

MUSICAL ICONOGRAPHIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVES: THE MUSEO ORIENTAL OF VALLADOLID

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Exhibitions are often organized as a practical way of showing valuable materials in a certain order, both on panels and in display boxes, but despite this being the very essence of the museum, the displayed materials and panels promote a particular historical speech toward which the visitor is lead, credulously assuming that the historical truth must be the basis of the narration. Nevertheless, “museums were born during the Age of Imperialism, often served and benefited capitalism, and continue to be instruments of the ruling classes and corporate powers, working for them ‘in the vineyards of consciousness’”.¹ Consequently, understanding the underlying discourse of an exhibition and its configuration is not only necessary in order to liberate the materials from a particular narrative, but it also permit us to understand the socio-political and cultural context of the museum’s creation and reveals its hidden agendas. This has been one of the main goals of the academic criticism towards the museums during the last decades.²

In this paper, we will offer an interpretation of the historical narratives that underlie the display of objects at the Museo Oriental of Valladolid, the largest collection of Asian art in Spain, established by the Order of Saint Augustine in 1874, in order to show the objects collected by the Augustinian friars since 1565. Under the evocative name of “Museo Oriental” the presentation of the collection follows a specific Roman Catholic narrative of the historical process occurring within the missions in the Far East, together with a particular view of the Other that suits some of the key notions of Said’s *Orientalism* (1978): The exhibition is a testimony of the European-Atlantic power over the Orient, and not a veridic discourse about the Orient, despite it claims to be so.³ To understand the parallel discourses, we have selected visual objects related to music and dance, musical instruments and panels about music, and analyzed how do they integrate in this particular Western narrative, to what extent do they suit the colonial discourse of the Otherness, and how do they promote the Western way of being in the world.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXHIBITION. The origin of the collection is the arrival of the Augustinian missionaries to Philippines in 1565, commanded by Fray Andrés de Urdaneta, in the earliest Spanish attempt to evangelize the island. Afterwards, they visited China (1575) and founded their first convent in Macao in 1884. Their presence in Japan was shorter and less significant: they arrived in 1584 and established the first church in 1602, but after the 1614 decree of extinction of Christianity, they did not land there again until 1681. For more than 400 years, the friars took back to the Valladolid convent artistic and ethnographic objects (at least 2000 out of 3000 missionaries attested in 400 years were formed in Valladolid), occasionally aiming to use them for instruction of young friars that would travel to the missions. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the exchange of people and objects with East Asia became securer and faster, thus resulting in an increase of the East Asian holdings of the order. During the twentieth century, the arrival of pieces from the Vatican Universal Exhibition of 1925 and, during the second half of the century, the private donations, completed the collection. The first exhibition of the holdings took place in 1874, but the modern museum was created and opened to the public as a city museum in 1980, under the advice of Luis González Robledo.⁴



1. *Nan Teou or the Seven Spirits of the South* (China, Qin dynasty). Painting on paper, 154 × 56 cm. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, 82B.

As stated by the museum itself, the goal of the exhibition is both to spread the knowledge about the cultures of the Far East, in order to promote a dialogue of peace between the East and the West, and also to remember 400 years of missionary history. But as Bennett recalls when reflecting on the political-discursive space of the museum “The first contradiction ... has consisted in the disparity between, on the one hand, the museum universalist aspirations embodied in the claim that the order of things and peoples it shaped into being was generally representative of humanity and, on the other hand, the fact that any particular museum display can always be held to be partial, selective and inadequate in relation to this objective”.⁵ As visitors, there is also a conflict between our private narrative as observers and our own concept of evangelization and colonialism and the Catholic narrative displayed.



2. *The Eight Immortals of the Tao* (China, Qin dynasty). Painting on paper, 53.5 × 51 cm. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, unnumbered. The immortals are holding their attributes, some of them musical instruments: Zhang Guo Lao with a *yüku* (a percussion instrument made of bamboo), Han Xiang Zi with a flute and Cao Guojiu with clappers.

The history of the Roman Catholic presence in the Far East is explained from the first panel, and it is always accompanied by the “achievements” of the Augustinian friars. Moreover, even if the educational intention is achieved by the means of exposing the “arts”, “crafts” and “exotic customs” of the Far East, we can soon see that the exhibition contents conform to Said’s orientalist paradigm. Nonetheless, this exhibition is about the “Orient”, meeting Said’s idea of the Orient as the stage on which the whole East is confined, and the West writes the drama.⁶ Many elements that characterize orientalism are well present: the mixture of the journey, the history and the fable, the stereotypes and the confrontations with the West.



