

LIGHT AT THE END OF A DARK CENTURY: THE RESURRECTION OF KYIV'S KHANENKO MUSEUM

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The volume *Art of Asia and the Islamic World*. Kyiv: Safran Book, 2023, 352 pp., dedicated to the biggest collection of Asian Art in Ukraine, is under review. The main part of the book is divided into four chapters, devoted to a selection of objects from four different cultural clusters: Hinduism and Buddhism, China, the Islamic world, and Japan. Each section opens with a one-page introduction about the corresponding part of the collection, and each object is accompanied by a full-page photograph, sometimes with an enlarged detail, and a concise, informative description.

The volume is edited by Hanna Rudyk, with contributions by Halyna Bilenko, Yuliia Fil, Oleksandr Halenko, Marta Lohvyn, Antonina Makarevych, Olha Novikova, Yevhen Osaulenko, Hanna Rudyk and Valeriia Yunda. Translated from Ukrainian by Tetiana Savchynska.

The authors' reconstruction of the early history of the museum is an extraordinary achievement, and surely not an easy task in the light of the disappearance of most of the Khanenko family archive following Varvara's death, as well as the removal of labels and other identifications from objects during the Soviet period.

Given the size of the collection, the 156 objects presented here are obviously only a small fraction of the museum's holdings, but they have been thoughtfully selected to convey the diversity of the material, ranging from the grandeur of Tibetan thangkas depicting fearsome divinities such as Vajrabhairava and the war god Begtse, to small objects in which one can almost detect the artist's sense of humour. One such piece that deserves a special mention is a nineteenth-century Chinese ivory carving of a cricket on a napa cabbage, an extraordinarily lifelike creation that also happens to be a three-dimensional rebus signifying prosperity and good fortune.

This book is an aesthetic delight that will make compelling reading for scholars and non-specialists alike, and it fully achieves its aim of informing the world about the existence of an outstanding house of treasures which, we may sincerely hope, will at last be allowed to enjoy the peace it has long deserved.

Keywords: Asian collection; Bohdan Khanenko; Hermitage; illegal acquisition; Khanenko Museum; Oriental art; Varvara Khanenko

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This elegant volume, the culmination of fifteen years of patient research by a dedicated team of nine scholars, is a worthy tribute to the most important collection of non-European art in Ukraine. Originally scheduled to appear in 2022, its publication was delayed

for a year owing to the Russian invasion of the country and the war that continues to rage at the time of writing this review.

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What makes the difference between a first-rate, beautifully produced museum catalogue and this volume is the introductory text, which includes a remarkable and poignant account of the history and vicissitudes of the museum. The collection originated as a vision shared by Bohdan Khanenko, a Ukrainian aristocrat, and his wife Varvara, the daughter of a wealthy philanthropist. After their marriage in 1874, the couple began acquiring valuable works of art, with particular attention to artifacts from the Islamic world. While most acquisitions were from auction houses and sales from other collections within Europe, the Khanenkos caught the wave of “Japanophilia”¹ that marked the turn of the twentieth century. It was probably in Harbin that Bohdan, who served as a member of the Red Cross during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, is likely to have made the first purchases of the future East Asian part of the collection.

The end of the collection in its original form came shortly after the Russian Revolution of 1917. A large number of the Khanenkos’ possessions were held in Petrograd, and Varvara – who had been widowed in the same year – arranged for these items to be sent to Kyiv. She then gifted the entire collection to the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in order to preserve its integrity, with the stipulation that it should retain the name of the donors, that it should remain intact and that no further items should be added to it. In the event, none of these conditions was honoured, and the dispersal of the collection began even before her death in 1922. The process was accelerated in 1928, when many items were removed to be sold on the international market to finance the Soviet Union’s programme of industrialisation, but certain items – notably a spectacular thirteenth-century Persian aquamanile in the form of a cow and its calf with a lion – made it no further than the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, where it still remains as an illegal acquisition, cynically identified as having been “gifted” by Kyiv. This depletion was further exacerbated by looting in the Second World War, during the withdrawal of Nazi forces². From 1936 to 1990 it was known as the Museum of Western and Oriental Art before it finally recovered the name of its founders with the beginning of Ukrainian independence. Judicious acquisitions during that time and since then have restored its former importance as a concentration of Asian and Islamic art, with a collection amounting to more than 3500 items.

The authors’ reconstruction of the early history of the museum is an extraordinary achievement, and surely not an easy task in the light of the disappearance of most of the Khanenko family archive following Varvara’s death, as well as the removal of labels and other identifications from objects during the Soviet period. Thanks to such documents as they were able to trace, as well as careful examination of auction records and photographs of the building’s interior over the course of the decades, they have succeeded admirably in accomplishing their aim.

Among other things, the photographs reveal the Khanenkos’ policy with regard to displaying the items in the collection, which the authors accurately refer to as an amateurish “luxuries-of-the-oriental-bazaar” aesthetic, in which Asian and Western objects are clustered together – to the point of obscuring their visibility – without proper lighting or labelling, in assemblages determined by their shared antiquity. Over the course of time, the centre of gravity of the collection shifted towards the non-Western – “Oriental” – acquisitions, and this emphasis has defined its identity to the present day.

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¹ The rise of “Japanophilia” has been documented in a number of publications, among them Carl Dawson's biography of Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), an Anglo-American (and, later, Japanese) writer who avidly promoted the appreciation of Japanese culture in the West [Dawson 1992].

² The plunder of Ukraine's artistic heritage – including the Khanenko Museum – under Nazi occupation has been examined in an article by Patricia Kennedy [Grimsted 2016].

³ The most detailed study to date of this protector god – who is also regarded by certain Buddhist schools as a supramundane divinity – is an unpublished dissertation by Amy Heller [Heller 1992].

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