

# Cataloguing the 'Oriental' in MoDA's Silver Studio Collection



## A Reflective Report Kirsty Kerr, July 2023

Cover Image: Example of items catalogued as 'oriental' in MoDA's Silver Studio Collection. This wallpaper design features trees, flowers and a pagoda; the words 'English Made' are visible alongside its trade mark.

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## Background: *Setting the Scene*

### About this Project

This project looked at the use of the word 'oriental' as a descriptive term in Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture (MoDA)'s [Silver Studio Collection](#). It was used by studio designers to describe a loosely-defined set of visual characteristics that gestured vaguely towards 'Eastern' motifs, either in their own work or in visual reference material. Subsequent cataloguers of these items have continued to use the term 'oriental' uncritically.

The project was not simply about reporting the terms used by the Silver Studio, but how MoDA describe the collection now - primarily in their internal catalogue, but also considering its impact on wider practice. It aimed to build on work going on elsewhere in the sector, which draws attention to the need to tackle in-built assumptions inherent within museum databases.<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting on current discourse, I explored how MoDA might unpack the word today to add more specific or suitable terms to the catalogue, in order to be both more appropriate and more useful to all users in finding relevant items.

### Aims and Methodology

Developed with the [New Museum School](#) and [University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies](#), the project spanned eight weeks, with one dedicated work day per week. The first three were on-site and largely involved familiarising myself with MoDA's collection stores and database, and the items therein. The remaining weeks took place remotely and involved collating my research, grounding it within relevant theory and critically reflecting on MoDA's - and my own - museum practice. An additional five weeks were used to compile and curate my findings into a report.

My process included reviewing and selecting from a catalogue of items termed 'oriental' in the collection, examining these first hand, and comparing the ways they are described across internal records (Silver Studio daybooks, MoDA's accession forms and collections database) as well as on public platforms. I created an audit of this information, cross-referencing findings to produce a series of case studies that highlight how item descriptions have, or have not, changed over time.

As part of the New Museum School 'Inclusive Transformation' programme, the project's wider aims are to expand audiences and nurture a museum workforce that better represents the diversity of the UK. The scheme recognises that sector-wide change will only happen when museums employ a wider range of people, so that more diverse voices and interpretations of heritage will be heard.<sup>2</sup>

In partnering with MoDA in this work, I hoped to help the museum to continue to think critically and be open to doing things differently in future, to make their collections more engaging, inclusive and accessible for all.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Collections Trust, *Decolonising the Database*, 2021 <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/decolonisation/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.cultureand.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/02/NewMuseum\\_School\\_Advanced\\_Programme\\_Brochure\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.cultureand.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/02/NewMuseum_School_Advanced_Programme_Brochure_pdf.pdf) [accessed 18 July 2023].



## The Silver Studio Collection: An Introduction

The Silver Studio Collection is the archive of one of Britain's leading commercial design studios, founded by Arthur Silver in 1880 and active until 1963. Based in Hammersmith, West London, the Silver Studio employed in-house and freelance designers to create domestic pattern designs, sold to manufacturers and retailers such as Sandersons, Essex & Co. and Liberty. Designs were mass-produced onto wallpapers, carpets and other furnishings, making their way into everyday British homes.

The archive includes over 40,000 original designs on paper, 10,000 wallpaper and textile samples, several hundred books and portfolios for design reference, as well as the studio's business and photographic records. It was given to the Hornsey College of Art in 1967, which subsequently merged into Middlesex University. Today, it is the largest collection within the University's Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, and is used as a resource for historical and visual inspiration by students and researchers.<sup>3</sup>



Images: Details of items catalogued as 'oriental' in the collection database, photographed during my placement.

As the record of a working studio responding to customer demand, the Silver Studio Collection gives insight into the tastes of the period - including the fashion for so-called 'oriental' motifs. In MoDA's collections database, the scope note for the style term 'Oriental/ Chinoiserie' tells us that

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s...wallpaper and textile manufacturers, also keen to profit from the latest craze, began producing papers and fabrics with Chinese and Oriental landscape scenes. Exotic birds, black backgrounds, Oriental figures, lanterns and temples were all common motifs...<sup>4</sup>

A nuanced look at the collection should acknowledge both the role of 'Eastern' influences on the studio (for example, Japanese katagami stencils used as source inspiration) but also, its own role in reflecting and maintaining visions of the 'Orient' held in the British imagination, domesticating them for consumption. A critical look at the collection, and the way it is described across records, should address its latent relationship to notions of Empire.

<sup>3</sup> Summarised from Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, *Overview of MoDA's Collection History* [n.d.]

<sup>4</sup> Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, *Scope Note for 'Oriental/ Chinoiserie'* [n.d.]

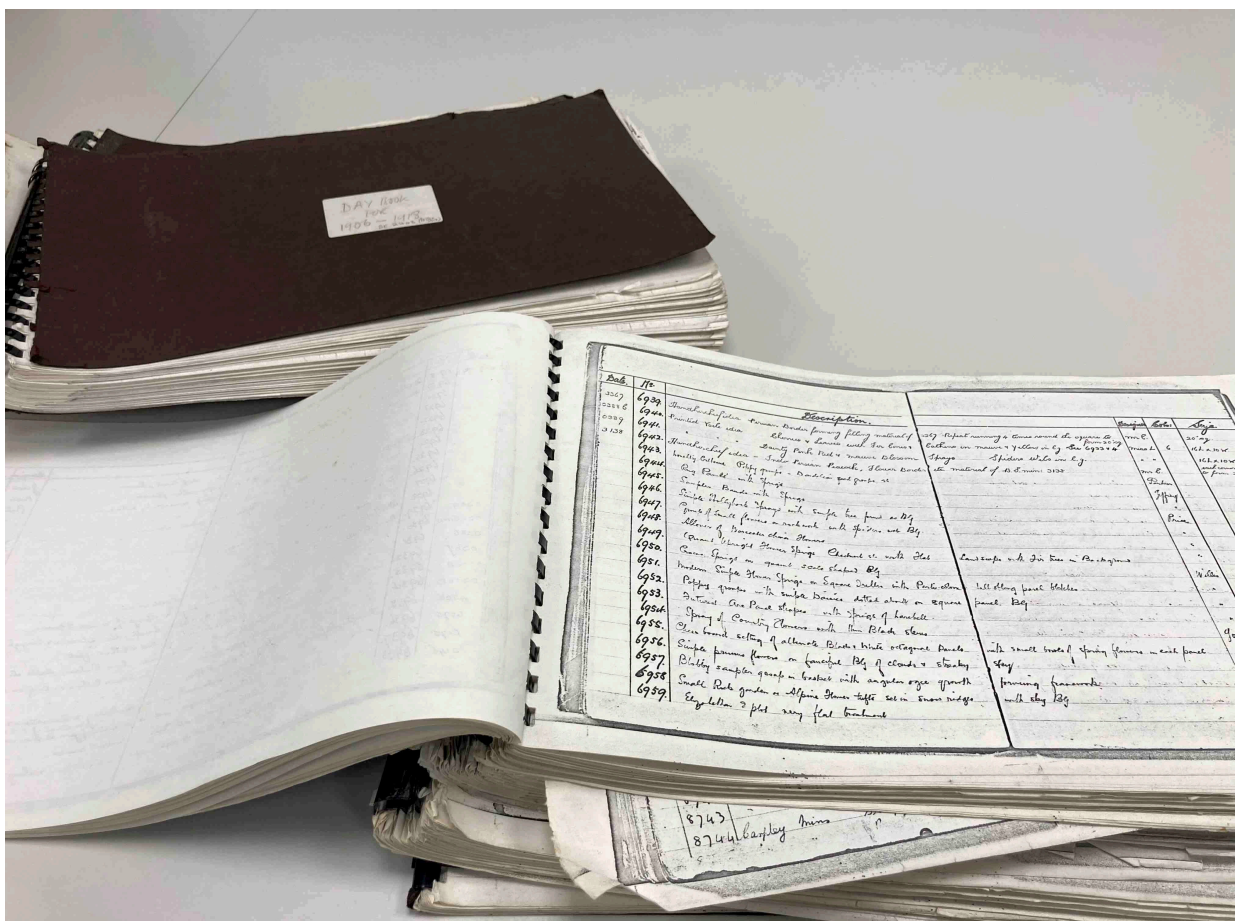


## The Silver Studio Collection: Case Studies

The accompanying series of Case Studies (see **Appendix**) highlight some of the nuances and complexities to consider when viewing MoDA's database through a decolonial lens.

The studies examine 'mixed' representations of 'Asian' cultural motifs in the collection, and inconsistencies in how these are described, including levels of vagueness in cataloguing terms. They analyse changes made to descriptions, including those that reveal subjective or multiple perspectives, and those that utilise the addition of historical context. Finally, they consider the relationship between internal record descriptions and public-facing, online interpretation.

The Silver Studio Collection is somewhat unusual in that it was acquired as a commercial studio archive, organised according to working practices rather than typical museum classifications. Applying principles of 'decolonisation' to a design collection of this sort (as opposed to, for example, an ethnographic museum) is not always straight-forward. In the discussion that follows, I consider how MoDA can contribute an approach to decolonial practice that is currently missing in museum discourse.



Images: Examples of Silver Studio daybook records at MoDA, explored as part of my research.

## Discussion: *Scoping the Surroundings*

### East of Where? On Positionality

The word 'oriental' comes from the Latin, 'Orient', meaning East. A navigational term, its use is inherently Eurocentric, presuming a Western vantage point. Edward Said's seminal text, 'Orientalism' unpacks its relationship to power and Empire extensively, as discussed below.

When addressing a term so tied to notions of position and perspective, to not consider my own 'vantage point' would be amiss. As a person of mixed White and South East Asian heritage, issues of Asian-British, ESEA diaspora, and mixed-race identity have personal significance, and are pertinent to my reflections on ideas of cross-culture, otherness and belonging, and British perceptions and portrayals of 'Eastern' cultures. The work of 'decolonisation' also carries complexity as a person with dual-heritage, holding the tensions of 'colonised' and 'coloniser' and who or what I might be seen to represent.

As well as personal identities, it is useful to reflect on my position within the sector. With a background in public programming, community engagement and curating artist-led spaces, I understand my practice as 'museum-adjacent' but often operating outside the institution (though throughout this project, I considered how this might not be perceived as - or indeed actually be - the case). Regardless, I acknowledge that my enthusiasms align with museums' public-facing work, and their relationship to worlds outside the sector, which is reflected in my discussion.

### Orienting the 'Oriental'

While the project focused on the use of 'oriental' as related to MoDA's specific collections, it is helpful to outline some of its wider associations, and to consider their relevance to museum practice and beyond.

Frequently cited as definitive, Said's 1978 exposition on 'Orientalism' continues to shape postcolonial theory today. His argument for 'Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the 'Orient'' maintains that the idea is intrinsically bound to Empire. He contends that the picture of a homogenous, exoticised 'Orient' is not only imagined, but constructed, by the West, in order to colonise it. In this imbalanced power relationship, the West upholds the East as its perpetually inferior 'other', wherein 'the former writes about, whereas the latter is written about'.<sup>5</sup>

Though Said's influence endures, more recent thinkers add nuance to the discussion. Homi Bhabha's idea of an empowered cultural 'hybridity' or 'third space' challenges the binary, one-way dynamic assumed in Said's argument.<sup>6</sup> Lau and Mendes' discourse on 're-Orientalism', a form of deliberate self-othering, suggests 'orientalised' peoples may subvert power to varying degrees, 'whether by complying with perceived [Western] expectations... playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes (eds.), *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011).

Nonetheless, the term's problematic connotations are widely criticised, evidenced by former US President Obama removing the word 'oriental' from federal law in 2016,<sup>8</sup> and several institutions renaming their 'Oriental Studies' faculties as 'Asian and Middle Eastern Studies', including the University of Oxford in 2022.<sup>9</sup>

Academia and museum theory are niche fields, so it is vital to remember the world beyond the sector - not just to avoid the 'echo chamber', but to cultivate a practice with grounding and relevance in wider society and everyday life. It might therefore be helpful to reflect on conversations happening in other areas.

### 'Oriental' and Fragrance

Commonly seen on scented candles and bubble baths, 'oriental' remains an official category in perfumery, 'distinguished by its warm, sensual notes'.<sup>i</sup> The first perfume to be marketed as such was Guerlain's *Shalimar* in 1921,<sup>ii</sup> supposedly inspired by India's Shalimar Gardens and the Taj Mahal, as told through its highly exoticised advertising.

