

Special Feature

The Multivalence of Collected Korean Objects in the Netherlands: National Collections, International Networks, and Second-hand Collection Practices

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Introduction

Through the past one and a half century, ethnological museum collections have been regarded simultaneously as sources of pride, contestation, and colonialist pasts, and each of such evaluations of the merits and demerits of these collections implies a different set of meanings that are attached to the museums, the collections, and the collecting practices that take place there. In spite of what some museums in Europe and North America have attempted to put on display (and quite a few still do) as historically unchanging, matter-of-fact accumulations of objects that provide a service to their audience such as “informing,” “educating,” or “enlightening” them, and not withstanding significant steps in the museum world to counter this troublesome past, we cannot discount the fact that ethnographic museum collections are festering nests of messy meanings and the material testimony to complex power relations of the past and present.

Recent scholarship is increasingly focused on dissecting and grasping how “the complex processes by which objects were assembled during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to form today’s museums were not ‘natural’ or predetermined developments. Instead, they resulted from diverse and complex cultural practices which integrated wide reaching networks of varied persons, places and things” (Byrne et al. 2011, 4). Add to this the multiple meanings that objects and collections can have for different parties involved, and we start to see the necessity to understand the “active lives” that museum objects lead in different settings (Kendall, Yang, and Yoon 2015, 1) and how an understanding of their meaning needs to incorporate multiple perspectives.

This research explores, analyzes, and proposes to embrace this complexity and multivalence that is manifested in museum collections of Korean artifacts in Europe. By making visible how multiple layers of meaning and interpretation provide these collections with complementing and sometimes competing layers of significance, we attempt to come closer to grasping and taking in a more complete understanding of the “webs of significance” that linger around historical ethnographic Korean collections. The aim is to construct a perspective to appreciate the overarching features of Korean collections in Europe for the

study of representations of the Korean peninsula through time and to lay out a number of focal points that need to be taken into account in discussing the future of these collections.

In order to achieve this aim, first we examine the historical constructedness and power structures that facilitated the emergence of the Korean collection at the World Museum in Leiden, the Netherlands. As part of the “national collection” (Dutch: *rijkscollectie*) of the Netherlands, the now 1,450-and-some Korean objects have been treated as a more or less independent, Dutch national achievement. Little attention has been paid, however, to the networks and processes that lead to the formation of the collection and to its relatedness to Korean collections in other European countries, and we shall discuss this discrepancy between narrative and reality for the assessment of the Leiden collection of Korean artifacts and discuss how multiple narratives and perspectives that exist in the appreciation of the collection may be preserved for future study.

The career, so to speak, of a museum object is constructed via continuous subsequent phases of signification: from the moment it catches the eye of a collector in its country of origin, to the moment it is put on display, and beyond that, as constituent of a larger “collection.” Even after reaching what is initially the final destination in the museum, its meaning is not set. Recent decades have seen the rise of debates on repatriation of art and ethnographical objects from museums in Western European and North American museums back to the location where they were conceived, slowly but surely responding to stakeholders across the globe through ongoing endeavors to decolonize museums. In the case of South Korea, the pushback on imperial collection practices of the past is palpable, and there has been a keen interest in knowing which objects are located in what location, with particular efforts being made over the last ten to fifteen years. Within these circumstances, we may expect a paradigm shift to be accompanied by the relocation of objects, and the documenting these developments in a sustainable way and on a broader scale is needed to preserve the stories that museum collections contain.

We will approach these competing layers of significance through a lens—or perhaps a prism in that our view is dispersed across different plains with a common origin—consisting of the object’s original use-value and contemporary context, followed by its placement into a museum collection as representative of a contemporary “other” as seen from the viewpoint of the European

* I would like to thank the two reviewers for their constructive remarks that allowed me to revise and improve the initial manuscript of this paper into this final version.

ethnographer. This constitutes the development of collected objects from ubiquitous and everyday contemporary (to the time of collection) items that were considered to represent the “other” living culture into highly singularized (cf. Kopytoff 1986), “one-of-a-kind” and precious relics of lifestyles that have long lost their actual use-value in the here and now. Frequently, this shift in character of collected objects over the years is accompanied by a rise in status from contemporary “ethnographic” objects documenting aspects of everyday life, to becoming unique samples of those same long-gone lifestyles—which elevates them to objects worthy of display, reverence, and ultimately, potential candidates for repatriation.

In order to make sense of the complex meanings that are present in ethnographical collections on Korea in European museums, I focus on two distinct angles of view to take into account when discussing this complex signification of museum objects in the present. We may distinguish between knowledge about the material art historical or ethnographic object *an sich* (hereafter, “object knowledge”), on the one hand, and knowledge about the context in which the object exists and has existed (hereafter, “contextual knowledge”), on the other. The first body of object knowledge may include such information as object identity (name/title), size, materials, techniques, and other features that are specific to the object as a material entity. The second body of contextual knowledge refers to the objects as a node in webs of collections, collectors, categories, histories and circumstances, provenances, and so on. Here, we also encounter an in-depth appreciation of the objects from a biographical point of view, including the complex interchanges between provenance and origin, “life phases/stories” of the object, and stories external to but inseparable from the object—such as its collecting history and reception outside of the area of origin. The analysis in this paper will mostly focus on this dimension of the objects. This temporal axis functions to think about the changing significance of ethnographic museum objects from the time they have been collected to the present. Having set these boundaries, the author acknowledges that there are plenty of objects that may cross over categories, such as when the object is assessed as an ethnographic item illustrating a particular culture first and as cultural heritage representing a past image of that same culture next.

Finally, as a possible solution to combining these planes of knowledge in a sustainable manner, this article discusses the value of a digital qualitative approach that allows the integration of different layers of meaning into one

location via a standardized database with the objects as central nodes. The potential of a digital approach to unify and integrate these facets of import to understanding collections in a more relational manner is discussed,¹ and we will see that bringing together multiple strands of information in one place via digital means opens up potential to visualize a network of people, conversations, perceptions, and meanings related to the collected objects.

