THE EAST ASIA Collection in the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, includes objects from China, Japan, Mongolia and Korea, and totals approximately 5000 artefacts. It is a part of the museum’s ethnographic collection of circa 50,000 objects from around the world. The East Asia Collection has not been systematically catalogued in recent times, and there are many groups and singular objects that deserve further research. In this article, I will briefly present the East Asia Collection, drawing attention to several key acquisitions and the collectors behind them, from the establishment of the museum in the 1850s to the Second World War (1).

I will begin with a few words about the foundation of the Ethnographic Museum to which the East Asia Collection belongs. The Ethnographic Museum in Christiania (renamed Oslo in 1925) opened to the public in 1857, but was formally established as a university museum three years before. Every Saturday, between one and two o’clock, visitors could enter the new monumental university building near the Royal Palace, climb the stairs to the second floor, walk through the mineralogical hall and climb the narrow and dark backstairs to the attic. The cold of the small unheated rooms in the winter and the heat of the summer did not hinder visitors, of all ages and social classes, from visiting the exhibition of nearly 200 strange and foreign objects.

The founding of the museum was, in fact, connected to the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851. When the exhibition was over, the marvellous building was moved to Sydenham and reopened with a series of museum galleries. In 1852, Robert G. Latham, the appointed leader of the ethnological department, contacted a friend in Norway, Ludvig K. Daa (1809–1877), headmaster at Christiania Cathedral School, and asked his help to organise an exchange between ethnographers from around the world and artefacts from the Sami peoples of the North. While collecting the Sami material, Daa made sure to obtain pairs for a future museum in Christiania. In Copenhagen, the director of the Royal Ethnographic Museum assisted Daa in obtaining artefacts from Greenland and the Far East. The Ethnographic Museum in Christiania was thus established with these three collections and a handful of gifts.

How could a small country like Norway continue collect-
Becoming museum director in 1862, Daa initiated correspondence with museums and consulates abroad, and reached out to the Norwegian seafarers’ unions to encourage sailors to bring artefacts back home. The museum was initially dependent on donations, so the collections were, as with many ethnographic museums established in the 19th century, not created via a systematic, scientific methodology, but more randomly by amateurs, with purchases made when opportunities arose or to fill gaps in the collections. This is very much reflected in the museum’s East Asian Collection today.

In addition, the East Asian Collection suffered the same fate as similar collections in other ethnographic museums. Should the collection reflect the daily lives of the people in a particular culture, or should it be an art collection? This unclear identity is illustrated by the wonderful and confusing mixture of carpentry tools, sandals, arrowheads, porcelains, ivory, cloisonné, wooden idols, silk embroidery and lacquer wares, and how some collectors split their donations between the Museum of Decorative Arts and Ethnographic Museum in Christiania. The East Asian Collection, therefore, displays a combination of simple and worn utilitarian objects for daily use—so-called ethnographica—and precious objets d’art, more commonly found in museums focusing on fine art, the decorative arts or East Asia.

In the beginning

In the first decade of the museum’s existence, East Asia was represented by only a handful of Chinese and Japanese objects. Then, in 1864, the situation started to change when Daa went on a tour of Europe to purchase objects for the budding museum collection. In London, he bought two Chinese jackets, two swords, and a complete set of samurai armour, which was then rather rare, as it was still in widespread use (four years before the end of the shogunate, or era of military rule). In Amsterdam, he bought various artefacts, of which two Blanc de Chine Guanyin statues and two Chinese ceramic figures with nodding heads (2) are of note. Daa’s extensive correspondence with Norwegian diplomats also bore fruit, and Thorvald Egidius, the Swedish-Norwegian consul general in Amsterdam, donated some forty Japanese objects, half of them good examples of newly produced basketry (3).

