

EUR_Asia

Digital brochure

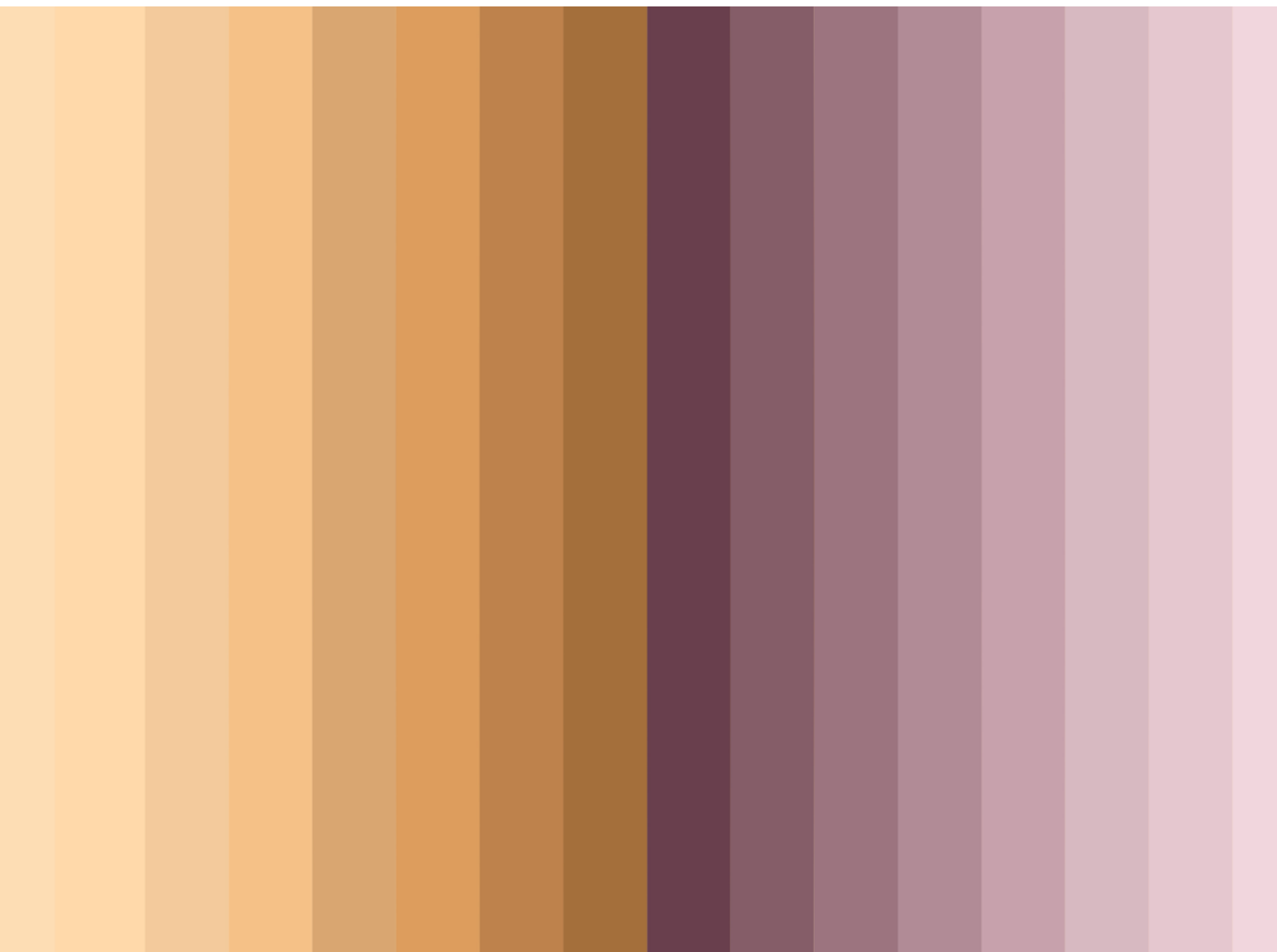


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Introduction

Andrea Viliani, Museum of Civilizations

This is not only an introduction but also a map, and above all a welcome.

Encompassing artefacts, documents, scientific research and original creative works, this new temporary display on the second floor of the Palazzo delle Scienze, entitled *EUR_Asia*, previews the permanent musealization of all the Asian arts and cultures collections of the Museum of Civilizations. By 2026, all will be brought together on the building's ground floor in a single integrated exhibition: both the archaeological and artistic collections of the National Museum of Oriental Art (MNAO), founded in 1957 at the behest of historian of religions Giuseppe Tucci, and the Asian ethnographic collections of the National Prehistoric Ethnographic Museum, founded in 1875 by archaeologist Luigi Pigorini.

The *EUR_Asia* temporary exhibition is divided into five sections, constituting the interconnected chapters of a museographic reflection that is both historical – tracing the history of museums that no longer exist, as well as the legacy of the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO), co-founded by Tucci in 1933 – and methodological – as it tests the criteria for the future re-mounting of these same collections. Given the implications and potentials of this dual scenario, setting out a path from past to future, the project is carried in collaboration with the Asian Art Museum of Turin (MAO), and in dialogue with a multiplicity of artists: our sincere thanks go to both the MAO and the individual artists

1.

The first section, *Chronicles and spectra of restoration: scientific research for a critical museology*, serves as a gateway and narrative opening to the exhibit, and starts at the entrance of the Palace of Sciences. The simultaneous presentation of several works and their diagnostic analyses – carried out by the 'La Venaria Reale' Conservation and Restoration Center and the Department of Applied Science and Technology of the Politecnico di Torino, on the occasion of the exhibition *Buddha*¹⁰ at the MAO – highlights the fundamental connection between art-historical and scientific research, and equally, between research and restoration.

Within this section, which continues on the monumental staircase, you can also experience a sound installation by musician and composer Valentina Ciardelli, together with Anna Astesano and Chiu Yung Chan: a trio for harp, double bass and *guqin*, an ancient instrument of Chinese tradition, which serves as an invitation to the reflective space-time of the exhibition.

2.

On the first floor, around the monumental staircase, the layout in the porticoes is inspired by the structure of Buddhist caves. Evoking the luminous progression along the side aisles of *chai-tyagrha* 26, a sanctuary carved from the living rock of Ajanta (Maharashtra, India), the path is marked out in vitrines housing a selection of some 100 works from the collections of the former MNAO, articulated in 16 cross-cutting narratives of Asian thought, history, arts and cultures. Each of these works, from different areas and eras, is explored in terms of the relationships between materiality and functionality, from practical and everyday to ritual and symbolic. In this, our path transcends the aspects of geographical reference and limitation, opening instead to exploring the universality of subjects - such as visions of death and immortality, the care of the body and spirit, the role of meditative techniques, the nuances of genres, cosmologies and cosmogonies - and the cross-penetration of art-historical themes - such as imaginary bestiaries, calligraphy, and the meaning of colours. Here we traverse all of Asia, experiencing the continent in a journey open to the influences of civilizations, religions and social systems, until finally voyaging beyond, into the hypothetical contours of what we might call 'Eurasia' (union of Europe and Asia), 'Afrasia' (Africa and Asia) and 'Oceanasia' (Oceania and Asia). After all, here at the Museum of Civilizations, our experience of Asian starts from within from EUR (the district named after the never-inaugurated *Rome Universal Exhibition in Rome* 1942), and more precisely with ... *EUR_Asia*. Although displayed in museum showcases, the objects also address the history of the museum as institution. Crossing borders and also millennia, we explore freely through space and time, reflecting in particular on the concept of the "Oriental art museum", and so on the very concept of the Orient, consolidated in Europe during the 19th century as this continent developed its identity - from the opposite side - as "the West". Going beyond this historical opposition and the resulting narratives, sometimes of exoticizing character, the exhibition traces connections between artifacts, spatial coordinates, epochs, knowledge sets and beliefs, cultural traditions,

natural materials and craft techniques. What develops is in illustrative map, composed of encounters and comparisons, exchanges and negotiations, of the multiple and composite stories held within these very collections.

3.

At the centre of the exhibition path stands a structure that, evoking a sacred Asian construction (a *stupa*, or temple), suggests the idea of the Cosmic Mountain or Tree of the World. Atop its central pillar there appears the image of a Buddha, in the gesture of reassurance (*abhayamudra*), overlooked by a small umbrella conceived by Andrea Anastasio, with his gaze with his gaze turned to those about to visit, while around this we find the works of artist Gala Porras-Kim, Research Fellow of the Museum of Civilizations and Artist in Residence at the MAO. Investigating the interdependence of provenance, meaning, original function and the de- and re-contextualization, interpretation, and conservation of museum collections, Porras-Kim's installation - *A Recollection Returns with a Soft Touch* - welcomes us as equal participants in the intimate relationship between the collections and those who regularly care for them, whether archaeologist, art historian, or conservator-restorer. The works selected by museum officers, together with their own persons, are sublimated by the artist in post-production, leaving only their hands visible as they move and describe the works. The object itself is de-focused, shifting our attention to the individuality and critical functions of the museum officers. Similarly, the vitrines containing the objects "erased" in the artwork are reposed as the devices they are: denouncing their narrative function and reaffirming the cultural and ritual identities of the objects.

