Universität Zürich[UZH]

Chair in East Asian Art History

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Rämistrasse 73
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Cap with kingfisher feather ornamentation, Qing dynasty (1644–1912), 18th–19th century, China. Art Institute Chicago.



Kitagawa Utamaro, Mallards and a Kingfisher, book illustration, Tsutaya Jūzaburō, 1790, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of Louis W. Hill, Jr. P.75.51.128

BA seminar
Spring 2025

Iridescent Luxuries: Perspectives on Commodities as Art in East Asia

Dr. Stephanie Santschi
Alva Speth, M.A.

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"Iridescent Luxuries: Perspectives on Commodities as Art in East Asia"

Instructors: Dr. Stephanie Santschi
Alva Speth
Contact: stephanie.santschi@khist.uzh.ch
alva.speth@khist.uzh.ch
Class time: Thursdays, 10:15–12:00
Location: RAK-E-6 (Seminarraum)
Language: English
Format: on campus

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This BA seminar critically examines the production and consumption of art in and from East Asia through the lens of commodity culture and materiality. Students will investigate how everyday objects and luxuries are transformed into art, challenging traditional boundaries between craft, commodity, and fine art. The course adopts a critical approach to understanding the complex relationships between creators, consumers, and the market in shaping artistic production and value. Through analysis of diverse artifacts such as illustrated books, jewelry, ceramics, and textiles, students will develop a nuanced understanding of how art is produced, valued, and consumed in East Asia. The seminar further encourages critical reflection on the construction of artistic canons and the ways in which material culture reflects and shapes societal values in the past and today.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

The course aims to:

- introduce students to theoretical frameworks such as Appadurai's politics of value and Kopytoff's biographical approach that discuss how everyday objects and luxury goods transform into art across East Asia;
- familiarize students with how artistic objects circulate through global trade networks, examining both historical patterns and contemporary markets;
- develop students' awareness of methodological approaches for investigating material culture in East Asia, focusing on how artistic value is constructed and negotiated across different contexts;
- expose students to diverse case studies of objects including illustrated books, jewelry and ceramics to examine how material culture both reflects and shapes societal values;
- support students in developing research and analytical skills through engagement with theoretical approaches and creation of original arguments about commodity culture to case studies.

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TEACHING AND EXAMINATION:

- The teaching consists of seminars, whose regular attendance is crucial. Due to the intensive nature of our discussions and the progressive development of theoretical frameworks throughout the course, missing sessions will significantly impact your ability to engage with the material and participate meaningfully in class discussions. While unforeseen circumstances may arise, students should plan to attend all sessions. If you must miss a class, please inform the instructors in advance and arrange to catch up on missed content with a fellow student.
- The course is examined by oral presentation (1/3 of the grade) and a written seminar paper (2/3) of the grade.
- Oral presentations will be delivered by students throughout the course. A detailed schedule will be agreed upon in the first session.
- The seminar paper can be submitted by either of the two dates: June 10, 2025 and July 1, 2025, 23:59 on each day, via upload as Word- file into the OLAT Upload folder. Students who submit their paper by the first deadline will receive the instructors' feedback (no grade) and will be able to resubmit an improved version of their paper by the second deadline. If no new version is submitted by the second deadline the first version will be graded. The seminar paper should be 20,000–30,000 characters long, including spaces but excluding footnotes, bibliography, and image captions. The topic of the seminar paper should follow the topic of the oral presentation.
- Formatting and style must follow the KGOA Style Guide.
- A signed Statement of Independent Work (Selbständigkeitserklärung) must accompany the seminar paper, confirming that the work is original, independently completed, and free from plagiarism. This statement can be submitted as a scanned document.
- Please find the KGOA Style Guide and the Selbständigkeitserklärung on https://www.khist.uzh.ch/de/chairs/ostasien/Studium/Richtlinien.html.
- **Generative AI tools are not permitted** for completing course assignments. Using Grammarly or similar applications for spelling and grammar checks ONLY is permitted. Using these programs' Generative AI extensions for tasks including brainstorming topics or writing is NOT permitted.
- More information on the content and format of the assignment will be provided in due course.
- In this course, Special Lecture Participation Points (SLPP) will contribute to the partial grade for the oral presentation, which accounts for 1/3 of your final course grade. For each guest lecture attended (including OLAT submission of questions), you will receive an additional 5% of your grade (for example, attending two lectures will increase your partial grade for oral presentation by 10%). As attendance at the Korea Conference is part of this course, no additional points can be acquired for this.