In Paris, the collection of the deceased Egyptologist, Edme-Francois Jomard, one of the editors of the renowned work, Description de L’Égypte, was sold at auction. A representative of the museum bought 150 Oriental artefacts at the event, about thirty of which came from India, Indonesia and the Philippines, with the rest from China and Japan. Among the Japanese artefacts were objects for daily use, such as sandals, games, calligraphy brushes and temple candles. The Chinese objects were of a similar nature, with one exception: a number of clay figurines. Approximately twenty-five figures, in a mixture of styles, depict opera performers, scholars and normal people in everyday life situa-

1The selection of objects and photographs has been influenced by large parts of the collection being unavailable due to rebuilding of the storage facility.

2The Ethnographic Museum is today part of the Museum of Cultural History.
tions (see the article by Linn A. Christiansen). A shipment of eighteen Chinese artefacts also arrived from Hong Kong, sent by Consul Ludwig Wiese. The gift comprised hats, shoes, musical instruments and a raincoat made of straw. Together, these acquisitions, dating to 1864, formed the basis of the East Asia Collection.

During the next two decades, the museum acquired mostly single objects or collections of fewer than ten pieces. One appraised gift came from Ludwig G. Larsen, a ship captain, in 1875. It is described on a catalogue card as "a Chinese Mandarin festive costume, seized in the last war in 1847, in Whampoa, when the British conquered the Boscas-Tigris fortresses". The dark blue silk robe is embroidered with dragons among flowers, bats, Buddhist jewels and fungi, and was the first of its kind in the museum. Another valuable acquisition comprised five Japanese Noh masks, purchased in London the same year, probably by Daa (4).

In 1877, Daa passed away and was succeeded by Yngvar Nielsen (1843–1916), who remained in this position until his death. In the summer of 1878, Nielsen bought twenty-nine Japanese artefacts from a Norwegian sailor, Johannes Østensen. Among them were drawings on cloth, some lacquerware, and a large dish and five plates made of tortoiseshell decorated with gold lacquer (5). Although not a substantial acquisition in size, it is worthy of mention for what might have been. Østensen had scheduled a number of fishing expeditions to the waters north of Japan, in particular the Kuril Islands, where he planned to collect for the museum. He reached Japan, but the museum later received the sad news that he had drowned on his very first expedition.

**Oliver Smith's collection**

In September 1884, a large ship sailed into the harbour of Kobe, Japan. The steam frigate, *Vanadis*, was on a world tour and had reached Japan after crossing the Pacific Ocean. On board was the twenty-five year old Prince Oscar Bernadotte, second son to King Oscar II of the Swedish-Norwegian union. Together with the ethnographer, Hjalmar Stolpe, the prince visited the home of a Norwegian sailor called Oliver Smith (1843–1888). Employed as a Japan coast and inland sea pilot for the Peninsular and Oriental Steamship Co., Smith had gathered a large collection of Japanese artefacts. During the royal visit, the prince and his entourage admired his collection which was well known in Japan. The visit may have motivated Smith to donate to his home country, because that winter and the following year, he sent approximately 430 artefacts to the museum.

The first shipment contained 146 tsuba, each of which was 100 years old or more at the time, "interesting and valuable examples of Japanese metal work", according to a book written by Yngvar Nielsen on the history of the museum (6). There were also two complete sets of samurai armour, one for a man, one for a boy, and a helmet used by the firing squad. There were swords and daggers, one said to be more than 400 years old at the time of acquisition. The next two shipments, in 1884–1885, included some superb Nabeshima porcelain (7), and three gilt wooden Buddha figures, between 50 and 74 cm tall. A fourth shipment of more than 200 artefacts arrived in 1886, mostly comprising porcelain and other types of ceramic wares.
Smith apparently wished to show different categories of decorated porcelain wares as many kinds are represented, several destined for the European market. These included Imari ware, celadons, underglaze blue with motifs outlined in gold, and dark blue enamelled dishes patterned with gold. There were also many forms of teaware. His collection of about sixty pieces includes vessels from a number of potters and kilns, discernible by the variation of clay and glazes. This rich collection of teacups, bowls and jugs was one of the earliest of its kind to have been sent to Europe, and displays a wide range of high quality ceramic wares\(^5\) (8, 9, 10). A final batch was dispatched by Smith from Japan in 1886. However, one can only wonder what it contained, as the ship sank and the cargo became sunken treasure somewhere between Kobe and Christiania. In 1887, the museum received a final letter from Smith, who wrote that “I am now very poor”. He died the following year at the age of forty-five. Museum director Nielsen declared that through Smith's donations, the museum finally established a Japanese department, and would forever cherish the memory of this Norwegian sailor who, from love of his country, enriched its scientific collections (11).

