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Afterword

The essays in this thematic issue have their origin in the RAI conference *Art, Materiality and Representation*, held at the British Museum and SOAS University of London in June 2018. These papers focus on museums with Asian collections outside Asia, and although not comprehensive in their coverage, they address various issues associated with these collections. The idea for this panel was initiated by Iside Carbone, who issued a challenging call for papers questioning how curators of Asian artefacts in collections outside Asia could map the cultural identities of these objects and transmit their great symbolic, intellectual, and emotional power outside their “native” context.¹ In this issue, the contributors attempt in a multidisciplinary way to define different types of Asian objects in public collections and the cultural features they embody, providing examples of collections in Argentina, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal, Poland and the United Kingdom. Many questions remain open, enabling the reader to think about the complex liminal position of collections of Asian materials in various contexts.² When looking at the reception of Asian artefacts across cultures in an increasingly interconnected world, the reader is prompted to reflect on cultural tropes related to art, materiality³ and Asia. Is art what we think it is?⁴ Why are certain kinds of objects chosen to represent specific cultural identities within museums? Is Asia outside Asia represented only within museums?

In order to find help to answer the questions above, we could take a short walk, metaphorically speaking, from the British Museum and SOAS to the Aby Warburg Research Institute, an institution that is a reminder of the importance of material culture as a receptacle of memories. In Warburg’s mind, Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory in Hellenistic mythology, “makes visible the pathos inherent in trying to find some measure of unity in the multiplicity confronting any spectator of history”.⁵ In other words,

spectators in front of an object, a garden, a smell, a sound, a taste can experience directly the power of a *memento*. A *memento*, if intended as an object kept to remember a person or an event, when perceived as representative of a specific culture within a museum, should be understood as an illusionistic device or a simulacrum. But does a *memento* deal only with the past? Memory, in the words of Derrida, “is the name of what is no longer a mental ‘capacity’ [but] projects itself toward the future, and constitutes the presence of the present”.⁶ As such, memory is a performative act of identity formation:⁷ it helps to (re)inscribe, (re)code, (re)cognise the past, which is a purely formal element,⁸ in the present and (re)orient it in the future. Memories, controlled and manipulated by the living,⁹ represent a cultural negotiation, whose product is the result of a temporal mediation and, especially nowadays, a cross-cultural construct. (Re)born in a new context, eventually a museum, the object is displayed in order to convey a message, an idea, or to (re)construct the identity of a “nation”,¹⁰ a social group or individuals, (*re*)presenting their traditions. Traditions are formal paraphernalia and ritualised practices with significant symbolic function. As stated by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, traditions that “appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometime invented”.¹¹ In exploring processes of museality, or in analysing the intrinsic characteristic of a museum object,¹² or thinking about musealization, another question remains open: what is tradition in museology?¹³ Whether “invented” or not, it is a dynamic concept connected to identity¹⁴ and, in line with Tomislav Šola’s thinking, since “humanity, in its infinite complexity of particular identities and their relationships, depends on its functions, upon public memory”,¹⁵ therefore the heritage of a place can in fact be linked directly to the identity of local communities and, when globally recognised as culturally important, becomes patrimony of humanity or a masterpiece.¹⁶

Within the articulation and transformation of memories and identities, the cultural heritage of a people is a communicated memory¹⁷ and in Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1929), thousands of images were chosen as the bearers of specific cultural traditions and part of social memory. In this incomplete *Atlas*, where iconography is primarily evocative, "Warburg trades discursive excess for the more immediate metonymies produced by juxtaposed images and heuristic diagrams. He revives the synchrony of seeing and demotes the diachrony of reading. Whereas iconology encourages detailed paraphrase, Mnemosyne embraces the concision, ambiguity, and instability of metaphoric expression"¹⁸ of the past, that is present in the present and projected in the future, rephrasing Derrida's words.¹⁹ The (re)collection through objects, as one can experience in a museological arrangement for instance, follows the same logic proposed by Warburg in his *Atlas* and what these objects represent in the viewer's imaginary is ambiguous and not measurable. The purpose of a collection also demands attention, for, as Tomislav Šola stresses, "in a fluctuating reality, nothing is stable by definition, so public memory is itself changing, partly by the occupations in charge, partly by the imposing, changing needs that demand fulfilment".²⁰ Pinpointing the idea of "changing needs that demand fulfilment",²¹ one could also suggest that those involved in a (re)collection process become (in)voluntary "forgers" of meanings, narratives and discourses. Such narratives and discourses can also be found outside museums, as some of the authors of this book point out.