Before moving on to look at specific (groups of) objects to illustrate the framework that has been laid out here, we will first review some complexities of collecting practice and consider the implications they have for collections of Korean artifacts outside of the Korean peninsula in the present.

The Many Facets of Collecting

The collections of museums that categorize themselves as ethnological institutes have been under scrutiny for a considerable time now. Especially for museums in Europe, their formative history is tied in with colonialism, unequal relations, and sometimes outright violence. The other way around, global power shifts and the rise of voices from continents and countries that were previously exploited are now factors that contribute to a conversation with more diverse viewpoints. The emergence of ethnological museums is not a mere coincidence or continuation of previous forms of collecting but has its roots in global developments at that period in time.

Ways to actually go beyond the issue of wrongful acquisition of objects and engage with the complexity of collecting in history and in the present are suggested to include

...deeper collections research, seeking to understand both specific histories of objects and the wider forms of social, economic, and political relationships of which these would have been part... (MacDonald, Lidchi, and Von Oswald 2017, 98)

Korean collections in Europe are not solely defined by their acquisition history

1 Cf. Petersen's (2011) focus on “ways in which the object and its history can be employed as a device in staging new empirical fields for the museum anthropologist.”

but are to be engaged with in a way that takes into account their composition and content from a more holistic perspective. Beyond what the objects *are* in terms of their material presence, aspects such as how they got to where they are located at present (acquisition/collection history), under what circumstances this took place and based on which perspectives and principles, and any (re) appreciation of such objects in the country of origin should be included so as to direct attention to the frameworks of signification and valuation that have helped form these collections. In addition, the effects that the shape and form of Korean collections in European museums have had on the perception of what is considered “Korean (traditional) culture” (as illustrated by the multitude of similar categories of objects representing such culture in collections around Europe) need to be uncovered to fully grasp the layers of significance these collections embody.

Recent years have seen an increase in concrete moves towards restitution of source communities and repatriation of ethnographic and art objects in European museums. Some very powerful works have been published and in general, the situation is now such that European museums cannot lay claim to uncontested ownership of their collections any longer (even though some still do). Addressing and documenting these processes, volumes such as Dan Hicks’ *Brutish Museums* (2020) focusing on the restitution of the Benin Bronzes come to mind, a process that has seen significant progress in recent years. In the Netherlands, the World Museum (successor to the National Museum of World Cultures, being the result of a merger in 2013 between three Dutch ethnological museums—Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, and the now-defunct Afrikamuseum in Berg en Dal—joined by the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam) has been an outspoken party in recognizing the colonial past of the museums and the voices of origin communities. In line with this trend in museum critique, Korea’s history of colonial experience has produced questions surrounding origin and ownership of Korea-originated objects as well. With the “opening” of the Joseon kingdom to the Western world in 1876, foreigners combining any of the occupations of diplomat, engineer, merchant, or ethnographer started to enter the country and ended up in advantageous positions from where they would “assist” the Joseon government in modernizing its institutions to pick up pace with the rest of the world. Following this period, the Korean peninsula came under occupation of the Japanese empire for about forty years, and this brought along a period of

well-documented colonial-style archaeological and heritage scholarship into the country (Pai 2000; Atkins 2010).

In both these periods, significant numbers of art objects and artifacts were taken from the country through various routes. Over the last decades, and increasingly since the establishment of the Overseas Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation (hereafter, OKCHF) in 2012, the Republic of Korea has invested significant time and funds into composing an inventory of so-called “overseas cultural heritage,” implying the dislocated aspect of these objects.

Critical investigation of the relations between European Korean collections and colonial power(s) is unavoidable. At the same time, some countries have played a prominent role in the modernization of Joseon social and official infrastructure, such as Germany, while others that also have significant Korean collections, such as the Netherlands, did not. Little research has gone into its background or comparison of the Leiden collection to others in Europe. By focusing on how objects (and object categories) and collection histories are connected, this paper provides suggestions to further develop dialogue on the moral sustainability of past collecting practices in the present and future and suggest how a broader international and “inter-collection” scope (aided by digital approaches) can help to facilitate insight into the stories and structures that are contained in Korean collections in Europe.

Korean Interest in Overseas Collections

The website of the OKCHF, tasked with taking inventory of Korean art and ethnographic objects located in collections outside of the Republic of Korea, provides statistics to the number of items that are counted as so-called “overseas cultural heritage.” Since the establishment of the Foundation in 2012, they count 246,304² objects of Korean origin that reside outside of the South Korean national borders (29 countries have been confirmed at the time of writing). We take these objects as a vantage point to look at the multi-layered and complex web of meanings that surround them (Bell 2017, 244), with a specific focus on the way objects are connected to other objects across institutes (museums) and

2 The source is available at <https://overseaschf.or.kr/okchf/index.do> (accessed September 25, 2024).

countries through the people that were involved in making them into *museum* objects.

The Leiden collection was recognized by Korean authorities as a significant presence of Korean artifacts overseas from an early point on. Some highlighted objects were already documented in the 1980 publication, *Hanguk minsok daegwan* (*Survey of Korean Folklore*), next to objects from various Korean museums, in the 1991 publication *The Korean Relics in Western Europe* as part of an early survey on overseas Korean objects, and more recently in an extensive survey of the collection by an OKCHF expert team in 2013, which resulted in the publication of the catalog *The Korean Collection of Museum Volkenkunde* in 2016 (OKCHF 2016). The documentation and descriptions in these catalogs tend to focus on material and local (Korean) appreciations of the objects in Korean collections outside of Korea. Such an angle influences both the selection of what is catalogued and what is not via legal and commonsense criteria of value, such as age of the object, its rarity, or its artistic qualities. Moreover, by labelling them “overseas heritage,” there is the connotation of objects out-of-place, in particular when we consider past and present efforts of Korean government bureaus and organizations to return objects in overseas collections to Korea.

