

Trieste and Asia: Overseas Ties of the Habsburg Port City (18th–20th Centuries)

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The Museum of Oriental Art in Trieste

“Asia begins southeast of Vienna”.¹ This phrase, attributed to Prince Metternich (1773–1859), highlights how the lands to the east of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was geographically and historically on the border between Europe and Asia, were seen by Europeans as a more or less far East, simultaneously menacing and attractive: a counterpart to a West which at that time considered itself the only repository of civilization.

As a Free Port of the Habsburg monarchy from the early 18th century, Trieste held a privileged position as a docking port for goods and people, making it one of the first places to have contact with East Asian cultures. We find concrete evidence of this today in the city’s Civic Museum of Oriental Art: by the 19th century, almost everybody in Trieste possessed items of Asian provenance, even if we cannot always call them “collectors”. The Zanella and Morpurgo collections are the exception to the rule.

Encounters between these worlds were characterised by fear and attraction. People transfer their desires onto what is new and unusual, and this is borne out by the collection of Trieste’s new Museum of Oriental Art, which hosts the artistic, archaeological and ethnographic collections of Asian origin of the former Municipal Museum of

Antiquity, founded in 1873. This new museum, which was inaugurated on 8 March 2001, is the first to be specifically dedicated to Oriental art in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region and one of the few existing in Italy. It is owned by the Municipality of Trieste and is part of the museum complex Civic Museums of History and Art, which documents the history of the city since its foundation. The Museum of Oriental Art is housed inside the eighteenth century Palazzetto Leo, not far from the main square of Trieste, Piazza dell’Unità d’Italia.

The artefacts that found their way to the nineteenth-century Museum varied in type, antiquity and quality: the interests of collectors depended on their individual taste, economic possibilities and inclinations. The collection thus ranges from ethnography—souvenirs and curious objects—to Chinese and Japanese porcelain, and Japanese prints and weapons. While some items—such as Japanese prints—have been considered of artistic interest since the beginning, others—such as the collection of Chinese porcelain, today one of the most important Italian nuclei of Chinese export porcelain—have come to acquire value, thanks to the confluence in the museum context with similar objects in thematic nuclei and to the new perspectives provided by studies in the historical-cultural and anthropological fields.

In this essay, I intend to retrace the reasons why Trieste is one of the few Italian cities to host a Museum of Oriental Art, and the way in which

1 Augustat and Blumauer 2017, 91.

this is a direct expression of its history over the last three centuries. It is a story of landings, journeys, geographical discoveries and trade, which explains why so many men and women acquired East Asian goods and later donated them to the local museum.²

The Birth of the Free Port and an Austrian East India Company

To understand why Trieste is in the peculiar position of hosting a museum of this sort, we must trace its relationship with the sea from the 18th century onwards. Here, Trieste and Austria-Hungary were in a very different position from the contemporary maritime—and colonial—powers. In fact, Austria was not a colonial power at all: it did not have long-lasting commercial companies such as the British East India Company or the Dutch VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or Dutch East India Company) which from the 17th century effectively established commercial—and subsequently colonial—monopolies in India and Indonesia respectively.

The Habsburg Monarchy did not have colonial ambitions in the strict sense, partly because its internal economic development was insufficiently robust and partly because its administration concentrated on the attempt to keep many ethnic groups together. Nevertheless, it was also in the interests of the Monarchy to obtain a share of the international trade between Europe and East Asia.

The Monarchy's first venture in this direction was as early as 1719, following the concession of the Free Port, with the creation of the *Compagnia per i commerci d'Oriente* (Eastern Trade Company), which was then called the *Imperiale Compagnia Orientale privilegiata* (Privileged Imperial Oriental Company), whose field of activity was to be focused principally on the Austrian coast and specifically on Trieste, Rijeka, Bakar and

Kraljevica. By "the East" was meant the Levant: the countries of Western Asia were to become the outlet and supply markets of the new Company. One of the privileges granted was in fact the monopoly of trade with Turkey. By 1725, however, the Company was already facing a crisis; around 1740 its activity ceased.³

In 1722, sanction was given to the grant of the *Compagnia imperiale e reale delle Indie* (Imperial and Royal India Company), based in Ostend, in the Austrian Netherlands. The most important of its provisions was a monopoly on trade with the East and West Indies and with Africa. In its first years of activity, the Company achieved success that exceeded even the most optimistic predictions. Above all, trade with China brought in substantial profits. However, under pressure from the various shipping companies protected by the great naval powers—the Netherlands and Britain—who saw their economic interests being prejudiced, the Company was soon forced to stop trading, and was dissolved in 1731.⁴

It was not until the 1770s that the imperial government found another entry into the Asian market. The first loads of Chinese goods arrived in Trieste thanks to the vision and business acumen of an active British merchant of Dutch origin in India, by name of William Bolts (1739–1808),⁵ who had begun his career as an employee of the East India Company and later became an independent trader. He linked his name to a 1772 book, *Considerations on India Affairs*, which detailed the East India Company's administration in Bengal.

In 1775, Bolts offered his services to the imperial government, proposing to re-establish Austrian trade with India from the Adriatic port of Trieste. His proposal was accepted by the government of Empress Maria Theresa, and 1776 saw the birth of the *Compagnia delle Indie* (India Company; or *Compagnie des Indes*), also called the *Compagnia*

² These topics have already been partially explored by me in Messina (2019; 2021). Other fundamental sources are the volumes Crusvar (2001) and Dénes et al. (2020).

³ Babudieri 1966, 22–23.

⁴ Space constraints prevent my telling the story of the company and its demise in more detail. For further information, see Babudieri (1966, 14–23).

⁵ Wanner 2012, 182.

Imperiale Asiatica di Trieste (Imperial Asian Company of Trieste; or *Compagnie Impériale Asiatique de Trieste*) or *Société de Commerce d'Asie et d'Afrique* (Asian and African Trading Company). The aim of the new Company was to sell products of Austrian manufacture (fabrics, weapons and ammunition, iron, copper, glass and precious fabrics) in the Indies, without the need for foreign intermediaries, and to supply Austria with foreign goods (coffee, indigo, sugar, silk, rhubarb, cotton, drugs and perfumes from Arabia and fabrics from India), thus ensuring that these Indian and Chinese products were also marketed in Italy and in countries that had commercial connections with Trieste. This venture required substantial capital, which Bolts sought in the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium), finding it in Antwerp banker Charles Proli (1723–1786) and his associates. Despite the name of the Company, the first ship set sail from and returned to Livorno, and for several years, none called at Trieste on either leg of her voyage.⁶

Nonetheless, we do have Bolts to thank for the first docking of East Asian goods in Trieste: on 23 or 30 September 1780, the Fürst Kaunitz, purchased by him in India, arrived in Trieste from Canton (Guangzhou), carrying the following goods, as we read in a document from the Historical Archives of the Chamber of Commerce of Trieste: “gelamine, Japon wood, cinchona root, pint papers, under-cups with black paint, linez [*sic*] that is half-satin with flowers, embroidered *polonaises*, coloured porcelain, turquoise porcelain.”⁷ The arrival of the Chinese goods aroused so much interest in the city that it was mentioned several times by the governor of Trieste, Karl von Zinzendorf (1739–1813) in his diaries, between 3 and 24 October 1780 and again on 14 and 23 November 1780.⁸ As the Habsburg governor of Trieste, Karl von Zinzendorf met the captain of the ship, who presented him with “three views of Canton, of Whampoa island and of Macau, painted in oil” (23

