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— Project Description —

Shared Coasts, Divided Historiographies: Mobilizing People, Ideas, and Artifacts in the East Asian Mediterranean

A. INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

1. Project Outline

This project brings together the next generation of art historians from the “East Asian Mediterranean”—centering around Kyushu, Okinawa, Taiwan, and South Korea. The project members will jointly explore exchanges of people, ideas, and artifacts in this geographical region during two historical periods, the First (1500–1850) and Second (1850–1945) Global Ages, respectively. We will revisit a history of continuous interaction, exchange, and transculturation in the fields of visual and material culture.

The history of the East Asian Mediterranean has been a turbulent, fragmented, and contested one. The region’s common heritage has been distorted by national and nationalistic agendas, which emulated western academic structures in the late 19th and early 20th century. The region has also suffered from traumatic experiences of violence and colonization, the aftermath of which has continued to overshadow shared concerns and create conflicts that still remain unsolved.

We use the concept of an East Asian Mediterranean as a loose foundational framework for our project, to deconstruct the ahistorical and misleading nationalist framework, acknowledge regional identities and lifestyles, highlight economic and cultural flows, and illustrate complex dynamics of players and motivations during the periods under investigation.

This two-year project consists of a series of lectures and reading workshops, two travel seminars, and the creation of a digital mapping platform. The lectures and reading workshops will be held in a hybrid format: in person at Kyushu University and online. The two travel seminars will explore academic networks throughout the East Asian Mediterranean. The digital platform will map out the key concerns of the project, progress of the events, and make source materials accessible to a wider scholarly community and a wider public beyond. The project thus activates a continuously moving discussion and creates a venue for junior and mid-career professionals to discuss methodologies and theoretical frameworks for the art history and cultural studies of this region. In this way, we will transcend national, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries, apply a decidedly interdisciplinary approach, and bring together scholars, curators, and practitioners from diverse fields and academic systems.

The principal goal is to open and interweave still largely encapsulated academic communities, connect previously marginalized regions, and instigate an open dialogue about shared and divided histories, the portrayal of self and other in art, a shared heritage of sustained transregional communication between and beyond spheres of regional culture, and historiographical traditions that determine and limit self-perceived cultural identity until today. We aim at raising a new paradigm for the next generation of art historical professionals that is grounded in interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and mutual understanding.

The herein proposed project of two years is intended as the initial module in the building of a lasting research architecture in the region. The junior academics who we see as the primary agents of this project will, as they pursue their careers in the future, also advance and spread the innovative approaches in their home countries. The network created by this endeavor will thus not only forge and promote a new generation of art historians in the region but also be of utmost relevance for repositioning the East Asian Mediterranean in world art history.

2. The Framework of the “Mediterranean”

The notion of an East Asian Mediterranean is an adaptation of Fernand Braudel’s pathbreaking study that analyzed Europe’s semi-enclosed seas—the proper Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea—as spaces of connectivity rather than separation (Braudel 1949). Among the great number of aspects discussed by Braudel, the following are the most impactful for this proposed project:

- The Mediterranean is not conceived as an exclusively maritime or littoral entity but a space of connection that opens up the coastal hinterlands and, in ultimate consequence, the entire landmass. Expansion and transmission of innovation is understood as occurring “without borders.”
- The exchange processes are acknowledged as inherently complex and conditioned by topographical, climatic, cultural, historical, and economic factors.
- Dynamic interactions between human and non-human actors (landscape, culture, technology, resources, ideologies, regimes) are simultaneously rooted in long-term (*longue durée*) and historically contemporaneous processes.

Over the previous two decades, the Braudelian model has been made productive for the East Asian context by historians (Schottenhammer 2005, Gipouloux 2009) and art historians (Ide 2010, Nomura 2015, Kim 2019). The advantage of reframing the processes of connection, demarcation, and exchange through the geographic model of an East Asian Mediterranean lies in overcoming traditional hierarchical paradigms such as that of center/periphery that unilaterally privileges the position of China versus its “satellites”.

