

The “Stunde Null (Zero Hour)” for Japanese Art History in Germany

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ABSTRACT

When the Nazi regime collapsed and the World War II finally ended in May 1945, the life of people in Germany was completely devastated. It was the time to begin the reconstruction from zero, so-called “Stunde Null (Zero Hour)”, and the research base for Japanese art history was no exception. This paper examines the condition of Japanese art history in Germany in the immediate post-war period and the course of its recovery.

As the interest in Japanese art grew since the end of 19th century, the research of art history has been developed in Germany, and Berlin was a major research hub. However, the East-Asian Art Collection in Berlin was badly damaged from war and substantially confiscated by the Soviet military after the war ended. The Japanese art historians in Germany lost their research environment, then re-established in small steps. For example, Dietrich Seckel established a department for East Asian art history at Heidelberg University in 1948. Also, the East Asian painting exhibition in Celle, 1950 displayed a small part of the East-Asian Art Collection, which was stored in a salt mine during the wartime.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been one and a half centuries since the cultural exchange between Germany and Japan officially started. In the field of art, the interest in Japanese art grew since the end of 19th century in Germany. Then the rich art market, the ideal research environment as well as a global network including art historians in Japan had been developed especially in Berlin. Toward its steady development, recent research well examined how their human networks contributed to the two countries' cultural politics from the latter half of the 1930s to the end of World War II¹. For example, fine art exhibition such as the “Old Japanese Art Exhibition (Ausstellung Altjapanischer Kunst)” in Berlin 1939 played a significant role as a tool for propaganda. The key figure was Otto Kummel (1874-1952), an East Asian art historian and the Director General of the National Museums in Berlin. He established the East-Asian Art Collection (Ostasiatische Kunstsammlung), a research base for the East Asian art history and also worked for the Nazis. By the end of war, what he enthusiastically established was absolutely demolished by the hostile countries. The permanent gallery of the collection was bombed and badly damaged on February 3rd 1945. The art collection was seized by the Soviet military, then the most of them are stored still in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg to date².

¹ cf. Japanisch-Deutsches Zentrum Berlin, 1997, *Berlin-Tôkyô im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Springer, Yasumatsu Miyuki, 2016, *Nazi Germany and the Art of Imperial Japan*, Yoshikawa Kobunkan.

² cf. Willibald Vait, 2001, Ein erster Besuch: Die Sammlung des Museums für Ostasiatisches Kunst Berlin in der Eremitage in St. Petersburg, *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift* 2, 35-40.

After Kümmel faded from the limelight, there was no means of continuing the research of Japanese art history in Germany. As the diplomatic relations between Japan and West Germany begun in 1952, the cultural exchange recovered by degrees and their systematic development especially after 1960s has been well recognized. However, the chaotic situation in the immediate postwar period remains unconsidered. With the memory of golden age, how did Japanese art circles re-established the research bases in Germany from scratch?

2. STUNDE NULL

In Germany, the moment when the World War II ended is often called “Stunde Null (Zero Hour)” indicating the starting point of reconstruction. Leopold Reidemeister (1900-1987), curator of the East-Asian Art Collection and Kümmel’s co-worker, could not come back to Berlin because neither place to work nor art collection was remained³. Therefore, he moved to Köln to work at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum. The occupation authorities carried the process of denazification (Entnazifizierung) to rid the German society of the Nazis-ideology, so persons who had a relationship to the Nazi-party removed from official or important positions. As a result, many curators and directors were dismissed, although the denazification hearing was not held in the case of Reidemeister. He then worked devotedly for the “Wiedergutmachung”, the reparations of the modern art which had been persecuted by Nazis during the war.

2.1 Dietrich Seckel in Heidelberg

Reidemeister left the field of East Asian art, but a new member soon joined from Japan. Dietrich Seckel (1910-2007) received his doctor’s degree in German studies, then lived in Japan from 1936 to 1947 as German teacher and started researching Japanese art history there⁴. During his eager research on *emaki* or Buddhist art, he interacted with Yashiro Yukio (1890-1975), Yamada Chisaburo (1908-1984) and other famous scholars⁵. Surprisingly, he also made the acquaintance of art historian from the US such as Sherman Lee (1918–2008) and Langdon Warner (1881–1955) right after the war. In his memoir, Seckel noted that those Americans were helpful and friendly although he might be not much acceptable for them politically⁶.

