

THE VIENNESE COMMODITIES COLLECTION

– “DIE WIENER WARENKUNDESAMMLUNG”

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM [1]

The emergence of the Viennese Commodities Collection at the *Technisches Museum Wien* dates back to the Vienna International Exhibition in 1873. From the beginning of the 20th century to 1971, this collection was enlarged to include 30,000 artifacts at the University of International Trade and Commerce and was possibly the largest collection of its kind worldwide. In 1971, the collection was moved from the former Institute for Technology and Commodities Science to Aspang Castle situated on the Wechsel mountain range in Lower Austria. In 1985, the Institute's head, Prof. Josef Hölzl, mediated the handing over of the collection to the Technisches Museum Wien.[2]

At the end of the 1990s, the classification and cataloging of the Viennese Commodities Collection at the *Technisches Museum Wien* began. At this time, almost no prior information about the artifacts had been collected and recorded. To some extent, the individual items of the collection had been labeled, but further information about them is missing. The inventory lists of the collection reveal very little information, in particular about the production dates, origins and original meanings of these trade goods.

THE PURPOSE OF THE COLLECTION

The value of the collection lies in its presentation of goods, materials and items that show the means of production of both Austrian and international manufacturers. The collection exhibits items that were traded in Vienna such as textiles, food products, spices, wood products and ceramic ware as well as stone and energy feedstock.

The Commodities Collection was enlarged in order to encourage trade with ‘the Orient’. At the end of the 19th century, the term ‘Orient’ included not only Southeast Europe, Turkey and the Middle East, but also China and Japan. Thus the items collected were intended for export from Austria on the one hand and for import from ‘the Orient’ and colonized countries on the other.

Selected Artifacts

The discovery of synthetic aniline dyes simplified the mass production of fez caps in Europe. In Austria, for example, there were prominent fez manufacturers in Bohemia and Moravia. For a long time, the caps were part of the prescribed dress for government officials in the Ottoman Empire and soon were an established part of women's and men's attire. When Kemal Atatürk banned the wearing of the fez in 1925, this line of production ended.[3]



Figure 1. Example of export articles: Fez “Zuave II”, Fez Manufacturer Thomas Novotny & Co., Batelau, Moravia, around 1900

The most important export articles are listed in part with their original commercial prices in the catalog of the *Orientalischen Museums*' commercial collection in Vienna.[4] As of the mid 1880s, the demand for raw materials from the colonies rose sharply.[5] Although Austria had no colonies herself, colonial goods such as coffee, coco, silk, etc. are included in the collection.

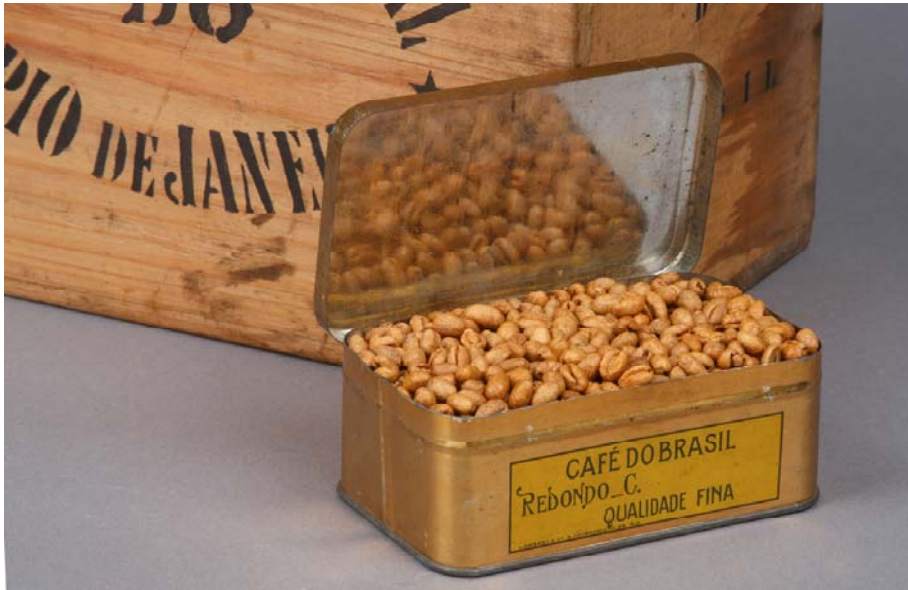


Figure 2. Example of import articles: a colonial product “Café do Brasil garantido puro”, Lambert & Co., Rio de Janeiro, around 1950

In order to attain greater economic independence especially in difficult times, substitute materials were developed to replace more expensive colonial goods. For example instead of coffee, a coffee substitute made of barley malt was used. Likewise, costly fibers were replaced with synthetic fibers and rather than utilizing plant-based dyes, synthetic dyes such as indanthrene were developed.