October;⁹ he would have them framed in February of the following year). Zinzendorf also writes that some ladies who were friends of his had bought tea, ivory objects and ink (4 October) from the crew members of the ship, who had also offered for sale “small Chinese statues and animal figures” (13 October).¹⁰ Furthermore, the merchants of the city filled their warehouses with many Chinese goods such as “Nanjing silks [...], lacquer, very heavy but badly designed embroidered fabrics, [...] furniture paper. The way of Chinese packaging is admirable [...]” (23 November).¹¹

Despite his many successes, Bolts’ enterprise was loss-making, overall. In 1781, therefore, at an audience with Emperor Joseph II, Bolts and Proli agreed to the transformation of their partnership into a joint-stock company. On 27 August, the *Compagnia Imperiale di Trieste e Anversa per il Commercio d’Asia* (Imperial Company of Trieste and Antwerp for Asian Commerce, or *Société Impériale pour le Commerce Asiatique de Trieste et d’Anvers*) was founded, a joint-stock company which focused on the tea trade in China, under the direction of the Proli group. In an attempt to gain space in this market, which promised to be profitable, Proli’s group sent five ships to Canton (Guangzhou).¹² However, things did not go as hoped. In January 1785, the Company suspended all payments and shortly thereafter was declared bankrupt, taking the Proli bank with it. The failure, which was sensational at the time, led Charles de Proli to commit suicide, in 1786.¹³

Bolts, who had already found himself bankrupt in mid-1782, had no more capital to play with, but he nevertheless managed to exploit his reputation as an expert in oriental trade in order to found a new joint-stock company in 1783, the *Società triestina* (Triestine Company). In September 1783, the vessel Cobenzell armed by the *Società triestina*

6 Gilibert 2003, 10.

7 Babudieri 1966, 67 note 63; Babudieri 1989, 232 note 9; Gilibert 2003, 16.

8 Klingenstein, Faber and Trampus 2009, 742–51, 761, 765.

9 Ibid., 745.

10 Ibid., 747.

11 Ibid., 765.

12 The logbook of one of them was recently discovered, see Garofalo (2021).

13 Babudieri 1966, 42, 44 note 20, 70.

left Trieste for Marseille, where she collected most of her cargo. Having rounded the Cape of Good Hope, she headed for the Malabar Coast in India, arriving in Bombay in August 1785, and then set course for China. The Cobenzell left Canton (Guangzhou) on 23 January 1786 and returned to Trieste on 16 February 1786 loaded with “saltpetre [an essential element for the production of gunpowder], tea, camphor, coffee, pepper and other merchandise”.¹⁴

The sources are silent on the topic of far Eastern travel for a few decades, until we hear of the voyage of the frigate S.M. Carolina, which left Trieste on 11 September 1820 to transport a diplomat to Brazil—where Maria Leopoldina Josefa Carolina of Habsburg-Lorraine (1797–1826), daughter of Francis I, was queen—and sail on to China, carrying a shipment of mercury, docking in Gibraltar, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, Batavia (Jakarta), Singapore, Macau and Canton (Guangzhou). It was in connection with this voyage that the first commercial treaties were signed with the Chinese government. On 7 July 1822, the S.M. Carolina returned to Trieste, loaded with “oriental” objects, according to the Trieste historian Giuseppe Caprin: an event that caused the passion for Chinese style to flourish in Trieste.¹⁵

The Austrian Lloyd Company and the New Routes from Trieste

As navigation changed with the introduction of steam, resourceful private entrepreneurs were quick to take advantage of the new opportunities. Bankers and merchants such as Giovanni Guglielmo Sartorio (1789–1871) and Carl Ludwig von Bruck (1798–1860) were among those who founded the *Società del Lloyd Austriaco* / *Österreichischer Lloyd* (Austrian Lloyd Company) in 1833, for insurance purposes.¹⁶ In 1836, the *Società di Navigazione a vapore del Lloyd Austriaco*

/ *Dampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft des Österreichischen Lloyd* (Austrian Lloyd Steam Navigation Company) of Trieste was set up, with the aim of connecting the port with regular lines served by Trieste steamships with the territories of the Levant, a natural expansion area for traffic of the Upper Adriatic.¹⁷

In 1837, regular services to Constantinople and Alexandria were inaugurated.¹⁸ The voyage of the paddle steamer Arciduca Lodovico to Constantinople, which began on 16 May 1837, was the first for a Lloyd's ship, sent to the Levant to announce to the Governments and Agencies the beginning of steam navigation: after calling at the ports of Ancona, Patras, Piraeus and Smyrna, she arrived in Constantinople on 30 May 1837. In 1848, Lloyd inaugurated the direct service to Alexandria, where it linked up with the steamboats arriving from Bombay, Calcutta and East Asia.¹⁹

Before 1869, however, the year of the inauguration of the Suez Canal, hardly any direct trade took place between Trieste, India and China. Only occasionally would a few foreign ships arrive to unload or load goods destined for trade with those distant countries.²⁰ The Trieste mercantile class was aware of this: the Deputation of the Trieste Stock Exchange had once again been exploring the relevant mercantile opportunities, establishing in 1842 a *Missione esploratrice del commercio nelle Indie Orientali per il Mar Rosso a spese dello Stabilimento di Consegna delle merci previa approvazione dell'eccelso Governo* (Mission to explore trade in the East Indies for the Red Sea at the expense of the Delivery Establishment of goods subject to the approval of the exalted Government) which was entrusted to the Dane Peter Erichsen.²¹

In this context and in the same period—the 1840s—the time was ripe for the establishment of

¹⁴ Ibid., 73; King 2011, 249.

¹⁵ Caprin 1888, 98 note 1.

¹⁶ Crusvar 2001, 19.

¹⁷ *Il Lloyd* 1938, 554; Crusvar 2001, 19; Museo del Turismo 2006, 139.

¹⁸ *Il Lloyd* 1938, 89; Crusvar 2001, 27.

¹⁹ Brandi 1995–1996, 53–54.

²⁰ *Il Lloyd* 1938, 338.

²¹ Babudieri 1966; Brandi 1995–1996, 34–37; Zanlorenzi 2010.

a particular and pioneering commercial activity in Trieste: Adolf Wünsch's shop, known as the *Gabinetto cinese Wünsch* (Wünsch Chinese Cabinet).²² This opened in 1843 as a pastry shop on the city's main street, Contrada del Corso (now Corso Italia), and by 1847, according to Pacifico Valussi, it housed objects from the Celestial Empire:

China is fashionable, just as tea, opium and even Chinese art are fashionable: therefore it is not to doubt whether even this class of readers will rush there spontaneously, as long as the shop windows continue to be adorned with the works that have come to us from the Celestial Empire.²³

Mentioned in city guides from the 1850s, the Wünsch shop was organised as follows: the refined pastry counter was located on the ground floor, while on the first floor there was an exhibition room of East Asian objects with a sales cabinet. The collection, which contained a large variety of Chinese, Indian and Japanese artistic and industrial objects, could be visited for the price of 20 carantani, which would then be subtracted from the cost of any purchases. Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian of Habsburg (1832-1867) frequented the shop and purchased goods there between 1853 and 1863, and the store was such a feature that in 1856 he took his brother, Emperor Franz Joseph, there during a visit to the city.²⁴

It is in this Archduke Maximilian, with his love of travel and his curiosity about distant cultures, that we find the key man who influenced and embedded the taste for the "exotic" in Trieste. The voyage of the frigate *Novara*, a circumnavigation of the globe with diplomatic and scientific purposes, commissioned by him as admiral of the Austrian Navy (30 April 1857–26 August 1859), was the

first scientific expedition on a planetary scale of the Austrian Imperial Navy (*K. u. K. Kriegsmarine*), and was to be of fundamental importance for the subsequent development of the scientific-exploratory activities of the Austrian Navy.

