

Presentation 2

From #culturedoesntstop to #openbutsafe and Back Again Activating the Japanese Collection at the MK&G

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Profile

Wibke SCHRAPE is Head of the East Asian Collection at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (MK&G). She worked as assistant curator at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin (2015–17) and functioned as assistant professor for Japanese art at the Institute of Art History, Freie Universität Berlin (2008–12). In 2018, she completed her dissertation on *Ikeda Koson (1803–68) and the Order of Images: Artistic and Art Historical Constructions of Rinpa* at FU Berlin. Recent publications include *From Japonisme to Japanese Art History: Trading, Collecting, and Promoting Japanese Art in Europe (1873–1914)*, *Toward the Future: Museums and Art History in East Asia* (2020, 83-92), and *Inky Bytes: Traces of Ink in the Digital Era* (2018).

Presentation

The MK&G is currently in its second closure since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and will potentially remain closed until the first quarter of 2021. Even with these challenges, we are fortunate to have a resilient community and are confident that visitors will return to our galleries, though concerns about economic, social, and cultural repercussions remain. Along with the health threats of COVID-19 and the consequences of the lockdowns, in many ways the pandemic has served as a magnifying glass amplifying the challenges museums are facing today.



Fig. 1a: Tea set curated by Christoph Peters, Christoph Peters Collection



Fig. 1b: Tea set for *usucha* in summer curated by the local Urasenke tea school group

Even before the pandemic, the focus of my work as a curator of the East Asian collection had shifted from exhibitions to projects that include exhibitions. The exhibition *Among Friends: Japanese Tea Ceramics* is, for instance, part of a three-year project to digitize the East Asian collection at the MK&G sponsored by the Zeit-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius. More than 700 Japanese ceramics were digitized in this project and will be published in the MKG Online Collection in the upcoming months.

The exhibition *Among Friends* focused on the relationships that grow around and out of the use of tea ceramics. As a matter of fact, a friendship between two Japan enthusiasts lies at the bottom of the tea ceramics collection in Hamburg: The MK&G founding director, Justus Brinckmann (1843–1915), acquired large parts of the tea ceramics collection from the art dealer S. Bing (1838–1905). Exchanges about tea ceramics and their production also formed the basis for the friendship between the ceramist Jan Kollwitz (b. 1960) and the writer, chajin, and collector Christoph Peters (b. 1966). I invited them both, as well as the local Urasenke tea school group that practices chanoyu in the MK&G’s Shōseian tea house to co-curate the exhibition. Jan Kollwitz and Christoph Peters cooperated in this project not only with their expertise but also with pieces from their ceramics production and collection. As a result, *Among Friends* was actually a much wider and open-minded exhibition that did not focus on wabi tea, or modern tea ceramics, but included a couple of different tastes and approaches to this specific topic of Japanese tea ceramics. The Urasenke tea school group and Christoph Peters also composed sets for drinking tea and explained about their different approaches in texts (Fig. 1).

The exhibition also included a small tatami space where people could sit down to touch and handle Japanese tea bowls (Fig. 2). We acquired seven tea bowls worth collecting for this hands-on station that were inventoried after the exhibition. Visitors were extremely careful and enjoyed handling the tea bowls in the exhibition. By cooperating with local and regional partners and including this hands-on experience, we were able to literally pick up the local audience at its own doorsteps.



Fig. 2: *Among Friends*.
Japanese Tea Ceramics, exhibition view

The online documentary (<https://zenodo.org/record/3991828#.YD9v6udCdPY>) records the collaborations of *Among Friends: Japanese Tea Ceramics* and enhances digital access to the collection. The documentary includes exhibition texts, objects—as far as copyrights are cleared—as well as impressions of the exhibition. It also entails visitor’s responses, a press review, and a documentary of the MK&G social media posts concerning this exhibition. Thus, it is actually more than just an online catalogue and reflects the exhibition as transparent as possible.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily eliminated the possibility of using exhibitions as a means of communication. However, the lockdowns revealed the potential of instantaneous digital communication. When the first lockdown was announced, the MK&G responded immediately with the social

media campaign #culturedoesntstop. In addition to advertising the digital program, the campaign included 29 short videos of ca. 1 minute, published within 7 weeks on Instagram and Facebook (Fig. 3). In each video, curators, conservators, collection managers, and the director explained a specific artwork. These videos were realized on the spot and with the means at hand, which at that time meant a smart phone. But although far from being perfect, these videos were a huge success. People responded very positively to them as an authentic form of communication.



