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Manufactured collectables:

An example from “Kuhn & Komor, curio dealers in the East”

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Kuhn & Komor were one of the most important curio dealers in East Asia from 1894 onwards. With branches in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Yokohama, Kobe, and Singapore, they were a key attraction for Western travelers doing the grand tour of East Asia. They did not only sell antiques but also modern artifacts, and were therefore employing a number of the best craftsmen. This paper focuses on a collection of Japanese coins acquired by Major George Uvedale Price (1853-1929) and kept at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University museum, UK. This collection includes more than 600 banknotes, ingots, genuine coins and imitations. A similar collection is kept at the Museum des Kulturen in Basel, Switzerland. These objects reveal how dealers in East Asia answered the demand for antiques (and in this case for coins) as commodities.

The history of the company will firstly be considered. This will enable us to date the collection of coins we are interested in. Then, an attempt to identify the kind of objects sold or produced by this company will provide us with a context. Finally, we will analyze the content of the collection and develop the idea of new collectible for such a type of commodity.

Kuhn & Komor, an outline of the history of the company

The *Kuhn & Komor* history is the story of a family business of Japanese "curio"¹ dealers that developed several branches in East Asia at the end of the 19th century. The story of this company is complex because it includes different businesses with similar names such as *Kuhn & Co*, *Kuhn & Komor*, *Komor & Komor* owned by members of the same family. Some confusion has been added by late misspelling of Kuhn into Kohn or Komor into

¹ The word curio standing for 'curiosities' was used for objects of East Asia. It was used for authentic objects rather than objects produced for export but in that regard Kuhn & Komor was selling both.

Komar. Finally, various chronologies are available which rely on unverified information and add to the confusion².

At the origin of the company is Moritz Montague Kuhn (d.1901). Of Hungarian descent, he came to Japan in 1871 and settled in Yokohama as a merchant of China & Japan Import-Export. In 1874 he engaged in curio trade and operated under *Kuhn & Co., Curio Depot* (新利洋行), at 51, Main street (Honchō-dori)³. He also ran a shop in the Grand Hotel (Yokohama). The company's advertisement in the *Japan directory* (1884) claims that it was founded in 1869⁴, which means that he may have started working in Hong Kong first before moving to Japan. From 1876 to 1880, he is not listed in Japan but in 1880 he operated again under *Kuhn & Co., Depot of Ancient and Modern Fine Japanese and Chinese Curiosities*. In 1885, Indian "curios" were also added. Until 1886 Moritz Kuhn ran his company alone supported by his wife. In 1887, his nephew Siegfried Komor⁵ (born in Pest 1863- died in Hong Kong 1935) joined his business as an employee. The latter became in 1889 the proprietor, together with C.H. Klaus, of the *Daibutsu, Grand Depot of Ancient and Modern Japanese and Chinese Curiosities*⁶.

As at 1890, Moritz Kuhn expanded his company, taking over the sole agency for Japan and China for the *Schwob Frères* (Schwob Brothers), watch manufacturer in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland. In 1890, Arthur Kuhn came to Japan and started to work for Moritz Kuhn at the *Kuhn & Co., Japanese and Chinese Fine Art Depot* (57, Honchō). From 1892 onwards a restructuring of the company took place: Moritz Kuhn ran the Japan-China-Export-Import with four Japanese employees in 57, Honchō (probably his wife and also his daughters Rose L. and Etty supporting him); Siegfried Komor took over the business of watches and become the director of the *Depot of Swiss Watches* and founded *Komor & Co., Wholesale Curios Dealer* (a company which only existed for a short period). In 1894, Samuel Henry Kuhn returned to Japan and was integrated into his father's company. This event probably pushed Arthur Kuhn to withdraw from *Kuhn and Co* and to found the same year with Siegfried Komor the company *Kuhn & Komor* (クー&コモル/康茂洋行), also known colloquially as K&K. They operated under *Fine Art Curio Dealers*, located at 37, Water Street (水町通り Mizumachi), Yokohama. Julius

² From that point of view, the best attempt has been made by M. Bincsik, who relied on Japanese directories and has drawn up a chronology of the society up to 1912. See Monika Bincsik, "Japán műtárgyak gyűjtéstörténete Magyarországon a 19. század második felében - kitekintéssel a nemzetközi összefüggésekre" (PhD diss., Loránd Eötvös University, 2009), 179-185.