The three-masted frigate with mixed sail-steam propulsion, originally built as a military ship in the Venice arsenal, weighed anchor in Trieste on 20 April 1857 and sailed through the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, from Madeira to Rio de Janeiro and back, heading on towards Cape Town and across the Indian Ocean, via Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Madras (now Chennai) in southern India, to the Nicobar Islands, Singapore, Manila (Philippines), Hong Kong and Shanghai. The visits to the Far East took place between 8 January and 11 August 1858. Sailing south, the *Novara* headed towards the Solomon Islands, up to Australia (Sydney) and New Zealand, then eastwards in the Pacific to Tahiti and southward again to Cape Horn. She returned to Trieste on 26 August 1859.²⁵ In March 1860, the "curiosities" collected during the trip were exhibited in Trieste; some of them are still in the city's museums: naturalistic specimens from the expedition are preserved today in the Civic Museum of Natural History of Trieste.²⁶

A few years earlier, in 1853, Japan had been forced to open up to the West. However, it was too early for Maximilian to travel to the Empire of the Rising Sun: relations between Japan and the USA, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and the Netherlands were first sanctioned by the Ansei treaties in 1858, and until 1867 Japan went through a long and turbulent period of transition, from the shogunate to the imperial regime, which was restored to power in 1868: the change of government which today is known as the "Meiji Restoration". The ripple effect of these events made itself felt in Trieste, as we read in the *Notice* published in *L'Osservatore triestino* on 9 April 1856: "the respectable public and in particular lovers of curiosities from China and Japan are warned that a batch of these objects

22 Crusvar 1998, 27–28, 34; Turina 2020, 114.

23 Valussi 1847.

24 Adolf Wünsch died in Trieste at the end of 1890: the shop was closed and, two years later, the entire *Chinese Cabinet* collection was auctioned in Vienna by Hugo Othmar Miethke. See *Katalog* (1892).

25 The most recent book about the *Novara* expedition is *Kosmos* (2024).

26 *Kosmos* 2024, 162–63, 172–75.



Fig. 1: Eugenio Scomparini (Trieste 1845–1913), *The Fabricci family*, c. 1880, Oil on Canvas, 68,5 x 107 cm. Trieste, History and Art Museums, inv. CMSA 13/5279.

in a beautiful assortment arrived here and is on sale at very low prices”.²⁷ This short record in the local newspaper is a sign of the beginning of the inflow—only a trickle, at this stage—of Japanese items to Trieste and of the interest they aroused among the wealthy.

Thanks to coeval paintings, and the houses of the 19th-century Triestine bourgeoisie which are now preserved as museums (such as the Sartorio and Morpurgo Museums), we can imagine the interiors of the houses in Trieste at the time, dotted with East Asian objects which allowed their owners to travel at least with their minds. The painting by Eugenio Scomparini (1845–1913) entitled *The Fabricci family* (ca. 1880) (fig. 1), for example, shows an extraordinary cross-section of an upper-class interior in Trieste at the end of the

19th century: prominent among the meticulously depicted furnishings is a large Japanese porcelain vase, in Imari style from the manufacture of Arita, which rests on a table in the corner. It is very similar to those belonging to Pasquale Revoltella and still exhibited in the museum of the same name (fig. 3). A similar arrangement appears in the Sartorio Civic Museum of Trieste: in Paolina’s living room there are still two large Satsuma porcelain vases and two Chinese porcelain vases.

The house of Mario Morpurgo de Nilma (1867–1943) (fig. 2), now the Morpurgo Civic Museum, is an example—one might even say a fossil—of an upper-class residence in Trieste from the second half of the nineteenth century. Although he never ventured to travel to distant lands, Morpurgo was the main collector of East Asian art in Trieste, responsible for an important

²⁷ Crusvar 1998, 24.



Fig. 2: House of Mario Morpurgo de Nilma, via M.R. Imbriani 5, Trieste. Studio, 1927, Trieste. History and Art Museums Photo Library, inv. F11017. Photograph by Pietro Opiglia.

collection of prints and surimono of Ukiyo-e. His studio housed the Japanese prints which are now exhibited at the Civic Museum of Oriental Art. Unfortunately, his collection did not survive in its entirety, since the transfer to the Municipality which he had indicated in his last Will and testament of 1941 took place in 1943 during the Second World War, in the shadow of the racial laws (Mario Morpurgo, although a convert to Catholicism, was of Jewish origin). With Trieste included in the Nazi *Adriatisches Küstenland*, the apartment was occupied by the SS in November 1943; many artefacts that were raided at the time have been only partially recovered. Today, there remain two large Chinese *famille rose* vases, while some porcelain pieces are exhibited in the Civic Museum of Oriental Art.

Trieste is the Gateway to Asia: Diplomats, Archdukes and Noblemen Set Sail for Japan

In 1868, in emulation of the other Western powers that were ratifying commercial treaties with Japan, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy sent an expedition to East Asia and South America, made up of the corvette S.M. Erzherzog Friedrich (launched on 11 September 1857 in Venice), and the frigate S.M. Donau (launched on 20 November 1856 in Trieste). The departure of the two ships from Trieste took place on 18 October 1868;²⁸ the aims of the expedition were to negotiate commercial treaties suitable for a great European monarchy, to establish a consular service, both in East Asia (Siam/Thailand, China, Japan) and in South America, and to collect “navigational”, scientific and ethnographic information on these distant lands, to be brought back for the benefit of Austrian citizens. The expedition went down in history as the “East Asian Expedition”.

Since the Suez Canal was not to open for another year, the ships passed through Gibraltar,

rounded the Cape of Good Hope and stopped over in Singapore, Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam), Macau, Hong Kong, Canton (Guangzhou) and Shanghai. The Erzherzog Friedrich reached Nagasaki on 6 September 1869, and the Donau on 16 September. On 6 October, they dropped anchor in Tokyo Bay. Exactly one year after their departure from Trieste, on 18 October 1869, the “Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation” between Japan and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was signed, establishing the first official diplomatic relations between the two countries.²⁹

The signatory to the “Treaty” on behalf of the Monarchy was Admiral Anton von Petz (1819–1885) who had been directly appointed by Emperor Franz Joseph as head of the expedition and plenipotentiary ambassador. He ended his military career as Commander of the Maritime District of Trieste, where he died on 7 May 1885, being buried in the local military cemetery.

Among the members of the expedition was Baron Enrico de Calice or Heinrich von Calice (1831–1912),³⁰ a native of Gorizia. As consul general in China and Japan, he effectively became the first representative of Austria-Hungary in Japan, where he remained until 1873. Before graduating in law and political science in Vienna, he had done a year of forensic practice at the Maritime Court of Trieste in 1853 and subsequently attended the Austrian Consular Academy at the Central Maritime Authority of Trieste, between 1855 and 1856.