Collections of Korean artifacts and art objects outside of the Korean peninsula can be seen as multivalent entities in that they may be regarded as uprooted heritage that is “out of place” or as museum objects “in place,” and as representations of Korean culture or as unique objects of a time long past, where any one of these valuations are often not mutually compatible with the others. Still, these collections are at times considered a witness of times past and the complex layers of meaning that came to be ascribed to them through their collection and introduction into the museum.

This research focuses on the Korean collection of the World Museum in Leiden, the Netherlands, which is part of the National Collection (*rijkscollectie*) and contains around 1,450 items related to Korean art and culture at the time of writing this paper. According to the official description of the National Collection, it testifies to the fact that “The Netherlands has a rich past when it comes to the manufacture and collection of movable heritage, the so-called

cultural properties.”³ If we look at part of the earliest foundations of the collection, however, it becomes clear that it is not just a Dutch endeavor that has resulted in the presence of these objects in Leiden.

Surveys by Korean authorities such as OKCHF and its predecessors take an object-oriented approach and focus on the various items as part of a larger body of Korean cultural heritage. The cultural significance of these objects does not stop at *what* they are but is also present in *how* they are here. It is evident that the Leiden collection and many of the objects in it would not have been where they are now, had it not been for international networks of personal connections, not all of which are Dutch at all (mainly between the Netherlands and Germany in our case). Furthermore, apart from the practical route that some of these objects have taken until they reached the museum in Leiden (Effert 2008), the context in which they were collected is a rich bed of layered cultural signification on both the Dutch side, that of the intermediary Germans, and on the originating Korean (or Joseon) side (Veldkamp 2014).

The next section gives a brief overview of some of the complex factors that have been at play in the formation of this collection based on archival materials, studies of Joseon at the time of collection, and the networks of people that made it possible for the Leiden museum to acquire a Korean collection in the first place.

History of the Early Korean Collection in Leiden

Looking at the pre-1900 formation of the Leiden collection, we can distinguish between two periods of collecting that have a distinct character. First of all, there are collection numbers 1 and 360 indicating the objects that were purchased from Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) and his predecessor in Deshima, Japan, Jan Cock Blomhoff (1779–1853). The World Museum collection database counts 41 Korea-related items in storage from Siebold and 49 from Blomhoff. Based on Von Siebold’s writings in vol. 7 of *Nippon* volume VII, these objects were obtained through shipwrecked Korean fishermen and

³ The original text is as follows: “Nederland heeft een rijk verleden als het gaat om het vervaardigen en verzamelen van roerend erfgoed, zogeheten cultuurgoederen.” The source is available at <https://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/onderwerpen/collecties-in-nederland/de-rijkscollectie> (accessed May 15, 2023).

traders who arrived at Deshima via Tsushima for temporary containment and were sent back once they had recovered. Considering the fact that these objects were *collected* in the early to mid-nineteenth century—Blomhoff was in Deshima from 1818 until 1823, Von Siebold from 1823 until 1829 when he was banned, and later for three-year period from 1859—they may be among the earliest collected artifacts of Korean origin in the Euro-American world in spite of the fact that there was no contact between the Netherlands and Joseon except for the adventures of Hendrik Hamel in the seventeenth century—but he brought home stories from Joseon, and not objects.

Following this period, not much happened in the collection for about thirty years, and it was not until the mid and late 1880s that an influx of new objects into Leiden would take place. It will be clear that this is after the Ganghwa Treaty of 1876 and, as a consequence, that this period of collecting shows similarities with the formation of many other European collections of Korean art and artifacts from the 1880s to the 1890s onward, such as in German, French, and British museums. Key collectors related to Leiden during this period have a background that is in congruence with the time period. J. Rhein, a naturalized Dutchman of Danish origin who worked as a secretary for the Dutch delegation in Peking, brings in ethnographic objects and genre paintings (illustrations by Gisan and Seokcheon) from 1885 (series RV-679). The year 1888 saw a large collection of high-quality objects acquired through engineer Friedrich Kraus (series RV-666), who had succeeded Paul Georg von Möllendorf in the capital of Seoul from 1885 in overseeing the Korean Mint (J. Kleiner 1983; H. Kneider 2009). In 1895, more objects of Korean origin entered the museum via entomologist Alfred Otto Herz (series RV-1070), who traveled East and Southeast Asia to collect insect samples—these collections are now held in the Zoological Museum of the Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg—but also a selection of cultural objects.

Apart from the occasional blue and white porcelain dragon vase (RV-2135-1, acquisition 1927), decorative pieces of art are not common in the Leiden collection and the records show very few significant acquisitions during the period up to 1945. As a result, there is not much expansion of the collection during this period. After 1945, we see significant additions to the collection starting again from the 1960s, such as in a group of miscellaneous wood and mother-in-pearl sewing accessories and containers for a *manggeon* hairband and for tobacco, a group of various ethnographic objects donated by the South

Korean embassy (series RV-3910, acquisition 1976), an unused set of shaman clothes and accessories (series RV-5879, acquisition 1997), and most recently, maps, postcards, and other materials related to tourism to Geumgangsan during the period of Japanese occupation (series 7178, acquisition 2019). The collection has a clear ethnographic focus and contains many everyday items ranging from sets of clothing and headgear to small furniture, a few ceramics, some brass bowls and vessels, writing utensils and small furniture, a good selection of fans, shoes, and carry-on items such as knives, combs, pouches, and historical coins from various eras.⁴

During this early and formative period of the collection, the Leiden museum was led by director Lindor Serrurier (1846–1901) who had first been the conservator for Japan from 1877 to 1880 and subsequently became the museum director until 1896. From 1882, the position of conservator came to be filled by the German J. D. E. Schmeltz (1839–1909), who would hold this task until he succeeded Serrurier as museum director. Schmeltz also was the founder of the *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie* (hereafter, *Archiv*), of which he was an editor until his death.