³ He moved the following year, 1875, to 79, Main street (Honchō-dori).

⁴ See illustration in Monika Bincsik, "The trade in Japanese art during the Meiji period with special reference to lacquer, as mirrored in the collection at the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts, Budapest", *Ars Decorativa* 21 (2002): 126. Other dates are also proposed for the foundation of the company: M. Chaiklin thinks that it was created in Canton in 1866, and expanded in 1869 into Yokohama (Martha Chaiklin, *Ivory and the Aesthetics of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014), 20). M. Kuhn may have taken advantage of the fact that the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Japan concluded on 18 October 1869 a trade and shipping agreement.

⁵ Kuhn and Komor are very likely to be two branches of the same family. Both names are variants of the patronym Cohen. The family name Komor was originally Kohn and was officially "Magyarized" in 1881 by Salomon Kohn, a Hungarian Jew, father of Isidor Komor (see: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1083498>).

⁶ Their collaboration was very short for C.H. Klaus left Japan the following year.

Kuhn came to Japan in 1894 to work for them. The same year a branch of the company was established in Hong Kong (a shop in the Hong Kong Hotel, Queen's Road) by Arthur Kuhn. In 1896, Julius Kuhn was transferred to Kobe in order to found another branch. The same year, Isidor (Izidor) Komor, younger brother of Siegfried, came from Budapest to join Arthur Kuhn in Hong Kong with his wife Frieda and their children (Paul, Isidor Jr. and George)⁷. The next year, he left Hong Kong and moved with his family to join the Yokohama branch. In 1898, the family moved to Shanghai, where he founded another branch, at first located in the opulent Shanghai Palace Hotel. Later K&K developed their headquarters in Shanghai and the family lived permanently there. In 1899, Isidor (Izidor) Kuhn joined him in Shanghai (he had come to Japan in 1896 to work for K&K). Samuel Donnenberg who had worked previously at the Yokohama branch became a partner and was in charge of the Shanghai branch in 1901. In 1902, Julius Kuhn became partner with K&K and managed the Kobe branch until 1903 when he was shifted to Yokohama as manager. As of 1902, his son with the same name, Julius Kuhn Jr., worked in Yokohama for K&K and was inducted in Kobe in 1904. The same year Arthur Kuhn came back to Yokohama from Hong Kong. Consequently I. Kuhn left the Shanghai branch for Hong Kong, where he still worked in 1908. Isidor Komor Jr. (b. 1887?), son of Isidor Komor, joined in the family business after 1907 in the Kobe branch. George (György) Komor (born in Budapest 1888, died in Yokohama 1976), son of Isidor Komor also worked in the family business after his education. The company K&K traded until 1923, under his management⁸. The shop was probably badly hit by the earthquake and subsequent fire of 1923⁹.

Meanwhile, *Kuhn & Co* continued trading in Yokohama until 1905. Moritz Kuhn had died in 1901¹⁰, but his son Samuel Henry Kuhn had taken the ownership of *Kuhn & Co*. He must have left Japan during the year 1906, for in 1907, he is no longer recorded in Japan.

The company *Kuhn & Komor's* trademark was “Stork and Sun”, used as a signboard on all their branches (see Figure 1), which were located in five East Asian cities.

- The original shop in Yokohama was founded in 1894 and was located on 37 Water Street (水町通り Mizumachi), see Figure 2 and 3. First Siegfried Komor, then Julius Kuhn in 1903, managed it. The shop was opposite the Grand Hotel and next to another art dealer Arthur & Bond¹¹.

⁷ Arthur Kuhn was closely connected to the Komors as his wife, Regina, was the younger sister of Isidor and Siegfried, see Györgyi Fajcsák, *Collecting Chinese art in Hungary from the early 19th century to 1945: as reflected by the artefacts of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts*, (Budapest: Department of East Asian Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, 2007), 166.

⁸ Bincsik, "The trade in Japanese art", 109.

⁹ See Joshua Hammer, *Yokohama Burning: The Deadly 1923 Earthquake and Fire that Helped Forge the Path to World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 103.

¹⁰ He was buried in the Foreigners' Cemetery of Yokohama, Jewish section.

¹¹ The enterprise Arthur & Bond dealt in the sale and export of art. Arthur, who had come from Britain, opened his art dealer's shop in Yokohama in 1889, going into partnership with Bond the following year. The two men also operated a branch and warehouse in London (at 52, St. Mary Axe, E. C.). They exported works of Japanese applied art, principally ivory, bronze and lacquered pieces, see Bincsik, "The trade in Japanese art", 109.