The East Asian Collection continued to grow slowly but steadily. In 1889, the museum received a gift from Iver Munthe Daac (1843–1924), who was employed in the Chi-

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8 Each object has a catalogue card, written when it was accessioned into the collection. Today, each card has been digitalised.

Oliver Smith (born Halvor Halvorsen) (1843–1888), marine pilot and collector. Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo/Mårten Teigen

String instrument, flute and sheng. The bamboo reeds of the sheng symbolise the folded wings of the phoenix. China, 19th century. Lengths 95 cm, 67.4 cm, 41.5 cm. (UEM 7911, 7908, 7896a). Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo/Mårten Teigen

Manchu armour that reportedly belonged to a prince. Metal sheets with silk brocade. China, 19th century. Height circa 130 cm (UEM 7416). Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo/Mårten Teigen

Mandarin Maritime Customs Service between 1868 and 1888, the last three years as inspector general. He was a keen collector of art, and upon his return to Norway, he sold 400 pieces of fine porcelain, textiles and bronzes to the Museum of Decorative Arts in Christiania. He also donated fourteen objects to the Ethnographic Museum, one of which is exceptional: a set of armour and helmet which had belonged to a Manchu prince (12).

A royal contribution

In 1892, a royal gift found its way into the collection. King Oscar II had been given thirty-eight Chinese musical instruments, and a catalogue describing their construction, history and use, by Albert Nielsen, Customs Director for Canton (Guangzhou), Kashing (Jiaxing) and Lungkow (Longkou). King Oscar II was greatly interested in art, history and archaeology, and was a patron to the museums in the Swedish-Norwegian union. Many donors were rewarded with royal orders, a cause for donations not to be underestimated in the museum’s history. The king bestowed the collection of musical instruments, comprising drums, flutes,
reed organs, gongs, and a range of string instruments, to the Ethnographic Museum. Albert Nielsen relates how he heard musical instruments played in temples and religious processions, in the theatre, at weddings and funerals. A bugle made from a conch shell, used by soldiers in battle and aboard war junks, was a rare and much sought after instrument. Nielsen describes the use of the tai-lo, or great gong, in public buildings or religious settings, but also as a signal to retreat during battle, to raise anchor, or to salute passing Mandarins. The sheng is an ancient type of reed wind instrument dating back to the Han dynasty (206 BC—AD 220) (13). Nielsen explained that the sound is created by sucking, not blowing; as a result, the musicians got lung diseases and usually never reached the age of forty.5

The editor’s choice

In 1895, a substantial collection of Chinese artefacts was bequeathed to the museum by Bruno Navarra, the editor of Der Ostasiatische Lloyd newspaper in Shanghai. The almost 200 objects comprised swords and other weapons, clay figurines, a Ming dynasty (1368–1644) bronze mirror and other bronzes, soapstone vases and lamp screens, and five model junks and a temple model (see the article by Rose Kerr). A group of instruments of torture, or models of them, were accompanied by graphic descriptions of their use (14). There were also two complete Mandarin costumes, one for winter, one for summer, and twenty-four well-carved and brightly painted wooden figures—representations of Confucian and Buddhist gods. One may wonder why a German in Shanghai would decide to donate a large collection to a small country on the fringes of Europe? The answer lies with Carl Bock, the Norwegian vice-consul, later consul general, in Shanghai from 1896–1902. Bock had made his name as an explorer in Sumatra and Borneo in 1878–1879 and Siam (Thailand) and Laos in 1881–1882 respectively, and subsequently in Norway as a writer and collector (15). In 1883, he brought back to the Ethnographic Museum a collection of nearly 100 artefacts, among them a group of Buddha sculptures (see the article by Paul Bromberg). Bock encouraged Europeans in the East to donate to the museum, with one such donor being Bruno Navarra.