In the *Archiv*, he published an important overview article of the Korean collection under the title *Die Sammlungen aus Korea im Ethnographischen Reichsmuseum zu Leiden (Collections from Korea in the Ethnographic National Museum in Leiden; hereafter, Sammlungen)*. For the largest part, the text contains detailed descriptions of a selection of objects that were present in the museum at the time of publication. Given that the year of publication is 1891, this overview contains reference to the /initial collection of Von Siebold/ Blomhoff, the objects acquired via Rhein, and the acquisition that was at that moment the most recent, namely the group of objects obtained through F. Kraus.

This survey article (in particular when read with the written communication between the museum and the collectors described below in mind) provides information then and now on at least two dimensions of the Korean collection in Leiden. First of all, there is the descriptive identity of objects and how they are constructed and of what materials, as well as a presentation of which objects belong together. One clear example is found in the description of clothing, of which Kraus provided the museum with male,

⁴ Details on these series of objects are available via a query on the collection website of the World Museum at <https://collectie.wereldmuseum.nl/>.

female, and children's costumes. In *Sammlungen*, Schmeltz (1891, 51–54) describes them as sets, starting from the underwear all the way to the outer coat, belt, and bindings for ankles and wrists. The same goes for shoes: the pairs of shoes are described as typical footwear for different classes of Korean people, and Schmeltz highlights the peculiarities of each pair or what makes them remarkable from an ethnographic point of view. Even though the descriptions are quite straightforward, the inclusion of reference to other sources and an indication of which objects belong together make for useful information when the current state of the collection is more fragmented and without documentation on the coherence of parts of the collection.

A second dimension of knowledge about the collection that can be derived from this text is the context in which these objects were collected. The article starts off by mentioning secondary literature, which is then used for comparison with the descriptions. Interestingly, one important source is the article preceding *Sammlungen* in the same issues of *Archiv*, a partial translation in German of the Japanese work *Keirin iji* (*Medical Matters of Keirin* 鷄林医事; this refers to Gyerim, a historical reference to Korea) from 1887 written by Masanao Koike 小池正直 (1854–1913), published in an edited form as “Zwei Jahre in Japan” (Koike 1891). Koike entered the Japanese army to work in various capacities at hospitals and military medical offices after graduating from the School of Medicine at the Tokyo Imperial University. When management of the colonial Saiseiin hospital in Seoul was transferred from the Japanese navy to the army, Koike became its director for two years from 1883 to 1885. *Keirin iji* describes his observations in a wide range of categories from geographical observations through customs and folklore to clothing, dwellings, and food. The second half of the text deals with medical data, such as statistics for number of patients for specific illnesses and so on. The precise character of the exchange of observations and knowledge between these scholars, while interesting, will have to be delegated to another occasion.

Besides the text by Koike, Schmeltz references a selection of other early accounts of Joseon such as those by W. E. Griffis' *Corea, the Hermit Nation* (1882), Otto Genest's *Jacobsen's Besuch bei den Koreanern* (1887), Percival Lowell's *Land of the Morning Calm* (1886), Ernst Opfert's *Ein verschlossenes Land* (1880), and Charles Varat's *En Corée* (1890) for comparison or to corroborate his own descriptions. This demonstrates that the context of knowledge in which *Sammlungen* was written is not a vacuum, but an amalgam of descriptions and

studies that had been published up to the time of publication of this collection overview.

The article alone, however, does not provide sufficient grounds to assume that personal relations and networks would have been at the foundation of the Korean collection in Leiden. Interestingly, the Leiden University Library Special Collections contain an archive of about 3,000 letters sent by and to Schmeltz in his capacity of editor at the *Archiv*, covering the years from 1887 until 1900. Among these, written communication between Schmeltz and Kraus can be found, in which they discuss practicalities such as the price of objects, requests for more samples, and others, but also what appear to be responses to questions by Schmeltz on the nature of the objects. Some of the text from the letters is quoted in an almost unchanged form in the eventual article, which suggests the importance that these observers “in the field” had on the formation of knowledge.

This happens on multiple occasions, such as with Schmeltz' (1891, 52) description of the *pungjam* (ornament) on a hair net or *manggeon*: “in the center of the bottom edge of the second, 666–60, a crescent moon-shaped piece of horn has been attached, which is equipped with a broad, short extension on the concave edge.... This same object is placed in front of the hairline, is worn under the hat and serves as a decoration; these are only for people of lower ranks, actually. They are also made of tortoise shell.”⁵ This is very similar to how Kraus originally describes it in the letters (letter F Kraus 2444b). The description of a set of medicinal tablets also shows such similarities: “This medicine consists of a brown mass, which is [first] pressed into small shapes when soft and [then] gilded after drying. In spite of my research, I could not grasp what it is made of. It is a gift from the king, but that does not help much. When used, the substance is moistened and rubbed on the [affected] part [of the body],”⁶ (postcard F Kraus 2445; similarly described in Schmeltz 1891, 50). In this

5 The original text is as follows: “...an der Mitte des unterandes des zweiten, 666/60, ist eine halbmondförmige concave Hornplatte befestigt, die von einem breiten, kurzen Fortsatz am concaven Rande versehen ist....Selbe kommt vor den Haarschopf zu liegen, wird unter dem Hute getragen und dient als Schmuck; eigentlich aber nur für Leute niederen Ranges. Auch von Schildpatt wird selbe verfertigt.”