In preparation for the ratification of the Treaty, an official exchange of gifts had taken place, on 16 October 1869, when the Japanese emperor received the Austro-Hungarian delegation in Tokyo. The most prestigious gifts were life-size Carrara marble statues of Franz Joseph and Elizabeth (Sisi) and a Bösendorfer piano. In addition, the Japanese were given an ornamental Hungarian saddle, Lobmeyr crystal vases, glass chalices and cups, a collection of coins from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, a camera and some photo albums, and scores of Austro-Hungarian songs.

28 Centro Regionale Studi di Storia militare antica e moderna Trieste 2010, 134–35.

29 Dénes 2020, 31–32.

30 Vidic 2017.



Fig. 3: Japan, Vase in Imari style, 19th century. Porcelain, overglaze polychrome Enamels, height 78 cm. Bequest of Pasquale Revoltella, 1872. Trieste, Revoltella Museum, inv. 1427.

The expedition left Japan on 4 November 1869, returning to the Mediterranean through the newly inaugurated Suez Canal. While the Donau continued to South America, where further treaties were signed, to return to Pula in March 1871, the Erzherzog Friedrich was forced to return to Trieste, after being damaged by a typhoon in the Canal.³¹

Following the ratification of the Japanese-Austrian treaty and other treaties by Emperor Franz Joseph on 8 June 1871, the corvette S.M. Fasana (launched on 22 January 1870 in Trieste, jewel of the San Marco shipyard) was deputed to sail to East Asia to Siam (now Thailand), China and Japan to ratify the treaties.³² Having left Pula on 4 August 1871, she made the journey, thanks to the opening of the Suez Canal, in the drastically reduced time of three months: on 12 January 1872, one day after disembarking in Yokohama, Enrico de Calice delivered the ratified treaty in person to the Meiji-Emperor. It was a solemn ceremony and, above all, the first international agreement to bear the seal of the divine *Tennō* (天皇). At the same time, Japan was warmly invited to take part in the future *Weltausstellung* in Vienna. Despite some doubts, the government accepted in February 1872, convinced by the argument that it was the right time to show the world how different Japan was from China, and how much autonomy the nation enjoyed.

The opening of the Suez Canal on 17 November 1869, one month after the signing of the treaty with Japan, represented a crucial turning point for the development of trade between Trieste and the Far East. Trieste was a key partner in the project, through the work of entrepreneur and economist Pasquale Revoltella (1795–1869), who had invested in the venture. Since 1864,³³ he had been insisting on the need to open up trade with East Asia, urging the Viennese bureaucracy to explore new opportunities and to establish a diplomatic presence in Siam (now Thailand), China and Japan.

Rewarded by the Emperor Franz Joseph with the title of baron in 1867, Revoltella was able to see the first fruits of his sound advice in 1868, but his premature death on 8 September 1869 prevented his witnessing the Canal's completion. He was also interested in East Asian objects: today, in the collections of the Revoltella Museum in Trieste, some East Asian objects are still preserved, such as two pairs of Japanese porcelain vases in Imari style from the Arita manufacture (inv. 1427-1428; inv. 1504-1505) (fig. 3) and a pair of Japanese bronze vases (inv. 1474-1475). Some small Chinese-produced ivory, lacquer and bronze objects are also on display in the library. It is not known how the baron acquired them, in particular the Japanese ones: he might have purchased them from the Wunsch shop or received them as a gift, perhaps from Archduke Maximilian himself, with whom he shared a bond of friendship.

From the moment of the opening of the Suez Canal, Austrian Lloyd's network of communication began to spread across the Far East: creating regular connections with Bombay (1873), Ceylon and Calcutta (1879), Singapore (1880), Hong Kong (1880), Shanghai (1892), Kobe and Yokohama (1893). In 1878, agencies of the Company were opened in Bombay (which became the main agency in 1887), Calcutta, Madras and Colombo.³⁴

From this period onwards, thanks to port activity and Lloyd's connections, Trieste regularly dispatched goods and people to the East and welcomed them to Europe, starting with the items sent from Tokyo for the Vienna *Weltausstellung* of 1873, which passed through the port of Trieste in 1872.³⁵

Although Japan had already participated in the exhibitions in London in 1862 and in Paris in 1867, Vienna was where the new Meiji government made its first official appearance, thus laying the ground for the new way Japan wished to be viewed from the outside. Japan had two objectives: to bring high-quality Japanese goods (particularly artisanal) to the attention of the entire world and

31 Dénes 2020, 37.

32 Centro Regionale Studi di Storia militare antica e moderna Trieste 2010, 136.

33 Revoltella 1864.

34 Brandi 1995-1996, 70.

35 Kutsuzawa 2018, 9; Turina 2020, 114.

thus increase exports, and to learn more about Western science and technology in order to adopt its methodologies in Japan.

The walls of the Japanese exposition were decorated with purple fabrics and brightly coloured paper lanterns. At the entrance, visitors were greeted by an enormous golden female dolphin, with the tail extending upwards beyond her head, brought from the south tower of Nagoya Castle; it was surrounded by metal floor vases and bronze statues of cranes,³⁶ which we can imagine as similar to the censer crane dating back to around 1880 in the Museum of Oriental Art (inv. CMSA 41198). Japanese bronzes were particularly appreciated by Western collectors, who had already had the opportunity to admire them during the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1867; furthermore cranes like this were among the most common export objects, often found in private collections of the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁷ Today, similar specimens are preserved at the Stibbert Museum in Florence, the Chiossone Museum in Genoa and the Musée Cernuschi in Paris. Trieste is no exception: the crane in the Museum of Oriental Art comes from the collection of Antonio Caccia (1829–1893), a literary man, musician and collector who at his death left numerous works of art to the Municipality of Trieste, today divided between the Civic Museums of History and Art and the Revoltella Museum.

Access to Japanese markets did not result in any particular increase in the Monarchy's economy,³⁸ but the opening of new trade routes, the opportunity for Austro-Hungarian citizens to visit Japan and the information and materials that reached the nations on the Danube from the Far East nevertheless fuelled a growing interest in Japan.

Although there were few Japanese visitors to the Monarchy (with the exception of the delegation to the *Weltausstellung* of 1873), the real benefit of the exposition was that the general public could now

read travelogues about Japan, see images of the country, and marvel at the objects collected there.

After the forced opening of the Japanese borders, the European aristocracy and upper classes began to extend their travels to take in the Land of the Rising Sun, whether for economic purposes, scientific research, cultural curiosity or simple prestige.³⁹ Trieste became the port of departure of choice for these memorable journeys. It is remarkable how many of them can be associated with holdings in European museums.