In recent years, debate around both the outdatedness and usefulness of 'oriental' as a scent descriptor led to the Institute for Art and Olfaction and the British Society of Perfumers recommending removal of the term,<sup>iii</sup> and to Fragrances of the World restructuring their classification wheels with 'more inclusive vocabulary'.<sup>iv</sup> Replacement terms have not been universally agreed, however, with some perfumers arguing that 'oriental' should be preserved as an important part of fragrance heritage. These debates have much relevance to current museum discourse - including ideas around classification systems, inclusive terminology, and the evolution of language, which are pertinent to this project.



Left: Screenshots of 'Fragrances of the World' fragrance wheels in 2021 and 2022, showing updated 'oriental' classifications. (Source: CBC Canada <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/oriental-fragrance-category-industry-petition-1.6084802>)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/president-obama-removes-oriental-and-negro-from-federal-law-7041701.html> [accessed 19 July 2023].

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ames.ox.ac.uk/article/announcing-a-change-of-name-to-the-faculty-of-asian-and-middle-eastern-studies> [accessed 19 July 2023].

<sup>i</sup> Madelyn Chung, 'Does Anyone Else Think It's Weird That "Oriental" Is a Widely Used Perfume Category?', *FASHION Magazine*, 2019 <https://fashionmagazine.com/flare/oriental-perfume-problematic/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.mic.com/life/oriental-perfume-racist-legacy> [accessed 19 July 2023].

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Fragrances of the World, *It's Time to Change*, 2022 <https://bsp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/MICHAEL-EDWARDS-TIME-TO-CHANGE.pdf> [accessed 18 July 2023].



## 'Oriental' and Food

Perhaps the most prevalent use of 'oriental' today is in relation to food. It is not unusual to find it on the shop-fronts of Asian food stores, or even ready-meals and packaged sandwiches in mainstream supermarkets, selling 'a taste of the Orient'. It speaks to various debates around 'authenticity' in cuisine, sometimes aligning with terms like 'pan-Asian' or 'Asian fusion' food. Within these discussions are all the nuances of cultural appreciation, appropriation and assimilation - from traditional recipes adapted for Western palettes, to White chefs being credited for putting Asian dishes 'on the map',<sup>v</sup> to communities commodifying their own cultural stereotypes as a form of survival, or entrepreneurialism.<sup>vi</sup>



Image: 'Oriental Food' signage for a store close to MoDA's building, photographed during my placement.

On issues of terminology, community organiser Jenny Lau suggests that adding suffixes like '-style' and '-inspired' to market 'Asian' flavours continues to mask forms of appropriation and power imbalance, and that even well-meaning terms can reach a 'semantic satiation point'.<sup>vii</sup> On 'oriental' itself, writer Kat Chow considers how, as a second-generation migrant, her perception of the term differs to her father's, in relation to both Chinese restaurants and Chinese-American identity. Her conclusion poignantly connects the terminologies we accept to wider issues of inclusion and exclusion:

as long as he keeps using [the term], it'll be acceptable for others to feel that way about him - as someone, or something, inextricably foreign, unable to ever truly belong... and even if my generation of Asian-Americans rejected it from the start, we can't dislodge it from everyone else's minds... [it] won't matter if the rest of the world refuses to bend.<sup>viii</sup>

## On Self-describing and Representation

Labels assigned to peoples and cultures who didn't choose them hold inherent issues of power. To paraphrase Said, who is *being* named and who is *doing* the naming?

While there is a case for reclaiming a name (and Lau and Mendes discuss complexities within this), Sylvia Shin Huey Chong reflects that in the US, 'activists felt that "Oriental" simply carried too much negative historical baggage for them to resignify', advocating the preferred term 'Asian American'.<sup>10</sup> (It is worth noting that in the US, both terms are taken to mean 'East Asian', and

<sup>v</sup> These ideas are discussed extensively by Jaya Saxena in 'What Did 'Authenticity' in Food Mean In 2019?', *Eater*, 2019 <https://www.eater.com/2019/12/3/20974732/authentic-food-definition-yelp> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>vi</sup> Sandy Lee, 'Chinese Identity in and Beyond Chinatown' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Princeton University, 2022) <https://dataspace.princeton.edu/handle/88435/dsp019c67wq99n> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>vii</sup> Jenny Lau, 'Style and -Inspired', *Eating for Longevity, Chewing on Identity*, 2023 <https://celestialpeach.substack.com/p/style-and-inspired> [accessed 18 July 2023].

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whilst Said primarily references the 'Middle East', this is how 'oriental' is most commonly understood today).

In a UK context, 'Asian' and 'Asian British' usually refer to people of South Asian heritage, such as Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi communities. This is frequently seen in ethnicity data surveys which separate 'Asian' and 'Chinese' options, while those from different East or South East Asian backgrounds are left with the literally othering category: 'Asian - Other'.<sup>11</sup>

Galvanised by the rise in hate crimes towards East and South East Asian people during Covid-19,<sup>12</sup> activist groups like [besea.n](http://besea.n) (Britain's East and South East Asian Network) and End the Virus of Racism (recently renamed [End Violence and Racism](https://www.endviolenceandracism.org/)) began to self-identify and self-organise under the ESEA acronym. In their Mission Statement, [besea.n](http://besea.n) explain that

ESEA folk are underrepresented in the British media, on screen, in creative spaces and in corporate and institutional positions of power. Much of our current media representation is negative... drawing on clichéd tropes that often denigrate, fetishise or Orientalise the subjects. ESEAs are regularly left out of public discourse around Asians in Britain, and the diverse demographics are poorly defined...<sup>13</sup>

As well as community solidarity and empowerment, their aims include helping society 'represent ESEA cultures positively and respectfully, employing current terminology to combat erasure'<sup>14</sup> - a call for visibility that echoes the pun in their name. Their co-authored [Response to the Call for Evidence on Ethnic Disparities and Inequality in the UK](https://www.evidenceonethnicdisparitiesandinequality.org/) outlines the systemic discrimination that continues to result in ESEA people being 'unseen' in the UK.

In undertaking this work with MoDA, it is important to acknowledge that ESEA communities continue to be missing or mis-represented within museum collections, spaces and workforces,<sup>15</sup> and to consider what this means for the project, and the sector as a whole.

## Decolonial Practice

In recent years, the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement has brought new urgency to the call for museums to 'decolonise' and redress their imperial legacies.<sup>16</sup> Though much of this debate has focused on the repatriation and restitution of objects acquired by colonial violence, 'decolonisation' is a much wider process which encompasses all areas of museum practice. As Sumaya Kassim explains, 'the legacies of European colonialism are immeasurably deep, far-reaching and ever-mutating, and so decolonial work and resistance must take on different forms, methods and evolve accordingly'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>viii</sup> Kat Chow, 'My 'Oriental' Father: On The Words We Use To Describe Ourselves', *Code Switch*, NPR, 2019 <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/05/25/478097902/my-oriental-father-on-the-words-we-use-to-describe-ourselves> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, '46. Orientalism', in Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ and K. Scott Wong (eds.), *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, (New York: NYU Press, 2015) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15r3zv2> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>11</sup> These issues with ethnicity data are discussed further in the co-authored *Response to the Call for Evidence on Ethnic Disparities and Inequality in the UK among ESEA communities*, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.tiltedaxispress.com/blog/resources-for-the-journey-against-anti-asian-racism> [accessed 19 July 2023].

<sup>13</sup> [besea.n](http://besea.n), *Mission Statement*, 2020 <https://www.besea.n/mission-statement> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust's 2022 report, *If Nothing Changes, Nothing Changes*, reveals that only 6-8% of the arts and heritage workforce are from Global Majority backgrounds. As mentioned, data is limited for ESEA groups.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.cultureand.org/news/black-lives-matter-charter-for-the-uk-heritage-sector/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>17</sup> Sumaya Kassim, *The museum will not be decolonised*, Media Diversified, 2017 <https://mediadiversified.org/2017/11/15/the-museum-will-not-be-decolonised/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

The following examples show a range of decolonial approaches from institutions relevant to MoDA's context - from museums relating to design or domestic settings, to research projects within Universities, to heritage spaces known for their 'oriental' objects or architecture.

**V&A Dundee: *Decolonising Scotland's design history* (2019-)**

Re-writing object histories to address imperial legacies

V&A Dundee's [Decolonising our Galleries](#) project aims to uncover missing perspectives and decentre dominant narratives in their presentation of Scottish design history, addressing its legacies of Empire.

In collaboration with the Transnational Scotland Network, the museum updated exhibition labels that omitted key details or misrepresented the colonial contexts of objects in their collection. This was done through a collective re-writing process, including workshops inviting a range of participants to re-examine and deconstruct previous object histories. They share some of the re-interpretations on their website, along with a statement that explains:

We want to change the perception that these galleries are 'permanent' and that they tell 'the' story of Scottish design, because there are countless alternative perspectives that can and should be brought in to complicate, challenge and provoke further discussion...

... it is our job as a museum to bring in new objects, themes, perspectives and voices that continually challenge interpretations of the past and present, widening and providing a platform for debate and helping us interrogate preconceptions and world views.<sup>ix</sup>

**UCL and University of Warwick: *The East India Company at Home* (2011-14)**

Re-interpreting the British home in an imperial context

[The East India Company at Home](#) was a 3-year research project with the University of Warwick and University College London. It examined the British country house in an imperial and global context, and the influence of the East India Company on material and domestic tastes in Britain between 1757-1857.

Through co-produced case studies, the project examined how the acquisition, use, and circulation of Asian luxury goods shaped the British country home, situating these items within their social, cultural, political and economic contexts, and exploring how they expressed regional, national and global identities.

Object studies included [Chinese wallpaper](#), a fashionably 'exotic' luxury item that played a role in globalising the British elite home, and [Willow Pattern plates](#), an example of an 'Eastern-inspired' but Western-produced object signifying both British belonging and Asian othering: 'an attempt by British manufacturers to fabricate an idyllic far-away place, loosely understood as Chinese'.<sup>x</sup>

<sup>ix</sup> V&A Dundee, *Decolonising our Galleries: An Introduction*, 2020 <https://www.vam.ac.uk/dundee/articles/decolonising-our-galleries-an-introduction> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>x</sup> The East India Company at Home, *The Willow Pattern Case Study: The Willow Pattern Explained*, University College London: UCL Blogs, 2014 <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/the-willow-pattern-dunham-massey/the-willow-pattern-case-study-the-willow-pattern-explained/> [accessed 18 July 2023].



### Leighton House Museum: *Oriental?! An immersive and aromatic panel discussion (2022)*

Addressing colonial language through public programmes

[Oriental?!](#) was an interactive, sensory panel discussion on the use of the term in the perfume industry, hosted by Leighton House. An apt setting, the museum's 'Arab Hall' is embellished with tiles from Syria, Egypt and Turkey, and is considered a classic example of British Orientalism that reflects former resident, Lord Leighton's fascination with the region.<sup>xi</sup>

The panel was chaired by sensory heritage specialist, Tasha Marks, who remarked that the event 'addressed colonial language... and it really encapsulated [the museum's] desire to push the boundaries, reach new audiences and stimulate discussion.'<sup>xii</sup> She was joined by range of panellists with backgrounds in academia, art history, perfumery and community engagement, who together unpacked the term, debating the importance of language and the tensions between cultural appreciation and appropriation.

### Museum of the Home: *Uncovering Vietnamese Archives Artist Residency (2022-)*

Working with ESEA communities to uncover under-told histories

Part of their commitment to diversifying collections and working with local ESEA communities, Museum of the Home's [Uncovering Vietnamese Archives](#) aims to tell different stories of home with the Vietnamese diaspora in East London.

The project launched with an open call for an ESEA artist-in-residence, focused on activating Vietnamese archives collaboratively and through a contemporary lens. The artist's role was to devise creative, meaningful ways for ESEA communities to engage with archives, to think critically about British-Vietnamese migration stories.

Artist Dora Lam delivered a series of empowering workshops, including self-archiving through photography 'to take an active role in documenting and representing your own... histories', building a living archive 'to present your stories through your own personal objects', and a sound story lab 'to realise the potential of your voice... [to create] sounds which reflect your... identities.'<sup>xiii</sup>

## Decolonising the Database

In a report on the Centre for Design History's *Decolonising the Database* event in 2021, Helen Mears reflects that the majority of decolonial work has been 'in the visible fields of public statements and programmes' and that, 'hidden from public view, the database often escapes critical interrogation'.<sup>18</sup> Museums have also been criticised for making performative public

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/museums/arab-hall-leighton-house> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>xii</sup> Tasha Marks, 'Panel Recording: Oriental?! at Leighton House', *AVM Curiosities*, 2023

<https://www.avmcuriosities.com/blog/2023/9/month/panel-recording-oriental-at-leighton-house> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>xiii</sup> Museum of the Home, *About Uncovering Vietnamese Archives: R&D Lab with Dora Lam*, 2023

<https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk/what-we-do/communities/esea-community/uncovering-vietnamese-archives-about/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>18</sup> Helen Mears, *Report: Decolonising the Database*, University of Brighton: Centre for Design History Blog, 2021

<https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/centrefordesignhistory/2021/09/10/report-decolonising-the-database/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

gestures that are not backed up by any real change to their internal 'core' practices.<sup>19</sup> However, increasingly and encouragingly, there are examples of work being done 'behind-the-scenes'.

