

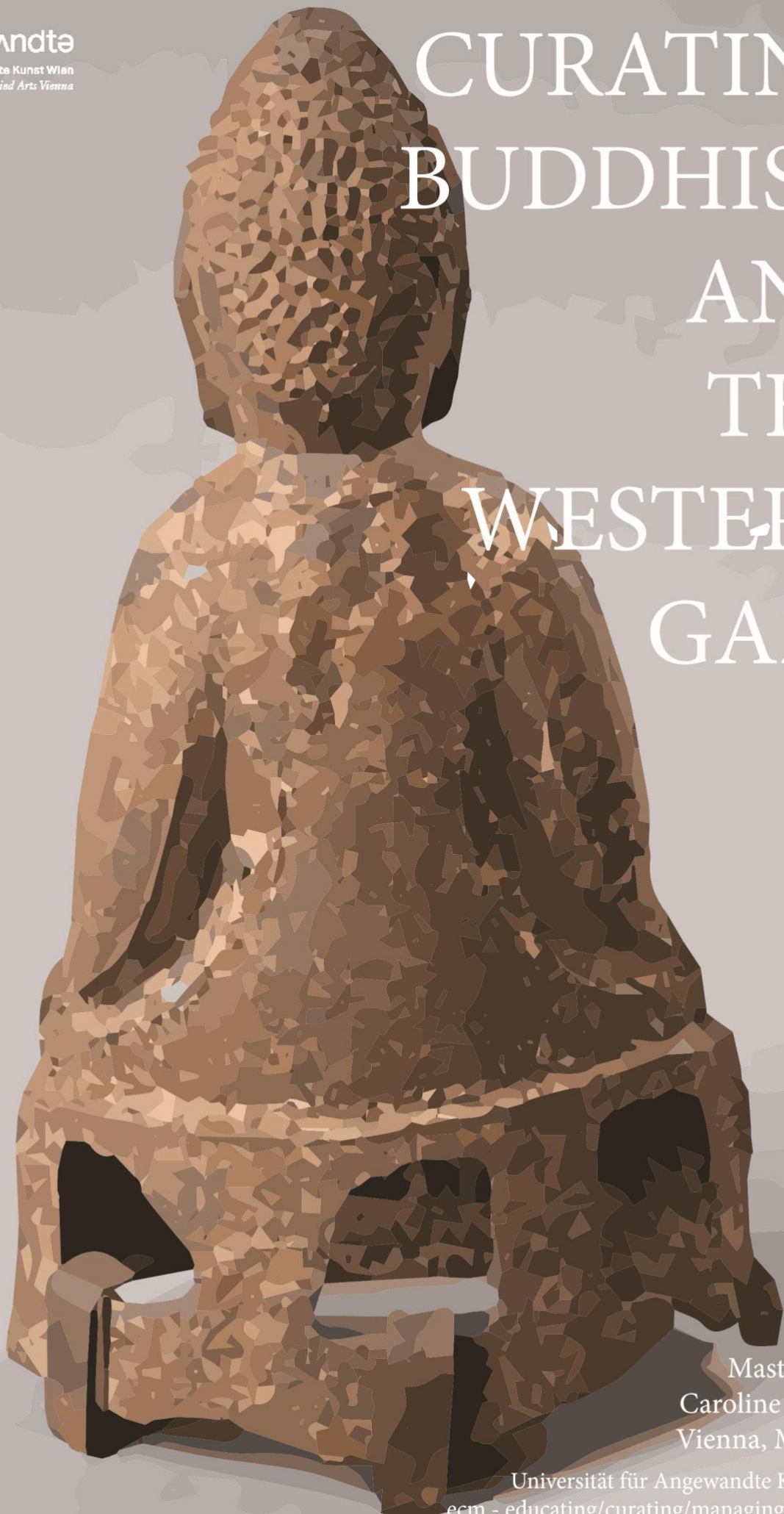
di:'angewandte

Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien
University of Applied Arts Vienna

/ecm

educating
curating
managing

CURATING BUDDHISM AND THE WESTERN GAZE



Master Thesis
Caroline Ahorner
Vienna, May 2024

Universität für Angewandte Kunst Wien
ecm - educating/curating/managing 2022-2024

Supervised by Martina Griesser-Stermscheg Priv.-Doz.Mag.^a Dr.ⁱⁿ and Beatrice Jaschke Sen.Sc.Mag.^a

Note of Thanks

Firstly, I want to sincerely thank my supervisor Martina Griesser-Stermscheg, who gave me the structure and support I needed and without whom I could not have written this thesis. Furthermore, I want to express a dear thank you to my second supervisor Beatrice Jaschke. A big thanks to my colleague Flore Friden, who offered me invaluable advice, and who also created the title page of this thesis, hence turning my vision into reality. Next, I want to thank Gonzalo Saavedra for his encouragement while I was drafting this thesis. Ultimately, I want to thank my family for their unwavering support, especially Karin Ahorner, Peter Ahorner and Pia Leimbacher.

I want to dedicate this paper to my uncle Sascha Stojan, whose perspective on life I will always cherish.

Table of Contents

Abstract	4
<i>Background</i>	7
<i>Methodology and Objectives</i>	8
Introduction - About Buddhism	9
Clarification of Terminus	10
The Religious, Sacred, Spiritual	11
About the method: Exhibition Analysis	21
Exhibition Analysis (ASIA. China – Japan – Korea).....	25
Exhibition Analysis (A Village in the Mountains).....	37
Conclusion.....	48

Keywords: Buddhism, Art exhibition, Western Gaze, Artefacts, Religion, Spirituality, Sacred, Aura, Arts and Crafts museum, Ethnological museum

Abstract

Buddhism is a complex term that describes both a religion and a compendium of lifestyles, values and practices, and it is experiencing increasing commodification. This thesis examines the intricacies of 'curating Buddhism' in the context of an exhibition, in a Western context, namely from the „Western Gaze“. The methodology includes, firstly, a literature review, and, secondly, the analysis of two exhibitions showcasing Buddhist-read artifacts and objects in Vienna, Austria. This paper aims to analyze and compare the curatorial concepts of each, with the research focus on the presentation of Buddhist items. The research question investigates which curatorial decisions were made that influence how Buddhist objects are presented in an exhibition in the context of a Western museum. In order to examine these layers, the thesis deals with the terms and concepts of spirituality, religiosity, and sacredness in the context of curating. Conclusions include the importance of approachability and empathy towards the exhibition visitors and the complications of presenting Buddhist objects in a permanent exhibition reproducing colonial power dynamics and hierarchies between objects and viewers.

Abstrakt

Buddhismus ist ein komplexer Begriff, der sowohl eine Religion als auch eine Sammlung von Lebensstilen, Werten, Praktiken und Erfahrungen beschreibt und eine zunehmende Kommerzialisierung erfährt. Diese Arbeit untersucht die Feinheiten des „Kuratierens des Buddhismus“ einer Ausstellung in einem westlichen Kontext, im sogenannten „Western Gaze“. Die Methodik umfasst erstens eine Literaturdiskussion und zweitens die Analyse zweier Ausstellungen, die buddhistisch gelesene Artefakte und Objekte in Wien, Österreich, zeigen. Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, die jeweiligen kuratorischen Konzepte zu analysieren und zu vergleichen, wobei der Forschungsschwerpunkt auf der Präsentation buddhistischer Gegenstände liegt. Die Forschungsfrage untersucht, welche kuratorischen Entscheidungen getroffen wurden, die die Präsentation buddhistischer Objekte in einer Ausstellung im Kontext eines westlichen Museums beeinflussen. Um diese Schichten zu untersuchen, befasst sich die Arbeit mit den Begriffen und Konzepten von Spiritualität, Religiosität und Heiligkeit im Kontext des Kuratierens. Zu den Schlussfolgerungen zählen die Bedeutung von Zugänglichkeit und Empathie gegenüber den Ausstellungsbesuchern sowie die Komplikationen der Präsentation

buddhistischer Objekte in einer Dauerausstellung, die koloniale Machtdynamiken und Hierarchien zwischen Objekten und Betrachtern reproduzieren können.

Research objectives

To define Buddhism can be described as a complex matter in itself. To explore what it means in curating, especially when put into a Western context as well as to contextualise and re-contextualise Buddhism in exhibitions and the institution that is the museum, will be the topic of this theses. In order to reflect and consider the aspects of showcasing Buddhist objects in exhibitions through a Western Gaze¹ as well as what the exhibition as function can convey, I will conduct two exhibition analysis of two different exhibition rooms in two different museums, each showcasing Buddhist objects, located in Vienna, Austria, in order to find out the following: Which possibilities and possible pitfalls of curating Buddhism are there and what could be said about its (appropriated) contexts from a Western point of view?