NOTES ON READINGS:

- Course readings are listed below (see "Course schedule").
- Please find all required readings in OLAT.
- Students are asked to read at least the Required Readings before each class.
- New resources may be added to the course. All changes will be announced via OLAT.

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COURSE STRUCTURE OVERVIEW

Session (Date)	Topic [Lecturer]	Assignment
Session 1 (20.2.)	What is (this) BA seminar about? [StS / AS]	
Session 2 (27.2.)	Theoretical Frameworks: Object Biographies [StS / AS]	
Session 3 (6.3.)	China: Art in the Marketplace [AS]	
Session 4 (13.3.)	Korea: Commodification of Representation [AS]	
Session 5 (20.3.)	Japan: Early Modern Visual Culture [StS]	Presentation Excerpt Upload (23.3., 23:59, OLAT)
Session 6 (27.3.)	Recap and Writing Workshop [StS]	
Session 7 (3.4.)	Luxury and Trade [AS]	Student Presentations
Session 8 (10.4.)	Popular Culture and Publishing [StS]	Student Presentations
Session 9 (17.4.)	Religious and Ritual Objects [AS]	Student Presentations
Easter Break		
Session 10 (8.5.)	Contemporary Markets and Global Exchange [StS]	Student Presentations
Session 11 (16 and 17.5.)	Korean Wave(s)? – Global Itineraries	Comment on OLAT (20.5., 23:59)
Session 12 (22.5.)	Symposium Recapitulation and Wrapup [StS / AS]	
Seminar paper submission	June 10, 23:59 (voluntary draft submission) July 1, 23:59 (final submission)	Seminar paper

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COURSE SCHEDULE
Incl. REQUIRED/RECOMMENDED READINGS (WEEKLY)

Session 1: What is (this) BA seminar about?
Thursday, February 20, 2025, 10:15–12:00
Lecturers: Alva Speth, Dr. Stephanie Santschi

Course content:

- Introduction of course goals, research methods, structure, presentation dates
- Introduction to assignments (presentation and final report)
- Discussion: The aura of the object and its relevance throughout art history and today

Intended Learning Outcomes:
By the end of this session, students can…

- identify course expectations, research methods, and assignment requirements
- differentiate key theoretical concepts that shape the course, including the relationship between commodity culture, art, and value in East Asian contexts
- begin developing frameworks for analysing material culture across different East Asian contexts and formulate initial questions about how objects transform between commodity and art status

Required reading:

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn from the 1935 essay. New York: Schocken Books, 1969 [English translation].
- Cao, Jan. "Benjamin's Chinese Painter: Copying, Adapting, and the Aura of Reproduction." *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 94, no. 1 (2019): 39–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2018.1548423.

Recommended readings:

- Benjamin, Walter. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Edition Suhrkamp, 1963 [German translation].
- Benjamin, Walter. "L'Œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique." *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5, no. 1, edited by Max Horkheimer. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1936 [French original].

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Session 2: Theoretical Frameworks: Object Biographies

Thursday, February 27, 2025, 10:15–12:00

Lecturers: Dr. Stephanie Santschi, Alva Speth

Course content:

- Essential terminology for this course
- Methodologies for critically evaluating the relationship between material culture, commodity and artistic value in East Asian contexts

Intended Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this session, students can…

- compare key theoretical approaches for studying material culture, particularly Kopytoff's biographical approach and Appadurai's politics of value
- examine how commoditization processes affect artistic value across different cultural contexts
- critically assess the applicability of Western theoretical frameworks to East Asian contexts

Required readings:

- Igor Kopytoff "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process," in: *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 64–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in: *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 3–63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Recommended readings:

- James Beattie and Lauren Murray, "Mapping the Social Lives of Objects: Popular and Artistic Responses to the 1937 Exhibition of Chinese Art in New Zealand," *East Asian History*, no. 37 (2011): 39–58.