A warning against Buddhism

Situated on the outskirts of Europe, Christiania was located far from the major markets dealing in Oriental art. Thus, museum director Yngvar Nielsen spent several weeks in Berlin in 1896, where he bought Japanese netsuke, vases, Buddha figures, okimono, swords and daggers. The costliest item was a sizeable sculpture of Buddha on a lotus throne, with an inscription dating it to 1731 (16). Interestingly, though, Nielsen strongly opposed Buddhism since he connected it with a growing trend of theosophy. He saw his task as warning people against it, believing that the best way of achieving this aim would be to buy Buddhist art, then presenting it to the public to discourage their interest.

Ironically, some of the finest Buddha images in the museum were collected by Nielsen in pursuit of his mission. In 1912, William Downing Webster, the ethnographic collec-

5In reality, one sucks and blows to make a sound.
tor and dealer in London, presented to Nielsen an “unusually beautiful bronze figure” (17), and in 1913, Nielsen bought a small collection of Buddha figures that ship captain Gundersen had brought from South China. Nielsen uses the expressions, “wonderful examples of Asian cast technique” and “delicate work”, in describing these artworks; it is apparent that, in spite of his resentment towards what they represented, he remained fully capable of appreciating their aesthetics and craftsmanship.

New museum, new nation

Towards the turn of the 20th century, it was clear that the university museums—comprising the Collection of Norwegian Antiquities, the Coin Cabinet and the Ethnographic Museum—were desperately in need of more space. In 1902, the Historical Museum, a new and grand Art Noveau building next to the university, was ready to receive their collections, and in 1904, it opened to the public (1). The same year, the amazingly well-preserved Viking ship, the Oseberg ship, was excavated and placed in a large shed in the university garden across the road from the museum, an attraction that drew large crowds (18).
Political change had been brewing for a while, resulting in the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian union in 1905. Many nationalists were jubilant, with some collectors wishing to contribute to the new, independent nation, thereby providing further collections to the brand new museum. One such donor was Marie Pedersen, who had collected during her many years accompanying her husband in Japan and Korea. In 1905, the museum bought 110 artefacts from her, mostly small and delicate items, with many clearly made for the European market (19). They included baskets, lacquerwork, porcelain and shells, as well as Korean chopsticks, spoons and bowls made of brass.

**The Ring Collection of Bencharong**

Theodor Ring (1866–1932) was a Norwegian naval officer, who spent a decade working in the Royal Siamese Navy around the turn of the last century. In 1904, he donated a collection of the colourful porcelain called Bencharong. This ware had seldom been seen in Europe at the time—it is still rare—and the donation was noted to be “one of the largest and most valuable gifts” the museum had ever received. Although the porcelain was used by the royal household in Siam, it was very much a Chinese product, made to order in the ceramic centres of Jingdezhen and Canton. The almost 200 pieces in Ring's donation come in all sizes, with a variety of forms, colours and patterns (20). Ring also made sure the Museum of Decorative Arts received its share, with a donation of fifty pieces. Two years later, he also donated a group of rare Canton enamelware made for use in Siamese temples (21). Even today, the Ring Collection is the largest depository of Bencharong outside of Thailand. When Theodor Ring died in 1932, his wife

6The Zoological Museum, Botanical Museum and Geological Museum were established at Toyen in Oslo between 1904–1917.

7In 2015, I curated the exhibition, “Royal Porcelain from Siam: The Ring Collection”, at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo with an accompanying catalogue, *Royal Porcelain from Siam: Unpacking the Ring Collection*. A conference with the same name took place on November 23rd, 2013.
and son sold his personal collection to the museum, comprising Southeast Asian artefacts and some Chinese porcelain, including monochromes and four quality vases, which would have been new when he bought them before he left the East for good in 1920 (22).

