

Maria Szymańska-Ilnata

The Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw: New Beginning and Challenges

Introduction

The purpose of this text is to briefly present the history of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, its mission and the assumptions behind its permanent exhibition which is now in development. The Asia and Pacific Museum is the only museum of its kind in Poland. It holds a collection of around 23,000 artefacts from different countries of Asia and the Pacific Islands, which was moved from one place to another several times, as the museum dealt with housing problems. The political and social situation in Poland had a big influence on the position occupied by the museum in the cultural landscape of Warsaw and Poland in the past. It has never been an institution of primary importance, nor has it attracted popular interest, but it has always had a loyal audience which has motivated the museum's employees, and formed an active group of real lovers of the culture, traditions and heritage of Asia and the Pacific.

The situation of the museum as an institution has changed significantly during recent years, as the housing problem was finally resolved. This will be discussed in the second part of the article, which is devoted to the present circumstances of the museum. The final part of the article presents plans which are now being realised. For the first time in its history, the museum is preparing to open a permanent exhibition, which was always the dream of the employees. Plans for this display have been in preparation for many years by two generations of curators. They have changed many times in response to new tendencies in museology, new visions developed by younger curators, and the development of knowledge and the collection. The article will reveal our present point of view and concept, explaining its political, historical and social context.

The history of the Asia and Pacific Museum

The Asia and Pacific Museum grew out of the private collection of Indonesian arts and crafts created by An-

drzej Wawrzyniak. Born in 1931 in Warsaw, he graduated from the Junga Sailing School, Gdańsk, and in 1948, still as a student, began sailing the seas, on the *Dar Pomorza* ship. After several voyages and completing further education, in 1950 he became an officer of the Polish Merchant Navy and made a gruelling voyage through the tropics to China. Wawrzyniak would often recall this journey as the turning point in his life. It was at this time that he developed an interest in Asia. Later, he studied at the Diplomatic-Consular Faculty of the Central School of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw and, following his graduation, started to work in diplomacy (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Andrzej Wawrzyniak in Jakarta; 1961; Visual Archive of the Asia and Pacific Museum.

Between 1961 and 1971 he was posted in Indonesia, where he developed a fascination with Indonesian culture and crafts which proved crucial for the mu-

seum.¹ At the beginning he started to collect daggers, masks and textiles. Later, his passion extended to other artefacts. Eventually, his Indonesian collection reached over 3000 items. It was brought to Poland thanks to the kind assistance of Wawrzyniak's former colleagues, Polish captains who transported the precious cargo on board their ships.

Andrzej Wawrzyniak prepared the first exhibition of his collection in 1966 in cooperation with the Cracow Ethnographic Museum. It was entitled *Art of the South Seas* and was presented in two instalments (fig. 2).

Afterwards, the collection was exhibited in a



Fig. 2 The *Art of the South Seas* exhibition; 1966; Visual Archive of the Asia and Pacific Museum.

number of Polish towns and cities. At that time Wawrzyniak was still working abroad as a diplomat in different countries. After he came back to Poland in 1971, he realised how difficult it was to keep such a big collection in good conditions. High costs of professional conservation, preventing damage due to the change of climate, proper storage – these were only some problems he faced and could not solve alone. Janusz Kamocki, Polish ethnographer, curator at the Ethnographic Museum in Cracow and one of the first Polish researchers in Indonesia, advised him to donate his collection to the state on the condition that it became the basis for the creation of a new museum with Wawrzyniak at the helm.² In 1973 this proposal was accepted by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts and the Warsaw city council after the collection had been evaluated by a special commission as historically, scientifically, and artistically valuable. In 1973 the Museum of Nusantara Archipelago was established,

with Andrzej Wawrzyniak appointed as director. The institution was given two townhouses dating from 1854 that required comprehensive renovation to become proper office and storage space (fig. 3).³

In the meantime the collection was stored in different places in Warsaw or shown to the public at temporary exhibitions in other museums. In 1976 the Museum changed its name to the Asia and Pacific Museum, as it started to broaden its collection to include artefacts from other Asian countries, despite of the lack of exhibition space and proper storage rooms.



