



A study of
Asian Games: The Art of Contest
at the
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art

November 2005

Office of Policy and Analysis
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC



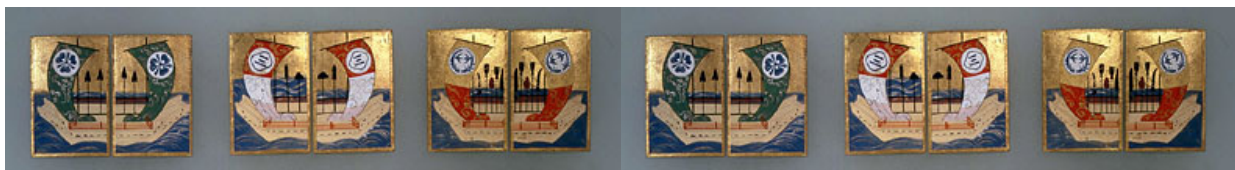
Preface

In spring 2005, the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) conducted a qualitative study of *Asian Games: The Art of Contest*, a temporary exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art (Sackler Gallery). The results in this report are based on interviews with visitors and two review panel sessions – one with Smithsonian staff peers and one with high school students. Several OP&A staff contributed to this study. Zahava D. Doering designed this study, conducted interviews, and wrote the report. Andrew Pekarik assisted with the analysis, developed the summary, and made valuable suggestions. Kathleen Ernst and James Smith conducted interviews with visitors. Amy L. Marino reviewed and designed the report. Sherri J. Barber, Teresa Amberley Bryant, and Shayla Shabazz, interns recruited and supervised by Whitney Watriss, provided useful perspectives. I would like to express my appreciation to my staff, eight other Smithsonian staff and three interns from the Duke Ellington School for the Arts who participated in the review panels and to the visitors who gave us their time.

Carole M. P. Neves, Director
Office of Policy and Analysis

Border design: *Matching cards (E-awase karuta)*¹

1 Complete captions for all exhibition objects are on p. 21.





Go board with containers and pieces



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Executive Summary

Visitors' responses depended on their expectations ...

For those who came expecting beautiful artworks—the exhibition was very satisfying because ...

- » Displays were well-designed
- » The objects were unique and rarely seen
- » Background information did not interfere with viewing
- » The craftsmanship was extraordinary

For those who came expecting interesting information—the exhibition was very satisfying because ...

- » Texts were clearly written
- » There were colorful family-friendly labels
- » The information was new to them
- » The narratives were engaging

For those who came expecting to contemplate and reflect on meaning—the exhibition was very satisfying because ...

- » It linked developments in the East with the West
- » It spanned many centuries and cultures
- » It expressed the universal nature of games

For those who came expecting to learn to play games—the exhibition was disappointing because ...

- » Game playing instructions were limited and complex
- » Its game-playing space was not well designed
- » Game-playing was an incidental aspect

Regardless of expectation—the exhibition was nostalgic and novel because ...

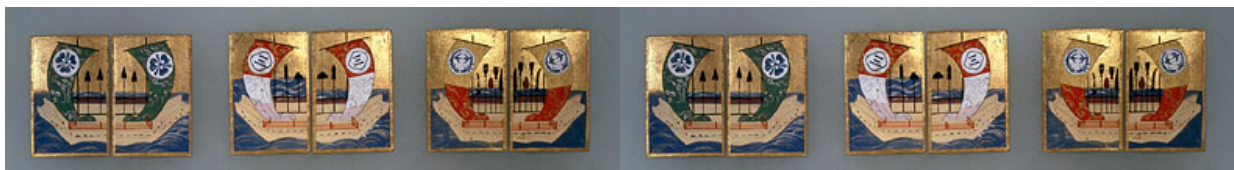
- » It evoked pleasurable memories of childhood
- » It revealed that familiar games came from Asia

Lesson Learned

- » Titles can create unanticipated expectations
 - ◇ As a loan exhibition, the title was pre-established
 - ◇ The title raised expectations of game-playing

Suggestions

- » A title and background study in advance of the show could help
 - ◇ Reveal unanticipated expectations
 - ◇ Encourage appropriate exhibition planning
 - ◇ Guide education and promotion activities
- » A study that focuses on families visiting the galleries could help
 - ◇ Identify needs of families
 - ◇ Improve in-gallery family-friendly materials





What's very compelling is that unlike eating or sleeping, playing a game is the only universal human activity that is not a necessity².

