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Buying and Selling East Asian Art during the First Decade after the October Revolution in 1917: Museum Purchases in Moscow

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to show how East Asian art was sold and bought in Russia in the first decade after the revolution 1917 by taking the example of the State Museum of Oriental Art (SMOA) in Moscow. The emergence of the SMOA itself was a consequence of political change. East Asian art objects were of interest since the authorities wanted to demonstrate interest by the new state in its Eastern neighbours. The focus of this paper are the forms of sale of East Asian art to the museum during the first decade after the Revolution (up to 1928). Until 1917, Asian art objects were mainly held in private collections. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the collectors of East Asian art were mostly industrialists, such as the brothers Sergei and Pyotr Shchukin. The Revolution of 1917 changed the situation:

the free art market practically ceased to exist under the Bolsheviks, and the field of private collecting and museum development changed overnight. Nevertheless, buying and selling art was still possible in Russia during the first decades after the Revolution. While private and state museums, galleries, and libraries were nationalised, and the most important private collections were declared property of the new state, smaller private collections were available for sale. The article is based on non-published inventory books and other archive documents of the SMOA and of The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). While available sources are limited, due to the lack of published archives, but also the irregular record-keeping typical for post-revolutionary chaos, the museum archive allows a closer look at the process of buying and selling East Asian art objects from a new angle.

At the time of the October Revolution, the history of collecting East Asian art in Russia was about 200 years old. The first Chinese art objects were brought to Russia by caravans from Beijing through Siberia and the Urals, or by sea on ships of the East India Company through Western Europe in the early eighteenth century under the command of Russian

tsar Peter the Great (1672-1725). In the following years, East Asian art objects entered the royal collection as diplomatic gifts or through members of official delegations to China and Japan. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Asian art was collected by diplomats, merchants, researchers, scientists, artists, and travellers in various ways: be it directly in East Asia, at specialised dealers in Russia or on the European market, mainly in Berlin and Paris.

In other words, until 1917, Asian art objects were mainly held in private collections. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the collectors of East Asian art were mostly industrialists, such as the brothers Sergei and Pyotr Shchukin. Later, many of them set up their own museums.

The revolution of 1917 changed the situation: the free art market practically ceased to exist under the Bolsheviks, and the field of private collecting and museum development changed overnight. The administrative structures were thrown into complete confusion, and a number of state bodies that controlled art monuments duplicated each other's responsibilities. The capabilities of the government were unable to turn the tide until the summer of 1918, when cultural objects fell under the jurisdiction of the People's Commissariat of Public Education (Narkompros). Under this structure the Department for Museums and Monuments and Antiquities was established, headed by Trotsky's wife Natalya Trotskaya.

Nevertheless, buying and selling art was still possible in Russia during the first decades after the Revolution. While private and state museums, galleries, and libraries were nationalised, and the most important private collections were declared property of the new state, numerous smaller private collections were available for sale.

Since the main players of the art market had been crushed or fled abroad, and it was forbidden to export art objects without written permission of Russian authorities to any other country from 1918,¹ there were soon almost no art buyers left in Russia except for the state itself. Of course, in such circumstances fair pricing is a moot point. The Bolsheviks' government and the newly formed state museums were buying art through numerous official channels. The work of antique shops was also regulated by the state, with museum authorities often being in a position to seize the most valuable works. Along with antique shops on the market there were the state players – the state museum fund, high profile museums, etc. It is no coincidence that under these circumstances a special museum appeared in Moscow, which first acted as a storage facility for a huge number of works of art from Japan and China.

This paper attempts to show how East Asian art was sold and bought in Russia in the first decade after the revolution 1917 by taking the example of the State Museum of Oriental

1 Decree of the Council of People's Commissars "On the Prohibition of Exporting and Selling Abroad the Objects of Special Artistic and Historical Values" from 19 September 1918.

