

Accidental acquisitions:

The nineteenth-century Korean collections
in the National Museum of Ethnology, Part 1



Fan, RMV 1-4176

Colophon

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Early contacts

Although, according to their acquisition data, the Korean collections in the National Museum of Ethnology are the oldest in Europe, they have rarely played a central role in the history of the collections held in the National Museum of Ethnology (Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, hereafter referred to as RMV). Until the late nineteenth century, no Korean items had been acquired directly by the Dutch from the peninsula itself. The principal reason for this is that the Chosŏn¹ government, in its isolationist policy, had no desire for diplomatic relations with any nation with which it shared no direct political interest. Relations with China and Japan were maintained, but even these were both limited and heavily regulated. In fact, until 1876, the Korean government did not permit its citizens to travel abroad, except on rare embassies to these neighbouring states. Moreover, all non-Chinese foreigners found on Korean soil were immediately arrested and placed in custody, to be sent back to their country of origin. A well-known episode during this isolationist period is that of Hendrik Hamel² and his companions, who were shipwrecked on the coast of Cheju Island in 1653.

In general, it can be said that, except for a few exceptions in the twentieth century, no substantial systematic collections of Korean objects, assembled by either individuals or museum professionals, are to be found in Europe. The same is true for the Netherlands and the National Museum of Ethnology. One notable exception is the 666 series acquired from Friedrich Kraus³ in 1888. Most of the nineteenth-century acquisitions can be characterized as 'accidental'. Until the 1870s the only direct contact between Europeans and Koreans occurred in Nagasaki, in Japan. All foreigners found to be in Japan illegally were sent to Nagasaki, where the central government had also concentrated most of the foreign trade. Koreans who had accidentally landed in Japan, usually because they had been shipwrecked, were housed in the trading office of the lord of Tsushima. The feudal domain of Tsushima, consisting mainly of the eponymous islands located between Japan and Korea, had the Japanese monopoly of the trade between both countries. Whereas the Koreans, until their transfer to Tsushima, were free to move about in Nagasaki, the Dutch were not. Groups of shipwrecked Koreans sometimes had to wait for months before they could board ship for their own country. Most Korean objects acquired by the Dutch therefore originate from the few personal encounters arranged with Koreans in Nagasaki, or from Japanese sources in that city. It goes without saying that Koreans who were stranded in Japan usually had very few personal belongings with them.

The earliest Korean objects to be collected are to be found in what is known as the 360 series, transferred in 1883 from the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities, which had closed eight years before. The earliest recorded Korean object in this collection is 360-1042, a rare shaman's hat, acquired from a certain (Mr.?) Sanders, probably in 1816.



RMV 360-1042

It is followed by the objects in the ranges 2902-69 and 3174-75, all collected by Jan Cock Blomhoff⁴ in Japan before 1823. A small number of other items also originate from acquisitions from the Royal Cabinet, including an interesting model of a ship.



RMV 360-7727

However, these five items do not have a clear provenance, apart from the fact that they were acquired by the Cabinet before its closure in 1875. One item, 360-7436, was registered as being Korean, but nothing else in its form or technique confirms this is actually the case. The forty-five extant numbers deriving from the Siebold collection (series 1) were probably all acquired by Philipp Franz von Siebold⁵ between 1823 and 1829 in Nagasaki.



Portrait of Philipp Franz von Siebold
(Lithograph by E. Chiossone, 1875)

Although Siebold's descriptions tell us solely about the conditions under which these acquisitions were made, we can only assume that the other Dutchmen on Dejima⁶ acquired their objects in a similar way.

The series numbered 1 and 360 cover all acquisitions made during the period of Korea's isolationist policy. After the country was opened up to trade in 1876, the Dutch never maintained any significant diplomatic presence in the country until the Korean War of 1950-53. Most acquisitions since 1876 arrived through foreign travellers and foreign dealers (series 412, 520, 679, 681, 1070). More information about these acquisitions will be given in the next instalments of this web publication. In total, the nineteenth-century collections hold about 495 numbers.

Siebold and his meetings with Koreans

In the section devoted to Korea in Philipp Franz von Siebold's *Nippon*, he mentions several encounters with Koreans in Nagasaki. One meeting, mentioned specifically, is dated 17 March 1828. Through his Japanese contacts, Siebold was able to secure permission to visit a group of Koreans at the Tsushima trading office.



K O R E A I.
KOREANEN EN DEERENDELEN. KAPITEL VII. DE NIIPPONERS.

Korean merchants and seamen; illustration from *Nippon* VII, tabula II.