Introduction

From February 26 to May 13, 2005, the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art (Sackler Gallery) hosted the traveling exhibition, *Asian Games: The Art of Contest*. This exhibition, organized by the Asia Society, New York, illustrates the role of games as social and cultural activities in the diverse societies of pre-modern Asia. It demonstrates the importance of Asia as a source of many modern board games—chess, backgammon, parcheesi, ludo, chutes and ladders—as well as card games, and sporting games such as polo and field hockey. In addition to games known to Western audiences, the exhibition also displays those less familiar, such as the Japanese shell-matching game (kai-oi) and incense competition (jishu-ko). The exhibition opened in New York prior to traveling to the Sackler Gallery and the Middlebury College Museum of Art in Vermont. A version of *Asian Games*

2 Helen Abbott, associate director of the Asia Society Museum, New York, quoted in Janis Johnson (2004), "Playful Pursuits: Games from Asia to the West," *Humanities*, July/August 2004, Volume 25/ Number 4. See [<http://www.neh.fed.us/news/humanities/2004-07/playfulpursuits.html>], accessed October 31, 2005.

is traveling to small and mid-size museums as a part of the National Endowment for the Humanities' *On the Road* initiative.

While the exhibition was at the Sackler Gallery, the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) conducted a two-phase study of *Asian Games*. The purpose of the study was to solicit reactions to the exhibition's content, design, and interpretive materials. The first phase consisted of open-ended interviews with a convenience sample of visitors and students.³ The second phase involved panels of individuals selected specifically to visit and reflect on the exhibition. The first panel was composed of eight museum professionals working throughout the Smithsonian, and the second of three interns from the Duke Ellington School for the Arts, a local high school.

Following an introduction to the exhibition, this report summarizes the results from the interviews and panel discussions.

*Asian Games: The Art of Contest*⁴ includes boards, pieces, and other game-playing

3 A convenience sample is a sample where the respondents are selected at the convenience of the researcher. The researcher makes only a limited attempt to insure that this sample is an accurate representation of some larger group or population. In this study, OP&A staff stood at the exit of the exhibition and intercepted visitors as they left.

4 Description based on information on the Sackler Gallery website, [<http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/past.htm>] and the online exhibition, [<http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online.htm#>], accessed October 27, 2005.

paraphernalia, as well as paintings, prints, and decorative arts that depict people playing games. The approximately two hundred objects include examples of game sets dating from the twelfth to nineteenth centuries; Persian and Indian court paintings; illuminated manuscripts of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries; and Chinese and Japanese scroll paintings, screens, ceramics, and decorative arts.

At the Sackler Gallery, the exhibition was displayed on two levels of the building. An introductory area was on the museum's second floor. From there, visitors descended a flight of twenty-two stairs to a landing that featured a game room where visitors could play some of the major board games in the exhibition, including chess, backgammon, weiqi (go in Japan), and pachisi. Images of people playing games were projected on the wall facing visitors as they descended into the games area. From the game room, visitors entered a series of rooms; each focused on various types of games. The exhibition's four sections — “Tossing and Turning: Games of Chance,” “War and Territory: Games of Strategy,” “From Cards to Connoisseurship: Games of Memory and Matching,” and “Power and Dexterity: Games of Physical Skill” — highlight the variety of games through history. In addition to the introductory panels and labels that accompanied the exhibition from the Asia Society, the Sackler Gallery introduced family-oriented labels, framed in colorful squares, for selected objects. Through these labels, young visitors and their families could learn about the origins of games, such as chess and backgammon, that are still popular today, and get a sense of how current favorites evolved from older models in Persia, China, India, and Japan.

Tossing and Turning: Games of Chance.

Among Asia's oldest surviving games are those that reflect cultural notions of fate. Early games of chance such as dice and the Indian game of Pachisi, which inspired the Western games of parcheesi, chutes and ladders, ludo, and sorry, were often centered on the players attaining moral edification and spiritual enlightenment. Early first millennium-B.C. lot-casting dice demonstrate such games' antiquity in the Indian subcontinent. Backgammon (“nard”) is thought to have been invented in Iran in the sixth or seventh century and spread to many other areas of Asia, including China and Japan. A Safavid period (1501–1722) illustration of the game's invention by the Persian king's wise vizier, as recounted in the “Shahnama” or “Persian Book of Kings,” is on view.