Art (SMOA)² in Moscow. The emergence of the SMOA itself was a consequence of political change. East Asian art objects were of interest to the political leadership in the context of potential expansion to the East. The authorities wanted to demonstrate interest by the new state in its Eastern neighbours.³ The focus of this paper are the forms of sale of East Asian art to the museum during the first decade after the Revolution (up to 1928). The sources of this study can be divided into several categories:

- 1) Published sources – decrees and resolutions of state bodies. A number of them are included in the appendix.
- 2) Unpublished or partially published documents from the archive of the SMOA itself, such as correspondence with *Glavnauka*, the State Purchasing commission and other organisations, acts of transfer from other museums, organisations or purchasing documents from individuals.
- 3) Archival documents (1918–1928) and inventory books of the SMOA. Unfortunately, in the late 1930s, old inventory books were destroyed in an apparently random act.⁴

The paper is based on non-published inventory books and other archive documents of the SMOA and documents of The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF).⁵ In general, the limitations of the available sources restrict the questions posed in this paper. Issues are not only the lack of published archives, but also the irregular record-keeping typical for post-revolutionary chaos. Nevertheless, the museum managed to accumulate an archive that allows a closer look at the process of buying and selling East Asian art objects from a new angle.

Since not all entries in the collections are registered in the inventory books of SMOA or only mention “transfer from the Museum fund”, the cross-referencing of documents

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- 2 Russian: Государственный музей Востока. The Museum of Oriental Art changed names several times; its first name was *Ars Asiatica*.
 - 3 Later, in 1930s, the arts of China and Japan were used as a propaganda tool, as Japanese prints and Chinese vases were shown in the context of communism. The communist display of East Asian art objects would be a subject for another study. From 1930, ideological factors gained more importance in the Soviet museum development, therefore Russian museology identifies 1930-60 as a separate stage in museum history.
 - 4 According to oral reports from old employees, the documents were burned by the main keeper of the museum collection. This act however coincides with Stalin’s purges and particularly repressions against the museum’s director Fyodor Gogel (1879–1951). It seems possible to suggest a connection between these two events. The new inventory had been started in 1940. Unfortunately, the items were recorded not by the date of acquisition, but arbitrarily, and many collections were broken up as a result. For example, even in the first book there are both items acquired in 1919 and 1938. The systematization of data during this study can provide a more accurate picture of acquisitions, which today remains blurred due to the chaotic keeping of records.
 - 5 Russian: Государственный архив Российской Федерации (ГАРФ).

from different archives will allow a clearer idea of the market activities and acquisition policies of the museum during the investigation period. The data not only permit tracing the development of the museum collection step-by-step but also show the altered situation on the art market itself.

The Revolution of 1917 and its consequences for the art market

Simultaneously with the Revolution, the outflow of works of art abroad began, as documented in a number of studies on the subject of art sales after 1917.⁶ One important figure with regard to East Asian art was the Head of Mission of the Petrograd Red Cross, the American William Boyce Thompson, who bought 300 objects from the Chinese collection of Grand Duke Nikolay Romanov in St Petersburg.⁷ Later, in 1923 even museums were allowed to sell property that was not considered to be of historical and artistic significance through auctions and antique shops.

But while the auction sales were conducted with the approval and under the leadership of the new authorities, the stream of works of art abroad became an undesirable consequence of the aggressive policy of the Bolsheviks in the field of culture. The situation developed rapidly: as early as on 30 October (12 November) 1917 the Winter Palace was declared a state museum, including all its contents formerly owned by the royal family. Losses of objects were vast. Keenly aware of this, the new authorities tried to prevent the looting and damage of art objects and the transfer of collections abroad. To control the situation, the authorities established the People's Commissariat for Education (or Narkompros⁸) on 1 November (14) 1917. This agency then issued numerous decrees relating to culture, including the museum world.

In 1926 Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933), the first Bolshevik Soviet People's Commissar, wrote: "Among the surges of the raging people, often completely ignorant and hungry, straightening their backs with a feeling of inextinguishable vengeance, spurred by a new struggle, new insults – in the midst of all this chaos we managed to preserve our museums where, in addition to art treasures, there were also kept material objects which cost a huge amount of money."⁹

6 The most detailed is the in-depth analysis by Waltraud Bayer, ed., *Verkaufte Kultur. Die sowjetischen Kunst- und Antiquitätenexporte, 1919 - 1938* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2001). Bayer examines the sale of Russian collections which had avoided confiscation during nationalization after 1918 and offers an extensive overview of data on the auctions of numerous art collections, including East Asian art objects.

7 Bayer, *Verkaufte Kultur*, 21.

8 Russian: Наркомпрос. Later, in 1946, the People's Commissariat for Education was transformed into the Ministry of Education.

