

## Museum library and intercultural networking : the library of the Musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet (National Museum of Asian Arts, Paris, France)

**Cristina Cramerotti**

Library and archives department, Musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet, Paris, France  
cristina.cramerotti@guimet.fr



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### **Abstract:**

*The Library and archives department of the musée Guimet possess a wide array of collections: besides books and periodicals, it houses manuscripts, scientific archives – both public and private, photographic archives and sound archives.*

*From the beginning in 1889, the library is at the core of research and communications with scholars, museums, and various cultural institutions all around the world, especially China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. We exchange exhibition catalogues and publications dealing with the museum collections, engage in joint editions of its most valuable manuscripts (with China), bilingual editions of historical documents (French and Japanese) and joint databases of photographs (with Japan). Every exhibition, edition or database project requires the cooperation of the two parties, a curator of musée Guimet and a counterpart from the institution we deal with. The exchange is twofold and mutually enriching.*

*Since some years we are engaged in various national databases in order to highlight our collection: a collective library catalogue, the French photographic platform Arago, and of course Joconde, central database maintained by the Ministry of culture which documents the collections of the main French museums. Other databases are available on our website in cooperation with Réunion des musées nationaux, a virtual exposition on early Meiji Japan, and a database of Chinese ceramics.*

*All these online resources are intended as bridges to bring closer and expand mutual knowledge on Asian collections in museums. We have more and more tools and databases, but the mere multiplication of these prevent from grasping the entire scene. Another obstacle we have to overcome is of course the language barrier, by systematically editing in at least two languages. French is not anymore widely used and we need English, the de facto global language, but we should add Asian languages in our search tools. Due to budget constraints this is rarely the case in France but by networking we will be able to exchange knowledge and data between non-Western and Western cultures*

**Keywords:** Museum library, Archives, Asian art, Intercultural networking,

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## **The Library and Archives Department of the National Museum of Asian Arts Guimet**

The library was founded at the same time as the museum in 1889. The founder, Emile Guimet (1836-1918), inherited a prosperous chemical enterprise known at the time for the creation of an artificial ultramarine colorant, the “Guimet blue”. Well educated and open minded, Guimet was fond of painting and music, interested in ancient civilizations and religions and began collecting artefacts and books on ancient Egypt. In 1876 he embarked on a great trip together with the French painter Félix Régamey and spent some time in Japan which fascinated him. He came back with a wide collection of art items and books. His successors at the head of the museum emphasized the Asian orientation of the collections. It is very important to note that Guimet intended the museum as a centre for research and knowledge spreading, explaining the central role of the library open to the public, cultural events including public conferences on art, music, religions, together with an ambitious publication program.

The library today is home to some 100.000 books and manuscripts in European and Asian languages, several hundred titles of periodicals, old maps, rubbings mainly from China and Cambodia, scientific archives (Paul Pelliot, Edouard Chavannes, Joseph Hackin, Philippe Stern, Jeannine Auboyer etc.). Of course, the archives also gather the documentation on the museum artefacts, history of collections and the museum.

From the 1930's onward, a sound archive was created with hours of music recordings on all kind of media. Last but not least, a very rich photographic archive was collected, mostly on Asia, with some 300.000 pictures.

Please feel free to look at the museum website [www.guimet.fr](http://www.guimet.fr). You will improve your French language skills! We plan to add an English version soon.

### **How can we access this diversity of collections?**

The library is part of the French national museum online public catalogue, *Catalogue collectif des bibliothèques des musées nationaux* [cbumn.culture.fr](http://cbumn.culture.fr). In the future, we might integrate the wider SUDOC (*Système universitaire de documentation*), the French collective catalogue of higher educational and research libraries ([www.sudoc.abes.fr](http://www.sudoc.abes.fr)) harvested by the *Catalogue collectif national* (CCFr [www.ccf.fr/bnf.fr](http://www.ccf.fr/bnf.fr)) a portal maintained by the French National Library.

Our catalogue is not totally retrospective, some parts of the non-latin script catalogues are still to be retroconverted.

The photographic archive is slowly being digitized thanks to our collaboration with the Réunion des musées nationaux (RMN, Federation of National Museums [www.photo.rmn.fr](http://www.photo.rmn.fr)) that led to the posting on our website of a virtual exhibition dealing with early Meiji Japan <http://www.guimet-photo-japon.fr/> and downloading of photographic collections into Arago, the new French photographic platform <http://www.photo-arago.fr>. The RMN is also responsible for the photographic coverage of collections in national museums, allowing us to publish a database of Chinese ceramics <http://www.guimet-grandidier.fr/html/4/index/index.htm>.