¹ „The Western Gaze is defined as a more privilege audience (people from the west) gazing/ looking at people who are not from the west and projecting their preconceptions, biases and ‘what have you’s’ onto them.“ – NO! Wahala Magazine, What is Ethical Storytelling? The Western Gaze, in: <https://www.nowahalamag.com/post/what-is-ethical-storytelling-the-western-gaze#:~:text=the%20'Western%20Gaze.-','what%20have%20you's'%20onto%20them.> (17th April 2024).

Background

As a person who is highly fascinated and impressed by Buddhist philosophy and practices and writing inevitably from a Western Gaze myself, it was interesting to me to reflect on combining the two fields of curating and Buddhism and ask questions about how Buddhism is actually represented in exhibitions in different types of museums in the Western sphere and what is found or lost in the process of curating Buddhist objects. I also want to mention the question of what it means that I, as an Austrian with, as of yet, no background in Buddhist practices, but being in the position of the „looker“, discuss this topic, and understand what aspects might have not been understood yet, or which pre-set opinions or judgements I might be reproducing again with this work. I have found that the extracting I will conduct in this thesis, and the pinpointing of features of the concept of Buddhism in exhibitions poses the question if this is an event, namely of commodifying Buddhism and selecting topics of Buddhism from a Western perspective and if this reproduces yet again in a manner of favoritism.

Methodology and Objectives

My first research approach is to discuss secondary research namely literature on the topic of exhibiting and curating Buddhism. The second and main research approach is to apply exhibition analysis tools as primary research in order to analyze two different exhibitions in which Buddhist objects are shown. As a consequence, I will explain how the findings are linked to concepts from said literature. I will define what a “Buddhist object” means in this thesis. I will also try to define concepts and definitions which are critical to understand the subtleties of curating Buddhism. In order to analyse the correlations, interpretations and investigation of other authors concerning sacred, religious and spiritual objects, in this context, of Buddhist ones, I will firstly look at the understanding of those terms and afterwards try to understand how they relate to the museum and lastly how they could be understood within the context of a Western museum. The upcoming first chapter after the introduction, the literature review, will start with a general literary reception of the notion that is Buddhism.

Introduction - About Buddhism

Buddhism encompasses many different meanings. It can be seen as a value system, a religion, a spiritual path, a lifestyle choice, or a cultural development. Buddhism cannot be pinned down to what it exactly “is”, as it is, in itself, determined by a way of thinking that marks life with “impermanence”, “suffering” and “without a lasting essence”.² Furthermore, Buddhism's approach to thinking, is that “thoughts originate dependently—they arise as a result of past habituation and present circumstances coming together.”³ Buddhism has emerged two millennia ago in Asia and has gained a foothold on all continents at the beginning of the 21st century. Buddhism, in its original historical and religious meaning, developed two main religious branches: Hinayana and Mahayana. Stemming from these, different schools like Mahayana, Vajrayana and Theravada developed, with the main „lessons“ revolving around the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold path. Discipline and Knowledge are linked together to lead Buddhist practitioners to Enlightenment, and, at last, to face and be free from suffering (Renger, 2020). In Europe, streams and ideas of Buddhism have been known since 300 years. Austria's first connection to Buddhism started in the late 16th century when travellers like Georg Christoph Fernberger started reaching India and China (Weitensfelder, 2023). The first approximation of the West towards Buddhism was firstly thought-based and intellectual, and after the second World War the approach and western appropriation of Buddhism got more experiential and pragmatic. Forms of

³ Russel RODGERS, Buddhism and Brain Science, in: <https://nelson.shambhala.org/2020/08/08/buddhism-and-brain-science/> (12th November 2023)

meditation like Vipassana or Zen were part in making practices of Buddhism, and followingly mindfulness-based stress reduction, accessible to society and media, and appealed to broader masses (Renger, 2020). Boundaries between Pop Culture, religiousness as well as non-religiousness turned increasingly fluid, as Buddha statues, for examples established as a main staple in furnishings and home decor for private as well as public spaces (Renger, 2020). Most of Buddhism's visibility in the West still is represented by the media and popular and everyday culture and its rites are processed practically, for example as stress-reducing healing practices. This visibility of Buddhist imagery and the appreciation of its aesthetics were part of diminishing the visibility of actual Buddhist cult acts and faith stories of the lived religiosity of it (Renger, 2020). What shapes the form of Buddhism in Asia, namely image cult, relic veneration, rituals for healing, thanksgiving for ancestors and treasuring the various Buddhist myths and legends in existence, were and are hardly noticed in the Western public. The reasons for Western ignorance of the basic principles, practices and values of Buddhism as found in Asia lie in colonial history (Renger, 2020).

Clarification of Terminus

Looking at Buddhism as a whole is looking at Buddhism in its details, as it is “made up” of a variety of different sets of beliefs and stories. In order to clarify which subjectives to look at Buddhism in terms of exhibition making, a differentiation is needed firstly in which terms to look at displaying Buddhist objects, the difference between Buddhist objects, art, or artefacts, but also, which terms could define such images, deities,

figures and set ups. Furthermore, I will try to differentiate what I mean by curating something: “sacred,” “spiritual,” or “religious” and how each of these terms fit in with the topic of Buddhism. I will analyse two exhibitions in which Buddhist historical objects and figures or figurines are put on display. Showcasing these types of objects are what I will mean when I refer to „exhibiting Buddhism“ in this thesis. For this research, I will neither analyse contemporary Buddhist art nor contemporary art made by Buddhist practitioners, which, nevertheless, is and can be an interesting area to research on and cannot be dismissed when analysing how „Buddhist art historical items“ are curated in the Western Gaze, anyhow, for this paper it would go beyond the scope and size of this research.

The Religious, Sacred, Spiritual

Buddhism is established as a world religion. Besides that, the aspect of spirituality is, especially in the sense of how the West looks at Buddhism, enhanced in cultural, religious and commercialised areas. The third description / term of Buddhist objects, as well used by many authors discussed above, is the one of sacrality or sacredness, which stems from religiousness. These three descriptions, terms or definitions attached to Buddhism, do exist exclusive of each other, but as well intertwined.

The author Gaitanos states that there are different definitions of religion and religiousness, for example that religion is the „faith in a higher being“, which corresponds to an intellectual definition, other than that a definition can be that what is

religious is anything „separate“ from any other human activity“, or that religion is defined as a cultural direction through the „clarification of meanings hidden within the symbols of each culture“. The term originated from Christian theological theory and thought, based on scientific rationality (Gaitanos, 2019). Intellectual definitions claim that the main feature of religion is an object-based belief. Other than that, prominent features of religion like „emotions like piety, the importance of faith and the key of traditional practices“ are not taken into account (Gaitanos, 2019). Consequently, the author here states that belief systems, categorized as religions, then could not be classified as religious, and states Theravada Buddhism as example of such belief system, on the other hand this system of defining religion would also provide proof for any belief system to be correct to be labeled „religious“, if there would be enough passionate belief in it (Harrison, 2006).

Firstly, I want to explain the different descriptions of Buddhist “objects”, “artefacts” and Buddhist “art” and why, in this thesis I will not make a distinction with these terms and will use them interchangeably. In the following part of the literature discussion, I want to look further into the question of what is defined by “Buddhist objects”. The author Giuliani states, that the distinction made between naming items “art” and those which are termed ethnographic “artefacts” has been going on only for the last five or six decades in the geographical landscape of the US and Europe (Giuliani, 2014, p.2). Another author, Veiga de Oliveria describes museums artefacts as witness objects. Oliveira further says that objects placed in an ethnological museum are testimonials to the life of the culture they originally belonged to, and their true meaning therefore lies in the dimension of the cultural world the artefact previously saw. There

are different layers of meaning and spheres inherent to an object, and Buddhist ones are no exception - additionally, there are other layers to be paid attention to. The author Parker mentions that concerning Buddhist objects, their religious contextualization creates a disconnect between the original context and its setting in the museum display, as any display design will eventually and unavoidably „render the object´s religiosity“ (Parker, 2019). Parker coins the term Buddhist art historical items which explains the variety but also undefinable character of Buddhist objects, in this case reflected in the rhetorical form. Buddhism and its art has developed over the last centuries, but the reception of its philosophies only has been acknowledged, and put into practice by Western society since, and has been exhibited in Western context and museums. When we speak of Buddhist art, objects, or artefacts, we often refer to figurines or statues of the Buddha. Buddha statues´ function were to „assist local audiences on their path to enlightenment“ (Parker, 2019).