9 URL: http://libelli.ru/works/why_we/ii.htm. Here and in the following highlighted by author.

During the first years after the Revolution the authorities released document after document related to individual art collections and even individual items, prohibiting by law the export of certain works of art. As early as in 1918 the Decree of the Council of People's Commissars On Registration was issued, concerning the recording and protection of monuments of art and antiquities in the possession of individuals, societies and institutions.¹⁰ The decree stated that: "no expropriation or transfer from one private or public ownership to another (...) can be made without the permission of the Collegium for Museum Affairs and the Protection of Monuments of Art and Antiquities in St Petersburg and Moscow"¹¹ and that "registered monuments, collections and individual items may be forcibly expropriated or transferred to the bodies of state protection".¹² At the end of this document the authorities drew attention to the fact that "those who fail to abide by the decree shall be subject to the full severity of the revolutionary legislation and liable to confiscation of all their property and imprisonment."¹³

This draconian decision to take collections under the "protection" of the government automatically meant that buying, selling and the export of art objects abroad became almost impossible. As a result, many noble families crossed the border without their possessions, abandoning numerous palaces and estates all over the country along with impressive collections of art.

It is no accident that the new government very soon felt the urgent need to create a number of new museums. Behind this decision lay the desire to establish the legal status of confiscated items and avoid the export of cultural property abroad, as well as concern about increasing incidences of looting. Accordingly, nationalised objects were quickly subsumed into a museum context. Consequently, the government was obliged to reorganise the country's entire museum system, taking into account individual museums' specialisation in the art of certain regions (Western European art, Russian art, Oriental art, etc.).

From now on, few avenues remained open to private collectors whose art objects had not yet been seized by the new authorities: 1) a risky export of items abroad, 2) clandestine sales or exchanges, 3) concealment of art objects, 4) depositing objects for storage in the Museum Fund; storing in the antique shops; selling to the National Procurement Commission; or selling directly to the museum.¹⁴

10 Russian: Декрет Совета Народных Комиссаров. О Регистрации, приеме на учет и охранении памятников искусства и старины, находящихся во владении частных лиц, обществ и учреждений (1918).

11 Paragraph 3 of the decree (see appendix).

12 Paragraph 5 of the decree (see appendix). URL: <http://istmat.info/node/31571>.

13 URL: <http://istmat.info/node/31571>.

14 The first option is examined profoundly in Bayer's publications, the second and third are not documented in any way and it seems unlikely that their paths might be tracked at the moment, and the last one may be investigated further based on remaining archival documents.

It was still possible to sell art objects to the state itself or to buy art at the auctions organised by authorities. Antique shops continued to exist but museum staff was authorised to select the most valuable art objects for their collections. For owners, the transfer of items to antique stores was fraught with a number of difficulties. For example, in 1919 the staff of the Museum Affairs Division carried out a survey of antique shops, which were municipalised in Moscow in June 1919. According to the decision of the Moscow City Council any item handed over to these shops for commission or storage had to be returned to the owners. An exception was made for art that was considered especially valuable from an artistic or historical point of view. To survey these stores, a special commission of experts was created which included I.E. Grabar, N.G. Mashkovtsev, A.M. Efros, V.V. Denisov and others. In other words, the authorities could visit any antique shop and seize the most valuable items, often without compensating for the financial losses of the owners. The main buyers had become the state and state-owned museums that emerged as a result of the political and shift in the collectors' scene.

One of the main tasks of the new government was to distribute the nationalised art objects. First, all museums were divided according to their specialisation. Art museums were allocated to a specific group and within this group, became divided by the dominant style and region of art: museums of Russian art, museums of old Western art, new Western art etc. The numbers are impressive: "until 1918 there were 151 museums in the country; in the following years there were founded: 101 museums in 1918, in 1919 – fifty-eight, in 1920 – thirty-eight, in 1921 – twenty-six, in 1922 – nineteen, in 1923 – six. Thus, for the period from 1918 to 1923 more than 250 museums have been established, most of them originated in 1918–1919, when the process of nationalisation of cultural monuments and their concentration in museums was most intensive".¹⁵ Since there was no specific museum of Oriental art at that time, the State Museum of Oriental Art was established in Moscow.