6 The original text is as follows: “Diese Medizin besteht aus einer braunen Masse, die weich in kleine Formen gepreßt und nach dem Trocknen mit Goldschaum überzogen wird. Was es ist, konnte ich trotz Nachforschung nicht erfahren. Es ist ein Geschenk des Königs, hilft aber nicht viel. Bei Anwendung wird das Mittel angefeuchtet und die Stelle viel eingerieben.”

way, the written communication between and explanations about the objects by Kraus and other collectors, diplomats, and intermediaries became crucial to how knowledge about Joseon was shaped back in Europe.

As we can see from the concise descriptions in this paper, the early Korean collection in Museum Volkenkunde is not an entity on its own but exists in a complex network of personal relations, intersections of various perceptions of Joseon at the time, and specific circumstances of valuation, selection, and collecting that remain hidden at first sight. Next, we zoom in on a few individual objects in the collection to explore and illustrate how this multi-dimensional aspect has taken foothold in their appreciation.

Object, People, Networks, and Histories

Let us look at some of the issues that are at stake in assessing the significance of a Korean collection beyond the historical value of art or its presence as a mere remnant of colonial structures in past times. As outlined in the previous sections, following the very particular circumstances that led to the start of the collection via Jan Cock Blomhoff and Philipp Franz von Siebold in the early nineteenth century, there are few parts of the late nineteenth century Korean collection in Leiden that were collected directly in Korea by Dutch collectors or people in Dutch service. One might say that a significant part of the early Korean collections in Leiden are “second hand” (i.e., obtained through a third party), especially in that the museum appears to have had little influence on the selection and collection criteria. In fact, it would seem that the close ties of the Dutch royal, museums, and academic circles with Germany have been particularly instrumental in accommodating this situation. It is only during the second half of the twentieth century that we find direct collection by Dutch people. The cases that follow each in their own way illustrate how the early (the end of 19th century) formation of the Korean collection at the World Museum in Leiden and thereby part of the “National Collection” of the Netherlands divert from and significantly stretch the idea of the Korean collection as a national, “native Dutch” collection.

Officer's Robe: Highlight of a Aarker Past

Our first example illustrates how particular objects become the highlight of a collection, a term that in itself reveals much of the criteria used to attach value to objects. Figure 1 shows a cutout from celebratory highlights catalogue of Museum Volkenkunde since 2013, published at the occasion of the 175th anniversary of the museum.⁷ In this volume, the museum's “best” objects have been taken from the regional collections of the museum to represent what it has in store for the visitor. Each of the entries is accompanied by a small explanation on the nature of the objects, their materials and use, and other background knowledge.



Figure 1. Joseon Officer's Robe/Armor and Helmet (RV-666-119+120) in the Highlights Catalog (Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde 2013)

In this particular case, in line with the tone of the publication, the explanation focuses on the alleged uniqueness of the robe/armor and helmet in the Leiden collection, which is grandiose and monumental because of its size, color, and rarity. This is further emphasized on the museum website:

⁷ In fact, the origins of this text go back to around 1987, when the first edition of this volume was published.

Eye-catching highlights are the Korean officer's robe and helmet. Only a few of these items are known across the globe. It might even be the only costume of this quality in the world. Robe and helmet were collected in a period during which Korea wanted to reform the army to a Western model at the end of the nineteenth century. The clear red wool, blue silk lining and edges of otter fur give it a rich image. This is enhanced by the gleaming metal scales, which have been lacquered alternately in black, red, and gold.⁸ (emphasis mine)

Similar wording is found in an earlier version of the highlights catalog since 1987, published at the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the museum, which illustrates how the armor has been a top item through the years:

Regrettably, hardly any Korean armor of good quality has survived. The items shown here were collected after Korea decided to Westernize its army. Due to the Japanese occupation and especially the Korean War, comparable material is no longer to be found in Korea itself. (Van Dongen, Forrer, and Van Gulik 1987, 50)

Two aspects of these descriptions spring to mind: first, the officer's robe/armor and helmet are suggested to possibly be unique (they are not—similar samples exist in collections in the UK and Germany, and there are some in Korea as well); and second, the collection history is reduced to its period of acquisition.

Both of these two aspects are interrelated, when we take a look at the provenance of these objects: they were acquired in 1888 from the aforementioned Friedrich Kraus, a German diplomat/engineer who succeeded the famous Paul Georg von Möllendorf in 1885 to manage the Korean Mint. This position may have been instrumental in facilitating the collection of objects of quite high value in Joseon in spite of some setbacks during his stay there. Although he was involved in a matter that was crucial to establishing Joseon in

the global trade and political circumstances of the time, making sure that the Joseon government had cash to use for trade, Kraus' work on the establishment of the Korean Mint did not go smoothly. Jeong (2024) describes how Kraus' endeavors were marred by delays in construction of the building and setting up and operating the machinery, primarily caused by lack of funds from the Joseon government. Kraus found himself in a situation where his salary was not paid out for months on end. Although he did have some success in minting coins that were to the liking of king Gojong, eventually he decided to return to Darmstadt leaving Seoul in April 1888 with many of the original plans left unfulfilled under his leadership. Following his return to Europe, more significant amounts of coins were minted under Kraus' successor, an engineer named Ditrich, from May of that same year. Despite this suboptimal course of events for Kraus, correspondence with the museum in Leiden does suggest that he had an active role in informing and acquiring for the museum (see above on the early history of the Korean collection in Leiden).

Instead of these objects being a national feat of collecting savvy, they should be seen as having been bought through a third party who happened to be in an advantageous position to garner up objects of considerable "cultural weight." In other words, these items (together with more objects in the Leiden collection by Kraus and other German collectors) are not directly connected to the Dutch museum and its vision, and they are what I would label "second hand" in that they were acquired through diplomacy and international connections of a third country (Germany in this case) rather than via Dutch relations to the Joseon court or other Korean parties (the first Korean objects collected by Blomhoff and Von Siebold via Japan/Dejima dating from the first half of the nineteenth century are much closer to supporting such national claims to the collection history).