4.

The last section, situated to the sides of Giulio Rosso's stained-glass window along the monumental staircase, is dedicated to the *Great Project for Cultural Heritage* and to the permanent remounting of the Collections of Asian Arts and Cultures, including architectural drawings and a number of artifacts from the Asian collections of the National Prehistoric Ethnographic Museum, not seen for decades and planned as centerpieces for the coming re-installation.

5.

Finally, a QR-code leads to a digital brochure presenting a curated collection of in-depth texts and images, conceived less as an accompaniment for the on-site visitor and more an opportunity for deeper exploration and support for personal reflection, whether before, during or after a visit. “Is it possible to free our conception of a culture from its geographic boundaries – which in any case are mobile and porous?” “From within the so-called ‘West’, can we imagine museum projects and identities dedicated to the ‘cultures of the world’ which are somehow no longer Eurocentric?” “Is it possible to develop a museum where the sharing of cultures, including the history of collection origins and interpretations, truly results in sharing?”
... Is it possible then, to visit Asia, while still in EUR?

Welcome, then, to... *EUR_Asia!*

Introduction

**Davide Quadrio with Anna Musini
and Francesca Filisetti, MAO Asian Art Museum of Turin**

This exhibition and research project stems from a series of dialogues, reflections and collaborations, shared over the years 2022-2024 between the Museum of Civilizations in Rome and the Museum of Asian Art in Turin, first by their respective directors and then their curatorial departments. More than an exhibition, this presentation develops as a reinterpretation of the permanent collections, distilled by the curators of the Museum of Civilizations and punctuated by juxtapositions, echoes, and expansions, and evoked by a series of display solutions, together with the daring operations of artist Gala Porras-Kim (Bogota, Colombia, 1984; residence and studio Los Angeles), and important contributions from Andrea Anastasio and the community of women of Nizamuddin Basti, New Delhi.

Over the course of a residency project of nearly two years, also involving on-site research, Gala Porras-Kim developed her work *A Recollection Returns with a Soft Touch*: investigating and instigating new questions about the presence and significance of Asian art collections in Western institutions. What do these objects represent in the European context? What is their original history, provenance and function? How did they arrive in Western collections? How are they studied, exhibited and preserved? How are they transmitted and communicated for public enjoyment? What are the relationships between objects of the collections and museum curators? Porras-Kim's project focused on the latter question in particular: actively involving the curators of the Museum of Civilizations, custodians of scientific research and connoisseurs of the artifacts preserved here. These collections themselves merge those of a series of long-standing institutions: the 'Giuseppe Tucci' National Museum of Oriental Art; the 'Luigi Pigorini' National Prehistoric and Ethnographic Museum; the 'Alessandra Vaccaro' Museum of the High Middle Ages; the 'Lamberto Loria' Museum of Traditional and Popular Arts, and the former National Colonial Museum. Through interviews, Porras-Kim's work *A Recollection Returns with a Soft Touch* explores the affective relationships between the curators and the works they conserve, opening a poetic and surprisingly emotional view into the deep connections between objects and persons, with

their human instincts of caring. The museum curators thus take centre place in this exhibition project and in the work developed by the artist, revealing their essential roles in the museum's mission and activities.

The circular space of the artwork presentation emphasizes the imaginary and symbolic aspect of the entire project, metaphorically recalling the structure of Mount Meru, the sacred central mountain of the Hindu and Buddhist universe, surmounted by the Standing Buddha. Fulcrum of the entire project, the statue is surrounded by a paper *chatra* designed by Andrea Anastasio and made by the women's community of the Nizamuddin Basti locality. The ritual umbrella completes and reveres the religious figure, constructing an ideal continuation between the original artifact and the present time, made of intelligence and by the same hands that constantly move tradition and history towards the future.¹ Signals like this remind us that a moment in time is always an organic becoming, never nostalgic, and always open to contemporary embrace.

Around this fulcrum there open further spaces of meditation, scattered with thematic islands presenting cross-cultural subjects and objects, from the Far East to the Mediterranean, in a symphony of wonders and discoveries. These open with a first space combining scientific approach with emotional involvement: a reportage on the analyses, studies and methodologies of conservation-restoration developed during a two-year collaboration involving the Museum of Civilizations (MuCiv); the Museum of Asian Art of Turin (MAO); 'La Venaria Reale' Conservation and Restoration Centre; the Department of Applied Science and Technology of the Politecnico di Torino. In connection with the MAO exhibition *Buddha¹⁰: A Fragmented Display on Buddhist Visual Evolution* (October 2022 - September 2023), several important works loaned by MuCiv were investigated through scientific analyses: a sculpture of the seated Buddha (inv. MPE 80217); a standing Guanyin (inv. MNAO 208), and ten votive bronze sculptures of the Auriti collection. The results of these scientific and experimental studies, currently in publication,² are seen next to the sculptures, in a video-presentation edited by Alessandro Muner, including images, graphs and 3D reconstructions. The exhibition includes Valentina Ciardelli's sound installation

1 For more on the community and cultural heritage of the Nizamuddin Basti area, see <https://presentations.thebestinheritage.com/2022/nizamuddin-basti>

2 Published in *Coatings Journal*: "A Technical Study of Chinese Buddhist Sculptures: First Insights into a Complex History of Transformation through Analysis of the Polychrome

Oro - Huángjīn, a trio for harp, double bass and guqin, an ancient instrument of Chinese tradition. The work, commissioned by the MAO in 2023, is part of a project immersing us in the historic circulation of Asian objects, their collection in Europe, and the proliferation of the Western gaze, imposing criteria of beauty and qualitative judgement.

Planning, gesture, research and presentation are the words perhaps best describing a journey begun two years ago, a process still in the making, but pausing here a moment at the Museum of Civilizations in purposeful crystallization: a first perception of the importance of a prestigious and unique collection in Italy, speaking of ourselves and of the origins, discoveries, poetic revelations and guiding spirits, which through exchanges and connections, have contributed to formation of the Eurasian cultural landscape. All this is presented in the sign of those who recognize the interconnectedness of history and its transformative values:

“...the point of arrival of culture is not the ability to grasp at a glance, as a harmonic and closed configuration, the ultimate order of knowledge: but, on the contrary, the conquest of a universal dioptric, which conceives history as a boundless humanistic extravagance, a dizzying orbit of rays, fires and specters, an immense theatre of optical illusions, projections and overexposures.”³

Decoration” (MDPI, 2024 <https://www.mdpi.com/2079-6412/14/3/344>). In pre-publication: i) MDPI Heritage Magazine; ii) EUROCORR 2024 (European Corrosion Congress).

3 Johanne Wolfgang Goethe, *Il Divano Occidentale Orientale*, RCS Rizzoli libri, Milan, 1990; from the introduction by Ludovica Kock, p. 9.

Exhibiting Oriental Art in European Museums in the 21st Century: A quest for the process of de-Orientalization

Mariko Murata

An ambitious project

An important inquiry revolves around the implications for European museums showcasing Oriental art and culture in the 21st century. Issues that permeate museum practices, such as the mindset that draws a solid boundary between the East and the West, the patriarchal gaze of the West towards Eastern culture, and the exoticizing of museum objects and collections, have been identified and widely criticized in academia. The question is, what actions can museums take to address these concerns? How can the intentions of decolonization and de-Orientalization of art be expressed as museum spaces and exhibitions while displaying old exhibits and collections?

The acts of collecting and exhibiting art imply taking objects out of their original context and assigning a different meaning by recontextualizing them with different stories and interpretations. While this is a characteristic of the museum system, it has immensely contributed to reflecting the collectors' fantasies towards the imagined 'other'. Consequently, 'the making of meaning in museum classification and display is mystified as adequate representation' while 'the time and order of the collection erase the concrete social labor of its making'.¹ This applies, for example, to the obliteration of colonialism as well as the deliberate attempts to erase any evidence of fascism, which characterize, as historical matrices, some parts of the collection of the Museum of Civilizations (*Museo delle Civiltà*, MuCiv).