The State Museum of Oriental Art and the formation of its collection

The State Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow can be called coeval with the Revolution: its history began in 1918, the year after the downfall of Russia's last tsar and only a few months after the dramatic and turbulent events of October 1917. It was specifically established to hold Asian art and the first one of its kind in Russia. Part of the newly formed collection came from private collections that had been nationalised and passed into museum possession from The State Museum Fund.¹⁶ Many other art objects were

15 V.K. Gardanov, *Museum Development and Protection of Cultural Monuments in the First Years of Soviet Power*, in *History of museums in the USSR* (Moscow, The Research Institute of Museum Studies, 1957), 29–30.

16 Russian: Государственный (национальный) музейный фонд. The State Museum Fund existed both in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In Moscow it existed from 1918 to 1928; requisitioned works of art had been stored and later distributed there, including the collections of aristocratic families such as Orlov-Davydov, Baryatinsky, Vyazemsky, Golitsyn and others.

acquired by the museum from The State Purchasing Commission,¹⁷ The Museum purchasing commission, antique shops and other organisations. As for the financial side, “the money necessary for the organisation of the Oriental museum was taken from the National Museum Fund”.¹⁸



Fig. 1: Ukiyo-e print by Utagawa Toyokuni I (1811), State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow, inv. no. 1100 I.

Several attempts to dissolve SMOA and its collection were undertaken. In the early 1920s, “in some museum circles the question was raised of the complete destruction of the museum and the division of its collections between interested museums in view of the allegedly scientific unreasonableness of the existence of a special Oriental museum.”¹⁹

Fortunately, the museum authorities were able to argue in favour of SMOA as a unique institution. The head of the museum, Fyodor Gogel (1879-1951), wrote in one of his reports to Glavnauka²⁰ that the museum held “collections of Chinese, Japanese and Persian ceramics, Chinese and Persian bronze and enamel, cloisonné, Persian lacquers, Chinese and Japanese stone objects, Japanese woodblocks, Persian miniature, collection of oriental carpets and fabrics, bone and wood carving etc.”²¹

Perhaps the most impressive department was the Department of East Asian Art. It received about ten thousand art objects until 1940, within just a few decades. How did it

17 Russian: Государственная Закупочная Комиссия (ГЭК).

18 GARF. F. 2306. Op. 28. D. 10. L. 56.

19 GMV. Kor. 1. Ed.hr. 3. L. 2a. On 19 April 1924 the head of the museum, Fyodor Gogel (1879–1951) wrote to Natalya Trotskaya (1882–1962) who was the head of the Museum Department of *Narkompros* from 1918 to 1928: “For your absence, the museum of *Ars Asiatica* is placed in a very difficult situation, why we appeal to your help and protection. On the part of other museums, claims were made for the collection of *Ars Asiatica*. The Armory Chamber desires fabrics, carpets, Chinese and Japanese Buddhist and ritual bronzes; Museum of porcelain – ceramics, Museum of furniture – wooden sculpture (Japan, XV century). [...] I ask permission to give you a personal report” (GMV. Kor. 1. Ed.hr. 2. L. 1).

20 Russian: Главнаука. *Glavnauka*, Central Administration for Scientific, Scholarly-Artistic, and Museum Institutions was an administrative body that existed from 1922 to September 1933 as part of the People's Commissariat for Education (*Narkompros*); in 1930 it was changed to the Scholarly Sector.

21 GMV. Kor. 1. Ed.hr. 1. L. 16a-b.

come about that a museum, which did not exist yet in 1917, managed to build its holdings so fast?

Documentation kept in the SMOA and other archives shows that along with transfers and gifts there were numerous purchases. So far, no studies based on the analysis of concrete quantitative data were undertaken. To some extent this is due to the inaccessibility of museum archives. An additional element of complexity for the study is created by the handwritten records in Russian. However, the biggest problem is due to irregular record keeping. For example, the inventory book starts with number 1 I (Plate. China. Tenth–Twelfth cent. transferred from the Stroganov School for Technical Drawing in 1918), but even museum number 5 I (The figure of a horse. China. Eighth century) was purchased by [or FROM??] V.Kh. Davydova in 1938. In addition, many data are written by hand into empty fields next to existing inventory records, usually in connection with the transfer of a previously recorded museum item (fig. 2). For this study, quantitative data was collected for the first time. The analysis is based on more than 3,500 entries in the inventory books. The following parameters were analysed and tabulated:

1. Inventory number.
2. Type of the object according to inventory number (plate, sculpture, vase etc.).
3. Country of origin (Japan, China²²).
4. Type of acquisition (transfer from Museum Fund or other organisations; purchase; gift; exchange).
5. Source of acquisition (organisation, individual).
6. Any information about the previous owner (yes/no).
7. Name of previous owner.
8. Date of acquisition.