Buzurjmihir Inventing Nard (Backgammon) in Answer to the Kain of Hind's Chess, from the Shahnama (Book of Kings)

War and Territory: Games of Strategy. This section of the exhibition highlights two major board games, chess and weiqi (Japanese go), and examines their diffusion and development in various Asian societies. Chess originated as “chaturanga” in India before 600 C.E. and may have featured elegantly carved ivory figures of elephants, camels, and horses. More abstract pieces appeared later in Iran and the Arab world, while the game probably spread along the Silk Road to China and Japan over 1,000 years ago (Tang dynasty, 618–906).

Early surviving chess pieces and sets on view include carved pieces from India, Burma, and Cambodia. Later illustrations in Persian and Indian court paintings highlight the game’s prestige and long history.

Similarly, pictures of players, as well as surviving pieces and containers, document the history of the game of weiqi, the most influential of Chinese board games, which was popular over 2,000 years ago (Han dynasty, 206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). In Japan, go achieved even greater status and popularity during the Edo period (1615–1868). The exhibition presents an elaborate go table with red and white agate pieces, as well as Edo-period paintings and woodblock prints that show the game’s importance in Japanese society.

From Cards to Connoisseurship: Games of Memory and Matching. Games of visual memory such as card games, dominoes, and mahjong provide clues to cultural attitudes toward gambling. The popularity of these games encouraged the development of game sets that could be played anywhere. A set of lacquer playing cards from Safavid Iran (1502–1722) and colorful, round ivory cards

from Mughal India (1526–1858) illustrate these games.

Power and Dexterity: Games of Physical Skill. The last section on games of power and dexterity looks at physical games like kickball and polo. The section includes Tang dynasty ceramic figurines of ladies and foreigners playing polo, a 17th century Japanese screen showing Tartars playing the game, and ceremonial Japanese kickballs.

The Visitors

The thirty-two visitors that were interviewed were intercepted primarily on weekdays, either in the hallway immediately outside the exhibition or in the game area. The conversations varied in length from less than two to about twenty minutes. The focus of the interviews was the types of experiences that visitors had in *Asian Games*. Interviews did not follow a specific set of questions, but most interviewees were asked how they happened to visit, what they appreciated about the exhibition or felt could be improved, and what they thought about the family-oriented labels. Similar to results from other studies, reasons for visiting the *Asian Games* ranged from visitors who made special trips to the gallery to see it, to those who happened upon the museum while touring the Smithsonian. One woman in her late-60s who lives in Washington, DC had heard a discussion about the exhibition on National Public Radio. Another visitor—a woman in her mid-20s who lives and works in Arlington, Virginia—

made a special trip after reading about *Asian Games*. Another local visitor said,

“Yes, actually I came today in particular to see this exhibit because I had read about it in a paper or something and I knew it had recently started. I’ve been interested in Asian things for quite awhile. It seemed like it would be fun.”

As with every exhibition, recommendations from family and friends motivate visitation. A local man commented,

“I’ve known about this for a couple of months, and I knew it was closing so I stopped by. And I had a pool of comments from my friends, good and bad, so I wanted to see it for myself.”

Repeat visitors to the Sackler Gallery typically mentioned the esteem they had developed for the Freer and Sackler Galleries (FSG) during previous visits and expressed their interest in seeing special exhibitions.

First-time visitors mentioned general interest in Asian art and culture, and curiosity about what the museum might contain. Some stopped by as part of “doing” the Smithsonian. For example, a young medical student from New Mexico spent mornings at a conference and afternoons at Smithsonian museums, methodically starting with the National Museum of the American Indian and visiting all the museums on the south side of the Mall before reaching the Sackler. A few local first-time visitors, especially interested in games, heard about the exhibition

from friends. One person emphasized, *“It was the game aspect. I mean I can play the games, ... but I was curious to see the pieces, the artwork, the boards and things, more so than the fact that it was Asian.”*

Another first time visitor told us,

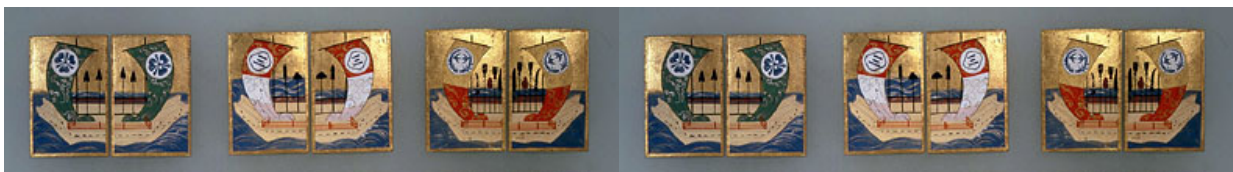
“I saw something about it in The Post, I think, right when it opened or before it opened. I’m interested in games and I play games, design games, test games and so forth and so I wanted to see it.”

