



Collective Rethinking for a Shared Future

To celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the European Union is partnership with the Centre for Fine Arts-Brussels (BOZAR) and the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) hosted the ASEM Day Virtual Celebration on 7 March 2021 which featured the launch of the digital exhibition, 'A Passage to Asia: 25 Centuries of Exchange between Asia and Europe' and a dialogue forum on the evolving forms of cooperation between museums in two regions. The opening event was graced by Ms Hilda Hardeman, Director, Head of Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), Mr Gunnar Wiegand, Managing Director, European External Action Service (EEAS), Ambassador MORIKAWA Toru, Executive Director, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), Mr Paul Dujardin, Former CEO, BOZAR advisor and H.E. Dr. Phoeurng Sackona, Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, Cambodia. Their statements at the opening event highlighted the importance of continued cultural exchange to maintain people-to-people connections in a world facing a global pandemic.

Harnessing cutting-edge technology for audience interaction, the digital exhibition presents rich cultural content featuring 18 precious artefacts from 16 museums. Each artefact is accompanied by labels and audio-visual materials and offers an immersive experience for visitors. It is an excellent example of ongoing collaborations among museums even at a time when on-site cultural events are not possible, and many museums and cultural spaces remain closed. The exhibition is available at <https://passagetoasia.eu/>.

In the second part of the event, the dialogue forum brought together Mr Anselm Franke, Head of Visual Arts and Film, Haus der Kulturen der Welt; Ms Natasha Ginwala, Artistic Director, 13th Gwangju Biennale, Artistic Director, COLOMBOSCOPE, Associate Curator, Berliner Festspiele, Gropius Bau; Ms Zoe Gray, Senior Curator, Wiels-Centre for Contemporary Art, Brussels; and, Mr Kennie Ting, Director, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. This discussion was moderated by Ambassador Leon Faber, Deputy Executive Director, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). Each of the speakers shared their experiences of the impact of the pandemic on their practice, the changes adopted by their institutions to address the 'new normal' and reflected on the future of cooperation between museums and cultural institutions in the future.

Key thoughts and ideas that emerged at the forum were:

- Museums have been in transition over the last decade or so, which has led to changes in the structure and curatorial narratives as well as adapting to the digital realm. These changes got accelerated given the closure of the physical space for public interaction due to the pandemic. With the museums and cultural institutions remaining closed, the **perception of risk changed rapidly**. Being deprived of the public, **risk started to be assessed in relation to innovation**.
- The shared planetary condition of the pandemic led to cultural spaces and museums **reflecting together** on their primary function and **reimagining the infrastructure** needed for **finding a common ground**. Museums and cultural institutions of the future could emerge as transdisciplinary spaces focussing on collective story-building, which would lend to the future infrastructure for knowledge exchange.
- The **need to introduce multiple voices of the community and diverse inclusive narratives** into the museum space to enable artists and communities belonging to different traditions to recognise themselves has become imperative. As forms of difference are continually generated in the world, **looking beyond the binary** framework and ensuring that diversity remains at the centre of the curatorial approach is key.
- Simply moving into the digital realm could not ensure equitable access to culture. In fact, the **digital divide** presented a completely new challenge to equity in accessing the digital world, which museums are currently tackling through innovative initiatives such as online community radio, podcasts and local social media platforms.
- The world has witnessed **growing solidarity** in the international arts community during this pandemic. This would lead to current models of cooperation being reshaped to ensure **continued sharing of knowledge and exchange of ideas** which would result in deeper, long-lasting and sustainable collaborations.

To conclude, the ASEM Day Virtual Celebration celebrated centuries of cultural exchange between Asia and Europe and highlighted that for a shared future, a firm commitment to support people-to-people exchange is imperative.



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