Through their collection management standard, *Spectrum*, Collections Trust is a sector-support organisation that 'help[s] museums capture and share the information that gives objects meaning'.<sup>20</sup> Recently, they have [signposted resources](#) that highlight ways museums can redress colonial legacies within their databases and cataloguing processes.<sup>21</sup> Many examples are from museums with clear links to colonialism, for instance, Bristol Museums and Archives' work with records documenting how the city profited from the trade in enslaved Africans, which has involved reassessing how the collection is described, reviewing problematic language and addressing omissions.<sup>22</sup>

These resources should not be seen as 'decolonisation toolkits' that can be applied 'across the board', and clearly each museum must take a tailored approach. On one level, identifying how MoDA's specific context fits within this work, and what 'decolonising' the Silver Studio Collection database actually means, is not clear-cut. As a design archive without disputed provenance or explicit links to colonialism, methods for addressing legacies of Empire may be less apparent.

Below, I outline relevant arguments and approaches, which consider database terminology and the structure of the database itself. As well as providing insight, these examples reveal gaps where MoDA might contribute new, nuanced thought to the discussion.

## On Terminology

### *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector* National Museums for World Cultures (2018)

Addressing the evolution of language and its relevance to museum practice ('our objects may be timeless, but the ways we speak about them are not')<sup>xiv</sup>, [this publication from the Netherlands' National Museum of World Cultures](#) provides terminology guidance for the cultural sector, with the aim of building more inclusive institutions. Alongside essays and case studies from a range of practitioners, it includes a glossary of words that are considered sensitive or contested, the context as to why, and alternative terms that may be used in museums.

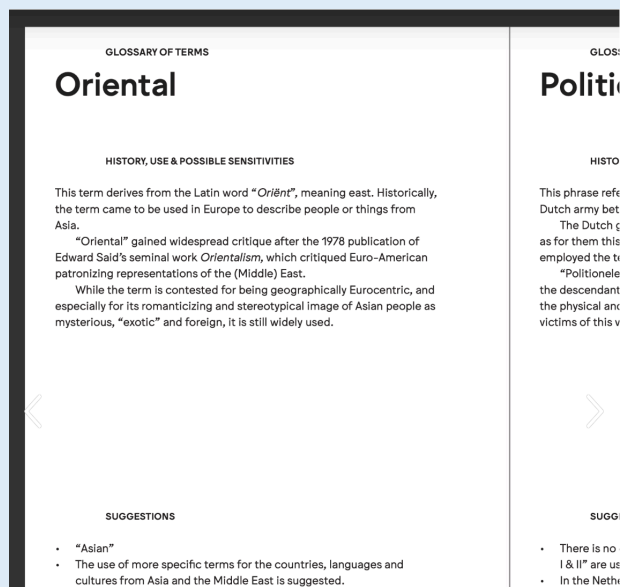


Image: Screenshot of the glossary's listing for 'Oriental'.

The listing for 'Oriental' draws on Edward Said's critique and suggests that 'Asian', or more geographically specific terms should be used instead.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.cultureand.org/news/black-lives-matter-charter-for-the-uk-heritage-sector/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>20</sup> Collections Trust, *Getting it together*, 2021 <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/tapping-our-collections-potential/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>21</sup> <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/decolonisation/> [accessed 19 July 2023].

<sup>22</sup> <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/blog/decolonising-descriptions/> [accessed 19 July 2023].

<sup>xiv</sup> Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld (eds.), *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, (National Museum of World Cultures, 2018).

***Inclusive Terminology Glossary: Guidance on Discriminatory and Harmful Language for Cultural Heritage Professionals***, Carissa Chew (2021-)

A more UK-specific project, the [Inclusive Terminology Glossary](#) was created by Carissa Chew and exists as a series of live, collaborative documents that anyone can contribute to via Google Drive. The project aims 'to collate accurate information about the historic and contemporary usage of words related to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and disability, to inform decision-making around language use in the heritage sector.' Alongside the glossary, Chew outlines principles of inclusive description and practical strategies for approaching this type of work.

At the time of writing, the listing for 'Oriental' cites recommendations from the *Words Matter* publication, with the contextual note for 'Orientalist' asserting it is 'an outdated colonialist term'.

<b>Oriental/s</b>	Oriental derives from the Latin word for "east". Historically, the term came to be used in Europe to describe people or things from South Asia, East Asia, and the so-called "Middle East", and was even sometimes used in lieu of "Semite". The term is criticised for being geographically Eurocentric, and especially for its romanticising and stereotypical image of South Asian, East Asian, and Middle Eastern people as mysterious, "exotic" and foreign.		Tropenmuseum – <a href="#">Words Matter</a> Owl apps – <a href="#">List of ethnic slurs by ethnicity</a>
<b>Oriental literature (LCSH)</b>	Asian literature? (Specifically in the Library of Congress Subject Heading context)		Cataloging Lab - <a href="#">Problem LCSH</a>
<b>Orientalist/s</b>	"Orientalist" is an outdated colonialist term for scholars who took interest in any aspect of East Asian, South Asia, or Middle Eastern history, languages, and cultures. The term is homogenising and non-specific.		

Image: Screenshot of the glossary's listings for 'Oriental/s', 'Oriental literature' and 'Orientalist/s' (July 2023).

Both projects state that they are works-in-progress and not definitive guides, acknowledging that language is constantly in transition. Chew includes a disclaimer that the Glossary 'inevitably contains some factual errors and major omissions' and encourages heritage professionals 'to use their best judgement and consult relevant communities and/or additional resources when the information contained... is not sufficient.'<sup>23</sup>

Although useful starting points, neither suggestion amply speaks to the nuances and contexts specific to MoDA's collection. In the article referenced below, Dalal-Clayton and Rutherford advocate a case-by-case approach to addressing issues of language, while also noting the sparsity of resources that focus on UK contexts (e.g. that address the specifics of British racism and colonial history), or on material culture like art and design.<sup>24</sup> Further consideration on the use of 'oriental' in these contexts - as well as any alternative or replacement terms - should therefore be developed.

<sup>23</sup> Carissa Chew, *Inclusive Terminology Glossary*, 2021 <https://culturalheritageterminology.co.uk/glossary/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>24</sup> Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ananda Rutherford, *Against a New Orthodoxy: Decolonised "Objectivity" in the Cataloguing and Description of Artworks*, Paul Mellon Centre Photographic Archive, 2022 <https://photoarchive.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/groups/against-a-new-orthodoxy> [accessed 18 July 2023].



**Against a New Orthodoxy:**

***Decolonised "Objectivity" in the Cataloguing and Description of Artworks***

Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ananda Rutherford (2022)

Discussing their work with the Paul Mellon Centre Photographic Archive, Dalal-Clayton and Rutherford make a strong case against what they deem a 'new orthodoxy' in the sector's attempts to 'decolonise' language in reactionary ways. Whilst acknowledging the need to address racist titles and problematic terms, they argue that presuming a 'single, universally appropriate way' to rename or re-describe replicates the same legacies museums are attempting to counter, and ironically

...uphold[s] the false sense of objectivity that cultural institutions have been so heavily criticised for promoting... akin to cleaning up or erasing uncomfortable historical content... the results are closer to the authoritative, curatorial, descriptive "neutrality" of traditional GLAM cataloguing...<sup>xiv</sup>

Instead, they advocate approaches that are specific in context, transparent in purpose and backed by research to make a meaningful difference. They contend that merely replacing offensive words will not change problematic representations, rather, we must also 'be alert to the underlying context, purpose, and effect' of descriptions and the historical, cultural and socio-political attitudes they expose, in order to problematise them.

Applied to MoDA's catalogue, this argument exposes the problem as wider than an issue of language, and the solution as more complex than removing a term. Put succinctly by Esther Peeren in the *Words Matter* publication: 'we cannot just "clean up" words, we have to also address the worldviews they represent.'<sup>25</sup>

## On Systems and Structures

Beyond the words and descriptions within their catalogues, museums must also critically examine the systems and frameworks by which they are organised. Mears reflects that

the museum database... is often structured around problematic classifications and hierarchies... [that] reflect not only the colonial contexts in which collections were formed, but also the narrow perspectives of the museum workforce...<sup>26</sup>

If, like museums, the very structure of the database was founded on imperial hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric forms of knowledge, can it really be decolonised? The practitioners' arguments summarised below speak to this in perceptive and progressive ways, exposing the systemic problems, whilst demonstrating ways museums can still work with the tools they have to drive change - and imagine future possibilities.

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<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Esther Peeren, 'Language Cannot be "Cleaned Up"', in Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld (eds.), *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, (National Museum of World Cultures, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Helen Mears, *Report: Decolonising the Database*, 2021.

### Kathleen Lawther

In [A Poor Curator Blames Her Tools](#), Lawther contends that database systems themselves are not the problem, but rather the information we choose to put into them. She argues that museums must stop 'gatekeeping' who contributes to records, and create space for voices outside of the sector:

We have treated the database as a tool to store objective facts about collections – measurements, locations, practicalities... We have neglected to record information that does not fit this mould... viewpoints from outside the dry curatorial voice... we have to do the work to document [these] with the same respect we have documented the 'expert' opinions of the curators of the past.<sup>xv</sup>

In [People-Centred Cataloguing](#), she maintains that prioritising peoples' needs will make collections more accessible for diverse audiences. To challenge cultural bias in descriptions, she advocates 'ethical, mutually beneficial user-research' to find preferred terms, and suggests that information about cataloguers should also be included to acknowledge subjectivity. She notes that *Spectrum* has 'units of information' that could be better utilised to capture more varied information of this sort.<sup>xvi</sup>

### Carissa Chew

Alongside her *Inclusive Terminology Glossary*, Chew includes a comprehensive list of practical strategies for museums undertaking this work. This includes methods for making changes to metadata, such as creating a 'cultural sensitivities' or 'content warning' field in the database, placing harmful language in inverted commas and supplementing it with alternative but equally meaningful terminology, and tracking these changes by keeping records of previous descriptions in the descriptive field. She suggests ways to warn users about discriminatory language, such as adding filters or advisory statements to the catalogue, as well as allowing them to report material by adding a note encouraging user-feedback or a 'suggest a correction' option.

Other suggestions include establishing a 'descriptive and interpretive practice policy', which could include reviewing cultural sensitivities as part of regular cataloguing practice, and publishing a 'glossary of preferred terminology', which could help users to locate material that relates to underrepresented histories. Museums can also publish an institutional statement on their website, which could be general or specific to a particular collection, and provide additional historical context.<sup>xvii</sup>

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<sup>xv</sup> Kathleen Lawther, *Decolonising the Database Part 2: A Poor Curator Blames Her Tools*, Acid Free Blog, 2018 <http://acidfreeblog.com/documentation/decolonising-the-database-2/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>xv</sup> Kathleen Lawther, *People-Centred Cataloguing*, 2023 <http://www.kathleenlawther.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/people-centred-cataloguing-final.pdf> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>xvii</sup> Carissa Chew, *Inclusive Terminology Glossary*, 2021.

## Marijke Kunst

In *Being True to the Catalogue*, Kunst discusses the ethical tensions that arise when museums share their catalogues online, particularly regarding titles that contain offensive terms that were used historically. She questions whether 'hiding' these words from record is 'effectively distorting or embellishing history', whilst also acknowledging the museum's responsibility to ensure every person accessing the collection feels included.<sup>xviii</sup>

She outlines the approach taken by the National Museum of World Cultures, which makes functional distinctions between the internal database and its public presentation. In the database, the museum provides preferred terms for describing things, but also includes a range of synonyms and older terms to aid object retrieval. On their website, users can search the thesaurus but derogatory terms will not be visible; results will direct them to preferred terms.

In this example, offensive terms are not deleted from the database structure (so researchers can still retrieve these, e.g. if they are interested in the cataloguing history), but the museum can use different public-facing 'presentation titles' that do not repeat discriminatory words found in the record. The website also includes explanations on their decision to replace derogatory words with more respectful terminology.

## Ananda Rutherford

In her presentation for [Doing the Work](#) with the Contemporary Art Society, Rutherford implores museums to first reflect on the structural issues and motivations of 'decolonising' their databases, recognising the aim is not simply 'data cleaning' or 'reputation saving', but to move towards a more anti-racist and critically reflective practice.<sup>xix</sup>

She contends that museums have aligned with colonial 'myths' that can be challenged and changed - from the immutability of classification and categorisation systems, to ideas of value, neutrality and objectivity.