Korean Dice: Everyday Culture and Anthropological Ties

A second example of international human connections leading to this indirect collection of objects that is the Korean collection in Leiden is a set of Korean dice displayed in Figure 2, which has been in the museum collection in Leiden from the year 1899 and is another example of contextual significance beyond "national" collecting. In contrast with the previous example, these objects are something small, part of everyday culture, and an illustration of the interests of

⁸ The original text is as follows: "Opvallende topstukken zijn de Koreaanse officiersmantel plus helm. Op de hele wereld zijn er maar een paar bekend. Mogelijk is het zelfs het enige tenue van deze kwaliteit ter wereld. Jas en helm zijn verzameld in de periode dat Korea het leger wilde hervormen naar westers voorbeeld, eind negentiende eeuw. De helderrode wol, de voering van blauwe zijde en de randen die zijn afgezet met otterpels geven het een rijke uitstraling. Dat wordt nog eens versterkt door de glimmende metalen schubben, afwisselend gelakt in zwart, rood en goud" (<https://www.volkenkunde.nl/nl/zien-en-doen-0/tentoonstellingen/japan-en-korea>, accessed March 21, 2022; emphasis mine).

the donating party. I would argue, however, that this does not devalue their importance as *collected objects*.



Figure 2. Dice and *Bamnyut* donated by Stewart Culin (Collection World Museum Leiden, RV-1215-13+14+16)

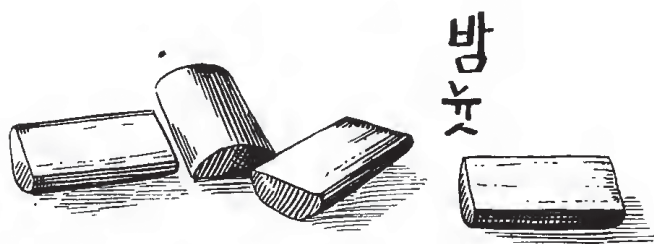


FIG. 76.—PAM-NYOUT. KOREA. Museum of Archæology, Univ. of Penna. No. 16,897.

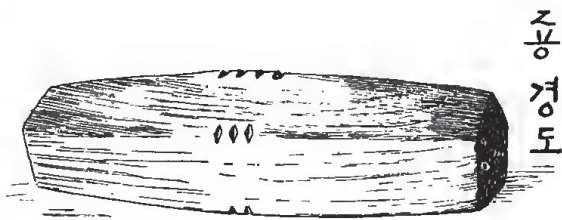


FIG. 84.—TJYONG-KYENG-TO. Museum of Archæology, Univ. of Penna. No. 16,899.

Figures 3 and 4. Illustrations of *Bamnyut* and the Oblong-shaped *Yunmok* Die for the Game *Jonggyeongdo* (Culin 1895, 67; 1895, 77)

These dice were gifted to the museum in Leiden by the famous anthropologist Stewart Culin at the turn of the 20th century. Culin, the author of *Korean Games* (1895), appears to have made an effort to send these dice as a set, exactly as they are presented in his book. In addition, for comparative purposes he mentions the existence of the “Long Lawrence” (Figure X, RV-1215-15), a cylindrical wooden die with great resemblance to the Korean sample used for the “Game of Dignitaries” as Culin puts it, or *jonggyeongdo*, shown in Figures 3 and 4 here.

To elaborate on the “life” or biography of these dice further, we might go as far as to say that their specific collection history defines them as meaningful *as a group of objects*. It can be argued that each of the objects has intrinsic value as a sample of the 1900-era Korean game life, but there is another aspect that glues these items together: their occurrence in the *Korean Games* book.

Finally, the comparison of these dice in that same book to the similarly shaped British die “Long Lawrence” (Figure 5) and the fact that a sample of that type of die is included in the group of objects donated by Culin to the Leiden museum demonstrate that they cannot be seen apart, lest the majority of their significance to the collection is hidden. Ironically, at present the “Long Lawrence” is not a recognized part of the Korean collection because of its non-Korean origin and thus separated from its partnered objects. It remains in “collection limbo” for the time being, with not even a clear and up-to-date

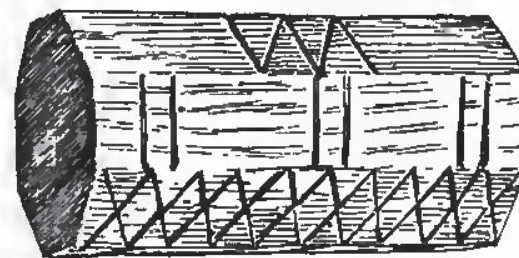


FIG. 85.—LONG LAWRENCE. ALMOND-BURY, ENGLAND.

Specimen reproduced from description given by Mrs. Gomme. Museum of Archæology, Univ. of Penna. No. 18,257.

Figure 5. Illustration of English Die “Long Lawrence” (Culin 1895, 78)

photograph in the collection database. In fact, the almost literal resemblance of the object in the collection to the drawing in *Korean Games* begs the question whether this is an original and authentic object, or a replica made for display purposes (and it may very well be the latter).

This set of objects is a good example of how intensive research into the backgrounds of objects remains relevant as a way to increase our understanding of what collecting means to the objects, to our perception of them, and to their significance in the whole of meanings surrounding the museum collection, including the shaping of cultural idioms to define, typify, and construct “Korean culture” (fill in as appropriate: Western, Korean, native, etc.) via objects. This is illustrated in greater detail with the illustrative paintings in the next paragraph, which are found in many collections across Europe and North America and straddle the boundary between art and cultural illustration.