The first high-profile traveller to leave, on 16 September 1887, was Enrico di Borbone-Parma, Count of Bardi (1851–1905) who left Trieste, accompanied by his wife and some friends, to undertake a “voyage around the world” of which Japan was to be one of the key stops.⁴⁰ Arriving in the Japanese archipelago on 20 February 1889, he made an eight-month stay, returning at the end of September 1889 with a vast collection of items purchased in the Far East, which became the foundational nucleus of today's Museum of Oriental Art in Venice. And it was precisely to Trieste that the over 1,500 boxes with almost 30,000 objects were sent, to remain in the city until the end of 1889, that is, until the prince decided to place the goods in the Vendramin Calergi palace in Venice.⁴¹

A few years later, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Este (1863–1914) made an expedition around the world on the cruiser Kaiserin Elisabeth, sailing on 15 December 1892 from Trieste through the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean, and on to Ceylon and India. From Calcutta, the ship went on to the Pacific via Singapore and Java and through the Torres Strait and the Thursday Islands. Between May and June 1893, the Kaiserin Elisabeth took the heir to the throne to Australia, New Caledonia and the Southern Solomon Islands; after a stop in south-eastern New Guinea, she called at the Maluku Islands, Sarawak in Borneo, Singapore, Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Macau. On July 29, the expedition reached Nagasaki, whence the Austrian

36 Fajcsák 2020, 64–65.

37 I wish to thank Martina Becattini, curator of the Stibbert Museum in Florence, for this useful information.

38 Dénes 2020, 37.

39 Boscolo Marchi 2020, 188.

40 Ibid. 2020.

41 Ibid., 189.

cruiser returned to Trieste without her illustrious passengers. For thirty-five days (29 July–5 September 1893), Franz Ferdinand and his entourage stayed in Japan, where Heinrich von Siebold, the collector who had been the intermediary for many of Enrico di Borbone's acquisitions four years earlier, was secretary of the Austrian legation.⁴² The Archduke continued his journey on the steamer *Empress of China*, stopping in Vancouver on the west coast of Canada,⁴³ and returning to Le Havre on 19 October 1893. In addition to a vast number of ethnographic objects, plants and animals, the expedition also brought home from this trip more than 1,500 photographs and albums, now preserved in the Photographic Collection of the Weltmuseum in Vienna.⁴⁴

Triestines on Board: Their Journeys and Their Stays in Asia

These eminent travellers were not, however, the first to embark from Trieste for the Far East. From the ratification of the commercial treaty, in the mid-1870s, up till the outbreak of the First World War, many Triestines found their way to Japan: rich bourgeois and businessmen, Lloyd's officials, captains and crew members, such as on-board doctors, thanks to whom the city's museum collections have been enriched with East Asian goods.

The position of accredited on-board doctor gave those with medical qualifications unparalleled opportunities. For Carlo de Marchesetti (1850–1926),⁴⁵ a Triestine doctor, paleo-ethnologist and botanist, the voyage opened up research pathways that led to his becoming Director of the Natural History Museum of Trieste. On 1 October 1875, Marchesetti set sail from Trieste on the Lloyd's steamer *Hungaria* as ship's doctor, officially tasked with studying endemic tropical diseases and related therapies *in situ*. After calling at Egypt and

Arabia, he descended the western coast of India to Tellicherry, stopping at Bombay, Goa, New Goa, Pangjim and Karwar. In the places he visited and even during the voyage, whenever the ship was in harbour, he collected plants and other specimens and took multiple notes to meet the commitment he had made to study infectious diseases, flora and the natural world in India.⁴⁶ He also went inland, visiting the mountains of Coorg (now Kodagu district) and Sattari. The petrified forest he found in the latter location not only made his name, but also awoke in him a renewed interest in the paleo-ethnological sciences, which he would later develop in parallel with his botanical research (Marchesetti is in fact known chiefly for his research in the field of prehistory and protohistory in Venezia Giulia and Istria; he went on to take responsibility for the first scientific contribution on the history of the Castellieri, the typical protohistoric settlements of Karst areas). On 10 April 1876 he set out for Europe aboard the *Ettore*,⁴⁷ and a few months later he became director of the Natural History Museum.

The subtle irony of his words in a letter from January 1876 shows something of how the Habsburg Empire was perceived:

As soon as I have some time I want to write a little article to make the position of an Austrian in the Indies known and how well Austria is known in those regions. At least by presenting myself as an Italian one knows which people I belong to, while saying here that I am Austrian is almost as if one were to say I come from the Principality of Liechtenstein or from Hesse-Cassel.⁴⁸

It is perhaps salutary to reflect that these tiny states and the Habsburg Empire might have been

⁴² Ibid., 192.

⁴³ Schicklgruber 2017, 63–64.

⁴⁴ Welt Museum Wien. n.d.

⁴⁵ Moser 2015, 295, 307–08 note 6.

⁴⁶ Marchesetti's letter to Muzio de Tommasini, illegible location, 22 February 1876, Archive of Natural History Museum of Trieste.

⁴⁷ Marchesetti's letter to Muzio de Tommasini, Bombay, 10 April 1876, Archive of Natural History Museum of Trieste.

⁴⁸ Marchesetti's letter to Muzio de Tommasini, Tellicherry, 19 January 1876, Archive of Natural History Museum of Trieste.



Fig. 4: Tanjore [or Thanjavur], southern India, Reverse painting featuring Viṣṇu with his wife Lakṣmī, 19th century, Tempera on Glass, 35 x 25 cm. Purchase from Carlo de Marchesetti, 1 March 1881. Trieste, Museum of Oriental Art, inv. CMSA 14792.

much of a muchness in the Far East at this stage, before the diffusion of Austrian Lloyd, probably because of the Monarchy's lack of interest in colonialist expansion.

In 1880, Marchesetti left Trieste again for his second expedition to the East, with the aim of expanding the Museum's collections. This trip, which should have led him to Hong Kong, was less successful than the first, however, because he was obliged to stop in Singapore (1881) with a serious illness.⁴⁹

On 1 March 1881, Carlo de Marchesetti sold to the Museum of Antiquities of Trieste about a hundred Chinese and Indian objects, evidently collected during the two trips. Some of them, including notably six tempera reverse paintings on glass depicting Indian divinities, made in Tanjore (Thanjavur) in southern India in the 19th century, are preserved in the Civic Museum of Oriental Art (inv. CMSA 14791-14796) (fig. 4). Again in 1881, Carlo de Marchesetti gave the speech *Trieste e il commercio orientale* (Trieste and Oriental Trade), published in 1882, which reported on the first decade of trade with India since the opening of the Suez Canal.⁵⁰

By contrast, the Triestine who was responsible for the main nucleus of the collections of the Civic Museum of Oriental Art (in particular the holdings of Chinese silk and porcelain) spent a long time in the Far East and had the opportunity to assemble his own collection during his stay. This was Carlo Zanella (1853–1900),⁵¹ Lloyd's agent in Hong Kong, Singapore and Bombay in the years when more and more routes to the East were being established. The original extent of his donation is documented by a letter dated 9 July 1900 and by the so-called "Elenco degli oggetti componenti il legato del fu Carlo Zanella. Giugno 1900" (List of Objects that Make Up the Legacy of the Late Carlo Zanella. June 1900), a list drafted by the director of the Museum, Alberto Puschi,⁵² of 1,005 objects, mostly from Chi-

na, Japan and India, along with coins and medals, including Asian ones. Today, because of the lack of original photographic documentation and the limited number of original labels or references marked on the objects, only a fifth of those objects can be identified. Such matches as can be made are based on short, often very general descriptions. The collection is basically heterogeneous, comprising a mixture of applied art and ethnographic objects, mostly of Chinese and Japanese origin: vases and sculptures made of porcelain, metal, bone, ivory, tortoise shell and wood; weapons; musical instruments; clothing; tapestry hangings; and furniture.