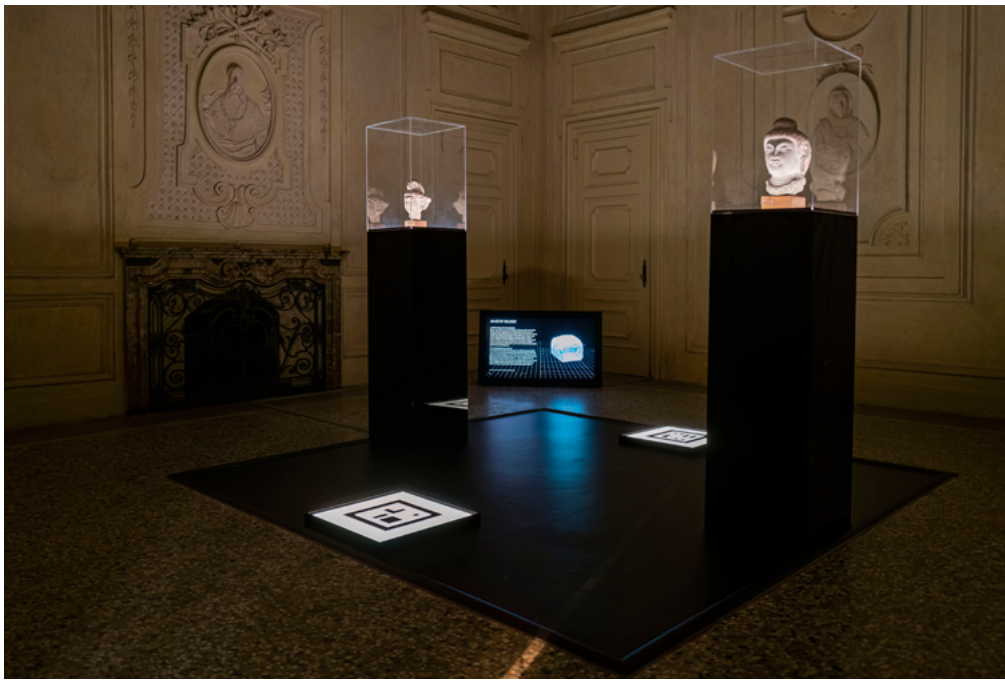
The MuCiv's Asian collection is an amalgamation of the 'Luigi Pigorini' National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography and the 'Giuseppe Tucci' National Museum of Oriental Art. The collection of the Museum of Oriental Art (*Museo d'Arte Orientale*, MAO) also consists of several collections in Italy. If we focus on these collections, one key issue emerges.

¹ Clifford, James (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, p. 220.

The main issue is that the acts of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting objects that are carried out while exposing themselves to the risk of an Orientalist gaze have continued under the 'illusion' that they adequately represent the world, namely the East. The biggest challenge for museums in the 21st century is how to raise awareness towards this fact and deconstruct such a gaze while working with objects and collections imbued with such a perception. The joint initiative between MuCiv and MAO attempts to address this question.

Reiterating that one of the processes in which MuCiv is actively engaged concerns the decolonization of the former Colonial Museum of Rome seems unnecessary. One might say nevertheless that even before the foundation of MuCiv in 2016, the history of the various museums that merged into it has been characterized by its premises; this has urged the museum team to initialize the opening up of the collections with the idea of "decolonization as process". According to Andrea Viliani, who took over as the Director of MuCiv in 2022, sharing methods of the archaeological missions, working with organizations aimed at intercepting assets suspected of loot to arrive in Italy, provenance research promoting restitution of works to their countries of origin, and the collaborations with exponents of indigenous communities and migrants are integral to the process of decolonization. These day-to-day practices, while not necessarily visible to the visitors, lay the foundation of a museum open to dialogues, creating a synergy in the museum space-time.

MAO in turn is a new museum of Oriental art that opened in 2008; this description appears to be an 'issue' or rather raises questions towards the issue of the Orientalist gaze. What strategy should be adopted by this 'new' museum bearing a name that reinforces the boundary between the East and the West? The answer to this question lies in the recent initiative launched by the Director of MAO, Davide Quadrio, and the curatorial team. Drawing on his extensive experience as the founder and director of several contemporary art centers in China, Quadrio has leveraged his connections with numerous artists from his established network and has been renewing the existing exhibitions and space by providing a fresh perspective through contemporary works. This approach has been combined with provenance research and scientific analysis to update the descriptions of the exhibited collections. The speed and density of the change are fairly remarkable, which the author immediately noted in her



Buddha¹⁰. Frammenti, derive e rifrazioni dell'immaginario visivo buddhista, installation view (2022-23), MAO Museo d'Arte Orientale, Turin
 Photo: Giorgio Perottino



Buddha¹⁰. Frammenti, derive e rifrazioni dell'immaginario visivo buddhista, installation view (2022-23), MAO Museo d'Arte Orientale, Turin
 Photo: Giorgio Perottino

involvement with MAO.²

The MuCiv–MAO project, which combines contemporary art and the latest scientific methods, is undoubtedly the most ambitious practice of de-Orientalization in Italy at present.

Decolonizing museums through contemporary art

Recently, decolonizing museums using contemporary art is a technique that has become increasingly common in European museums. Anthropological museums are particularly interested in it as a means of linking historical and colonial objects with the present and raising awareness of the issue among visitors. While museums that use contemporary art as extensively as the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam in the Netherlands are rare, the practice of displaying contemporary artworks in traditional exhibition spaces is becoming increasingly widespread.

However, this trend has faced criticism. A common complaint is that contemporary art is ‘difficult’ to understand. The more a visitor is fond of or familiar with conventional Asian art and culture exhibitions, the more negative their perception towards the display of contemporary art. This is not surprising, as the new approach interferes with the traditional style of visual pleasure and creates an uncomfortable space. Otherwise, contemporary art would not have served the purpose of its installation.

Another objection is regarding ‘artwashing’, referring to the fact that contemporary art gives the collection a different appearance and obscures the colonial past. If the installed work functioned in this manner, it would be worthy of criticism. However, if the work has the power to question the existing ideas and concepts, it can challenge the display of exhibits and ‘perceptions’ ingrained in museums. Although it is immensely difficult (or almost impossible) to ‘wash away’ such perceptions, this is the greatest ‘task’ of the contemporary art introduced into the gallery space. Approaches, such as reviewing the selection of objects, changing their descriptions displayed in panels, and reporting their provenance to visitors, are extremely crucial for a new representation; however, they have certain limitations. Orientalism in European museums is embodied in the manner in which collections are curated and classified and exhibition spaces are configured. The recent call for contemporary art is closely linked

2 Since June 2023, the author has been working and interacting with MAO as part of the collaboration project between MAO and IIAS (International Institute for Asian Studies). The author was a fellow at IIAS from October 2022 to September 2023.

to this structural issue. Since it often takes the form of installations, contemporary art directly intervenes in the 'space'. It is also 'conceptual' in nature, and this raises questions regarding the concept of 'museum Orientalism'. While contemporary art is not a magic tool, it is much sought-after for these characteristics.

Museum Orientalism

The practice of Orientalism is far more deeply rooted in museum practices than one can imagine. The indefinite divide between the East and the West in museums is apparent in the way in which the collections are categorized. In European arts and culture museums with historical backgrounds, the exhibition space is divided into sections by geographic regions, such as Europe, Africa³, Asia, and Oceania. In France, the Louvre's entire collection of Asian art was transferred to the Musée Guimet in 1945, and to this day, 'the separation of Oriental art from the main building of the Louvre demonstrates the recognition that the cultural quality and unit of Oriental art was different from what it should be in the Louvre'.⁴

More characteristically, the Asia section is invariably strictly divided into national units, such as India, China, Japan, and Korea, even though the museum can only allocate small areas for each country. This division of space is inherited from the time of the first World Expo that took place in 1851 and is also linked to the academic system of art history in which each area of expertise is divided into national units. However, if we consider pre-modern East Asia as an example, the area was defined by the tributary system of China in contrast to the nationstates of Europe. The international order in East Asia was maintained by a system in which the Chinese emperors granted titles to the heads of neighboring states and ruled those states as foreign domains; this guaranteed the independence of countries and a loose network with dynamic exchanges. This structure was beyond the imagination of the Europeans, who could only understand it in terms of their own system at the time. This has led to contemporary national art histories and the clear division in exhibited spaces, consequently erasing traces of the deep relationships establi-

3 When the British Museum finally opened its Africa Gallery in 2001, there were very few art museums that had an Africa section, because African objects were not considered art. The fact that the museum's basement was the designated space for the newly opened exhibit drew a fair amount of criticism.

4 Sato, Doshin (2007) *Bijutsu no aidentiti: Dare no tame ni, nan no tame ni (Identity in Art: For whom, for what?)*, Yoshikawa Kobukan, p. 20.

shed in Asia. Moreover, 'art' was a European concept. In the case of Buddhist art, which is almost synonymous with Asian art, the practice of gathering objects in one place for visual pleasure and looking at them solely through an aesthetic lens did not exist before the Western gaze. Thus, the 'illusion of an adequate representation of the world' is embedded in the practice of museums and their spatial configurations, rendering Asian dynamics and interactions invisible.

