Framing China: performativity and narrative in museum displays of Chinese porcelain

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CHAPTER 1 Trans-Bordering: The Trans-Border Arrangement of Ming Pilgrim Flasks and the Narrative of Transculturation in the British Museum

The British Museum is the History of the World…

Edward Verrall Lucas, *A Wanderer in London*

Introduction: Trans-Border Arrangement in a Transcultural Perspective

Since 2017, the British Museum has undertaken a significant transformation in its narrative scheme. According to the current museum director, Hartwig Fischer (appointed in 2016), this transformation will last for a decade and aims at reorganizing the museum's collections to tell "more coherent and compelling stories [with] an emphasis on the interconnectedness of cultures."[58] So, how exactly does the museum make its narrative structure and spatial organization more coherent to better express the "interconnectedness of cultures"? For Fischer, this goal means that the museum, as a "world country," needs to deploy and interpret its collections not only based on their places of origin but also the context of cultural exchange across regions.[59] As an initial result of the transformation plan, the new *Gallery 33 China and South Asia* (opened at the end of 2017) displays Chinese and Indian objects and incorporates products from Japan, Europe, and West Asia to amplify a sense of cultural connection and diversity. Indeed, in the British Museum, which boasts encyclopedic collections, walking through galleries delineated according to regional/continental boundaries provides a *space* to discuss cultural connections embodied in material objects that have circulated through different places. As the museum has begun to re-display objects in an attempt to blur boundaries between cultures, it seems pertinent to explore how such a tactic of display,

[58] Mark Brown, "British Museum to Bring Back Reading Room as Part of Revamp," *The Guardian*, July 4, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/jul/04/british-museum-to-bring-back-reading-room-as-part-of-revamp [Accessed January 20, 2021].

[59] John-Paul Stonard, "How Hartwig Fischer plans to transform the British Museum," *APOLLO*, September 13, 2017, https://www.apollo-magazine.com/how-hartwig-fischer-plans-to-transform-the-british-museum/ [Accessed January 20, 2021]; Charlotte Higgins, "British Museum Director Hartwig Fischer: 'There are no Foreigners Here—the Museum is a World Country'," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/apr/13/british-museum-director-hartwig-fischer-there-are-no-foreigners-here-the-museum-is-a-world-country [Accessed January 20, 2021].

which I call *trans-border arrangement*, transforms the narrative presented in the physical layout of the museum.

Trans-border arrangement refers to displaying and classifying an object based on its provenance (its context of production) as well as its relations with other objects and people; its transfer, gifting, collection, consumption, and appropriation. This display scheme represents, in museum space today, the circulation of material objects across territorial boundaries over a period of time in the past. The prefix *trans-* in a trans-border arrangement means traversal and transformation; it highlights the transformation of meaning, identity, and value of objects along their movements across cultural boundaries. Trans-border arrangement, as a display scheme that the British Museum has begun to put into practice, echoes the art historians Monica Juneja and Anna Grasskamp's call for a critical curatorial and pedagogical practice that helps articulate objects' meanings in a dynamic process of displacement and integration from one cultural-geographical context to another.[60] Juneja and Grasskamp urge a rethink of the validity of conventional categories, such as nation-states, regions, and period styles that are prevalent in the discipline of art history and the institution of the museum.[61] They propose to develop new strategies of display and interpretation to allow "a polyphonous object to narrate its many stories," instead of being anchored in "a self-contained geographical location [and thus freezing its] identity within a myth of origin."[62] This mode of curating, as Juneja and Grasskamp note, lies at a critical intersection between the spatial organization of museum collections and the concept of material objects' social/global biographies.[63]

According to the anthropological concept of object biographies, the objects' meanings are contextual, accumulated, and flux, rather than inherent, monolithic, and fixed. In the landmark volume *The Social Life of Things* (1986), the anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff point out that things, like people, have *social lives*. Their biographical approach seeks to understand objects' meanings in terms of their life cycles "from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption."[64] Taking up the idea of the social lives of things, the historians Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello further explore things' *global lives*, following the global turn in the field of history, in which "the connected histories that led to the circulation of objects throughout the various parts of the world" are brought to the fore.[65] This approach emphasizes circulation and re-contextualization on a global scale to see how objects acquire multiple meanings and identities as they travel across regions. It thus helps navigate the tension between

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[60] Monica Juneja and Anna Grasskamp, "EurAsian Matters: An Introduction," in *EurAsian Matters: China, Europe, and the Transcultural Object, 1600-1800*, eds. Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja (Cham: Springer, 2018), 7.
[61] The establishment of art history as an academic discipline was accompanied with "the growth of nationalism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe that militated for the formation of nation states." See Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, "The 'Netherlandish model?' Netherlandish art history as/and global art history," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 66, (2016): 274.
[62] Juneja and Grasskamp, "EurAsian Matters: An Introduction," 4.
[63] Ibid., 4-7.
[64] Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13, 18; Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66-68.
[65] Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, eds., *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connection in the Early Modern World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 13.

the sense of cultural compartmentalization suggested in the British Museum's spatial organization (the museum's main galleries are divided by geo-cultural regions) and the museum's objects that have global trajectories and biographies (e.g. Ming-Qing porcelain).

There are studies adopting an object-biographical approach to consider how museums can better express cultural diversity in their displays. An example is the volume *Islamic Art and the Museum*, which is comprised of papers presented at the conference "Layers of Islamic Art and the Museum Context" held in Berlin in 2010.[66] To avoid a homogeneous understanding of Islamic art, the volume emphasizes the importance for museums to display Islamic objects in ways that can highlight their "affiliations with other objects in different spheres of life."[67] Most of the case studies in the volume focus on the arrangements in the museums of Islamic art in Europe or in the galleries of Islamic art within European museums. This chapter, as I will explain further later, focuses on the displacements of Ming porcelain across the British Museum's galleries of China, India, and Europe, and demonstrates how this trans-border arrangement of Ming porcelain foregrounds the object's multiple meanings and changing identities.[68]

The trans-border arrangement of objects in the British Museum, as a display scheme that enables one to conceive of cultural boundaries (which roughly overlap with the museum's departmental boundaries) as porous, maps out the narrative of transculturation.[69] The term transculturation was coined in 1940 by the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz as an alternative to the more Eurocentric term acculturation.[70] According to Ortiz, the idea of acculturation has a Eurocentric stance. It suggests that immigrants and indigenous people have to acculturate themselves to the superior European culture. For Ortiz, acculturation suggests a unilateral process of acquisition and adaption. Comparatively, transculturation better expresses the diverse transformations and repercussions that occurred "in the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another."[71] Later, in the early twenty-first century, the philosopher Wolfgang Welsch reconfigures the concept of transculturation/transculturality in order to dismantle the Enlightenment idea of culture as a bounded and homogeneous sphere.[72] In the lens of modern societies, Welsch argues that a monolithic idea of culture is untenable, in that "Cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other."[73] With Welsch, transculturality moves beyond the ideas of multiculturality and interculturality by highlighting "the inner differentiation

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[66] Benoit Junod, et al., eds. *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology in the Muslim World* (London: Saqi, 2012).

[67] Ibid., 14.

[68] The idea of the social lives of things has also been incorporated in studies of museum exhibitions to reconstruct historical developments and to see how objects have been imbued with multiple meanings by collectors and exhibition makers before and after they enter museums. See Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects," *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1999): 169-178; Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, "Objects and the Museum," *Isis* 96, no. 4 (2005): 559-571; and Kate Hill, ed., *Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities* (London: Boydell and Brewer, 2012).

[69] I will not delve into the British Museum's digital space built in such online platforms as Google Arts and Cultures, as it is beyond the scope of this chapter.

[70] Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970[1940]), viii.

[71] Ibid., 102. For Ortiz, the word transculturation also highlights the "the loss or uprooting of a previous culture [and] the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena." He refers to the former as a process of "deculturation" and the latter as "neoculturation." Ibid., 102-103.

[72] Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality: The Changing Form of Cultures Today," *Filozofski vestnik* 22, no. 2 (2001): 59-86.

[73] Ibid., 68.

and complexity of modern cultures;" the term avoids "the old homogenizing and separatist idea of cultures."[74]

Welsch's critique of a bounded notion of culture helps reflect on the dominant modes of museum categorization based on a cultural-geographical division. Yet, this chapter departs from his understanding of transculturation in two ways.[75] First, Welsch takes a somewhat restricted view of transculturation. His concept pertains specifically to modern societies following the wave of globalization, and so it excludes a historical perspective. Welsch is concerned more about how the concept of transculturation can be used to understand the features and forms of cultures today, so as to correct ideas of cultural exclusiveness generated in ethnocentric frameworks of belonging. Hence, his notion of transculturation is not so germane to my examination of the display of the history of material culture in the British Museum, given that most of the museum's collections were gathered in earlier historical epochs. Second, and more importantly, Welsch considers transculturation as a trait of modern cultures, without explicitly accounting for the dynamic processes of transformation within the circuit of cultural exchange. This obviously differ from my focus here with regards to the objects' identity-transformation as expressed in their trans-border arrangement in museum space. In view of these two factors, this chapter draws on Monica Juneja's position on the notion of transculturation, which is more relevant to my purpose here in this chapter.

Instead of designating border-crossing and cultural mixing as exclusive to modern societies, Juneja proposes to "go back to Antiquity and extend [the research lens] into the present in order to understand historical forms of mobility."[76] Juneja refers to transculturation as both "a concrete object of investigation as well as an analytic method," and conceives of a transcultural perspective that challenges the existing narratives of cultural solidarity and signals a view of culture that highlights "contact, interaction and entanglement."[77] Viewed in this transcultural perspective, boundaries between cultures and regions are not a given but rather constitute a subject of analysis. A transcultural framework of analysis enables an intensive engagement with questions of "different kinds of relationships between actors, objects and cultural groups which follow from encounter and mobility."[78] Indeed, as this chapter will show, the trans-border arrangement of Ming porcelain pilgrim flasks—a category of Chinese porcelain that I focus on here—in the galleries of China, India, and Europe in the British Museum today not only maps out the objects' spatial mobility across boundaries between geo-cultural regions. It also indicates various relationships between the objects and people of different cultural groups who produced, customized, owned, transferred, and appropriated them.

Additionally, this chapter is grounded in Juneja's transculturation concept because she specifically draws on transcultural thinking to revisit the existing frameworks of museum

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[74] Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today," in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (London: Sage, 1999), 197.

[75] For a critical take on Wolfgang Welsch's development of transculturation/transculturality, see Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna, "Understanding Transculturalism," in *Transcultural Modernisms*, ed. Model House Research Group (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 22–33.

[76] See Mariachiara Gasparini, "Interview with Monica Juneja about Global Art History," *TRAFO*, January 29, 2014, https://trafo.hypotheses.org/567 [Accessed January 20, 2021].

[77] Juneja and Kravagna, "Understanding Transculturalism," 24-25.