Fig. 3: Stills from 6 videos from the #culturedoesntstop campaign

In May 2020, the MK&G promoted the reopened exhibitions under the hashtag #openbutsafe. The marketing, press, and digital communication departments put a lot of effort into raising the quality of social media posts, including English subtitles to videos and also developed specific strategies for the individual channels, comprising also Twitter to the already established Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube accounts.

During the ongoing second lockdown, the MK&G has focused on advancing sustainable digitalization—not in competition with exhibition spaces, but as an integral part of communication and activating the collections for diverse communities in an accessible and engaging way. In this regard, the four-year project NEO Collections in cooperation with the Nationalmuseum Stockholm and the Überseemuseum Bremen is of special interest. It is a project about user centered, explorative, open and reusable digital museum collections and the way they are accessed, curated, and enriched. In the first phase, we are learning how to prototype and shift the perspective from ourselves to our communities in a series of workshops with our digital partner Abhay Adhikari.

Now that the second lockdown stretches already into the fifth month, the MK&G broadened digital offers beyond its website and social media communication. The digital program includes videos, digital live tours through exhibitions, interactive digital artist talks, and presentations as well as an exhibition app (School of No Consequences), and a participative online radio platform (Life on Planet Orsimanirana).

In future, we will try to include digital perspectives already in the planning process of collection and exhibition projects. All in all, I would summarize my priority tasks as a curator as both, serving the collection and fostering local as well as digital communities. And I do think, that working in projects including exhibitions as well as digitalization, and conservational treatment is a good strategy to cope with increasing demands in periods when financial means and staff resources are rather tight.

Talk Session 2

Ms. Wibke Schrape

Dr. Mary Redfern (Curator of the East Asian Collections, Chester Beatty, Ireland)

Mary Redfern (M): I'm Mary Redfern. I'm the curator of the East Asian Collections at the Chester Beatty in Ireland. First of all, may I thank Kito Satomi and her colleagues for hosting this workshop again. It is such an important workshop for our global community with our peers, and it is wonderful that it can happen this year even though we are all in different places.

Thank you, Wibke for a beautifully sort out presentation with many important points. I think you really touched on a lot of things that resonate with my own experience at the Chester Beatty, such as the significance of COVID as a moment to both reflect and re-examining priorities and the acute needs of our audiences in these times. But also the issues that we have in terms of the sustainability of resourcing, creating new content, trying to always adapt, and the shifts that we have even within this sort of COVID period in terms of what audiences are expecting from quality and screen weariness. We can produce all this wonderful content, but maybe people just don't want to look at their screens anymore. We are all in this sort of strange world, and it's constantly changing. I think your presentation really showed how even the COVID period itself is a time of constant change, and we're constantly trying to adapt.

My first question is sort of thinking more optimistically towards the post-COVID world, suggested by your really wonderful tea ceramics exhibition, and the images of the project and the partners that you worked with. I think it really highlighted for me the special qualities of exhibitions as a site for people to gather, for objects to be set in juxtaposition, and for experiences to unfold. For me, it is the way that museums can build really strong communities, and a goal we need to bring to the digital realm: How we can create similar experiences of building communities through digital technologies.

But staying in the world of the physical for a moment longer, as a very small question, I was just interested in the tea bowls that you used for handling in the exhibition. You mentioned that these were accessioned after the exhibition. Could they now be used in the same way as inventoried objects? I was wondering if you could tell us more about the pieces that were chosen? Were they contemporary pieces or historic pieces? Did this raise concerns with colleagues? Was it something you told visitors, that these were going into the collection? And so, thinking back to when we can touch and hold objects again. That's my first question.