Fig. 3 The old building on Solec Street; ca. 1990; Visual Archive of the Asia and Pacific Museum.

The situation changed slightly in 1977, when the Gallery of Nusantara was allocated 100 m² of basement space in a residential building on Nowogrodzka Street. The first exhibition in the new location was dedicated to the donors to the Museum. The Gallery of Nusantara was in operation until 2007 (fig. 4).⁴



Fig. 4 Nusantara Gallery; 2007; E. Helbert; Visual Archive of the Asia and Pacific Museum.

The second exhibition space was opened in a historic tenement building on Freta Street, close to Warsaw Old Town. From 1984 to 2014 it was also used for meetings, small conferences and lectures. During that time, the Museum's work was split between several locations, which made working life difficult. The offices and the technical workshop were for some time located away from the storage rooms, while the two exhibition spaces were in different parts of the city. After 1987 the housing situation became more stable. The offices and storage rooms were moved to two buildings on Solec Street, and the displays were organised at the galleries on Freta and Nowogrodzka Street. Since 2002 the Asia and Pacific Museum cooperated with the Botanical Garden of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Powsin, organising several temporary exhibitions, for example, of contemporary monumental temple sculptures in stone.⁵

As we can see from this brief historical outline, the museum struggled owing to the lack of permanent exhibition space. Although it owns the land between the two townhouses where its offices and storage spaces are located, it was not able to afford the construction of a new building on that plot. The first design for the new building was prepared in 1978, and the second, envisioning a space for the museum and offices for rent, in 1998, but neither was realised. In 2004 a partnership was launched with a private investor to construct a building in a new location, housing a hotel, offices for rent and spaces that the museum could use. Although it took several years to complete, the building was finally ready in 2013 (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Main entrance to the Museum; 2014; E. Helbert; the Asia and Pacific Museum.

The first “new beginning” in the history of the Asia and Pacific Museum

In 2013 the Museum started operating in the huge new building designed by the Szaroszyk and Rycerski Architectural Studio that also housed many apartments for sale. The museum space is located on two floors. On the ground floor there is a permanent exhibition space measuring 1000 m², a room for temporary exhibitions, a library, reading room, educational space, conference room, café, shop, storage space for exhibits, conservation and photographic studios and a few offices. The first floor houses the offices of most of the museum's departments and some storage rooms. Although the design of the permanent exhibition was ready from the beginning, it took some time to obtain the necessary funding.

Despite these problems, the museum was very actively promoting Asian arts, cultures and crafts. We started off with a campaign called *Akcja Solec (Solec Action)* which sought to present the museum's potential to the people living nearby, the mass media and the authorities. We displayed some of the most spectacular artefacts from the collection in the empty rooms of the new building and organised guided tours during the day and at night (fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Action Solec; 2014; E. Helbert; the Asia and Pacific Museum.

We wanted to show that we had a lot of interesting items and stories to present. The response was very positive. Our campaign captured people's interest, and many said a permanent exhibition was indeed needed. We hoped that with the help of local journalists who published articles about the sad story

of the museum it would be easier to obtain the necessary funds for that purpose, but we had to wait a few more years for such funds to materialise.

The first grant came in 2014 from the European Regional Operational Programme and the Mazowsze provincial government and allowed us to buy equipment for the conservation studio, photographic studio, storage rooms, library and conference room. We were able to start organising conferences, meetings and lectures, which have been an important part of the museum's activity since its beginnings. It was reassuring to see the visitors of the Asian and Nusantara Galleries attending our events at the new location, and that our visitors were not only local residents, but people really interested in Asia and loyal regulars of our institution.

In 2016 thanks to the grants we received from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the space for temporary exhibitions was equipped and a small section of the permanent exhibition was opened. The permanent display, entitled *Sound Zone*, is dedicated to the musical traditions of the Asia and Pacific region and I had the pleasure of being its curator (fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Sound Zone; 2016; P. Zygmunt; the Asia and Pacific Museum.