One visitor related his visit to contemporary events:

“But it is very important I think at this time, to see things from Iran and other places. I don’t have to do the war. That’s in your face everyday. The reason most people are even aware of where that area of the world is, is because the news is about fighting and they’ve got sons and daughters; that is their only interest, but, you don’t see the good.”

One woman, in response to being asked if she was interested in games said,

“I am not; however, I was very much impressed with the intensity [with which] those who are interested in board games ... play their games. I think that is what impressed me because I was like — wow — some people are really into this.”



The Objects and the Presentation

The content and craftsmanship. In general, no matter what level of interest in or personal relationship to games, visitors were impressed by and commented on the beauty of the objects and the craftsmanship. One visitor, who indicated that he was not a ‘games person’ said, “The craftsmanship is very intense, the details were very impressive.” Other comments include, *I think the objects were beautifully presented and the cases were gorgeous ... the objects were beautiful. They are wonderful things.*

I’m not a gambling person so I didn’t pay attention to the ideas of the games themselves. I saw them as art pieces, so craft was a very nice thing and the boards were very beautiful pieces.

One local visitor exclaimed,

The chess set with the elephants and cannons and so forth— I thought that it was magnificent! Just beautiful! I also like the “go” board with the agate pieces- It was spectacular! ... And the ruler of Mazor, the box he made of the eleven games- that one; I just wanted to open it up and see where they were and try out the different games. Those were the three that really stick right off the top.

The design and organization. The design of the exhibition also elicited comments from visitors, most of them positive.

Yes, I absolutely was struck by the color of the walls, and the way that my eye was drawn to the descriptive parts so that if I was look[ing] at small pieces of art and wondering what games they were from, there was a white sign on a brightly colored wall that clearly caught my eye. It was well designed graphically.

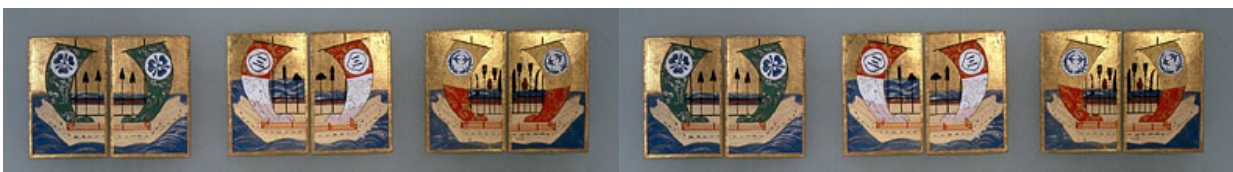
Several visitors found the organization of the exhibition helpful. One said,

I like the categorization of the games; you know, I hadn’t really thought about certain relationships between the games, for example, dominoes and its relationships to card games. Dominos tries to make pairs but you also make tricks, which is sort of matching up more than two, which I thought was kind of interesting.

However, the Smithsonian peer panel found the checkerboard of monitor projections above the game area a problem. As one panel member said, “*I was annoyed about that. It seemed like a visual game, [but] it didn’t seem like I was going to learn something, so I was frustrated.*”

Another was more emphatic,

The monitor thing set it off for me – here were the projections of the games, and everybody is physically playing the games on the TV screens, and then there are the games there. I really wanted to dive in here



12 Asian Games

-- and then -- I don't know how to play these games and I'm certainly not going to sit down and read the pamphlet! But if they had had a monitor per game and actually had instructions ...

In commenting about the design, a panel member had mixed feelings,

I thought it was attractive; when I first walked in I knew where to go. The signs were peeling so that was a real negative. They were laminated ...vinyl; the young persons' sign was laminated too and it was peeling at the corners. I thought the colors were really pretty. I liked how the graphic motif of the squares was carried throughout and keyed to the type of game.

The overall organization scheme met with the approval of the adult panel; one member summarized the discussion but added a suggestion for improvement:

I thought the way they organized the show in terms of the kinds of games made sense. They could have had monitors with the instructions in each section, so if you really wanted to learn how to play the game and had the game board right there it would have made the whole game part of it make sense. If you were interested in the objects as aesthetic things you could still enjoy them, but if you also wanted to be instructed in the game you could have seen all its various manifestations.