Pungsokhwa: Ubiquitous Paintings of the Everyday

For a third example of how the Leiden collection—by derivation, Korean collections in Europe in general—can be assessed beyond what it contains *as an individual collection*, we turn towards a set of 36 genre paintings (Figure 6), of which 23 are by the famous painter Gisan Kim Jun-geun 箕山 金俊根 and 13 are signed by a less well-known artist in this type of work, Seokcheon Kim Ye-ho 石泉 金禮鎬. The ubiquitousness of these paintings in so-called Western collections and publications was noted in Korean publications from the 1970s and documented in more detail and with a focus on the Leiden collection by Dutch (Walraven 1983) and later in a comparative perspective by North American scholars (e.g., Han 2006). The omnipresence of Gisan genre paintings in European and US museums poses another set of problems that challenges unilinear national claims of ethnographic collections. First of all, these paintings were intentionally produced for export and thus incorporate issues of representation (both in supply and demand of these paintings). Second, because of their existence in many museums of East Asian art and ethnography, with larger and smaller sets of paintings of a limited total number of scenes, they can hardly be considered unique and at least one significant part of their story lies in the composition and distribution of the entire body of these paintings worldwide.

Although these simple paintings of everyday scenes are seemingly



Figure 6. Gisan and Seokcheon Genre Paintings (series RV-679-1 “Hair Braid Craftsmen” and RV-679-7 “Offering Drink and Song”)

unassuming and are populated by figures that show little expression, both the topics and the figures that are depicted depart from canonical genre paintings from the likes of Kim Hongdo and Sin Yunbok (Kim 2009), something that is obscured by referring to them as just “genre paintings.” These characteristics support the argument that their envisioned audience was not a Korean one but a foreign clientele, who purchased them as souvenirs or as depictions of ethnographic scenes (Shin 2006), readily consumed by collectors who were sent out into the world to fill up the newly emerging ethnological museums in Europe. The use of Gisan’s work in contemporary ethnographic studies, such as Stewart Culin’s *Korean Games* mentioned above and many other European and American publications related to the Korean peninsula, illustrates this (Walraven 1983, 28–30). In this way, these paintings constitute a genre of illustrative art of which the mode of production and consumption is specific to, and has to be seen in the context of, the circumstances of Joseon at the end of the nineteenth century.

The set in Leiden was acquired via Jan Rhein (ca. 1856–1892), primary school teacher and the son of a naturalized Danish merchant. Rhein studied

Chinese and went to China in 1865, where he worked as the student-interpreter to the Dutch delegation in Peking from 1875, and as a secretary-interpreter from 1876 for J. H. Ferguson, Minister Resident and Consul General of the Netherlands in China (Van Dongen 1966, 63; Kuiper 2016, 423). There is no known record of him having visited Joseon, which begs the questions of whether Gisan paintings were also sold outside of Korea, or of if perhaps he acquired them through a connection who did travel across the sea to the peninsula. In any case, the Leiden set of Gisan and Seokcheon paintings is among the smaller ones in Europe, and from its overlap with other more substantial collections in Germany and Denmark for example, it can be said that an important part of its story will be of a positional nature—how it fits in with other sets of paintings in Europe and the US. Valiant efforts of comparison have already been made for example by Kim (2009), but further comprehensive studies focused on these sets of paintings as one body of export art can clarify their role in shaping images of Korea/Joseon during and beyond this historical period.

The above three cases demonstrate how we come across a broad range of objects and the people and networks that facilitated their inclusion in the Korean collection in Leiden. The objects themselves started out as visual and material illustrations of Joseon as a country far away, both in geographical and in cultural terms. The way in which they are made to fulfil this role, however, is highly dependent on the people involved in the collecting process, who sometimes have multiple roles as commissioned collectors, arbiters of appropriateness of objects for collection, negotiating partners, salesmen, directors, curators, and other such functions in the process of transposing objects out of their natural “habitat,” so to speak, and into the museum context.

While the objects discussed above are by no means comprehensive examples of the types of texts surround Korean museum objects (there are many more and in greater variety), each of these types of objects has become representative of a view of a past Korea: the court and elite culture as well as illustrations of lifestyles and everyday scenes long lost (possibly even at the time of painting), or of “folk games” that are now only found in museums or on the lowest shelves in a toy or stationery store. In this role, these objects emphasize the necessity of knowing object backgrounds and stories to complement knowledge about their material and technical existence.

Preserving Dimensions of Value: Connecting the Dots via Digital Data-driven Approaches

The aforementioned examples each represent one facet of collection history of the Leiden Korean collection that is not easily covered by the national narrative as imposed on the collection by the Dutch governmental structure, or by the “uprooted cultural heritage” narrative as propagated by Korean institutes such as OKCHF. They contain some elements of both perspectives, but a large part of their more nuanced significance is obscured by these big stories. In particular, their presence as part of a larger body of connections, networks, and bodies of similar objects that span across multiple collections, nations, and continents remains invisible, in spite of the fact that these are the stories that warrant our attention now.

We have established that museum collections in general, and in this research, Korean collections in Europe in particular, are the result of a varying degree of personal initiatives, networks and exchanges, and temporal shifts in evaluation of the value of objects as ethnographic (representing a contemporary “other” in everyday use objects or objects of arts and craftwork) towards unique specimens of lost cultures. At the same time, problematic aspects of these circumstances of collection, such colonial or other power relations at the time of collecting, receive increased attention with the result of objects being repatriated. So how to go about incorporating, recording, and preserving these many significant layers of narratives in sight of a future where objects may again leave their once-thought permanent residence of the museum in order to return to their location of origin (their “home”)?