Following the birth of *Studioli*, *Wunderkammern* or *Cabinets des Curieux*, one witnesses around the mid-nineteenth century the dispersal of precious collections and their display in wider spaces, i.e. museums. Objects formerly restricted to a small number of people gradually became accessible to a wider public;²² at the same time, one also witnesses the earliest lectures on aesthetics.²³ With the consequent distinction between artist and artisan, objects came to be categorised in two main ways: as works with a specific and embodied meaning, an inner essence and beauty, or as works with a specific use.²⁴ The distinction also lends itself to the notion

that non-art objects are not easily understood out of context, i.e. removed from their place of manufacture and use, whereas a work of art can survive outside its "original" milieu as a result of the relationship between the aesthetic²⁵ and artistic experience and practice. On the other hand, when there is no clearcut distinction between art and non-art objects, museums serve as more general repositories of different kind of works. It is important to ask: what happens when things are removed from their context? Selecting objects outside their "native" contexts, can mean choosing and manipulating the narrative according to the selector's own gaze – the discourse thus created is not necessarily subjective, but is nonetheless filtered and framed by the selector's (the recipient's) culture. A strong example of this is the exhibition of beautiful Japanese tea bowls without *furoshiki* (wrapping cloths),²⁶ which, although beautiful, is stripped of an important part of its Japanese cultural features, namely the narrative around the significant role of gift-giving.

In our own time, an age of artistic capitalism,²⁷ art grapples with the market. Objects become more desirable through and after exhibition; this *mise-en-scène* increases their value on the market. Objects on display, whether in *Wunderkammern* or in museums, stimulate emotions and desires. Any object (art or non-art alike) is detected first by our sensory system, and only then categorised, interpreted and assigned meaning. The object is named after the emotions have synthesised and reorganised the information gathered by our senses.²⁸ In museums the discourse on the interaction between sensation, perception and cultural representation has an extraordinary capacity to overcome discursive boundaries between artefacts and functional objects, playing a central role in the selection of works of art or non-art objects.²⁹ Articulating the visible and the legible is very difficult – the hyperreality condensed in museums may insist on formal beauty, yet the criterion for aesthetic value may not always be clear. These sorts of contextual shifts (from pure aesthetic to mere function) are ubiquitous, especially in our hypermodern society, where the emotional-aesthetic dimension is combined with the entrepreneurial logic of consumption: beauty sells.³⁰

One of the great functions of museums is to

bridge cultures in time and space, becoming what Homi Bhabha has named the “Third Space of enunciation”,³¹ a privileged place where cultural difference is articulated. Asian objects displayed outside Asia epitomise Asian cultures in the viewer’s mind. But how are these actually represented? In most cases “when encounters between cultures take place, each culture’s images of the other are likely to be stereotyped”.³² Stereotypically, they “often take the form of inversions of the viewer’s self-image”.³³ This may be the result of visual illiteracy³⁴ – a void between visual and mental images, which may bring a distorted perception of remote societies, despite our worldwide network of communication.³⁵ Museums³⁶ are privileged *loci* where the spectator can find the taxonomy, or *folksonomy*,³⁷ of a multiplicity of objects, normally displayed in an evolutionary pattern. In museums, whether conceived as Adornian’s *sepulchres* or as Malraux’s ideal without walls, works of art, curiosities or objects of scientific interest are trapped, offering a reading of different cultures. Museums have also an educational purpose, however, borrowing Homi Bhabha’s words as “split-space of enunciation [that] may open the way to conceptualising an international³⁸ culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity”.³⁹ This condition of hybridity and constant transition results - at least in so far as it emerges in the greater part of this thematic issue - when the western gaze comes across Asian materiality. Museological practice develops together with the history of art and the anthropology of art,⁴⁰ offering not only a juxtaposition of artefacts, but a conscious sequential ordering of objects, whose purpose is to narrate a story. The model of connecting different objects is variously determined partly by those responsible for this process, “partly by the imposing, changing needs that demand fulfillment”.⁴¹

During the age of exploration and the arrival of the Europeans in Asia,⁴² colonial adventurers, conquerors and collectors began collecting beautiful and exotic objects⁴³ which later reached other parts of the world. The objects were collected and exhibited with fabricated, surrogated narratives about Asian peoples or

nations. Homi Bhabha’s discourse of “mimicry constructed around an ambivalence”⁴⁴ fits very well here. In fact, these objects have served as models – albeit questionable – to illustrate significant aspects of Asian cultures outside Asia, creating “the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal [...]” as a “sign of a double articulation, a complex strategy of reform, [...] which appropriates the ‘Other’ as it visualizes power”.⁴⁵ In other words, mimicry is the desire for a reformed and recognisable ‘Other’, who “as a subject of a difference, is almost the same, but not quite”.⁴⁶ When objects from Asia were shipped back to Europe, they gained a new life. Especially since the eighteenth century, under the impetus of the Enlightenment’s quest for knowledge of peoples and cultures, these objects, charged with new symbolic meanings, have been displayed to western audiences that started to scrutinise Asia through its material culture. Public display spaces became conceptual frameworks where debates over cultural identities and heritage were conducted, taking into consideration deterritorialisation and hybridity.

To conclude, and going back to the question of the relationship(s) between art, materiality and representation, critical thinking is provided by the authors of this issue, on the nature of the objects displayed, on the landscapes, on the planned spaces or on traditional Asian cultures in performative arts outside Asia. All these case studies invite us to contemplate new conceptualisations of museums and representations of cultural identities. They also initiate a discourse that (in)directly challenges conventional views of certain public spaces (and not only museums) as places for cultural encounters and intercultural discussions. This should represent the starting point for further reflections on how the (re)contextualisation of Asia is framed within the articulation and transformation of memories and hybrid identities.