Another consequence of the absolute delineation of the East and the West is that it has created a gaze that sees 'the East' as a highly abstract mass. Oriental art collections remain a poorly studied field with few discussions beyond the aesthetics of exoticism. Buddhist sculptures from the Auriti collection, which will be partially displayed in this exhibition and were also presented in the exhibition *Buddha*¹⁰ at MAO (20 October 2022–3 September 2023), are a case in point. According to co-curator Laura Vigo, the collection includes fragmented Buddhas, which were brought to Italy in a certain number by Japanese art dealers and businessmen, such as Tadashi Sekino (1868–1935), Kaichiro Nezu (1860–1940), and Sadajiro Yamanaka (1866–1936).⁵ They excavated and/or acquired these Buddha statues mainly from China at a time when Japan was expanding its empire. Japan was the first Asian country to become a 'modern state', and it assumed the role of Asia's 'leader', making full use of the empire as a means of communication with Europe. Here, Japan's imperialism in Asia is evidently overlooked by combining it with the rest of Asia and considering Japan as a part of exotic Asia.

Taking a chance with a 'cool media'

Asia has either been fragmented or seen as an abstract mass, and both these ideologies have a long tradition of practices that make the displays 'adequate representations'. How can this notion be reframed? It seems rather improbable. Not only the West but also the East appears to be 'stuck' in this framework (which is proven by this essay in which these terms appear in dichotomy). The only strategy that may be successful is to momentarily 'insert' the notion into the traditional space such that the visitors realize that something is different or perplexing. As mentioned previously, this can be achieved to some extent by

5 Vigo, Laura (2022) 'Buddhas on the move. On westward circulation and translocation of Buddhist visual and material culture', *Buddha*¹⁰: *A Fragmented Display on Buddhist Visual Evolution*, MAO Museo d'Arte Orientale, pp. 12-18.

altering the criteria of the selection of objects, their arrangement, and their descriptions on panels. However, the message of an exhibition is not solely determined by the intentions and aims of the museum; 'meaning' is established only when visitors react to it and interpret it in their own way. Therefore, the greater the variation in style and space, the higher the ability of visitors to perceive the change in the message. By contrast, receiving a different message from the conventional exhibition format in which objects are quietly housed in glass cases is more challenging. Exhibitions are a type of media that require active participation from the audience (McLuhan would have classified them as 'cool media'⁶).

Contemporary art, scientific analysis, or any multimodal approach that enables a narrative beyond the geographical perception could be a gateway to reveal and alternate the traditional values attached to these objects and collections. Ultimately, the museums decide to demonstrate their firm determination in this matter. In this short essay, the authors' intent is not to highlight the functionality of contemporary art but rather to clarify the aim of the MuCiv–MAO initiative. Seeking appropriate methods of intervention to change the deep-rooted tradition of museum Orientalism is the reason why Oriental art is exhibited in European museums in the 21st century. Evidently, it is a quest that has only just begun.

6 Hot and cool media are counter-concepts and are relatively determined; for example, radio is hot while telephone is cool. (McLuhan, Marshall (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw Hill.)

The Operative Logic of an Image

Heba Y. Amin

This text is an abridgement of several notes and comments by the artist Heba Y. Amin (Cairo, Egypt, 1980) on her own research-based practice, written first of all for the catalogue of her solo exhibition “A Rectilinear Propagation of Thought” (2018) at the Zilberman Berlin Gallery, then expanded for the work “Windows on the West” (2019), and further elaborated in conversation with curator Anthony Downey for the exhibition “When I See the Future, I Close my Eyes, Chapter II” (2022), also at Zilberman Berlin.



Harem de Méhémet-Ali, Horace Vernet and Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet, 7 November 1839, lithograph. Print after a lost daguerreotype from “Excursions daguerriennes I”, 1840. (Rare Book Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library).

The first photographic image documented from the African continent dates to 7 November 1839, just three months after France introduced the daguerreotype camera to the world. The photograph, *Harem De Mehemet-Ali* (1839), was taken in Alexandria by the French Orientalist painter Horace Vernet (Paris, 1789 – 1863), assisted by his nephew Frédéric Goupil-Fesque (France, 1817-1881), as they ‘captured’ the exterior of Muhammad Ali Pasha’s harem palace. Although there was nothing erotic about Vernet’s image as such, its contrived sexual implications excited the contemporary audiences of Paris.¹

Vernet and his nephew were proponents of the ‘civilizing mission’, in line with European ideals of white superiority and the aims of colonization. Becoming ‘civilized’ implied a renunciation of native traditions, and yet Europeans rushed to capture the first images of the rich cultural marvels of Africa and Asia with their new technologies. Vernet and Goupil-Fesque documented their travels extensively in both writing and photography; they were “glad to think that, under the growing influence of French civilization, the region’s slumbering reason will be awakened.”²

Vernet’s original photograph, alongside countless others, stands as an example of France’s exercise of territorial domination through the fusion of landscape and body.³ European colonialism depended on technology for territorial expansion and domination but also, at its core, the visualization of the colonial project depended on a new techno-aesthetic of fantasy geographies. Photography was well-suited to the tasks of surveying and mapping ‘primitive’ landscapes for the taking, but also, by extension, in claiming and exploiting the people who inhabited these lands.⁴ Constructed in the dreamscape manner of Orienta-

1 This story is the subject of several years of artistic research beginning with my solo exhibition *A Rectilinear Propagation of Thought* at Zilberman Berlin Gallery in 2018. It has since been the topic of much discussion and writing in my artistic practice.

2 Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet, *Voyage d’Horace Vernet en Orient*. (Bruxelles C. Muquardt, 1844), 21.

3 The fusion of landscape and body was not unique to European colonizers. In the eleventh century manuscript *Kitab al masalik wa-l-mamalik* (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms) by Andalusian geographer Abu Abdullah al-Bakri, merchants and traders convey sexual descriptions of the women they encounter in West and North Africa as part of the descriptions of geographies traveled. Their voyeurism was mediated through technologies of measurement and observation that rendered it sufficiently scientific for inclusion in a text on geography. This text is explored further as part of my artistic project “The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid”, which documents the contemporary geographies of West and North Africa through the routes of this historic manuscript. Further information about the project can be found in the exhibition catalog of *A Rectilinear Propagation of Thought* (2018) at Zilberman Berlin Gallery.

4 Michael Bollig and Olaf Bubenzer, eds. *African Landscapes - Interdisciplinary Approaches*. (New York: Springer, 2009), 316.

list painting, mages of indigenous people became a tool for political propaganda. However, given the inaccessibility of the North African female subject, European artists – to fit their fantasies – fabricated an erotic version of the native women. Even Vernet alludes to the predatory manner of his photographic excursions: they were “daguerreotyping like lions,” he wrote.⁵ Ironically, the harem is not actually pictured in his photograph, but its eroticism is implied through the voyeuristic gaze of the technological device.

Colonial subjects were often portrayed as exotic and inferior, with images doing the work to justify the imposition of colonial rule as a benevolent mission. Orientalism communicated the incapacity to achieve emancipation, the inability of the subject to become a historical agent and free themselves from their own natural condition.⁶ Photography therefore played a crucial role in the framing of knowledge, as photos continued to circulate and so shape the European perception of others, through the Orientalist lens. Colonial authorities further used photography to create identification cards, surveillance records, and anthropometric data that facilitated management and control over indigenous populations. In his filmic essay, *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (Images of the World and the Inscription of War), artist Harun Farocki (Nový Jičín, 1944 – Berlin, 2014) addressed the implicit violence of the Western gaze through the book of photographs, *Femmes Algeriennes*, produced by French conscript Marc Garanger (Ézy-sur-Eure, 1935 – Lamblore, 2020). His orders were to photograph Algerian women for identification purposes, but his colonial subjects – normally dressed in modest clothing – were forced to strip their veils and pose against their will. These photographic practices served to dehumanize and objectify colonized people, reducing them to mere subjects of scientific inquiry and administrative control.

What happens to a people who have no agency to represent themselves, whose absence of self-determination coincides with the critical moment when the production of photographic ima-

5 “Nous avons daguerréotypifié comme des lions et vous recevrez une partie de ce que nous avons fait comme échantillon.”, letter of 21 November 1839, Paris Archives des Musées nationaux, P30.

6 Edward Said popularized the term *Orientalism* in the context of postcolonial studies with his seminal book of the same name, published 1978. He argued that the European colonial powers of the 19th century had contrived and maintained largely inaccurate and stereotypical representations of Asian and North African cultures, in advancement of their political interests.

ges was first introduced? Still today, we see that the biases and power dynamics inherent in early photographic representations continue to shape visual culture. Not only have global perceptions of the so-called East been shaped by the West for centuries, but the same categorical systems that were used to classify and stereotype marginalized peoples in the past are now being encoded in the algorithms of Artificial Intelligence, perpetuating and amplifying existing biases in the technologies and platforms of our daily use.

