

Decolonizing Ethnographic Museums in Central Europe

Japan at the Vienna World Fair 1873 and the legacy of the Siebold collections

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10:00–12:00

Troja 1.12

This presentation will introduce the research project “Decolonizing Ethnographic Museums in Central Europe”, a two-year project funded by the FOND Junior Programme at Charles University in Prague and at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology. The project focuses on the decolonization strategies of three museums in Central Europe, including the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures in Prague, Czech Republic, the Weltmuseum in Vienna, Austria, and the Néprajzi Múzeum (Museum of Ethnography) in Budapest, Hungary. These museums differ in the size of their collections, their exhibition spaces, and the regional and global claims they make for their collections. However, all three museum collections are shaped by the early collecting practices of the Habsburg Empire and have historically grown out of these Habsburg collections and museums. This talk will focus, in particular, on the Japanese collections of the Edo and Meiji periods. Highlighting key moments such as the Vienna World Exhibition of 1873 and the role of the Siebold family in shaping these Japanese collections in Central Europe, the talk will contextualize these collections within a broader historical framework and a general aristocratic taste for Japonism in this

period. Through this exploration, the talk seeks to uncover new narratives and red threads that contribute to the broader project of decolonization within the museum landscape beyond well-known and well-researched collections. In particular, it will focus on how museums deal with the history of these collections, the associated provenance research and their appropriate presentation. The paper concludes by considering prospects for future research, including a possible book project aimed at both academic and wider audiences.

Dr. Melanie Sindelar is an art anthropologist, editor, translator, and coach for early career academics. She received her PhD in art anthropology from the University of Vienna in 2019 with distinction and her MSc degree in social anthropology in 2013 from the University of Oxford. Previously, she held a visiting professorship at the Central European University (CEU) and has been lecturing in anthropology and sociology at Webster University’s Vienna Campus and the University of Vienna. Currently, she works as a FOND Junior postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Charles University, Prague.