The missionaries

Miss Petrea Naess, who set out to work in China in 1890, was one of the many missionaries who contributed to the museum. In 1899, she sold to the museum a richly equipped bridal costume, with exquisite embroidery, from Yunnan (23). Fifteen years later, another bridal costume was added to the East Asian Collection, this time collected by another female missionary, Miss Vauvert Jensen, who worked as a nurse in China and Mongolia. She brought the silk costume in two parts, gown and under-gown, and donated them on a visit home in 1914. Each part is opulently embroidered with Central Asian motifs, with flowers, swastika and fungi. The red colour was auspicious and suitable for a young bride, and the last time it had been worn was by a Mongol princess, according to Miss Jensen (23).

In 1911, a collection of sixty artefacts was donated by Jørgen E. Nilsen, a missionary doctor, who worked in Hunan, China, at the beginning of the 20th century. The donation comprised objects for use in daily life, such as carpentry tools and opium paraphernalia, as well as ancestor tablets and representations of different gods in painted wood. Once, he was called to assist at a difficult birth and, in return for his assistance, he acquired an image of a female house goddess wrapped in cloth. Nilsen explained that each time someone needed help in a testing situation, a piece of cloth was wrapped around the goddess, whereupon a goat or hen was slaughtered, and the blood squirted upon the fabric (24).

Adrian Jacobsen

Johan Adrian Jacobsen (1853–1957) is relatively unknown in Norway, but he may have been one of the greatest ethnographic collectors in Germany (25). From a very young age he sailed the Arctic waters. In 1877, he was engaged by the director of Berlin Zoo to sail to Greenland and bring back an Inuit family to be put on display. In the 1880s, he undertook three long journeys with the aim of adding to the collections of the Royal Ethnographic Museum in Berlin. He sailed to Patagonia, North-west America, Siberia, Manchuria, Korea, Japan, Indonesia, the Indian Ocean, the Arctic Ocean and the Antarctic Ocean, collecting more than 18,000 artefacts for the Berlin museum. Between 1886 and 1913 he sold or donated over 750 artefacts to the Ethnographic Museum in Christiania, of which over 160 come from East Asia: from Japan there were netsuke, kake-mono of embroidered silk, mask models from the No theatre, swords, and small things produced for the European market, such as cigar cases made from baleen plates.
China came thirty porcelain plates and large dishes, several made for the Muslim market (26); and from Korea nine paintings on paper. After a long life of exploration and collecting, Jacobsen was given many awards, among them the signal honour of becoming Honorary Chief-tain of the Sioux tribe of North America.

The missionary expert on Buddhism

From 1899, Theo Sørensen (1873–1959) spent almost a quarter of a century as a missionary with the China Inland Mission in Tatsienlu (Kangding, Sichuan), on the border of Tibet. After studying the Tibetan language and religion, he undertook a number of long journeys into the mountainous countryside, where he also collected objects and scriptures.

On a visit back home to Christiania in the Spring of 1901, he sold artefacts to the museum. Among the twenty objects used for ritual and daily life was a trumpet made of a human thigh bone, used by the lamas in Lhasa, and a double drum, with the membrane prepared from human skin. The collection was the museum’s first from Tibet, and did not expand until Sørensen returned in 1910. Among the eighty artefacts in the second purchase were fifty-eight plain bronze altar lamps, each in the shape of a cup on a ribbed stem. When seeing the collection, one may be tempted to ask what enticed him to collect all those lamps? In December 1920, Sørensen gave a lecture on Tibetan Buddhism at the British Legation in Peking (Beijing), where he presented twenty-two large thangkas he had ordered from a monastery in Tibet. Upon his return to Norway in 1922, he offered them for sale to the museum. The price was, however, too high and the museum could not afford them. They would not have been in the museum’s collection today had it not been for ship captain Hesselbarth, who bought them and bequeathed them to the museum. In 1991, they were shown in a temporary exhibition about Ti-

bet, on the occasion of the Dalai Lama’s visit to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (27).