Carlo Zanella was based in Hong Kong on behalf of the Austrian Lloyd from 1884 to 1894, first as assistant to the local agent and then as the principal agent in the Far East, with an interruption between 1892 and 1893, when he was transferred to Singapore. We know that he had started to gather East Asian objects thanks to a notice of auction of the furnishings of his Singapore home, which took place on 1 July 1893 and included "Japanese bric-a-brac stands" and "wall scrolls".⁵³ After Hong Kong, Zanella spent some time in Bombay and retired in 1896 or 1897. He died suddenly and prematurely in Trieste on 23 April 1900. His obituary spoke of "an unobtrusive man, [who] endeared himself to all with whom he came in contact. He [...] was himself of unusually wide and cultured reading."⁵⁴

Let us not forget that—in the words of a politician of the time—the representatives of the Austrian Lloyd were regarded as deputy ambassadors of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, enjoying the same status as the British East India Company representatives. In some places in the East, Lloyd's representatives were almost sovereign: effectively, envoys of a great foreign power.⁵⁵

The first real diplomat we know of is a person who contributed greatly to the building of relationships between Trieste and Japan, namely the landowner and businessman Georg von Hütterott

49 Moser 2015, 295–96, 308 note 10.

50 Brandi 1995–1996, 70 note 21.

51 Messina 2019, 11–12.

52 Folder *Elenchi doni. Legato Zanella*, Archive of History and Art Museums, Trieste.

53 *The Singapore Free Press* 1893.

54 *The Straits Times* 1900, 3.

55 Museo del Turismo 2006, 138–39.

(1852–1910).⁵⁶ In 1879, when he was only 27 years old, von Hütterott was appointed Honorary Consul of Japan for Austria-Hungary, based in Trieste, probably the first and certainly the youngest Japanese imperial consul in Europe (the consul in Venice was appointed in 1880).

What qualified Georg von Hütterott for the post was the two-year journey he had already made around the world in 1874, through Calcutta, Ceylon, Singapore, Java, Canton and Hong Kong to Japan, where he made a protracted stay before continuing his journey to the west coast of the United States. After crossing North America, he participated in the International Exhibition in Philadelphia as official representative of the city of Trieste before his return home.

Just under ten years later, on 1 November 1883, von Hütterott and his wife Marie Henriette embarked for Japan on the Austrian Lloyd steamship *Orion*, reaching Nagasaki on New Year's Day of 1884. As well as travelling around the country, the couple also dedicated themselves to the study of the Japanese language. Their diaries and correspondence demonstrate how they had both been captivated by the charm of a country in the midst of an industrial revolution, yet still largely linked to a feudal culture: a dedication to Japan that was even honoured by Emperor Meiji, who awarded Georg the *Kyokujitsu-shō* (Order of the Rising Sun) in February 1885, on the grounds of his “commitment to the diffusion and dissemination of interest in Japanese culture”.⁵⁷ During their time in Japan, Hütterott compiled his study on the manufacturing of *katanas* and Japanese blades, of which he was a passionate collector (dated “Tokio, December 1884” and signed “Georg Hütterott, Kaiserlich Japanischer Consul in Triest”),⁵⁸ while his wife kept a travel diary and wrote a sensitive analysis of the condition of Japanese women, entitled *Die Frau in Japan*. They left Yokohama in January 1885 and, after a two-month stop in Ceylon, returned to Trieste in May 1885.⁵⁹

56 Marić 2005, 6; Zanlorenzi 2006, 662.

57 Zanlorenzi 2006, 675–76.

58 Hütterott 2005 [1884–1888].

59 Marić 2005; Zanlorenzi 2010, 420.

Thanks to von Hütterott, a new “Treaty of Friendship and Trade” between Japan and the Austro-Hungarian Empire was signed in 1897.⁶⁰ He was also closely involved in the nine-day courtesy visit to Trieste and the Empire paid by a team of the Japanese navy in September 1907. The *Tsukuba* (14,000 t armoured cruiser) and the *Chitose*, two ships of the Imperial Japanese Navy, docked in the port of Trieste on the return leg of a cruise to the United States and Europe, which took place between 1 April and 16 November 1907. The delegation, commanded by Vice Admiral Ijuin Gorō (1852–1921), had officially attended the Jamestown Exposition, an international fair organised to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the foundation of the colony of Virginia. After reaching Trieste on 5 September, the guests were treated to excursions and banquets (at the Hotel de la Ville, Villa Necker, Villa Revoltella, Hotel Obelisco) and a concert by the Japanese imperial troupe, who performed almost exclusively Western music in the Piazza Grande (now Piazza dell’Unità d’Italia). On September 11, 1907, a delegation of the crews and the commander of the naval squadron went to Vienna to be received by Kaiser Franz Josef.

Although Georg von Hütterott lived in Trieste until his death in 1910, what remains of the Japanese collection he put together is today preserved in the Museum of the City of Rovinj, in Istria, where he had begun to build a splendid estate on the island of Sant’Andrea in 1890, and where his widow and her youngest daughter Barbara moved in 1927. This may explain why Trieste retains little memory of him, despite his great importance for the economic and industrial history of the city. In fact, it should not be forgotten that, at the end of the 19th century, along with Adolf Wunsch and Vittorio Serravallo, he was among the main promoters of the *Società Austriaca di Pesca e Piscicoltura Marina* (Austrian Society of Marine Fishing and Fish Farming), which was responsible for the establishment of a Fishing Museum which was the embryo of the current Maritime Museum.⁶¹

60 Zanlorenzi 2010, 424.

61 Zanlorenzi 2007, 359.

The objects preserved in Rovinj represent only a part of the Georg von Hütterott collection.⁶² In particular, nothing remains of the Japanese weapons section, with the exception of three bows and nineteen spears currently on display in the Civic Museum of Oriental Art in Trieste. These were donated by his widow to the Revoltella Museum in 1934 and were delivered to the Civic Museum of History and Art of Trieste in 1962, passing to the Civic Museum of Oriental Art in 2001.⁶³

More information has recently come to light about the background to another important collection, thanks to the discovery of a newspaper article concerning the voyage round the world in 1895–1896 of Baron Rosario Currò jr (1851–1929),⁶⁴ a rich philanthropist and Trieste-born collector of Sicilian origin. Currò made important bequests to the Revoltella Museum and the Museums of History and Art: terracottas, Greek vases, Etruscan bronzes, Roman glass, coins and medals, historical chests, furniture, caskets, majolica, porcelain, clocks, bas-reliefs, miniatures, weapons, twenty-five painted tables and canvases, and objects from the Far East. Japanese, Indian and a few Chinese objects appear both in his legacy and in some previous donations to the Trieste civic museums (fig. 5). His trip around the world followed the route of Franz Ferdinand from a few years earlier, with a stop in Japan. The departure is jokingly described as follows:

Yesterday, in the afternoon, Messrs. Dr. Vittorio Serravallo and Francesco Pohlutka, i.r. Lieutenantcy Advisor embarked on the Lloyd's steamship 'Gisella' to take a short trip ... which will last eight months. Those two gentlemen intend to visit India, China and Japan, then returning to Trieste via America. Baron Rosario Currò boarded with them and wanted to accompany them for a short walk ... all the way to India.⁶⁵

We know that Currò did in fact travel on with his two companions; in May 1896 the three landed in Honolulu and subsequently in San Francisco.⁶⁶ Vittorio Serravallo (1858–1929) is an interesting character: a pharmacist and trader in goods imported from European colonies (such as coffee, tea, spices, sugar, cocoa and chocolate). He was also the inventor of a new recipe for Ferrochina, a popular restorative tonic, which he called *Vino di China ferruginoso Serravallo* (Serravallo ferruginous cinchona wine, prepared from cinchona bark from Borneo, Java and Sumatra, mixed with white wine from Alcamo in Sicily). After opening a production plant in 1895, he created copious advertising material to promote his product in every imaginable language, and used his contacts from the trip around the world to establish a vast worldwide sales network.⁶⁷ The plant was active until 1988.