The algorithmic gaze conceptualizes 'the Other' through a lens of categorization, control and exploitation, mirroring the dynamics of colonialism in the digital realm. Much like the production of early photography, most people affected by algorithmic rationalization have little to no agency in shaping the very systems that define their future. Algorithms 'see' the world through the lens of binary logic, reducing complex social phenomena to quantifiable data points, thus simplifying our perceptions of reality and reinforcing stereotypes. They rely on vast amounts of data to make predictions and decisions, but the data used is often shaped by historical biases, inequalities, and colonial legacies. We've further established systems that take the human eye out of the equation, instead constructing an opaque algorithmic gaze whose inner workings are unknown. In fact, technologies today do not operate on the logics of human society: machine learning systems use operational images, or images produced by machines which speak to machines, to carry out tasks like tracking, navigating, detecting and identifying.⁷ We are no longer dealing with the human act of seeing. Instead, by removing the human from reasonability (and responsibility) for action, we transfer accountability to the machine, a non-human object.⁸

Algorithms are not pure abstractions, however, instead being programmed within the political and social biases from which they emerge. At one point photography was generally understood as objective, as at least an attempted presentation of reality. While we know this was never really the case, today the aspiration of the digital image no longer has anything to do with the

7 German filmmaker Harun Farocki coined the term 'operational image' in his film *Eye/Machine* (2000).

8 For a further discussion of these methodological issues concerning colonization and drone warfare, see Heba Y. Amin and Anthony Downey, "Contesting Post-Digital Futures: Drone Warfare and The Geo-Politics of Aerial Surveillance in the Middle East", *Digital War* 1 (2020), pp. 65–73.

representational, since the Internet is increasingly disinterested with upholding fact and instead driven by the circulation of digital images and artifacts without attention to values of truth. The epistemological values of this information are gained through its apparatus of circulation. This means that we need to question the global application of technologies, developed and reinscribed through the colonial gaze, and examine the apparatus at the forefront of image production.

What is so striking about Vernet's photograph of Muhammad Ali Pasha's harem palace is that, even at the very beginning, it exposes the power dynamics and techno-political frameworks at play. Although not necessarily intentionally, it lays bare the invisible workings of an image. For this reason, it became the object of my fascination and artistic experimentation. *Windows on the West* explores how the extractive techniques of colonial vision can be critically reconsidered from within their structural logic.⁹ This work utilizes a Jacquard weaving loom to recreate Vernet's original photograph through automated labor and machine vision. One of the first machines to perform automated tasks through a punch card system, the Jacquard weaving loom is a historical precursor to modern computing and algorithmic thinking. It represents the binary logic that mirrors the fundamental principles of digital computing, where data is represented using binary digits. In this case, the process of reconstructing the image is not only about eliminating the predatory male gaze (of Vernet), but further about understanding the origins of machine vision and its evolution towards autonomous systems of image making. The work - no longer simply an image - is a material work of art that went through the idea of digitization and has transformed to a new concretization. Perhaps in thinking through the device of fabrication one can reach another level of understanding around the operative logic.

The continued colonization of future ways of seeing by biased AI systems poses significant challenges for the decolonization of

9 *Windows on the West* was first exhibited in the 14th century Hall of Moheb al-Den Abu al-Tayeb in the heart of historic Cairo (UNESCO World Heritage listed), situated next to the Egyptian Textile Museum, the only museum of the Middle East devoted to the history of textiles. The work later became part of a solo exhibition, "When I See the Future, I Close My Eyes, Chapter II" (2022) at Zilberman Berlin Gallery (curated by Anthony Downey) which addressed the history and future of image-making technologies and post-digital models of representation. The work is now part of the permanent collection of the photography department of Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris, purchased for the exhibition *Mondes photographiques, histoires des débuts* (2023) curated by Christine Barthe and Annabelle Lacour.



Windows on the West, 2019. Hand-woven Jacquard textile, recycled yarn 135 x 250 cm. Installation view, Zilberman Berlin Gallery. Photo courtesy of CHROMA.



Windows on the West, 2019. Detail. Hand-woven Jacquard textile, recycled yarn 135 x 250 cm. Installation view, Zilberman Berlin Gallery. Photo courtesy of CHROMA.

aesthetics, particularly when data sets work at a scale far beyond human interpretation. Deconstructing Oriental stereotypes in the Western museological context is no longer only about critically engaging with and subverting the colonial narratives and power dynamics embedded in Orientalist representations. There is much more at stake. We must interrogate the design of digital technologies that contribute to cyber-colonialism and ‘digital Orientalism’ – meaning the reproduction and persistence of Orientalist ideologies and power dynamics within the digital realm. It is not surprising that, across cultural institutions, the decolonial discourse has proven insufficient and largely performative, since we have failed to tackle a fundamental problem: the reverse engineering of systems built in the first place through the exploitation of others. In order to re-examine historical artworks, artifacts, and exhibitions through a decolonial lens, and so challenge the Orientalist gaze traditionally dominant in Western museums, we must better understand the techno-politics through which they were founded.

At the moment, seeing how cultural actors regurgitate similar language constructs, which limit our ways of thinking on the decolonization of institutions, we must ask ourselves: how effective our work is in creating solutions? Are we not perpetuating the same problematic dynamics, when the accountability of institutions is contingent on marginalized people confronting their own traumas? We need quality thinking within the social fabric to collectively imagine the construction of solidarity, beyond maintenance of cultural memory and reparation of harms. At this urgent moment, we can no longer do the dirty work of morality at a distance. We need to think and work through the very apparatuses that have reinforced such inequalities.

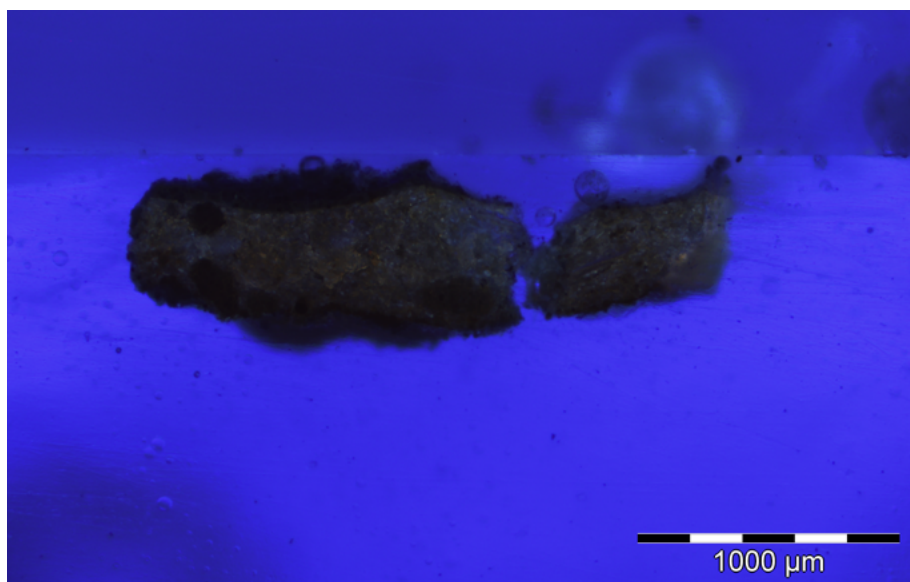
Buddha¹⁰ On the Move

A conversation on methodologies of investigation, conservation and restoration, moderated by the Museum of Asian Art of Turin, with 'La Venaria Reale' Center for Conservation and Restoration and the Department of Applied Science and Technology of the Politecnico di Torino (DISAT-PoliTO)

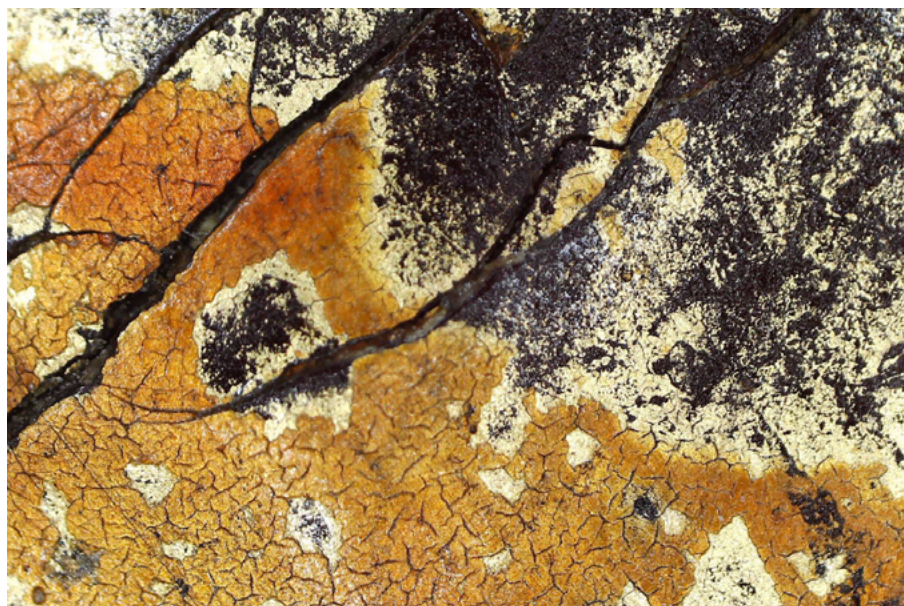
In 2022 the Museum of Asian Art (MAO), together with 'La Venaria Reale' Center for Conservation and Restoration (CCR) and the Politecnico di Torino (DISAT-PoliTO), began a process of analysis and conservation-restoration of a group of seven wooden sculptures of Chinese provenance from the Museum's permanent collection, dated to the 16th-18th centuries. These votive and ritual objects, depicting Buddha, Bodhisattva, Guanyin and Luohan, were programmed for display in the exhibition *Buddha¹⁰: A Fragmented Display on Buddhist Visual Evolution* (MAO, Turin, 19 October 2022 - 3 September 2023). Subsequently, the Museum of Civilizations in Rome (MuCiv) also entered the collaboration, interested in the analyses and investigation of several works from their collections that were featured in the exhibition: a sculpture of a seated Buddha; a standing Guanyin; a group of ten bronze votive sculptures from the Auriti collection.