She suggests the first practical step is to assess and audit the database, to understand 'where documenting and cataloguing is replicating racist tropes and bias', and to use the audit data to inform new policy and practice. She advocates the preservation of historical catalogue descriptions as another record of human cultural production, which museums need to be able to look back on, identify and learn from. She urges museum staff to mobilise the tools and systems they already have (e.g. to add or show preferred, related and historic terms), and to be transparent in these processes.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Marijke Kunst, 'Being True to the Catalogue', in Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld (eds.), *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, (National Museum of World Cultures, 2018).

<sup>xix</sup> Ananda Rutherford, *Doing the Work: Documentation and Decolonisation*, 2021  
<https://museumdataanddry.com/2021/03/24/documentation-and-decolonisation/> [accessed 18 July 2023].



## Marenka Thompson-Odlum

In her presentation for the *Doing the Work* programme, Thompson-Odlum reflects on *Labelling Matters* at the Pitt Rivers Museum, a project that aims to both tackle problematic language in the museum and to reimagine its labelling to find new, innovative forms of interpretation.

She suggests that in future, museum databases should make object histories retrievable in more nuanced and complex ways, and incorporate knowledge outside of the 'rational' Western forms upheld by the traditional curatorial voice. She speculates on how emotional or embodied ways of knowing could be accommodated – whether methods of cataloguing audio and video, for example, could allow for richer, more nuanced, multi-vocal and global records, with room for contestation and debate.

She argues that museums need to relinquish control within the database structure, to allow others to input records in their own voice, without the museum 'correcting' them.<sup>xx</sup>

As seen from these examples, museums can and should address the imperial, Eurocentric frameworks that are embedded and upheld in their databases. Whether these fixed systems and hierarchical structures are 'fit for purpose' for contemporary museology, and our understanding of knowledge as pluralistic, dynamic and co-created, is a wider discussion. To paraphrase Kassim: the database will not be decolonised<sup>27</sup> - but for now, museums can seek creative ways to disrupt its established structures and narratives, using the tools at hand.

## On Re-defining

As demonstrated, the process of reviewing a catalogue term like 'oriental' is complex, and one that requires intentionality, sensitivity and transparency. Decolonial principles should be applied to the word itself, to the structures by which it is recorded, and additionally - to the methods by which it is removed, replaced or redefined.

Dalal-Clayton and Rutherford's argument against a 'new orthodoxy' warns of museums imposing new 'objective' descriptors in their renaming attempts.<sup>28</sup> Forms of 'top-down' labelling can perpetuate colonial legacies, by presuming the authority to categorise and define. As such, any changes MoDA makes to the use of 'oriental' should be approached collaboratively, and invite diverse voices to be part of the process.

In this respect, Collection Trust's revised standard, [Spectrum 5.1](#) aims to encourage a 'more open and inclusive approach' to documenting collections. Updated through consultation in 2022, it also includes a new definition for 'Cataloguing':

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<sup>xx</sup> Marenka Thompson-Odlum, *Doing the Work: Documenting Collections*, Collections Trust, 2021

<https://collectiontrust.org.uk/resource/doing-the-work-documenting-collections/> [accessed July 18 2023].

<sup>27</sup> Sumaya Kassim, *The museum will not be decolonised*, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ananda Rutherford, *Against a New Orthodoxy*, 2022.

## Cataloguing the 'Oriental': A Reflective Report

The *ongoing process* of recording and managing information about collections, often *from multiple perspectives*, to meet the needs of a range of users.<sup>29</sup> [my emphasis]

The new standard promotes the multi-vocal potentiality of the database, and aims to 'dispel the concept of an 'ideal' or 'finished' catalogue record'. For example, it highlights how the 'Use of collections' procedure can record and link a wider range of user-generated content. This can counter the 'objective' institutional voice by incorporating new, critical perspectives from more diverse communities.

### On Co-creating Change

In order to find preferred, culturally-sensitive terms, museums can consult with relevant community groups and 'external experts' beyond the sector. However, it is crucial that this is done in ethical, mutually-beneficial and non-extractive ways. In collaborative work, and especially regarding 'decolonisation', museums should be wary of power imbalances and who the burden of change falls upon. As Kassim explains, discussing co-curation as women of colour: 'we all deeply felt the weight of responsibility to represent and narrativize the perspectives of our communities. At the same time, we were all wary of being tokenised.'<sup>30</sup>

In *Blurring field-box boundaries*, Qanitah Malik explores participatory documentation in museums, through a series of case studies focused on ethical community collaboration. She discusses how different groups can access and enrich the database, as well as the tools and resources needed to build meaningful relationships with this type of community engagement.

The studies explore how museums can enhance collection and object descriptions by involving and acknowledging multiple descendant groups. Recommendations include 'incorporat[ing] 'unstructured' data into structured database-systems', 'layering object names/ associations' and creating spaces for audiences to provide more context through 'the addition of notes-fields, additional tagging, and linking terminology lists to collection management systems.'<sup>31</sup> Through thorough and flexible documentation, museums can provide a plurality of perspectives and tell multi-layered stories.

Malik evidences how this can be done through 'collaborative, respectful and sustained' relationships, stressing the need for spaces of engagement 'so people have a say in what values are ascribed to collections'.<sup>32</sup> The learnings from these studies are a great resource for MoDA as they consider the next steps of this project.

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<sup>29</sup> Collections Trust, *What's new in Spectrum 5.1?*, 2022 <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/spectrum-5/summary-of-changes/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>30</sup> Sumaya Kassim, *The museum will not be decolonised*, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Qanitah Malik, *Blurring Field-Box Boundaries: Documenting through Community Participation*, Collections Trust, 2021 <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Blurring-Field-Box-Boundaries-final.pdf> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

## Recommendations: *Navigating the New*

### Reflections

Through undertaking this research with MoDA, I've been challenged to critically reflect on my own position, as well as that of the museum. The project has been one of evolving learning, necessitating that I examine, question, readjust and develop my own stances and understandings as I encountered new sources of knowledge. In many ways, this process reflects a vision for museums and their databases today.

As it unfolded, I found the project's aims, questions and potential answers to be more complex than first envisaged. Redressing the use of 'oriental' in MoDA's database is not as simple as changing the term. Attempting to 'fix' this problem cumulatively uncovers new ones, and reveals its deep-rootedness. Take, for example, the following:

**If, in line with terminology guidance, we assume a position that 'oriental' is inappropriate, do we also assume a solution that it should be removed?**

-> If the term is removed from object descriptions, how then should users search for these items? Will removing it make them more difficult to retrieve?

->> If those items relate, in some way, to underrepresented histories, what does it mean to make them less discoverable?

->>> What does it mean to 'correct' or 'preserve' a record? Should we see the catalogue itself as a historical and cultural artefact?

**If we take a clear stance that 'oriental' is offensive when applied to people, do we take the same stance when it is applied to design motifs?**

-> What if the design depicts people? What if it only depicts landscapes, or flowers, or patterns? Does the term carry the same issues in all cases?

->> If the term is replaced, what should it be replaced with? Who decides? How is it decided?

->>> Are self-defined terms such as 'ESEA' or 'Asian-British' suitable in these cases?

**If, in line with terminology guidance, we should use geographic specificity, how does that apply to imagined landscapes?**

-> Is describing an imagined landscape as 'oriental' as opposed to labelling it 'Japanese', or even 'Asian', in fact more appropriate?

->> If 'oriental' assumes a Western gaze, and the depictions are by Western designers, is the term therefore accurate and appropriate?

->>> If a term is subjective, can that be acknowledged? If a term is outdated, can it be historicised? If a term is problematic, can it be redressed or reclaimed?

Though this process is clearly complex and multi-layered, I maintain that MoDA must still do the work to address the use of 'oriental' in their catalogue. While it should be approached with

## Cataloguing the 'Oriental': A Reflective Report

nuance and sensitivity, more of a stance must be taken to expose its latent links to Empire, to acknowledge that the word is not neutral, but carries issues of power and othering, belonging and exclusion. To quote Dalal-Clayton and Rutherford:

That these kinds of phrases, ideas and habits are so easily repeated and published without sufficiently problematising them is evidence of the thoroughly embedded structural racism in prevalent narrations and understandings of history.<sup>33</sup>

Without problematising a term that presumes a White gaze, the museum continues to presume a White audience, and a White Britain. Beyond privileging and perpetuating Eurocentric narratives of the past, it also risks excluding audiences long underrepresented in UK museums, and wider society, in the present.

In order to redress this issue and cultivate a museum that is more representative, inclusive and accessible to all, I suggest some possible approaches below. These include ways to acknowledge and critique the imperial associations of 'oriental' **(a)** within the database and publicly, **(b)** within the term itself, and **(c)** with diverse voices and communities.

## Suggestions

In MoDA's podcast episode, [The Empire at Home](#), guest speaker and historian Sarah Cheang makes a distinction between postcolonial critique and 'decolonisation': while the former exposes the problems, the latter asks, 'so what are we going to do about this?'<sup>34</sup> I believe there are steps MoDA can take to begin 'decolonising' their practices, but the first is to acknowledge the issue and outline the work that needs doing.

### **(a) Problematising: addressing the issues with 'oriental' both internally and publicly**

MoDA can uncover and acknowledge imperial histories to better contextualise the term 'oriental', both within the database and on its public platforms.

Possible methods for addressing this internally could include:

- **Adding and updating contextual information within the database**, e.g. reviewing the current scope note for the term 'oriental', to better address its links to Empire and to make a commitment to decolonial interpretations. A similar contextual note could be added to the catalogue's overview of the Silver Studio Collection.
- **Establishing an 'inclusive cataloguing policy' and linking this to the database**, which could address cultural sensitivities and outline preferred terms and/ or guidance on how to contextualise the term in more appropriate ways (see **(b)**). This could either be a general policy or specific to the Silver Studio Collection.

For reference, MoDA can look at the [Cataloguing Code of Ethics](#) from the [Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee](#), which advocates critical cataloguing as a practice that 'focuses on understanding and changing how knowledge organisations codify systems of oppression.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ananda Rutherford, *Against a New Orthodoxy*, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Chaeng, 'The Empire at Home', *That Feels Like Home* [podcast], Series 3 Episode 2, Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, 2021 <https://moda.mdx.ac.uk/conversations/home-empire/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>35</sup> Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee, *Cataloguing Code of Ethics*, 2021 [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IBz7nXQPfr3U1P6Xiar9cLakzoNX\\_P9fq7eHvzfSIz0/](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IBz7nXQPfr3U1P6Xiar9cLakzoNX_P9fq7eHvzfSIz0/) [accessed 18 July 2023].



Possible methods for addressing this publicly could include:

- **Publishing a statement on the MoDA website**, to acknowledge legacies of Empire in the collection and its documentation, and to outline the work MoDA is doing to redress this. This could be found on the home page or the Silver Studio Collection page, and could also act as a springboard linking to wider work in their 'Co-Creation' or 'Conversations' website sections, as well as informing future programming.
- **Communicating this work via other platforms**, e.g. social media and public programmes, to promote transparency and create opportunities for dialogue (see **(c)**).

Examples of how other museums have made similar public acknowledgements, explanations or commitments include:

**Pitt Rivers Museum:** [Labelling Matters website page](#), which includes the following explanation providing context to their approach to reinterpretation and transparency:

The intention of the project is not to destroy any of these unfortunate archives, but to in fact activate and mobilise them to address some of the problems that lie at the root of racialised stereotypes and other problematic systemic colonial legacies that linger in the present.<sup>xxi</sup>

**The Keep Archive Centre:** [Inclusive Cataloguing Statement](#), which includes a section on 'Why are we doing this work?' alongside their Statement of Intent.

**Bristol Museums:** [Decolonising Descriptions: Aims and Objectives](#), which clearly outlines the steps they are taking, alongside a link to their Equalities and Inclusion Policy.