This is especially helpful when investigating the First Global Age. This period has long been researched from a predominantly European vantage point, followed by a more differentiated approach that construed the exchange processes as a prolonged bilateral “dialogue” between Asia and Europe (Lach 1965–1977). Our project responds to calls for revisiting the field as a complex network of national, institutional, and individual actors that involves a multifaceted mesh of global and regional East Asian interconnections. The period frame corresponding to the First Global Age is of outstanding significance for Japan’s political, cultural, and art history: What is considered today as quintessential Japanese cultural production was in fact largely created during this time frame. Japan took significant impulses from the encounter with foreign cultures ranging from Ryūkyū, Taiwan, Korea, China, and Southeast Asia to distant world regions such as South Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe.

A second advantage of the model is to enable deconstructing the fiction of monolithic cultures (Japan, Taiwan, Korea) where there were historically a great number of distinct dominions, ethnic and social groups. Just to bring forward one example, the archipelago of Ryūkyū (Okinawa) is geographically and culturally a border region between the Asian continent, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. During the early modern period it was formally an independent kingdom that employed a Chinese-inspired, yet in many details distinct system of rulership. In the early 17th century, Ryūkyū was occupied by a Japanese domain lord and forced to send regular tributary missions to the shogunal government in Edo (now Tokyo) which in turn highly publicized these dispatches as proof of its power and legitimacy. Annexed by the modernizing Meiji regime, Okinawa's indigenous culture was marginalized and judged as inferior according to the standards of a newly installed narrative of a national Japanese art history. Shuri Palace, the seat of the Ryūkyūan king, was destroyed during WWII, then rebuilt in an ahistorical, Japanized style only to fall victim again to a conflagration in 2019. This case raises fundamental questions about the construction of identity, heritage, and historiography in a culturally "hybrid" field of tension between nation state and local cultures.

In addition, the analytical model of the East Asian Mediterranean will help complicate what has been for a long time perceived as bilateral relationships or oppositions between "East" and "West." The concept of an East Asian Mediterranean will provide a theoretic framework to revisit the place of the "Asian other," hybrid objects and human communities which commissioned or traded them within the cultural production at the crucial juncture between the medieval and early modern, as well as the early modern and modern period. A specific angle of investigation in this regard will be the visual representation of strangers as well as the use of foreign materials, technologies, styles, practices, taxonomies, concepts, worldviews, and ideologies in works of art and material culture.

3. Kyushu University as the Hub

The choice of Kyushu University is congenial to the aims of this project. Kyushu functioned for millennia as Japan's gateway to the Korean peninsula, the continent, and the southern islands of Taiwan, Ryūkyū (Okinawa), and Southeast and South Asia as well. Kyushu was the primary site of foreign presence during the First Global Age. Here were the entrepôts of Nagasaki, Hirado, and Hakata (modern Fukuoka where Kyushu University is located) and here was the main base of Christian missionary activities and subsequently the site of the fiercest prosecutions. Nagasaki remained the principal connection with the Netherlands and the cultures of the East Asian Mediterranean during the isolationist Edo period (1615–1868).

During the Meiji and Taishō period (1912–1926) Kyushu returned to being a major hub for connections, notably to Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria and connected spheres of Japan's imperialist ambitions. The northern stretch of Kyushu was swiftly industrialized and became the heart of Japan's coal mining. A freighted history of partly forced migrant workers, especially from annexed Korea, can be traced in works of art and architecture from this period.

We believe that basing the project administration in Japan and beginning both travel seminars in a harbor along the coast of Kyushu will provide an exceptional chance to issue from the perceived "home terrain" of the established narrative and delve into exactly those border zones (geographic, cultural, institutional, historical) from which this project intends to deconstruct the monolithic narrative of national art histories. Not the least, Fukuoka, the city which Kyushu University is based at, is the location of the Kyushu National Museum (2005), Japan's fourth national museum and the only one founded after the Meiji period. The museum's mission is "to display and research Japan within Asia." In sum, Kyushu University is an ideal institution for setting up the hub for this projected transnational research network. By leaving Japan and

physically engaging with the shared coasts of this proposal's title, the group will naturally be invited to challenge and rethink accepted certainties.

B. PROGRAM STRUCTURE

1. Event Types

We will from the outset challenge hierarchies, seniority, national agendas, and disciplinary boundaries, for instance, through encouraging scholars on the junior level, such who are not institutionally affiliated, who are from underrepresented age or gender groups, and from marginalized communities or specializations to propose topics for the various formats of this project and to play an active role in designing, administering, and realizing our goals.