The aims of this analysis and study program are: to strengthen the skills system for the conservation and fruition of collections of Asian arts and cultures (public and private), with particular reference to technical-scientific knowledge on materials, techniques of execution, conservation and restoration methodologies; to advance understandings of their cultural values, and to elaborate narrative, exhibition and educational strategies.

The approach to the restoration, evaluated and studied also with the Superintendency of Archeology, Fine Arts and Landscape for the City of Turin, in particular with Valeria Moratti, brought to light complex issues around investigation techniques and conservation and restoration methodologies. During the restoration phases, planned in constant dialogue with the Museum, its curators and conservators, the importance of the emotional component emerged, and together with scientific and art-historical knowledge, this influenced the choices on the kinds of interventions. With the support of art-historical studies the project traced the original production of the sculptures but also, and with more



Seated Buddha in Dhyānamudrā, China (Fujian)
16th-17th c. Ming DYNasty. Sculpted, lacquered and gilded wood; blue pigment, 117 x 79 x 74 cm. Museo delle Civiltà, Roma, ex inv. MPE 80217. Indagine stratigrafica, dettagli dei capelli, realizzata dal Centro di Conservazione e Restauro "La Venaria Reale", 2023, Turin.



Seated Buddha in Dhyānamudrā, China (Fujian)
16th-17th c. Ming DYNasty. Sculpted, lacquered and gilded wood; blue pigment, 117 x 79 x 74 cm. Museo delle Civiltà, Roma, ex inv. MPE 80217. Immagine video microscopio, realizzata dal Centro di Conservazione e Restauro "La Venaria Reale", 2023, Turin.

certainty, their subsequent circulation, testifying to their artistic quality and fleshing out their complex histories. This approach, in turn, encouraged reflection on the very concept of “collecting” Buddhist objects in Europe from the second half of the 19th century, inquiring into the influence of Western culture, aesthetic outlook and values on the selection, purchase and circulation of these sculptures: originally votive and for religious sites. What emerged was the importance of consciousness on these issues in the management, presentation and fruition of such cultural testimonies, aimed at imaginary preserving their integrity and in these regards, fostering deeper public understanding.

MAO: How to intervene, given our Western context, in restoration of artefacts of Asian origin? Which methodologies should be used? Is a “conservative” approach advisable, limiting intervention and leaving visible the traces of history? How should we deal with restorations carried out over the years and resulting as layers of time on the works? These are some questions that emerged, and although we would not arrive at unequivocal answers, they did stimulate reflection on how we might deconstruct the “Orientalist” view of objects of Asian origin. Which steps in this process were more meaningful for the CCR and Polytechnic, the most difficult in choosing an approach, most relevant?

CCR e DISAT-PoliTO: From the very beginning, confronted with works of this type, this emphasized the common perception of a clear contrast between East and West, both because of a profound difference in symbolic meanings and given the ethical and methodological implications linked with restoration processes. In the West, we have more the idea of minimal intervention and reversibility of treatments, when instead, traditional Eastern reconstructive practice aims at maintaining integrity of the symbolic and religious significance of the works. That’s a dichotomy also evident in the methods and materials of intervention: in Europe strongly favoring scientific and experimental approaches, but instead in Oriental practice, adopting materials and skills traceable to traditional manufacture. This project led us to reflect on the fusion of Western and Eastern processes and practices, with the common thread of consolidating the state of the works in the most appropriate and valorizing manner, aimed above all at restoring the knowledge of the artefacts. The preliminary meetings with specialists in the fields of execution techniques, artistic production and Buddhist visual culture helped greatly in understanding the functions and iconographies

of the objects. Also, we began to see that the study of artefacts of Buddhist culture generally concentrates on their circulation within Asia. Instead, there's been favoring little evaluation of their modification since entering European circulation, which often happened in response to aesthetics suiting Western tastes, and specifically to attract collectors. Another very challenging idea is that from an Eastern perspective, the layering of pictorial materials is representative of a specific culture in memory and practice, an integral part of the intangible cultural heritage, and so comparable to the Western concept of "original" material.

The cognitive analyses descending from such thinking were indispensable in discriminating the historical phases succeeding one another in the work, in expanding knowledge on the specificities of execution techniques, and supporting assessments of authenticity. These approaches offer better guidance on treatment, and contribute to interpretation of transformations through time, starting with the changes of function: from devotional works, to works in private collections, to museum works.

MAO: The Polytechnic led the preliminary 3D photogrammetric analysis under visible, ultraviolet and infrared light, assembling a 360° view of the works and their details. With chemical analyses and x-ray imaging, we also probed their internal structures.¹ These studies stimulated our reflections on the entire concept of "collecting", highlighting how an often "exoticizing" gaze has influenced the presence of these sculptures, originally votive and for religious and sacred places, within Western museums, and their transformations for reasons of taste. We could delve into their individual histories, identifying stylistic modifications that accompanied changes in function or taste, and restorations descending from environmental and climatic conditions that had not been suited to their preservation. In these analyses and studies, technical-scientific skills intertwined with historical-artistic skills. Could you elaborate on this "choral" approach to the work? For example, which technologies proved most significant?

CCR, DISAT-PoliTO: Given the complexity of the study and the specifics of the objects, we needed to call on different professional profiles and investigative techniques, not only from within

¹ For further information on the main techniques of scientific investigation <https://www.centrorestaurovenaria.it/en/laboratories/diagnostics>



Detail of the Auriti Collection, Museo delle Civiltà.
3D model, VIS, realized by the Applied Sciences and Technology
Dept. of the Politecnico di Torino (DISAT-PoliTO),
2023, Turin.



Guanyin (*bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara),
Northern China, 10th-12th c.
Liao Dynasty. Wood, 124 x 28 x 23 cm.
Museo delle Civiltà, Roma, ex inv. MNAO
208. UV image, 2023, realized by the
Centro di Conservazione e Restauro
“La Venaria Reale”, 2023, Turin.

MAO, CCR and the Politecnico. We also reached out to the network of experts in Chinese Buddhist production: this especially helped us direct the in-depth investigations in consideration of the symbolic and iconographic aspects, and focus on the peculiarities of the original painting technique.

Multi-spectral photogrammetry, close observation and point-focused chemical analyses proved fundamental in understanding the materials used and the transformations occurring through time. One of the great challenges was in understanding the polychrome decorations of the sculptures, given the irregular distribution of the pictorial materials, the way they overlap one another, and the contrasts in colors. We could detect certain parts redone, traceable to the second half of the 19th century and later. Hypothetically, these successions of painting phases can be traced to changing tastes, or attempted remedying of specific problems. On most of the works analyzed, for example, the microscopic work revealed signs of a previous biological attack: fungi that had penetrated into the paint layers and caused significant embrittlement.

We also identified an intermediate, monochrome brownish decorative phase, most likely an application after the pieces entered circulation on the European market, perhaps to suit the tastes of Western collectors. Given the preliminary information we had acquired on the techniques of construction, we could discriminate between pre- and post-19th century productions. Also the x-ray imaging analyses, 2D and 3D, proved essential in locating these works chronologically. As we “inspected” the sculpture interiors, we could detect significant differences in the assembly systems and the number of wooden blocks used, and also gain information on their current state of preservation.

MAO: Towards the end of the *Buddha*¹⁰ exhibition our thoughts went to several works on loan from the Museum of Civilizations: a Seated Buddha; a sculpture depicting Guanyin standing; a group of ten votive bronze sculptures from the Auriti collection.² Together with the curators, the decision was made to carry out some analyses on these works.

The results of are presented in the exhibition *EUR_Asia* at the Museum of Civilizations. Surprising data emerged from some of the images, revealing the presence of previously unknown elements within the sculptures: for example the round metal object

2 Respectively: inv. MPE 80217; inv. MPE 80217; inv. 625, 631, 659, 650, 667, 669, 670, 695, 708, 710.

identified by x-ray inside the sculpture of the seated Buddha. Apart from this special case, what kinds of elements can be detected with these kinds of analysis, and what stood out most in the studies? For example a sample was taken from the Guanyin sculpture, for Carbon 14 analysis:³ how would this support more precise dating of the original production?