Early in the twentieth century, another doctor followed in the footsteps of the doctor and paleo-ethnologist Marchesetti. Francesco Isidoro Pepeu (1887–1971) who belonged to an eminent Trieste family of distinguished collectors, graduated in medicine in 1910 and embarked as a ship's doctor on Lloyd's steamships in the Middle East and East Asia. On one of his trips in 1912, he stopped in Shanghai to visit his sister and brother-in-law, a Lloyd's Inspector, like Carlo Zanella. Four Chinese porcelain containers from the 18th century, recently donated by his nephew Giancarlo Pepeu to the Civic Museum of Oriental Art (fig. 6), bear witness to this journey.⁶⁸

Francesco Pepeu was an eclectic character: as well as an esteemed doctor, he was also a traveller, passionate art collector and amateur photographer, as evidenced by numerous donations to the Civic Museums. The assets donated by his nephew include a large photographic corpus, today preserved

62 Marić 2005.

63 Zanlorenzi 2006, 689–91.

64 *Il Piccolo del Mattino* 1895, 3.

65 Ibid.

66 *Honolulu Pacific Commercial Advertiser* 1896, 1; *The Hawaiian Gazette* 1896, 8; *The San Francisco Call* 1896, 7.

67 Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities and Cultural Heritage n.d.; J. Serravallo (1913), which is a collection of advertisements and reviews of the *Ferrochina Serravallo*, in multiple languages.

68 Messina 2019, 140 cat. NE 3, NE 4; 142 cat. NE 6; 147 cat. NE 13.



Fig. 5: Kyoto, Kinkōzan workshop, Awata-style Satsuma ware. Small baluster vase, last quarter of 19th-early 20th century, Earthenware, overglaze old and polychrome Enamels, height 15 cm, diameter 11 cm. Bequest of Rosario Currò, 24 June 1929. Trieste, Museum of Oriental Art, inv. CMSA 30011.

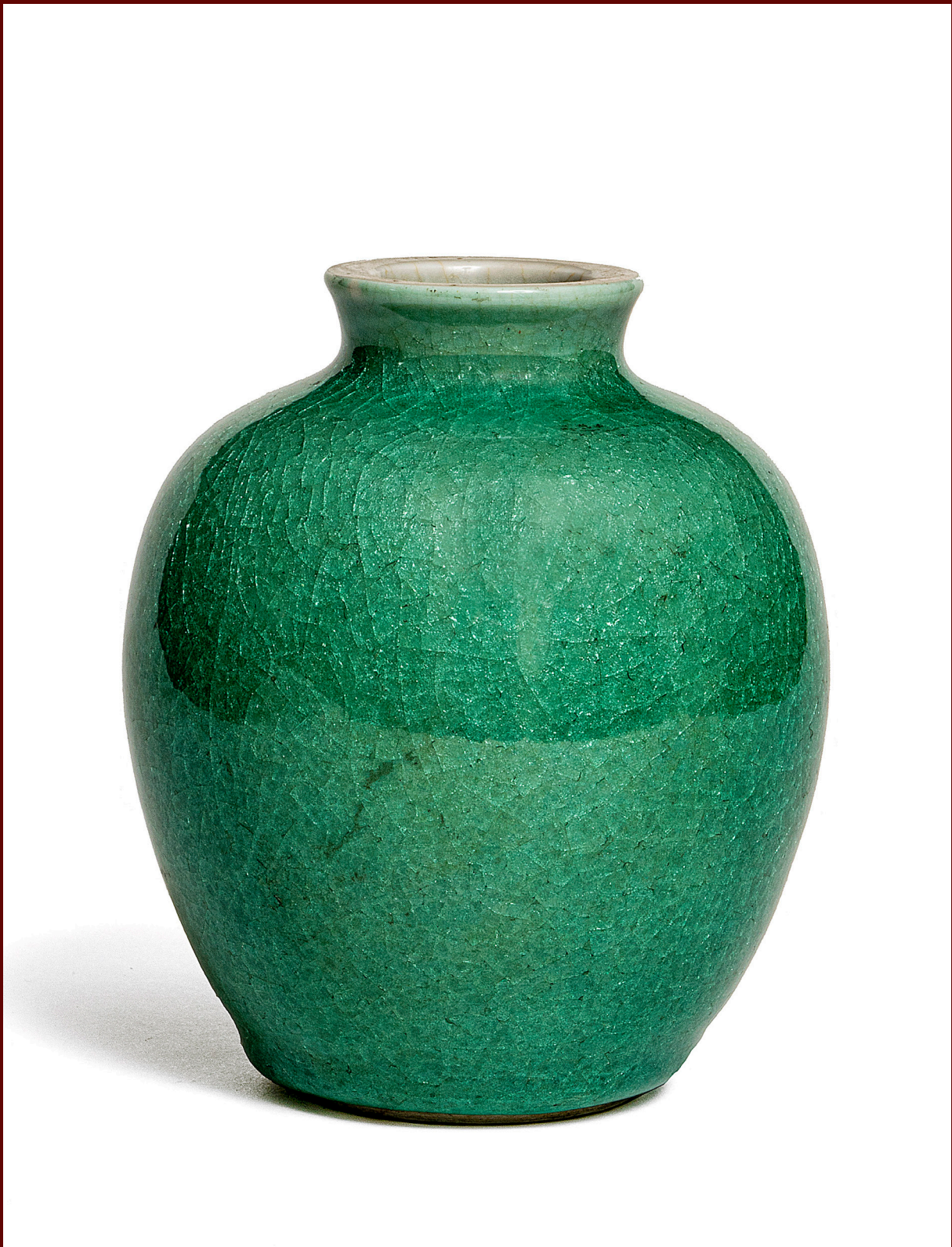


Fig. 6: China, Small "apple green" vase, Qing dynasty, late Qianlong period (1736–1795) or later. Porcelain, "apple green" copper oxide crackle Glaze, height 13,3 cm, diameter 10,8 cm, donated by Pepeu family, 29 September 2016. Trieste, Museum of Oriental Art, inv. CMSA 41148.

in the Photo Library, which also includes albums of travel photographs, the purpose of which was to fix and preserve the memory of the places visited in the Far East, India and Africa. Unfortunately, his youthful trip to China is not documented, but his 1925 trip to India, again as a ship's doctor, is immortalised in a series of photographs recording his journey from Delhi to Jaipur. These testify to his ethno-anthropological interest, focusing on people's daily lives rather than on the stops of the Grand Tour, thus documenting the living conditions in India in the 1920s.⁶⁹

In the wake of the establishment of diplomatic-economic relations with European states, the Japanese government hired selected outsiders, known as "*o-yatoi gaikokujin*" (お雇い外国人), to take part in the great Meiji restoration by spending a few years in Japan to work on improving the quality and competitiveness of their sector of expertise in the newly formed Japanese economic system. Amerigo Hofmann (1875–1945),⁷⁰ for instance, who graduated as a forestry engineer from the *Hochschule für Bodenkultur* (High School for Soil Culture) in Vienna and is remembered as the pioneer of Italian forestry, was invited to Japan in his thirties in 1904 as Professor of Forestry Hydraulics at the University of Tokyo. He remained there until 1909, putting what he was teaching into practice by successfully landscaping badlands in a catchment basin not far from the city of Nagoya. Today the site is jealously preserved, with Hofmann's systematising work enclosed and held up as an example in the Hofmann Work Memorial Park in Nagoya.⁷¹ During his stay in Japan the government also tasked Hofmann with various missions to Korea and Taiwan, then Japanese dependencies, including the conduct of a census of *Laurus camphora* (camphor) plants in Taiwan. In 1913, he published *Aus den Waldungen des Fernen Ostens* (*In the Woods of the Far East*).⁷² He donated a cabinet containing a collection of 579 nocturnal and

diurnal Japanese butterflies to the Natural History Museum of Trieste (inv. L/L1 -L12).