[78] Gasparini, "Interview with Monica Juneja about Global Art History."

categorization.[79] Recent years have seen the burgeoning of a transculturally-framed art history that sought to, as Juneja notes, "use connected material cultures to unsettle many narratives of style and civilizational uniqueness, in scholarship as well as in the expanding world of curation and display."[80] The trans-border arrangement of objects in the British Museum can be seen as an initial attempt on the part of the museum to incorporate a transcultural perspective in its narrative. However, the attempt has been barely conceptualized in the museological domain and poorly promoted to the museum's visitors. As the importance of trans-border arrangement in constructing a narrative of transculturation in the museum remains merely implicit, this chapter aims to make it explicit.

This chapter has three sections. It begins with an analysis of narratives of the oneness of the world suggested in the British Museum's famous project *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, launched in 2010. This project and its suggestion of Enlightenment ideology of de-bordered universality work as a point of comparison for the ideas of trans-border arrangement and transcultural narrative proposed in this chapter. To illustrate a trans-border arrangement, the second section provides an empirical investigation of the multiple placements of Ming pilgrim flasks in the museum's galleries of China, India, and Europe. Ming pilgrim flasks are a potent example to explore how trans-border arrangement is relevant to rethinking the existing regionally-bounded categorization in the museum, because they were produced by cultural connections and for global markets. These flasks being Ming also has its importance, which will be discussed in this section in conjunction with the British Museum's particular interest in Ming china/China as reflected in its spatial layout in the Chinese gallery and exhibition-planning. The third section contextualizes the trans-border arrangement in the British Museum in terms of the global turn in art history that blossomed in the late 1990s, and shows how such a display scheme can motivate a rethinking of the museum's role as a cartographic tool that spatializes relationships.[81]

1-1 From De-Bordering to Trans-Bordering: Transfer and Transformation

[79] Monica Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea…' Art History, Transculturation, and World-Making—With and Beyond the Nation," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 81, no. 4 (2018): 478-480.

[80] Ibid., 469. An example Juneja provides here is Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). The painting is displayed at the Museo Reina Museum in Madrid but without reference to a conventional art-historical framework, such as genre. Rather, it is combined with works of different materials (e.g. magazines, sketches, and posters) from the same historical moment to make visible a wider web of cultural connections between these works and Latin America. See Ibid., 479.

[81] The proposition of critically reflecting on national compartmentalization and the nationalist understandings of art historical styles was developed in the German-speaking scholarship around the turn of the twentieth century. However, partly because of growing German nationalism between the World Wars, this non-nationalist approach to art history lacked success. See Ulrich Pfisterer, "Origins and Principles of World Art History—1900 (and 2000)," in *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, eds. Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), 69-89. For detailed documentation and analysis of the earlier development of an intercultural perspective in the study of art in Europe before the twentieth century, see Wilfried van Damme, "'Good to Think': The Historiography of Intercultural Art Studies," *World Art* 1, no. 1 (2011): 43-57. In the 1990s, the study of art history from a pluralistic perspective and through a multidisciplinary approach in order to transcend essentializing national boundaries was developed in European universities. For an introduction, see Wilfried van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans, "Art History in a Global Frame: World Art Studies," in *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, eds. Matthew Rampley et al. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 219-220.

In 2004, a year after the celebration of its 250th anniversary, the British Museum branded itself with a new image: *A Museum of the World, for the World*.[82] This image is certainly rhetorical in that the British Museum uses it to affirm its importance and uniqueness in the museum world and to legitimize keeping a worldwide collection.[83] The image was circulated widely in various forms, such as a statement of museum strategy, annual reports, and posts on social media. The most effective reinforcement of this new image may be the project *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (hereinafter referred to as *A History of the World*).

Launched in 2010, *A History of the World* aimed to portray a large-scale tableau of humanity's social and material developments. The project was presented on multiple platforms, including a radio series (on BBC Radio 4), book, website, gallery display, and series of internationally touring exhibitions.[84] The project has a grand narrative structure. It sought to present the public a vista of worldwide and millennia-spanning connections through a single object; a close-up of how materials from different cultural groups have been exchanged and have interacted at particular times; a long take of a particular object's changes in meaning along with its chronological movements across different parts of the world.[85] Although the project officially concluded in the end of 2010, its legacy continues to grow today, as its radio podcasts remains downloadable, its website is archived, and its touring exhibition remains on display in various museums around the world.[86] Additionally, the worldwide popularity of this project seems to have successfully saved the museum from the potential embarrassment of being outdated.[87] Offering audiences a grand view of how all human beings have a shared past was praised by the museum director of the time, Neil MacGregor (in office 2002-2015), as what a universal museum is meant to do.[88]

Echoing the British Museum's potential to shape "the oneness of the world," *A History of the World* underscores the eighteenth-century Enlightenment idea of universality.[89] In the age of the Enlightenment, it was believed that the mysterious world would be unlocked by collecting things from all over the world and bringing them together in one place to further categorize, observe, and inductively reason through

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[82] "A Museum of the World, for the World" is the title of the *British Museum Review 2004-2006*.

[83] This chapter will not make an argument about how the museum balances (if this is really possible) its shadowy past of imperial looting with repatriation claims made today, as such issues have been discussed in detail elsewhere. See Mark O'Neill, "Enlightenment Museums: Universal or Merely Global?," *Museum and Society* 2, no. 3 (2004): 190-202; Neil G. W. Curtis, "Universal Museums, Museum Objects and Repatriation: The Tangled Stories of Things," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006): 117-127.

[84] The radio series contains 100 episodes with Neil MacGregor as the narrator. Each features an object from the British Museum collection. The book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* by Neil MacGregor is based on the radio transcripts with some modifications and additions.

[85] Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

[86] For the radio podcasts, see http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/british-museum-objects/ [Accessed January 20, 2021]. For the website of 'A History of the World in 100 Objects': http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/exploreraltflash [Accessed January 20, 2021]. The *A History of the World in 100 Objects* project also relates to other programs. One example is the interactive microsite created in cooperation with Google *The Museum of the World* (launched in 2015): https://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/ [Accessed January 20, 2021].

[87] Jonathan Jones, "Neil MacGregor saved the British Museum. It's time to reinvent it again," *The Guardian*, April 8, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2015/apr/08/neil-macgregor-british-museum-legacy-future-challenge [Accessed January 20, 2021].

[88] Neil MacGregor, "To Shape the Citizens of 'That Great City, the World'," in *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 39-54.

[89] Ibid., 43.

them. Based on Enlightenment ideology, the British Museum was established to be an encyclopedia of world knowledge.[90] By constructing a linear narrative that covers an extensive span of time (2,000,000 BC–AD 2010) with a selection of twenty themes sequenced in a roughly developmental order, *A History of the World* emphasizes how the same values have been shared in different times, in different places, and by different people.[91] Regardless of the debates that such historical directionality towards a universality might trigger (i.e. restoring the paradigm of progress and subordinating cultural differences to the familiar quest for a European model of universal civilization drenched in teleological connotations), a potential limitation of this project lies in its multiplatform nature.

Arguably, not every platform is equally effective at presenting a sprawling narrative without undermining the sense of mobility in cultural interactions. At the heart of *A History of the World* are the complex processes through which an object can tell stories not limited to one cultural context but extending temporally and spatially across many.[92] In this sense, as MacGregor argues, "the object becomes a document not just of the world for which it was made, but of the later periods which altered it."[93] In practice, however, such a perspective is probably better communicated via radio or books than an exhibition, for the former platforms accommodate detailed descriptions of the global biographies of material things, while each object can only be placed in one thematic framework at a time when put on display in a museum. This inevitably limits the degree to which the mobility of material objects can be visualized to audiences.

Such difficulty is evident in the 2010 floor plan of the British Museum (**Figure 1.1**). Instead of gathering the one hundred objects together in one space as an exhibition, the curators decided to leave the pieces in their original semi-permanent galleries. Their association with *A History of the World* was highlighted through extra captions attached beside each object and a special floor plan highlighting the locations of the selected objects with yellow-circled numbers. This floor plan can be seen as a visual manifestation of the Enlightenment idea of housing "the world under one roof."[94] It recalls this Enlightenment universalism by shaping the spatial sense of *A History of the World* into a de-bordered container, in which geo-cultural boundaries are dissolved in the face of a higher universality. It reinforces senses of oneness and stability, as the dynamic processes through which the objects are given multilayered identities in their movements around the world are not mapped out. At the same time, paradoxically, these boundaries are mapped in the museum's floor plan: galleries are demarcated into a series of square grids that are colored differently to delineate a series of regions in line with regional, national, and continental borders (as well as departmental boundaries) (**Figure 1.2**).

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[90] For more about the British Museum's Enlightenment roots, see Kim Sloan, ed., *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century* (London: The British Museum Press, 2003).

[91] The developmental perspective suggested in this project is revealed in its thematic titles, especially in the choice of vocabulary to create a sense of temporal process. For example: Making Us Human (2,000,000–9000 BC), After the Ice Age: Food and Sex (9000–3500 BC), The First Cities and States (4000–2000 BC), The Beginning of Science and Literature (1500–700 BC), Empire Builders (300 BC–AD 1), The Rise of World Faiths (200–600), The Threshold of the Modern World (1375–1550), and The First Global Economy (1450–1600).

[92] MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, xxi.

[93] Ibid.

[94] MacGregor, "To Shape the Citizens of 'That Great City, the World'," 39.

The British Museum repeatedly emphasizes its role in telling an interconnected story of the world, and the importance of this telling, but is this equivalent to putting objects into an overarching framework called oneness? Is it really possible or necessary to dissolve any form of boundary in the museum world? The word (inter)connection seems to suggest a sense of mobility: people, materials, and information moving across various regions forming connections and exchanges. However, the word oneness seems to evoke a rather static picture: objects are gathered together to indicate a higher-level, ultimate universality.

The idea of oneness is equally expressed in the world maps provided in the book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* accompanying the project. Looking down on the world as if from outer space, these maps show only the silhouettes of continents, without national or geo-cultural boundaries dividing them (**Figure 1.3**). They serve not merely to indicate the origins of the displayed items, but also to persuade audiences that what they are looking at—a de-bordered world materialized by the selected objects—is an objective reality. But, is it? The geographer John Brian Harley reminds us that "cartographic facts are only facts within a specific cultural perspective."[95] These world maps are not neutral but rhetorical, and this is manifested in two ways. First, the objects on the maps are selected purposefully in order to match the twenty themes of the project. Second, Europe is put at the center of the world on this projection. Notably, when the touring exhibition *A History of the World* reached the National Museum of China in Beijing in 2017, the world map provided in the exhibition's venue there became centered around China (**Figure 1.4**). This contrast, perhaps, suggests different interpretations of which place symbolizes the navel of the world.

