

**ZOLTÁN BIEDERMANN, ANNE GERRITSEN,  
GIORGIO RIELLO (eds.), *Global Gifts.  
The Material Culture of Diplomacy  
in Early Modern Eurasia*, Cambridge 2018,  
Cambridge University Press, 301 pp.,  
ISBN 978-1-108-41550-7**

This volume on global gifts is a truly refreshing and inspiring book, which strives to bring together methods and approaches in the socio-cultural anthropology of the gift, material culture studies, diplomatic history and much beyond. For a long time diplomatic history has been a rather conservative field of study, paying privileged attention to political history, its legal contexts and mostly male protagonists. One can thus read the volume as a significant contribution to reformulating and revitalizing diplomatic history and establishing what has been called the New Diplomatic History. The editors view diplomatic history in the contexts of the shifting power structures, intercultural contacts, exchanges and intermediaries that were often connected with gifts, and gift giving practices. They remind readers that recent publications in New Diplomatic History have pushed the boundaries of the continent to include Byzantium and Muscovy (p. 9). On the other hand, although the volume ambitiously refers to Eurasia, the “other” Europe, i.e. the non-Western part of the continent and Central Asia, is largely circumvented in the book. The focus is primarily on the Mediterranean and the western European countries and their former colonies and trading posts in Asia. The same asymmetry becomes even more evident when we look at the list of authors, who are based exclusively at Western European scholarly and art historical institutions. The opportunity to engage a more diverse spectrum of voices has thus been missed.

In addition to revitalizing diplomatic history, the volume can be read as a manifesto of material culture studies since it clearly points to the limits of the post-linguistic turn belief that “we only have texts”. Through emphasis on gift circulation and gifting practices it shows the importance of non-verbal communication, particularly in the contexts of cross-cultural relations. A broad array of artefacts, images and practices, such as gestures, are analysed alongside written records and provide very valuable insights into selected aspects of early modern global history.

In the Introduction the editors raise several important questions, which are then repeatedly addressed, if not answered in detail, throughout the volume.

They are particularly concerned with the question of what makes a diplomatic gift and they point out that it is often difficult to determine “where the boundaries between gifts, luxury commodities, tribute and booty can be drawn” (p. 7). They also touch on a question which is much discussed across the social sciences, namely of the so called diffuse agency of things, humans and possibly animal actors etc. Although this highly topical issue is not elaborated in depth, the volume clearly shows there is a potential for further research as the editors emphasize “that diplomatic gifts sometimes served as ambassadors in their own right, fulfilling a function – the “gift function” – rather than just figuring as a rigid category of object” (p. 28). Moreover, animals were often both expected and appreciated by the recipients as well as provided by the givers; this included horses, birds, and a wide spectrum of exotic animals for displays in menageries. Another promising theme is the performative or theatrical dimension of diplomatic contacts and exchanges: gifts often served as props, substitutions or instruments of impression management.

The editors decided to arrange the chapters in an approximately chronological way. The first chapter is a case study of diplomatic and material exchanges between the Ottoman court and one of the Italian city-states. Antonia Gattward Cevizli explores gift exchange between sultan Bayezid II and Francesco II Gonzaga, the Marquis of Mantua, in the 1490s which entailed fine horses imported from the Ottoman Empire but also portraits, luxurious cloth and clothing. While the horses enabled Francesco to improve his Mantuan breed and further donate these greatly valued animals to other European rulers, the Ottomans highly appreciated high quality Mantuan armour.

In the second chapter Luca Molà analyses the luxury presents delivered by the permanent representatives (the so called *baili*) and ambassadors of the Republic of Venice to the Ottoman court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The majority of the gifts included the famed Murano glass and mirrors, silk fabrics or woollen cloth. This essay also shows the important role gifts could play in promoting interest in and encouraging desire for and consumption of refined artisanal products. Moreover, the Ottoman demand for exquisite Venetian goods also stimulated technological innovations as special wishes were formulated and public competitions for artisans announced.

In the third essay Zoltán Biedermann draws attention to a collection of fine ivory caskets that were sent as diplomatic gifts from Sri-Lanka to Lisbon in order to strengthen the Sri Lankan – Portuguese alliance in the sixteenth century. Biedermann points out the hybrid character of the ivory caskets' decoration, which combined European and Asian motifs as a result of cross-cultural contact. While doing so he also rejects the outdated and hierarchical notion of “influ-

ence” in favour of concepts that would reflect the agency of Asian craftspeople, such as “appropriation”, the “translatability of values” or the “connectability of visual idioms” (pp. 108–110).

