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Social Life and Shifting Meaning of Collected Objects: Japanese Ceramics of Sir William Cornelius Van Horne (1843–1915)

How do objects acquire meaning and how does the meaning change? My dissertation, *From Japan to Canadian Museum Storage: Shifting Meaning of Objects from the Japanese Ceramics Collection of William Cornelius Van Horne (1843–1915)*, looks at how a group of Japanese ceramic objects, collected by Sir William C. Van Horne in late nineteenth century Montreal, have acquired meaning. I examine the shifting meaning of these objects through their spatial and temporal movements from Japan to Canada and from the late nineteenth century to the present. These objects embody interpretational gaps – between a high reputation during the collector’s lifetime, their ambiguous status in the museum storage today and the misidentification of a genuine tea bowl made by prominent potter Nonomura Ninsei (active ca.1646–1677) in the collection.

Japanese objects and the Western idea of “what constitutes authentic Japanese ceramics” interrelate and influence each other in complex ways through various interactions among people, institutions and societies. These interactions create the moments when the meaning of these objects shift. By looking at these shifts, I challenge the notion of a fixed idea of authenticity surrounding Japanese ceramics, both in Japan and in the West, and reveal the covert and unconscious mechanisms of how an object is given meaning.

Tracing the “social life” (Appadurai, 1988) of Van Horne’s Japanese ceramics demonstrates the continuous history of the objects with three points of passage: transfer of Japanese ceramics from Japan to the West; transformation from commodities to a private collection; and from a private to a museum collection. The circulation of Japanese ceramics



Portrait: Interior of Van Horne’s Residence (sojourn room). e003641849. Sir William Van Horne Fonds. Library and Archive Canada

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from Japan to the West in the mid to late nineteenth century was driven by the former's national modernization project and the latter's cultural phenomenon of japonisme. Japan's wide adoption of new ways of thinking imported from the West—especially the concept of “fine art” that had not existed in Japan—required a re-categorization of the country's cultural productions. In turn, as Western collectors' demand for Japanese ceramics increased, they sought “more authentic” Japanese ceramics rather than those made for export. During this time, the idea of authenticity surrounding Japanese ceramics was thus in flux. Within this shifting notion of authenticity, the status of Ninsei was elevated to a national potter.

Van Horne's collecting activities in Victorian Montreal were not only informed by a colonial logic reflecting his social status as a railway baron: The intimate relationship he formed with the objects themselves, evident in his hand-written catalogues, made his Japanese ceramic collection highly complex. Van Horne's interest focused on researching the individual objects in his hands, rather than simply appreciating their aesthetic quality. He was not as interested in the grand ideas projected on the objects as other collectors: ideas such as saving the vanishing Japanese traditional culture, or serving the Canadian public by establishing a museum collection. These characteristics of the Van Horne collection played a crucial role in how it is understood, or “mis”understood, in the later days.

While museums' roles in knowledge production are conventionally understood through the politics of display, non-displayed objects also contribute to the formation of knowledge in the museum. The interpretation of Van Horne's Japanese ceramics changed after his death in 1915, through inheritance, dispersion, and institutionalization in two museums, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Royal Ontario Museum, where many of them remained in storage for decades. In the early twentieth century, the emerging art historical perspective of Japanese cultural objects diminished the museums' interest in Van Horne's Japanese ceramics. Furthermore, changing museum operations such as the cataloguing system, as well as agendas of the various individuals who handled the Van Horne Japanese ceramics (myself included), affected perceptions of the objects within the museum. The Ninsei tea bowl, for example, was entangled in the gap between the high reputation of the potter and the undesirable interpretation of Van Horne's objects as a whole and was mistakenly considered inauthentic. It was only in 2007 when the tea bowl was re-assessed as genuine by a Japanese expert.

Works Cited:

Arjun Appadurai (1988). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press