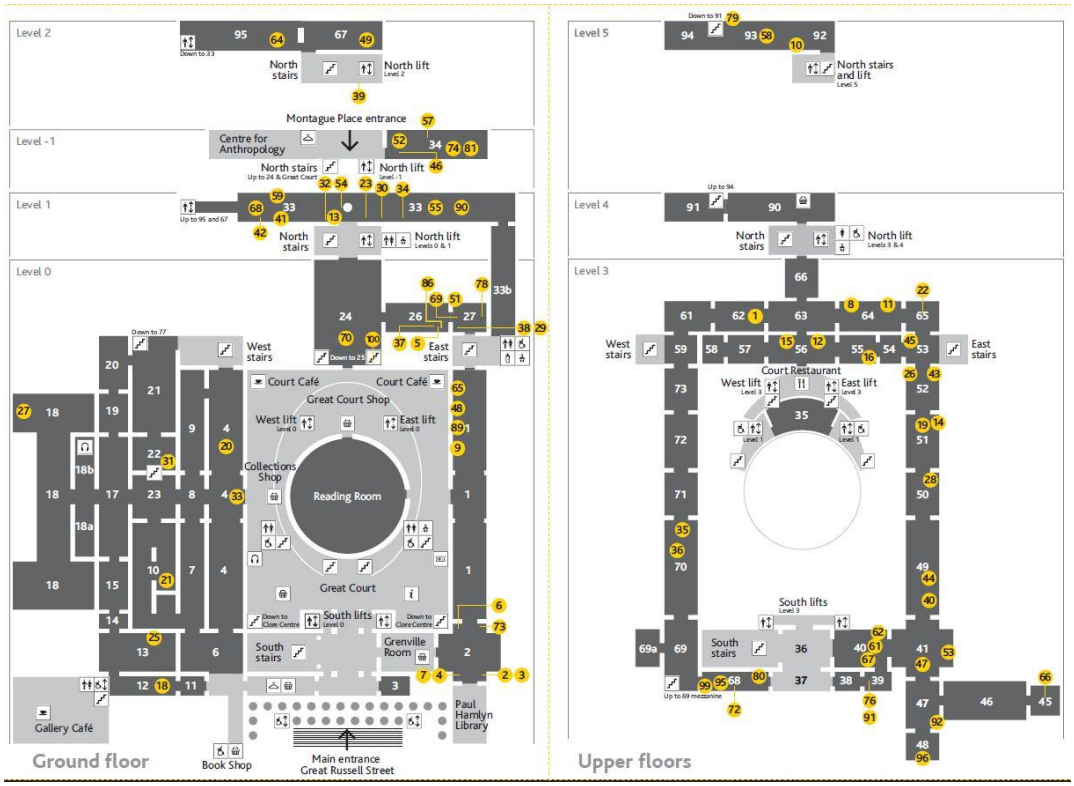

Figure 1.1 British Museum Map for *A History of the World in 100 Objects* in 2010 – Ground and Upper floors. Published by The British Museum Press. © The Trustees of the British Museum

[95] John Brain Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 3.

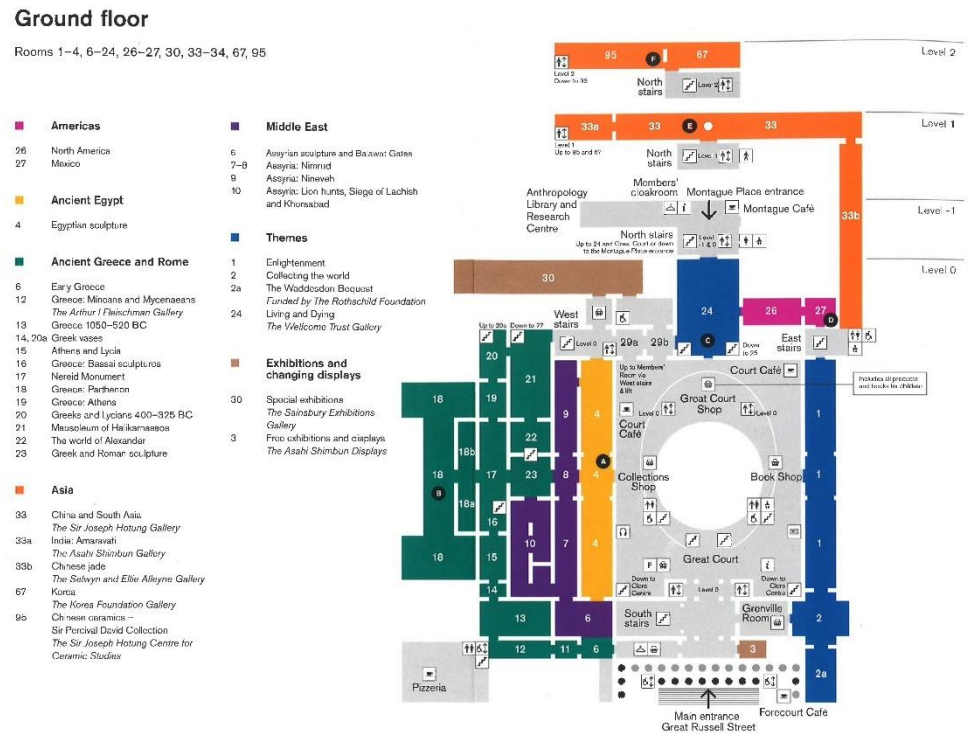

Figure 1.2 British Museum Map 2019 – Ground Floor. Published by The British Museum Press. © The Trustees of the British Museum

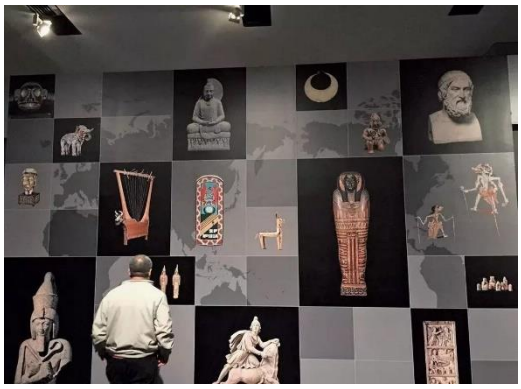

Figure 1.3 (left) The world map for objects numbered 26-50, from Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (2010). Other world maps for the rest of the objects provided in this book are all in the same Eurocentric format
Figure 1.4 (right) Pacific Centered World Map overlaid with some images of the objects on display in the exhibition *A History of the World in 100 Objects* at the National Museum of China. © *Meishu guancha* 美術觀察 [*Art Observation*]

Of all *A History of the World*'s platforms, the international touring exhibition is where the idea of oneness can be expressed most clearly. The touring exhibition has been exhibited in different countries around the world since 2014. In these international venues, the group of one hundred and one objects (the additional one is chosen from the hosting museum's own collection) was displayed in one or several galleries allocated specifically for holding special exhibitions. The idea that a condensed world history is enclosed in a de-bordered container is suggested by some advertising slogans. For example: "2 million years of human history—*in one room*" at the National Museum in Australia; and "Zhexie wenwu neng jiang gushi, tamen jujiyichu, gongtong jiangshu le yi ge zui wei da de gushi—shi jie li shi! 這些文物能講故事，

它們聚集一處，共同講述了一個最偉大的故事—世界歷史！[These objects are gathered together *in one place* to tell the greatest story—the world history]" at the National Museum of China.[96]

In terms of the poster design, the poster created by the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum in Japan expresses a sense of de-bordering quite evidently. It shows an assemblage of various objects from different places to create a sense of oneness (**Figure 1.5**). In comparison, the exhibition posters designed by the Shanghai Museum and the National Museum of China seem to convey more a sense of cultural comparison. The Shanghai Museum created a pair of flag posters for the exhibition: one in blue, on which most of the objects come from China, Japan, and South Asia; another in dusty-rose, on which most of the objects come from Egypt and Europe (**Figures 1.6-1.7**). According to the museum, this pair of flag posters were intended to show a sense of "dongxi wenhua de pengzhuang he jiaorong 東西文化的碰撞和交融 [the collision and confluence of the East and West cultures]."[97] Similarly, the exhibition's poster for the National Museum of China displays a split image of the silver medal commemorating Sir Francis Drake's 1577-80 voyage around the world (**Figure 1.8**). Collected in the British Museum, the silver plate has two sides: on one side the eastern hemisphere and on the other the western. This poster only shows the side with the eastern hemisphere and splits in half; the left is engraved with the word Asia and the right Europe. Compared to the exhibition poster designed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, the posters designed by the Shanghai Museum and the National Museum of China highlight more the contrast between the East and the West, which inevitably loosens the sense of de-bordering implied in the idea of the oneness of the world.

Figure 1.5 (left) The poster for the special exhibition *A History of the World in 100 Objects* at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. © The Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum
Figures 1.6-1.7 (middle and right) Two flag posters, one in blue (with most, but not all, objects from Asia), the other in dusty-rose (with most, but not all, objects from Egypt and Europe), for the special exhibition *A History of the World in 100 Objects* at the Shanghai Museum. © The Shanghai Museum

[96] See the National Museum of Australia's advertising video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMz0A6VliX0; and the National Museum of China's exhibition website: http://www.chnmuseum.cn/Portals/0/web/zt/20170301ahow/index.html [Accessed January 20, 2021] (emphasis added).
[97] See *Zzi mei ti* Z 字媒體 [*Zi.Media*]: https://zi.media/@yidianzixun/post/eWjJtn [Accessed January 20, 2021].

Figure 1.8 Poster for the exhibition *A History of the World in 100 Objects* at the National Museum of China. © The National Museum of China

As a celebration of universality, the formula of *xxx history in 100 objects* has become popular in the museum world since the British Museum's project achieved great success.[98] This formula and its accompanying macro-historical perspectives indeed provides some novel insights to reinterpret the meanings of, and to restructure associations between, museum collections. However, they simultaneously run the risk of neutralizing the significant roles museums play in constructing the meanings of their materials. Particularly, the emphasis on macro-level narrative structures does not seem like an ideal approach to show in the museum space how the meanings and identities of objects can transform in patterns of circulation. Although *A History of the World* intends to take on a biographical perspective to explain the changing meanings of objects along with their movements across time and space, this objective is, as argued earlier, undermined in the physical exhibitions. In the end, the dynamic process of objects' traversal cannot be presented if there are no traversable boundaries.

In pursuing the question of how to deploy a transcultural perspective to conceive a new display scheme, I propose trans-border arrangement worth exploring. In contrast to the Enlightenment ideology of de-bordered universality, trans-border arrangement and the implied narrative of transculturation makes the British Museum a place where the identity-transformation of objects can be spatialized.