The reception of Buddhist art varies throughout academia and differs according to the authors´ perspective. The field of study of Buddhist Art History developed, one author states, in line with the growth of the British Museum, where Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks obtained and curated items there which, Parker claims, „form the basis of Buddhist art historical theory“ (Parker, 2019).⁴ The Western museum curator or former collector is here framed as the history maker of another culture. In her paper, Parker

⁴ „Debates in Buddhist art theory in the academic world are based on these items, such as the aniconic versus the anthropomorphic manifestations of the living Buddha, the origin of Buddha figure from either Gandhara or Mathura art schools of style, and the influence of Hellenistic art style on Buddhist art. These debates and theories were created as a result of the expansion of the British Empire. The collection of items by the British Museum has formed the foundations of the Buddhist art scholarship.“ – see: Parker, 2019, p.11.

examines the dialogue between the “life of these objects, from their point of entry into Western epistemological structures, and the specific development of the academic discipline of Buddhist art history” (Parker, 2019). The author further mentions, obtaining a definition of Igor Kopytoff, so-called “object biographies,” which describes when an object carries “various biographies and sets of identities depending on the item’s current use and assignment of status.”⁵ Collections form object identities, hence, objects inherit meaning. Yiao-hwei Chuang states in her article, ‘Presenting Buddhism in Museums’, that “Buddhist objects are the visual expression of Buddhist ideals and the embodiment of Buddhist teachings. ’So how do we – and can we -, as an institution or a curator, respectfully display and appreciate these objects for what Chuang terms their ‘spiritual dimension’?” (Parker, 2019, p.9).

The author Yiao-hwei Chuang, as quoted by Parker, 2019, states „Buddhist objects are the visual expression of Buddhist ideals and the embodiment of Buddhist teachings “. I would argue, drawing on Chuang’s statement, that a question can be to whom these Buddhist ideals and embodied Buddhist teachings speak and if there must be more context provided for visitors who did not previously know about those factors. Parker asks how we (as an institution or a curator) can „respectfully display and appreciate these objects for what Chuang terms their ‘spiritual dimension’“ (Chuang, in: Parker, 2019). Can this spiritual dimension be described as the „aura” of the object? Chuang is very direct that these items (Buddhist items) were not created for aesthetically inclined

⁵ Kopytoff, Igor. (1986). The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Edited by Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 64-92.

museum displays. These items are the embodiment of Buddhist religious ideals, ultimately Chuang states ‘they are religious objects’ (Chuang, in: Parker, 2019, p. 118). Geertz discusses in the 70’s that symbols deliver mankind something to hold on to, something to make sense of and they create some sort of structure, furthermore, a totality of symbols and when placed together, also build the base for „any religious belief system“ (Geertz, 1977, p.129). Karp and Katz state the must-do of recognizing that the significance behind objects often lie in their their background of being found in a domestic sphere, and that these objects create meaning through their context, and further the context they are in shapes their meaning.

The author Greenblatt discusses when a physical object is considered art, and states that the two factors of “wonder” and “resonance” must be present (Giulianti p.4, p.5, 2014). Again, I link this to the concept of aura, and its relevancy. The author further states that “Wonder [means] the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.” (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42). If this is to be true, a momentum, space, and time to breath, and to pause are necessary to experience and a result of experience an object in order for it to be considered art.

To summarise, a physical object, Greenblatt claims in 1991 can be then considered art, considering aesthetic theory and its scholars, the material should have a “sense of resonance and wonder” (Giulianti, 2014, p.4/5). If we see arts role as being a mediator

between the artist and its audience⁶, and the artist can be seen as the creator, what does the object “itself” want from the viewer in the first place? (Fritz Graebner, in: Ullmann, 2016) describes artefacts as “direct testimonies” which include “all the factual components of human cultures, dead or living, that we have in our hands and before our eyes”⁷. Sónia Silva talks about contemplation, wonder and surrendering to the object as well, when discussing in her research what an artefact means versus the art-work, and explains the work of the curators in the exhibition “Modernism”: through the act of contemplating and being exposed to the sense of wonder, a surrendering should happen – to the work of the art, which makes the art an artwork in the first place, like Brent Plate explains (Silva, 2017). This wonder, and aura needs visitors to step away from the role of exerting control onto the artefacts but let go and be present in the moment with the object (and step into a direct dialogue).

Wonder may well be, in Stephen Greenblatt’s words, the “power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention” (2004, 546). But, as Greenblatt as well as the curators in Lisbon would agree, art installation techniques play a key role in the production of wonder and mystique. In the case of museums, the “work” of art is greatly enhanced by “the seductions of an elaborately crafted aura. – Sónia Silva⁸

Silva further strengthens the importance of wonder and mystique, and that art installation techniques “play a key role in the production of wonder and mystique”, and further argues that the “work” of art, is “greatly enhanced by a “elaborately crafted

⁶ Sheppard, citing Tolstoy, p.20, 1987; in: Guilianti, 2014 p. 6.

⁷ Fritz Graebner, Method of Ethnology (Heidelberg, 1911), in: Wernhart, Binter, Source genres and neighboring sciences, p. 62., in: Ullmann, p.22, 2016.

⁸ Sónia Silva, Art and Fetish in the Anthropology Museum, Material Religion Volume 13, Issue 1, 2017.

aura”⁹. When asking the question of how a museum nowadays can articulate the different „histories“ of an object it is asked what role the museum display plays and how this can be achieved (Parker, 2019).

(...) art institutions today still tend to prioritize poetics over politics, ‘tradition’ over modernity, homogeneity over heterogeneity. Such lingering Orientalism can be attributed to reasons ranging from logistical difficulties to conflicted interests, but above all to a lack of historicity: the intentional or habitual shunning of contextual complexities, the inclusion of which may deprive the artworks – and their hosts – of their pretense to neutrality, transcendence and aura. - Chang Tan, 2023

Parker is concerned with (the lack of) respect of the objects’ spiritual dimensions’ (Parker, 2019).¹⁰ The same author mentions as well „a number of intrinsic problems with the museum display system“ (Parker, 2019), of which I want to mention the one of “difficulty in accommodating a plurality of histories”. To acknowledge each history of each object within one collection shown, and which are shown under one timeline, is difficult, says Parker also due to the lack of “historical specificity”. To link objects together might also erase any other specificities the individual objects have, so to commonize them would be to eradicate whatever facts are not fitting the narrative of the one specific theme under which a plurality of objects stand. Even though museums nowadays step away from “‘scientific epistemic configuration’ of categorizing objects which once dominated museum display “, Parker states that there is still “not a clean

⁹ Silva, referencing: Smart and Paine, 2000–2001, 4; 2013 (2017, p. 107).

¹⁰ This „deprivation“ of the aura has been described by a number of other authors, for example Parker (the question is if aura can only be present if spirituality is respected, and if spirituality has to purposefully be curated in order to create or maintain a sense of aura; and is aura the same as an aura-tic presence of an object).

separation between the two systems of categorization. Elements of both are still discernible in museums today that impact how a museum shapes and teaches knowledge” (Parker, 2019). In „The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery“, Joan R. Branham wrote about Sacrality and Aura in the Museum (Branham, 1994/1995). To describe objects he used in his subtitle the word „mute“ and to describe space, he added „articulate“ (Branham, 1994/95, p.33) With these (seemingly) basic descriptions, many other authors would agree in the sense that objects cannot speak for themselves (Branham, 1994/95). On the other hand, we have the „space“ that can be manipulated and transformed to an extent that influences a viewer's perspective. He quotes Walter Benjamin when he said in „The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction“ that the uniqueness of an artwork gives rise to the notion of „aura“ (Benjamin, in: Branham, 1994/95), which produces a „unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.“ (Benjamin, in: Branham, 1994/95). The author Tan states in 2015 that, even though (critical) approaches of Asian American artist and curators can also be „fraught with contradictions and ambivalence“, they still have a more nuanced, illuminated and historically more accurate approach to discuss and display Asian art (Tan, 2015). Chuang states that Buddhist objects, placed and shown in a Western museum, have the possibility to „teach and contribute to a cultural narrative through the display of objects“. (Chuang, 2000, in Parker 2019). Chuang, through stating and summarizing the essential teachings of Buddhism before diving into Buddhism and its objects, makes it clear that, at least for her, there is - or should be - a correlation between Buddha's teachings and a curatorial approach of Buddha's objects. A statement about an example of a display choice by Chuang is made when she argued that the „displays can't impress the sacredness of an item when it is part of a larger collection“ (Chuang,

2000, p.113). To summarize again Chuang's critique: the Buddhist object itself is used in the museum with a function unlike the one it originally had (to accompany the path to enlightenment): to expand and evoke and teach the audience about the Buddhist religion, while the Buddhist object in itself and its importance is sidetracked. But how can an object transfer „value“ or „meaning“ before you transferred „value“ or „meaning“ of the object? Chuang gives recommendations for what can trigger improvement of Buddhist museum displays: awareness.