Thirty-six people, identified as fishermen, sailors, merchants and travellers, were present at the time. The members of the group, which also included women and children, were all crew and passengers of three ships that had sailed from Chöllado⁷.

It was Siebold's intention to obtain information on their physical characteristics, customs, language, writing system and so on. A few of them had been selected by Siebold's host for conversation through an interpreter: two merchants, a teacher, a businessman, a skipper, and a cabin boy. They had been chosen for their diversity and their usefulness as informants. Draughtsman Carl Hubert de Villeneuve's⁸ portraits, and painter Kawahara Keiga's⁹ pictures of objects made on this occasion, were eventually used for an album (inv.no. 1-4491) and formed the basis for illustrations in the book.



A Korean merchant, a master and a ship boy; illustrations from album **RMV 1-4491**, which were used as originals for the lithographies in *Nippon*.

Some of the group are identified by name. Unfortunately, although Siebold made some effort to describe and transliterate spoken and written Korean, using Japanese sources and direct observation, his transcriptions seem quite inconsistent and inaccurate. A list of Korean words included in the book confirms this. One of the merchants was named 'Ho sa tsiêm' (identified in the Japanese translation as Hō Sa-ch'ōm), whereas the teacher was identified as 'Kum tsiun'. (Kim Ch'i-yun in the translation).



Portrait of Hō Sa-ch'ōm.

The others remain anonymous. As was customary, gifts were exchanged, and Siebold presented alcoholic beverages and several metres of cloth. In return, he was given some manuscripts, scroll paintings, a small table, several jars, dishes, some clothing and accessories. Unfortunately no itemized list is provided, so we cannot deduce which of these objects correspond to the existing objects in series 1. However, we do know that there are no tables in this collection. At a later date the Koreans also sent Siebold gifts, for example, 'trifles, examples of their writing and farewell letters'. In the same paragraph, Siebold specifically mentions another landscape painting, 'executed in the old Chinese manner'. Similarly, these items cannot be traced in the museum's collection.

In the same chapter, Siebold gives us a relatively detailed account of the shipwrecked Koreans' demeanour, dress and accessories.



Coat and trousers, RMV 1-4169 and 4170



Fan, RMV 1-4176

It seems that Siebold had difficulty in distinguishing cotton, linen and ramie (a textile made from vegetable fibres). His views of the Koreans consist mainly of comparisons with Japanese, Chinese and Europeans. His stereotyping of racial characteristics, and his idea that these are in some way connected to social class, are very amusing. He specifically mentions that Hō, in response to a question of Siebold's, indicates that Kim has the typical physiognomy of a 'commoner'. This passage shows that both nineteenth-century Koreans and Germans were preoccupied with class distinctions. However, most of the information on Korea that Siebold gives in *Nippon* was picked up from Japanese locals in the Japanese trading post just north of the port city of Pusan (Jap.: Fusankai) and from a Japanese publication, *Chōsen monogatari* (Edo, 1791), compiled by Kimura Rikiemon, partly based on seventeenth-century accounts of Japanese sailors.



Chinese map of Korea, illustration from *Nippon*, VII, tabula XI

Naturally, Siebold's own observations are the most interesting because, up to that time, there had been no other first-hand European-language accounts of Korea or Korean culture, other than Hamel's *Journael, Van de ongeluckige Reyse 't Jacht de Sperwer, Varende van Batavia na Tyowan en Fermosa in 't Jaer 1653* (Amsterdam, 1668). Some of these observations are quite informative, for example on the way a Korean ship is built, or on the way in which morning prayers with drum accompaniment are conducted. Although Chinese chess (Korean: *changgi*) is properly identified, even as early as Siebold's time, people apparently thought that *go* (Korean: *paduk*) was originally a Japanese game, rather than Chinese.



Four Koreans playing go, illustration from the album of Von Siebold, **RMV 1-4491**

A separate chapter is devoted to the Korean language and writing system, since they were completely unknown in Europe. Siebold was probably ignorant of the fact that *han'gŭl*, the Korean script, was an artificially developed alphabet, a syllabary as he persistently calls it, in the same way one would call Japanese *kana* script a syllabary. In 1832 the orientalist Julius Klaproth, at the Institut Royal in Paris, wrote a translation of Hayashi Shihei's¹⁰ *Sankoku tsūran zuzetsu* (1786) in which *han'gŭl* was for the first time presented to Europeans. However, Siebold complains that in 1824 he had already sent a similar syllabary to the Dutch East Indies government in Batavia, with the request that it should be sent to the Insitut Royal. This syllabary was apparently sent, but lost, since according to Siebold, Klaproth's reports on Korea were not appreciated by the Royal Netherlands Institute. Nonetheless it is again published in *Nippon*. In addition, his accompanying list of Korean and Sino-Korean words contain a great number of inaccuracies.