Figure 3. Example of substitute materials: a coffee substitute made of barley malt: whole grain Kneipp Barley Coffee, Kathrein's Malzkaffee-Fabriken AG, Vienna, around 1920

The collection presented a relatively accurate picture of industrial production in Austria. Particular attention was given to conserving the goods in their individual stages of production.[6] In particular, the production process of bentwood furniture from the raw wooden boards to the first stages of bending and finally to the polished end product is shown.



Figure 4. Example of stages of processing: a bentwood furniture molding press for a sofa, around 1900

It is impossible to provide more precise information about the individual artifacts based on today's knowledge as no complete inventory lists or catalogs exist. As a result, it is particularly difficult to classify this collection in a larger context and to make use of it for scientific purposes or for example exhibitions. However, it is likely that other historical records existed apart from the inventory lists. The collection has neither been expanded nor been under scientific supervision since it was handed over to the *Technisches Museum Wien*. Moreover, public access to the collection has been restricted.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT 'FORMUSE'

In Austria, there is currently a research program funded by the Federal Ministry of Science and Research which supports development, quality control and research at Austrian museums. Within the framework of the project, our research team will collect information concerning the origin, trade routes, trade potential, characteristics and quality requirements of selected artifacts. These artifacts will be described on the basis of inventory lists, catalogs and other source literature from the time period of the Vienna International Exhibition in 1873 to the First Austrian Republic, and later as required.

The intension is to find more accurate records, such as inventory books, card indexes, letters and similar sources in the archives of the former locations of the “Commodities Collection”. Then this information will be used to identify the origin of the complete collection on the one hand and to determine and record the means of acquisition and location of certain artifacts on the other. Furthermore, major aspects of the collection and trade relations will be discerned by comparing this collection to similar collections in Europe.

Through the application of various scientific disciplines, commodity science emerges from its traditional field of use and for the first time allows for an analysis of the “Commodities Collection” in an interdisciplinary context.

By determining the origin and creating a detailed scientific and technological description of the items, inferences about their importance in trade (import and export) can be made. In order to achieve this, the characteristics and quality requirements of the goods demanded at that time must be determined. Thus the main goal is to correctly date the artifacts and to describe them according to their cultural historical, economic and scientific requirements. This information will complete the *Technisches Museum Wien*’s artifact data base and also make it publicly accessible by the end of the project. Thereby the comprehensive data on the collection will serve as an important cultural historical source of information for both the scientific community and the museum, as well as, for those who are interested in commodity science.

SUMMARY

The emergence of the Viennese Commodities Collection at the *Technisches Museum Wien* dates back to the Vienna International Exhibition in 1873. Numerous samples and raw materials from the Vienna International Exhibition and later artifacts from the Orientalischen Museum were largely unknown on the European market at that time, and thus had a high commercial value. Often they originated from colonized countries in Africa and Asia at a time when the Habsburg monarchy did not itself have any colonies. Based on inventory lists, inventory catalogs and other source literature, the goal of the project is to collect information concerning the origin, trade routes, trade potential, characteristics and quality requirements of selected artifacts particularly from the time of the collection’s establishment in 1873 up to the First Austrian Republic.

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[3] Purkhart M; *Die österreichische Fezindustrie*; Dissertation, Universität Wien 2006

[4] *Katalog der commerciellen Sammlungen des Orientalischen Museums in Wien*, Wien 1882

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[6] Luxbacher G; *Warenkunde als Sammelwissenschaft zwischen bürgerlicher Produktkultur und technischer Rohstofflehre: die Warenkundliche Sammlung des Wiener Handelsmuseums*; Johann Beckmann-Journal, 7 (1/2) 1993, 57 – 74