Another panel member described the design by saying,

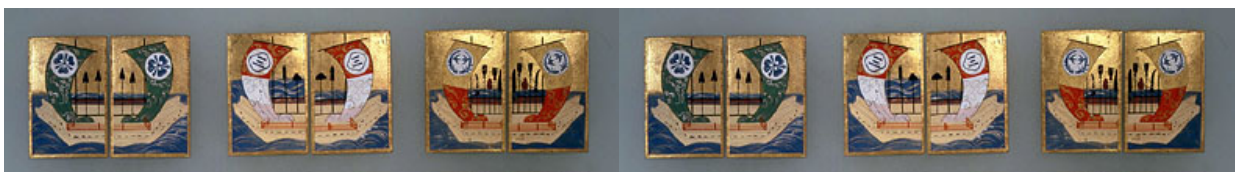
What I loved about it was that it immediately signaled to me – this is going to be a jazzy fun show. The colors were bright and vivid; it was contemporary. This is going to be hip, engaging... and then immediately it was not. The colors became annoying because they were so vibrating it made it hard to read the labels and to peer into the [vitrines] which had to be low lit because many of them were open on natural supports. A conflict between hip and wonderful and the way the material was presented, which was very traditional and straight. I was loosened and ready and it made me stand up straight.

The labels. In the interviews, OP&A staff specifically asked about the panels and labels, including the family-oriented materials.

Visitors who took the time to read the panels and labels appreciated the information on the origins of the games and the artifacts. One visiting art teacher noted,

It seems like a lot of it was geared towards kids. And I noticed you have the separate little plaques and I just think that's really cool. It would make me want to bring my classes to this museum since there would be more stuff that's already set in place, and then you don't have to do as much prep work. You can just focus on getting them through.

However, an older woman, making her first visit to the galleries had difficulties reading the labels,





For me it was a little too dark to read some of the titles. ... And a lot of them [labels] are down low. Which I assume is planned for kids being able to read it at the right height. But for those of us who are more ancient, it's harder to get down there. And because some of the textiles and things are older, and a little faded, the light made it harder to see them. But the information on the pieces was very well done.

Comments from visitors included, *We know they were designed for families, but we haven't read every word. We're chasing a big crowd for this exhibit, so ... but it's really a fun one!*

I probably read three quarters of them [labels]. I read the children's ones and the adult ones. I really like the adult ones --the children's ones are great.



Game pieces for mahjong or Chinese dominoes

By having the second set of labels it allows the younger kids to find some connection. ... I know particularly for me, as a parent, games are real big in my family so having younger kids able to access them is a good thing.

I was just saying how it's kind of distracting. Maybe I have astigmatism or something, but when I was reading I could see the different colors. So maybe if it was just one bright color instead of a bunch of different colors...

Panel members were more critical and saw a missed opportunity:

I was very irritated by the children's labels – they weren't in a position for children to read them. They were on the wall at the same level as the adult labels, which I thought was a missed opportunity. Plus, they had too much language and I found them kind of condescending. Suddenly we go to children's labels and we have cute little pat colloquial phrases as headers. I don't think kids need to have that – they know when they are being played down to and that's what those labels did. They would have been much more successful if they had just culled out those questions for the kids to think about.

I thought the child labels were very good, not condescending. They weren't just didactic. But the labels for the adults were almost illegible. It was light orange against dark orange and I found that difficult.



Interpretation

It is clear that the organizers had an interpretive approach to the materials and themes that they hoped to communicate. We can identify some of the themes that resonated with visitors from the interviews, as well as from the panel discussions.

Theme: The familiar and the exotic. One of the themes recurrent in the comments was the pleasure of finding and identifying the familiar, as well as discovering and appreciating the exotic. For example, the intricately carved chess pieces, including kings on elephants and bishops on camels, garnered praise from chess players. “The chess sets are wonderful -- you can see the jewel on the top of the turban of the king!” At least one set of parents was overheard identifying with the 18th-century woodblock print titled “Children Quarreling Over Sugoroku” (a Japanese game).

A ceramic figurine of a female polo player proved especially intriguing to a school group, as did the fact that women were among the fiercest competitors in 8th century China. The students’ noses were pressed against a case containing a game of *toko*, in which the player must toss feathered darts into a bronze jar. “Some basketball!” mumbled one.