The author Meijers talks in 1996 about a trend in exhibitions going „toward the ahistorical exhibition“, and that that the exhibitions she talked about¹¹ have in common „the facts that they abandon the traditional chronological arrangement“, as well as the „classification in terms of material“, and as a result „Empathy“ is the tool that is provoked through abandonment of those classifications, and lead to enable visitors making/drawing connections between seemingly initially non-connected objects (Meijers, 1996). A museum space cannot easily be changed, so the first variable of the institution is a given. In 1997, the author Lisa Roberts already states that, even though any visitor in any museum will encounter the „same raw material“, each visitor will construct their own narrative when seeing the objects in an exhibition based on their own unique view and experiences (Roberts, 1997, p. 137). Audience sympathy as well as empathy, for Zheng, relate directly and are a result of creating and maintaining relevance in museum practices and should be a purpose museums should aim for they

¹¹ Namely: Harald Szeemans exhibitions, see: p.5 in: Thinking About Exhibitions: „A-Historische Klanken, Harald Szeemann, Boymans-van Beuningen Museum“ 1988 (Rudi Fuchs, documenta 7, 1982)

need to fulfill. (Zheng, 2023). Zheng argues that without resonancy felt by visitors, there is no relevancy (Zheng, 2023). Huang states in 1997 that „themes of exhibition narratives and education deliveries often cover the social pulse and public concerns“ (Huang, 1997). Zheng talks about how in Chinese museum the importance of empathy, to cultivate it and to show it is absent, and how, because of this, there is a lack of understanding on how to reach the audience, “especially on the spiritual level” (Zheng, 2023).

As McKenna-Cress & Kamien (2013, p. 114), write, "the affective is always as important in exhibitions as the cognitive and the physical: when our emotions are engaged, we care more and are more likely to remember" the experience. - Zheng, 2023

In theory, more often than not, the under-presentation of the sacred is mentioned, and, as an answer to the need to preserve the sacred qualities of a Buddhist figure, for example, an intention to showcase and not undermine, but, on the contrary, to emphasise sacredness, can be summarised, is often found in Western exhibitions. In which ways, sacredness can be emphasised, or enhanced, can be multi-faceted, anyhow what can be said is that the curator and the display holds power over the object and its sacredness in this way, as the presentation can be manipulated and the narrative and how it is absorbed can be directly linked to the exhibition design and curation. Especially concerning sacredness, where rituals, set-ups, lighting, space, smell, and sound play a vital role, as the display plays with exactly those factors, it almost stands in an opposing way to the „sacred display“.

About the method: Exhibition Analysis

As I just tried to generate a snapshot of past and recent literature about Buddhism in connection to exhibitions as per 2024, I now want to take a look at the method of the exhibition analysis, as it will be the second and main research method in this treatise.

There have been different approaches and methods established in exhibition theory, in order to comprehend, analyse and put an exhibition into a context of structured descriptions in order to understanding them more deeply beyond their aesthetic qualities and in its varying and complex characteristics. In the following analysis I want apply methods and ways of thinking about an exhibition and tools of exhibition analysis, which were developed by the the following authors: Mieke Bal, Regina Wonisch, Gabriele Muttenthaler, Simone Ullmann, and Jana Scholze. Concerning the choices of methods and explanations, I will mainly refer to Marion Rückers thesis „(POST-)KOLONIALES AUSSTELLEN? Betrachtungen zu der Dauerausstellung "Süd-, Südostasien und Himalayaländer: Götterbilder" im Völkerkundemuseum Wien“ as main model. Rücker mentions for her own methodological approach, that she is not only concerned with obvious (visually comprehensible) content of the exhibition, when speaking of analysing the „visible“, but also the „Subtext“ of an exhibition, which can be perceived per object arrangements and set-ups textual contents, and spatial design of the room (Rücker, 2010).¹² Rücker further mentions that sensual or atmospheric sensations, that can occur in an exhibition, needing a more interpretative approach, are

¹² The author also mentions the „Überschußdiskurs“ (BAL, Kulturanalyse, S.80), which is the content that exists, purposefully or not, in concealed or mediated form when revealing itself (in: Rückers, 2010).

not included in the methods of analysis that read exhibitions like a text. We can analyze previous displays and how „they have interpreted other cultures“ (Parker, 2019). Parker asks: “ is there a correct display that can define cultures from the past and is it possible to create one?” (Parker, 2019). Parker laments that *Display practice* has the function and authority to determine how visitors take in and absorb information, and further has the power to culturally and historically narrate the subject at hand (Parker, 2019).

In both Case Studies I want to followingly describe the history of the exhibition and the museum shortly. Continuing, I will describe the exhibition visually, and analyse the dialogues present within the room and between the curated objects, the museum, “the” display and visitor(s), as well as look at possible eurocentric types of exhibiting which can be found in each exhibition. In order to do that, a specific set-up present in the exhibition (room) will be analysed.

Case Study (MAK)

MAK¹³ – Permanent exhibition ASIA. China – Japan – Korea by Tadashi Kawamata

The MAK, founded as „The Imperial Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry“ in 1864, and the Weltmuseum, former Museum of Ethnology (established in 1928 in the facilities of Neue Hofburg), share aspects of common history, as they both „inherited“ parts of the Trade Museum¹⁴ collection. A smaller part of this collection still belongs to the

¹³ Museum für angewandte Kunst; Museum type: Museum of Applied Arts; Exhibition location: Stubenring, Vienna, Austria.

¹⁴ The „Cercle Oriental“, founded in 1873 in Vienna, Austria, had the goal to establish professional contact with Asian countries; which turned into the „Oriental Museum“ and consequently the „Trade Museum“ (see: MAKguide ASIA. China – Japan - Korea, p.42).

Museum of Ethnology / Weltmuseum Wien, while the Museum of Applied Arts Asian collection contains over more than 15,000 objects stemming from the Trade Museum.¹⁵

150 years ago, the Museum of Applied Arts (Museum für Angewandte Kunst), in short MAK, started with the accumulation of art and decorative arts from the Asian region, extracted from private as well as public sources and is now what is known to be the MAK Collection Asia, encompassing 25,000 (approximately) objects. These objects refer to and provide insight to Asia's art history. The Asian permanent exhibition, marked by a design concept by Tadashi Kawamata and started in February 2014, the initial spatial concept was redesigned by Kawamata, including the changing of various objects as well as reorganising display modules. Tadashi Kawamata was born in 1953 in Mikasa Japan and currently resides in Paris and works there and worldwide. The redesigned exhibition of the Asian permanent exhibition opened in May 2026 and with it, a distinct perspective on China's, Japan's and South Korea's culture & art. The key features which are inherent to the artist's vision and concept manifests itself in perpetual change, and plays on light, shadow, and changing viewpoints. The curator, Mio Wakita-Elis¹⁶ is the head of the MAK Asia Collection.

Although one cannot state that an Asian collection automatically inherits Buddhist objects, in this case, Buddhist statues, images and figures / figurines are featured in the exhibition, and are as well featured as main set ups in it, and therefore serve as a focal

¹⁵ In: MAKguide ASIA China – Japan – Korea

¹⁶ More about Wakita-Elis: https://www.mak.at/jart/prj3/mak-resp/data/uploads/MAKPressReleaseWakita-Elis_2019-0201_1102935.pdf (13th November, 2013)

point to view at how Buddhism is exhibited, within a Western Museum, in this case designed and curated by a Japanese artist and a Japanese curator and art historian. The collection and its permanent exhibition are, unlike many other permanent exhibition, function as interchangeable and serving the other, as Kawamata intended to change objects throughout the course of time, making the collection, or some objects of it, visible, which would have never been, like in other stood-still collections kept in the cellar of the museum, visible. The concept of the MAKtours allows visitors to experience the permanent exhibition seen through the lens of differing focal points. The collection exists of various ceramics and porcelain, colour woodcuts, dye stencils and offers an insight into the diversity of East Asian art and its history. The online collection is accessible through the MAK website and makes other parts and objects visible which are not shown in the exhibition room itself. ¹⁷

Permanent change, or the potential to change is a principle of the MAK installation. In one or two years the „Kawamata“ Gallery might look entirely different. – Tadashi Kawamata¹⁸

The collection started in 1864 and has been maintained to this day, with the permanent exhibition being reinstalled by Tadashi Kawamata in 2014, with a first draft sketched in 2013. The MAK itself states, that there are „two reasons why a museum of applied arts owns large collection of Asian art“: First, an interest in Asia appeared in the 19th century, with a great curiosity and longing for knowledge about Art from and History of

¹⁷ All information above retrieved from the MAK Website, <https://www.mak.at/programm/ausstellungen/asien> (18th November 2023)

¹⁸ Quote by Kawamata; Interview with Johannes Wieninger, November 2013, p.24, in: MAKguide ASIA. China – Japan – Korea.

Asia (MAK/Guide). Secondly, in 1864 the criterion of classification of the objects were materials – textiles and ceramic tiles especially suitable for this – hence the look to the East part of the program, because of history of porcelain so tightly linked to East Asia. To present diversity of surface and ornament design would have been impossible without presenting Asian design.

