

## The Composition of the Siebold Collection in the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden

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*Rijkmuseum voor Volkenkunde*

1. Introduction
2. Politics and Museums
3. Siebold and the Sciences
4. Classification Systems
5. Siebold's Holistic Approach
6. Siebold's Personal Views on Japan
7. Siebold's Influence on Early European Museum Collecting
8. The Scientific Importance of the Siebold Collection in the National Museum of Ethnology

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although Philipp Franz von Siebold (born in Würzburg in 1795, died in Munich in 1866) has clearly left his mark on Japanese history as an individual, his importance as a museologist *avant-la-lettre* is still underappreciated. His efforts to document Japanese culture systematically of course have their roots in his personal background and the academic developments in Europe at the time. The social sciences did not exist at the advanced level we know today, and so Siebold did not have any concrete example to work from in setting up an ethnographic museum collection. We do know, however, that there were efforts being made by positivist scientists to chart the world's cultures. What we now know as cultural anthropology was in effect a kind of ethno-geography, which compiled knowledge of the weird and strange in order to understand more of the wondrous world in which people lived. Figures such as Siebold's fellow German, Alexander von Humboldt, who were inspired by the Enlightenment movement, led explorations to gather systematic and detailed information in as yet unexplored worlds, thereby earning high social status and academic respect.

## 2. POLITICS AND MUSEUMS

By Siebold's time — the first quarter of the 19th century — there were already public museums with collections of rare and valuable objects, mostly collected by socially eminent figures such as royalty, which informed the public about the

wonders of the world. The concept of a museum for the enlightenment of the masses had already been in existence for over a hundred years, the most famous example being the private *Kunstammer* of Peter the Great in St. Petersburg, the forerunner of the Hermitage museum. By the time Siebold left for Asia, an exhibition gallery for the royal collections had also been established in the Netherlands at the initiative of King Willem I. This was the Royal Cabinet of Rarities, open to the public from 1816. This was the first public institution in the Netherlands at which man-made objects from foreign cultures all over the world were put on display next to European examples of fine arts and ingenuity.

After the end of Napoleonic rule and the demise of the Republic of the Netherlands in 1813, the new Kingdom of the Netherlands came into existence under politically difficult circumstances. The Dutch East India Company had already been dissolved in 1798, and the Dutch trade settlements had come under foreign, mostly British rule. There were no colonies under direct state control. Only Dejima in Nagasaki and El Mina on the Gold Coast were still Dutch. Although some other settlements were subsequently returned, the Dutch government remained in financially dire straits, and had to be prudent as it simultaneously rebuilt the country's economy and invested in culture. Other countries, from the late 18th century onwards, had set the example of founding museums to house important private or communal collections. However, until at least the second half of the following century, the public for museum collections had always been very limited. At first, emphasis was put on national museums that presented local history and science in the form of antiquities and natural history.

This political situation was one of the reasons why, after the founding of the new monarchy, the Dutch government sought to strengthen its political and economic position in the Far East, based on Batavia. The only monopoly outpost the Dutch had was the establishment at Dejima, but it was burdened with relatively high running costs and low returns. It was clear to the Dutch East India government that more information on Japan's potential for trade was needed, given that the Netherlands was the only European nation with a presence there. Siebold's assignment can be seen as part of the government's efforts to be first to the post before Japan eventually opened up to diplomatic ties and trade with the rest of the Western world.

### **3. SIEBOLD AND THE SCIENCES**

As is well known, Siebold was educated at Würzburg University, specializing in his family's traditional occupation of medicine and surgery. A thorough knowledge of pharmacy, including the basics of botany, formed an essential element of his studies. Botany was the first of the natural sciences to use an integrated classification system for all its subjects, mainly because of the pioneering work of Linné. Although ethnography did exist as a sub-field within geography, in Siebold's early years it cannot be called a scientific subject in its own right, with its own theory

and method. Ethnography at the time was a primitive discipline, mainly concerned with the description of selected parts of material culture, as can be seen in the work of such historians of museum ethnography as Nélia Dias [DIAS 1991]. Early ethnology, on the other hand, was also largely descriptive and closely connected to the origins of ethnographic museums.