It is introduced on the museum's website as follows:

"It presents approximately 120 musical instruments originating from various cultural milieux and countries. It includes both simple instruments played by amateurs as well as real masterpieces used by professional musicians at royal courts. The cultural context and functions are illustrated with the help of various multimedia providing the opportunity to learn about the traditional role of an instru-

ment as well as some more contemporary changes in the sphere of music influenced by the intermingling of different cultures. The visitor has the possibility not only to admire some beautiful objects from this collection but also enjoy the sounds of selected instruments, watch movies presenting techniques of how to play them and learn from the contemporary and historical photo documentation of musical traditions. For people wanting to check their musical skills, it is possible to try out a few traditional instruments."⁶

The *Sound Zone* display uses only around 100 m² of space. However, it has been very well received by visitors and won a Mazowsze museum award in 2016.

At the end of 2017 the Museum received a grant to complete the larger part of the permanent exhibition, which should open in 2020. It will consist of three galleries presenting the history and cultures of Central Asia, Mongolia and Indonesia. This will be the "second new beginning" for the museum.

The cultural context of the existence of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Poland and its mission

The situation of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw is quite different from that of museums in Western Europe, not only because of its profile and the quality and antiquity of our collection, or even its continuing lack of funding. The basic difference derives from the historical conditions which influence peoples' knowledge, mentality and needs. We have to think about our public's background when we are planning the permanent exhibition at the Asia and Pacific Museum and be aware of many different, sometimes very unpleasant, factors.

We have first to consider our history, and remember that Poland has never had close links with any Asian country. It did not have colonies unlike many European countries which are famous for having extensive collections of Asian art. Nor do we have any tradition of conducting research in Asia and, obviously, we do not have old Asian collections. Very few Polish travellers or scientists went to Asia before the First World War, but their small collections and writings are now considered very important. Only a few individuals or small expeditions went to Asia for re-

search purposes during the twentieth century, due to the historical and political conditions. A sea-change came after 1989, when the Polish borders were opened and scientists became free to travel and conduct historical, archaeological and ethnographic research abroad.

Taking all those factors into account, the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw is the biggest and most important in Poland, although it is not very old. It consists of around 23,000 items, which have been displayed in almost 1,000 exhibitions during over the forty years of the museum's activity. From the very beginning, the Asia and Pacific Museum aimed to promote and present Asian cultures to Polish citizens. The museum has tried to broaden the knowledge of the Polish public with regard to a heritage different from their own. As written in the mission statement of the museum:

“we begin from the assumption that artistic and aesthetic values contribute especially to the important area of understanding between cultures and people, an area that is the easiest place to meet without aggression but with mutual curiosity and good will. This mission is particularly important in Poland, a country with a relatively homogeneous culture and without a great tradition of contacts with countries outside of Europe. Moreover, the museum would like to provoke some reflection regarding the diversity and similarities between cultures, the relations between local traditions and the contemporary global world, as well as the influence of our fascinations and prejudices on our perception of a different, unknown reality.”⁷

Over the years of delivering various kinds of activities and events, such as discussions, lectures, photo presentations and so on, we realised that there were two main types of visitors to our museum. The larger group is made of people who do not know much about Asian countries and cultures. Their perception of Asia is mostly very limited and full of stereotypes. To cater for their needs, the museum has to provide very basic information which is easy to understand and remember. The second group comprises travellers, students, researchers and artists, who come to

the museum to broaden their knowledge and compare their own experiences. Some artists come looking for inspiration. As our museum is the unique in Poland, we strive to please both groups of visitors. The challenge is made greater by the fact that in both groups there are people of very different ages – from students to pensioners – and they expect the same content to be presented in a different way.

There are many questions that we have to answer when preparing our permanent exhibition. First of all, we should define our target group. As we have a diverse public, and it will not be possible to meet all of their different needs and expectations in a single exhibition with a single manner of explanation, alternative solutions must be sought.⁸ Using survey methodology, observations and, of course, website statistics, we have established that our core audience are women between the age of 25 and 50. However, to install a permanent exhibition tailored especially for them could be somewhat limiting.

