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“Ryūkyū and Okinawa Textile Collections through Western Receptions”

Although the Ryūkyū Kingdom has been known to the Western world since at least the sixteenth century, collections of its textiles were relatively slow to materialize. In contrast, Japanese and Chinese textiles were eagerly collected, as can be seen on the walls of Western painting galleries. Japanese textiles were brought back through Dutch and Chinese trading networks and Chinese textiles had long been collected, mainly through Chinese trading ports. In contrast to China and Japan, the Ryūkyū Kingdom was considered a separate and largely unknown entity and Western appreciation for its unique culture and sophisticated textile arts appeared relatively late.

As an example from the nineteenth century, the comprehensive Baelz Textile Collection in the University of Reutlingen with its 800 examples of textile samples collected by Erwin von Baelz (1849-1913) in Japan during the early 1870s, does not contain a single piece of textile from the Ryūkyū Kingdom. For von Baelz and others, Ryūkyū culture was a separate world than that of Japan.

One of the first attempts to make a comprehensive collection of Ryūkyū culture, including its textiles, were made through the Prussian government in the 1880s. On instructions from Berlin, objects were collected between 1881 and 1884 by representatives of the imperial Japanese government in Okinawa, and a collection of 469 items arrived in Berlin at the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin (today's Ethnological Museum of Berlin). Due to losses during the Second World War, the collection was significantly reduced, but still contained seventy pieces of textiles. In 2013, after extensive surveys, a team of experts from the Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts in Naha was able to publish the entire Berlin collection in a two-volume catalogue.

This presentation will look at some of the routes by which the textiles of Ryūkyū and Okinawa arrived in Western collections and will explore the roles of key actors who were involved in the process. It will examine the routes of the Berlin collection and other twentieth-century agents active in introducing Ryūkyū culture to the West, including Sōetsu Yanagi (1889-1961), Langdon Warner (1881-1955), and Jaap Langewis (1902-73).