**V&A Museum:** [Tackling racist language in collections](#), a report for the Collections Trust that shares their use of disclaimers and 'suggest feedback' buttons on their website:

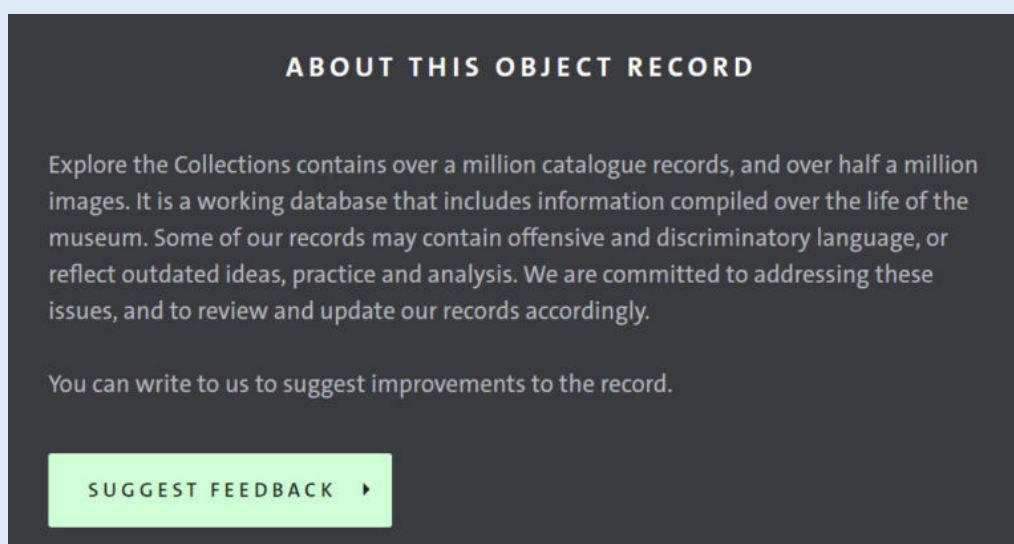


Image: The V&A's disclaimer found on object pages of their website (Source: Collections Trust).

<sup>xxi</sup> Pitt Rivers Museum, *Labelling Matters: Reviewing the Pitt Rivers Museum's use of language for the 21st century*, 2020 <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters> [accessed 18 July 2023].

Within their acknowledgements, there is room for MoDA to highlight nuances in the debate. For example, the museum can address 'oriental' in relation to power and Empire, but also create space to explore how it speaks to ideas of cross-culture, mixedness, 'hybridity' and 'authenticity', making for an engaged, multi-layered discussion that invites feedback and contention.

These steps would build on MoDA's guidance for cataloguing sensitive items (currently being developed in their internal 'Guru' management tool) and discussions in their *The Empire at Home* podcast episode, which explores colonial narratives in British homemaking in relation to their collections.

## **(b) Redressing: taking practical steps to unsettle power structures within the database and terminology**

After acknowledging the *why* of this work, MoDA can begin to tackle the *what* and *how*. They can take action to expose and unsettle colonial legacies within the database, and begin to rebalance power to promote more inclusive, globalised narratives.

In her talk on 'Deconstructing and Re-imagining the Museum Label' for the *Doing the Work* programme, Thompson-Odlum explains that when addressing problematic descriptions in the Pitt Rivers Museum collection, she asked three questions:<sup>36</sup>

- Does this label establish hierarchies?
- Does this label assign power and privilege the production of Eurocentric knowledge?
- Does this label impose White Eurocentric culture?<sup>37</sup>

MoDA can follow these or create a similar guide for reviewing usages of 'oriental' in their catalogue, to identify where the term is not 'sufficiently problematised'. While there is no 'quick fix' or blanket approach, I recommend that MoDA then consider the following actions:

- 1) **All instances of 'oriental' can be placed in inverted commas.** This is a simple action that acknowledges the subjectivity of the term, identifies bias, and goes some way to expose and challenge the 'objective' institutional voice.
- 2) **Change instances of 'oriental' to 'orientalist', 'orientalised', or 'orientalising'.** These slight alterations recognise that the term is not neutral and go some way to uncover its issues of power: where 'orientalist' suggests positionality, 'orientalised' and 'orientalising' expose that an action *has been done* to someone or something.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, as the root word is retained, the discoverability of items currently labelled 'oriental' should not be affected in catalogue searches, and MoDA have an opportunity to indicate and explain preferred terms.

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<sup>36</sup> Marenka Thompson-Odlum, *Doing the Work*, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> In the talk referenced, Thompson-Odlum explains how this theoretical methodology was developed from Anibal Quijano's concept of the 'colonial matrix of power'.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Richard Kofi's reflections in "Slave Ship": Disrespectful Or Not?' in the *Words Matter* publication: 'using "enslaved" instead of "slave" acknowledges enslavement as an act of power... rather than simply referring to the person within a social category.'

- 3) **Where possible and appropriate, use geographically specific and culturally accurate terms instead.** See an example of this in Case Study 1. As a further consideration, MoDA can review where uses of geographic specificity may not be accurate, e.g. 'Japanese lady' and 'Japanese scene' in Case Study 8 might be better described as 'orientalised depiction of a Japanese lady' and 'romanticised Japanese scene', for instance. In public programming or work with diverse audiences, self-advocated collective terms (e.g. 'global majority', 'ESEA') are always preferred over contentious governmental data terms (e.g. 'BAME', 'Asian – Other')
- 4) **Enhance records containing 'oriental' with more context and critique.** Changing the term alone is a simplistic 'solution' that risks masking deeper issues, or even replicating authoritative colonial practices.<sup>39</sup> To quote Wayne Modest, 'it is not just words that matter: the perspectives or the position from which one writes or displays also matters'.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, as well as reviewing and adding contextual notes and guidance as suggested in point (a), MoDA should also explore methods for inviting and recording interpretation from a wider range of critical voices, and including this in the database (see (c)).

The time and resource required for these actions vary, so I recommend that MoDA consider these steps consecutively and review records on a case-by-case basis; a mixed approach will likely be the most suitable. This work should be undertaken with sensitivity and transparency, capturing a record of ongoing changes, and communicating the context as to why they have been made. Crucially, MoDA should include voices outside of the museum in this process, inviting feedback and suggestions from a diverse range of people.

### (c) Including: inviting, and amplifying, more diverse voices and perspectives

MoDA describe themselves as 'an accessible research collection welcoming anyone'<sup>41</sup>, and their vision and mission statements include commitments to critical reflection and co-creating knowledge.<sup>42</sup> The 'Conversation' and 'Co-Creation' sections of their website are platforms for 'open[ing] up the collections to questions and critique' and 'exploring our collections with our audiences... to feed [co-created] knowledge back into a shared knowledge base.'<sup>43</sup> These spaces promote dialogue, debate and non-traditional forms of learning, and include collaborative podcasts, blogs and video resources.

MoDA can expand on this work to interpret the Silver Studio Collection in new ways, with diverse voices currently missing from the museum and its database. Through international projects, the museum has established good partnerships with institutions in Japan, but can also build relationships with British ESEA networks.

MoDA's context is somewhat unusual; as a University museum without public exhibition space (but accessible to all by appointment), their priorities are student and online audiences over local community engagement. Their Learning and Access Policy notes that

The student population of Middlesex University is extremely diverse with at least 40% of students from minority ethnic origins, and a large proportion of international students.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Anjalie Dalal-Clayton and Ananda Rutherford, *Against a New Orthodoxy*, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld (eds.), *Words Matter*, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture website, <https://moda.mdx.ac.uk/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>42</sup> <https://moda.mdx.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2017-2020MODAMissionKeyAims.pdf> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>43</sup> Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture website.

<sup>44</sup> Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, *Learning & Access Policy*, 2019

<https://moda.mdx.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2019MoDALearningAccessPolicy.pdf> [accessed 18 July 2023].

In line with their mission and commitment to access, MoDA can create more spaces for engagement that connect and resonate with this diverse student body. As well as the wider international student community, there are a number of Asian and ESEA student societies (e.g. the Chinese Student Scholars Association, Malaysian and Filipino Societies) and cultural interest groups (e.g. the K-Pop and Korean Culture Society and the Anime and Manga Society) that MoDA may like to reach out to or consider when developing collaborative projects or resources.<sup>45</sup>

Building on their current offer, MoDA can develop programming around the Silver Studio Collection, opening it up in new ways to examine its 'oriental' items and related themes with more diverse collaborators. Some ideas are:

- **ESEA Artist Research Residency** - drawing on learnings from Museum of the Home's model, MoDA could commission a resident artist(s) with ESEA heritage to research and respond to the collection, and co-develop new creative opportunities for more diverse audiences to participate.
- **'In Conversation' Events** - building on their current programme, MoDA could launch a series of empowering, interactive discussions around their 'oriental' items, platforming diverse panellists and participants. For example, inviting ESEA designers to contrast how they represent their own heritages, opening dialogue about self-defining and self-empowerment, or artists with mixed-race or cross-cultural backgrounds, to discuss how experiences of 'mixed' identity can foster empathy and creativity.
- **New Object Stories** - sustaining relationships nurtured through these collaborations, MoDA can commission a more diverse range of people to reinterpret 'oriental' items in their collections. These could take varied forms, such as blogs, social media posts, videos, podcasts and object displays, as well as more traditional object studies and descriptions (cf. case studies for *The East India Company at Home* project, or new interpretation labels at the V&A Dundee, as examples).

For each of these ideas, MoDA can mobilise methods for recording new knowledge generated in their catalogue, enriching records with multi-vocal, multi-layered interpretations. On building more synergy between public engagement and the database, Mears outlines the

need to make stronger linkages between the (traditionally inward-facing) work of documenting and researching the collections and (traditionally outward-facing) programmes of public engagement and identify opportunities for more people, including people who embody different forms of expertise, to set the terms of this activity.<sup>46</sup>

In this work, MoDA should commit to creating meaningful, mutually-beneficial opportunities for participation, and ethical, sustainable forms of community collaboration. They can draw on expertise from organisations such as [Museum Detox](#), a network for people of colour in the sector, or [besea.n](#), who offer resources, consultancy and workshop facilitation around positive ESEA representation.

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<sup>45</sup> The full range of student societies at Middlesex University can be found here: <https://www.mdxsu.com/groups/> [accessed 18 July 2023].

<sup>46</sup> Helen Mears, *Report: Decolonising the Database*, 2021.

## Closing Thoughts

As I conclude, I remember that both cataloguing and 'decolonisation' are ongoing works. In our attempts to find a 'fix', it is easy to get caught up in the terminology and lose sight of the bigger picture. In reality, this process is complex, and just one part of a wider work to transform museums as a whole.

Having a background in public-facing work, the opportunity to reflect on less familiar practices challenged me to recognise museums' internal and external roles as interdependent, and that principles of access, equality, inclusion and representation must apply to all fields. As Kassim explains: 'decolonising is a process we must all work on *together*'.<sup>47</sup> The museum's database speaks beyond its workforce to its publics, and its publics should speak back into it. If this conversation continues to include a narrow section of society, the museum continues to communicate who belongs and who does not.

In this work, MoDA have an opportunity to redress the (in)visibility of ESEA people in UK museums and society, and to challenge long perpetuated (mis)perceptions of Asian and Asian-British identity. Beyond this, they have an opportunity to amplify new voices, and to empower communities to speak for themselves – to name, represent and celebrate their own heritages, and to tell their stories from their own perspectives.

By championing less Eurocentric language and more globalised interpretations, MoDA can speak with the voices of a more diverse, equitable society. Of course, this won't happen overnight - but if this change can happen in one museum, or one museum policy, why not more? Isn't that the aim of 'Inclusive Transformation' anyway?

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<sup>47</sup> Sumaya Kassim, *The museum will not be decolonised*, 2017.



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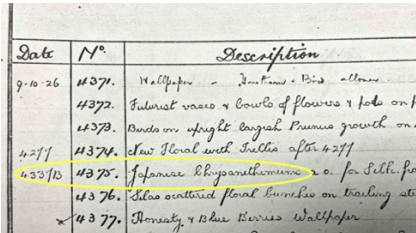
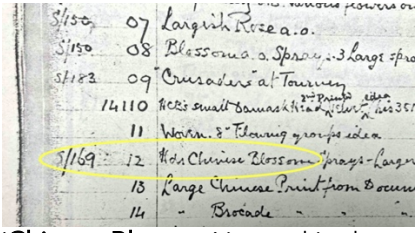


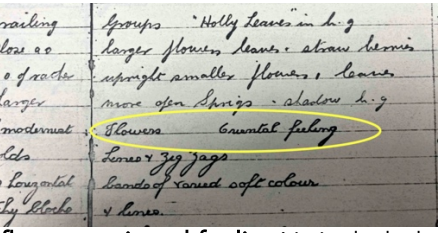
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Case Study 1: Examples of inconsistent levels of specificity and vagueness in descriptions

<p>1a) Accession Number: SD2356 Studio Number: 4375 Database image:</p>  <p>Descriptions:</p>  <p>'Japanese Chrysanthemums' is used in the daybook description. This term also appears in the database record (Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p>1b) Accession Number: SD13272 Studio Number: 14112B Database image:</p>  <p>Descriptions:</p>  <p>'Chinese Blossom' is used in the daybook description. This term also appears in the database record (Title and Brief description fields).</p>	<p>1c) Accession Number: SD13851 Studio Number: 14635 Database image:</p>  <p>Descriptions:</p>  <p>'varied oriental flowers' is included in the daybook description. This term does not appear in the database record. (See Case Study 3a).</p>	<p>1d) Accession Number: SD9622 Studio Number: 9855 Database image:</p>  <p>Descriptions:</p>  <p>'flowers, oriental feeling' is included in the daybook description. This term is referenced in the database record (Brief description: Comments field). (See Case Study 6a).</p>
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**Analysis:** 1a is an example of a design description which uses both geographic and botanical specificity. In other cases, the word 'oriental' seems to be applied as a looser term for more generalised, impressionistic or imagined motifs, and where geographic specificity is not possible or appropriate. In most cases, the original daybook descriptions have been transferred to the database record in some form (e.g. to the Title, Brief description or Comments fields), but are sometimes referenced differently (see Case Studies 3 and 6).