The museum's mission should be to encourage other groups to visit, in particular young people. Visiting a museum which presents other cultures, religions and traditions can help promote tolerance and acceptance of difference in a society where the presence of foreigners is quite a new occurrence and still leads to misunderstandings. People of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds need a place to present their way of life and to make friends. We can see that the museum is one such place for people of Asian origin.⁹ We organise many events such as culinary festivals, concerts, photo presentations, discussions and workshops where people can meet and get to know each other. Recently we have also mounted an exhibition presenting works of artists of Arab descent living in Poland, including sculptures, paintings and medals. Our next goal is to prepare a permanent exhibition where we can ratchet up our efforts.

A concept for the permanent exhibition and challenges

Stemming from the issues discussed above, another problem which we have to consider carefully is the manner of presentation of foreign cultures. As museologists, art historians and cultural anthropologists, we already know that there is no objectivity or transpar-

ency in our work. Researchers have an impact on the people and the places they engage with in their investigations, and present their reading of facts, not the facts themselves. We are aware that showing culture in a pure or authentic form is not possible.¹⁰ The same applies to the museum's collections and exhibitions. Indeed, the shape of the collection depends, among many other factors, on:

- the people who created it, namely the collectors, donors and people who make acquisition decisions
- the time when it was created
- the place where it was created
- the purpose for which it was created
- the available funds
- the space conditions.¹¹

The collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw was created mostly by one man, Andrzej Wawrzyniak, its founder and director for forty years. His preferences, connections, friendships, tastes and career were the most significant factors that influenced the shape of the collection. The same applies to other smaller collections donated or sold to the Asia and Pacific Museum which came into existence thanks to travellers, diplomats, scholars or people who simply lived in a foreign country and became fascinated with its culture. These underlying features cannot be denied, and we have to take them into account while working with the collection and planning the permanent exhibition. These circumstances should also be explained to the visitors to help them understand the way the institution functions, the choices curators make and the design of the galleries.¹²

The concept of our permanent exhibition created around fifteen years ago was based on the idea of a journey to the East, the cultural worlds of Asia and Oceania which the visitor was supposed to enter from the perspective of a European, or even a Pole. The full project includes galleries representing the whole of Asia and Oceania, although now, during the first stage of realisation, we shall prepare only three of them (fig. 8).

“The journey begins from the geographically and historically closest countries of the Middle East and then passes through Central

Asia, richly represented in the collection with a section on the cultures of the Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tajiks and other people, including ethnically diversified Afghanistan. Next, the trail heads towards the steppe regions of Mongolia and the highlands of Tibet, a land connected by the religious and artistic culture of Buddhism. Beyond the symbolic border between the Himalayas and Nepal, India abounds with its rich diversity of colour and Hindu culture. Later, visitors enter the South-East Asia zone, where Hindu religious and artistic influences have left an evident trace.



Fig. 8. Visualisation of sections of the permanent exhibition; 2012; Kłaput Project; Jarosław Kłaput, Barbara Kłaput, Dariusz Kunowski.

The exhibits here are divided into an extensive section devoted to Burma (Myanmar) – the only art collection in Poland of this country presents an extraordinary splendour of sculpture, small architecture and artistic handicrafts – followed by a passage through the area of the Golden Triangle area of Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. Vietnam is next, represented by religious, folk and decorative art. Both paths come together again as they head towards China, focusing on the traditional culture of the late empire and its continuation. A small space inspired by *tokonoma* [an alcove for display] is devoted to Japan. Further on, the Indonesian gallery finally opens up, with a presentation of the largest and the fullest foundation collection

amassed by Andrzej Wawrzyniak. Its centrepiece is a pavilion with gamelan instruments – a classical orchestra – and shadow theatre, around which are some arrangements devoted to particular islands of the Archipelago and the most important elements of its cultures. From Indonesia an offshoot leads to an area of the Pacific, specifically Melanesia, totally different from other areas of the exhibition, with collections originating mainly from New Guinea and Vanuatu.”¹³

The last section is the *Sound Zone* display, already open to the public, which, as described above, presents the musical cultures of Asia and Oceania through a collection of musical instruments and recordings illustrating their context of use. This layout will enable the presentation of Asian cultures in a clear, geographical arrangement, which can be easily followed by the visitor with any level of knowledge. It will also allow us to display a large selection of the most interesting and valuable objects from the collection.