By analysing the collected data, it was possible to obtain a first impression of the situation in the art market regarding East Asian art objects immediately after the Revolution. The analysis of the inventory book entries reveals that from 1918 to 1928 the museum received about 2,421 art objects that originated in China and Japan, with two peaks in 1919 and 1926.

A huge part of the acquisitions for the newly formed museum was the transfer of Asian art items from existing museums, as well as transfers from the storages of the State

22 Surprisingly, no Korean art objects came into the possession of the museum at that time.

Museum Fund in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.²³ These storage facilities held all works of art found in abandoned and requisitioned mansions and manors, including valuable paintings and objects of decorative and applied art that formerly decorated rich private residences.²⁴ The huge number of effectively confiscated art works was kept without any reference to the previous owners, which makes it hard to trace the provenance of these objects.



Fig. 2: Ukiyo-e print by Kitagawa Utamaro (19th Century), State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow, inv. no. 1101 I.

The analysis of SMOA collection shows that only around 35% of museum objects that came into the museum's possession were accompanied by any information on their provenance. This information is mostly obtained through the archival material of the museum. Unfortunately, not all items have object marks. In cases where marks exist, it's usually the mark of other institutions, not of the owner (with the exception of the Shchukin collection). Further examination of marks and work in archives of other institutions will be helpful in future research.

23 GMV. Kor. 1. Ed.hr. 1. L. 16a-b.

24 "The workers of the National Museum Fund, organized under the People's Commissariat of Education, were barely able to cope with the huge amount of art treasures that came to be at their disposal. For new things, the spacious rooms of the English Club, Zubalov's house, Hirschman's and Berg's mansions were occupied, but they were not enough" (Y. Osnos, October Revolution and monuments of art, in *Art*, no. 6, 1940, 66).

Since items purchased from private individuals had been one of the main sources of accumulating a collection during the first years of the new museum,²⁵ one of the primary objectives of the study was to track how many objects were not distributed by the Commission of the Museum Fund but acquired from private collectors or dealers.

Among those who offered art objects for purchase were the famous avant-garde painter and member of the Jack of Diamonds group Pyotr Konchalovsky (1876–1956),²⁶ the Soviet painter Georgy Nissky (1903–1987),²⁷ and the painter and art historian Igor Grabar (1871–1960). All were loyal to the new state. However, the offers did not always lead to successful purchases. On 13 January 1919, the Collegium considered the acquisition of the collection of Japanese prints by I.E. Grabar, and later on the purchase of 145 sheets from V.P. Muratov for 4,000 rubles, nine items from Vladimir Shaposhnikov for 7,200 rubles, twenty-five from Andreev for 6,000 rubles, eleven from the artist N.G. Osmolovsky for 6,000 rubles, twenty items from E.V. Kipriyanova for 5,000 rubles etc. Yet none of these names are found in the inventory books of the museum from 1918 to 1928. This means that none of these purchases took place at that time. Igor Grabar's collection was later received by the museum after the artist's death in 1960.

Nevertheless the study shows that every fifth object (18%) was purchased from individuals. In particular this applies to the Japanese woodblock prints.²⁸ The museum acquired a number of Japanese colour prints in small quantities, sometimes even in separate sheets, which allowed the Museum to form a significant and systematically selected collection of Japanese colour prints.²⁹ Later in 1920, the museum purchased several collections of Japanese prints without recording artist names (938–992 I, 1001–1002, 1023–1067 I, 1207–1214 I). Some of these Japanese woodblocks were bought from the owners B.A. Pavlovskiy (1230–1241 I), F.L. Mishukov (1242–1229 I), I. Ilyin (1250–1259 I), M.S. Sergeev

25 The newspaper *Izvestia* wrote about the opening of the new museum: “On 22 September, the first Russian Museum of Oriental Art (Ars Asiatica [during the first decades the museum changed names several times] was opened. The museum has two departments – the Far East (China, Japan, Siam) and the Middle East (Persia, Caucasus, Central Asia). The collection included items from Moscow museums and purchases from private individuals. The museum includes: Chinese, Japanese and Persian ceramics, Persian carpets, Central Asian, Caucasian and Chinese, Persian and Chinese fabrics, Persian miniatures, Japanese woodcuts, Chinese paintings, etc. The museum is temporarily located in two museums of the Historical Museum and was opened in 1919 on Sundays from eleven to three o'clock.” (Museum of the Eastern Art, in *Izvestia*, 24 September 1919, 212 (764), 2).