Exhibition Analysis (ASIA. China – Japan – Korea)

I will use the frameworks mentioned above, and ask questions I can derive from them in the following analysis, taking into consideration that my own perception and pre-judgements will colour the interpretation of the room. Furthermore, I will make assumptions on which vantage points, implicit as well as explicit, the viewer might focus on¹⁹. After all, I want to give the reader an example of what an actual experience of visiting the exhibition might be like, creating with the following analysis a walk-through in the form of a read-through.

The order of object arrangements I will discuss is consequent with the way in which the visitor moves through the room. The sequence, though, is not in an exact accordance to how the room is set up, as the visitor is assumed to roam freely through the room according to their liking, and there is no suggestion by the curator or artist for a sequence of looking, apart from the natural arrangement of the room which guides the visitor to an object set up at the end of the room, which I will therefore analyse at the

¹⁹ I will not assume whether the „visitor/reader“ is informed or not, as the experience of an exhibition should not be, in my opinion, dependent on having prior knowledge of a topic.

end. The visitor has two ways of going back to the entrance which also functions at the exit.

Firstly, I want to describe the exhibition room as a whole and, afterwards, focus on a set up / object arrangement within the exhibition which is exemplary for the whole room concept. The exhibition room is located in the MAK Vienna. After entering the main hall of the building, the exhibition room is found in one of the side doors in the left corner. The room, due to a see through entrance, is already visible from the outside, so the viewer knows what to expect. Above the door there is a sign that says „Asien“ - „Asia“. The exhibition MAK-Schausammlung „ASIA. China - Japan - Korea“ features cultural objects and art of East Asia, from Japan, China and South Korea, which were acquired by MAK Museum over the course of the last 150 years. The collection was firstly established in 2014 and then re-compositioned in 2016 by Tadashi Kawamata. Although not overpowering the exhibited elements, the construction and architectural design of Kawamata features wood and glass as main materials. Kawamata works with wood as his main artistic tool to create his spatial concepts. Concerning the material, he states that wood is

so simple, you can find it everywhere, in every place in the world, and everywhere you have the same standardized dimensions, (...) and important industrial product. (...) excellent to work with and easy to procure. (...) Not expensive, everyone can work with it, (...) really very easy. (...) needs no special technique. (...) a material accessible to all. - Kawamata, 2013

Before entering the room, a high and heavy glass door with wooden sticks as door openers, stands in between you and the room, although the official starting point of the

room begins when standing in front of these doors, as text and introduction (commentary by the artist and exhibition designer of the room set up) is painted on visitor is called to take a closer look, to take their time and to contemplate - in other words: patience and curiosity is rewarded with knowing intricacies of the artists thought process and his explanation of the room. On the left side of the door you can find the German version of the text, whereas on the right side the english version is placed at the same height. Inside the room, the official exhibition text is placed on the right corner on the same wall as the entrance, conveying a sense of casualness.

The mentioned wooden sticks as door handles integrate now visually with the exhibition set up made up of high wooden sticks and structures, blurring the lines between outside and inside, and integrate the entrance already into the visual concept. The wooden structures and ceiling high vitrines build the main concept and set up of the exhibition. Glass vitrines are placed on the floor, held together buy the uncouthed wood, which reaches high into the room. The usual height in which vitrines are placed in museums is thereby ignored, and disrupts the viewers expectations on where to find the objects. The exhibition „pathway“ you can go now offers two options, to go through the „vitrine walk“ either through left or right. There is not much room to move around and the glass wood construction makes it impossible to not watch your every move. The visitor is being watched by four Buddha heads which are placed on top of the wooden display. In this way, the visitor is forced to reflect on their movement in the room and is thrown back on themselves and their interaction with the objects. The objects are not placed in favor of the viewer, rather in a comfortability for themselves and in accordance with what they are: household objects, objects of everyday life. The

precociousness and fragility, their beauty and their value are nevertheless embraced and enhanced through their placement within the glass vitrines. Furthermore, they are, as well, thrown back on themselves, and do not need or rely on an enhancement of theirs through a set up, which make them seem more valuable, as they are important in their own right. On the other hand, the sacredness and scarcity of Buddha figures are enhanced by their placement which is above the viewers perspective, protected within the walls of the room, or, like the heads, placed above our heads, seemingly holding the wooden structure together with their watchful and peaceful expressions. This relaxedness and self-assurance of the objects, emphasised through the display, stands in contrast with the fragility but also down-to-earth, strong and construction-like attitude of the display structure itself.



Img. 1: Exhibition view, MAK

The installation is marked by the visual aspects of a construction site, (see: Image 1) of the unfinished, which can be seen for example in the surrounding of a window, which is half-painted with white colour, almost like a visual narration of the artist / constructor changing his mind half-way, but still accepting whatever was done to the room, and not trying to change every little imperfection. The themes of acceptance, of flexibility, of duality are reoccurring in the exhibition under different circumstances of how dialogues play out between the objects and the viewer, the objects with each other, the display with the viewer as well as the display with the objects. The showcases are built around the objects (it seems), rather than that the objects, serve as placeholder or something to „fill“ the vitrines and the space. The function serves the form, while both step into dialogue with each other as well. The handwritten object descriptions approach the visitor in a personal manner and communicates more directly than a standardized, printed label. The heads are placed in a high position, and take a look of the room themselves. At the end of the pathways, two Buddha statues, opposing the back wall, which is also the closed entrance to the shop, can be detected. The glass door and its surroundings is painted casually with grey paint. Although some parts of the door are made out of glass, due to the paint no looker from the outside (the museum shop) is invited in. Light serves as a tool to emphasize the Buddha statues in a subtle way, less like shining a lamp on them but rather like the natural sun would touch the object.

Besides the display conveying a certain atmosphere, and design elements that convey certain unseen dialogues, I want to now talk about the narrative that the exhibition (unwillingly) conveys. Firstly, the room exhibits an amount of each showcasing and

presenting the countries of Japan, China and Korea through their arts and crafts, which are all gathered, and collected by Europeans and their beauty and value is showcased and protected by glass vitrines. This continuation of a history of violently gathering objects is continued within this exhibition. Although the display is non-normative in the way the objects are presented within the vitrines (concerning the height of the objects), nevertheless, the theme of “collecting countries” is reproduced once again and the presentation of the fragile beauty of things, conserved within another country, in another exhibition and in glass vitrines continues the history of the violent acts of “hunting, gathering and presenting”. “Presenting” in this exhibition is the act of the display overshadowing the objects, which seem more as a decoration for the display itself, as a tool to enhance the display design in its function. To view this curatorial concept is a balancing act between remarking that in order to view the positioned objects in a respectful way, one has to bow down to them, which cherishes the object in its own right, but on the other hand, it can be seen as non-importance in their own right and rather as a testimony to collecting and taking up space within display, and to enhance it as supernumeraries. Another remark, concerning the name of the exhibition room, is that to gather the names of three countries to describe a whole continent (ASIA – Japan, China, Korea) is a Western violent act in and of itself to re-name and re-scribe in a geographical eurocentric and describe an exhibition in this way. To compare this entitlement to another European museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum, for example, claims to embrace and showcase spiritual values of Buddhist items just by re-grouping

Buddhist items according to the types of image and not in referral to their historical or geographical provenience.²⁰

Specific Set-up

To continue and further delve into the room and its dialogues, I want to take discuss at a specific display set-up in the room. At the end of the two pathways two Buddhist statues can be seen which are looking at each other, specifically a Daoist dignitary and Buddha Sakyamuni²¹. Both statues are placed on stacked wood and some paper magazines. The accumulation of the two figures represent the vitality and the diversity of the collection, which hints, again, to the wresting of objects out of their original context, hence this duo underlines the eurocentric viewpoint in this sense.

²⁰ See: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/asia-department/a-new-buddhist-art-gallery-at-the-va>

²¹ Img. 1 depicts (as per exhibition description): Daoist dignitary (Wenchang Wang?), Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644), Bronze fire gilt; Buddha Sakyamuni (shijin), China, Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644), Bronze with rests of gilding



Img. 2: Exhibition view MAK of specific Set-up

The silent dialogue between these two objects turns into a visible one, emphasized by the direct positioning of the two figures, which are human-like in form, therefore „able to look“ and stare into each others' eyes. Now you as a visitor are in a position of experiencing a dialogue that is outside of yourself. The worship happens naturally, as the visitor is on the outside of this connection, yet on the same level as the statues are placed on the floor. Sacredness is neither hidden, nor emphasized. The meditation is happening either way, is existent, whether the visitor chooses to join in or not. The connotation level is almost broken here, as there is no permanence or surface to „attack“ to create a fixed level of dialogue that lasts. As a consequence, there might not be any need nor desire created in the exhibition, and one simply “is” in the exhibition. Why do some people read the ending of a book before they buy or read it? Or even in the middle of the book? It is because the meaning of a story or narrative reveals itself in what it actually stands for/what it needs to teach you, which can not be fulfillingly conveyed without the emergence of what we call “the moral” of the story, as in: what are the results of so-and-so actions taken? The set-up of the two Buddha statues is a meditation, about looking, about being the looker, about hearing a silent dialogue and the moral in itself: that there might not be something „to see“ here but that we come to awareness that we always „are seeing“. If, even in the snapshot of the exhibition, which does have a momentary permanence, on the one hand, is designed for the time of the visit, and if it is assumed that the visitor will not visit the exhibition anymore often, or probably does not know or be informed about it the exhibition is or could be changed, one could conclude that a level of awareness about the intention of the exhibition removes pressure to interpret, and the exhibition is thrown back on itself, in the other

case the knowledge about the “lightness of being” in the exhibition, it is reflected back at the visitor. This question of the autonomy and independent life of an exhibition is therefore interesting, since in psychology the functionality of the communication level grows with the self-confidence and self-assurance of the two dialogue partners.