- The branch in Hong Kong was founded in 1894. The shop was located under the Hong Kong Hotel¹², 21&23 Queen's road, and managed by Arthur Kuhn until 1904 and from 1911 to 1913¹³. In 1914 Siegfried Komor became its manager¹⁴ and the shop changed its name to *Komor & Komor* in 1916. It was then situated at Des Voeux road, opposite Cook's office (probably on the other side of the hotel).
- The branch in Kobe was founded in 1896. At first, the K&K building was next to the Oriental Hotel, (n° 36) then opposite (n° 81 Kyo-machi) from 1897 onwards, and managed by Julius Kuhn.
- The branch in Shanghai was founded in 1898 under the management of Isidor Komor and was situated on 123, Guangdong lu under the Central Hotel. Toyo Murakami, a publisher of postcards, was associated with the business¹⁵.
- The branch in Singapore was founded in 1902 at 25 Raffles Place, and moved to the Hotel de l'Europe (Adis building) in 1907. It was managed by Samuel Donnenberg who was in charge of the business in India and the Malay Peninsula.

Kuhn & Komor and the Chinese-Japanese curio trade

Yokohama was the main port of entry to Japan for Westerners and had become a travel destination in 1859. Nearly all steamboats would pass by this city. Martha Chaiklin notes that "by 1894, as many as 80,000 tourists went to Japan annually."¹⁶ Japonism and the taste for Japanese esthetics were very important among travelers until the First World War. Consequently, the city was full of curio shops. Theodore Duret, arriving in 1870 in Yokohama notes in his *Voyage en Asie* that the first thing Europeans do when entering Japan, is to buy curios¹⁷. Buying such souvenirs was very much part of the travel experience.

Emile Guimet (1836-1918), founder of the Guimet Museum in Lyon and then in Paris, noted that "Japan was a land of *bibelots* and curiosities (...) nine out of ten merchants were sellers of old antiques."¹⁸ Many dealers were therefore to be found in Yokohama: Musashiya, Minoda Chojiro, Samurai Shokai (self-proclaimed Kurio King), Arthur and Bond, etc. But Kuhn & Komor was advertised as the 'Asprey' of Asia, manufacturing a

¹² The Hongkong Daily Press reported in August 1907 that a part of the hotel collapsed killing two and seriously injuring five Chinese persons. The accident occurred in the part of the hotel situated on Queen's Road. Some verandas suddenly went down and crashed Messrs. Kuhn and Komor curio shop. The valuable stock of the curio shop was totally wrecked.

¹³ I. Kuhn managed it between 1904 and 1911.

¹⁴ See list of jurors of 1916, accessed July 19, 2016, <http://gwulo.com/jurors-list-1916>.

¹⁵ See *The Directory & Chronicle for China, Japan, Corea, Indo-China, Straits Settlements, Malay States, Siam, Netherlands India, Borneo, the Philippines*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong press office, 1908), 784.

¹⁶ In Chaiklin, *Ivory and the Aesthetics of Modernity*, 20.

¹⁷ "Or il faut vous dire qu'aussitôt débarqués à Yokohama, nous avons commencé à acheter des bibelots. C'est la première chose que font tous les Européens qui mettent le pied au Japon. Nous avons débuté comme tout le monde, sans dessein arrêté, sans parti pris, allant un peu au hasard, cependant nous nous sommes vite sentis attirés vers les bronzes.", in Théodore Duret, *Voyage en Asie*, (Paris: Lévy Frères, 1874), 20.

¹⁸ See Ting Chang, *Travel, collecting and Museums of Asian art in Nineteenth-century Paris* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 47.

choice and exclusive body of top of the range decorative objects for both home and personal use. Some of their items had been given as diplomatic gifts by the Japanese government and a number of them are to be found in European royal collections¹⁹. They were selling both antiques and modern production. They would advertise themselves as selling "Great specialties of all classes of Antique and modern fine art curiosities: silk embroideries, silver, bronze, porcelain, ivory, water colours, panels, tea and coffee sets, cabinets, screens, etc.". They employed Japanese silversmiths and wood carvers and were manufacturing decorative objects, such as jewelry, sterling silver, china, crystal, Japanese netsuke and carved wood furniture²⁰. An example of a desk can be found at the Brooklyn Museum²¹.