3. Hunan school, *The Metamorphosis of Guan Yin* (China, Qin dynasty). Painting on paper, 125 × 57 cm. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, 73C. The people represented closer to the divinity are the wealthy and the priests. Details on the right show musical scenes from everyday life, which contrast the conch shell played by the goddess.



4. Figures of men in a funeral procession (China, Ming dynasty, 1550-1600). Glazed ceramic. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, unnumbered. Men are shown carrying trumpets, a drum and clappers.

Throughout the exhibition, there are different visions of the East depending of the civilizations portrayed. We will focus in two very different narratives: the orientalist mysteries of the Chinese exotic civilization and the Philippines, a land of *mauvais sauvages* where only some territories under Christian rule were civilized. Subsequently, orientalism and primitivism, two of the main colonial discourses about the Other, run in parallel with the Roman Catholic narrative, legitimizing the Western presence, its rules and its conceptions of the world.

Considering the museum as a performative stage where the narration will take place, we will analyze how the materials related to music are presented and displayed in order to meet these different narratives. Then, we will use visual sources about music, musical instruments and panels about music as a case study to unveil the different layers of meaning and the implicit narratives in the display. In our preliminary approach to the museum's holdings in order to make a catalogue of visual sources about music, we have examined almost one hundred examples, sixty percent of them belonging to the Chinese collection. The majority of the images showing Chinese music are shown in the exhibition, except for a few export paintings. The Japanese section shows 36 items; however, 26 of them belong to the nineteenth-century Japanese photography collection, and only six of them are on display. For the Philippines, only six scenes were found, and three are exhibited, but nevertheless, they are extremely significant. Regarding the organological collection, as it is almost always the case, musical instruments are silent, and become objects of visual interest, turning into works of art, which the visitor is supposed to observe and admire. But their situation in the exhibition, the materials around them and the panels that accompany them are also a good reflection of the various implied discourses.



5. Scholar playing the qin (China, Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period, 1723–1735). White porcelain. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, unnumbered.

THE EXOTIC CIVILIZATION OF CHINA. From the first room, we can see a unitary concept of China as the Other, a single reality without complexities in contraposition with the Us that is the audience. The focus of the section is to show the artistic skills of the Chinese and their exotic and exquisite material culture, with small glimpses of religious and cultural “curiosities”.

The most abundant scenes showing music in materials such as clay, porcelain, cast, silk and paper, could be generally organized in five main themes: (1) religious paintings or attributes of divine characters, such as for instance the paintings on paper of the *Seven Spirits of the South* [fig. 1], *The Eight Immortals of the Dao* [fig. 2] or the *Metamorphosis of Kuan Yin* [fig. 3]; (2) funerary processions, both in statuettes [fig. 4] and in exportation paintings; (3) scholars or literates playing the qin [fig. 5]; (4) export paintings with musical instruments and musical scenes of the everyday life [fig. 6]; and (5) courtesan scenes [fig. 7].

Nevertheless, there is an undeniable gap between the abundance of musical scenes and the panel and section dedicated to the music in Chinese culture, where some Chinese musical instruments are also displayed. The music section of the exhibition is situated under the title “Chinese Music, Theater and Games” [fig. 8]. There are no references to its ritual use in funerary procession as clearly appears in the funerary



6. Woman playing an erhu (China, Qin dynasty, 1895). Export watercolor on paper of Tinsin, 15 × 10 cm. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, 178.

statuettes and the export paintings displayed, or to its significant place and symbolism in the hands of the Dao Elders, or even to the social and cultural importance of the music among the elites. The Chinese music is explained and expressed “through and by virtue of European imagination”,⁷ in a section to which music belongs in our own categorization of culture: together with games, toys and other forms of entertainment. Moreover, in a brief explanatory panel about the Chinese musical system, it is stated that “Chinese music was developed in an original way, different than the European experience”, that it “only uses five of the twelve musical semitones [sic]”, that “the rhythmical and popular music was used in profane and religious ceremonies”, and finally, that already during the Zhou dynasty, “it was used in the magic ceremonies of the shamans”. So, on the one hand, music is situated in the same sphere as games, children toys and theater, but it is also stated that it was used in profane and religious ceremonies, and also in shamanistic magic. It is hard to understand from our perspective the actual meaning of these explanations, which totally lack of a coherent musical language (five semitones, rhythmical and popular music), but obviously the last two definitions are showing a musical practice that takes part during the performance of mysterious and magic rituals (paradoxically, none of them appearing in the large number of images displayed).