The exhibition will be divided into separate, artistically designed, displays devoted to each of the above mentioned regions to underline the diversity of landscapes and cultures. There will be references to architecture, landscape and characteristic colours, however, the main emphasis will be on authentic objects which are very rare in Poland. The project also incorporates some modern technological solutions involving videos, photos, sounds and additional textual information that will help to present the context in which the exhibits were created and used.

Special place will be dedicated to the Polish scientists, artists, collectors and others who played a significant role in the popularisation of Asian traditions, history and art in Poland. There will be some panels devoted to a few selected figures, presenting their biographies and achievements. Due to limited space we will not be able to honour all the deserving individuals in this way, but we are planning to prepare a special multimedia stand and a website where everyone will have the possibility to learn more about these important figures, their lives and contribution to Polish and Asian art and science.

The exhibition concept follows our belief that the

borders between the different regional sections should be well marked in order to give precise information to the visitors, although we know that in reality many influences may intersect, creating a far more complex picture. However, this kind of deeper understanding needs a good knowledge of the basic problems and circumstances, which is still not very common for Polish visitors. We hope that our first permanent exhibition will help them to glean basic information from the more general object descriptions. For those looking for further details and specific information, we will prepare broader multimedia descriptions available on demand or at special desks. We hope that the exhibition will spark our visitors' interest and encourage them to learn more about the traditions, cultures and history of the Asia and Pacific region. More complex issues and problems will be presented from a deeper and wider perspective in our temporary exhibitions. These will mostly be addressed to people who already have some knowledge about Asian countries and are looking for more detailed information on their traditions and cultures or a commentary on present-day developments. As curators, we believe this division between the permanent and temporary exhibitions will be intelligible, and will help us to meet the expectations of different groups of visitors.

We are also going to prepare several walks to explore our permanent exhibition. Apart from the basic and advanced walks for adults, we shall also create walks for children of different ages. We believe that children are a very important group of visitors. The children's walks will help them to find interesting items, and will feature games and tasks to be solved. We shall try to prepare walks for visitors of different ages which can be followed simultaneously by different members of a family. For example, there will be interactive spots in the exhibition which will engage children, giving their parents time to read a longer description or to study an exhibit in more detail. Children will be able to touch some materials that are uncommon in the Polish climate, such as coconut, or smell the most popular spices from a given region, for example Indonesian pepper, cinnamon or cloves. The interactive spots will, of course, be accessible to all visitors, but we want the objects to be placed at a level that is comfortable for children, which means

rather low. People of all ages will be able to try on traditional Javanese masks or feel the texture of different traditional textiles from Central Asia. The main interactive spot in the Mongolian Gallery will be a complete, originally equipped yurt. This multisensory trip will be accompanied by printed guidebooks adapted for visitors of different ages. Everyone will have the possibility of using them in their own way to make their visit to the museum more comfortable and to get the information they need. Hopefully, this will be a pleasant experience, and will help people of all ages to spend an interesting and valuable time at our museum.

Our contemporary world is full of information, images and all kinds of stimuli. It is also changing very fast. At our museum, which has been waiting for over forty years to present its treasures, objects will be the centre of attention. We shall use new technologies to present the context of use of some artefacts, but not to replace them. Multimedia such as videos, photos, or audio recordings will be available at special spots. Incidentally, we are struggling to find these materials. The history of Poland is once again responsible for this situation. As mentioned before, there was no strong tradition of Asian studies in Poland in the past, therefore, there are no major archives with old photos and films. For the last few years, the museum has been collecting multimedia travel and research documentation, mostly donated by its authors or their heirs. There is no special department to coordinate this work, so it is mostly done by the curators. Despite all these inconveniences, during the last two years alone we have managed to digitise and upload over thirty thousand images and films to our database. We were, in fact, the first museum in Poland to start uploading videos to its database. Most of the multimedia content are photos taken by reporters and people who were working in Asian countries in the 1970s and 80s. There are also digital photos and videos made by young travellers and researchers at the end of the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century. By juxtaposing them we can show changes in local social life that took place over several decades. Our goal is to present not only the traditional, often idealised version of Asian cultures, but their real, contemporary face which is sometimes very complex.