There must have been an intense competition between the shops selling curios. We can assume though that Kuhn & Komor tried to secure clients by inventing new designs or even by inventing new categories of collectables. The quantity of curios purchased could indeed be considerable: travelers would not take back one or two objects but boxes full of objects. Several museums find their origin there: Henri Cernuschi (1821-1896), a banker from Paris, went in Japan and China in 1871 fleeing from political turmoil in Paris. He sent back many boxes containing 5,000 items (mostly bronzes vessels or sculptures) and including a 4.4 meter high Buddha statue. The collection became the Cernuschi Museum in 1897 Paris²². Johann-Rudolf Merian-Zaeslin (1845-1906), a swiss businessman in silk trade, gave all his Japanese objects to the Museum der Kulturen in Basel. The anthropological collection of Frederick John Horniman, acquired during his travels in East Asia as a tea merchant, became the Horniman Museum in London in 1901. Ferenc Hopp (1833-1919), a businessman from Budapest, did the same, his collection of 4,000 objects was donated in 1919 to Hungary to become the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts, in Budapest²³. This type of wealthy client was often trying to acquire an extensive collection of one type of object or material. We can assume that the dealers attempted to produce and sell collectibles, that is objects that would lead people to acquire a variety in order to build a collection. They were not only supplying a demand for curios but also building a market by creating new classes of collectables. It will be argued that the set of replicas of Japanese coins kept at the Ashmolean museum belongs to that category of objects.

The Japanese coins replicas sold by Kuhn & Komor

¹⁹ Two pieces by Kuhn & Komor were given by the Japanese Government to King Edward VII and King George V - today in the Royal Museum at Sandringham.

²⁰ See *Catalogue of Japanese carved wood furniture*, Yokohama: Kuhn & Komor, 1910.

²¹ Object 1990.230.13a-b, wrongly attributed to Kuhn and Komar.

²² Michel Maucuer, "Bronzes chinois antiques et archaïsants dans la collection Cernuschi", *Arts asiatiques* 53 (1998): 39-48.

²³ For more details see Fajcsák, *Collecting Chinese art* and Eva Cseh, "Japanese Art in the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts", in 東洋美術館所蔵 日本美術品図録/*Catalogue of Japanese Art in The Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts* (京都 Kyoto: 国際日本文化研究センターKokusai Nihon Bunka Kenkyū Sentā, 1995), xii-xviii.

The owner of the Japanese replicas we are presenting today was Major George Uvedale Price (b. 10 December 1853, d. 29 October 1929)²⁴. Little is known about his life: he must have stayed in Amoy (today's Xiamen-Gulangyu, Fujian) and in Formosa (today's Taiwan) around the end of 19th century. He published several photographs taken in these places²⁵. Back in the United Kingdom, he could no longer keep his collection of East Asian coins and donated it to the Bodleian Library in 1903²⁶. His collection included coins from Japan, Vietnam and China among others. They were transferred to the Ashmolean Museum in October 1920, after the creation of the Heberden Coin room (a new department of the museum dedicated to coins).

The Japanese replicas are accompanied by a catalogue entitled *Catalogue of the large and most complete existing collection of Japanese coins and paper money*²⁷. This catalogue bears a ticket of "(Ku)hn & Komor, Japanese & Chinese fine art depot, 21 & 23 Queens road, Hong Kong, 35, Water Street, Yokohama". As mentioned above, the Hong Kong shop opened in 1894, we can infer that the set was probably purchased between 1894 and 1900. The absence of the company's symbol "stork and sun" also suggests that this was made in the early years of its foundation²⁸.

The set is composed of six hundred and sixty four items, including coins, banknotes and objects displayed on fifty different trays²⁹ (see Figures 4-7). Two large ingots in base metal belonged to the same set. The whole thing is quite heavy and seems difficult to transport, but a closer inspection shows that it was precisely designed for transport: the trays are intended to be stacked in two sections of twenty five trays, and the categories have been organised to match that structure (which means that the chronological order is challenged). Each tray has a block of wood underneath to prevent any movement while being transported.