Although some museums had ethnographic departments, these were not organized along specifically ethnographic or ethnological lines. Siebold's whole collection, of some 6,000 objects, was publicly accessible at his home from 1832, given which it can be argued that it was the world's earliest collection to be arranged ethnographically. By today's standards, however, while the core of the collection could be called ethnographic, Siebold's system for arranging the collection was not purely ethnological or anthropological. Siebold had to devise his own classification system for the collection, a major preoccupation of 19th-century scholars. Although it has never been conclusively established, Siebold's classification of objects may have been influenced by two of his predecessors in Japan, Jan Cock Blomhoff (1779–1853; on Dejima 1809–13 and 1817–23) and Johannes van Overmeer Fisscher (1800–48; on Dejima 1819–29), both of whom had created their own classification systems. Blomhoff and Fisscher had both given a small number of objects and sold substantial collections (in each case over 1,500 items) to the aforementioned Royal Cabinet of Rarities, and as a condition for their acquisition produced summary catalogues of their collections. An earlier, large collection containing ethnographic objects had been lost by Hendrik Doeff during his voyage back to Europe.

#### 4. CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

Blomhoff's classification, and possibly Fisscher's, were compiled before Siebold finished his own. Moreover in some respects these two collections rival Siebold's in terms of their size and quality. After his return to the Netherlands Siebold even added some items from these two collections to his own. What these two collections lacked, however, was documentary support, in the form either of Japanese-language books, or of pictures depicting the use and meaning of the objects. In the remainder of this paper I will discuss the classification systems of the three collections and look at the implications of Siebold's classification both for museology and anthropology generally. I will also mention a few specific examples which reveal both the breadth and depth of the Siebold collection.

Blomhoff's catalogue was sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1826 [BLOMHOFF 1826]. Its headings were as follows:

Departments

1. The Imperial coat of arms
2. Coin specimens
3. Group of dolls representing family life
4. Three Japanese masks and wigs

5. Japanese clothing
6. Female costumes
7. Rare costumes of the Ryukyus
8. [Ditto] of the Koreas
9. Korean domestic utensils
10. Ezo costumes
11. Chinese costumes
12. Japanese everyday and luxury utensils for men and women
13. A salon [i.e. pavilion] for the enjoyment of the Dairo
14. Procession
15. A second train
16. Three vessels
17. An enormously thick candle
18. Nine statues of historical figures
19. Two groups of statues
20. Three strange busts
21. An extra collection of J[apanese] musical instruments
22. Several types of weapon
23. A collection of falconry equipment
24. Two Javanese polearms
25. Marriage ceremony
26. Tea preparation
27. Utensils: Clock
28. Farming equipment
29. Carpentry tools
30. Domestic utensils
31. Hobbies and leisure
32. Carvings and crafts<sup>1)</sup>
33. Leather crafts
34. Children's toys
35. Art objects
36. Woodworking studio
37. A collection of glass objects made in Japan
38. Stone objects
39. Porcelain and earthenware
40. Bamboo and straw objects
41. Miscellaneous objects
42. Fantastic objects
43. Art objects

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1) Blomhoff apparently did not differentiate between "artfully made" objects, crafts, or fine arts, for all of which he used the Dutch word "kunstwerken," which at the time embraced all of these categories.

- 44. Fine old and various lacquerware
- 45. Paintings and drawings, paintings
- 46. Printing and writing
- 47. Geography
- 48. Paper objects
- 49. Architecture
- Appendix: Printed books and drawings

As can be seen, classes—or departments, as they were called—were defined by one of three different criteria: social context, function, or material composition. In some cases there is an awareness of differences in context, while in others objects are simply lumped together because they look similar.

Fisscher's classification, sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1831, was as follows [FISSCHER 1831]:

- A. Geography
- B. Language and literature
- C. Antiquities and rarities
- E. Idols, clerical dress, and temple ornaments
- F. Weapons and military uniforms
- G. Ceremonial dress and other ceremonial objects
- H. Musical instruments and other amusement objects
- I. Stuffed animals, plants, and shells
- K. Domestic utensils and dress
- L. Buildings, vessels, and crafts
- M. Miscellaneous objects (appendix)

From this overview it becomes clear that Fisscher's categories are both similar to and yet more systematic than Blomhoff's. However, in several categories Fisscher again tried to combine material composition, functional and social context, so causing some confusion. Blomhoff's catalogue was simply a list, bringing together related objects with little textual elaboration. Fisscher, although lacking an academic background, created larger, seemingly arbitrary categories encompassing groups of objects which were loosely related to each other. Here we see an early attempt at a primitive hierarchy. Also, Fisscher took the trouble to explain in his catalogue some of his choices of both categories and objects, albeit not always convincingly.