SYLLABARUM		SYLLABARUM												LITERARUM	
SYLLABARUM	SYLLABARUM	가	카	타	차	자	야	사	바	파	다	나	가	가	가
가	카	타	차	자	야	사	바	파	다	나	가	가	가	가	가
하	카	타	차	자	야	사	바	파	다	나	가	가	가	가	가
허	커	터	처	저	여	서	버	퍼	더	너	가	가	가	가	가
화	코	토	초	조	요	소	보	포	도	노	교	교	교	교	교
와	코	토	초	조	요	소	보	포	도	노	교	교	교	교	교
위	쿠	투	추	주	유	슈	부	푸	두	누	구	구	구	구	구
키	키	티	치	지	이	시	비	피	디	니	기	기	기	기	기
키	키	티	치	지	이	시	비	피	디	니	기	기	기	기	기
키	키	티	치	지	이	시	비	피	디	니	기	기	기	기	기

Scriptura Cooraiana, Korean syllables- and characters; *Nippon* VII, tabula X

The objects

The Korean sections of the Blomhoff and Siebold collections are mainly of a similar nature. Most of the items are everyday, personal belongings brought along for a short journey or saved from a wreck. As such, they are not really representative on any wider scale of the Korean material culture of that time. Interestingly, Siebold succeeded in having several paintings made locally by some of the Koreans he met (six in total; nos 1-1356 through -1360 and 1-1362).



RMV 1-1356, 1-1360 and 1-1362

We know these were locally made, because all the signatures contain the prefix "Chosŏn", the contemporary name for Korea. An exception is probably no. 1-2589, a sample of wood which most likely originates from a Japanese collection.



RMV 1-2589

Looked upon as a whole, most of the objects seem to be of mediocre quality by Korean standards. Three pages of illustrations (tab. XII, XIII and XIV) can be found in *Nippon*, and include items which are no longer in the collection.



Interestingly enough, one object from the Blomhoff collection, 360-2959, can be found on plate XIII.



RMV 360-2959

Where four of the objects included are concerned, their locus of production is actually Japanese, but they can be considered as integral to the Korean collection. These are album item no. 1-4491 and two paintings (360-7757 and -7758), all mentioned above, containing depictions (produced by Keiga or his school, and De Villeneuve) of Koreans and a Korean ship.



RMV 360-7757 and 7758.

One other item, an undated printed version of the classical Chinese teaching book, the *Qianziwen* (Korean *Ch'ŏnjamun*), the "Thousand-character book" is also originally Japanese, but also contains printed han'gŭl script for the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters, whereas Japanese katakana¹¹ script has been added by hand.



RMV 1-4334

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Notes

¹ Chosŏn (1392-1910) is the name chosen for Korea by the dynasty founded in 1392 by General Yi Sŏng-gye (1335-1408, King T'aejo, reigned 1392-8) after deposing the last Koryŏ King, Kongyang. 'Chosŏn' referred to a prehistoric mythical Korean kingdom of the same name.

² Hendrik Hamel (1630-92) stayed in Korea for thirteen years before escaping to Dejima.

³ Friedrich Kraus stayed in Korea from 1885 to 1888 in the service of the Korean government. His collection will be described in the next instalment of the nineteenth-century Korean Collections.

⁴ Jan Cock Blomhoff (1779-1853) stayed on Dejima from 1809-13 as warehouse master, and from 1817-23 as chief merchant.

⁵ Philipp Franz von Siebold (1797-1866), founder of the National Museum of Ethnology, stayed on Dejima from 1823 until 1829.

⁶ Dejima (old spelling: 'Deshima') was the artificial island in Nagasaki Bay where the Dutch had their trading establishment from 1641 to 1856.

⁷ Chŏllado is the name of a province located in Korea's Southwest, an administrative unit in use during most of the Chosŏn period.

⁸ Carl Hubert de Villeneuve (1800-74) was a Dutch painter who was asked by Siebold to come to Dejima from Batavia in 1825 and who was to remain there until 1829.

⁹ Kawahara Keiga (1786? - after 1860) was appointed as painter by the Nagasaki governors, to produce works commissioned by the Dutch on Dejima.

¹⁰ Hayashi Shihei (1738-93) was an important Nagasaki scholar who published works on Japan and its relations with neighbouring countries.

¹¹ Katakana script is one of two phonetic syllabaries (the other being hiragana) used next to, or instead of, Chinese characters in the Japanese writing system.