[98] In 2017, the History Colorado Center in Denver's Golden Triangle Museum District unveiled a new semi-permanent exhibition, *Zoom in: The Centennial State in 100 Objects*. Based on a sweeping overview of 13,000 years of human history in Colorado, it aims to explore "the ways objects define who we are as Coloradans." See the website of 'Zoom in: The Centennial State in 100 Objects': https://www.historycolorado.org/exhibit/zoomin [Accessed January 20, 2021]. Similarly, the Wrexham County Borough Museum in Wrexham launched the special exhibition *A History of North-East Wales in 100 Objects* (April 21 to June 30, 2018). From a 4,000-year-old burial urn to a modern-day Airbus wing rib, the exhibition intended to show "an outstanding diverse representation of our region's past, stretching over centuries and including items from every part of our corner of North East Wales." See the report "The History of North East Wales in 100 Objects," *Wrexham Council News*, April 18, 2018, https://news.wrexham.gov.uk/the-history-of-north-east-wales-in-100-objects/ [Accessed January 20, 2021]. Like the British Museum's *A History of the World*, which projects a huge picture of humanity as a whole by traversing huge swaths of time, these two exhibitions emphasize the oneness of their respective localities by surveying time frames that cover millennia.

1-2 Objects in Motion: The Trans-Border Arrangement of Ming Pilgrim Flasks

This section will explore the trans-border arrangement of three Ming pilgrim flasks across *Gallery 33 China and South Asia* and *Gallery 46 Europe 1400-1800*, along with a Chinese-style Iranian flask in *Gallery 43 The Islamic World* (the museum's only religious category) (**Figures 1.9-1.13**). The aim here is to tease out how these Ming flasks' identities are transformed as they traverse the cultural-geographical boundaries that the gallery walls stand for.


Figure 1.9 (left) Ming pilgrim flask. Yongle period, 1403-1424. Height: 25 cm; Width: 22 cm. Collected in the British Museum, museum number: 1947,0712.325 (on display in the Chinese section of *Gallery 33 China and South Asia*)
Figure 1.10 (right) Ming pilgrim flask. Yongle or Xuande period, 1403-1435. Height: 22 cm; Width: 19.5 cm. Collected in the British Museum, museum number: 1968,0422.32 (on display in the South Asian section of *Gallery 33 China and South Asia*)



Figures 1.11-1.12 (left and middle) Ming pilgrim flask (two sides). Wanli period, 1590-1620. Height: 30.5 cm; Width: 14.7 cm. Collected in the British Museum, museum number: Franks.778.+ (on display in *Gallery 46 Europe 1400-1800*)
Figure 1.13 (right) Safavid pilgrim flask. Safavid dynasty, 1626-1627. Height: 28 cm; Width: 18 cm. Collected in the British Museum, museum number: 1950,1019.1 (on display in *Gallery 43 The Islamic World*)

The pilgrim flask is characterized by a flattened globular body with a cylindrical neck. In China, such vessels are known as *bao-yue-ping* 抱月瓶 [moon-flasks] or *bianhu* 扁壺 [flattened bottles]. As indicated by the word pilgrim itself, these flasks are "objects in motion."[99] Their shape can be traced back to the eastern Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age.[100] Later, metal and glass pilgrim flasks became relatively common in West Asia. In the British Museum, examples of pottery from the eastern Mediterranean can be found in *Gallery 57 Ancient Levant*, and pieces of metal and glass flasks are seen in *Galleries 42-43 The Islamic World*. Pilgrim flasks were introduced to Tang China (618-907) via the Silk Roads.[101] A Tang ceramic flask decorated with scrolling grapevines is showcased in *Gallery 33 China and South Asia*, with its shape and decoration labelled as "exotic."[102] Pilgrim flasks then became a famous Ming product and were imported to India, West Asia, and Europe via diplomatic channels and trade routes. In Safavid Iran (1501-1736), in particular, the blue and white color scheme and floral decorations on Ming porcelain were appropriated by Iranian potters to make their pilgrim flasks appear Ming-like. Thus, we see that a circuit of exchange ran between Ming China and Safavid Iran. This connection will be explained further by associating a Ming pilgrim flask in *Gallery 33 China and South Asia* with a Ming-style Iranian flask in *Gallery 43 The Islamic World*. Both galleries underwent a major refurbishment that aimed to reinforce the idea of cultural interaction, and reopened in 2017 and 2018, respectively.[103]

1-2-1 Gallery 33 China and South Asia and Gallery 43 The Islamic World

Gallery 33 contains two sections, China and South Asia, both are organized chronologically, spanning prehistory to modern times (**Figures 1.14-1.15**). Each section has a blue and white Ming flask on display. The one showcased in the bay *Early Ming 1368-1487* in the Chinese section is decorated with fruiting and flowering lychee branches (see **Figure 1.9**), while the one placed in the bay *Sultans and Mughals 1300-1850* in the South Asian section is ornamented with blossoming peony branches (see **Figure 1.10**). They were both made in the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen during the first half of the fifteenth century, and together they materialize the extensive trade networks between Ming China, Mughal India (1526-1857), and Safavid Iran.

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[99] Meredith Martin and Daniela Bleichmar, "Introduction: Objects in Motion in the Early Modern World," *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015): 605-619.

[100] Denise P. Leidy, *How to Read Chinese Ceramics* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 74.

[101] Robert Finlay, "The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History," *Journal of World History* 9, no. 2 (1998): 181.

[102] The museum number of the Tang ceramic flask displayed in *Gallery 33 China and South Asia*: 1936,1012.243.

[103] For details about the renovation of *Gallery 33 China and South Asia*, see Jane Portal, "Creating the New Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery of China and South Asia," *Arts of Asia* 47, no. 6 (2017): 42-49. The refurbishment of *Galleries 42-43 The Islamic World* was supported by the Albukhary Foundation, and they are now intentionally located adjacent to the European galleries, which provides "the connections between the cultures of Islam […] and the cultures of the Mediterranean World and Europe." See the press release "New Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World to open in 2018" via the website 'artdaily': https://artdaily.cc/news/77408/British-Museum-announces-new-Albukhary-Foundation-Gallery-of-the-Islamic-World-to-open-in-2018#.X7Kt72hKiUk [Accessed January 20, 2021].


Figure 1.14 (left) View of *Gallery 33*, Chinese section. The British Museum Images, image ID: 01613429185. © The Trustees of the British Museum
Figure 1.15 (right) View of *Gallery 33*, South Asian section. The British Museum Images, image ID: 01613498047. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Before delving into the display of the Ming flask in *Gallery 33*, it seems relevant to first examine the British Museum's particular interest in Ming china/China. In *Gallery 33*, the Ming dynasty is the only Chinese dynasty that is divided into two chronological groups: *Early Ming 1368-1487* and *Late Ming 1487-1644*. There is no Early Tang/Late Tang, nor Early Qing/Late Qing. The bay *Early Ming 1368-1467* is a newly added section in the gallery's refurbishment and perhaps can be considered as a legacy of a temporary exhibition hosted at the museum around a year before *Gallery 33* was closed for renovation: *Ming: 50 Years that Changed China* (September 18, 2014-January 5, 2015, hereinafter referred to as *Ming: 50 Years*).[104] The fifty-year timeframe, from 1400 to 1500, is praised in this exhibition as "a golden age in China's history."[105]

Ming: 50 Years is arguably part of the Ming trend sweeping the museum world in Europe and the United States. Before this exhibition, there were several special exhibitions focusing on the Ming dynasty in Europe and the United States, for example: *Power and Glory: Court Arts of China's Ming Dynasty* (2008) at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco; *Arts of the Ming Dynasty: China's Age of Brilliance* (2009) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; *Mysterious Ming* (2013) at the Princessehof Ceramics Museum

[104] This exhibition originated from the research project, *Ming: Courts and Contacts 1400-1450*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and led by Craig Clunas and Jessica Harrison-Hall, who are also the curators of the exhibition. The research project also resulted in a conference of the same title held in 2014, accompanying the exhibition *Ming: 50 Years that Changed China*. See Craig Clunas, Jessica Harrison-Hall, and Luk Yu-Ping, eds., *Ming China: Courts and Contacts 1400-1450* (London: The British Museum, 2016).
[105] See: https://culture360.asef.org/news-events/exhibition-ming-50-years-that-changed-china-uk/ [Accessed January 20, 2021]. For a critical review discussing the definition of "a golden age in China's history" and the questionable concept of "change," see Jonathan Jones, "Ming mania at the British Museum—is it time we got over our obsession?," *The Guardian*, September 10, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/sep/10/ming-mania-british-museum-get-over-obsession [Accessed January 20, 2021]. Some Chinese reviews point out that what has been changed over this fifty-year timeframe was not China itself, but China's image to the Europeans. Hence, the timeframe represents not a golden age in China's history, but rather a Chinese golden age in the European eye. See Ye Ye 葉燁, "Ming: Shengshi huangchao wushi nian—Daying bowuguan tezhan" 明：盛世皇朝五十年—大英博物館特展 [Ming: 50 Years that Changed China—A Special Exhibition in the British Museum], *wenshi zhishi* 文史知識 [*Chinese Literature and History*] 4, (2015): 108-113.

in Leeuwarden; and *Ming: The Golden Empire* (2014) at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. All these exhibitions specifically associate the word Ming with the qualities of preciousness, brightness, and brilliance.[106] Indeed, as the art historian Stacey Pierson points out, the word Ming tends to be combined with the word (porcelain) vase, as a literary motif and figure of speech representing qualities such as fragility, fineness, preciousness, and exoticness.[107] Between 2014 and 2015, in anticipation of *Ming: 50 Years*, the British Museum toured a large Ming blue and white globular vase (*tianqiu ping* 天球瓶, its shape like a flask but its body much more rotund) to Glasgow, Sheffield, Bristol, and Basingstoke (**Figure 1.16**). According to Luk Yu-Ping, one of the curators of *Ming: 50 Years*, the reason for choosing this object to tour was quite obvious: "Without knowing much about the Ming dynasty, most people will probably have heard of the 'Ming vase'."[108] This Ming globular vase is currently displayed together with the Ming pilgrim flaks with lychee branches in the Chinese section of *Gallery 33* after the gallery reopened in 2017 (see **Figure 1.19**).

Figure 1.16 Ming globular vase. Xuande period, 1426-1435. Height: 51 cm; Width: 38 cm. Collected in the British Museum, museum number: 1975,1028.19

The Ming pilgrim flask is displayed in the showcase *Trade and Diplomacy* in the Chinese section of *Gallery 33* (**Figure 1.17**). In the old *Gallery 33*, the showcase dedicated to the Ming dynasty contained only porcelain (**Figure 1.18**). By comparison, the Ming display in the newly renovated *Gallery 33* is less crowded than the previous arrangement but includes more objects in diverse materials and from different places.[109] The showcase *Trade and Diplomacy* presents interregional connections and exchanges of materials and visual languages. The showcase's theme revolves around seven Ming government-backed voyages to

[106] See: https://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/powerglory/intro.html; https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2009/arts-of-the-ming-dynasty; https://www.cultuurarchief.nl/z/tentoonstellingen/1303-het-mysterie-ming.htm [Accessed January 20, 2021].
[107] For more about the historical development of the trope of the Ming vase in English cultural discourse, see Stacey Pierson, *From Object to Concept: Global Consumption and the Transformation of Ming Porcelain* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), especially Chapter 3 'Porcelain as Metaphor—Inventing "the Ming Vase" (18th-20th Centuries)'.
[108] This quotation originally appeared in the article "Made in China: An Imperial Ming Vase," written by Luk Yu-Ping for the British Museum's online blog. However, the page is no longer available after an update of the British Museum's website. For an online archive, see: https://changed407.rssing.com/chan-29755778/latest.php [Accessed January 20, 2021].
[109] The dark green backdrops installed in each showcase in the newly restored *Gallery 33 China and South Asia* also help to minimize glass reflections, and thus enhance the visiting experience.