Wibke Schrape (W): The pieces were partly historical and partly contemporary. For example, we had contemporary pieces by Jan Kollwitz, who was having a major exhibit in one room nearly exclusively. We wanted people to get a feeling of his ceramics. One bowl was by Jan Kollwitz, and another bowl was by Kato Shuntei II, a contemporary ceramist from Japan. But there were also historical pieces, like a Takatori tea bowl

from the 19th century, and also a Raku tea bowl, which was probably from the 19th or even 18th century. The colleagues were all very delighted with this idea. The concerns came mostly from visitors, from Japanese people especially, and the people from the tea group had a lot of concerns. They really came to me and asked, "Are you sure you want to do this? This is really very dangerous."

But my experience was that people handled them very carefully, and we decided not to use our tea bowls. I would not do it the same way now since they are inventoried. In this case, I think it is always important to have people accompanying such hands-on station. If you want to have them in the gallery just for visitors to explore, I wouldn't use inventoried pieces. That was the decision we made. So we acquired pieces at comparatively low prices with the help of Christoph Peters, who helped me to find these pieces. He is very experienced in this field. We acquired pieces of the standards that they can be inventoried afterwards but decided not to use pieces which are already inventoried. Nevertheless, people were really careful to use them.

M: I think it is a great to have handling pieces in exhibitions, but there's sort of this difference between the handling object or the education object and the museum standard and sort of eroding that. I think the way in which you managed it, is really interesting.

My second question is a slightly bigger one and probably not so easy to answer. But I'd love to know more about the NEO Collections project that you mentioned. I realize that it's at a very early stage. But it sounds really intriguing, so I'd love to know more about its aims, and its background and the potential use. Maybe you already see for it to build a new kind of community.

W: That's really a difficult question, because I'm only a very small part in this huge project, which the MK&G is doing together with the Übersee Museum, Bremen and the National museum in Stockholm, and all three museums explored different areas. The goal is really to build and use the collections in the digital sphere. Not like a museum for people to explore, but in a more interactive way. For instance, the person responsible for digital strategy in our museum is Antje Schmidt, and her focus is on sharing power. She wants people not only to have access, but also to be able to decide on the objects or to give their own meaning to these objects, not only the creators. That's what I understand is her mission.

But we really don't know yet what we are going to do, which for me is the most challenging thing about this project. It's a 4-year project and there's no clear goal. It's not saying you have to inventorize, you have to digitalize 4000 objects, or you will do a new online collection platform. There's no goal like that. The goal is to prototype something and to develop something which is more user friendly, and to give the community more power and more access to the collection. It's really an experiment, and this is really difficult for people who carefully think about what they are going to do and go there. But that's not what we're doing. We are trying to change the perspective, look what the viewers want, what the people in the online communities want, and try for years to develop something together with them that is more useful for them than our current

online collection.

M: We've done so much in terms of digitizing objects and sort of creating these wonderful online databases. But there's a next step, and I think this project sounds like a trial to figure out what we can do to open that up beyond just images and information, into something that people can really engage with and explore. I am sure you will tell us more about it in future years, and I look forward to hearing more.

W: I think engagement is the key.

M: One of the things that we learned is that at the start of COVID, we were all being asked to pivot and change how we work. In a way, we are not only seeing that we have to change, which we are constantly doing in response to our audience, but also that we were already in this process. Like your NEO Collections project, this was all underway well before we were in this place where we can only engage through our website with digital content.

We are kind of accelerating some processes but we are also seeing them in a very different way. We have often thought about digital as a way to engage with our global communities. But obviously now we are also using it much more with our local communities as well, so it's an interesting time, and it's kind of interesting that while it's incredibly challenging and difficult, COVID is throwing into relief a lot of the things that we've been doing already in terms of trying to change and adapt museums to fit new needs. I think your presentation just really encapsulated all of that very beautifully. Thank you very much.

W: Thank you very much.