

Photographic partners for ethnographic artefacts

Ethnographic artefacts, dating back to the 17th century or even earlier, are commonly found partnered with illustrations to further explain their context and relevance. The earlier techniques of sketching, watercolour, etching, and other hand-produced imagery, were often replaced with photography when the technology was introduced and developed in the 19th century.

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Artefacts and illustrations

The historical museum in Bern, a foundation supported by the canton, the city of Bern, and the Burgher community of Bern, was opened in 1894. Nevertheless, the extra-European collections are substantially older and date back to the 17th century. It is interesting to note that the first ethnographic collection in Bern was presented in combination with illustrations. This collection originated with a donation by Albrecht Herport to the town's cabinet of curiosities (these 'cabinets' are often considered to have been precursors to museums). His ethnographic objects, from Java and Taiwan, were accompanied by his drawings from South and South-east Asia. Ten etchings based on his drawings were published in 1669, in Herport's book *Eine kurtze Ost-Indianische Reiss-beschreibung*, enriching his collection of extraordinary artefacts.

We again find this connection between objects and illustrations in the collection of John Webber, a draftsman and painter of Bernese origin, who travelled with James Cook during his third voyage. Webber collected ethnographic artefacts, which he later gave to his hometown; in addition, he tirelessly documented the Pacific world by drawing what he encountered. Many of his, over three hundred, paintings and drawings were published in the form of engravings.

Shortly before the technology of photography was established – in the first half of the 19th century – about 450 drawings, paintings and engravings from the New World came to the collection in Bern. Works by Rudolf Friedrich Kurz, Karl Bodmer and Charles Bird King, which documented the North American Indians, were entered into the Bernese collection together with artefacts from these cultures.

Introduction of photography

Photography developed further during the middle of the 19th century, and quickly became an accompaniment to cultural anthropological research, enriching the information collected on many aspects of the material cultures worldwide. Ethnographic collections were more and more complemented by photographic documents; an historical examination of the photographs shows that constant subjects were introduced

in changing forms of representation and are open to interpretation. Landscapes, architecture, portraits, genre scenes, and people in everyday-life situations or during ceremonies, help to enrich the context of the collection artefacts.

In Bern today the ethnographic collection comprises 60,000 inventory numbers; about 13,000 of them are historic-ethnographic photographs from all the continents: Africa constitutes the main part with 58%, followed by Asia with 37%, the Americas with 4% and Oceania with 1%. The photos in Bern's Oriental collection are generally attributed to Asia, including the photos depicting the Balkan in a time when it still formed a part of the declining Ottoman Empire. The photographs pertaining to Asia have a regional divide as follows: Central Asia with 40%, followed by East Asia with 30%, and South Asia and Southeast Asia with 15% each.

The Henri Moser collection

Photographs bequeathed by Henri Moser, the foremost donator to the Bern Oriental collection, form an important and rich part of this collection. The photos are rare early records of inner-Asian centres such as Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva in today's Uzbekistan. Moser's photos were taken by himself as well as by other photographers. Among the negatives there are 250 paper negatives, a technique developed in 1883 by George Eastman. Paper negatives were used instead of glass-plates, especially for travel photography and expeditions, until the late 1880s.

Henri Moser (1844-1923) was the son of an industry-pioneer from Schaffhausen. The family migrated for some time to St. Petersburg, where Henri was born. Crucial in his life were five journeys in Asia; one to Siberia undertaken in the year 1867, and four journeys to Central Asia in the years 1868/69, 1869/70, 1883/84 and 1888/89. He showed a widespread interest in different activities and he gained acknowledgement all over Europe as a specialist of the Orient, thanks to his narratives and photographic documentations of Central Asia and Persia. In a way he was also a photo-pioneer and he experimented with the technical possibilities of early photography. The journals of his expeditions were published in weekly magazines

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and in scientific periodicals. This resulted in a report about his experiences in Asia, printed in his bestselling book *A travers l'Asie Centrale*, published in 1885 in Paris by E. Plon, and a subsequent German translation *Durch Central-Asien*, published in 1888 in Leipzig by A. Brockhaus.

On his third journey to Central Asia Moser travelled in the company of the governor-general of Russian Turkestan, General Michael Tschernajeff. On his fourth journey to Central Asia he travelled in the company of his wife and the Russian General Annenkoff. Before his third voyage, and the above mentioned publication, Moser had the opportunity to organise the state reception for the Iranian Shahinshah Nasr-Eddin, by order of the Swiss government. This helped him to reach diplomatic recognition.

Exhibitions of oriental objects and curiosities, held in Switzerland, and Islamic art shows in Paris, gave him the opportunity to present his collection and his view of the Islamic world in the context of the orient-enthusiasm of the *fin de siècle*. Already in Moser's travel writings does his affinity for development efforts and technical innovations for Asia become apparent. He very actively spread the idea of an unlimited 'civilisation progress' during his travels through Bosnia and Herzegovina, which he undertook at the behest of Austria's minister of finance, Benjamin von Kállay. As a diplomat of the k. und k. Monarchy he promoted a propagandistic view of these regions for Europe, which led him to become the exhibition-commissioner of Bosnia-Herzegovina at the World's Fair in Brussels (1897) and the famous World's Fair in Paris in 1900. Both events are prominently present in various facets of Moser's photo-documentations.