CCR, DISAT-Polito: For the study of the Seated Buddha (inv. MPE 802170) we drew on specialists at the Polytechnic, expert in 3D multispectral models. This was part of what we call a “cognitive campaign”, aimed at understanding the wooden structure and characterizing the materials of the surface decoration. The tomographic analysis⁴ revealed the assembly using a limited number of blocks, a characteristic compatible with the reference chronology (16th-17th century, late Ming dynasty). The wooden blocks, hollowed out internally – possibly to reduce the overall weight – were assembled solely by joinery work and connecting elements. We were fascinated by the revelation of two internal cavities, oriented horizontally. In the upper we see a circular metal element of around 10-15 cm, constrained, but the function of the lower cavity is still difficult to understand. The metal elements yield a strongly radiopaque response, and thanks to this we can also identify a smaller planar element of circular shape positioned below the Buddha’s hands, and highlight the use of metal foils for the creation of the figure’s lips and eyes.

The materials used in decorating the sculpture include clays, mixed with substantial amounts of starch, in preparation for both the hair and the gold decoration: again a feature compatible with decoration techniques of the Chinese area. 3D modelling is a tool used for in-depth documentation of the state of preservation of a work, of its use, and also to support diagnostic analyses and restoration work. We developed a 3D multispectral model using visible, ultraviolet and infrared radiation: the virtual replication with UV was especially important in identifying different materials.

3 The C¹⁴ radiocarbon method provides radiometric dating of organic material based on the measurement of relative abundances of the radioactive isotope carbon-14. Among “absolute” dating methods, the measurement of residual concentrations of C¹⁴ is very well known and widely applied. For further information, see the website of the Laboratory of Nuclear Techniques for the Environment and Cultural Heritage and measurement the Department of Physics and Astronomy of the University of Florence, which carried out the analyses on the Guanyin sculpture (ex inv. MNAO 208) <https://web.infn.it/labec/en/elementor-111/cultural-heritage/>

4 Computed tomography with x-rays (acronyms TAC, or CT): digital x-rays can be produced even for large works.

An example is the identification of an element attributable to the lacquer family, laid on top of the gilding, with the distribution clearly revealed in the UV reflectography (UVR) acquisitions. Thanks to this, we can readily distinguish the areas of characterizing presence and absence of that layer. Again, thanks to the 3D model in false-color infrared reflectography, we were able to identify the use of different blue pigments in the Buddha's hair, confirmed by point-focused chemical analyses.

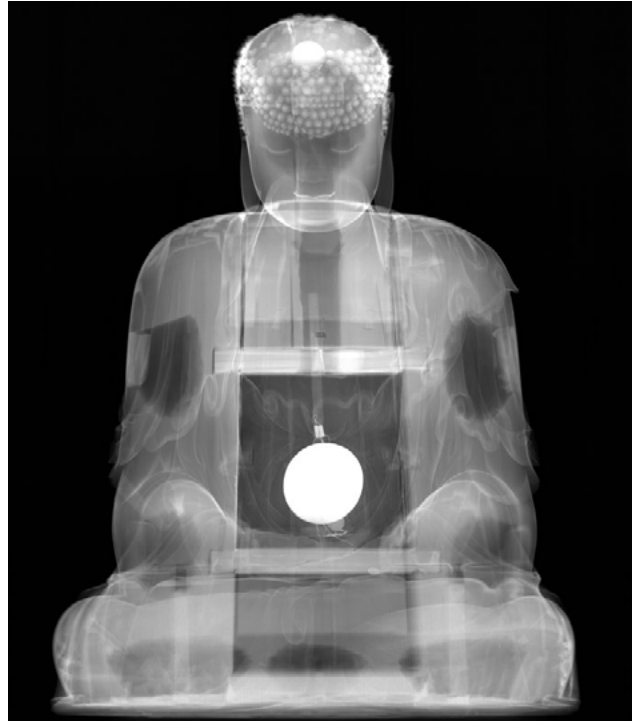
X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analyses on the group of ten bronze votive sculptures from the Auriti collection (Inv. 625, 631, 659, 650, 667, 669, 670, 695, 708, 710) enabled identification of the elemental composition of the sculptures, and the Raman spectroscopy supported detection of any corrosion products present on the surfaces. The analyses identified the composition of the metal alloy used in producing the sculptures: a copper-lead-tin based alloy, with traces of iron, silver and zinc. Furthermore, for the six sculptures showing partial or total gilding, the analyses showed the presence of mercury on the surfaces: this is revelatory, as it identifies the use of the amalgam technique of gilding. Finally, we could detect the color presence of various corrosion products of red and blue-green colors, identifying these respectively as cuprite and atacamite or clinoatacamite. On the seated Buddha (inv. 667), we found the particular presence of rouaite, a mineral product formed under exposure of the metal surface to high heat, consistent with the execution of the "fire" technique of amalgam gilding. In fact what happened was that the artisans first spread the amalgam on the surface and then, applying high temperatures, promoted complete evaporation of the mercury, resulting in a shiny and brilliant gilding.

In the interests of documenting the state of preservation, we also developed the 3D visible-light model of the Bodhisattva in "mediating prince" posture (inv. 708), and the 3D visible and UV-fluorescence model of the seated Buddha (inv. 667), both of the bronze votive series.

Given the wooden structure of the statue of Guanyin, Bodhisattva of Compassion (formerly inv. MNAO 208), this meant we could carry out radiocarbon dating, with support from the LABEC laboratory of the CHNet-INFN network.⁵

4 LABEC: Laboratory of nuclear techniques for Environment and Cultural Heritage. CHNet-INFN: the network of laboratories of the Institution of Nuclear Physics (INFN), dedicated to technology transfer in the study of Cultural Heritage.

What we found was that the work most probably dates to the 1500s, or in any case between the end of the 1400s and the first half of the 1600s. From macroscopic observation of the features of the support, although heavily eroded and compromised by decay, we can also identify the wood used in carving the figure: it appears to be *Paulownia* sp., a species native to China and other Asian countries.



Seated Buddha in *dhyānamudrā*, China (Fujian)
16th-17th c. Ming Dynasty. Sculpted, lacquered
and gilded wood; blue pigment , 117 x 79 x 74 cm
Museo delle Civiltà, Roma ex inv. MPE 80217.
CT image, realized by the Centro di
Conservazione e Restauro “La Venaria Reale”,
2023, Turin.



Seated Buddha in *dhyānamudrā*, China (Fujian)
16th-17th c. Ming Dynasty. Sculpted, lacquered and
gilded wood; blue pigment ; 117 x 79 x 74 cm. Museo
delle Civiltà, Roma ex inv. MPE 80217.
3D model, UVFC, realized by the Applied Sciences
and Technology Dept. of the Politecnico
di Torino (DISAT-PoliTO), 2023, Turin.

The Museum of Civilizations as an Octopus

A conversation between Gala Porras-Kim and Matteo Lucchetti

Gala Porras-Kim's installation *A Recollection Returns with a Soft Touch* is the result of the artist's work since 2022, during her Research Fellowship at the Museum of Civilizations. Over these two years, the artist delved into the cataloging systems of the various collections and placed them in relation to the biographies of the individual objects, reconceiving the collections as living entities endowed with their own intrinsic subjectivity developed over time and space in relation to their original contexts, functions, and meanings, as well as the interpretations given by the museum institution.

By tracing the history of the materials and techniques used in the creation of these object-subjects and reconstructing the different cultural ancestries and histories that survive their interpretation in the museum institution, Porras-Kim brings to light the dichotomy between their origins – within diverse ritual contexts – and the inequity of the Western's orientalist gaze in re-signifying them as museum objects. Porras-Kim recontextualizes the objects and, in doing so, conveys the processes that led to their entry to the collections, observes their material and immaterial transformations, and shares the knowledge that enabled their preservation, focusing on what she calls the “conservation anxiety” of the curators.

In *A Recollection Returns with a Soft Touch*, the artist asked permission of the staff who care for the collections of the former National Museum of Oriental Art to film them as they presented some objects to which they are particularly attached, whether for professional or personal reasons. Their stories are presented within the same showcases that house the objects, thus giving the words, memories, and sensibilities of the curators/conservators a rare visibility – different from the official, seemingly neutral, and impartial Museum voice. By asking to respond personally, the work breaks the illusion that historical objects can be treated solely scientifically to forefront the authors of the way we understand the past. In the videos, only the hands are visible as the objects in the collection are handled as these stories are told, giving them a phantasmal aspect, as if they were apparitions of the many lives the objects in the collection have lived. The gesture of giving materiality to these multiple interpretations sub-

stances the idea that it's possible to activate a sensible relation with all museum collections – since in these there also coexist the lives and stories of those who have ensured their existence and preservation over time. In the following conversation, the Museum of Civilizations Contemporary Arts and Cultures Curator, Matteo Lucchetti, discusses with Gala Porras Kim her artistic practice and the process of making *A Recollection Returns with a Soft Touch*.