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Session 3: China: Art in the Marketplace
Thursday, March 6, 2025, 10:15–12:00
Lecturer: Alva Speth

Course content:

- Commodification of art in Ming-Qing China
- Ambivalence of scholarly art and demands of the marketplace
- Consumption of art in early modern China
- Artisans as brands and gender bias in the reception of crafts

Intended Learning Outcomes:
By the end of this session, students can…

- Recall important contributions to the study of the social life of things in Chinese art history.
- identify different functions of art in early modern China.
- recognize the possibilities and limitations of studying crafts through a material culture lens.
- apply theoretical frameworks from previous sessions to analyse early modern Chinese visual culture.

Required readings:

- Clunas, Craig. *Art in China*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. [Chapter "Art in the Marketplace," read pages 173-194.]
- Clunas, Craig. *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*. Craig Clunas. Paperback ed. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. [Chapter "Things in Motion"]
- Ko, Dorothy. *The Social Life of Inkstones*. Washington: University of Washington Press, 2017. [Chapters "Introduction" and "Chapter 4 Beyond Suzhou: Gu Erniang the Super-Brand"]

Recommended readings:

- Brook, Timothy. *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Clunas, Craig. *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*. Paperb. ed. Honolulu, HI: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2006.
- Ko, Dorothy. *The Social Life of Inkstones.* University of Washington Press, 2017.

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Session 4: Korea: Commodification of Representation
Thursday, March 13, 2025, 10:15–12:00
Lecturer: Alva Speth

Course content:

- *Chaekgeori* (still-life paintings, lit. "books and things") as a transcultural and societally complex genre
- Changing attitudes towards consumer culture in the late Joseon dynasty (late 17th century–1897)
- Commodification of representational art

Intended Learning Outcomes:
By the end of this session, students can…

- describe changing attitudes towards luxury goods in the Joseon dynasty
- trace the cultural and social dynamics of the transmission of painting conventions in the case of *chaekgori.*
- examine the societal role of collecting objects and the power of their display.
- apply Kopytoff's theory to see how this representational power was commodified.

Required readings:

- Kim Sunglim. "Still Life in Motion: The Origins and Development of Chaekgeori Painting." *Ars Orientalis* 51 (2021). https://doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0051.003.
- Jang Namwon. "Treasured Ceramics of the Late Joseon Period Viewed from a Material Culture Perspective." *Journal of Korean Art & Archaeology* 11 (2017): 11–25. https://www.ijkaa.org/v.11/0/11/39#body-section-4.

Recommended readings:

- Kim Sunglim. *Flowering Plums and Curio Cabinets: The Culture of Objects in Late Chosŏn Korean Art.* Korean studies of the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018.

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Session 5: Japan: Early Modern Visual Culture
Thursday, March 20, 2025, 10:15–12:00
Lecturer: Dr. Stephanie Santschi

Course Content:
- Creativity and state control
- Art market dynamics

Intended Learning Outcomes:
By the end of this session, students can…
- describe the relationship between artistic production and state control in early modern Japan
- recognize the role of different actors (artists, publishers, merchants, state officials) in shaping visual culture
- apply theoretical frameworks from previous sessions to analyze early modern Japanese visual culture

Required readings:
- Guth, Christine. "Picturing the Early Modern Craftscape." In *Craft Culture in Early Modern Japan: Materials, Makers, and Mastery*, 57–108. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520382497 [accessible via UZH VPN].
- Yonemoto Marcia, "The 'Spatial Vernacular' in Tokugawa Maps." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 3 (2000): 647–666. https://doi.org/10.2307/2658946 [accessible via UZH VPN].

Recommended readings:
- Screech, Timon. *Obtaining Images: Art, Production and Display in Edo Japan*. London: Reaktion Books, 2012.
- Sherif, Ann. "Book Histories, Material Culture, and East Asian Studies." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 3, no. 1 (2017): 35–53. https://doi.org/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.3.1.0035.

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Session 6: Recap and Writing Workshop
Thursday, March 27, 2025, 10:15–12:00
Lecturer: Dr. Stephanie Santschi

Preparation:
- Upload Presentation Outline until March 22, 23:59 into OLAT Submission Folder
- Length: 400–600 words, English or German, formatted to KGOA Style Guide
- Content: working title of presentation, clear thesis statement/research question, brief outline of main argument, 1–2 key objects/case studies discussed in the presentation, min. 1 key text from required readings to which you connect your topic, preliminary bibliography (3–5 sources)