From 2020 to 2022, together with fellow researchers Dr. Ji Young Park, Maria Sobotka, and Katharina Süberkrüb, we conducted a project titled “Diplomatic Artifacts” funded by OKCHF, which researched this issue by exploring the possibilities of gathering multi-layered collection data together with their documentation into one standardized database. Doing so would provide a cornerstone to build on for future provenance and collection history research, with a scope that exceeds national and ideological boundaries and allows researchers to make connections among collections, object categories, collectors, and so on. In this project, we worked towards the construction of a template into which object data can be fed to compose a database of Korean museum objects.

Ideally, these data would come from participating museums, but for the pilot it was decided to focus on data collected by the National Research Institute for Cultural Heritage (NRICH) and OKCHF, which are already relatively standardized and facilitate the conversion process more easily. Aimed at producing an expandable structure which allows the insertion of data of an increasing number of collections so as to be able to compare across collections and locations, such an approach can zoom out for a more quantitative approach (number of items in a category, distribution across collections, iconographic research, etc.) or zoom in on any small number of objects for a more qualitative approach (object comparison, same collectors in different locations, connections between collectors, objects, etc.).

In order to be able to make sense of such a “cloud” of meaning surrounding objects (such as described in the previous sections of this article) and to facilitate gathering both object knowledge and contextual knowledge in one place, we decided to explore the digital approach in the form of a database where the object itself is a central node to which items of object knowledge, but also qualitative renditions of contextual knowledge can be related. This also opened the path to grouping objects that are not physically in one location but may be connected by ways of their origin, the intermediary that brought them to Europe, and their mention in the same documents or texts, and so on. So, the purpose of approaching the complexities of object stories through this object database is not to generate new lists of objects, but to connect and contextualize them in a flexible, modular, and sustainable manner.

In the actual object database, this flexible, modular, and sustainable objective was realized via two structural levels. First, inconsistent categorization and typification was addressed by enabling the selection of multiple attribute categories across disciplinary significance and material composition. For example, no longer is an archaeological object limited to being represented in the category of “archaeology,” but also as “metalware” or “furniture.” In practice, catalogues of Korean art and artifacts tend to provide a table of contents that is divided into categories either related to disciplinary (e.g., archaeology), material-based (e.g., pottery, wood, or metalware), shape (e.g., paintings), period-oriented (e.g., Goryeo or Joseon), or other formats. Not a few cases demonstrate that these ontologically separate divisions are both mixed up in the same catalog, or even used inconsistently—a certain pottery can be considered “Goryeo art” whereas others may be ethnographic objects from Joseon, and particular styles

of metalware may be put under the archaeological section because they were excavated. In both cases, the object may actually belong to multiple categories, and much is dependent on the intent or purpose of the categorization. This inconsistent categorization of objects happens in spite of the fact that art objects as a separate entity rely greatly on the appreciation that has been bestowed upon them through the years.

Second, beyond the construction of a flexible and inclusive standard template for various object data including a provenance section with unified items for the many collectors, institutes, and other parties involved in the facilitation of selection, collection, and display of Korean artifacts in European museums, we incorporated an option to attach (digital copies of) archival materials such as the letters described above and various types of literature and catalogs to the object record. This makes it possible to have as much contextual information as possible in one place and allows for it to be used to filter and connect groups of objects across museums, national boundaries, and standardized object categories. For any approach to recording and documenting data on the objects themselves as well as the body of contextual knowledge that surrounds them, a flexible approach to attaching categories and attributes to objects is essential, together with an inclusive method that allows for the object and all the descriptive data to be located in one place. Further development of this approach is needed to ensure benefit for museums outside of Korea as well as Korean authorities focused on overseas cultural heritage.

Conclusions

This paper builds on the assertion that uniquely unidimensional views of Korean collections in Europe, such as claims to the authorship/ownership of museum collections as national efforts but also of the objects in them as uprooted heritage, may be deemed problematic for multiple reasons. At least this is the case for the Korean collection of the World Museum in Leiden. Increasing attention is duly given to the colonial, violent histories that are covered up by the glitter and glamour of beautifully lit object displays in the museum. At the same time, it will be important to keep a keen eye on recording and documenting *together with the object data* the contextual knowledge on national structures, individual actions, and institutions mediating between

these two extremes in an international environment from the period that these ethnographic collections were first formed. These aspects are an equally significant part of the object histories in these collections. By taking to objects a data approach that molds them into comparable records in a large database, new connections can be discovered, mapped, and analyzed to allow for a more nuanced look into the multi-layered significance of museum objects.

Besides the appreciation of individual collection histories, the relation with collection histories of similar objects in other collections can be recognized, including putting weight on the connections and networks that exist between them as signifying factors. By intensifying our focus on the contextual aspects of collecting, we may very well find that at least for part of the ethnological collections in Europe (with a focus on Korea in this article), there is much more hoarding and trading after initial collection at the foundation of national collections nowadays than we would be comfortable to admit. We need to continue to be very critical about terminologies such as “collecting expeditions” and other romanticized images of gathering goods outside of the own national borders.

By taking a broad and data-centered approach, object stories can be lifted from their national narratives and start to be placed into a more holistic perspective that takes into account the complexity and messiness of international, inter-collection networks and exchange that eventually got these objects where they are now.

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Abstract

Museum collections of Korean art and ethnographic objects outside Korea are often explained as the product of national endeavors on the one hand, or as uprooted overseas cultural heritage on the other. This research argues for a holistic approach to understanding the cultural significance of such objects as a combination of their material attributes and as part of a larger body of Korean relics of the past, and their contextual attributes such as the circumstances, networks, and individual actions that have led to them ending up in the museum. By acknowledging also the importance of these opposing views of what makes Korean collections outside Korea culturally significant, we can preserve the history surrounding them more completely and more accurately. This article proposes the mobilization of a digital approach to gathering these different bodies of knowledge in one location in an inclusive, flexible, and sustainable manner.

Keywords: Korean collections, ethnographic museums, overseas heritage, provenance research, digital provenance research, collection database