Case Study 2: Examples of 'mixed' representations of multiple Asian cultures, and inconsistency in how these are described

<p><b>2a)</b>                  Accession Number: <b>SD3950</b>                  Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>Brief description: <b>design</b>                  Comments...                  Comment: Slightly stylised landscape design, featuring castle-like buildings with red onion domes, interspersed with various trees and with oriental ships on water, linked by a grey-blue area outlined to represent hills or maybe clouds.                  Available to public?: No                  Dimension...                  Dimension: height: 306 millimetres                  Conversion: 30.6 cm                  Dimension: width: 356 millimetres                  Conversion: 35.6 cm                  Materials &amp; techniques note: watercolour &amp; gouache on brown tracing paper                  Style: Oriental/Chinoiserie                  Object production date...                  Date: 1917/1923                  [01/01/1917 - 31/12/1923]                  Object production person:                  Person: Miss K                  Role/association: Designer</p> <p>'Slightly stylised landscape... featuring castle-like buildings with red onion domes, interspersed... with oriental ships...' (from Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p><b>2b)</b>                  Accession Number: <b>SD2609</b>                  Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>Brief description: <b>Design</b>                  Comments...                  Comment: Design for a textile based on an Indo-Chinese damask idea, featuring bridges, temples, fruit, trees, leaves, flowers and 2 figures sitting in the centre, in brown and cream, on a black ground.                  Available to public?: No                  Dimension...                  Dimension: height: 615 millimetres                  Conversion: 61.5 cm                  Dimension: width: 400 millimetres                  Conversion: 40.0 cm                  Materials &amp; techniques note: gouache on tracing paper</p> <p>'Design... based on an Indo-Chinese damask idea, featuring bridges, temples, fruit... and 2 figures...' (from Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p><b>2c)</b>                  Accession Number: <b>SW1310</b>                  Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>Brief description: <b>Wallpaper</b>                  Comments...                  Comment: Exotic wallpaper with landscape/scenery featuring the Taj-Mahal, trees and Chinese lanterns. This is a typical early 20's romantic wallpaper.                  Available to public?: No                  Dimension...                  Dimension: height: 405 millimetres                  Conversion: 40.5 cm                  Dimension: width: 558 millimetres                  Conversion: 55.8 cm                  Materials &amp; techniques note: surface machine printed, half drop repeat wallpaper                  Style: Oriental/Chinoiserie                  Object production date...                  Date: ca. 1925                  [01/01/1920 - 31/12/1929]</p> <p>'Exotic wallpaper... featuring the Taj-Mahal, trees and Chinese lanterns... a typical early 20's romantic wallpaper.' (from Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p><b>2d)</b>                  Accession Number: <b>SD14031</b>                  Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>Brief description: <b>Persian inspired design of a garden with figures, a domed pagoda, flowers and a tree</b>                  Dimension...                  Dimension: height: 289 millimetres                  Conversion: 28.9 cm                  Dimension: width: 248 millimetres                  Conversion: 24.8 cm                  Materials &amp; techniques note: Gouache on cartridge paper                  Style: Persian</p> <p>'Persian inspired design... with figures, a domed pagoda, flowers and a tree.' (from Brief description field). (See Case Study 3b for more on this item).</p>
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**Analysis:** Many examples amalgamate (stereotypical) motifs from several (imagined) Asian cultures within one design. In these cases, the cataloguers have gone some way to acknowledge this, but their approaches are inconsistent and seem to vary in perceptiveness. Example 2a alludes to an imagined landscape ('slightly stylised', 'castle-like'), and 2c notes the tastes of the time period ('typical early 20's romantic'), but in all cases, more could be done to provide context and critique – e.g. *whose* taste and *whose* imagination is being depicted.

Case Study 3: Examples of changes made to the descriptive terms used across different records

<p><b>3a)</b>                  Accession Number: <b>SD13851</b>                  Studio Number: <b>14635</b>                  Database image:</p>  <p><b>Descriptions:</b></p> <table border="1" data-bbox="226 874 580 1046"> <tr> <td colspan="2">Description</td> <td>Provenance</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2">Daybook: "Indianna" a.o. showing growth varied oriental flowers + buds.</td> <td>Donated by Miss Mary Perlett, 1967</td> </tr> </table> <p>"Indianna" and 'oriental' are used on the accession sheet (which notes this was taken from the daybook description).</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="210 1219 580 1262"> <tr> <td>Title...</td> <td>Indian inspired design for a textile</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Brief description:</td> <td>Indian inspired design for a textile featuring light green wavy stems, leaves and flower heads in red, yellow, blue and purple, outlined in black, 1953.</td> </tr> </table> <p>'Indian inspired' is used in the database record (Title and Brief description fields).</p>	Description		Provenance	Daybook: "Indianna" a.o. showing growth varied oriental flowers + buds.		Donated by Miss Mary Perlett, 1967	Title...	Indian inspired design for a textile	Brief description:	Indian inspired design for a textile featuring light green wavy stems, leaves and flower heads in red, yellow, blue and purple, outlined in black, 1953.	<p><b>3b)</b>                  Accession Number: <b>SD14031</b>                  Studio Number: <b>15367</b>                  Database image:</p>  <p><b>Descriptions:</b></p> <table border="1" data-bbox="640 874 1016 1066"> <tr> <td colspan="2">Description</td> <td>Provenance</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2">Daybook: Persian Garden a series of episodic islands with figures, bird + boat, 2 pagodas, flowers + trees etc. Bright oriental colours</td> <td>Donated by Miss Mary Perlett, 1967</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3">No bird or boat on this part design</td> </tr> </table> <p>'Persian Garden' is used on the accession sheet (which notes this was taken from the daybook description).</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="624 1241 1061 1262"> <tr> <td>Brief description:</td> <td>Indian inspired design of a garden with figures, a domed pagoda, flowers and a tree</td> </tr> </table> <p>'Persian inspired design of a garden' is used in the database record (Brief description field).</p>	Description		Provenance	Daybook: Persian Garden a series of episodic islands with figures, bird + boat, 2 pagodas, flowers + trees etc. Bright oriental colours		Donated by Miss Mary Perlett, 1967	No bird or boat on this part design			Brief description:	Indian inspired design of a garden with figures, a domed pagoda, flowers and a tree	<p><b>3c)</b>                  Accession Number: <b>SD13675</b>                  Studio Number: <b>7482A</b>                  Database image:</p>  <p><b>Descriptions:</b></p> <table border="1" data-bbox="1102 874 1509 1086"> <tr> <td colspan="2">Description</td> <td>Provenance</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2">In Daybook: Wallpaper Chinese groups (Pellonant Influence)</td> <td>Donated by Miss Mary Perlett, 1967</td> </tr> </table> <p>'Chinese' is used on the accession sheet (which notes this was taken from the daybook description).</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="1086 1219 1509 1262"> <tr> <td>Brief description:</td> <td>design</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Comments:</td> <td>Oriental scene with pagoda, steps and flowers</td> </tr> </table> <p>'Oriental' is used in the database record (Brief description: Comments field).</p>	Description		Provenance	In Daybook: Wallpaper Chinese groups (Pellonant Influence)		Donated by Miss Mary Perlett, 1967	Brief description:	design	Comments:	Oriental scene with pagoda, steps and flowers	<p><b>3d)</b>                  Accession Number: <b>SD13392</b>                  Studio Number: <b>15630B</b>                  Database image:</p>  <p><b>Descriptions:</b></p> <table border="1" data-bbox="1541 874 1995 1102"> <tr> <td colspan="2">Title...</td> <td>Provenance</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2">May 7/53 14524 Roman Danub. Thin green effect by the line in wood, etc. 25 - - - - - Allover the most Roman Scarlet Flowers 26. Dark W.P. Cloudy treatment. Ros. of the same color. 2 tones. 27. - - - - - Thin blue form in alternate light and 28. - - - - - Small light blue flowers. c. 10mm on 29. Large W.P. - - - - - Small blue, 1/2 inch diameter 15630 A - - - - - Chinese 6. 1/2 inch. Later as flower 31. Dark W.P. Blue and white. 4 thin flowers hanging. No 2nd 32. - - - - - Large bright blue flowers on a circle.</td> <td>Donated by Miss Mary Perlett, 1967</td> </tr> </table> <p>'Chinese' is used in the daybook (this is also used on the accession sheet).</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="1541 1182 2027 1235"> <tr> <td>Title...</td> <td>Design for a textile featuring oriental flowers</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Brief description:</td> <td>Design for a textile featuring oriental flowers in blue, pink and yellow with green foliage, on a soft grey background, 1952.</td> </tr> </table> <p>'Oriental' is used in the database record (Title and Brief description fields).</p>	Title...		Provenance	May 7/53 14524 Roman Danub. Thin green effect by the line in wood, etc. 25 - - - - - Allover the most Roman Scarlet Flowers 26. Dark W.P. Cloudy treatment. Ros. of the same color. 2 tones. 27. - - - - - Thin blue form in alternate light and 28. - - - - - Small light blue flowers. c. 10mm on 29. 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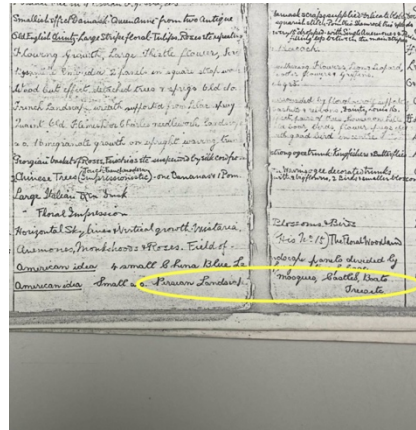
3e)

Accession Number: SD3950

Database image:



Description – Daybook:



'Persian Landscape' is used in the daybook description. The entry also mentions 'mosques, castles, boats' and interestingly, the underlined words, 'American idea'.

Description – Accession Form:

Middlesex Polytechnic Single  
The Silver Studio Collection

Accession Form Box B

Accession number SD 3950a	Studio number 735	Negative number
Accession date	Invoice value	
Condition		
Title Sketch for a carpet	Measurement 30x22	
Manufacturer unpainted	Designer	
Medium pencil & crayon on detail paper	Date 1894	
Inches 127.9 / 735 / used		
Exhibitions Art Nouveau Exhibition, cat no. 85 (1981)		
References		
Illustrations		
Description Persian influenced design of acanthus scroll leaves w/ brown crayon		

Provenance  
Donated by Miss Mary Perles, 1987

'Persian influenced' is used in the accession form description.

Description – Database Record:

Brief description: design

Comments:  
Slightly stylised landscape design, featuring castle-like buildings with red onion domes, interspersed with various trees and with oriental ships on water, linked by a gray-blue area outlined to represent hills or maybe clouds.

Available to public?: No

Dimension: height: 306 millimetres  
Conversion: 30.6 cm  
Dimension: width: 356 millimetres  
Conversion: 35.6 cm

Materials & techniques note: watercolour & gouache on brown tracing paper

Style: Oriental/Chinoiserie

Object production date: 1917/1923  
Date: [01/01/1917 - 31/12/1923]

Object production person:  
Person: Miss K.  
Role/association: Designer

'Slightly stylised landscape' is used in the database record (Brief description: Comments field). The entry also mentions 'castle-like buildings with red onion domes' and 'oriental ships'.

**Analysis:** Descriptive terms have changed across MoDA's records and as information has been transferred - though not always in consistent ways. In 3a, the daybook's more dated terms, 'Indianna' and 'oriental' have not been carried over into the database. By contrast, in 3c and 3d, the word 'oriental' does not appear in the original daybook entry but is introduced in the database. 3e shows how the description can vary across all records: the daybook, accession form and database. Note the change from 'mosques, castles' to 'castle-like buildings with red onion domes', and 'boats' to 'oriental ships' – perhaps intended to emphasise the design's imagined, fantastical depiction of 'the East'.