We decided to use our exhibits, which are mostly very traditional items, to explain the history and the traditional facet of Asian and Oceanian cultures. Multimedia will serve to illustrate the changes, foreign influences and modernisation of these cultures. This is why we have put so much effort into acquiring as much multimedia as possible. This work will bear fruit in the future, and visitors will not only admire original objects, but will also be able to get to know the wider context. Moreover, this growing audiovisual collection is available in our library: we hope that it will attract the interest of scholars, artists and students, and will prove useful in their work.

It can be speculated that the biggest change that took place over the last few years as regards the concept of our permanent exhibition was in the curator's approach to the collection and the way of its presentation. Former concepts concentrated on a static view of traditions that constitute the frames binding the community. They were supposed to be unchangeable, irrefutable features allowing our visitors to easily distinguish one ethnic group from another. It was believed that the curator, as a European outsider, was able to objectively observe and present foreign cultures or their chosen aspects to the European public. Nowadays, when cultural anthropology and other sciences have become more reflexive, there has also been a significant shift in our curators' point of view.¹⁴ We are aware that cultures and traditions are changing dynamically and that we are not able to present anything in an objective way. For this reason, we will make the curators visible in our exhibition. They will become guides, presenting the exhibits they chose. They will tell their own story about the culture or region that became their passion and to which they have devoted many years of research and work. Their story will begin many centuries ago, as they present the oldest, archaeological items and continue until the present time of very fast and dynamic changes, which must be showcased for the benefit of today's audiences and documented for future generations. Finally, the curator will be responsible for the vision of the presented part of the world that will be created in the minds of visitors during their journey through the exhibition. Such challenging tasks will be fulfilled following the newest trends in museology¹⁵

and by making use of the achievements and developments of all related fields of science, depending on the career trajectories of the curators in fields such as history, art history, musicology, oriental studies, cultural anthropology etc. The ultimate goal of our team of curators, consisting of art historians, specialists in Asian arts and cultures, cultural anthropologists and musicologists, will be to prepare an interesting, valuable and modern long-term exhibition, suitable for Polish visitors and well-embedded in the historical, cultural and social contexts of Poland.

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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to present the situation of the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw as it pre-

pires to complete its biggest and most important project so far: the creation of the first permanent exhibition in its forty-year history. The first part of the article presents the history of the museum and its collection, beginning with a brief biography of its founder, Andrzej Wawrzyniak and ending with the allocation of a new building in a new location in 2013. The second part discusses “the new beginning” – the first years at the new, still empty, building, the fight for funds for equipment and exhibitions, and finally the realisation of the first part of the permanent exhibition entitled *Sound Zone*. In the last section, I summarise the historical, political and cultural context in which the museum exists in Poland. I also explain the background of its visitors. The main part of the paper is devoted to the permanent exhibition which is currently in development. I outline our assumptions, goals, plans and some of the ways in which we decided to achieve them.

Author

Maria Szymańska-Ilnata, PhD (b. 1984) is a curator at the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, responsible for the collection of musical instruments and Indonesian artefacts. She graduated in Musicology, Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology from the University of Warsaw. She studied traditional Javanese dance and music at the Institute of Indonesian Arts (ISI) in Surakarta, Indonesia. She prepared the first section of the permanent exhibition at the Asia and Pacific Museum, devoted to the musical culture and instruments of many countries of Asia and Oceania. She publishes in academic and popular magazines and books.

Title

Maria Szymańska-Ilnata, The Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw: New Beginning and Challenges, 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 (10 p.), www.kunsttexte.de.