

Sharing Collections and Presenting Cultural Heritage in Asian-European Exchange

ASEMUS conference 'Marketplace of Museums'

Asian Art >
General

An important event, in both the arts world and museum sphere, the first workshop meetings of the ASEMUS (Asia- Europe Museum) network were held during a conference in Leiden, from 10 to 14 April this year. The workshops were set up to bring together museum professionals from the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) countries to discuss topics that merit cooperation in museum activities. As a cooperation platform for Europe and Asia, the ASEM countries include the fifteen EU member states and ten Asian nations (seven ASEAN members, China, Korea and Japan). The workshops were in fact discussion platforms to develop specific activities, such as information exchange, technical assistance and exhibitions. During a three-day period, each of the five working groups set out to develop a programme for future workshops.

By Ken Vos

The meetings were held in the National Museum of Ethnology (NME, Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde) and were co-hosted by the National Museum of the Philippines and the National Museum of Ethnology. Registration for participants was semi-open, meaning that both the ASEMUS Executive Committee and the co-hosts recommended a number of chairpersons, speakers and invited participants, whereas the remainder of the allotted places, about one hundred in total, was filled by outside applicants, the majority of course from the Netherlands. This method was chosen so that of the ASEM member countries as many as possible were represented, while at the same time, discussions could take place effectively and efficiently with the participation of experienced discussants and potential stakeholders.

Of the five workshops that were set up, the first and fourth workshops are described here in greater detail. At the start of the conference it was not clear how effectively these workshops would be, much depending on the input of individual participants and their specific socio-political environments. As the participants, apart from the local organizers and the chairpersons, were free to choose any workshop in which to participate, the composition of each was

fluid. After the first day of sessions, however, it became apparent that the majority of the participants became core members of their respective workshops. This relatively informal setting was conducive to freewheeling discussions in a relaxed atmosphere, as was remarked by many participants. In most cases, the first few sessions were used for presentations on related subjects, introductions, determining definitions, and formulating goals.

For the first workshop, originally called 'Scattered collections of Asian minorities', short presentations were given by a number of distinguished people from museums and academia. During the discussions following the presentations it soon became apparent that the term 'minorities' was a scientifically inaccurate and politically inappropriate term. For one thing, a national ethnic minority can be a locally dominant ethnicity. In the official policies of a country such as Indonesia, for instance, no minorities or majorities are differentiated, so no special status can be derived from association with an ethnic group. The term 'minority' might also imply local hierarchies. Also, it was concluded that whereas 'collections' could be a starting point for the discussions, intangible cultural heritage, such as music, dance, oral traditions and knowledge, should be taken into consideration as well. After

ample discussion it was decided to rename the workshop 'Research and development of scattered collections in ASEMUS partner countries'. This was defined as the systematic study, management and use of heritage resources from Asia that are scattered in European and Asian museums.

Frameworks for Pilot Projects

Several strategies for this purpose were formulated. It was proposed that the sharing of information should be done through community development, communication networks, standardization of documentation and contributions towards cultural heritage management. It was decided to choose a limited number of pilot project proposals to comply with a set number of criteria and principles. Apart from evident management and evaluation considerations, these criteria also stipulate that communities must benefit from such projects through electronic repatriation and the stimulation of cultural revival. Another important criteria is that of cultural diversity, such as in race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation, taking into account the realities of contemporary multicultural societies. In this context, the term 'multicultural' denotes several cultural roots in a social setting, not just ethnicities, such as in urban environments, as

opposed to trying to understand societies as isolated, homogeneous communities. Four examples of frameworks have been formulated for such pilot projects to be submitted to the ASEMUS board before 30 June 2002.

As a first potential framework, the National Museum of the Philippines and the Ethnology Museum of Hamburg might partner as lead museums to be regional hubs for their respective continental partners. The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology may also act as a focus for connecting scattered collections in Europe and Asia. A third potential focus will be on a specific region: the scattered collections from the islands of West of Sumatra. Finally, another proposed project is the study of multicultural heritage resources on Macau, the Philippines with Lisbon, Portugal as a field site. Due to political implications, definite actors for the proposals could not be fixed. By 1 September 2002, the preliminary proposals should be reviewed to be finalized for submission before the next workshop meeting in Copenhagen in autumn 2002.

Travelling Exhibition(s)

The fourth workshop, 'Travelling exhibition on Asian perceptions of Europe and European perceptions on Asia' was composed of short presentations on intercultural exhibitions. Further incentives for discussion were the papers presented during the plenary sessions by Yoshida and Sandahl who had been invited speakers.

Following Sandahl's proposal for an intercultural exhibition, the relationship and unity of the human body and mind was taken as a basic concept for further development. Two main points of discussion were raised concerning this concept. First that the conceptual separation of body and mind is a basically European approach, and would be difficult for Asian audiences understand. A term such as 'the human condition' would also embrace mind and body as undifferentiated aspects. Second, cultural similarities rather than differences would be emphasized when developing this concept. This theme would be best developed by creating sub-themes that would act as modules for the exhibition. The main focus would therefore be on the further development of these (sub-)themes or modules. These modules would create flexible logistics for setting up travelling exhibitions, as these would make it possible to break up the complete exhibition into parts to be adapted to smaller venues and particular display conditions.

Exhibition Themes

Many ideas came up during the discussions for selecting interesting object categories, such as individualism and sociality, geomancy, physical and psychological comfort, concept of time, food etc. These were partly elaborated in six provisional modules or themes: (1) portraiture, (2) living spaces, (3) spirituality, (4) well-being and health, (5) sexuality and (6) the symbolic body.

These modules are not finalized and not arranged in any hierarchical order and may be dropped or make room for newly developed ones. The modules may make up one single or two large exhibitions to be held in larger venues, for example, one with European material in Asia and one with Asian material in Europe. One single exhibition with objects from both regions would also be a possibility. The separately displayed modules would be supported by the same catalogue and website in at least the dominant local language(s), which might include a virtual exhibition. There is a distinct Asian market for impressive objects in the 'masterpiece' category. On the other hand, such an exhibition should not focus too much on tradition. Naturally, such a project cannot not be restricted to the persons and institutions participating at this conference.

Targets, Funding and Time Frame

At an early stage provisional venues should be selected. For this purpose, a synopsis of the exhibition and its constituent modules must be produced by September 2002. For this purpose, the concept and its modules should be further developed through discussion. One way of proceeding is an electronic questionnaire with open questions to all the participants of the conference. Those who are interested in contributing, or who know suitable specialists on these intercultural topics, are invited to contact the local organizer (at the e-mail listed below). At the same time, preliminary suggestions of the objects to be shown should be formulated with summaries for each theme. A paper noting possible funding sources should accompany these documents. When the project in any form is considered to be sustainable by the ASEMUS committee, a team of curators and other specialists must be identified and appointed by autumn 2003, when the workshop meets next in Shanghai. Also, a draft text and images, a first selection of objects and object types must be ready by then. A designer or designer team must be appointed, a business plan also needs to be produced for this meeting.

Considering the progress that was made in all of the workshops which constituted the ASEMUS conference, it must be concluded that at least a number of practical collaborative and intercultural projects will eventually materialize. The atmosphere of intellectual openness and the willingness of many parties to forge new relationships on several levels may mean that ASEMUS as a museum network will be a sustainable proposition with long-term positive effects. In ideological terms, it may be that relations between Asian and European museums become more symmetric and therefore mutually beneficial. ◀

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Group of ancestor statues, wood and rattan, Nias, h 24-35 cm, before 1894.

National Museum of Ethnology, inv.no. 1002-172