

Between East and West



Chinese paper, ivory, metal and silk fan (19th century). Picture: Reflections of Asia at the Powerhouse Museum

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Moving the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta is a mistake. Worse, it is a stupid and obstinate mistake, made and persisted with by the NSW government against all advice from the museological and cultural community.

Hostility to the plan has been so great that the government has been forced into a charade of consultation, which has confirmed overwhelming opposition, and which has been predictably ignored.

The storm of criticism obliged the government to set up a parliamentary inquiry into museums and galleries in June 2016, which reported in February 2019. Its findings were unambiguous: "After much evidence, it seems the decision to relocate the Powerhouse Museum has been based on poor planning and advice, a flawed business case and insufficient community consultation. Nothing so far has demonstrated the necessity or purpose for relocating this institution ..."

The report recommended instead providing funds for renovation and improvements at the current site, and the building of a new museum for Parramatta.

During the last state election in March, the Labor Party committed itself broadly to adopting these recommendations. Unfortunately, the leader of the party then spoiled everything by warning some old-fashioned Labor voters that their houses would soon be purchased by Asians with PhDs. Naively, he imagined that no one with any animosity towards him personally or politically would overhear him in his attempt to bond with the disgruntled battlers.

In his demise, he also took with him what had seemed for a while like a very real possibility that the Powerhouse would be saved. And then, in the middle of July, the NSW government finally issued what was presented as a response to the parliamentary report, but which was in reality a perfunctory dismissal of its findings, an insult to the intelligence of its readers and worse, thuggish in its disregard of expert advice and community consultation.

So now we are back to the dismal prospect that the museum will be moved, at immense expense and risk to its precious collections, to a place where no one will visit it. Why not? Because, as I have pointed out before, tourists with limited time will not go all the way out to Parramatta. And Sydney people, like those in all cities, want to come into the centre of the city for cultural attractions, not go sideways to other suburbs.



Porcelain dish made in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, late Ming dynasty (early 1400s). Reflections of Asia at the Powerhouse Museum.

The whole thing is even more incomprehensible since the redevelopment of the old Goods Line into an urban walkway a few years ago has made the museum more accessible than ever, an easy and pleasant stroll from Central station. The Powerhouse has a lot of potential for improvement and renewal, but it should not leave its present site.

It is also very unlikely that everything currently on exhibition will end up being shown in Parramatta. Some of the displays are enormous, require considerable exhibition space, and are extremely hard to move safely.

One of these is the Boulton-Watt steam engine, with its extraordinary sun-and-planet gear system, which was installed at Whitbread's brewery in London in 1785, three years before the modern history of Australia began with the First Fleet. This engine worked for 102 years before being retired — surely fully amortised by then — in 1887 and becoming part of the museum's collection.

Another massive item nearby is the first train to roll in NSW. It was made in England in 1854, and began by hauling the materials for the construction of the train line itself before the first passenger services were inaugurated in 1855. As the accompanying panels point out, it is extremely rare for any nation to have retained its first locomotive.

But the museum's collections are vast, and comprise minutely small and delicate items as well as colossal mechanical ones. The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, as it is officially called, originated in plans made after the Sydney International Exhibition in 1879, and after various vicissitudes and temporary premises, opened at a handsome new building erected next to the Sydney Technical College in Ultimo in 1893. The timing echoed that of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which had similarly been established as the South Kensington Museum, a generation earlier, in the wake of the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. And like the Victoria and Albert Museum, as it was called from 1899, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences was designed to inspire contemporary crafts with a living museum of techniques and methods as well as a corpus of examples and models.



Japanese Satsuma ware (1800s). Picture: Reflections of Asia at the Powerhouse Museum

One can sense some of that original purpose in this exhibition, which brings together a considerable number of items of Asian art and craft, from ceramics to textiles, from weapons to religious figures. There are, among other things, fine examples of different kinds of ceramics, from folk wares to refined court porcelains, with a variety of forms as well as different decorations and glazes. Many of these, a fraction of the whole collection, have never before been exhibited.

In a manner analogous to the salon hang format adopted for smaller 19th-century pictures at both the NGV and the State Library of NSW, the collections are grouped in a long double-sided glass case in fairly dense clusters by medium and material, and detailed information, including close-up photographs, is provided on screens around the periphery of the exhibition.