South and West Asia between 1405 and 1433.[110] Thus, we see Chinese red lacquerware gifted to the Ashikaga court in Japan (1338-1573) combined with Japanese blades gifted to the Ming court; a Ming dish grouped with a Vietnamese stoneware plate with a similar color scheme and decoration; a pair of Ming pillow ends inlaid with gems from India and Sri Lanka; and a Ming pilgrim flask juxtaposed against two other Ming bottles and two comparable pieces of metalwork made in Herat, which shows the "[Ming] Court fashion for the exotic," according to the label (**Figure 1.19**).

Adjacent to the display, reproductions of *Horse with Chinese Grooms* (1418) and *Royal Feast in a Garden* (about 1444) illustrate a reciprocal exchange: large horses from West Asia were vital for the Ming army, and Ming porcelain was desirable for the Persian Sultans (**Figures 1.20-1.21**).[111] These graphics potentially create a transition between *Gallery 33 China and South Asia* and *Galleries 42-43 The Islamic World*, where several pieces of Ming porcelain are grouped with Persian ceramics. Influenced by shapes found in Islamic design, pilgrim flasks were exotic in the context of the Ming empire. Yet, when Ming porcelain became famous in the Islamic markets, Iranian artisans started to fashion their exotic-looking stone-paste flasks by imitating the visual designs of Ming porcelain. This connection is shown by the showcase *Chinese Inspirations* in *Gallery 43 The Islamic World* (**Figure 1.22**). Here, a Chinese-style Safavid Iranian pilgrim flask is grouped with several pieces of Ming porcelain and their imitations made in Mamluk Egypt (1250-1517), Safavid Iran, and Mughal India.

Figure 1.17 Showcase *Trade and Diplomacy* in *Gallery 33*, Chinese section. Photographed by the author in 2017

[110] Commanded by the Chinese mariner and diplomat Zheng He (1371-1433/35), these seven maritime expeditions helped to revitalize the Sinocentric tribute system. The voyages reached as far west as the coast of East Africa. By acknowledging Ming China's superior position, these tributaries not only acquired guarantees of peace but also benefited from commercial transactions.

[111] *Horse with Chinese Grooms* is a double-paged painting from the *Bahram Mirza album* (assembled 1544-1545), now collected in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul. *Royal Feast in a Garden* is an illustration from the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Firdausi (about 934-1020), now collected in the Cleveland Museum of Art, museum number: 1956.10.a.

Figure 1.18 Showcase *Ming Dynasty* with Ming porcelain in *Gallery 33* before the refurbishment. Photographed by the author in 2014

Figure 1.19 A close look at the showcase Trade and Diplomacy. On the top shelf (from left to right): a Ming pilgrim flask; a Ming porcelain ewer; an Afghan metal ewer (late 1100s-early 1200s); a Ming porcelain tankard (on the right side of this tankard is an Afghan metal tankard, which is out of frame in this photo). On the middle shelf: a Ming porcelain dish (left) and a Vietnamese stoneware dish (right). On the bottom shelf: two Ming globular vases (the right piece is the one taken on the spotlight tour between 2014 and 2015). Photographed by the author in 2017.

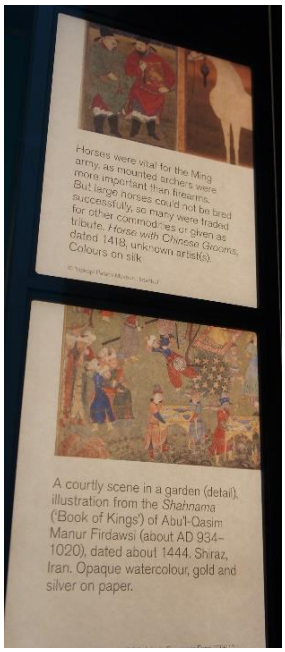

Figure 1.20 (left) Illustrated labels in the showcase *Trade and Diplomacy* (upper: *Horse with Chinese Grooms*; lower: *Royal Feast in a Garden*) Photographed by the author in December 2017
Figure 1.21 (right) *Royal Feast in a Garden* (detail) (about 1444). Opaque watercolor, gold, and silver on paper. Sheet in original: height 32.7 cm; width 22 cm. Collected in the Cleveland Museum of Art, museum number: 1956.10.a

Figure 1.22 A close look at the showcase *Chinese Inspirations* in *Gallery 43 The Islamic World*. A: Egyptian earthenware dish (1300-1500). B: Chinese Ming dish (found in Indonesia). C: Egyptian earthenware dish (1400-1500). D: Safavid pilgrim flask. E: Iranian stone-paste dish with lotuses (1500-1550). F: Iranian stone-paste jar (1601-1625). G: Indian stone-paste flask (1800-1900). Photographed by the author in 2017

The placement of the Ming pilgrim flask in the showcase *Cultural Interactions* in the South Asian section of *Gallery 33*, like the one in the Chinese section described above, indicates the idea of cultural exchange: it reflects the close relationship between China and India under the Mughal emperors. Before the refurbishment, the old South-Asian section of *Gallery 33* mainly displayed religious statuary, which could generate a misunderstanding or cultural stereotype, as if the culture of South Asia is confined to religious life. Following the gallery renovation, the South Asia section of *Gallery 33* now incorporates more diverse objects, not only those made in India; the display of the pieces of Ming-Qing porcelain is exemplary of this. In the showcase *Cultural Interactions*, the pilgrim flask is juxtaposed with a Qing water pipe commissioned by Indian patrons and a Ming cloisonné ewer with an Indian-inspired shape (**Figure 1.23**). Also found in this showcase are shards of Ming porcelain from Gaur, one Indian city where Chinese officials from the Ming court were greeted (**Figure 1.24**). The label calls the pilgrim flask "Emperor Aurangzeb's moon-flask," placing emphasis on ownership:

> This Chinese moon-flask belonged to the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (ruled 1658-1707). His name is inscribed at the bottom with the date 1660, the second year of his rule. The flask may have reached him through trade or as a diplomatic gift.

The identification of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb as owner indicates a process of identity-transformation that Ming porcelain underwent in Mughal India. In the words of the art historian Stacey Pierson, the flask is "no longer a 'Chinese' object in the possessive sense but rather an Indian object of Chinese origin."[112] However, this change of identity in terms of ownership becomes unnoticeable. The Aurangzeb inscription—a mark of personal ownership—is on the bottom of the flask and hidden from view by its arrangement.

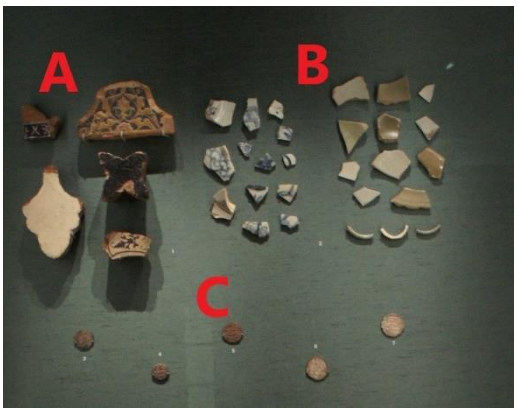

Figure 1.23 (left) A close look at the showcase *Cultural Interaction* in *Gallery 33*, South Asian section. Photographed by the author in 2017. From left to right: a Chinese Qing porcelain water pipe base (1662-1722); a Ming-Qing cloisonné ewer made for the Mughal market (1600s); and a Ming pilgrim flask
Figure 1.24 (right) A close look at the showcase *Cultural Interaction* in *Gallery 33*, South Asian section. A: Five pieces of tiles in Gaur (ca. 1400). B: Shards of Ming porcelain from Gaur. C: Coins from Gaur (13th to 15th century)

[112] Pierson, *From Object to Concept*, 39.

The Mughal Empire witnessed the prosperity and decline of Ming China and went on to behold a time of thriving European maritime powers, with their ambitious schemes for trade and colonization. The Portuguese were the first navigators to sail directly to India from Europe, and they settled in Goa, Malacca, and Macao. From these places, tons of Chinese porcelain were transported to Lisbon. In 1571, the Spaniards established their headquarters in Manila, on the west coast of the Philippines, where South American silver was transported in exchange for Chinese silk, cotton, and porcelain. The Netherlands greeted their Golden Age in the seventeenth century, a greeting that coincides with the founding of the Dutch East India Company (the VOC, founded in 1602). Throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, more than three million Chinese porcelain pieces were transported from Batavia, the Company's headquarters in Asia, to Amsterdam.[113] The English East India Company (the EIC, founded in 1600) thereafter took over the VOC to become the dominant sea power in the eighteenth century. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, sails and charts of Europeans progressively spread wherever profits were called. On this grand stage of history, a late Ming pilgrim flask traveled far across the oceans, and it is now on view in the British Museum's *Gallery 46 Europe 1400-1800*. This section has shown that the placements of Ming pilgrim flasks in the Chinese and Indian sections of *Gallery 33* suggest a change in the flasks' identity—from Chinese/Ming to Indian/Mughal—in the possessive sense. Below, I will discuss how the display of a late-Ming pilgrim flask in the museum's gallery of Europe indicates another process of identity-transformation in terms of possession: from Chinese/Ming to European.

1-2-2 Gallery 46 Europe 1400-1800

Gallery 46 Europe 1400-1800 shows how encounters with Africa, America, and Asia generated profound social changes and artistic developments in Europe. To speak specifically of the massive wall case where a piece of Ming pilgrim flask is on display, it reveals how European trading companies acted as go-betweens, reshaping the European worldview through contacting, and consuming, Others (**Figure 1.25**).