Course content:
- Feedback on presentation excerpt
- Presentation guidelines

Intended Learning Outcomes:
By the end of this session, students can…
- list effective strategies for academic presentations in art history
- develop clear and effective presentation structures for their chosen topics
- formulate research questions that examine relationships between commodity and art status, organize research findings into coherent academic presentations, and structure arguments that incorporate both theoretical frameworks and object analysis
- give peer feedback on presentation excerpt

Required reading:
- Hamilton College. “How to Outline A Speech.” https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/centers/oralcommunication/guides/how-to-outline-a-speech, last accessed February 5, 2025.
- UZH Geo, *Online Guidelines for Academic Research and Writing: Presentation skills* https://microsite.geo.uzh.ch/olwa/olwa/en/html/unit_unit6.html, last accessed February 5, 2025.

Recommended readings:
- Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*. Pearson, 2014.
- Pop, Andrei. *How to Do Things with Pictures: A Guide to Writing in Art History.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard College, 2008.
- Chun, Cody, Kieran O’Neil, Kylie Young, and Julie Nelson Christoph. *Sound Writing: Writing for Art*. Annual Edition, Universal Version. University of Pudget Sound, 2020. https://soundwriting.pugetsound.edu/universal/writing-for-art.html (last accessed February 5, 2025).

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Session 7: Input + Student Presentations: Luxury and Trade

Thursday, April 3, 2025, 10:15–12:00

Lecturer: Alva Speth

Course content:

- Luxury and trade
- Student presentations

Intended Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this session, students can…

- Apply Appadurai's theory of enclaved commodities to luxury goods
- Examine gender biases towards the consumption of luxury goods in early modern Japan and China
- engage in readings- and presentation-related discussion

Required readings:

- Chaiklin, Martha. "Imports and Autarky: Tortoiseshell in Early Modern Japan." In *Luxury in Global Perspective: Objects and Practices, 1600–2000*, edited by Bernd-Stefan Grewe and Karin Hofmeester, 218–241. Studies in Comparative World History. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Wang Lianming. "A World Dotted with Kingfisher Blue: Feather Tributes and the Qing Court." In *The Social Lives of Chinese Objects*, edited by Alice Bianchi and Lyce Jankowski, 228–267. European Studies in Asian Art and Archaeology 2. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2023.

Recommended readings:

- Hay, Jonathan. *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010.
- Lacey, Pippa. "The Coral Network: The Trade of Red Coral to the Qing Imperial Court in the Eighteenth Century." In *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World*, edited by Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, 81–102. London, New York: Routledge, 2016.

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Session 8: Student Presentations: Popular Culture and Publishing

Thursday, April 10, 2025, 10:15–12:00

Lecturer: Dr. Stephanie Santschi

Course content:

- Popular culture and publishing
- Student presentations

Intended Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this session, students can…

- analyse how concepts of play and symbolism function to transform everyday objects into culturally significant symbols
- examine how objects acquire symbolic meaning through circulation and reproduction across different East Asian cultural contexts
- explain how publishing practices and popular culture shape the creation of cultural and artistic value in East Asian contexts

Required readings:

- Bell, David Raymond. "Learning, Play, and Creativity: *Asobi*, Suzuki Harunobu, and the Creative Practice." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 4 (2016): 86–113. https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.50.4.0086.
- Murck, Alfreda. "Golden Mangoes: The Life Cycle of a Cultural Revolution Symbol." *Archives of Asian Art* 57 (2007): 1–21. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20111345.

Recommended readings

- Kamei-Dyche, Andrew T. "The History of Books and Print Culture in Japan: The State of the Discipline." *Book History* 14 (2011): 270–304. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41306539.
- Horlyck, Charlotte. "Desirable Commodities — Unearthing and Collecting Koryŏ Celadon Ceramics in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, *University of London* 76, no. 3 (2013): 467–91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24692280.

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Session 9: Student Presentations: Religious and Ritual Objects
Thursday, April 17, 2025, 10:15–12:00
Lecturer: Alva Speth

Course content:
- Religious and ritual objects
- Student presentations

Intended Learning Outcomes:
By the end of this session, students can…
- identify the dynamic roles and values embodied by and assigned to religious and ritual objects throughout the object's career.
- discuss the relationship between material culture and Buddhism in East Asia
- engage in readings- and presentation-related discussion

Required readings:
- Bond, Kevin. "Buddhism on the Battlefield: The Cult of the 'Substitute Body' Talisman in Imperial Japan (1890–1945)." In *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object*, edited by Benjamin J. Fleming, 120–134. Routledge Research in Religion, Media, and Culture 4. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Kieschnick, John. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. [Chapter "Introduction"].
- Pejcochova, Michaela. "From Ritual to Colonial Fantasies. Chinese Ritual Objects as Part of Western Collections of Asian Art in the First Half of the Twentieth Century." In *The Social Lives of Chinese Objects*, edited by Alice Bianchi and Lyce Jankowski, 57–81. European Studies in Asian Art and Archaeology 2. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2023.