The subsequent essay by Barbara Karl explores the asymmetric diplomatic gift exchange between the Austrian Habsburgs and the Ottoman sultans over the course of the sixteenth century (more precisely between the battle of Mohács in 1526 and the agreement of Zsitvatorok in 1606, which inaugurated an era of more balanced mutual relations). This time frame enables her to highlight conflicting interpretations of gift exchange from the Ottoman and Habsburg perspectives. While the court in Constantinople viewed Habsburg gifts as tributes and an expression of an inferior status, the Habsburgs strived to frame them as honorific gifts (*Ebrengechenke*). Barbara Karl focuses on a time period during which ambassadors and negotiators from various parts of the Central European Habsburg monarchy, including e.g. Bohemia and Hungary, participated in diplomatic missions and left many written sources. There is a rich scholarly literature related to her topic published outside Austria and Germany, which seems to have been dismissed, and the footnotes thus give only selective credit to a narrow range of relevant authors and works. For example, Karl pays much attention to emperor Rudolph II, (including his gift of five richly dressed and armed Ottoman captives to the Elector of Saxony, Christian II). For a long time, the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague has been a major centre of research in the visual arts and culture during the age of Rudolph II. One might for example mention that in 2013 the Prague based journal *Studia Rudolphina* published an English article by Ivana Horacek on gift exchange between Emperor Rudolph II and Elector Christian II of Saxony, which thematically fits this chapter and volume so well that it is striking it is not referenced. This uneven approach to the study of Habsburg Central Europe is also reflected in the Introduction, where the editors employ the term Habsburg Austria for the sixteenth century while local scholars would only with caution use this when referring to the eighteenth century stage – after the major homogenizing reforms – at the earliest. It would be so very becoming if the volume, which draws such a rich inspiration from cultural anthropological theory, were also to help to instil the anthropological ideals of reciprocity, balance and inclusiveness upon everyday scholarly practice.

The fifth chapter, by Carla Alferes Pinto, is the most theoretically explicit and ambitious contribution in the volume. Following Arjun Appadurai, Alferes Pinto takes a situational approach to gift circulation and explores how gifts changed their meanings as they moved across cultural borders. Alferes Pinto is very attentive to inter-cultural misunderstandings and differing approaches to shared gifts. She focuses on the diplomatic gift exchange orchestrated by Aleixo

de Meneses, archbishop of Goa and governor of the Portuguese empire in Asia, and by the Shah ‘Abbās I of Persia. In an effort to move the Persian shah to convert to Catholicism, Meneses sent him a series of Christian paintings and other religiously laden artefacts which failed to successfully cultivate diplomatic dialogue and were soon further “recycled” as gifts from the shah to the Christian king of Georgia, Alexander II.

In the following chapter, Claudia Swan explores the nascent Dutch Republic’s strategies in forging and cultivating diplomatic ties. Dutch state documents often described Dutch diplomatic gifts as rarities or curiosities (so called *Rariteyten*): costly, elaborate and exceptional objects that were either locally produced or imported as curious, rare, exotic goods, which enabled the Dutch representatives to articulate and materialise Dutch trade power and political ambitions.

The complicated situation of the Dutch East India Company in Tokugawa Japan is analysed in the subsequent essay by Adam Clulow. After 1609, Dutch representatives searched for a suitable formula for presenting gifts to the shogun and major Tokugawa officials in order to tie Japan to the Dutch global trading network. In the absence of a king who would have been understood as a sovereign and possibly an acceptable partner for the shogun, the Dutch at first introduced the fictive “king of Holland” as a donor and receiver of diplomatic gifts. Nonetheless, under the pressure of and rumours from other European diplomats the Dutch had to stop to refer to a fictive king and tried to employ the name of the Governor General instead, which, however, did not meet with appreciation and understanding in Japan. Thus, the Dutch representatives came up with a new definition of the situation and after 1634 started to present themselves as vassals of the shogun. Their gifts were therefore understood as a tribute rather than diplomatic presents. This contribution thus refines the map of patterns of inter-cultural negotiations in various diplomatic situations in Eurasian settings.

In the eighth chapter, Mary Laven analyses a list of potential gifts that were suggested to accompany a papal delegation to the Emperor of China, which eventually did not take place. It was drafted in the late 1580s by the Jesuit Alessandro Valignano. Laven distinguishes four main strategies that shaped the compilation of the list: 1) an approach sensitive to the host culture, 2) a strategy to impress the Chinese court with technologies and skills from the Christian world, 3) a connective or hybridizing approach, which combines gifts referring to both European and Asian cultures and finally 4) a strategy which might be called “evangelical smuggling”, i.e. importing objects laden with Christian religious messages. Laven thus captures very well the complexity and ambivalence of approaches in early modern cross-cultural gifting.

In the penultimate chapter Giorgio Riello compares the 1686 Siamese embassy to the French court from the French and the Siamese points of view, thus shifting the narrative away from its long dominant focus on France. He comes to the convincing conclusion that while king Narai of Siam actively suggested desired gifts, showed interest in and knowledge of things European, king Louis XIV of France was considerably less familiar with the Siamese or more broadly Asian contexts and appreciated the Siamese embassy mainly as a spectacular event and an occasion to add sparkle to his carefully staged self-image.

In the final essay of the volume Natasha Eaton explores the role of jewels and images as gifts in British diplomacy in late eighteenth century India. She particularly underlines the elaborate strategies adopted by local Indian rulers (*nawabs*) to resist and subvert the rules enforced by the British.

While the Introduction meets expectations well, the book would certainly profit from a final commentary, as this would provide the opportunity to re-think many of the intriguing questions and problems that are addressed in the volume in a rather cursory way, and could give the book a more compact character. Nonetheless, the volume presents a very compelling collection of essays and it is a highly valuable addition to global and cross-cultural history. Moreover, I am convinced it can become a very welcome item on reading lists not only for history seminars but also in cultural anthropological, or, indeed, interdisciplinary courses.

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