How many visitors knew, before the exhibition, that chutes and ladders is derived from

snakes and ladders, a game devised by Indian sages to teach children the moral value of patience in character building? Visitors frequently noted this. A panel member acknowledged,

But the one place I got engaged was when I turned around and I loved the little section on snakes and ladders, which we know as chutes and ladders, and it was this connection between Asia and the West, between then and not quite now, and the notion that these games have been passed forward and go over distance. And they did it only through the objects. The “oh my” moment for me was “it was snakes and ladders, not chutes and ladders.” Then I felt much more interested in the whole exhibit and as I went through I could start to get those kinds of things.



Liubo players



Theme: Remembering and nostalgia. The exhibition invited conversations and memories of long-ago afternoons of childhood parcheesi and Monopoly, as well as certain nostalgia for a pre-palm pilot era. One elderly visitor articulated her enjoyment of the exhibition:

I think it's because I'm kind of familiar with the American versions of the original games and I still have some of my parcheesi games. I have all my board games from when I was young, 'cause you don't throw those, some pieces might be missing, but you know you keep them...For years when people came to visit, before television took everybody's attention, you could pull out a game and people visited for awhile. but that's out because when you walk in [now] the T.V. set

is on and anytime of the year there's football, basketball, and now you'll have baseball. That dominates everything—games are out unless you turn off the T.V.

One man, exclaimed, *“I am going to go and call my sisters about games we all played when we were younger that have roots!”*

Theme: Role of Asian culture in game development. For many visitors, the exhibition was an introduction to Asian culture and provided a broad-brush perspective for some or specific details for others. Most frequent were expressions of surprise at the Asian roots of games and their long history. I am surprised that some of these games go back that many years. That was surprising to me.

Just the influence of Asia, it's really pretty powerful as a takeaway [message], because you think of them [games] as being Western, but chess -- that was an Indian game. That just amazes me, so it's just broadened me to know all of this came from Asia.

Ah, well, I was really interested because I do not know a lot about the historic theme, but I did know how to play some of the other games -- the more modern ones. So, it was really neat to see kind of how the old games progressed into modern series. Also, I'm Chinese; I only know the Chinese games; I didn't know the Japanese adaptation or the Indian or Middle Eastern games.



Snakes and ladders board



One visitor was pleased with the cultural materials, but felt that,

I think they did a good job about the stories: where they came from and how the games have been changed over years, over centuries. But how to play the game, they probably need a little more space to work that in.

Theme: Universal nature of games. Some visitors commented on the universality of games as a form of leisure. At the same time, others realized that there is a serious aspect to games, as well.

Well I have always liked playing games and it was interesting to see that games have been part of history for centuries. And it was interesting to see that the games that we play evolved in continents that were not America, and that people enjoyed for centuries this kind of entertainment. So I thought it was very interesting to see that some of the things that people like really haven't changed over the years. ... Obviously people took these games very seriously, a lot like Americans take sports seriously and games seriously today. So I thought that it was really fascinating on many levels, both on the competitive level and on the artistry level.

I could never imagine [before] why an exhibit of games would be important but it's interesting to me that actually they do reflect life, you know, like the battle games, and it's an important part of life for so many years, so many thousands of years.

The Overall Experience

Reactions to the exhibition were grounded in personal expectations for it. One panel member commented,

I felt like the curators didn't make up their minds about what the show was about. Was it about playing games and learning about how games are universal through time OR is it about the beautiful objects? My entry expectation was for the games and I love beautiful objects, but I think they should have made up their minds about what was the true purpose of this. Then, it felt like... oh gee...they thought 'Let's make this appeal to children too' – they missed an opportunity to make it really appealing to everybody, adults and children.

One visitor had a more pragmatic approach to the issue of a theme,

I think it would be nice to basically get an editorial comment from the organizer of the exhibition. You know, about what they were trying to accomplish so I could get an interpretation of what they were trying to get at. Maybe 'What is their intended takeaway message?'

In trying to summarize the panel discussion, one person noted,

What I was disappointed by and what kept me annoyed throughout the whole show was that my expectations were disappointed. I knew it was at the Sackler; I know what the

Sackler does, and I love the Sackler. But I think it was the game room at the beginning of the show that made me think, “Hmmm; you know, maybe I’ll really learn something about these games and wouldn’t it be fun to play!” and so on. And then I got increasingly annoyed as that expectation was not met. So I would have advised to just keep it the connoisseurs’ show that it is—the beautiful objects, the Sackler show—and then if they wanted to add an educational kids’ component (whether it was about war or about games through the ages or any one of the themes we have brought out), they could have done that at the end of the show, maybe in the educational room space. And just have it all on one floor, and not have the precipice...