Matteo Lucchetti: My first question relates to your artistic practice, and specifically to how you have decided to deepen your knowledge around many kinds of museums – mostly encyclopedic, ethnographic, and academic ones; those built through the Western lenses of creating narratives around the world's cultural objects. You developed a methodology that departs from the act of recognizing, within mainstream narratives, a certain degree of framing of objects and materialities belonging to the people who did not have a part in that framing. Given such a start, have you ever considered that your work could become a tool to liberate objects from their captivating framing?

Gala Porras-Kim: I think that many museums feel similar, but they're all actually very different. The way in which they approach the challenges people inherit from the past, because the collection is accumulated its particular way for a long time usually, is actually quite different per institution, and feeling the collection's specific personality is what I like when looking into institutions. To do so is to look at the registration, conservation, or the way in which the display is made, and also how distant is the mission of the museum vs the reality of how its run. The existing methodology doesn't have the flexibility to incorporate all the contexts in which historical material existed, so everybody has to figure out a loophole, a way of dealing with real problems in this strict and narrow institutional framework. Museums think they can be objective, but there's so much subjectivity in dealing with these impractical questions – like how to keep things forever or how to tell a true story of the past. There's no way to do that in this narrow space. Part of the work is to recognize the subjectivity behind these decisions.

ML: How do you feel about the idea that your work might, or might not, liberate objects from these very specific and situated methodological solutions?

GPK: I don't think in terms of liberating them, but of making them denser. The object has existed without the museum but right now it just happens to be inside of it. Some historical objects have been operating in the context in which they existed before they were in the museum, and so just because now they are in the historical collection it doesn't mean that that function stops. Museums are temporary containers, and collective stories are happening simultaneously inside them. They don't cancel each other out. The issue is when an institution presents it to the public in a singular way, just as a historical object when it's actually all these multiple layers. It's historical, but it's also the thing before, it's a part of nature, and it's also in context with humans or the environment. It's all these things collectively. So, I'm not necessarily liberating the objects, but recognizing that these materials are part of other worlds.

ML: You mentioned that in your work what gets revealed is the subjectivity at play in every museum and the «anxiety of the conservator» is perhaps one of the motors with which your work gets started. Can you elaborate on this element of anxiety in connection to the relationships you establish with museums' curators and conservators?

GPK: I think that anxiety might exist because curators, conservators, and registrars already know that there is a conflict between the way they practice their job and the care of objects in a collection beyond its materiality. Visitors can't see that there is a subjective interpretation of many of the decisions they have to make. Wood has its own specific scientific and conservation needs, but the object itself is not only just its material – yes, it is physically wood, but the wood is just kind of the container of other cultural information, manifested through the shape. How does this cultural part get preserved? That's the curators' job, to negotiate that past history with their own interpretation.

ML: You told me about growing up within the academic background of your parents, that you used to play with them cataloging daily objects, and how this familiarity with the foundational act of museum-making makes you think of your work as a sort of academic research through images and visual materials. I would speculate that your artistic practice creates loopholes in what academia considers out of the line and not acceptable by a peer-review methodology. How do you stay at peace with the idea that your work could be also seen as academic research? Can you make a comparison between the two? Where do you see the

similarities and the discrepancies?

GP: I think this question falls under the type of cataloging. What people think the limit of both academic research and art making might be: people have different expectations towards what is academic and what is not. To me, those are not set boundaries at all. I came up in a Western institutional sphere, and it's been a real struggle to learn, unlearn, and relax some of my expectations of what things need to look like to be inside this boundary. But when you think about the amount of knowledge that exists outside of the institution, you ask yourself why, how come it is not integrated, like for example learning history through oral traditions is a very different and democratic way of passing information, but why do we prioritize learning with books over oral traditions? It's about relaxing the shape of what the information and the packaging should be. What is the essential part? Is it the actual information or the way it's presented? When I started making works, I presented a lot of them at academic conferences. I thought that the art field has the widest boundary, but it still feels like people put a boundary where there is supposed to be no boundary at all. To make artistic research fit in an academic setting is very difficult, because it has to hit all of these requirements. I made a lot of projects within academic institutions because I want the long-term structure to approach the research in a different way. There's the shape of information, like a tunnel, and outside of it there you have to make it up.

ML: I like the image of relaxing the given shape, stretching it to enlarge the points of view.

GP: I think that academics are also stretching the shape all the time. They're finding loopholes, using terms that other people will recognize, so it doesn't look like a loophole when it definitely is. It's the same with the law, it feels strict, but it's actually very subjective. You can move the rules all the time if you know how the institution works. When I'm in the studio, my material is the museum, the institution, or the collection, and I try to learn its qualities and how it moves, similar to material tests in other mediums.

ML: When you first visited the Museo delle Civiltà, you thought you were coming to one museum, and instead you experienced a museum made of museums where entirely different ways of cataloging were clashing with one another. Sometimes they were not even making any sense, or they were showing holes in the

way they didn't connect with this idea of the catalog as the museum's infrastructure. What was your first impression when you approached the museum and realized the materiality with which this museum has been shaped?

GPK: What I thought particular about the museum was that it felt really fragmented because many of these collections are still separated within the museum. Museums everywhere are made of different collections, but over time they get sort of homogenized and absorbed into a singular-looking new shape, a new collection. It's like the provenance of your collections has been updated, but you can still see the particularities of each one of the previous collections that constitute it. It felt like it was still unresolved, like a time capsule where you can still recognize the particular personalities of each of the sections of the museum because it hasn't been fully merged into the idea or vision that it would become one collection. It feels like an octopus where different sections are, in theory, attached to a central place, which I think is not even there yet. It's just legs without the center. But even though the collections are not linked through a collective catalog, they are linked materially through the conservation department that cuts across all the sections materially.

ML: The next step from this first overview was to work specifically on the National Oriental Collection. How and why did you decide that the work would be about asking the curators or the conservators about their favorite objects, the ones they were more attached to?

GPK: I think that conservators always have to think so scientifically that when you ask them something subjective, it's often difficult to answer. The project is based on asking curators and conservators in the museum to find their favorite object, whether they worked with that material or taught something about it. I wanted to capture them telling the reason why they personally connect with the object as well as them handling it, because conservators are the only people who physically intervene in the work so they try to be very objective and really only use a scientific touch. But as they were describing the objects, you can actually start to recognize their very personal touch. The conservator, who's supposed to touch the object scientifically, is now touching it very subjectively and talking about the relationship with that material, in contrast with the general work of their day-to-day separate and neutral voice.

ML: Were there any anecdotes that came out of their storytelling that you remember or that particularly struck your interest?

GPK: Conservators had their emotional connection to the specific object, which was the premise of the work, but their willingness or hesitation made the project for real, because they were asked to step out of their daily work. I liked not only their individual anecdotes, but especially the emotional jump to acknowledging that their touch is attached to their own specific subjectivity and body.

I think that the touch itself is very meaningful. In Italy, there are a lot of gestural moves, so I wanted the touch to actually be recognized because through it we can recognize the move from an institution to an individual, and how those two things exist in the same body. The way an object is handled scientifically versus the way an object is handled emotionally is so different.

What I was also thinking about with the hands was when you see such an old object, you can imagine so many different generations like ghost hands touching it in a very similar way. When people see the object in a museum, that's what they might also imagine. How did someone use this object or how was it interacted with? One of the most jarring breaks in its story is that nobody's touching it anymore – like a bowl that someone drank from it every day, and all of a sudden it's in a vitrine, not being touched at all except by mainly a conservator. In that sense, from the objects' point of view, something that has been handled so often and is integral to this other non-historical version of its existence can only be partially reenacted through the institutional handling.

ML: Indeed. The ghostly element has occurred in other works of yours, not only for this idea that the cultural object has been separated from its daily use but also for the idea that the object is subjective in itself. My last question is a funny one: how many ghosts have you encountered in your work and what kind of relationship did you establish with them, if you did?

GPK: I think that ghosts are infinite. I like to think that everybody who has ever been alive except us is dead. This, in a way to quantify the amount of ghosts that might exist. Plants can be ghosts; animals, when they die, also become ghosts since we don't know the technicalities of what constitutes one. I think it depends greatly on the definition of what a ghost might be – and that is again a cataloging question. It's more like a ghost vs

an immortal thing that is supposed to do something forever. A ghost feels like it retains the particular attributes of a past time, where as an immortal being is always incorporating its contemporary definition as part of itself.



Gala Porras-Kim, *A recollection returns with a soft touch*, 2024, still from video.
Courtesy the artist.

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curated by

Davide Quadrio, Anna Musini
with Francesca Filisetti (MAO);
Andrea Viliani (MuCiv)

Texts

Heba Y. Amin, Francesca Filisetti, Mariko Murata,
Anna Musini, Davide Quadrio, Andrea Viliani

Conversations

MAO Museo d'Arte Orientale, Fondazione Centro di Conservazione
e Restauro "La Venaria Reale", Dipartimento di Scienza Applicata
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Matteo Lucchetti, Gala Porras-Kim

Managing Editor

Vittoria Pavesi with Caterina Venafro

Translations

Clara Ciccioni, Neal Putt

Graphic Design

Andrea Pizzalis