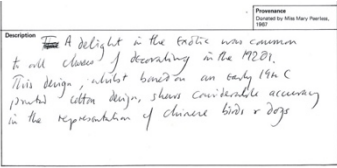

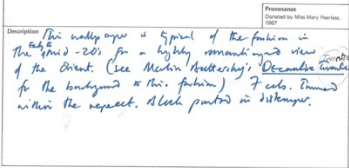







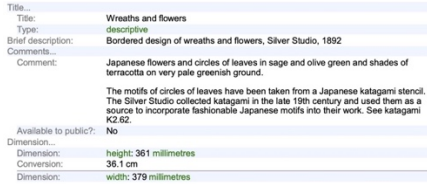
Case Study 4: Examples of variation and inconsistency in alternative descriptive terms in the database

<p><b>4a)</b> Accession Number: <b>ST189</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description (WHOLE): Fabric sample Other number (WHOLE): Number: 54 Type: Catalogue number (Silver Studio Then &amp; Now exhibition) Number: 1934 Type: Studio Number Comments (WHOLE): Comment: only ST189D used for exhibition Source: zh Date: 08/12/2000 [08/12/2000 - 08/12/2000] Available to public?: No Comment: Three samples of fabric showing a distinct Oriental influence in the design which features blossom flowers and roses, exotic birds such as finches, swallows and a golden pheasant, and berries. Miss Mold won a prize for designing this fabric and her colleagues in the Silver Studio had a piece made into an eiderdown for her.</p> <p>'...Oriental influence in the design' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>	<p><b>4b)</b> Accession Number: <b>SD2289</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description: Design Comments: Comment: Oriental style printed textile design featuring red anemone sprays, with grey and brown leaves, across white clouds and surrounded by green, pink, yellow, red and white butterflies and yellow anemone sprays, on a black ground. Available to public?: No Dimension: Dimension: height: 445 millimetres Conversion: 44.5 cm Dimension: width: 260 millimetres Conversion: 26.0 cm Materials &amp; techniques note: Style: gouache on copy paper Oriental/Chinoiserie Object production date... Date: 1920</p> <p>'Oriental style...' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>	<p><b>4c)</b> Accession Number: <b>SW2028</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Title: Wallpaper with a design of small birds on an 'Oriental' bamboo pattern Brief description: Wallpaper with a design of small birds on an 'Oriental' bamboo pattern by Sanderson &amp; Sons Ltd, c.1925 Comments: Comment: Wallpaper with a design of small birds on an 'Oriental' bamboo pattern. Available to public?: No Dimension: Dimension: height: 823 millimetres Conversion: 82.3 cm Dimension: width: 514 millimetres Conversion: 51.4 cm Materials &amp; techniques note: Style: block printed (?) Oriental/Chinoiserie Object production date... Date: ca. 1925 [01/01/1920 - 31/12/1929] Object production organisation... Organisation: Arthur Sanderson &amp; Sons Ltd</p> <p>'...'Oriental' bamboo pattern' (Title, Brief description and Comments fields)</p>	<p><b>4d)</b> Accession Number: <b>SD2057A</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description: Design Comments: Comment: Design for a wallpaper featuring upright stripes of stylised dull green leaves, yellow flowers and thin blue stems, on a pale green ground. This delicate design rather resembles some trial designs for the front cover of 'The Studio' magazine thatilingworth-key did at this time. The debt to Oriental art is very clear. Available to public?: No Dimension: Dimension: height: 430 millimetres Conversion: 43.0 cm Dimension: width: 625 millimetres Conversion: 62.5 cm Materials &amp; techniques note: Style: gouache on heavy paper Aesthetic Object production date... Date: 1893 [01/01/1893 - 31/12/1893] Object production organisation... Organisation: Silver Studio</p> <p>'...The debt to Oriental art is very clear.' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>
<p><b>4e)</b> Accession Number: <b>SD11095</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description: Design Comments: Comment: Design probably for a greeting card, in watercolour paint. Very strongly Japanese influenced design of a meditation or rounsel with crowded filling of stones, turtles etc. Available to public?: No Dimension: Dimension: height: 350 millimetres Conversion: 35.0 cm Dimension: width: 289 millimetres Conversion: 28.9 cm Materials &amp; techniques note: Watercolour on cartridge paper</p> <p>'...Very strongly Japanese influenced...' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>	<p><b>4f)</b> Accession Number: <b>SD9232</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Title: Frogs having a picnic on a lily pad Type: descriptive Brief description: Design for a Christmas card by Arthur Silver featuring musical frogs enjoying a feast with the words A Merry Xmas, Best Wishes 1893-91. Comments: Comment: The writing in the bottom right hand corner is Chinese and describes a landscape. From top to bottom mountain, river, forest, mountain (again but in a more elaborate form). You can see how the characters reflect their meanings visually. Source: Jinya Xu (Student from Kingston Uni on a research visit) Date: 09/11/2018 [09/11/2018 - 09/11/2018] Available to public?: No Comment: Design for a Christmas Card. Pseudo-Japanese design of frogs having a picnic on a lily pad. This shows Arthur Silver's enormous admiration for Japanese art.</p> <p>'...Pseudo-Japanese... shows... admiration for Japanese art.' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>	<p><b>4g)</b> Accession Number: <b>SD2609</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description: Design Comments: Comment: Design for a textile based on an Indo-Chinese damask idea, featuring bridges, temples, fruit, trees, leaves, flowers and 2 figures sitting in the centre, in brown and cream, on a black ground. Available to public?: No Dimension: Dimension: height: 615 millimetres Conversion: 61.5 cm Dimension: width: 400 millimetres Conversion: 40.0 cm Materials &amp; techniques note: gouache on tracing paper</p> <p>'...an Indo-Chinese damask idea...' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>	<p><b>4h)</b> Accession Number: <b>SW1300</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description: Wallpaper Comments: Comment: Early 1920s exotic Chinoiserie wallpaper, featuring trees on a black ground. Available to public?: No Dimension: Dimension: height: 712 millimetres Conversion: 71.2 cm Dimension: width: 520 millimetres Conversion: 52.0 cm Materials &amp; techniques note: Style: surface machine printed, whole drop repeat wallpaper Oriental/Chinoiserie</p> <p>'...exotic Chinoiserie wallpaper...' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>
<p><b>4i)</b> Accession Number: <b>SD3249</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description: Design Comments: Comment: Wallpaper design with a chinoiserie style 'exotic' pattern of sprays of pink blossom and green/blue leaves, on a background of brown and grey bamboo or palm leaves. Available to public?: No</p> <p>'...chinoiserie style 'exotic' pattern...' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>	<p><b>4j)</b> Accession Number: <b>SW1059</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description: chinoiserie-inspired wallpaper with a bright orange ground Comments: Comment: Tango orange wallpaper which is similar to the romantic versions of Chinoiserie by Hefter Scott and other producers in the early 1920s. The provision of a cut-out from, however, would indicate a date in the late 1920s. Available to public?: No</p> <p>'chinoiserie-inspired wallpaper...' (Brief description field)</p>	<p><b>4k)</b> Accession Number: <b>SW350</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description: Wallpaper Comments: Comment: Wallpaper with a chinoiserie-adapted design of leaves and flowers in brown, blue, red and white, on a lawn/pink ground. Available to public?: No</p> <p>'...a chinoiserie-adapted design...' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>	<p><b>4l)</b> Accession Number: <b>SW1089</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <p>Brief description: Wallpaper Comments: Comment: Imitation eighteenth century Chinese wallpaper, in eleven colours. This design is typical of Silver Studio productions in the 1920s but the design has not yet been traced. Available to public?: No</p> <p>'Imitation... Chinese wallpaper...' (Brief description: Comments field)</p>

**Analysis:** A plethora of alternative terms suggest ideas ranging from inauthenticity (4l – 'imitation', 4f – 'Pseudo') and hybridity (4g – 'Indo-Chinese'), to the nuances between influence (4a, 4e) and inspiration (4j), appreciation and appropriation (c.f. 4f - 'enormous admiration for Japanese art' and 4d – 'The debt to Oriental art is very clear'). Note the inconsistency in the use of quotation marks for 'exotic' (4h, 4i) and 'oriental' (4a-d), and the use of 'chinoiserie' (4h-k).






## Case Study 5: Examples of additional historical context included in record descriptions

<p>5a) Accession Number: <b>SD434</b> Database image and description example:</p>   <p>'A delight in the exotic was common to all classes of decorating in the 1920s...' – excerpt from accession form description. This is also found in the database record (Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p>5b) Accession Number: <b>SW869</b> Database image and description example:</p>   <p>'...typical of the fashion... for a highly romanticised view of the Orient.' – excerpt from accession form description. This is also found in the database record (Brief description: Comments and Label text fields).</p>	<p>5c) Accession Number: <b>SW679</b> Database image and description example:</p>   <p>'...The use of gilt... was common as it enhanced the exotic effect. A romantic view of the orient was a feature of... the period... typical of the influence of cheap wallpaper manufacturers...' - excerpt from database record (Brief description: Comments field).</p>
<p>5d) Accession Number: <b>SW333</b> Database image and description example:</p>   <p>'...showing the British fascination with the exotic, oriental motifs in the late 1920s.' - excerpt from database record (Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p>5e) Accession Number: <b>SW317</b> Database image and description example:</p>   <p>'...machine printing shows that by the mid 20's the desire for this style... had reached the mass market...' - excerpt from database record (Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p>5f) Accession Number: <b>SD2588</b> Database image and description example:</p>   <p>'The motifs... have been taken from a Japanese katagami stencil. The Silver Studio collected katagami in the late 19th century and used them as a source to incorporate fashionable Japanese motifs...' - excerpt from database record (Brief description: Comments field).</p>





**Analysis:** In many cases, cataloguers have used terms such as 'the Orient', 'oriental' and 'exotic' in their descriptions, but contextualised them with additional information. Often, these expound on how the designs reflect the fashions of the time period, including interesting discussion around class, taste, manufacturing and the market. These examples could benefit from further critique of 'the British fascination with the exotic' (5d), e.g. how this relates to issues of Empire, power and colonialism. 5f demonstrates how context can be used to highlight the sources of design inspiration.

Case Study 6: Examples of records that reveal subjectivity and/or multiple perspectives

<p>6a) Accession Number: SD9622 Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>SD9622 (Design)</p> <p>9555. SILVER STUDIO CO</p> <p><b>Brief description:</b> Design</p> <p><b>Comments...</b></p> <p><b>Comment:</b> This is a design for a dress print. The design is one of flowers, which the daybook describes as 'modernist' with an 'oriental feeling'. These are in various colours of red, blue, green, yellow, purple and black. Each flower is on a white background but this is then outlined in black and the gaps inbetween the flowers filled in black. There is also a small colour chart at the bottom left hand corner of the design.</p> <p><b>Available to public?:</b> No</p> <p><b>Dimension...</b> height: 123 millimetres</p> <p><b>Dimension:</b> 12.3 cm</p> <p><b>Dimension:</b> width: 113 millimetres</p> <p><b>Conversion:</b> 11.3 cm</p> <p><b>Materials &amp; techniques note:</b></p> <p>'...The design is one of flowers, <b>which the daybook describes as 'modernist' with an 'oriental feeling'...</b>' (Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p>6b) Accession Number: SD9232 Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>SD9232 (Design)</p> <p><b>Title...</b></p> <p><b>Title:</b> Frogs having a picnic on a lily pad</p> <p><b>Type:</b> descriptive</p> <p><b>Brief description:</b> Design for a Christmas card by Arthur Silver featuring musical frogs enjoying a feast with the words A Merry Xmas, Best Wishes 1890-91.</p> <p><b>Comments...</b></p> <p><b>Comment:</b> The writing in the bottom right hand corner is Chinese and describes a landscape. From top to bottom mountain, river, forest, mountain (again but in a more elaborate form). You can see how the characters reflect their meanings visually.</p> <p><b>Source:</b> Jinya Xu (student from Kingston Uni on a research visit)</p> <p><b>Date:</b> 09/11/2018 [09/11/2018 - 09/11/2018]</p> <p><b>Available to public?:</b> No</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> Design for a Christmas Card. Pseudo-Japanese design of frogs having a picnic on a lily pad. This shows Arthur Silver's enormous admiration for Japanese art.</p> <p><b>Available to public?:</b> No</p> <p><b>Dimension...</b> height: 320 millimetres</p> <p><b>Dimension:</b> 32.0 cm</p> <p><b>Conversion:</b> 32.0 cm</p> <p>'The writing... is Chinese and describes a landscape... You can see how the characters reflect their meanings visually. / <b>Source: Jinya Xu (student from Kingston Uni on a research visit).</b>' (Brief description: Comments field). (See Case Study 8b for more on this item).</p>	<p>6c) Accession Number: SW378 Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>SW378 (wall covering)</p> <p><b>Title...</b></p> <p><b>Title:</b> Chinoiserie tropical birds and foliage</p> <p><b>Type:</b> descriptive</p> <p><b>Brief description:</b> Chinoiserie tropical birds and foliage wallpaper design by the Silver Studio for John Line &amp; Sons, c.1928.</p> <p><b>Comments...</b></p> <p><b>Comment:</b> Label text consists of comments made by viewers in response to each wallpaper sample. Those asked for their comments were all Friends of MoDA.</p> <p><b>Source:</b> mc</p> <p><b>Date:</b> 18/09/2007 [18/09/2007 - 18/09/2007]</p> <p><b>Available to public?:</b> No</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> Chinoiserie wallpaper with a design of tropical birds and foliage, in shades of blue, red, white, brown and mauve, on an orange ground. The Silver Studio designer Miss W. Mold excelled at this sort of design.</p> <p><b>Available to public?:</b> No</p> <p>'Label text consists of <b>comments made by viewers in response</b> to each wallpaper sample. <b>Those asked for their comments were all Friends of MoDA.</b>' (Brief description: Comments field).</p>
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**Analysis:** These examples reveal different ways that MoDA's records are, and can continue to be, evolving and multi-voiced. In 6a, the cataloguer references the original daybook description using quotation marks, very simply emphasising its subjective 'voice'. In 6b, the record is enriched by a later comment, adding new knowledge from a student who has translated the design's Chinese characters. 6c suggests a collaborative approach to interpretation – an idea that MoDA could expand on to invite diverse perspectives which enhance and subvert, consider and critique, the 'objective' museum voice.