26 The Russian painter Pyotr Petrovich Konchalovsky (1876–1956) was one of the founders of the Jack of Diamonds group that formed the beginning of the Russian Avant-garde. Due to the publishing business of his father he came to know famous Russian painters – Surikov, Repin, Vasnetsov, Serov, Vrubel, Levitan, etc. He had frequently visited Europe and probably bought Japanese woodblock prints in France.

27 Georgy Grigoryevich Nysskii (1903–1987) was a Soviet painter and winner of the State Stalin Prize (1951). In his youth, he was close to the members of the artistic movement *Mir Iskusstva*.

28 This number may increase with further investigations, because sometimes the only information is that the art object came into possession of the Museum fund but museum documents do not indicate if it was confiscated or bought from the owner. However, the collected information is already sufficient to conclude that opportunities to sell and buy art in the new state still remained but the forms of deals were subject to significant changes due to the political situation.

29 GMV. Kor. 1. Ed. hr. 3. L. 16.

(1261–1265 I), M.N. Loseva (1266–12721), Gorsky (1273–1277 I), Osenol (1283–1290 I), A.V. Lidninskaya (1292–1300 I), and others.

In the documents of The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF)³⁰ it is noted that the State Museum Fund bought a number of items from the collection of Myslina (571–612 I) for 10,600 rubles, from A.K. Fabergé³¹ (539–570 I, 644–648 I) for 11,500 rubles, and two Turkmen and one Chinese carpet, bronze sculpture, a samurai sword and “fifty books on art, history and way of life of the East and a folder with colour reproductions of carpets of the Winter Palace and Eastern ceramics” for 20,000 rubles.³²



Fig. 3: Chinese new year print (19th Century), State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow; inv. no. 1091 I.

From the moment of its foundation, a major acquisition channel was the Purchasing Commission of the Museum Fund. 75% of the collection was acquired through transfer from the Museum Fund to SMOA. The objects began to be purchased in October 1918 through the Collegium on Museum Affairs and Preservation of Artistic and Historical Monuments, established in November 1917 as a part of *Narkompros*. In January 1919 for example, the Collegium considered “the acquisition of a Chinese vase from the Music

30 Russian: Государственный архив Российской Федерации (ГАРФ).

31 Agathon Fabergé (1876–1951). Son of the Russian jeweller Peter Carl Fabergé, best known for the famous Fabergé eggs. Since 1898 Agathon Fabergé had been expert of the Diamond Room of the Winter Palace, an appraiser of His Imperial Majesty. He collected Chinese and Japanese objects, including carpets, porcelain, jadeite, Buddha statues, vases, prints, paintings, Japanese *tsuba*, *netsuke*, and in general preferred East Asian art objects (V.V. Skurlov, Fabergé and St. Petersburg jewellers, in *Neva* [1997], 16–18). From 1922 to 1924 Agathon Fabergé was authorized by *Gokhran* Petrograd and combined his position with the sale of antiques. As a result of these activities, Fabergé was convicted and dismissed from his post. In 1927, he and his wife left Russia over the frozen Gulf of Finland. Later he lived in Helsinki on the sale of antiques.

32 GARF. F. 2306. Op. 28. D. 12. L. 24,25, 33, 36; GMV. Kor. 1. Ed.hr. 1. L. 186; Ed.hr. 3.

Department of Proletcult”³³ and authorised the issuance of “1000 rubles for the purchase of objects for the Museum of the East”.³⁴

From June 1919 on, the head of SMOA Fyodor Gogel was a member of the Collegium³⁵ and the museum benefited through advantages in the purchase and distribution of art objects: “Such an intensive growth of the Museum’s collections is explained by a firm principled line taken in relation to its acquisitions. With all the acquisitions of the monuments of the material culture of the East, as well as when issuing from the Museum Fund and in general with all the distribution of Oriental objects between the Museums, the priority was given to our Museum. Other museums were given the opportunity to take their pick only after the selection of oriental objects by the Museum of the Arts of the East, had been made.”³⁶ The number of acquisitions increased enormously in the following years. As a consequence SMOA’S own museum purchasing commission was created in December 1920.³⁷