The trays 1 & 26 gather genuine *hansatsu* dating back to 1868-1869 (see Figure 4). Trays 25 and 50 present different containers for coins (bags) and bullion (bamboos to transport gold dust for instance), see Figure 5. The other trays are displaying metal replicas and sometimes genuine copper-alloy cash coins (see Figures 6 and 7). All are accompanied by a label in Japanese usually indicating the denomination of the object, its size and weight, the reign and ruler's name, the age of the coin, and sometimes analysis of the metal content (as on tray 40)³⁰. The dates of coins are given backwards from the year

²⁴ George Uvedale Price was the son of General George Uvedale Price and Elizabeth Palmer.

²⁵ Such as *Rambles with a camera, or a series of photographs with descriptive text illustrating the physical features, scenery, temples, types of native life, etc., etc., of native life of the island of Amoy and its immediate neighbourhood*, Yokohama: Kelly & Walsh, 1893; *Reminiscences of north Formosa*, Yokohama: Kelly & Walsh, 1895 ; *People of "The Land of Chin": a series of photographs depicting types of the Chinese race*. Part I., Yokohama: Kelly & Walsh, [1896?].

²⁶ The donation was offered in 1902 and registered in 1903.

²⁷ HCR Archives (Arch.Bodl.Safe 39). This catalogue is written exclusively in English but several mistakes indicate that the writer was not a native speaker.

²⁸ The address 35 does not match other sources; we can infer that it was the first address of the company, which then moved to 37, by 1900.

²⁹ One object is missing (tray 4/coin no. 4).

³⁰ E.T. Leeds transcribed and attempted to translate all the labels into English in his catalogue of this collection (see *The G. Uvedale Price Collection of Facsimiles of Japanese Currency*, Arch. Ash. 19).

1889³¹. The most ancient items date back to the 12th century³² and the most recent to the 16th year of the Meiji era (i.e. 1883). The arrangement loosely follows that adopted by the *Kingin Zuroku* 金銀圖録 (“Illustrated catalogue of gold and silver (Coinage)”) written by Morishige Kondō 近藤守重³³.

A similar set of coins replicas was brought to our attention by Manon Rais³⁴. This set belongs to the Museum der Kulturen in Basel. It is a smaller set (38 trays) but in a much better conservation state (see Figures 8 and 9). The tickets are inlaid in silver and the trays are enclosed by a glass panel. It was purchased by Johann-Rudolf Merian-Zaeslin who lived in Japan between 1874 and 1893 and was donated to the Museum der Kulturen in 1894. It implies that it predates the Ashmolean set. It has possibly been purchased from Kuhn & Co. The existence of this set raises the question of the number of examples that may exist. I will argue that in the case of the Basel set, the set belongs to the souvenir category - it is a very elaborate set done with care. It is unclear why the tickets had been written in Japanese if it was for foreign clients, but we must keep in mind, that the travelers coming to Japan were not all English speakers. A strong advertisement argument of Kuhn & Komor was their ability to speak different language such as French, English, German, Hungarian... These objects could then be purchased by any client, including Japanese people who would like to offer it to a foreigner as a symbol of Japanese culture. In the case of the Ashmolean set, the set is of a lesser quality and seems to have been produced in a hurry (especially when looking at the way the calligraphy evolves between the first and last tray). No silver inlay, no glass panel. The set is also much larger. This set is intended for an erudite collector with a specific interest in numismatics, as the set follows the arrangement of a numismatic catalogue.

Conclusion

The Ashmolean Museum and the Museum der Kulturen in Basel have two similar sets of Japanese coins replicas, which obviously share a common origin. The Ashmolean set was purchased from Kuhn & Komor at the very end of the 19th century. Neither the word imitation nor replica appears in the descriptive catalogue that accompanied the set in the Ashmolean collection. This omission is not exactly a lie: it is very obvious that the majority of these coins are not genuine, though some recent types are indeed genuine. This set of replicas was realized using genuine coins, as the prints of the chop marks suggest. This technique would allow a genuine object to be duplicated as many times as wanted, it allows therefore reproducing antiques without being accused of creating forgeries. We cannot conclude that these objects were produced by Kuhn & Komor as we

³¹ For instance on tray 4 the coin no. 9 dates back to 1569 and is described as 320 years old (經過三百二十年).

³² Such as in tray 5/coin no.8, 10/3, 14/5.9, 16/7.

³³ Morishige Kondō 近藤守重, *Kingin Zuroku* 金銀圖録, Osaka : Kawachiya Genshichirō, Bunka 7 [1810].