Groups of objects in this wall case are organized into four bays, each with a thematic topic: *Northern Sea Trade*; *Impact of the East*; *Trade and Territory*; and *Distant Worlds Made Tangible*. Since these four bays are separated only by thin sheets of glass, they seem more like a continuous story than four unconnected themes: from regional maritime commerce to overseas trade, and then back to the domestic context to show how the vast distances between Europe and the outside world were compressed by collecting. The Ming pilgrim flask is placed in the second bay, *Impact of the East*. Considered in association with the other objects displayed in the wall case, the Ming flask is readily identified as a possession of Europeans, or to use Russell Belk's words, the Ming flask becomes an "extended self" of Europeans.[114]

According to Belk, the concept of 'extended self' is comprised of "not only that which is seen as 'me' (the self), but also that which is seen as 'mine'."[115] It enables one to define who one is by what one

[113] T. Volker, *Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 22, 227.
[114] Russell W. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 15, no. 2 (1988): 139-168.
[115] Ibid., 140. To possess an object means to invest our time, efforts, and attention in it, and these investments may transform it into property that can serve to fashion a desirable self-image. Emerging in the seventeenth century, property became a central way for Europeans to conceptualize an ideal selfhood, and this mode of

possesses. This is not limited to the individual dimension, but extends to "a hierarchical arrangement of levels of self, because we exist not only as individuals, but also as collectivities."[116] For the present discussion of how this Ming pilgrim flask is displayed in a way that makes it an aspect of 'extended self' for Europeans, two levels of Self can be identified: individual (Philip II, King of Spain and Portugal, 1527-1598) and cultural group (the European traders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially the English, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese). Which level of Self is identified depends on which vantage point is selected to view the Ming flask and its relations to the other materials on display.

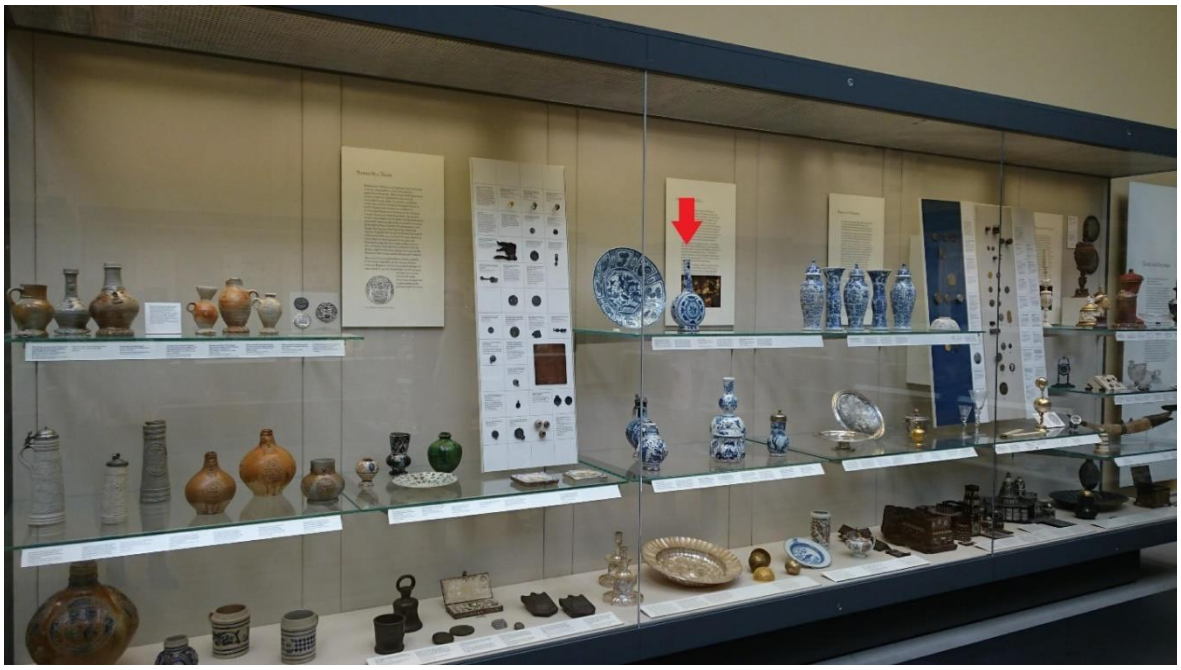

Figure 1.25 View of the wall case in *Gallery 46 Europe 1400-1800* with a Ming pilgrim flask (where the red arrow points). Photographed by the author in 2019

To start off, let us take a closer look at the flask. In the second bay, *Impact of the East*, the flask is combined with other Chinese and Indian products made for the European markets and some pieces of Dutch and British earthenware in Chinese-style to exemplify the "Oriental mania" in seventeenth-century Europe, as is indicated by the caption (**Figure 1.26**). Compared to the Ming flasks shown in the Chinese and Indian sections of *Gallery 33* discussed above, this Ming flask in *Gallery 46* has a particularly tall neck and its foot is trapezoidal. Its unique shape is considered to be inspired by "a Near or Middle Eastern metal prototype," like, for example, the brass pilgrim flask, which was probably made in the Indian provinces of the Ghurid empire (around 879-1215), now on display in the museum's *Gallery 42 The Islamic World* (**Figure 1.27**).[117]

conceptualization was facilitated by the expansion of trading networks. See Crawford Brough Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[116] Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," 152.

[117] Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos, *Global by Design: Chinese Ceramics from the R. Albuquerque Collection* (London: Jorge Welsh Research & Publishing, 2016), 106.

Figure 1.26 (left) View of the *Impact of the East* bay. On the top shelf: a Ming dish (left) and a Ming pilgrim flask (right, where the red arrow points). On the middle shelf: five pieces of seventeenth-century tin-glazed earthenware from England and the Netherlands. On the bottom shelf: two seventeenth-century Indian candlesticks and a basin made for the European market, and a gilded Indian Goa stone with two containers. Photographed by the author in 2019
Figure 1.27 (right) Brass pilgrim flask inlaid with silver. Ghurid dynasty, ca. 1200. Height: 32 cm; Width: 22 cm. Collected in the British Museum, museum number: 1883,1019.7 (on display in *Gallery 42 The Islamic World*)

The way that the flask is arranged further shifts our attention from its Chinese origin to its European ownership. The side facing the visitor is decorated with a Spanish coat of arms showing lions and castles, which is, according to the label, copied from coins minted during the reign of Philip II. The pattern on the other side of the flask, a landscape with a seated Chinese scholar and his servant, is neither visible nor mentioned (see **Figure 1.12**). As it was a personalized product and token of status of King Philip II, this Chinese flask can be re-identified and appropriated as Spanish/European, and is now categorized in the British Museum based on its location of consumption.

Standing a few paces away from the wall case, we can associate the Ming flask with the objects displayed in the third bay, *Trade and Territory*, the former seems to become a cartographic tool that situates the European sense of Self by mapping the European sphere of influence across the globe. The group of objects in the third bay maps out the overseas commercial circuit connecting Europe to Africa, America,

and Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (**Figure 1.28**). There is, to name just a few objects, a Qing porcelain garniture set; a broken Ming bowl salvaged from the large cargo of a Chinese junk wrecked in the South China Sea around 1643; a globe-shaped German cup engraved with a world map; two Dutch wine glasses engraved with sailing ships; a British seal-die with the arms of the Royal African Company; and a silver eight reales minted in Peru under the reign of the Spanish King Philip II, showing castles and lions just like the coat of arms on the Ming flask. The Ming pilgrim flask can be seen in combination with these objects, as it was also a trade good with exchange value. Together, they help materialize a sense of domination: the possession of objects from foreign lands and other cultures is a powerful assertion of national authority that expands beyond national boundaries.[118] The sense that the outside world became controllable for Europeans as their territorial boundaries were expanded by colonization and trade is also illustrated by a map alongside the *Trade and Territory* caption (**Figure 1.29**). On the face of it, the map shows a series of excavations of wrecked *East Indiamen* ships to demonstrate "the scale of the export trade," as the caption puts it. Yet, what is also suggested in this Eurocentric map of the world is, perhaps, how desires for material and power drove the expansion of European territories and spheres of influence.

If we step away a bit further, the Ming pilgrim flask can also be seen together with the objects in the fourth and final bay, *Distant Worlds Made Tangible* (**Figure 1.30**). With engraved gems and mother-of-pearl, and metal-mounted vessels made of coral, ivory, amber, and coconut, this part of the display recalls an archetypal cabinet of curiosities, in which various objects showcases a microcosm representation of the universe."[119] The caption reads:

> Distant Worlds Made Tangible
> The discovery of the New World and the development of contacts with Africa and the Far East revolutionized the way in which the world was perceived. The Natural World, as studied by Renaissance scientists, now encompassed rarities from exotic lands. Such rarities, whether natural (a coconut shell), or artificial (a Chinese porcelain bowl), were often mounted in silver and gold.

Organizing, categorizing, and mounting material collections, the cabinet of curiosities embodied a logic Europeans used to mirror the wider world in a microcosm, and to mediate the interrelation between binaries such as natural and artefactual, distance and intimacy, overseas and domestic, and intangible and tangible. The cabinet of curiosities to which this fourth bay of the wall case refers creates what the art historian Rebecca Duclos calls "a desired microcosm."[120] In this microcosm, "the collection worked in a map-like way to construct the world by first ordering it and then interpreting that order so as to create a sense of place within the uncharted expanse of the cosmos."[121]

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[118] See Sharon Macdonald, "Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities," *Journal of Museum and Society* 1, no. 1 (2003): 3.
[119] Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990[1987]), 69.
[120] Rebecca Duclos, "The Cartographies of Collecting," in *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, ed. Simon J. Knell (London and New York: Routledge, 2004[1999]), 90.
[121] Ibid.

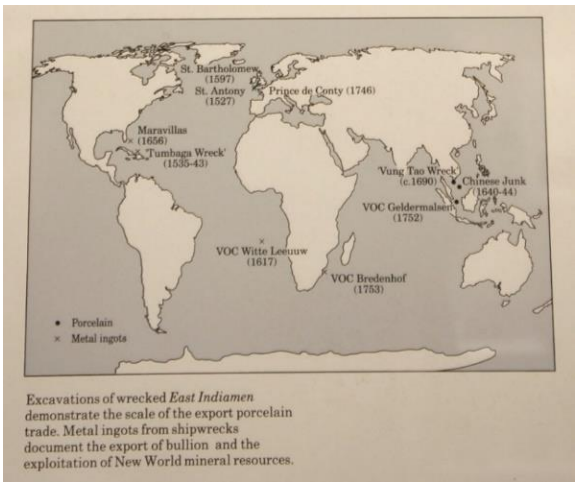

Figure 1.28 (left) View of the *Trade and Territory* bay. A: A Qing garniture set (1680-1690). B: A Ming bowl for the Southeast Asian market excavated from a Chinese junk wrecked in the South China Sea (around 1643). C: Two Dutch wine glasses engraved with sailing ships (ca. 1750). D: A silver eight reales minted in Peru under the reign of the Spanish King Philip II, showing castles and lions. Photographed by the author in 2019
Figure 1.29 (right) Map of Chinese porcelain trade attached to the *Trade and Territory* bay caption. Photographed by the author in 2019

Figure 1.30 View of three bays: A: *Impact of the East* (the red arrow points to the Ming pilgrim flask); B: *Trade and Territory*; and C: *Distant Worlds made Tangible*. Photographed by the author in 2019

The picture, *The Yarmouth Collection* (ca. 1665, also know as *The Paston Treasures*), featured with the *Distant Worlds Made Tangible* bay caption is also noteworthy in that it potentially secures a European sense of Self in terms of possession (**Figure 1.31**). This Dutch still life depicts a panoply of valuables assembled by the Paston family of Norfolk, in the United Kingdom. In the central foreground is a singing girl who is surrounded by objects both natural and artifactual. These objects include, just to name a few: a Chinese porcelain dish filled with a pink lobster, roses and fruits, a silver-gilt flagon decorated with shells, a monkey, a clock, and an enslaved person probably owned by the Pastons.[122] Intangible concepts of geographical distances are compressed by these tangible things crowded into an interior scene. The anthropologist David Howes refers to this painting as "an empire of the senses constituted by the best the world has to offer… In this microcosm earth, sea and sky are all symbolically present through representative objects and animals."[123] What is more, the sensory empire here is equally "a political empire:"

> Rich and rare sensations have been brought together from all over the world (as is suggested by the presence of the globe). Not just artefacts and plants, but also animals and humans form part of this empire. […] We see here that everything has been displaced from its original setting and brought together to form a new world order.[124]

Featuring this still life in the bay caption of *Distant Worlds Made Tangible* is suggestive in that it contributes to securing the European ownership of the objects placed in this bay and, more broadly speaking, in this wall case, including the Ming pilgrim flask. Or, put differently, the objects on display here become components of a sensory/political empire built upon the European ownership and accumulation of objects from around the world.