Case Study (Weltmuseum Wien)

Weltmuseum Wien²² – exhibition room: A Village in the mountains / Ein Dorf in den Bergen

About the collection

Consisting of 536,000 objects, the weltmuseum Vienna, being an anthropological museum, possesses a collection containing different ethnographical and archaeological artefacts each assigned to a different geographical area. The Himalaya Room is one room of of the permanent exhibition, the „Schausammlung“ of Weltmuseum, which is made up of 14 strung-together exhibition rooms, which are, assigned to said geographical areas and are each described in a narrative way according to the stories the objects tell of each area and time. A number of these ethnographic artefacts include items of clothing, accessories, work and war uniforms with colonial backgrounds. There is also a photo collection, a library and a written archive. This exhibition houses a number of objects from various countries with colonial histories. Africa southern of the Sahara; North Africa, Near East, Central Asia and Siberia; East

²² Museum type: Ethnographical Museum; exhibition location: Heldenplatz, Vienna, Austria.

Asia: China, Korea, Japan; Insular Southeast Asia; South, Southeast Asia, Himalayan countries; Oceania and Australia; North and Central America; South America. The collections mentioned above were curated, in the same order as mentioned above, by Nadja Haumberger, Axel Steinmann, Bettina Zorn, Sri Kuhnt-Saptodewo, Christian Schicklgruber, N.N, Gerard van Bussel, Claudia Augustat, Manfred Kaufmann, Heinz Gratzner and Ildiké Cazan-Simányi.

The room „A Village in the Mountains“ is part of the permanent exhibition of the World Museum in Vienna, which can also be found on the web as Museo Etnográfico de Viena (World Museum Vienna), will be analyzed in the next paragraph. In this analysis the focus lies on the Himalaya room, named „Ein Dorf in den Bergen“ / „A village in the mountains“ curated by Christian Schicklgruber, who himself had visited Nepal²³. In the second exhibition analysis I will focus on the room „A village in the mountains“, which is part of the Weltmuseum Schausammlung (Permanent exhibition), to which I will also refer sometimes as „Himalaya Room“), as it is a specifically interesting research focus, as the room only features Buddhist objects: in one sense the objects are obviously Buddhist as there are distinctively Buddha figures and figurines, Buddhist religious artefacts, are shown, and in the other sense, even the objects which do not serve a Buddhist religious purpose in itself, they are all still everyday items originating in Nepal and Himalaya. Buddhism is present in both case studies, and hence, relevant to analyse and compare, especially how each museum (categorised in its own way „modern arts and crafts“, „ethnographic“) treats the topic of Buddhism.

²³ weltmuseum Jahresbericht, 2016, in: https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/fileadmin/user_upload/WMW_Jahresbericht_2016.pdf (2nd December 2023).

The Western Gaze and its observant view of the Other is undeniably present in the room, but it is not hiding it and sets a clear goal also concerning its questions and objectives, as the description of what the room should achieve by Weltmuseum Wien is the following:

This gallery offers the opportunity to take part in the life of the residents of a Himalayan Buddhist village. Participating in the life of “others” also means asking questions of oneself: Where is the centre of my life? Who do I share it with? Why do I leave it? Where do I work? How do I view my environment? Which gods do I believe in and where do I encounter them? And perhaps the most fundamental of all questions: How do I explain the world to myself?²⁴

Exhibition Analysis (A Village in the Mountains)

For the second exhibition analysis, the same principles and format as the first analysis methods apply. Here I want to mention again, that the main principles of how I will look at the exhibition, will be based on Clifford Geertz approach, namely to read the exhibition like a text to create a fragmented manuscript, in order to tap into a specific cultural system that can be found within the exhibition made up of social behavior, the weighting of the institutional, iconographic forms and symbolic signs, set-up and design, arrangement, wording and commentary and sensual experiences²⁵. As the Himalaya Room is an exhibition in its own right within a bigger exhibition, namely part of an exhibition featuring various other rooms, one can assume that you have already been in at least one other room, which features objects from another culture than Himalaya, when entering our room in question. The exhibition room Himalaya Raum is, unlike other exhibition rooms, which are mainly dark rooms painted in black colours,

²⁴ Source: Weltmuseum Wien, <https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/schausammlung/#ein-dorf-in-den-bergen> (17th October 2023)

²⁵ Mutthenthaler, Wonisch, *Gesten des Zeigens* (2016, S. 49-53, quoting Clifford Geertz)

held and designed in white color. In this sense, the Himalaya room already stands out compared to its „neighbouring rooms“, at least visually. The room has two passages / entry points that serve as either exit or entrance, depending from which side of the exhibition you enter. When entering the room, a bodily reaction might happen due to this change of the main colour, and one could assume it is to visualize the cold and snow of the Himalaya. The assembly of the exhibition is made up of four pedestal modules, with the biggest one placed in the middle of the room.



Img. 3: Video image, (Weltmuseum Wien), Youtube



Img. 4: Video images above retrieved from <https://youtu.be/1JJfoysg1I?si=zGQp142sX-FwiWqc>



Img. 5²⁶

The modules/display are single-cast white cubes in the form of pedestals with gradations and partially with showcases embedded within their structure. The module in the middle has two sides, with one hosting the largest object arrangement featuring

²⁶ Images above retrieved from: <https://youtu.be/1JJfoysg1I?si=zGQp142sX-FwiWqc>

everyday objects from Himalaya, which also features a hanging installation above it. On the other side, separated by a wall which is integrated into the module, another object arrangement is placed, which resembles a deity set up of a Buddhist shrine in a temple. The other modules are placed on each side of the room, and the fifth is placed on a wall as well next to one of the doors. Next to the other door on the left said the exhibition text is placed. Additionally, two artworks are hung on the walls. As the exhibition room is placed within the permanent collection which is made up of different rooms following from one to another, there are two possible entrances to the „A Village in the Mountains“ exhibition. Entering from the exhibition room „Stories from Mesoamerica“, you will firstly find yourself standing in front of a high wall of a white module placed in the middle, with one showcase integrated into it. Placed within the showcase, you see three Buddha figurines, in three colours: green, blue and red, with partially transparent bodies and a golden head, each resting on a gold base. On the other hand, when entering from the other side „Culture War in Vienna“ you will stand in front of an altar placed slightly higher on a pedestal, which is integrated in the main white showcase module in the middle of the room. The altar is, so to say, placed on the back side of the module in the middle. Anyhow, as you enter now through this side, you observe an original set up of an altar, with the white modules resembling the Himalayan mountains. As you step closer, you will observe various details and different „Buddhist art historical items“ placed on the altar. Assuming now you enter from the entrance I mentioned first, the image of the Himalayan mountain is embodied through the arrangement of the white modules, as well as the height of it. Making use of neutral looking white cubes, the structure of a „classical museum set up“ is not hidden, yet used and integrated to resemble the topic of the room, which is the life of people and

mountaineers in the Himalayan alps, practicing and living Buddhism. The exhibition text/description of the room is placed on the side, and is accompanied by two videos (one being an Interview with Hans Haid, Writer and Ethnological researcher talking about the Alps, and on the other hand a comment by curator Christian Schicklgruber, social anthropologist and museum director of Weltmuseum Wien). The two aspects of Buddhism, firstly how it is integrated in daily life is shown as well as the ritualistic and religious items. For each module set up, you can watch a Video showing Interviews with different people relating to Buddhism, in one way or the other. Even though the display set up seems neutral and „cold“, the contributions in form of the videos (Interviews with Himalayans) and items on display (a mixture of religious objects as well as everyday objects) create an atmosphere to move closer and to relate deeply with the contexts. The context of suffering in Buddhism and realities of everyday life in the Himalaya are represented with a contemporary artwork shown in the room, contrasting the other objects: the painting „I have to Feed Myself, My Family and My Country“ by Hitman Gurung, dated 2013, depicts a mother carrying the sarcophagus of her son. On one part of one of the module arrangements, 108 butter lamps - a significant item in Buddhist homes, temples and altars - fill up the space of one of the showcases. The number 108 plays a significant role in Buddhism as well: “In Buddhism, it is also believed that the road to Nirvana is laden with exactly 108 temptations. So, every Buddhist has to overcome 108 earthly temptations to achieve nirvana. In addition, the ring of prayer beads worn around the waist of Zen priests is usually made of 108 beads” claims and explains, for example, the Himalayan Yoga Institute.²⁷The exhibition

²⁷ Source/URL: <https://www.himalayanyogainstitute.com/what-is-so-sacred-about-the-number-108/#:~:text=In%20Buddhism%2C%20it%20is%20also,usually%20made%20of%20108%20beads.> (18th December 2023)

showcases Buddhist statues and figures singularly, as well as next to each other, in lit up showcases. The main set-up, marked as such by the curator Schicklgruber as well, is the arrangement of everyday objects originating from the mountains in North Vietnam, from Bhutan, Nepal, Ladakh, Sikkim and Nagaland. The theme of homogenization²⁸ is burst open in the gallery of A Village in the Mountains, as, even though different objects from different locations are put under one theme/header, each object is put on their own spot and do not stand in for the other objects, but directly represent life itself of a place, which again, is dependent on these objects.