³⁴ Manon Rais, "Amélioration de la lisibilité par les techniques d'imagerie et par la restauration d'étiquettes argentées ternies. Etude appliquée aux étiquettes métallisées d'une collection de monnaies japonaises du Museum der Kulturen Basel" (Master dissertation, Haute Ecole spécialisée de Suisse Occidentale, 2015).

know only they had at some stage became the retailers. It is though interesting to see how they displayed, as a complete and elaborate set, objects that individually would have sold for little money. The whole was not entirely authentic but was at least highly exotic and would fit the travelers desire for souvenirs.

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Figure 1. Kuhn and Komor trademark - Stork and Sun

Detail of an Advertisement in *The Club Hotel, Limited: Guide Book of Yokohama, Tokyo and Principal Places in Japan* (undated), pages not numbered.

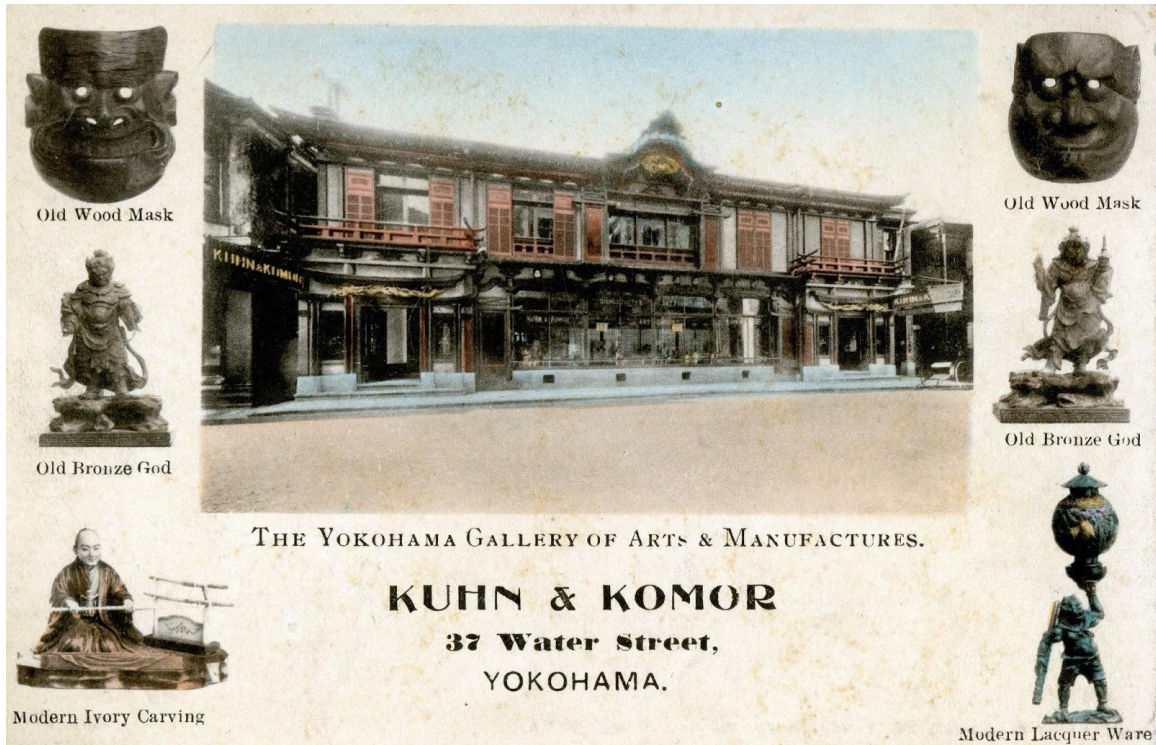


Figure 2. Postcard, Yokohama Postcard club
 available on: https://yokohamapostcardclub.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/blog-post_6124.html



Figure 3. Interior of the Kuhn & Komor shop in Yokohama (LEEDM.F.L.1981.066),
 Clifton Park Museum, Rotherham



Figure 4. Tray of *hansatsu* (Uvedale Price 1903-1), Ashmolean Museum.



Figure 5. Tray of *paranumismatica* (Uvedale Price 1903-50), Ashmolean Museum



Figure 6. Tray of *oban* (Uvedale Price 1903-31), Ashmolean Museum



Figure 7. Tray of various coins and ingots (Uvedale Price 1903-29), Ashmolean Museum



Figure 8. Tray of paranumismatica (Ild902.28), Museum der Kulturen



Figure 9. Tray of *oban* (Ild 902.09), Museum der Kulturen