A crucial feature of this project is the creation of flexible and innovative venues for discussion and social interaction that serve for activating exchanges among the project members and simultaneously enables including a wider audience. Keeping this project's focus on junior academics in mind, we favor informal presentation and discussion styles. It is our special desire to foster deeper understanding of the historical and cultural foundations, distinct disciplinary traditions, and sensibilities of all contributing individuals, institutions, and groups.

The duration of the project proposed herein is 24 months.

The project will be opened with a constitutive meeting of all project members, representatives of the institutional partners, local facilitators, and members of the advisory board.

After the constitutive meeting three distinct event formats will be deployed: (1) a series of hybrid lectures and reading workshops, (2) two travel seminars, and (3) an interactive digital mapping platform that serves for deepening discussions and mapping the project's progress. Together, these three formats will provide opportunities for engagement with individuals (researchers, research groups, curators, conservators, practitioners, public intellectuals), institutions (research facilities, museums, conservation workshops, libraries, archives, private collections) and sites (historical neighborhoods, monuments, culturally imbued landscapes).

◆ Lecture Series

The backbone of our activities will be a series of biweekly lectures that are conducted in hybrid format (online/in-person, scheduled in two-part series' during the semesters). Online reading groups for the participants will prepare the talks through focused discussions of relevant theoretical readings. The seminar meetings will be announced publicly and open for pre-registered participants. We adopt two formats in this series: "lectures" and "debates."

- The lecture topics will be selected based on quality, innovation, and regional origin. We will post a call for submissions and simultaneously approach certain individuals who we deem indispensable for the project's success. In both cases, junior scholars will be privileged.
- Each debate session will be opened with about three "impulse statements"—extremely short presentations of five minutes in length in which we encourage the speakers to be provocative, informal, and trigger responses. The ensuing group discussions will be moderated by an experienced scholar who will be instructed to leave ample room for the junior members to express their thoughts.

◆ Travel Seminars

In each year we will conduct one Travel Seminar (scheduled in the summer break when the seminar series pauses).

The travel seminars are integral for the project's success for a variety of reasons:

The group will reenact trans-cultural movement and border-crossings of Japan-Tsushima-South Korea and Japan-Okinawa-Taiwan. The itinerary will force the participants to engage and discuss issues of cultural hybridity, appropriation, and political exploitation of cultural heritage. This will be especially productive when visiting sites such as in Gusan where Korean exhibition makers utilized the Japanese colonial legacy to establish a national narrative by renovating/altering the Japanese buildings into a memorial.

The group will also develop skills in comparing and contrasting institutions belonging to the same type with each other. For instance, the visits to the Kyushu National Museum, the National Palace Museum in Taipei, the Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum in Naha, and the National Museum of Korea in Seoul will invite discussions about the goals and responsibilities of *national* museums when explaining and contextualizing artifacts from foreign cultures. The visit of the construction site of Shuri Palace in Naha will enable direct observation of techniques and interactions with monument conservators and cultural administrators at a reconstruction site.

In addition, the participants will over the course of the travel seminars familiarize themselves with fundamental methods of site-based research, intercultural communication, evaluation of contrasting views as well as techniques of translating visual, material, and textual narratives between the distinct cultural and disciplinary backgrounds of the group members.

◆ Digital Mapping

The seminar series and the travel seminars will be accompanied by the creation of an interactive digital mapping platform. This platform will be operated on a server hosted by Kyushu University and remain as a continuing and growing site of encounter, not only for the project members, but subsequent generations of scholars.

The platform serves for deepening discussions, distributing research materials, publicizing encounters made during the travel seminars, and introducing the participating teams and institutions to a wider audience. It will include a general project description, introductory statements, biographies, and bibliographies of all project members, a mailing list, a "resources" page as well as a moderated blog that will allow to continue and follow up on topics addressed during the Q&A of "lectures" and "debates" in the seminar series.

There will be dedicated forums for specific groups such as a graduate students discussion site, a curators' lounge, and a work-in-progress corner with current projects of conservators and museums.

The digital mapping platform will also contain an access-restricted section that will be accessible to project members and a select number of international collaborators. Pending consent of the respective speakers, this restricted section will contain recordings of a number of lectures and debates, a venue for ongoing member discussions, and a file sharing platform to distribute publications and other materials.