Before we look at Siebold's classification system, it is interesting to note that all three collectors had to work under restricted circumstances. While Blomhoff and Siebold were able to use their higher social status in making contacts, this was not the case with Fisscher, whose highest position was that of warehousemaster, clearly lower than that of chief merchant (Blomhoff) or physician (Siebold). All three men were able to travel to Edo at least once, which is also reflected in the composition of their collections. It is therefore more instructive to look at the differences between

their collections, than at their many similarities.

Finally, in comparison to the seemingly intuitive categories created by Blomhoff and Fisscher, Siebold's look like a first attempt at a scientific classification. However, it is also clear that Siebold had problems in producing a closed system. There were four main classes in the handwritten catalogue, probably compiled between 1832 and 1837 [SIEBOLD, n.d.].

- I. Scientific objects
- II. Objects of culture and industry
- III. Models
- IV. Ethnographic objects from other areas

These classes are interesting for their implied bias toward visual information: that is, Siebold seems to have regarded books, prints, paintings, and even coins as purveyors of "scientific" information, whereas all other objects are seen as examples of the actual physical culture. The first three classes were subdivided into the following "sections."

[Class I]

1. Printed books, manuscripts, and woodcuts
2. Drawings and paintings
3. Coins, commemorative medals, and some antiquities

[Class II]

4. Raw materials and products obtained by a simple manufacturing process
5. Products of art and industry largely made from a single material
6. Products of art and industry made from combinations of materials

[Class III]

7. Buildings and implements serving the comfort and security of man
8. Models of furniture and implements for agriculture, fishing, and other economic activities
9. Machines and instruments

Under these sections there were further categories and sub-categories designating specific characteristics of the objects, such as the nature of their raw materials, the process by which they were manufactured, and their social context. For example, under class II, section 4, one has: A. Products of the animal world; B. Products of the vegetable world; C. Products of the mineral world; D. Products obtained by a simple manufacturing process. Under class III, section 6, one finds: A. Clothing, footwear, wigs, and other necessities for the comfort and luxury of men and women; B. Objects relating to "kami worship," to manners and customs; C. Weaponry; D. Musical instruments; E. Scientific, mathematical, surgical, and other instruments; F.

Games, toys, etc.

It is clear that Siebold was inspired by his knowledge of botanical classification. He therefore tried to introduce a hierarchical system that, through ever-increasing refinement, would eventually go down to specify categories of related objects. However, the existing semantic bias among the classes was exacerbated as material properties had to be further subdivided into social and functional categories, based upon the apparently traditional and “intuitive” classification which also appears in the Blomhoff and Fisscher collections. Thus while Siebold tried to develop a scientific classification along the lines of Linné’s classification of plants, he failed to do this consistently.

## 5. SIEBOLD’S HOLISTIC APPROACH

The depth and breadth of all three collections might have made it possible to relate the collected objects to visual documentation in paintings, drawings, and books, but unfortunately none of the collectors did so. The Dutch were lucky in having the Nagasaki painter, Kawahara Keiga, who had been appointed to an unofficial post, allowing him to enter Dejima. All three collectors were therefore able to commission various series of paintings from Kawahara, in a style which combined elements of Yamato painting with Western-influenced realism. These included detailed renderings of objects made by the Japanese and the technical processes involved. For some reason, this visual documentation, as well as that found in Japanese books, were classified separately from the actual objects. Thus, Kawahara’s depiction of lacquer workers is not directly referred to the actual lacquer objects in the collection. It seems that Blomhoff and Fisscher commissioned works without any direct consideration of the actual objects depicted, whereas one series by Kawahara, showing the tools used and products made by craftsmen, includes objects actually in the Siebold collection.

Blomhoff and Fisscher both included subjective judgments in their catalogues, while Siebold avoided doing so, being first and foremost a scientist. Whereas Blomhoff and Fisscher both seem to have tried to build collections of aesthetically pleasing objects, for Siebold this concern was secondary to a holistic approach which sought to present as many aspects of Japanese nature and culture as possible, through a typology of material culture. The collectors’ personal views and interests naturally influenced the composition of their collections. Siebold’s interests in Japanese-language information, geography, technology, and all things medical are reflected in the number of objects related to these subjects. It also explains why Siebold was as interested in the processes by which objects were produced as in the traditional focus on the finished products themselves. One of the reasons for this was that Siebold started collecting ethnographic and other objects as an extension of his information gathering on behalf of the Dutch East India government. This need to put things in a spatial or chronological perspective can be seen in his unfinished *Nippon*, which placed not only Japanese society, but also his own voyage to Japan, in historical



perspective [SIEBOLD 1832–58]. It is interesting to note that while a substantial amount of space is devoted to geography and raw materials, little is said about the technical aspects of Japanese material culture, including arts and crafts.