Recommended readings
- Fleming, Benjamin J., ed. *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object*. 1 [edition]. Routledge Research in Religion, Media, and Culture 4. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Stiller, Maya. "Precious Items Piling up Like Mountains: Buddhist Art Production via Fundraising Campaigns in Late Koryŏ Korea (918–1392)." *Religions* 12, no. 10 (2021): 885. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100885.

EASTER BREAK

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Session 10: Student Presentations: Contemporary Markets and Global Exchange

Thursday, May 8, 2025, 10:15–12:00

Lecturer: Dr. Stephanie Santschi

Course content:

- Contemporary markets and global exchange
- Student presentations

Intended Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this session, students can…

- relate Bourdieu's different forms of capital (cultural, economic, social) to patterns of value creation in contemporary East Asian art markets
- analyze how globalization processes affect the production, circulation, and consumption of East Asian art in local and international contexts
- evaluate contemporary art market practices and collecting through theoretical frameworks developed throughout the course

Required readings:

- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, translated by Richard Nice, edited by J. Richardson, 241–258. Westport: Greenwood, 1986 [English translation].
- Borggreen, Gunhild. "Art and Consumption in Post-Bubble Japan: From Postmodern Irony to Shared Engagement." In *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Ewa Machotka, 175–194. Amsterdam University Press, 2018. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv56fgjm.13.

Recommended readings

- Braden, L.E.A. "Collectors and Collections: Critical Recognition of the World's Top Art Collectors." *Social Forces* 94, no. 4 (2016): 1483–1507. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24754283.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "Ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital." In *Soziale Ungleichheiten* (Soziale Welt, Sonderheft 2), edited by Reinhard Kreckel, 183–98. Goettingen: Otto Schartz & Co., 1983.
- Seo Yongseok, Jim Dator, and Dick Pratt. "East Asian Response to the Globalization of Culture: Perceptional Change and Cultural Policy." In *Fairness, Globalization, and Public Institutions: East Asia and Beyond*, 319–336. University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3zp081.28.

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Session 11: Korean Wave(s)? – Global Itineraries

Friday, May 16 and Saturday, May 17, detailed schedule tbc

Course content:

- Attendance of a panel at the Korea Symposium
- Submission of written reaction to one lecture until Tuesday, May 20, 23:59 in the Seminar OLAT Forum

Intended Learning Outcomes:

By attending the Symposium, students can…

- Relate course content to current academic approaches to Korean art and culture's global circulation, including how theoretical frameworks from the course apply to contemporary research
- evaluate the contribution of current research to commodity culture in East Asian art

Required reading:

- Book of Abstracts: Conference "Korean Wave(s)? Global Itineraries of Korean Art and Culture," University of Zurich – Museum Rietberg, May 16–17, 2025.

Follow-up assignment:

- written reaction (min. 300 words) to one lecture until Tuesday, May 20, 23:59 in the Seminar OLAT Forum
- Content: Summary of the main arguments and a brief discussion of the questions raised by the presentation as well as a reflection on how the presentation relates to one of the course themes

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Session 12: Symposium Recapitulation and Wrap-up

Thursday, May 22, 2025, 10:15–12:00

Lecturers: Alva Speth, Dr. Stephanie Santschi

Course content:

- Part I: Reflection of symposium themes
- Part II: Synthesis of regional approaches and discussion of cross-cultural themes of the course
- Part III: course evaluation and final questions

Intended Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this session, students can…

- analyse how theoretical frameworks about commodity culture and value creation can be applied across different East Asian contexts and time periods
- evaluate methodological approaches for studying material culture's role in reflecting and shaping societal values across East Asian contexts
- synthesize insights from course readings, discussions, and the symposium to develop their own frameworks for analysing art and commodity culture in East Asia