Figure 1.31 *The Yarmouth Collection*, Dutch School, ca. 1665. Oil on canvas. Height: 165 cm; Width 246.5 cm. Collected in the Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery. Accession number: NWHCM: 1947.170

[122] For a detailed survey of the symbolic meanings of the objects in *The Yarmouth Collection*, see Robert Wenley, "Robert Paston and the Yarmouth Collection," *Norfolk Archaeology* 41, no. 2 (1991): 113-144.
[123] David Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 13.
[124] Ibid.

Using the phrase *Distant Worlds Made Tangible*, and the ideas evoked by this phrase, as a kind of closing remark in the wall case, is equally suggestive. Conceivably, the phrase encourages an affiliation with the displays in the previous bays, and in this way a continuous storyline unfolds in parallel with a flow of material goods: exotic commodities transported along trade routes towards Europe, where their tangible presence evoked overseas voyages and experiences of exploration; they might then be collected in a domestic cabinet, wherein they were possessed and appropriated as a way for Europeans to map and grasp the world. Arguably, the arrangement in the wall case reveals an object-biographical approach to display, through which the identity-transformation of the objects, such as the Ming pilgrim flask, is traceable.

The association between European self-fashioning and Chinese porcelain is even more conspicuous in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which will be analyzed in the next chapter. For the moment though, I will move on to contextualize trans-border arrangement in terms of the global turn in art history.

1-3 The Global Turn in Art History and Transcultural Presentation in the Museum Space

The trans-border arrangement of Ming pilgrim flasks in the British Museum indicates that these objects are components of the material culture of Ming China and many other cultural groups that have participated in the creation of their object biographies. Tracing the trans-border arrangement of Ming pilgrim flasks in the British Museum's Asian and European galleries, walking past its combination of various objects, replicates in our act the dissemination of Ming porcelain on an interregional scale (in Eurasia).[125] This reenactment, one that foregrounds the narrative of transculturation would have been hard to imagine just a few decades ago. Based on his curatorial experience in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in the 1980s, the art historian Craig Clunas points out that it would have inevitably aroused disputes if an object was not displayed according to its provenance.[126] For example, Chinese objects would not have been placed in the Japanese gallery, and no European products would have been found in the gallery of the Middle East—no matter how closely interconnected these regions have been for thousands of years via transfers of people and materials. Such a production-based categorization of museum collections, however, has been called into question in both academia and curatorial practices.

1-3-1 Art History from a Global Perspective: Boundaries in Question

The word global in the global turn in art history generally refers to a pluralistic transcultural perspective rather than a comprehensive geographical scope.[127] Here, I do not take the historian Bruce Mazlish's use

[125] For the analogy between walking through a museum and thumbing through an art history book, see Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3, no. 4 (1980): 455.
[126] Craig Clunas, "Wuzhi wenhua—zai dongxi eryuanlun zhi wai" 物質文化—在東西二元論之外 [Material Culture Beyond the East/West Binary], *Xin Shixue* 新史學 [*New History*] 17, no. 4 (2006): 204.
[127] Gasparini, "Interview with Monica Juneja about Global Art History."

of the term global history to refer primarily to "the history of globalization" in "a new global epoch" emerging roughly after the 1970s.[128] Following this idea, confines global (art) history to a contemporary development. Rather, I draw on the explanation of the historian Sebastian Conrad, who considers 'global history' not as a synonym for macro-history or the history of globalization, but as a perspective, or more specifically, "a heuristic device that allows the historian to pose questions and generate answers that are different from those created by other approaches."[129] As Conrad reminds us, global does not necessarily mean the de-bordered, "planetary totality of historical processes," but can also entail an approach that helps move beyond and reflect on established frameworks in the narrative of history.[130] Understanding global as a research perspective promises a particular way of looking at (art) history that focuses on dynamic processes of connection, circulation, and transformation. It thereby breaks out of compartmental thinking about cultures which is rooted in nationalism and the Eurocentric binary of Us and Others.[131]

This reading of global is aligned with the "notion of globality informed by a transcultural perspective" that Monica Juneja proposes. A transcultural perspective, according to Juneja, "works to re-define the units of art history, away from national frames and following the logic of the movement of agents, objects and practices."[132] Thus, the global turn in art history viewed from a transcultural perspective opens up questions about the validity of the preexisting categories into which the discipline has long been sorted. Could the discipline of art history be restructured in ways that move beyond such monolithic categories as period styles, empires, and nation-states and towards the historical-spatial networks underpinning ongoing patterns of cultural interaction? Could the history of art and material culture be organized by a de-territorialized, rather than a center-periphery model? How does a rethinking of the essentializing frames of art historical narrative help to unravel the possible ideological texture of the discipline?

These questions reveal how rethinking art history from a global/transcultural perspective often entails critical self-reflection on the ways the discipline has been constructed. Along the same lines, it often entails challenging static, homogeneous, and bounded ideas of culture. "We cannot," as the art historian Kitty Zijlmans points out, "unwrite the art history that has been written […] What we can do, and what has been happening for the past decade, is to reevaluate how art history has been written and question why it happened in such a way."[133] To do so, we need to unsettle the existing framing of art historical writing, "of its methods and descriptions of in- and exclusion."[134] Importantly, the purpose of

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[128] Bruce Mazlish, "Comparing Global History to World History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 3 (1998): 390-391.
[129] Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 11, 72.
[130] Ibid., 95.
[131] The global turn in art history not only seeks approaches to transcend the conventional boundaries of categorization. It also calls for enhancing interdisciplinary cooperation. See Kitty Zijlmans, "Pushing Back Frontiers: Towards a History of Art in a Global Perspective," *International Journal of Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2003): 203.
[132] Juneja, "'A Very Civil Idea…'," 480; Gasparini, "Interview with Monica Juneja about Global Art History."
[133] Kitty Zijlmans, "An Intercultural Perspective in Art History: Beyond Othering and Appropriation," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 293.
[134] Kitty Zijlmans, "The Discourse on Contemporary Art and the Globalization of the Art System," in *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, eds. Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008), 149.

rethinking the disciplinary frame of art history is not to eliminate all forms of boundaries entirely, but to take all boundary conditions as a subject of investigation, rather than as a given fact. For the art historian Claire Farago, this means that we need to treat all boundary conditions as "porous and double-sided, strategically invested rather than natural or inevitable constructs."[135]

To think of cultural boundaries as porous rather than self-contained involves a shift in emphasis from vertical influence to horizontal circulation. The study of vertical artistic influence or diffusion is considered increasingly inadequate in light of the global turn in art history, as it often suggests a central-peripheral structure of thought that perpetuates a Eurocentric bias.[136] By contrast, viewing circulation as "a motor of transformation," as Juneja does, enables one to perceive an object's meaning as accumulating and transforming along with its displacement across porous boundaries, across points of production, exchange, and consumption.[137] Hence, a key part of approaching art history from a global/transcultural perspective is acknowledging the life history and alterity of an object, an object whose identity formation needs to be explored from multiple perspectives. The trans-border arrangement of the Ming pilgrim flasks in the British Museum, I propose, provides a promising example to demonstrate how museum presentation can explore and redraw the existing boundaries of art-historical categorization through the application of a transcultural approach.

There are undoubtedly many more ways for a museum to challenge homogeneous, bounded ideas of culture and cultural identity. The museum world today has seen efforts at spatial reorganization and collection re-contextualization, attempts to reflect on the existing modes of display and categorization. An interesting example is the research project *Objects in Transfer* (2012-2016), at the Museum für Islamische Kunst (Museum of Islamic Art) in Berlin, which has been practiced in the semi-permanent galleries of the museum since 2016. The idea of transculturation and its impact on unsettling the rigid cultural boundaries endorsed by the exclusive categories of museums is central to the project. The art historian Vera Beyer, who was the head of *Objects in Transfer*, points out: "We have explored connections and transfers of objects that are transcultural in the sense that they undermine current cultural categories—in this case that of Islamic art."[138] For objects with biographical trajectories crossing different cultural regions, the umbrella term *Islamic Art*—a religious category combined with the European concept of art—is obviously inadequate, because it constitutes "a process of delimitation of Christian from Islamic culture."[139] To enable audiences to trace the transfer of the selected objects, a number of interactive

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[135] Claire Farago, "The 'Global Turn' in Art History: Why, When, and How Does It Matter?" in *The Globalization of Renaissance Art: A Critical Review*, ed. Daniel Savoy (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 307.

[136] For more about the difference between studies of diffusion or influence and studies of continuing circulations without implications of cultural hierarchies, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel. eds., *Circulations in Global History of Art* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 2-3.

[137] Monica Juneja, "Circulation and Beyond—The Trajectories of Vision in Early Modern Eurasia," in *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, eds. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 60-61.

[138] Vera Beyer, "Beyond the Museum Walls. Questioning the Cultural Delimitation of 'Islamic Art' by Pointing to the Entanglement of Collections," in *Objects in Transfer: A Transcultural Exhibition Trail through the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin*, eds. Vera Beyer, Isabelle Dolezalek, and Sophia Vassilopoulou (Berlin: Museum für Islamische Kunst, 2016), 14-15. Online at: http://www.objects-in-transfer.sfb-episteme.de/document/Objects%20in%20Transfer.pdf [Accessed January 20, 2021].

