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Conference Report:

Things on the Move:

Materiality of Objects in Global and Imperial Trajectories, 1700–1900

by Lena Potschka

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CONFERENCE REPORTS

Things on the Move: Materiality of Objects in Global and Imperial Trajectories, 1700–1900. Conference organized by the German Historical Institute London in collaboration with the Prize Papers Project and held at the GHIL, 8–10 September 2022. Conveners: Indra Sen Gupta (GHIL), Felix Brahm (Bielefeld University), and Lucas Haasis (University of Oldenburg).

Alongside European imperialism and colonialism, the early modern and modern periods were characterized by extensive globalization processes which fuelled the emergence of global trade and markets and amplified the movement of people—both voluntary and involuntary. As a result of the interweaving of these complex processes, the movement of objects around the globe increased substantially over this period. These ‘things on the move’ were crucial points of contact, as they were situated at the centre of global interaction.¹ At the same time, they were often produced locally. Their production and circulation at the intersection of processes of imperialism, colonialism, and globalization meant that they played a key role in global as well as local material history. They connected these two levels, often in uncertain and unpredictable ways.² A major aim of the conference was to better understand the complex and ambivalent relationship between processes of globalization and colonialism/imperialism through a focus on material and object flows and by

¹ Eve Rosenhaft and Felix Brahm (eds.), *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850* (Woodbridge, 2016); Judith Becker (ed.), *European Missions in Contact Zones: Transformation through Interaction in a (Post-)Colonial World* (Göttingen, 2015); Felicia Gottmann, ‘Mixed Company in the Contact Zone: The “Glocal” Diplomatic Efforts of a Prussian East Indian in 1750s Cape Verde’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 23/5 (2019), 423–41.

² Roland Robertson, ‘Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity’, in id., Mike Featherstone, and Scott Lash (eds.), *Global Modernities* (London, 1995), 25–44.

analysing the significance of those objects' mobility in this period of great transformation.

As objects are bearers of meaning, it is crucial to consider how and why things moved from one place to another. Were they, for instance, traded, given as presents, inherited, or stolen? In their introductions, the organizers Felix Brahm, Lucas Haasis, and Indra Sengupta outlined the framework for the conference. They highlighted its central objective, which was to analyse objects and their trajectories from different perspectives, such as global history, global microhistory, and colonial history, focusing particularly on where these perspectives intersect. The papers engaged with the following key questions: what everyday practices shaped the material global worlds of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? How do we define the role and agency of objects in global, imperial, and colonial contexts? And how did objects produce, carry, and change meanings and functions in colonial and global trajectories?

The keynote lecture by Anne Gerritsen (University of Warwick) shed light on the complexity of the conference's topics and the opportunities offered by them. Gerritsen offered an intriguing insight into the global material world of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China on the basis of a 'shopping list' taken from a handbook owned by a Chinese merchant trading locally in the city of Canton. While research usually focuses on the goods exported from China to Europe, this source lists goods which were imported to China through the port of Canton and afterwards distributed inland. The handbook is a rather special source, as it was not public, but semi-private. In addition to the list of goods, it preserved information about key trading routes and useful business tips that were supposed to stay within the merchant's family. Gerritsen thus highlighted an everyday practice that shaped the global as well as the local material world.

Proving how significant and fruitful her approach can be, Gerritsen proposed four crucial measures for further research in this field: first, expanding the source base by using private and semi-private material, such as documents from local archives, instead of relying only on central, imperial sources; second, expanding the time period by looking across and challenging established boundaries in order to understand trading patterns and the complex process of globalization; third,

expanding the geographical scope of research by shifting the focus from coastal regions to the hinterland and considering the agency of both with respect to the movement of objects; and fourth, expanding the current focus on actors and groups by looking beyond merchants based in ports and including, for instance, local merchants in small towns who were connected to domestic trade. Gerritsen's keynote lecture was part of the first panel of the conference, which explored commodities and consumption within global and imperial trajectories. However, these four measures were key issues that shaped the discussion throughout the conference.

The subsequent papers picked up on the themes that Gerritsen introduced. Hilde Neus (Anton de Kom Universiteit van Suriname) offered insights into a social practice by free women of colour in eighteenth-century Suriname known as 'Missys' that enabled them to exercise agency through the use of luxury objects. Because of their status as free women, they were allowed to own property and improve their social status within the colonial setting. Through a kind of public dance party (*doe*), the Missys displayed their social status by dressing themselves and their slaves in luxurious clothing and jewellery, mostly imported from the Netherlands. Neus discussed how these objects held cultural importance because of their meaning and function in this specific colonial context.

Emma Forsberg (Lund University) examined the practice of gift-giving by early modern Swedish diplomats, asking what role they played in global consumption, and what expectations were put upon them within their individual spheres. Objects were gifted to people in high political positions and clearly had a specific symbolism and meaning, as they were supposed to display Sweden's wealth and power within a global context. However, the intended and received meanings could differ. The practice of gift-giving thus created and shaped early modern international connections and interactions.

Artemis Yagou (Deutsches Museum, Munich) completed the panel by analysing the consumption of commodities through an object-based research discourse. She demonstrated the correlation between science, technology, and society with reference to the invention of portable watches in the eighteenth century. Watches gained tremendous popularity, as they not only enabled timekeeping while on the move, but also

functioned as a fashionable symbol of innovation and distinction. In addition, watches were an important point of contact between different parts and societies of the world; for instance, there was a high demand for European-made watches in Ottoman markets.