The oldest item is a neolithic Chinese pot, some 5000 years old, with a form and decorations that have striking affinities with pots produced in other regions of the Eurasian continent around the same period. More recently, there are fine examples of celadon dishes from the Ming dynasty as well as other classic Chinese forms such as blue and white wares.

An interesting comparison is between two blue and white 14th century dishes, one from the Chinese Ming dynasty, the other from the same period in Vietnam. The latter is more informally and freely painted, the former more precisely, with a linked floral pattern that may reveal some influence of floral designs from further west, in the Persian world, although its rim is painted with an entirely Chinese border of water and waves.

The West — including the near East — admired Chinese ceramics for centuries without being able to emulate them, because we had neither the right kind of clay nor the kiln technology to produce high-fired, vitrified porcelain. But the cultural exchange was not all one way, as we can see with various Western and East Asian influences in forms and patterns.

One of the most interesting cases was that of the famous Chinese blue and white wares, which were originally produced for export into the Persian market, employing cobalt blue imported from Persia; then from the Ming dynasty, the Chinese began to make them for themselves as well, and soon for a massive seaborne export trade to Europe.

Other clusters of objects include lacquer wares, from the deeply carved Chinese lacquer, red with cinnabar, to smooth black Japanese work. Here too the West admired the beauty of the unfamiliar effect without being able to reproduce it, although it was imitated in a process using mixtures of varnish instead of real lacquer, which was known, appropriately, as "japanning".

Folding fans too come from Japan and China, even though these could be more easily copied in Europe. But the fashion began when Portuguese traders started to import them in the 16th century, and they ended up being so completely integrated into modern Western fashions and the accoutrements of a lady, particularly on formal occasions like balls, that if it were not for the Japanese and Chinese decorations painted on them we would tend to forget that they are oriental in origin.

As all these examples suggest, there are many examples of hybridisation here, from Western art imitating Eastern styles to Eastern art made for the Western market and Western tastes; exchanges have existed since antiquity, but were vastly increased by the opening of maritime trade with Europe in the Renaissance, and further accelerated by the new steamships of the 19th century and by the opening of Japan after 1854.

This, indeed, was part of the intention of Min-Jung Kim, the Museum's Asian art curator, who put this exhibition together. In an article on the Powerhouse website, she makes the fascinating observation that the collection looks somehow "foreign" to the eye of an Asian-born curator, ultimately because so many of its pieces had been intentionally made to appeal to Western collectors — who, in an equally fascinating twist, were acquiring these things as authentic tokens of an exotic culture.

As already mentioned, the ostensible reason for collecting these items was as teaching aids and examples of exquisite workmanship in various materials and media, intended to inspire contemporary practitioners and provide them with models. But the attraction of oriental cultures is much deeper than that: the religions and philosophies of the East have long fascinated the West and only grew deeper from the romantic period onwards.

There were many reasons for this. The spread of European trade and imperial dominions meant that far more Europeans had contact with, or even spent long periods of their lives in the East. At the same time, the search for alternative spiritual traditions, especially in the latter part of the 19th century and the early 20th, together with the new understanding that linguistics, history and anthropology had given us of the East, meant that more and more middle-class people collected oriental ceramics, furniture and sculpture as well as carpets and other textiles.

Looking closely at the labels accompanying these works, we can see that many have come into the collection as gifts from such collectors, and were thus originally bought with intentions rather different from those of the original Museum of Applied Arts. A number of precious objects, including a beautiful collection of samurai sword guards, or tsuba, were acquired by bequest from the extensive collection of Christian Rowe Thornett.

In other cases, the relationship with the museum has been developed during the lifetime of the collector, as a kind of philanthropic collaboration: thus Judith Rutherford is both a scholar and collector of Chinese civil servant rank badges from the Qing dynasty, and her husband Ken is a collector of the hat finials that also helped to distinguish the rank of these men at a distance. They have been progressively giving the museum works and will presumably leave more by bequest.

Such philanthropic relations are vital to the development of an institution like this, but are not likely to be enhanced by exiling the museum to a distant suburb.

The indispensable basis for any properly thought out business plan for a museum is to be close and accessible to its audience, to other important cultural institutions, and to its supporters, collectors and benefactors.

Reflections of Asia, Powerhouse Museum, until September 1