In the years between 1918 and 1928, SMOA reported to build up an East Asian collection of 2,251 registered objects.³⁸ According to a calculation of 5 December 1928, they consisted of the following:

33 Part of the People’s Commissariat for Education, Russian: Пролеткульт.

34 GARF. F. 2306. Op. 28. D. 9. L. 127a, 128a, 137a, 154a, 169a.

35 Stated in a resolution from 20 June 1919 by the Collegium on Museum Affairs: “To consider the main composition of the Purchasing Commission as follows: Grabar I.E., Muratov P.P., Mashkovtsev N.G. and Trapeznikov T.G. On questions of applied art, Oriental and others, invite experts with the right to a decisive vote (Bartam N.D., Gogel F.V., Popov M.M., etc.). The day of the meetings of the Purchasing Committee is Thursday” (GARF. F. 2306. Op. 28. D. 9. Protocol No. 133. L. 191a).

36 GMV. Kor. 1. Ed. hr. 3. L. 1a-b; Kor. 3. Ed.hr. 74. L. 61.

37 The meeting of the museum’s Collegium was held on 8 December 1920, for the minutes see appendix (2) at the end of this article. The foundation of the commission was officially accepted by the head of Museum Department of Narkompros, Natalia Trotskaya, on 18 February 1921: “According to the decision of the Board of ODMOPIS Narkompros on 15 February this year. (Minutes No. 7), the Ars Asiatica Museum was given the right to have a Purchasing Commission for the production of independent purchases; copies of the Commission’s protocols should be sent to the Central Purchase Commission of the Department” (OUKHK. 1918-25. D. 1. L. 61). The documents from 1923 show that the museum purchasing commission quickly faced a shortage of funds: “In view of the difficult financial situation there can be no question of a significant and systematic replenishment of the Museum. The amount requested assumes only cases of emergency, when it is possible to purchase things of exceptional value and at a low price, cases that can never happen again. In anticipation of such opportunities, unfortunately, several times overlooked by the Museum for lack of funds, the amount requested is 2,000 rubles. This amount will give an opportunity to buy things of high museum significance that periodically come up on the market and can go abroad illegally, where they are valued many times more than 2,000 rubles.” The requested money was allocated to the museum, but it seems they were not spent for reasons unknown.

38 GMV. Cor. 1. Ed. hr. 23. L. 20. However, research for this article shows that the museum received about 2,421 objects. This may be due to the difference caused by changes in the inventory books being rewritten in 1940. Some items could be recorded as earlier acquisitions or, more likely, the counting system may have changed so that individual parts of the objects (for example vessel caps) could be counted not as one but as several objects.

Porcelain, ceramics (vases, bowls, dishes, figures, etc.)	516
Bronze and other metals (household items	–
bowls, figures and weapons)	251
Painting on paper and silk	37
Japanese prints	614
Bone carving – three items and wood	157
Varnishes (boxes, vases, cups, boxes, etc.)	56
Cloisonné (vases, dishes, shapes, etc.)	66
Enamel – fifty. Carved stone	71
Turkestan carpets	19
Chinese and Japanese fabrics	55
Different materials (glass, horn, etc.)	15

By 1923, the Russian market for East Asian art had become very limited. Objects from private collections had been either exported and hidden or already nationalised or sold. The shift from a free to a regulated market seems to have been accomplished. However, SMOA was still keen to expand its East Asian collection “in various directions, mainly in the field of eastern ceramics, all early periods, as well as in Persian miniature, Japanese engraving, antique carpets and fabrics (...) [and] ancient Chinese painting”.³⁹ To solve the problem of a lack of art objects on the market, SMOA sometimes took to unorthodox routes: “For the creation of the Eastern Museum we have our own special way; this, of course, is not the buying up of eastern items at auctions of the Old and New Worlds, but an appeal to our plenipotentiaries and trade missions, which, thanks to the sympathies of the Eastern peoples to the USSR, will be able to obtain for us many items of oriental art”.⁴⁰ Another atypical way to grow the collection were exchanges with individual citizens who were happy to barter for desirable objects of furnishing. For example, in 1923 a Chinese dish from the 1730s-1740s (1837 I) and a Chinese vase from the eighteenth

39 GMV. Kor. 1. Ed.hr. 1 L. 21a-b.

40 Ya. A. Tugendholt, We organize the Museum of the East (On the Opening of the Exhibition of Eastern Fine arts). in *Izvestia*, 4 June 1924, no. 126 (2161). 5.

century (1842 I) were received by the museum in exchange for carpets 521 II and 797 II. Similar cases took place later.