7. Sheng Mao (1310–1371), *Listening to Music in the Bamboo Grove* (China, Yuan dynasty). Ink and pigment on silk, scroll 215 × 34 cm. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, 048. The detail shows a female instrumental ensemble consisting of a bamboo flute, a konghou harp, a long-neck ruan, and a paixiao (panpipe).



Consequently, the music section is a perfect summary of the concept of the Chinese civilization as the exotic Other. This clear orientalist perspective of Chinese musical practice (in contrast with Western music, as an exotic invention used in the most curious and mysterious rituals, but with an interesting complexity of instruments and theory to be considered as a high culture) is running in parallel with the Roman Catholic historical narrative, the cornerstone of the display. The exhibition panels explain how even if Christianity in China dates back to the eighth century, and despite the great scientific and missionary achievements of the Augustinians, it is still a minority religion in the country. If we juxtapose both discourses, we are led to understand that the presentation of the skilful but exotic and mysterious Chinese civilization is a pretext to justify the failure of its evangelization.

THE MAUVAIS SAUVAGE AND THE “PRIMITIVE TRIBES” OF LUZON. The second part of the exhibition takes the visitors to Philippines, where the evangelization was a total success. Images of music scenes are scarce, but, nonetheless, highly illustrative of the presented narrative. The first room is dedicated to the evangelized Philippines, and among religious art, biographies of famous Augustinians of the Island and colonial documents, we find three music-related objects. One is a visual narrative about the life of Fr. Juan Tombo



8. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, exhibit on “Music, Games and Theatre” in China. Authors’ photo.

(1825–1884) with scenes of the life in the Philippines during the middle of the nineteenth century, which includes a scene showing a typical musical ensemble in traditional clothes: a high-class Philippine woman is playing a harp, a man playing a guitar, and between them is probably a singer [fig. 9]. Also exhibited are figurines of two musicians belonging to *tipos del país* (country genre), which was made popular by Bonifacio Flores Arévalo (1850–1920), an enlightened Philippine, sculptor, dentist and patriot [fig. 10]. Dressed in traditional Philippine clothes, the musicians play western Philippines instruments of Spanish origin: a traverse flute and a small guitar, maybe a piccolo and a *octavina* (small plucked Philippine instrument shaped as a guitar, with fourteen strings in six courses; the sculpture is only showing six pegs, so possibly it is a small guitar) used in Western musical ensembles from the sixteenth century.



9. Anonymous, *Life of Fray Juan Tombo in Philipines (1850-1860)*. Oil on canvas. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, unnumbered. On the left is the detail from the lower left-side corner showing an instrumental ensemble consisting of a harp, a guitar and a singer.

Among the religious Philippine art, the colonial documents and the portraits of Philippine friars, these musical scenes can only be understood as an idyllic representations of the education achieved through the evangelization and the colonization. The contrast between this section and the next one, with some musical instruments from Mindanao, the Islamic province, is extreme: here are shown only some musical instruments without any explanation together with other exotic objects of the Mindanao tribes. But probably the most interesting room is the last one, dedicated to the "Primitive Tribes of Luzon". As it is stated in the preface of the volume *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*, museums commonly "provide windows on other cultures of the world, but when they are examined more closely they can also be seen to mirror the profession of anthropology itself, both its achievements and its foibles".⁸ This section is doubtlessly a clear example of nineteenth-century anthropology, both in the selection of objects and in the panels in display, which lead the visitor to the idea of the *mauvais sauvage*. We see photos of half naked and suspicious "primitive humans" with the most dreadful and uncivilized cultural practices. Musical instruments have again here an important role; located next to the large collection of head-cutting axes and the gongs pending from dead enemies' jaws, they are a remarkable example of these primitive behaviours [fig. 11]. There is no information about their economic practices, their homes, their passing rites, their family relationships, the children's life or their musical culture. We only see frightening idols, axes that cut the heads of the



10. Sculptor from Santa Rita (Pampanga), Flutist and guitarist (19th century). Plaster, wood and fabric. Valladolid, Museo Oriental, unnumbered.