The three high school interns visited the exhibition and discussed their reactions. All three were unenthusiastic, primarily because the exhibition did not meet their expectations for “games.” One of the interns expected more interaction and said, *“it didn’t have any sound, it didn’t have any television screen, and it didn’t have really anything to offer you except for looking at the art.”* Another noted,

To me, when you go to see exhibits, it should be extracurricular, like you should be doing it because you want to do it. I felt like I had to go in there and I had to force myself to enjoy it, when I didn’t enjoy it. And they had this one part in the game room that was so boring that you didn’t even know that it was a game room.

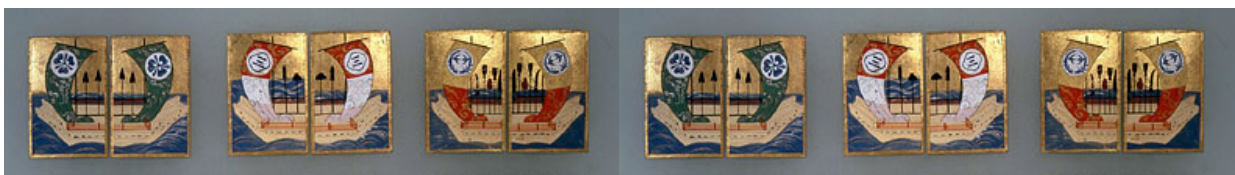
Explaining her reactions, she commented that I think the title is what made me expect too much out of it because it is *Asian Games*, ... and when I got there I was like ‘oh, the history of Asian games’.

The third high school judge, who called the overall exhibition ‘boring’, elaborated her criticism:

And I mean it was like very spacious, but I think the space added to [what] made it so boring ‘cause when you think of games you think of all this fun and all these things to do and it makes you want to play, play, play. And there were very few seating places, I mean other than the little game area, and there was another seating place—I don’t remember exactly where it was at—but I do remember some lady sitting down. But it was like so big; there were like no seats, and it kind of annoyed me, because I wanted to sit down for a minute. Anyways, they didn’t have any sounds or anything, and I’m not saying that games are all about sounds, but I think what would have added to it, even if it were Asian music or something. And I think what also made me not really care too much for it is that I anticipated too much out of it.

Expectations also play a role in what visitors communicate to others about an exhibition. One Korean visitor who heard about it from his friends related,

One [friend] who was a foreign service person who has been in Southeast Asia thought



it was very well presented. But my friends who were Koreans were not too impressed because there were only one or two Korean artifacts, games that we grew up with. I came to see if there were any of them.

He continued,

I came to see at least one Korean thing that I used to grow up with. I'm surprised there's no kite. And things we used to play with the foot or with sticks. But you cannot present all of the things. It's expensive and they come from diverse areas. But that was my impression; it didn't fit my yearning to see.

In contrast, and at a most personal level, one Chinese visitor talked about the pride he felt at looking at the games, especially in talking about weiqi:

Oh yeah, it's popular. I mean that's the thing, we are really proud of it. It's been like 1000 years, but it still survives, and it's still popular. I think that is true, one is weiqi and another one is mahjong.

One person's expectations were in games of ordinary people. He said,

I'd rather be playing things that people grow up with, and these are very well-to-do or palace-kept things that came out here to be shown, but I don't know that ordinary people would have backgammon or the shell poetry reading. I think that [exhibition] is more museum looking than it is part of us growing up. That's my experience.

In contrast, a visiting 5th grade student was intrigued by an 8th-century bowl of silver gilt.