Endnotes

1. What is a “native” context is hard to define. Here it could be simply understood as the place where objects were actually manufactured or originally found. See also Jan Mrázek and Morgan Pitelka, *What’s the Use of Art?: Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, Honolulu 2008.
2. See Helen Wang’s article in this issue.
3. This representation by objects is a legitimate choice, which also has great limitation, for if based only on material culture, there are worlds that cannot be reproduced in any exhibition. On materiality and modern material culture, a topic which represents

- a research domain in its own right, see Paul Graves-Brown, *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, London 2000, p. 2.
4. Donald Preziosi and Claire J. Farago, *Art Is Not What You Think It Is*, Chichester 2012.
 5. Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*, Ithaca, N.Y. 2012, p. xiii.
 6. Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul De Man*, New York 1989, p. 102.
 7. Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik, *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, London and New York 2015, p. 4.
 8. Derrida 1989, *Memoires for Paul De Man*, p. 59.
 9. Graves-Brown 2000, *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, p. 114.
 10. Homi Bhabha points out that the "nation" has often hidden behind terms such as "tradition", "folklore", or "community". However, what really emerges is the fictive quality of nation and consequently of concepts such as tradition. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger first introduced the concept of "invented traditions", an idea which represents the culture of what Benedict Anderson has epitomised as "imagined communities". See Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, London 1991, p. 48; Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983; Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.
 11. Hobsbawm, and Ranger 1983, *The Invention of Tradition*, p. 1.
 12. Zbyněk Z. Stránský, *La muséologie et l'identité: commentaires et points de vue*, in: ICOFOM Study Series, ISS, vol. 11, 1986, p. 55-60.
 13. This was also a question that arose during the ICOFOM symposium held in Kyoto last year (2019). Read Kerstin Smeds, *Tradition in Museology. Materials for a Discussion*, Paris 2019.
 14. Stránský 1986, *La muséologie et l'identité*.
 15. Public memory is compared to a genotype, or in other words a set of inherited political and cultural characteristics, which are transmitted and conditioned by the transmitter's choices. Tomislav Šola, *Mnemosophy: An Essay on the Science of Public Memory*, Zagreb 2015, p. 33.
 16. On this topic read Peter F. Biehl, *Identity and Heritage: Contemporary Challenges in a Globalized World*, Cham 2015.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Johnson 2012, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*, p. xi.
 19. Derrida 1989, *Memoires for Paul De Man*, p. 102.
 20. Šola 2015, *Mnemosophy: An Essay on the Science of Public Memory*, p. 35.
 21. Ibid.
 22. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London 2006, p. 93.
 23. According to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, art means to create beautiful objects that promote our own spiritual freedom declaring the end of absolute beauty. See Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, Manchester 2014, p. 115.
 24. Functional objects rely more on contexts to display their purpose. Mrázek and Pitelka 2008, *What's the Use of Art?*, p. 3.
 25. Although the perception of beauty has never been absolute and immutable, beauty is actually recognised as a distinctive mark of a work of art. Aesthetic models vary in time and space but they always contain something to be desired and condense all that pleases. See Umberto Eco, and Alastair McEwan, *On Beauty*, London 2010, p. 39.
 26. Mrázek and Pitelka 2008, *What's the Use of Art?*, p. 1.
 27. Ibid.
 28. Elisabetta Colla and Victoria Bogushevskaya, *Thinking Colours: Perception*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2015, p. xv.
 29. Ibid.
 30. Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *L'esthetisation du monde: vivre a l'âge du capitalisme artiste*, Paris 2016.
 31. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p. 37.
 32. Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, London 2006, p. 125.
 33. Burke 2006, *Eyewitnessing*, p. 126.
 34. James Elkins, *Visual Literacy*, New York and London 2008.
 35. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, New York 2013, p. 75.
 36. For a history of museums read Carole Paul, *The First Modern Museums of Art: The Birth of an Institution in 18th- and Early-19th-Century Europe*, Los Angeles 2012.
 37. Kerstin Smeds stresses how museums are changing and becoming more and more multicultural platforms for negotiation between the past and a future that would be more sustainable, a sort of process-museum based on folksonomy a classification that includes user/visitor aggregation and distribution of knowledge. Smeds 2019, *Tradition in Museology*, p. 11.
 38. As Homi Bhabha explains in this case "inter" should be intended as "the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture". Bhabha 1994, *The Location of Culture*, p. 38.
 39. Ibid.
 40. Raymond Firth, *Social Anthropology as Science and as Art*, Dunedin, N.Z. 1958. On this topic read also Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, Oxford 1992.
 41. Šola 2015, *Mnemosophy*, p. 35.
 42. Donald F. Lach and Edwin J. Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe. A Century of Wonder. The Visual Arts*, vol. 2-1, Chicago 1994.
 43. It is important to stress that there is an "Asia before Europe". On this read Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge 2000.
 44. Bhabha 1994, *The Location of Culture*, p. 86.
 45. Ibid.
 46. Ibid.
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Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul De Man*, New York 1989.

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