## **6. SIEBOLD'S PERSONAL VIEWS ON JAPAN**

Siebold himself, in the positivistic tradition of his age, tried to refrain from judging Japanese society and the Japanese. Nevertheless, his impressions of Japan are in the main quite positive, despite his reservations about the Bakufu's policy of isolation. In his contacts with Japanese academics and his personal relationship with his Japanese wife and her family, he approached the Japanese as equals, rather than as a distant outsider. Needless to say, Siebold's work is especially valued in Japan because of his ability and willingness to share his knowledge of recent developments in various European scientific disciplines. Naturally Siebold therefore had access to excellent informants and was also able to ask people to collect for him. His capacity for cultivating personal contacts also enabled him to move more freely within Nagasaki than was common for the Dutch stationed on Dejima.

## **7. SIEBOLD'S INFLUENCE ON EARLY EUROPEAN MUSEUM COLLECTING**

When Siebold returned from Japan in 1830, ethnography in Europe was still in its infancy, but already closely connected to museums. All over Europe — especially in Germany, Denmark, Russia, and France — ethnographic collections were gradually taken more seriously, such that reorganizing these museums and their departments became a necessity. Until then, non-Western collections were primarily a way of displaying exotic, beautiful, and rare objects, and so reflecting the high social status or adventurous character of the collector. From the second half of the century, such collections began to be (mis)used to show how many non-European societies were (supposedly) less technologically advanced than the “enlightened” European ones. In this way, ethnographic museums could be seen to justify European expansion and political dominance over these societies. The Dutch government, and Siebold himself, were not too interested in representing Japan in this light. They were interested in expanding beyond their existing colonial territories, but only for commercial purposes.

The most immediate influence on Siebold's attempts at classifying ethnographic museum objects was French, from his correspondence with Edme-François Jomard, the curator of the Royal, now National, Library in Paris, who was concerned with geographic and ethnographic classifications of objects. Jomard had compiled his first classification of ethnographic materials in 1831, although not for museum purposes. This had been read by Siebold, who in turn wrote to Jomard in 1843, criticizing the limited scope of his system, which only recognized groupings of products without taking into account the larger context of that society's ethnography

and so the comparative possibilities of an ethnology which might enable a classification for all cultures. Although Siebold did add a small number of non-Japanese (non-Ainu, non-Ryukyuan, and non-Korean) objects to his collection, these were for comparative purposes only. Impressed by the level of technological development in Japan, Siebold naturally did not support the evolutionism that dominated both Jomard's functionalist method and that of later, more famous ethnologists and anthropologists.

## **8. THE SCIENTIFIC IMPORTANCE OF THE SIEBOLD COLLECTION IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY**

The Siebold collection at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden contains many examples of Japanese material culture from the late Edo period that cannot be found elsewhere. More importantly, however, Siebold had the foresight to collect not just those objects that were peculiar or rare in the eyes of an outsider. His emphasis on documenting in concrete form as many aspects of Japanese culture as was feasible within the practical and social limitations which he faced is the reason why such seemingly everyday objects are part of the collection. In this respect he can be regarded as a modern anthropologist. On the other hand, his admiration for Japanese culture did not extend so far as to go out of his way to collect the best examples of each type of object. Better examples of similar objects — tea bowls, for example — can be found in the almost contemporary collections of Blomhoff and Fisscher.

The other strength of the collection's make-up is the systematic use of various sources of documentation to complement the physical evidence. That is, from the outset Siebold had an ethnographic museum in mind; he did not want merely to exhibit things Japanese, but was trying to explain Japanese society. In effect, the collection in his museum was a device with which to visualize Japanese society, rather than the object-oriented presentation which was common in his time. Such presentations could already be seen in the Blomhoff and Fisscher collections in the Royal Cabinet of Rarities in The Hague. A further goal of Siebold was to demonstrate technological processes and raw materials, an approach that had only been partly understood by the other two collectors, who had only collected some of the necessary visual documentation and raw materials. Finally, Siebold's attempt at classification was based on concepts borrowed from another discipline, namely botany. As we have seen, he did not quite succeed, but despite this he was considered an authority in the field of ethnographic museums in his own lifetime, because of his experience and the structural framework governing his collection in Leiden. Because of this need to break with an unstructured view of material culture, he became a pioneer museologist, whose legacy and originality should not be underestimated.

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