[139] Ibid., 13. For more about the construction of the category Islamic art in art history discipline and the museum world, see Junod, et al., eds. *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology in the Muslim World*.

installations are embedded in the galleries, including touchscreens, and a digital platform accessed through QR codes. There are also floor arrows pointing toward related objects housed in two other museums in Berlin, the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum) and the Museum für Byzantinische Kunst (Museum of Byzantine Art), where similar arrows point back in return. Such cross-references further encourage a tracing of cultural connections beyond the limits of museum walls.

Another promising strategy for (art) historians and curators to transcend a narrowly national perspective is a shift to working within larger interregional spaces, such as the seas and oceans which are filigreed with interregional trading networks.[140] The power of cultural boundaries has also been challenged by a number of museum studies looking for a more reciprocal relationship between museums and the communities around them.[141] Interregional and thematic frameworks indeed provide a logical approach for museums to go beyond a territorially-bound categorization. However, in addressing the question of "how the identity potentialities of the museum can be put to new use," the dominant cultural-geographical categories do not have to be entirely abolished.[142] As the art historian Mary Sheriff has pointed out, such divisions, which structure most museum galleries and art-historical narratives, "are surely heuristic necessities."[143] This is especially true in the case of the British Museum; for a museum that presents an extensive collection, a cultural-geographical framework is still immediately graspable, allowing visitors to navigate the gallery space easily.[144] The point here is to acknowledge that these boundaries are not mutually exclusive but porous, and museums can spatialize material circulations that transcend the existing borderlines by activating the trans-border movements of the objects they display. This further brings us to a critical point: recognizing that it is possible to cast a more positive light on the metaphor of museum-as-map, rooted in nineteenth-century imperialism and colonialism as it may be. The idea of mapping transcultural exhibition trails in this museum space prompts a reflection on the long-recognized role of museums as classificatory maps.

1-3-2 Rethinking the Role of the Museum as a Cartographic Tool

Collecting and mapping are both forms of territorialization. According to the political historian Benedict Anderson, both maps and museums were the "institutions of power" used by the colonial powers in

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[140] For example, between 2014 and 2015, the British Museum hosted the special exhibition *Connecting Continents: Indian Ocean Trade and Exchange*. This small exhibition presents objects from the museum's collection that cross cultural (also departmental) boundaries, including a nineteenth-century Indonesian boat model made of cloves from the Department of Asia and a Roman necklace made of South Asian sapphires and garnets from the Department of Greece and Rome. In addition to the Indian Ocean, the East Asian seas (specifically stretching from the Sea of Japan to the South China Sea) are another maritime space that has recently earned significant curatorial attention, see Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

[141] See Macdonald, "Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities," 1-16; Rosmarie Beier-de Haan, "Re-staging Histories and Identities," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 186-197; and Rhiannon Mason, "National Museums, Globalization, and Postnationalism: Imaging a Cosmopolitan Museology," *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 1 (2013): 40-64.

[142] Macdonald, "Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities," 6.

[143] Mary D. Sheriff, *Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art Since the Age of Exploration* (Chapel Hill: The Universality of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1.

[144] Christopher Whitehead et al., eds., *Museums, Migration and Identity in Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

Southeast Asia to imagine their dominions and secure the legitimacy through "a totalizing classificatory grid."[145] Indeed, the correspondence between curatorial and cartographic practices was established in imperial and colonial contexts. Rebecca Duclos argues that collecting and displaying objects seized from (and thus becoming a metonymy of) colonized lands was a metaphor for the collector's capacity as a colonizing power. These imperial assemblages, according to Duclos, have the "cartographic power" of securing the colonized in the colonizer's ownership.[146] Similarly, in characterizing the spatial nature of the ethnographic and natural-historical museums that emerged during nineteenth century, the museum scholar Eilean Hooper-Greenhill also notes the interweaving of collecting, mapping, and colonizing: "The drawing together of these objects from disparate parts of the world was as much a form of cartography as the drawing of a map [because they both are] a form of symbolic conquest."[147] The correspondence between collecting/displaying and mapping in a colonial context, therefore, lies much in the fact that they both provide a tangible presence to the intangible power of domination and manipulation. They both use the spatial trope of boundary to map out the binary distinction between the forceful Self (the colonizers, collectors, and cartographers) and the powerless Other (the colonized, collected, and mapped).

Certainly, a museum's role as cartographic tool, stemming from colonial contexts, needs to be revised to better reflect a more dynamic and fluid understanding of cultural identity in the postmodern world. For example, the cartographic role of museums has been adapted to explore how particular patterns of migration and migrant experience can be mapped in museum spaces, and in doing so, creates a more inclusive society.[148] Notably, certain objects, such as the Ming pilgrim flasks, are readily considered as migrants in the sense that they are "an expression of transregional connections and the exchange of techniques, thoughts, patterns, fashions and ideas."[149] Compared to the conception of the oneness of the world discussed earlier, the presentation of transculturation with objects that have transcultural lives seems more relevant to the British Museum's growing engagement with the idea of cultural exchange.

In fact, the exploration of a new cartographic metaphor is an especially urgent issue for the British Museum. Branding itself as a museum where the oneness of the world is exhibited, the museum sought to downplay, if not eliminate, its national/imperial aura. As MacGregor claims:

> It is a standing source of astonishment and amusement to visitors that the British Museum has so few British things in it, that it is a museum about the world as seen from Britain rather than a history focused on these islands.[150]

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[145] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006[1983]), 163, 184.
[146] Rebecca Duclos, "The Cartographies of Collecting," 86.
[147] Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.
[148] See Whitehead et al., eds., *Museums, Migration and Identity in Europe*.
[149] Stefan Weber, "Preface," in *Objects in Transfer: A Transcultural Exhibition Trail through the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin*, eds. Vera Beyer, Isabelle Dolezalek, and Sophia Vassilopoulou (Berlin: Museum für Islamische Kunst, 2016), 5. Online at: http://www.objects-in-transfer.sfb-episteme.de/document/Objects%20in%20Transfer.pdf [Accessed January 20, 2021].
[150] Neil MacGregor, "Britain is at the Centre of a Conversation with the World," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/apr/19/comment.comment1 [Accessed January 20, 2021].

Indeed, the museum does not present a national narrative with a British collection as its main focus. However, this does not necessarily mean that the museum "has nothing to do with national ownership."[151] On the contrary, I agree with Craig Clunas' argument that "The 'British Museum' could never be restricted to British things, for to do so would set a limit to the reach of British power, as well as to the gaze of the all-comprehending and autonomous subject."[152]

This all-comprehending gaze points to what the political theorist Timothy Mitchell calls "the world as an exhibition."[153] Focusing on the great nineteenth-century exhibitions in Europe, Mitchell argues that the world-as-exhibition suggests a particular mode of seeing; that is, the Europeans acted as beholders with a detached, privileged point of view to see the world organized and grasped as an exhibition—to make sense of the "external reality" presented before their eyes in a seemingly objective form.[154] Such a Euro-centric, privileged view, according to Sharon Macdonald, was often materialized through the "central atria" that many nineteenth-century European museums had.[155] Notably, such an ideologically-laden central atrium is now found in the British Museum: The Great Court of the British Museum is crowned with the inscription "AD 2000 This Great Court Celebrating the New Millennium Is Dedicated to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II" (**Figure 1.32**). The Great Court provides a vantage point from which an imperial sense of the world-as-exhibition is suggested physically and metaphorically. This sense is also visualized in the museum's floor map on which the Great Court is surrounded by the galleries representing areas of the world (see **Figure 1.2**).

Figure 1.32 British Museum's Great Court with the inscription "AD 2000 This Great Court Celebrating the New Millennium Is Dedicated to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II." The British Museum Images, image ID: 01613552871. © The Trustees of the British Museum

[151] MacGregor, "To Shape the Citizens of 'That Great City, the World'," 54.
[152] Craig Clunas, "China in Britain: The Imperial Collection," in *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum*, eds. Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1998), 43.
[153] Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1988), 10.
[154] Ibid., 21.
[155] Macdonald, "Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities," 4.

The idea of the oneness of the world reflects an objectifying, world-as-exhibition gaze. By comparison, the mapping of a transcultural narrative through the trans-border arrangement of objects that have global lives (e.g. Ming pilgrim flasks) corresponds to an ideological position of loosening or transcending Self-Other boundaries, with emphasis on the shifting of subject-positions and mutual permeability of cultures. This, in my opinion, could help transform the British Museum into a place to communicate that, to quote Fischer, "human history was driven and has always been driven by exchange, by cultures communicating."[156]

Conclusion: Beyond a Universal Container

The trans-border arrangement of the Ming flasks analyzed in this chapter shows the British Museum's potential to accommodate and project the narrative of transculturation into its spatial configuration, to be a place where different narrative frameworks (chronological and synchronic, cultural and transcultural) can coexist and complement each other. Such coexistence can help tell more dynamic stories of cultural connection and enable a more dynamic reading of the museum's collections. It also helps move the museum beyond its age-old foundation of universalism by calling attention to the inadequacy of classifying an object based merely on its place of origin, by acknowledging the fluid and plural identities that an object might have accumulated throughout its life history.

We have seen regarding the Ming pilgrim flasks in their trans-border arrangement is how such a display scheme can foreground cross-fertilization between regions and thus potentially dismantle the obsolete Self-Other boundary and bounded cultural identities. In this sense, trans-border arrangement and the accompanying narrative of transculturation can aptly approach one of the main objectives of the British Museum today: that is, to become a place where global interconnections can be illuminated. However, it should be noted that the trans-border arrangement in the museum is currently quite challenging for audiences to trace, or even to notice, because of the lack of clear instructions. How does the museum encourage a more dynamic reading of its collection pieces on display so as to fulfill its vision today? There are a number of object trails accompanied by leaflets that already incorporate galleries in the British Museum: around the themes of, for example, empire and colonial exploitation, and LGBTQ history.[157] Conceivably, if there is a transcultural exhibition trail with selected objects with global biographies (e.g. Ming pilgrim flasks) acting as 'gateways' to a culturally entangled world, a visit to the British Museum can potentially become a voyage towards a transcultural outlook.[158] In the next chapter, I

[156] Higgins, "Interview British Museum Director Hartwig Fischer."
[157] For the object trails in the British Museum today, see: https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails [Accessed January 20, 2021].
[158] The word gateway here is used on purpose in order to evoke the idea of "gateway objects" which the British Museum adopted in 2006 to structure a more comprehensible interpretative model in its semi-permanent galleries. Gateway objects refer to a group of carefully chosen objects that act as gateways to larger themes. They are usually arranged in a way that can effectively grab audiences' attention—for example, in the center of a display case or at the entrance of a gallery—in order to tell an overarching story of that showcase or that gallery. The gateway objects approach was proposed by the British Museum's interpretation team, established in 2005. See Jane Batty et al., "Object-Focused Text at the British Museum," *Exhibition* 36, no. 1 (2016): 70-80.

will shift the focus to another intriguing national museum, where the glorious past shared by a specific group of people, the Dutch, is staged; namely, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.