At the other end of the spectrum, Trieste collections are indebted to the response of turn-of-the-century visual artists to the Far East. Many felt—as Gauguin did—the call of distant lands. The painter Amalia Goldmann Besso (1856–1932) was one of these. During the world tour which she made in the company of her nephew, the journalist Salvatore Besso (1884–1912), she stopped in Japan in August 1910 and stayed till early 1911, after crossing Russia and China on the Trans-Siberian Railway.⁷³

During her stay in Tokyo, Goldmann Besso decided to take painting lessons from the master Hama, with whom she remained in contact by letter, and whose tuition informed her "Impressions", small-format and quickly executed tablets, with views of villages crossed with luminous brushstrokes, today preserved at the Marco Besso Foundation in Rome. The Trieste museums do not possess such works by Amalia Goldmann Besso, but on 8 September 1926, she donated the first three Japanese prints to the collections (inv. CMSA SNR 1570, CMSA SNR 1571, CMSA SNR 1572, notably "Yokkaichi, Miegawa 四日市三重川" (Yokkaichi: Mie River) by Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川 広重 (ca. 1833–1834), which is part of the series "Tōkaidō gojusan tsugi no uchi 東海道五十三次" (The Series of the Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō) (fig. 7). Until then, the Trieste museum's Japanese print collection had been slow to take shape. We hear only of the purchase of two *ehon* by Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾 北斎 (1760–1849) in 1881, including volume III of "Fugaku hyakkei 富嶽百景三編" (One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji), and of the receipt of prints from the painter Argio Orell, the greatest Trieste exponent of Japonism and a collector of Japanese woodcuts, as part of an exchange in the following year.⁷⁴

The painter Vittorio Bolaffio (1883–1931) left Paris for Trieste in early 1912, having decided to embark as a stoker on the Lloyd Triestino ships. Bolaffio was a pupil of Giovanni Fattori and

69 Colecchia 2020.

70 Gabbrielli 2005, 133–34.

71 Ibid., 134.

72 Hofmann 2013.

73 Spagnoletto 2020.

74 Zanlorenzi 2009.



Fig. 7: Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), “Yokkaichi: Mie River” (Yokkaichi Miegawa 四日市 三重川), from “The Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road” (Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi no uchi 東海道五十三次之内), ca. 1833–1834, Color woodblock print (nishikie), 220 x 345 mm (ōban), donated by Amalia Goldmann Besso, 8 September 1926. Trieste, Museum of Oriental Art, inv. CMSA SNR1571.

a friend of Amedeo Modigliani who, in Paris in 1910, had introduced him to the works of Matisse, Cézanne and Gauguin. From his first voyage, with stops in India, Java, Singapore and Japan, he brought back lively sketches of local life and port scenes, as well as some paintings set in Singapore. The only one of these works preserved in Trieste is “La Cinesina” (Chinese Girl), formerly in the Malabotta collection and today owned by the Revoltella Museum.⁷⁵ The trip to the Far East was decisive for the luminous rendering of Bolaffio’s works: the piercing light of midday or the polarised light of sunsets over the sea would never abandon him again.

By “the Far East” travellers understood far more than simply China, India or Japan. Gioachino De

Grassi (1838–1904)⁷⁶ who arrived in Siam (now Thailand) from Koper in 1870, founded a construction company which quickly earned the esteem of the royal family, and became Siam’s most prolific architect of that era for twenty years. He had a Siamese-style family tomb built for his brother Antonio in the cemetery of Koper. In 1883, he was joined by Giulio Stoelker (1856–1914), designer-builder from Trieste, and brother of Amalia Stoelker, Gioachino’s future wife. Both stayed in Siam until 1893, planning the country’s first railway, across the Malay peninsula to Singapore. Giulio Stoelker’s great-grandson, Giulio Schizzi, has generously donated family photographs and documents to the Photo Library of the Civic Museums of History and Art of Trieste.

⁷⁵ Gregorat 2017, 58–61.

⁷⁶ Nalesini 1998.



Fig. 8: Japan, Satsuma ware, tea or coffee set, end of 19th century. Porcelain, overglaze gold and polychrome Enamels, donated by Sergio and Anna degli Ivanissevich, 18 September 2013. Trieste, Museum of Oriental Art, inv. CMSA 40309/a-b, 40310/a-b, 40311, 40312/a-f, 40313/a-f.

One did not, however, have to be an archduke, nobleman, doctor or commander to travel on Lloyd's ships to the Far East and return with objects of an exotic flavour.

At the turn of the 20th century, nearly every Triestine who was at sea, from ship's cooks to Lloyd's engine drivers, purchased souvenirs of the Far East—especially tea or coffee sets—for their family, to the point where they are to be found in almost every house in Trieste (fig. 8). Lovingly preserved by descendants as precious memories, in some cases these objects were donated by enlightened heirs to the Civic Museum of Oriental Art, following its inauguration in 2001. If their artistic value is often relative, their historical and anthropological interest is very high: these are mass-produced porcelains, created for export and therefore designed to satisfy the image that the West had of the East: applied art artefacts in which Japanese artisans, in a dizzying game of mirrors, offered their

clients their personal representation of exoticism.

Speaking of “games of mirrors”, let us conclude by recalling an engraving which shows the flip side of this analysis: not only did Japan become known in Trieste, but Trieste was also of consequence in Japan. In the 6th volume of *Yochi shiryaku* (*Outlines of World Geography or Short Description of the World*) by Uchida Masao 内田 正雄 (1839–1876), published in Tokyo in 1871—the most used geography text in the early Meiji era, which was strongly influential in the opening of the Japanese to the world—we find a view of Trieste,⁷⁷ among the eight views dedicated to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The only cities represented are Vienna, Trieste and Budapest, because at the time Trieste—now a medium-size city—was actually the fourth city of the empire, after Vienna, Budapest and Prague.

Thanks to its status as a Free Port within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 18th- and

⁷⁷ Ildikó Farkas 2020, 49.

19th-century Trieste was characterised as the privileged location for connections with Asia. While the first attempts to establish colonial-style trade in the nineteenth century were not commercially successful—although they allowed the arrival of Chinese objects into the city which sparked the curiosity of the wealthier citizens—the foundation of a powerful shipping company such as Austrian Lloyd and the opening of the Suez Canal made a decisive difference: Trieste became the privileged port of call of the Empire for goods and people from the Far East, in particular India, China and Japan. The Civic Museum of Oriental Art is the mirror of this reality: far from being an “exotic” entity in the cultural ground of Trieste or the result of the collecting passion of a particularly keen, culturally up-to-date or economically advantaged individual, it is the concrete reflection of the particular geographical, political and economic situation enjoyed by the city.

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