Photographers in East Asia

When it comes to East Asia, Bern's ethnographic photographic collection focuses mainly on Japan. As Japan opened up to the Western world in the second half of the 19th century, many photographers from Europe and America started to arrive there. Photos taken by Felice Beato (1833-1907) were some of the very first, and a small number found their way into the Bern collection.

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1 (above): 'Kirgiz family in front of their yurt'. Photo taken by Henri Moser or other photographer in the expedition of 1868, on Moser's first journey to Central Asia.



2 (top left): 'Mosques of Samarkand'. Photo taken by Henri Moser or other photographer on his third journey to Central Asia, in the years 1883/84.

3 (top right): Felice Beato's album, 'Views of Japan; Mr. Shōjirō', about 1868.

4 (below): Paul Ritter collection (Leporello album), 'Korean teacher with four girls'. Photo taken in 1894 by anonymous photographer.



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Other East Asian photos in the collection are a little later, dating from around 1880-1910. These photos were collected by Swiss merchants and diplomats travelling to the new commercial spheres. They brought back with them to the Western world scenes and portraits of peoples from Japan, China and Korea, and also views of famous localities and buildings; these were the precursors to the picture postcard.

Paul Ritter (1865–1921), for example, was in the Swiss diplomatic service, posted in Yokohama in 1892–1902, and in Tokyo in 1906–1909. He was responsible for China, Japan and Korea and brought many photographs back to Switzerland. His landscapes and scenes from Japan are of remarkable quality, and his leporello album containing 136 everyday-life scenes in Seoul and studio-portraits of people from Korea in the year 1894, is particularly noteworthy.

Many portraits and genre-scenes were taken in studios and were often illuminated. Series made by the H. Suito studio in Tokyo show the step-by-step process of the two main economically important production activities of Japan in the style of the early 20th century: the cultivation of rice and tea.

Photos depicting China are of the same genre as those from Japan, and document everyday-life and views of landscapes and famous architecture. Portraits and arranged scenes with people are generally taken in studios. The tendency to compare working and upper class people reflect China from a colonial point of view. The activities of the working class are portrayed with mundane daily activities, while the upper class are presented in fine clothes in photos taken in studios or luxury homes.

Depicting reality

Walter Bosshard (1892–1975) exhibited more of a journalistic quality in his photographs of Mongolia and Tibet. He was a member of the German Central-Asia expedition in the years 1927/28 in Turkestan and Tibet. He became a pioneer of modern photojournalism and he worked hard to depict the reality in word and picture. Bosshard also reported from India and his portraits of important personalities of the first half of the 20th century became famous throughout the world.

5 (below inset): Walter Bosshard, 'Caravan in the Takla Makan desert'. Photo taken in 1928 on the German Central Asia expedition.

6 (below): Walter Volz, 'On the way to the gold-mine', about 1900. The picture shows a human group in Southwest-Sumatra where gold was won since old times, and which the Dutch continued above all in the province of Bengkulu.

Another significant part of the Asia collection in Bern are photographs from Southeast Asia. Especially noteworthy are photos documenting the first Dutch Borneo expedition taken by the Swiss Johann Jakob Büttikofer, in the years 1893/94. Büttikofer (1850–1927) was a biologist and head of the zoological garden in Rotterdam and he was a member of the expedition crew. He was experienced in fieldwork in the tropics and his photos chiefly document the contacts between the peoples of inner Borneo and the participants of the Dutch Borneo expedition. Above all, his work shows an insight into a world before the influence of Western colonialism became effective. The expedition went up the Kapus river into the depths of Borneo's forest-world. The initial aim of traversing Borneo from West to East in one journey could not be realised; it was thus followed by successive expeditions on the Mahakam-river to the East coast of Borneo, originally planned to be the second part of the first expedition. The results of the undertakings are published in two volumes by A. W. Niewenhuijs: *Quer durch Borneo, Ergebnisse seiner Reisen in den Jahren 1893–94, 1896–97, 1898–1900*. Büttikofer did not take part in the second and third expeditions and his photographs of the first journey are regrettably not included in Niewenhuijs' published report.

Another Bernese natural scientist in Dutch service was Walter Volz (1875-1907). He was active first in Indonesia, primarily in Sumatra, and later in West Africa (Liberia), as a geologist and zoologist. Whilst conducting research in Liberian villages with the local people, he was shot during a military operation by the French.

Many other photo-documents show scenes and insights into the cultures of the mainland and the many islands of Southeast Asian archipelagos at the end of the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century. Cultural events including rituals, ceremonies and for example the Javanese theatre, are typical for this kind of outdoor documentations. Many photographs of peoples of all social levels and ranks are mostly arranged studio works. Besides Büttikofer and Volz we know only a few names of the photographers active in Southeast Asia at that time, as many were in fact local photographers who presented and sold their work to the many European travellers in countries such as Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. The local photographers offered a large number of photographs, which the travellers brought home, often together with collector items.

The documentation of far-away regions resulted in masses of photographic-documents; they were products of socio-historical and ethnographic research, but they are in all cases simply interpretations of the reality. Standing near the cradle of photography, Charles Baudelaire formulated in his 1859 essay, *The photograph and the modern audience*, a criticism of the acceptance that photography is a simple mirror of the world or a mechanical transfer of reality. Photography is always an interpretation of the reality. The photographic motive is connected to the subject that selects it; it is linked to the things and persons in front and behind the camera. The photographer and the collector transmit this mirror of the world creating a complex relationship between reality, interpreter, observer and beholder.

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