to reconcile an intense programme of museum activities with the time necessary to research them. Given the scarcity of time and the demands of public exhibitions, many of the objects are presented without complete information or still require confirmation. On occasion we encounter a lack of standardisation in the local designations in the texts produced. Furthermore, while the establishment of the Kwok On collection derives from the pioneering vision of its collector(s), aiming at extending the knowledge of Chinese and Asian civilisations beyond academia, it could not but be influenced by political issues, the prevailing

aesthetics and the random intervention of chance. As the Goan researcher Jason Fernandes stated, taking as an example the display of a KO statue of the Indian goddess Yellama in the KO exhibition "Gods of Asia" at the MO in 2008, the absence of Islam and Christianity in the collection is significant.⁴ The narratives on the origins and functions of the goddess associated with Shiite Islam are correspondingly silenced. In the case of the PPA, the rich section dedicated to Indian and Indo-Portuguese art reflects the presence of numerous private and public collections on this theme in Portugal, while, in contrast, Muslim Asia fails to gain due representation. Stemming from this situation, and considering that this is just an example of a wide-spread reality of museums in general, the selective presentation of the available materials requires a museologist to engage in particular efforts to dissipate and dispel the impression of imbalance in the museum's sections.

For this purpose, it is important to bear in mind the emerging context of paradigm and scope changes occurring in museum studies, and in museums' social functions, programmes and practices, as well in the visitors' choices. Indeed, the current recommendation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), approved in December 2018 is to revise the current museum definition.

"Over recent decades museums have radically transformed, adjusted and re-invented their principles, policies and practices, to the point where the ICOM museum definition no longer seems to reflect the challenges and manifold visions and responsibilities. [...] As a result, ICOM has invited its members, committees, partners and other interested stakeholders to participate in the development of potential alternatives for the museum definition [...]."⁵

Curators and members of the technical team at the MO are aware of the need to develop more effective means with a more complex gaze and a greater capacity for intervention within the scope of boosting the level of polysemy and intercultural communication and bringing such problematic issues into the exhibitions. One of the temporary exhibitions at the MO, entitled "A Museum from Another World",⁶ a

dialogue between contemporary works of art, archaeological Chinese jades and terracottas and objects from the Kwok On collection, wittingly presented within an ambience resembling a cabinet of curiosities, drew attention to the underlying doubt: after all, just which of these objects belong(s) to the “Other”?

Endnotes

1. João Leal, *O Património e a Antropologia Portuguesa: uma perspectiva histórica*, in: *Museu e Património Imaterial: agentes, fronteiras, identidades*, ed. Paulo Ferreira da Costa, Lisbon 2009, p.289-295. Elsa Peralta, *A sedução da história: construção e incorporação da "imagem de marca" Portugal*, in: *Turismo y patrimonio: entramados narrativos*, eds. Llorenç Prats and Agustín Santana, Tenerife 2011, p. 231-243.
2. And the quantity of KO objects, around 10,000 at the time, came to alter the initial idea about the scale of the museum building and made more complex the perspective on the storage and exhibition spaces that would now be needed.
3. This number annually expands in keeping with the objects gathered by the missions undertaken by Fundação Oriente ever since its first donation.
4. *India Visual* conference held at the Oriente Museum, 2017.
5. <https://icom.museum/en/news/watch-the-2nd-episode-of-seeking-change-a-new-museum-definition/>, 11-03-2020.
6. On display from 15 March to 3 June 2018.

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Fernando António Pereira, *Museu do Oriente*, Lisboa 2008.

Jacques Pimpaneau, *Les Théâtres d'Asie*, Paris 1986.

Jacques Pimpaneau, *Théâtre et Religion en Asie*, Paris 1989.

Christopher Tilley, *Interpreting Material Culture, in: The Meanings of Things: Material Culture and Symbolic Expression*, ed. Ian Hodder, London 1989, p. 185-194.

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Summary

The Orient Museum (Museu do Oriente), in Lisbon, was created in 2008 by the Orient Foundation (Fundação Oriente, FO), a private organisation that was established in 1988. Its founding mission statement declares that the museum's two collections, Portuguese Presence in Asia (PPA) and Kwok On (KO), were brought together with the intention of building peaceful links between Western and Asian civilisations. This purpose is pursued by disclosing artistic evidence of the prolific contacts from the sixteenth century onwards (by PPA), and by promoting the richness of contemporary Asian cultural diversity both in the Portuguese and broader European contexts, through the presentation of traditional performing arts and narrative testimonies (by KO). The PPA collection was acquired by the FO on national and international markets and is part of the permanent exhibition. The KO collection was donated to the FO in 1999 by the French Association des Arts et Traditions Populaires de l'Asie and is presented in the form of temporary exhibitions. The museum promotes a cross-disciplinary profile, interweaving historical and anthropological points of view that define its programming. Yet the complex reality of presenting its collections poses to the

museum's staff a myriad of questions while working to increase polysemy and to reduce metonymic on the meanings of actions and objects.

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Title

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