From the beginning of 1930s purchasing became quite a risky activity, as it attracted unwanted attention. On 6 May 1930 the “Calendar schedule of purges in the central institutions of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic” had been approved at a meeting of the Collegium of Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate. SMOA had been scheduled for inspection in this document for 1930-1931.⁴¹

The next wave of acquisitions happened between 1935–1937, in the context of the repressions of Joseph Stalin. This topic is subject to further research, and quantitative analysis of museum items’ data can provide a source of new information on this difficult time in the history of Soviet Russia.

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Appendix 1

Decree of the Council of People’s Commissars “On Registration, recording and protection of monuments of art and antiquities in the possession of individuals, societies and institutions”⁴²

“In order to protect, study and possibly more fully acquaint the broad masses of the population with the treasures of art and antiquities located in Russia, the Council of People’s Commissars decides:

1) To make the first state registration of all monuments and objects of art and antiquity, both in the form of whole collections and individual items, in whomsoever’s possession they are.

41 GARE. F. 406. Op. 1. D. 965. Protocol no. 26. p. 2. l. 254. The director of the museum, Fyodor Gogol, was mainly under suspicion as demonstrated in his personnel file from 1930: “Copy. Not subject to disclosure. TRANSCRIPT. From the characteristics of the Uchraspred of Narkompros given to Deputy Director of the Museum of Oriental Cultures. GOGEL F.V. Engineer-tracker. Withheld that information. He is engaged in haggling antiques. Must be replaced. The transcript is correct: The accountant of the Narkompros’s Uchraspred / Andreeva / P / 1930.” The museum authorities had already pointed out that Gogel is “one of the few experts, specialist in the material culture of the East and, as such, has been working for a number of years, doing scientific research for the Glavnauka’s Commission for Control of Export Abroad”. Later Gogol was purged but was able to continue working in the museum “due to the lack of staff” (see: GMV. Cor. 3. Ed Hr. 59. L. 32).

42 Russian: Декрет Совета Народных Комиссаров. О Регистрации, приеме на учет и охранении памятников искусства и старины, находящихся во владении частных лиц, обществ и учреждений (1918).

2) To take into account the monuments, collections of art and antiquities that are in the possession of societies, institutions and private individuals, as well as individual items of great scientific, historical or artistic significance.

3) No expropriation or transfer from one private or public ownership to another, as well as movement, repair, amendment or alteration of monuments, collections and individual art objects and antiquities that are taken into account cannot be made without the permission of the Collegium for Museum Affairs and the Protection of Monuments of art and Antiquities in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

4) Owners of registered objects or collections are assisted in their protection and issued special protection letters.

5) Registered monuments, collections and individual items may be forcibly expropriated or transferred to the bodies of state protection if their safety is in danger caused by neglect of owners, or because it is impossible for owners to take the necessary security measures, or in cases of non-compliance by owners of storage rules.”⁴³

Appendix 2

Meeting minute of the Collegium in order to create SMOA’s Purchase Commission, 8 December 1920.

“Gogel F.V. presided. Presented: Nekrasov K.F. [from the Museum Department of Glavnauka], Popov M.M., Shulga N.A. and Borichevsky E.I.

Heard: 1. On the desirability of education at the Museum of the Purchasing Commission.

Resolved: Taking into account that the purchase through the Purchasing Commission of the Department of Museums and Monuments of Art and Antiquities is technically inconvenient because this Commission can consider the proposals made to the museum only in the order of the queue, and also in view of the need to deliver the items to the museum that under the existing conditions of transport presents great difficulties and threatens to damage the objects, and in view of the agreement held on this issue with the senior inspector Nikolsky V.A., it was decided on the establishment of the Museum’s Purchase Commission consisting of Gogel F.V., Nekrasov K.F., Popov M.M.”⁴⁴

43 URL: <http://istmat.info/node/31571>.

44 GARF. F. 2307. Op. 3. D. 205. L. 24