enemies and the gongs with human parts, as in a house of horrors that steals any humanity away from the Igorot people. Although never explicit, the audience can easily make a comparison between the beautiful typical Philippine ensembles with colorful traditional dresses, and the dreadful gongs with human jaws. That is to say, a comparison between the horrors of the non-evangelized (or even non-Islamic Philippines) and the high cultural and artistic level of the evangelized Philippines. Therefore, the Roman Catholic narrative is juxtaposed once again to the colonial narrative of Primitivism. The Philippines' *mise-en-scène* takes the audience on a journey to the past, from the evolutionated and evangelized Philippines to the primitive Luzon tribes, which is clearly trying to legitimate the colonial dominion of Spain in the Islands and the benefits of the evangelization.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS. This exhibition is one more example of to what extent museums are used to perpetuate specific narrative discourses, which justify historical events and ideological agendas. But what is particularly interesting in our case is the cohabitation of parallel narratives and the way they integrate with each other: the different visions of the East, the Roman Catholic narrative and the orientalism, primitivism and colonialism paradigms. Additionally, the use of images showing music making and musical instruments as case study has revealed itself extremely useful. Music is a relevant part of culture, and musical behaviors can hide many cultural meanings that are not easily accessed through other cultural actions. In this exhibi-



11. Gang-sa gong (Bontoc, Northern Luzon, 19th century). Bronze and human jaw. Valladolid, Museo Oriental.

tion, we are not learning anything about the musical practices of China or Philippines, but we can take a glance of some of the Western conception of its own music and the music of the Other. Western music symbolizes civilization, the musical cultures with a musical theory can be considered somehow civilized, while other sound practices belong to the sphere of the “primitive” humans, in an evolutionary stage that needs to be surpassed. We have to remember that colonialism was not only material, but also “was experienced through multiple forms of sensory perception: the formation of new conventions and distinctions around food, odours, sounds ... both colonial and indigenous categories were often generated viscerally, out of responses of desire or disgust that could mutate in different kinds of social relations”.⁹ This is precisely the reason that images showing music making and musical instruments can be used for legitimizing the colonial narrative.

Finally, even if this exhibition is an interesting testimony of the different colonial narratives, with whom the identity of the West has been created, it would need to meet the needs of our postcolonial society if it wants to keep its academic claims, educative goals and its intention to enable intercultural dialogue. Quoting the last paragraph of Said’s *Orientalism*:

I consider Orientalism’s failure to have been a human as much as an intellectual one; for in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience. The worldwide hegemony of Orientalism and all it stands for can now be challenged, if we can benefit properly from the general twentieth-century rise to political and historical awareness of so many of the earths’ peoples. If this book has any future use, it will be as a modest contribution to that challenge, and as warning: that systems of thought like Orientalism, discourses of power, ideological fiction—mind-forg’d manacles—are all too easily made, applied, and guarded.¹⁰

Furthermore, as musicologists we can not disregard the necessity of a reevaluation of the musical instruments and pictures of music making in the museum holdings, in order to liberate them from the colonial narrative and situate them in relationship with their social and cultural contexts. Then, it will be possible to update the methodological and theoretical framework and answer to some of the questions that modern ethnomusicology proposes, such as their uses and functions within a culture, or other aspects such as gender, identity, hybridization, performance, ritual or status.

NOTES

¹ Michael M. Arnes, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992), 3, after Hans Haacke, "Museums, Managers of Consciousness", *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, ed. by Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 60-73, 67.

² Moira G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996); Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practice* (London: Sage, Hardt & Negri, 1997); Mary Bouquet, ed., *Academic Anthropology and the Museum: Back to the Future* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001); Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles, *Collecting, Colonialism: Material Culture and Colonial Change* (Oxford: Berg, 2001); H. Glenn Penn, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V. Street, eds., *Cultural Encounters: Representing "Otherness"* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000); Susan Seleener-Smith, *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 6.

⁴ Blas Sierra de la Calle, *Museo Oriental: Guía del Visitante* (Valladolid: Real Colegio PP. Agustinos, 1982) and *Museo Oriental: China, Japón, Filipinas: Obras selectas* (Valladolid: Caja España, Obra social, 2004).

⁵ Tony Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 102-103.

⁶ "The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe. An orientalist is but the particular specialist in knowledge for which Europe at large is responsible, in the way that an audience is historically and culturally responsible for (and responsive to) dramas technically put together by the dramatist." Said, *Orientalism*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸ M.M. Arnes, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, xiii.

⁹ Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips, *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2006), 3.

¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 328.