Case Study 7: Additional examples of records that are unhelpful, problematic, or would benefit from context or critique

<p>7a) Accession Number: <b>SD1774</b> Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>Brief description: Design Comments... Very pretty printed textile design featuring small floral sprays and trees, in yellow, red, black and green, within green outlined, overlapping, pointed oval festoon panels. The overall look is quite Oriental. Available to public?: No Dimension: height: 602 millimetres Conversion: 60.2 cm Dimension: width: 564 millimetres Conversion: 56.4 cm Materials &amp; techniques note: general and watercolour on copy paper Object production date... Date: 1939 [01/01/1939 - 31/12/1939]</p> <p>'...The overall look is quite <b>Oriental.</b>' (Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p>7b) Accession Number: <b>SD22195</b> Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>Brief description: Design Comments... A large open design including pagodas, tree branches with a bird in a cage and figures in Chinese costume on a pale background. Available to public?: No Dimension: height: 540 millimetres Conversion: 54.0 cm Dimension: width: 540 millimetres Conversion: 54.0 cm Materials &amp; techniques note: gouache on heavy paper Style: Oriental/Chinoiserie Object production date... Date: Ca. 1930 [01/01/1925 - 31/12/1934] Object production organisation: Organisation: Franklin &amp; Franklin</p> <p>'...figures in Chinese costume on a pale background' (Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p>7c) Accession Number: <b>SW381</b> Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>Brief description: Wallpaper Comments... Wallpaper with a Chinoiserie design. This piece features a central scene of an Oriental family consisting of a father, mother and son, on a patch of grass framed by a red fence and large trees. The boy is setting a white bird free and in the background there are more white birds. The foreground shows a garden temple with two Japanese ladies sitting inside. The vivid colouring in blue, red, black, green and yellow on a grey ground, is reminiscent of contemporary French wallpapers. Available to public?: No Dimension: height: 28 inches Conversion: 71.12 cm Dimension: width: 20 1/2 inches Conversion: 50.8 cm</p> <p>'...Chinoiserie design... features a central scene of an <b>Oriental family... two Japanese ladies sitting...</b>' (Brief description: Comments field).</p>	<p>7d) Accession Number: <b>SW1.6</b> Database record excerpt:</p>  <p>Brief description: Wallpaper Other number... Number: 5.6 Type: Catalogue number (Japantastic exhibition) Comments... Use of Label text... Text: Japanese ladies carrying parasols or fans were another popular motif during this period. To Western eyes these would have seemed demure, but they were in fact derived from Japanese prints of courtesans and geshas. Type: Exhibition Label Exhibition: Japantastic Text: This is a wallpaper sample taken from an Arthur Sanderson &amp; Sons Ltd wallpaper pattern book in 1928. This sample features a pretty, delicate pattern of Oriental women, in groups or alone, carrying parasols or fans, between branches with flowers and leaves, in pink, green, yellow, grey, lilac and black, on a white ground with shadowy grey/silver trees and temples. Type: Web Caption</p> <p>'...a pretty, delicate pattern of <b>Oriental women...</b>' (Use of, Label text fields: Web Caption). Cf. context given in Exhibition Label text: '<b>To Western eyes these would have seemed demure...</b>'</p>
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**Analysis:** These examples are useful in demonstrating the ongoing work that must be done to maintain a database that is relevant, accessible and inclusive. Many records would benefit from further review, context, critique and re-interpretation. 7a is typical of several wherein the term 'oriental' is used in very vague ways. 7b-d are more problematic examples of exoticising or 'othering' descriptions, particularly in reference to figures. In 7d, the two Label text records are a useful comparison of how the same item can be described; the added context of 'to Western eyes...' in the Exhibition Label acknowledges bias and subverts the uncritiqued stereotypes implied in the Web Caption ('pretty, delicate'). Note that both texts were used for public-facing platforms. (See Case Study 8 for more on the relationship between MoDA's internal records and public-facing interpretation).



Case Study 8: Examples of MoDA's internal record descriptions compared with their public-facing, online interpretation

<p><b>8a)</b> Accession Number: <b>SW679</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>Title...</td><td>Red wallpaper sample</td></tr> <tr><td>Type:</td><td>descriptive</td></tr> <tr><td>Brief description:</td><td>Surface machine printed wallpaper featuring pagodas, people and birds on a red background with gilt highlighting, designed by George H. Willis, ca. 1925.</td></tr> <tr><td>Comments...</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Comment:</td><td>Wallpaper with a chinoiserie design. The use of gilt on wallpapers in the mid 1920s was common as it enhanced the exotic effect. A romantic view of the orient was a feature of both wallpaper and textile designs of the period. The quality of the drawing is well below the Silver Studio's usual standard and this particular paper is typical of the influence of cheap wallpaper manufacturers at this period. The design was originally created for use as a furnishing textile.</td></tr> </table> <p>'...in the mid 1920s... <b>A romantic view of the orient</b> was a feature...'</p> <p>Online example excerpt (Twitter):</p> <p>'In the mid-20th century a <b>romantic view of the Orient</b> was common...'</p>	Title...	Red wallpaper sample	Type:	descriptive	Brief description:	Surface machine printed wallpaper featuring pagodas, people and birds on a red background with gilt highlighting, designed by George H. Willis, ca. 1925.	Comments...		Comment:	Wallpaper with a chinoiserie design. The use of gilt on wallpapers in the mid 1920s was common as it enhanced the exotic effect. A romantic view of the orient was a feature of both wallpaper and textile designs of the period. The quality of the drawing is well below the Silver Studio's usual standard and this particular paper is typical of the influence of cheap wallpaper manufacturers at this period. The design was originally created for use as a furnishing textile.	<p><b>8b)</b> Accession Number: <b>SD9232</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>Title:</td><td>Frogs having a picnic on a fly pad</td></tr> <tr><td>Type:</td><td>descriptive</td></tr> <tr><td>Brief description:</td><td>Design for a Christmas card by Arthur Silver featuring musical frogs enjoying a feast with the words A Merry Xmas, Best Wishes 1890-91.</td></tr> <tr><td>Comments...</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Comment:</td><td>The writing in the bottom right hand corner is Chinese and describes a landscape. From top to bottom mountain, river, forest, mountain (again but in a more elaborate form). You can see how the characters reflect their meanings visually.</td></tr> <tr><td>Source:</td><td>Jinya Xu (student from Kingston Uni on a research visit)</td></tr> <tr><td>Date:</td><td>09/12/2018</td></tr> <tr><td>Available to public?:</td><td>No</td></tr> <tr><td>Comment:</td><td>Design for a Christmas Card. 'Pseudo-Japanese design of frogs having a picnic on a fly pad'. This shows Arthur Silver's enormous admiration for Japanese art.</td></tr> </table> <p>'<b>Pseudo-Japanese design...</b> 'The writing in the bottom hand corner is <b>Chinese...</b>'</p> <p>Online example excerpt (Twitter):</p> <p>'...blends Japanese and European natural motifs, although <b>the script at the bottom is actually Chinese!</b>'</p>	Title:	Frogs having a picnic on a fly pad	Type:	descriptive	Brief description:	Design for a Christmas card by Arthur Silver featuring musical frogs enjoying a feast with the words A Merry Xmas, Best Wishes 1890-91.	Comments...		Comment:	The writing in the bottom right hand corner is Chinese and describes a landscape. From top to bottom mountain, river, forest, mountain (again but in a more elaborate form). You can see how the characters reflect their meanings visually.	Source:	Jinya Xu (student from Kingston Uni on a research visit)	Date:	09/12/2018	Available to public?:	No	Comment:	Design for a Christmas Card. 'Pseudo-Japanese design of frogs having a picnic on a fly pad'. This shows Arthur Silver's enormous admiration for Japanese art.	<p><b>8c)</b> Accession Number: <b>SW869</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>Title...</td><td>Wallpaper with moonlit scene</td></tr> <tr><td>Brief description:</td><td>Wallpaper featuring a woman holding a parasol in the moonlight on a blue background, manufactured by Heffer Scott ca. 1925.</td></tr> <tr><td>Comments...</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Comment:</td><td>Wallpaper featuring a moonlit Japanese scene of a Japanese lady, partly illuminated by the moon, standing with an orange and blue parasol, in a shaded pagoda. Around the pagoda are silhouetted trees and the moon can be seen clearly in the sky. In the foreground there are a few pink and mustard yellow flowers and the background colour is a vivid mid-blue. This wallpaper is typical of the fashion in the early to mid 20s for a highly romanticised view of the Orient.</td></tr> </table> <p>'...featuring a <b>moonlit Japanese scene</b> of a Japanese lady... a highly <b>romanticised view of the Orient</b>'</p> <p>Online example excerpt (Twitter):</p> <p>'...beautiful <b>Japanese-inspired design...</b>'</p>	Title...	Wallpaper with moonlit scene	Brief description:	Wallpaper featuring a woman holding a parasol in the moonlight on a blue background, manufactured by Heffer Scott ca. 1925.	Comments...		Comment:	Wallpaper featuring a moonlit Japanese scene of a Japanese lady, partly illuminated by the moon, standing with an orange and blue parasol, in a shaded pagoda. Around the pagoda are silhouetted trees and the moon can be seen clearly in the sky. In the foreground there are a few pink and mustard yellow flowers and the background colour is a vivid mid-blue. This wallpaper is typical of the fashion in the early to mid 20s for a highly romanticised view of the Orient.	<p><b>8d)</b> Accession Number: <b>SD10305</b> Database record excerpt:</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>Title...</td><td>Japanese lady holding a fan</td></tr> <tr><td>Type:</td><td>descriptive</td></tr> <tr><td>Brief description:</td><td>Japanese lady holding a fan wallpaper design by Winifred Mold, c.1925.</td></tr> <tr><td>Comments...</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>Comment:</td><td>Colour detail for a wallpaper design. In the foreground is a Japanese lady holding a fan, whilst in the background are details of a Japanese landscape.</td></tr> </table> <p>'...<b>Japanese lady holding a fan...</b> details of a Japanese landscape.'</p> <p>Online example excerpt (Website):</p> <p>'<b>Japanese lady holding a fan</b> / ... a romantic view of the Orient... <b>Japanese ladies carrying parasols or fans were a common motif...</b>'</p>	Title...	Japanese lady holding a fan	Type:	descriptive	Brief description:	Japanese lady holding a fan wallpaper design by Winifred Mold, c.1925.	Comments...		Comment:	Colour detail for a wallpaper design. In the foreground is a Japanese lady holding a fan, whilst in the background are details of a Japanese landscape.
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<p><b>8e)</b> Additional online examples (Twitter):</p> <p>'...<b>Japanese design influence</b>' '...<b>Chinese-inspired wallpaper</b>' '...<b>Chinese influenced designs</b>' '...<b>East Asian symbols</b>'</p>																																																	

**Analysis:** Examples 8a-d demonstrate the relationship between MoDA's database and their online interpretation – the primary way in which this collection is accessed by the public. In many cases, internal descriptions are transferred almost directly with small changes to wording or tone; in some, further interpretive context is given (e.g. 8d). 8e gives examples of more recently used, public-facing descriptive design terms (cf. terms used in Case Study 4).