As for the museum collections, Joconde is a central database maintained by the Ministry of culture which documents the collections of the main French museums <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/pres.htm>.

Another example of fruitful collaboration is the database of Chinese rubbings held in European libraries, on the web site of the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (French School of Asian Studies) <http://www.efeo.fr/estampages/>.

As for the sound archive, we are at the beginning of a long process of inventory and description prior to its digitization possibly in partnership with the French national library.

Quite typically, at least in France, the catalogue of the library was the first to go digital. Libraries all around the world struggle hard to give access to their catalogues, an impetus that was greatly improved by the adoption of standards on description, indexation, then romanization and implementation of the Unicode. In France, this movement was determined by the government since 25 years, beginning with the creation of SUDOC by the Ministry of education. The opening of data.gouv.fr at the end of 2011, the French national platform displaying public data marks a further step into the creation of a digital ecosystem open to all, widely accessible and reusable. The open data policy is now widespread in many countries, and I see it as a major tool to give access to our cultural richness, enhance cooperation and exchanges. For example, the National library of France has arranged its sets of data (catalogues, Gallica etc.) to enter data.gouv.fr in order to improve the visibility of its collections on popular search engines.

## **Networking**

We understand that networking is not only a tool to build platforms, databases and catalogues, it is also a way of improve our knowledge, professional skills, curiosity by exchanging ideas and research. For example, the librarians dealing with Chinese collections in Europe have long ago created a professional association, European Association of Sinological Librarians. During its annual conferences, participants exchange news, discuss technical matters as well as research trends. The European Associations of Japanese Resources Specialists work more or less along the same line. Now with Internet we could think that we don't need this kind of meetings but it is unlikely. We all come from different countries and libraries, some very big, some smaller, with unequal funding, diverse tools; by focusing on some topic we are able to communicate better and faster in a few days then prolong the discussion via a mailing list. Everyday new online resources appear on the web, intended as bridges to bring closer and expand mutual knowledge on Asia in our case. We have more and more tools and databases, but the mere multiplication of these prevent from grasping the entire scene. Exchanging about our experiences helps us maintain a sense of coherence.

Furthermore museum libraries are quite specific and generally on the small scale. In France, depending on the museum, the library may be open only to professionals or the museum staff. It is more or less integrated in the museum life. The library image is frequently blurred, its legitimacy questioned, the staff feeling underestimated. Thus funding is quite problematic, and the economic crisis since 2008 does not help. Networking becomes a priority in order to balance the scarcity of staff and money. At Guimet museum library, we have created a large network of exchanges. Typically, this network was created and expands thanks to personal ties with other librarians, scholars and curators visiting the library. When a specialized librarian leaves the library, it is quite difficult to maintain living the network, often due to language barrier. When the Vietnamese collection librarian will retire, I am not sure how to carry on the cooperation.

Another way of networking could be through training but the process is quite difficult. Once again, understaffing and poor budget are real constraints on both sides.

## **Exchanging**

We exchange exhibition catalogues and publications dealing with the museum collections, engage in joint editions of its most valuable manuscripts (with China), bilingual editions of historical documents (French and Japanese) and joint databases of photographs (with Japan). Every exhibition, edition or database project requires the cooperation of the two parties, a curator of musée Guimet and a counterpart from the institution we deal with. The exchange is twofold and mutually enriching.

## **Strategic foresight**

The Guimet museum collections cover most of Asia, with a large Chinese and Japanese section, Korea, Southeast Asia, India, Tibet, Central Asia, Afghanistan and a textile section. Thus it is mainly “classical art”. A few years ago, the president of the museum decided to open up the exhibition policy to display contemporary art from Asia. The outcome was somehow disappointing, the public showed contrasting opinions. But at the library we decided to anticipate and buy books on contemporary Asian art, because today’s art will be classical tomorrow. Let us recall how the museum establishment in France first responded to the Impressionist movement. Even if the art scene in Asia is exploding and the publications are so abounding that it is not easy to follow the movement, we consider that the library is at the core of the reflection on such a topic. Used to scientific monitoring, librarians must anticipate to build tomorrow’s collections. As for the technical part of our job, to make our collections known, we must use common search tools and make life easy for the public, generally used to simple search, without downgrading the quality of information.