Sørensen also collected Buddhist scriptures, of which the most prestigious and rare was the Tibetan Buddhist canon, the Tripitaka. It took twenty-five horses to transport the 325 volumes, each one metre long and 15 cm wide. At the time, there were only four known copies in Europe, located in Paris, London, Berlin and St. Petersburg. In 1923, this

9In 2017, nine objects collected by Jacobsen were returned by the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (formerly the Royal Ethnographic Museum) to Alaska, because they were burial objects of indigenous peoples taken without consent.
magnificent work was put on display in the museum, and in 1954, it was transferred to the National Library, together with other Tibetan, Mongolian and Asian scriptures. Sørensen explains in his book, *Work in Tibet*, that the Tibetans were not easy to convert. No active opposition took place, but if individuals wished to become Christians, “they do all they can in a mild way to hinder it”. If his religious endeavours were not entirely successful, Sørensen, at least, achieved a considerable reputation for his linguistic and anthropological work.

There were many smaller donations and acquisitions, from sailors, explorers, missionaries, businessmen and travellers, far too numerous to include here. One prized gift, however, comprised two lacquered sculptures donated by a Norwegian tradesman, Oscar Langerud, in 1926. One is a life-size Luohan, one of the eighteen disciples of Buddha (28), the other a mighty Guardian of the Eastern sphere, almost two metres tall. Unfortunately, we do not have any information as to their provenance, except that Langerud bought them in Hamburg, where he lived and worked.

Ole M. Solberg (1879–1946), the museum director who took over from Yngvar Nielsen in 1916, worked at expanding the East Asia Collection. It appears that he focused on enriching the Japanese Collection at a time when Japan’s influence on the decorative arts in Norway was still strong. Between 1913 and 1932, he purchased many classical Japanese objects from antiques dealers in London, Berlin, Munich and Copenhagen, and the East Asian Collection was supplemented with tsusus, netsukes, juchū kachūs, inros and swords (29). About twenty woodblock prints also entered the collection, many by renowned artists from the 18th and the 19th century. In Hamburg, he also purchased a group of thirty-nine teapots from China and Japan.

**Mamen from Inner Mongolia**

Between 1929 and 1932, Oscar M. Mamen (1885–1951), the Norwegian adventurer and photographer, and his British partner, the anthropologist Ethel Lindgren (1905–1988), undertook fieldwork among the Evenki and Oroch tribes of Inner Mongolia (30). In 1933 and 1938 respectively, Mamen donated objects collected on his journeys in Mongolia, with an additional donation in 1954, sent from Tanzania (Tanzania), where he spent the last years of his life. In total, he donated approximately 275 artefacts, including snuff bottles made from semi-precious stone, Mandarin hats and costumes, silk pouches for the belt, and a selection of tobacco pipes. The gift also comprised numerous small bronzes, such as Scythian knives, mirrors, buckles and arrowheads, and fine female headgear made of coral studded silver. There were also a dozen large tea bowls made from Mansur birch, half of them lined with silver (31), and many objects connected with Tibetan Buddhism, such as the kapala skull cup, made for ritual use (32).

**Conclusion**

During the Second World War, the museum was occupied by the German military. All the exhibitions were dismantled and stowed away, and the Art Nouveau gold leaf decorations on the interior walls were painted over. Museum director Solberg moved into two small rooms on the top floor when his own house was confiscated. He seldom

31 Tea bowl, Mansur birch and silver. Diameter 12.5 cm, height 4.6 cm. Mongolia, early 20th century (UEM 38600). Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo/Ellen C. Holte

32 Kapala skull cup. Human skull lined with silver and decorated with filigree work, inlaid coral and turquoise. Width 17.5 cm, height 15.5 cm. Tibet. 19th century (UEM 38521). Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo/Erik Irgens Johnsen

sation. While some donations were added to the East Asia Collection, including the museum’s largest Japanese collection by a single benefactor, the era of acquisitions was over.

In October 2018, the East Asia exhibition on the third floor was dismantled due to roof repairs. Today, it has not yet been decided when this varied and rich collection will again be shown to the public.

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Among other distinctions, he was declared Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1922 and of the Royal Geographical Society in 1923.

In 2017, a descendant donated to the museum archive 10,000 photographs, 4000 negatives, notes and diaries from Mamen’s stay in Inner Mongolia, which will greatly add to our knowledge of these peoples.