Specific Set-Up

For this second analysis, I want to describe a specific object set-up of the exhibition, to enhance and understanding of the curatorial approach of the room and to look at a specific placement more intricately. On one side of the biggest module in the room, there is an altar placed on an elevation, featuring, amongst other deities and objects, the Buddha Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism. The curatorial concept of the room, can be described as recreating a Village in the Himalayas, like the name of the room says, which makes a statement about being able to recreate everyday life of a whole community within a room in a Western institution, which, in itself is not possible but also creates inevitably a lack, namely of what is not represented. Everyday as well as sacred objects are placed, but without referencing to the political issues and tensions in the „exhibited country“ itself. In order to not divert from the objects, which stands in contrast to the MAK exhibition, the functions and stories of peoples and deities are emphasized.

²⁸ Oliver Marchart: Die Institution spricht. Kunstvermittlung als Herrschafts- und als Emanzipationstechnologie



Img. 6: View of specific object/set-up (Weltmuseum Wien)



Img. 7: Detailed, partial view of the „home altar“ (Weltmuseum Wien)



Img. 8: Detailed, partial view of the „home altar“ (Weltmuseum Wien)



Img. 9: Video image depicting „home altar“, source: Weltmuseum Wien, YouTube

This altar could have been set up locally for praying, and complements the meaning of the main display set up (the arrangement of everyday Himalayan objects placed on the other side). The home altar²⁹ features various objects on display. A cabinet and hutch build the altar as well as the base on which those objects are placed. The Buddhist objects include a figure of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, of Buddha Shakyamuni and Guru Rinpoche. Furthermore, a butter lamp, devotional image, a Dakini, a Lama and a Phallic symbol are exhibited. Other than that, Flower vases, a symbol for longevity, Chagna Dorje, Banknotes, and Offering bowls are part of the altar. The placement of the green altar leveled up and placed within the white cube-esque, feels, at first sight, out of place, as it would naturally serve the purpose of praying and calls for a moment of silent worship. Nevertheless, the fact that the altar is set-up at homes and is

²⁹ „Just as we have seen around the hearth, objects from various regions are positioned next to each other at the home shrine. Nevertheless, this shrine and the way it is arranged might still be found as such in a single household. Here at the museum, the shrine demonstrates how regular offerings are made to the gods and which ritual objects are kept at the home shrine. We have created a place where a priest could actually perform a ritual.“ – from the exhibition text (description of home altar).

reproduced again in the exhibition, can enhance two meanings: the importance of objects when placed in an exhibition inevitably serves the purpose of elevating the altar to something not only which serves for one to be able to pray, but also that the object (the altar and its objects) serve as something worthy of praying as a whole objects itself. Secondly, the re-sacralisation of the altar is not one - in the sense that except the existence of the sacred objects in the exhibition – and the display does not try to recreate a moment of devotion. What can be said, on another note, is that apparent knowledge of the Western museum is presented in what can be seen as an intimate altar (home altar) and the objects, in itself represent a highly personal moment of praying, as well as the altar that represents history of violence as well, which is not further commented. It could be argued to question whether the Western gaze and knowledge of what a Himalayan altar is presented here or an actual representation – which, nevertheless could never be an original in the sense that an original cannot be within the museum, because it is in a museum.

Conclusion

To summarise again the findings from the literature review, and to put them into context with the findings above, it can be said that *empathy* and *approachability* of the public enhance the experience of the visitors concerning showcasing objects that have spiritual value to some, and the importance of speaking to visitors emotions is enhanced as well. Creative and experimental exhibiting, taking into account different layers of a topic is suggested as well. Within the frame, the object exists and consequently, they are in a silent dialogue with each other. When it comes to the frame, in this case it is the museum, and the object, as soon as placed within the confinements of it, is inevitably put into this dialogue. When Buddhist objects are presented within the spatial design of the museum, intercultural aspects need an in-depth consideration in order for Buddhist objects to be presented in a respectful way.

(...) museums can provide a positive impact through history presentation and cultural interpretation. (...) cautious about exhibition theme selection and related narration. Besides their ideological nature, themes in popular culture could be taken into consideration when choosing exhibition themes to reach the audience - Zheng, 2023

It can be stated, that it is a complex task to thematize Buddhism in a permanent exhibition, and it seems as if the function and value (historical and aesthetical) of the objects, which can be described as Buddhist art historical items can not be viewed or presented exclusive of each other. In both exhibitions, the coloniality of hunting, gathering and presenting is visually expressed. Given the contextualization of the sacredness in the Weltmuseum (A Village in the Mountains) the appreciation of the objects in what they stand for was more present than in the MAK, where the objects

focus and function seemingly within the display lies more in being decorative. Both ways of presentation are linked directly to the function and type of each Museum. For ethnographical as well as arts and crafts institutions, it is a complex task to at the same time creatively, correctly, respectfully, informatively present a Buddhist collection, and to showcase the intangibility of it, as well as regional as well as international conflict inherent to it, when representing and collecting was part of the pre-curatorial process in itself and Buddhism being a complex and varied topic that goes beyond the words “religion”, “spirituality” and “political instrumentalisation”. I found that the spiritual value was not specifically enhanced in either exhibition. These contrasts found in each exhibition mentioned above are a chance for new possibilities of curating Buddhism. With digitalization, for example, new ways of curating arise. Curators can learn from past actual physical exhibitions in order to negotiate themes of sacredness, property, value of things and “collecting Buddhism” anew, deal with reproducing old habits of showcasing in another realm. My research is very limited in the sense that I specifically looked solely at different object representations within two museums, which are both institutions in Vienna, and I did not include every political aspect that could have been extracted academically from both exhibitions. The research of Buddhist art and objects in curating is still very much at the beginning, especially concerning contemporary curating or curating contemporary Buddhism. This thesis hopefully helped, in a more experimental way, to combine theories and opinions, with the help of the method of the exhibition analysis, to establish new connections and to start new thought processes.

Literature

Mieke BAL, Sagen, Zeigen, Prahlen, in: Thomas Fechner-Smarsly, Sonja Neef (Hg.), *Kulturanalyse*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 72–116.

Joan R. B., Sacrality and Aura in the Museum. Mute Objects and Articulate Sace, in: *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, Vol. 52/53 1994/1995 p. 33-47.

BBC (bbc.co.uk), Dhamma in Buddhism. The Three Marks of Existence (3rd November 2023), URL: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiF4cWD1fODAxVOevEDHTYIBXQQFnoECBQQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bbc.co.uk%2Fbitesize%2Fguides%2Fzr7ck2p%2Frevision%2F3&usg=AOvVaw16nds5yZPWI88yKPZQxNje&opi=89978449>

Chang TAN, Telling global stories, one at a time: the politics and poetics of exhibiting Asian art, in: *World Art*, 2015, 5:2, p. 307-330.

Yiao-hwei CHUANG, Presenting Buddhism in Museums, in: *Godly Things. Museums, Objects and Religion*, 2002.

Georgios GAITANOS, Definition of Religion, in: *Introduction to Religious Studies*, Department of Theology and Culture, College University Logos-Tirana, October 2019, DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.12358.22085, URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336898785_Definition_of_Religion (9th February 2024)

Clifford GEERTZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1977, Basic Books.

Stacey A. GIULIANTI, *Artefact as Art. Symbolism, Aesthetics, and Cultural Essence in Pre-Columbian Antiquities*, 2014, Burlington College, Chapter 6, *Buddhapada: The Enlightened Being and the Limits of Representation at Amarāvātī*.

Stephen GREENBLATT, *Resonance and Wonder*, in: *Exhibiting Cultures*, 1991, Smithsonian Books.