In 1947, almost all Germans who were living in Japan were repatriated. Seckel was released after three weeks screening and started to work at public library in Stuttgart (Württembergischen Landesbibliothek). His first work as Japanese art historian in Germany was editing catalog for the exhibition of Japanese woodblock prints and illustrated books in

³ cf. Leopold Reidemeister, 1980, Rückblick: 80. Geburtstag Leopold Reidemeisters, *Jahrbuch Preußischer Kulturbesitz* Bd.XVII, 27-31.

⁴ A series of photography took by Seckel (1936-1942) is digitalized and published on the website of Heidelberg University Library: http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/helios/digi/heidicon_seckel_archiv.html. See also Anne-Laure Bodin, 2016, *Japan durch die Augen eines deutschen Kunsthistorikers gesehen*, Master thesis (Heidelberg University).

⁵ cf. Dietrich Seckel, 1981, *Schriften-Verzeichnis mit einem autobiographischen Essay Mein Weg zur Kunst Ostasiens*, Haag u. Herchen.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

1948⁷. Soon he got to know some East Asian art historian such as Werner Speiser (1908-1965) and Rose Hempel (1920-2009), who were Kümmel's pupils. Then he finished his habilitation at Institute of Art History in Heidelberg University. The external examiners of his thesis were Wilhelm Gundert (1880-1971), an expert of Japanese and Buddhist Studies, and Otto Kümmel. It indicates that Seckel met Kümmel and his circles for the first time only after the golden age, but he managed to re-establish the research base for Japanese art history with their support. Although he was the only person at the department (Ostasiatische Abteilung) when he started teaching at Heidelberg University in 1948, the member of faculty steadily increased and formed an Institute of East Asian Art in 1965. Seckel recalled: "when I started, there was neither book nor photographic slide"⁸. Now the institute is one of the biggest research center of East Asian art history in Europe.

2.2 Display of Japanese Art

The East-Asian Art Collection in Berlin has obtained permanent gallery at the former Applied Art Museum (now Martin-Gropius-Bau) in 1924 designed by Kümmel. During the war, the collection was stored firstly in basement of the building, then moved to the "Zoo flak tower" in 1943. A part of it was sheltered in a salt mine in the west of Germany and transported by British army to Celle and Wiesbaden after the war. Consisted of Chinese and Japanese scroll paintings, the Celle part had an opportunity to display in summer 1950 as the exhibition "Ein Jahrtausend Ostasiatischer Malerei (One thousand years of East Asian Painting)" at Celle Castle (Figure 1)⁹.



Figure 1: Exh. Catalog (Celle)



Figure 2: Exh. Catalog (Berlin)

According to the foreword of catalog, the exhibition was curated by Kümmel¹⁰. Though retired from his official job, the learned chose the items to display, designed the installation and edited the catalog. It was the last work in his career as a result. The introduction he wrote for the catalog explaining Chinese and Japanese paintings is six pages long. The exhibition with same contents was also held at Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin from September 1951 to March 1952 (Figure 2)¹¹. Despite the fact that the exhibition spaces in Celle Castle and

⁷ The exhibition "Ostasiatische Graphik" (Sammlung Hahn) was held at Tübinger Kunstgebäude in 1948.

⁸ Seckel, 1981, *op.cit.*, 105.

⁹ Ehemals Staatliche Museen Berlin, 1953, *Die Berliner Museen*, Gebrüder Mann, 141.

¹⁰ Robert Schmidt, 1950, Vorwort, *Ein Jahrtausend Ostasiatischer Malerei*, Schloss Celle, 3.

¹¹ The exhibition in Berlin was entitled: Ein Jahrtausend Ostasiatischer Malerei: Meisterwerke aus der Ostasiatischen Kunstabteilung der Berliner Museen.

Charlottenburg Palace were not suitable for displaying works of East Asian art, the museum staff strongly promoted to present the objects remained in West Germany to the public. Also, 300 objects stored in the mine returned to the collection (the Museum of East Asian Art) until 1957. The museum nevertheless had to wait to acquire its own permanent gallery in Dahlem until 1970.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Through the study of “Stunde Null”, it is determined what the researchers established until 1945 and their loss after the war. Moreover, the research base or the temporary exhibition space created in the chaotic period can be seen as a researcher’s demand for academic open space. As we saw in the cases of Seckel and the painting exhibition, it is obvious that Otto Kümmel’s role and influence were huge even after the war. Without his contribution, the Japanese art history in Germany could never be successful and continue to the present day.

Due to the lack of research resources, the situation in East Germany is yet to be investigated. It is inferable that the museum and researchers relate to Japanese art affected by the Cold War significantly.

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