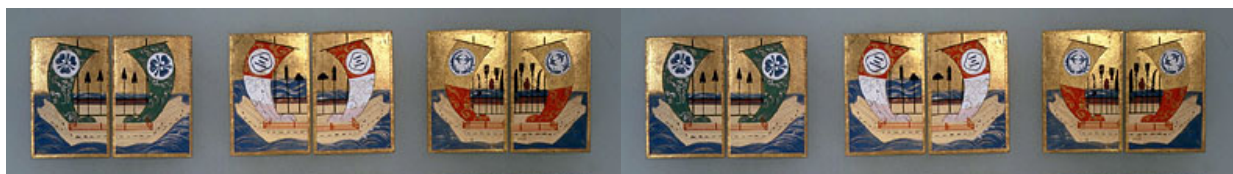


Indian cubic dice

On it was embossed one of the oldest images of people playing backgammon. In the image the winner appears to shout, his arm raised in the air. When this was pointed out to him, he nodded with appreciation and told the interviewer accompanying the group, *Man, they don't make those [bowls] for us!*

Another man was pleased, as it met his expectations:

Well I was interested in the origins of the games so I pretty much satisfied that curiosity. I'm also interested in playing games in general. So...Generally I thought it was very nice.





Summary

This exhibition presents Asia's fundamental role in the development and evolution of games. It includes some of Asia's most significant examples of boards, pieces, and other game-playing paraphernalia from museums and private collections worldwide. *Asian Games* describes the origins of the games on display and also demonstrates that many of the games represented in the exhibition originated in one part of Asia and traveled through others, were transformed in new cultural contexts, and sometimes found their way to the West, where they are still enjoyed today. While some respondents were critical of the presentation, visitors and staff who were interviewed for this study generally appreciated the artistic quality of the objects, understood at least some of the exhibition's key messages, and found aspects of the exhibition that resonated with their backgrounds and experiences. Visitors who expected a connoisseur show or those who expected to add to their overall cultural appreciation were especially engaged by the exhibition. Those whose interest was primarily in learning to play games or improve their skills were disappointed in the exhibition's limits. Regardless of expectation, however, the exhibition evoked pleasurable memories of game playing and an appreciation of the origins of many familiar games.

Image Credits

All images courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

Border design:

Matching cards (E-awase karuta)
Japan; Edo period (1618–1868), 19th century
Ink and color on paper; 8.2 cm x 5.6 cm each
Tokyo National Museum

Cover

Upper Left:

Formerly attributed to Ma Yuan
(active ca. 1189–1225)
The Football Players
China; Ming dynasty (1368–1644), 15th century
Hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk,
115.6 x 55.3 cm
© Cleveland Museum of Art, 2004, Gift of Mr. And
Mrs. Wilbure Cowett, 1971.26

Lower Left:

Matching cards (E-awase karuta)

Right:

Polo players
China; Tang dynasty (618–907), 8th century
Earthenware, traces of polychrome decoration,
Approx. 39.4 x 33 x 9.2 cm
Purchase, the R.H. Norton Trust, 62.13 and 62.14

Page 4:

Go board with container and pieces
Japan; Edo period (1615–1868), early 18th century
Wood, with gold *maki-e* on lacquer ground; 27.0 x
45.4 x 42.0 cm; container height: 10.0 cm, diameter:
11.0 cm
Kozu Kobunka Kaikan Museum, 6A-8

Page 9:

Buzurjmihir Inventing Nard (Backgammon) in
Answer to the Kain of Hind's Chess, from the
Shahnama (Book of kings)
Iran, Safavid period (1502–1722), 1536
Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper
Lent by the British Library, Add. 15531, folio 445b

Page 14:

Game pieces for mahjong or Chinese dominoes
China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), 1873 or earlier,
Bamboo and ivory
Lent by the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 28.779,
gift of the Long Island Historical Society

Page 15:

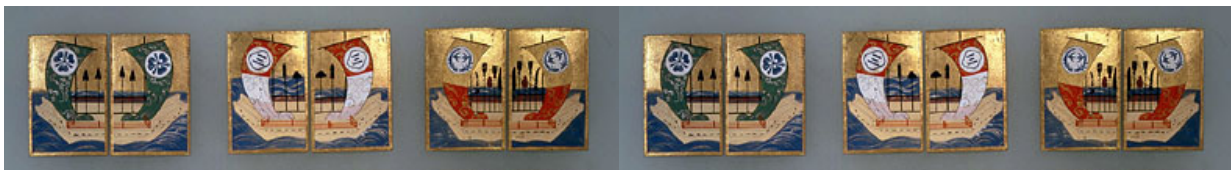
Liubo players
China; Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.),
1st century B.C.E.–1st century C.E. Ceramic,
approx. 12 x 15 cm, The British Museum

Page 16:

Snakes and ladders board
England, date unknown
Ink on paper, Lent by a private collection

Page 19:

Cubic dice
India, 19th century, Various materials
Lent by a private collection





Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis
Washington, DC 20560-0405
www.si.edu/opanda