Andrea HAUSER, *Staunen – Lernen – Erleben. Bedeutungsebenen gesammelter Objekte und ihrer musealen Präsentation im Wandel* in: Gisela Ecker, Martina Stange, Ulrike Vedder (Pbl.), *Sammeln – Ausstellen – Wegwerfen*, 2001, Taunus, p. 31–48,

Dr. Victoria HARRISON, *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion in a Multi-cultural World*. In: *The International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59, 2006, p. 133-152; URL: https://www.gla.ac.uk/0t4/humanities/files/mindmapping/Religion1_files/docs/Pragmatics.pdf (20th January 2024)

Huang, S. HUANG, *Modern museum education. Theory and practice*, 1997, Taiwan Province Museum Press.

Ivan KARP, *Culture and Representation*, 1991, in: *Exhibiting Cultures*, Smithsonian Books.

Ivan KARP and Corinne A. KATZ, *Collecting, Exhibiting, and Interpreting. Museums as Mediators and Midwives of Meaning*, 2014, Emory University & Museum of International Folk Art.

Igor KOPYTOFF, *The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process*. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Edited by Arjun Appadurai, 1986, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 64-92.

Corinne A. KRATZ, *Rhetorics of Value. Constituting Worth and Meaning through Cultural Display*, 2011.

Adam KUPER, *The Museum of Other People. From Colonial Acquisitions to Cosmopolitan Exhibitions*, 2023, Profile Books.

Achim LANDWEHR, *Historische Diskursanalyse*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 2009.

Nurudeen LAMINI, *The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path*, in: *History of World Religions*, 2023.

Oliver MARCHART, *Die Institution spricht. Kunstvermittlung als Herrschafts- und als Emanzipationstechnologie*, (n.d), URL: <https://www.museumdenken.eu/post/oliver-marchart-uber-die-institution-museum-und-die-vermittlung>. (23th March 2024)

Roswitha MUTTENTHALER, *Roswitha Muttenthaler fragt nach Methode und Zweck von Ausstellungsanalyse und -kritik* (n.d.), URL: <https://www.museumdenken.eu/post/methode-und-zweck-von-ausstellungsanalyse-und-kritik> (12th January 2024)

Roswitha MUTTENTHALER and Regina WONISCH, *Regina. Gesten des Zeigens: Zur Repräsentation von Gender und Race in Ausstellungen*, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839405802> (19th March 2024)

Crispin PAINE. 2013. *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*. London: Bloomsbury.

Deidre C. PARKER, *Tracing Buddhism in the British Museum. Biographies of Select Buddhist Objects acquired by the British Museum in the 19th - 20th c.*, PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, 2019.

Ruth B. PHILLIPS, and Christopher B. STEINER, *Art, Authenticity, and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter*, in: *Unpacking Culture*, edited by Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, Berkeley: University of California Press 1999, p. 3-19.

S. Brent PLATE, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics. Rethinking Religion Through the Arts*, New York 2015.

Krzysztof POMIAN, *Der Ursprung des Museums. Vom Sammeln*, Berlin 1998 (1988), p. 50.

Russel RODGERS, *Buddhism and Brain Science*, August 8, 2020, URL: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwif2uXk1fODAxV5FhAIHV4XBAQQFnoECAYQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fnelson.shambhala.org%2>

F2020%2F08%2F08%2Fbuddhism-and-brain-science%2F%23%3A~%3Atext%3DFrom%2520the%2520Buddhist%2520point%2520of%2520view%252C%2520thoughts%2520originate%2520dependently%25E2%2580%2594they%2Caccept%2520that%2520thoughts%2520arise%2520dependently.&usg=AOvVaw1kdusF-RMF9ItK0Ry_DalJ&opi=89978449 (29th April 2024)

Marion RÜCKER, „(POST-)KOLONIALES AUSSTELLEN? Betrachtungen zu der Dauerausstellung "Süd-, Südostasien und Himalayaländer: Götterbilder" im Völkerkundemuseum Wien“, /ecm 2008-10, Master thesis, URL: <https://services.phaidra.bibliothek.uni-ak.ac.at/api/object/o:38086/get> (2nd March 2024)

Jana SCHOLZE, Medium Ausstellung. Lektüren musealer Gestaltung in Oxford, Leipzig, Amsterdam und Berlin, Bielefeld 2004, S. 24.

Sónia SILVA, Art and Fetish in the anthropology museum, in: Material Religion, 13:1, published online 06 March 2017, p. 77-96.

Pamela SMART, Crafting Aura. Art Museums, Audiences and Engagement, in: Visual Anthropology Review 16 (2) p. 2–24, 2000-2001.

Chang TAN, Telling global stories, one at a time. The politics and poetics of exhibiting Asian art, Penn State University, in: World Art, Vol.5 No.2, Pennsylvania 2015, p. 370-330.

Thomas THIEMEYER, Geschichtswissenschaft: Das Museum als Quelle, in: Joachim BAUR (pub.), Museumsanalyse. Methoden und Konturen eines neuen Forschungsfeldes, Bielefeld 2010.

Louise TYTHACOTT, Curating the Sacred: Exhibiting Buddhism at World Museum Liverpool, Department of the History of Art and Archaeology, SOAS University of London 2017.

Simone ULLMANN, Vom Eurozentrismus zum `Post`-Eurozentrismus. Eine vergleichende Analyse von ethnologischen Museen in Europa, Universität Wien, Master thesis, 2016.

Glenn WALLIS. A Critique of Western Buddhism. Ruins of the Buddhist Real, September 08 2018.

Yi ZHENG, Relevance, sympathy, and empathy. Golden lines to reach the audience, Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, Department of Cultural Heritage and Museology, Fudan University, China 2023.

Appendix



Image of the title page: „Sitting Buddha“. Source: MAK Museum, https://sammlung.mak.at/sammlung_online?id=collect-45188

Object name: figure, Title: Sitting Buddha, Execution: Anonymous, China, 14th to 15th century
Period: Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Material/Technology: Cast iron, Dimensions: Height: 33.3
cm, Width: 19.1 cm, Depth: 11.4 cm, Inventory number: PL 611, Provenance: Gift/Donation
(1948), Department: Asia, Collection: Asia Collection, Sculpture Collection, Exner Collection

Detailed analysis of one set up (Weltmuseum): “Home altar” – Object list and descriptions:

- 1 Hutch, Bhutan, 20th century, Wood, Christian Schicklgruber Coll.
- 2 Cabinet Bhutan, 20th century, Wood, Christian Schicklgruber Coll.
- 3 Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, Bhutan, 20th century, Metal, Christian Schicklgruber Coll.
- 4 Buddha Shakyamuni, Bhutan, 20th century, Metal, Christian Schicklgruber Coll.
- 5 Guru Rinpoche, Bhutan, 20th century, Metal, Christian Schicklgruber Coll.
- 6 Butter lamp, Bhutan, 20th century Plastic, glass Christian Schicklgruber Coll.
- 7 Devotional image, Bhutan, 20th century, Paper, Christian Schicklgruber Coll.
- 8 Dakini, Bhutan, 20th century, Paper, Christian Schicklgruber Coll.
- 9 Lama, Bhutan, 20th century, Paper, Christian Schicklgruber. Coll.
- 10 Phallic symbol, Bhutan, 20th century, Wood, Christian Schicklgruber Coll.

CV

As of: 2024

Caroline Ahorner BA

carolineahorner@gmail.com

PROFILE

Name: Caroline Ahorner

Date of Birth: 21st May 1996

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

- Hinterland (Verein hinterland, 1050 Vienna)

- Exhibition management and curatorial work

2023

- Management assistance and Gallery supervision

2018

- Marriott Hotel Vienna

- Bar and service

June 2018 - September 2018

- Art & Antique Salzburg

- Sales and customer service

2015

- Internship at RocsGrey Consulting GmbH

- Assistance and administration

January 2013

HIGHER EDUCATION AND DEGREE COURSES

2014 - 2016: University of Vienna

BA Studies in Art History

2017 - 2019: Tourismsschulen MODUL Vienna

Diploma: International Course in Hotel Management (ICHM)

2019 - 2022: NHL Stenden University of Applied Arts, Leeuwarden, Netherlands

Bachelor of Arts: in International Tourism Management

2022 - 2024: University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria

Master of Arts: ecm - educating/curating/making (continuing education)

SCHOOL EDUCATION

2006 - 2014: Secondary/high school Neulandschulen Grinzing

Degree: General higher education entrance qualification

2002 – 2006: Elementary/primary school Neulandschulen Grinzing

LANGUAGES

German (Mother tongue)

English (Very good)

Spanish (Good)

French (basic knowledge)

ADDITIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

Bartender (Mixologist) certification issued by EBS (European Bartender School)

Mediator certificate

AM driver's license and code 111

INTERESTS

Art, music, traveling, photography