The second panel moved from commodities and consumption to the social practice of colonial collecting and the importance of colonial knowledge in Western knowledge production. Caroline Drieënhuizen (Open University of the Netherlands) criticized the widespread Eurocentric attitude towards Western collectors in this particular field of research and pointed out that the agency of locals (such as former owners or informants) is often neglected. According to Drieënhuizen, this perspective does not do justice to the complexity of the collecting process within colonial structures. With the help of a case study, she demonstrated how a group of local people in the nineteenth-century Dutch colony of Indonesia managed to exercise agency by determining which objects Europeans were able to collect. She thus showed how important and influential the role of locals was for colonial collecting and knowledge formation.

Sarah Longair (University of Lincoln) showed how objects sometimes had the power to resist processes of global commodification. She used the example of the Seychelles to demonstrate how islands were places of self-sufficiency on the one hand, and of mobility and global connections on the other. The object at the centre of her paper was the *coco de mer*, an enormous double-lobed species of coconut growing exclusively on the Seychelles. Objects made from these unique fruits were produced and traded as curiosities around the globe. However, the palm trees on which they grew resisted European-controlled mass production, as they can only be cultivated on their island of origin, a fact that fundamentally shaped the conditions and processes of exchange and material culture.

Meenakshi A (Yale University) focused on the making of cement as a construction material in colonial India and, in general, the British Empire in the nineteenth century. Her paper examined the production of knowledge about and the circulation of cement across a range of sites characterized by differing soil and climatic conditions. She pointed out that the very materiality of cement produced construction results that differed from site to site. This variation meant that the

technical and engineering knowledge that was generated on the production and use of cement was far from stable or uniform throughout the British Empire. The specific materiality of cement thus created what the speaker described as ‘new kinds of mobilities and circulations within the British Empire’.

The third panel shifted the focus to institutions and the afterlives of colonial collections. The question of how institutions handle their past while also considering current debates about the restitution of looted objects was particularly important for the papers in this panel. Emile De Bruijn (National Trust) presented a project to catalogue a National Trust collection which involved reviewing object records that had been previously described as ‘oriental’. De Bruijn offered a proposal for reinterpreting problematic and offensive object descriptions: namely, to provide context for critical engagement with the objects in question by adding extra information such as their place of production, object groups, materials, and an accurate expert identification. The goal of the cataloguing project was to challenge the use of imprecise Eurocentric terms by identifying new ways of assessing relations across objects and groups.

Mobeen Hussain (Trinity College Dublin) focused on universities as institutions which have been actively involved in acquiring colonial collections in the past. She chose Trinity College Dublin as an example to demonstrate how collectors have gathered wide-ranging natural history collections in the service of science through brutal exploitation. Her focus was on how universities and similar institutions today are engaging with their history of collusion with colonial collecting practices.

The paper by Katherine Arnold (London School of Economics and Political Science) pursued this theme further in the following panel, which was dedicated to objects in global and imperial connections. She presented two entirely different types of collected object—a rare African parasitic plant and human remains—in the world of nineteenth-century natural history collecting. These objects, which seem impossible to compare, can nonetheless be brought into the same analytical frame, offering innovative methods for exploring the field as a space, fieldwork as a practice, and the ways in which collectors constructed and interacted with the world around them. Arnold

also highlighted the depth and complexity of collections that were, and still are, held in colonial storehouses such as botanic gardens, herbaria, and museums around the world.

Oliver Finnegan and Lucia Pereira Pardo (UK National Archives) and Andrew Little (Prize Papers Project) dedicated their joint presentation with Lucas Haasis to objects and their materiality in the Prize Papers Project. The project's goal is to digitize the legal records of over 35,000 British ship captures, which are held by the National Archives. The collection also contains an enormous amount of undelivered mail as well as various objects, such as pieces of fabric, jewellery, and samples of seeds and beans that were captured on their way across the ocean. The project coordinators consider it crucial to preserve the original material condition of these objects during digitization, as these artefacts have not been touched for centuries and are thus valuable time capsules. Special attention is paid to the material features of the objects, such as shape, size, colour, smell, or physical state, as even the smallest such features can be significant for understanding certain aspects and practices of the early modern global world.

Christian Stenz (Heidelberg University) opened the last panel with a striking example of how the meaning of objects can change entirely as a consequence of being removed from their original setting. His paper focused on wooden lintels from the Maya city of Tikal that were extracted from a temple wall. In the process, they had to be literally cut out of their material context. As a result, not only did their physical state change drastically, but also their original, intended meaning and function.

Yu Ying Lee (Yuan Ze University) concluded the conference by discussing the question of how Chinese antiques became desirable in the West. Her paper focused on Liulichang, a historic trading area in Beijing. During the Second Opium War, British and French troops looted the city's Summer Palace and brought a variety of objects to Europe. One consequence of this was that Western demands for Chinese antiques grew enormously, resulting in the emergence of Liulichang as a central trading point for collectors. The looting of the palace thus increased the global circulation and trade in Chinese antiquities.

To sum up, the conference discussed a variety of topics and areas of research. Although the papers offered very different approaches

and focused on a range of specific objects in various contexts, they also highlighted meaningful similarities. The conference clearly demonstrated the potential of material history on a local and global scale in an epoch marked by the criss-crossing forces of globalization, imperial expansion, and the growth in colonial structures.

LENA POTSCHKA (University of Oldenburg)