

Cross-Cultural Heritage Objects: the Japanese Stone Lantern

Petre Vlad

Independent Researcher, Constanta, Romania
Orcid: 0009-0006-8610-9817

Abstract: Cultural objects are items that are deemed significant as pertaining to a culture. Cross-cultural heritage objects can either be considered the result of appropriation or of merging belief systems, traditions, and other elements. Regardless of their exact classification, their preservation is a necessity for maintaining the accuracy of history. This article analyzes the case of a stone artefact tying together two radically different worlds, one from the Far East of Asia, the other from the former Communist Bloc of Europe. It traces the origin of the Japanese Stone Lantern gifted to the city of Constanta, giving the general context and noting relevant details. The artefact is further analyzed from a technical standpoint, highlighting possible conservation and restoration approaches.

Keywords: Cultural objects, Heritage, Japan, Romania, Stone conservation, Restoration.

I. INTRODUCTION

Heritage, as a word, derives from the Latin *hereditas*, adopted into English via the old French term “heritage”. Its meaning remains unchanged, that of inheritance. A synonym, patrimony, derives similarly from the Latin *patrimonium*, signifying a property which is passed from one generation (the father) to the next (sons, descendants). Understanding the origin of these terms is important in order to put things into perspective, as opposed to accepting them as abstract notions. It is commonly accepted that cultural inheritance, or heritage, can be both tangible and intangible. One of the tangible forms that exist is embodied by cultural objects. Their value is given subjectively but also objectively, through their recognition by literary works, expertise, and national or international documents. However, value can be intrinsic, independent of regulated requirements or crude monetary reasoning. Cross-cultural heritage represents a unique category that challenges the idea of inheritance by separate, distinct civilizations. One such example can be that of the Japanese Lantern of Constanta, a traditional stone artefact gifted by the city of Yokohama as a token of international friendship.

II. CONTEXT

2.1. Political and historical context

Romania’s bilateral diplomatic relations with Japan were established in 1921 and, after a 15-year interruption beginning with 1944, were resumed in September 1959 [1], shortly after both states became members of the United Nations. At that time, Romania was strengthening its international relations in order to establish beneficial cooperation. While being a communist republic at the time, such policies helped build viable partnerships outside the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. In 1975, Romanian president Nicolae Ceausescu made an official visit to Japan, being greeted in Tokyo by Emperor Hirohito. In 1977, the cities of Constanta and Yokohama sign a partnership through which they become sister cities. In 1982, MutsuoAryiama, president of the Yokohama - Constanta Friendship Committee, visits Romania. On this occasion, the Committee

gifts a stone lantern on behalf of the city of Yokohama. Mr. Ariyama had previously visited the country as early as 1956 [2], and would later be declared honorary citizen of Constanta in 1998.

2.2. Cultural context

Stone lanterns have been an integral part of Japanese culture for many generations and although strongly linked to Shintoism, they emerged through the crossing of several distant cultures. Buddhism, originating from the Indian subcontinent circa 5th - 6th century BC [3], gained followers in China in the 2nd century AD, before arriving in Japan via Korea four centuries later. The use of stone lanterns as votive objects was a practice common to Buddhist temples, where their light had symbolic value [4]. The Japanese adapted the symbolic object, giving it new significance and different forms.

The artefact gifted to Constanta represents one of the several traditional varieties of lantern, the Kasuga-gataishidōrō (春日型石灯籠), roughly translated as “Kasuga-style stone lantern”. It is further identified as Tachi-gata, which means “pedestal style”. These are, however, not necessarily official names, but general descriptive terms, also shortened as Kasuga-dōrō (“Kasuga lantern”). Its name, structure and ornamentation hark back to the Kasuga Taisha shrine from the Nara Prefecture of Japan, built in 768 AD [5], where it is believed this tradition started. Nara (formerly Heijōkyō) was the imperial capital of Japan during the late 8th century [6].

The lantern in question was mounted on the bank of Tabacarie Lake, in a special area reminiscent of a Japanese garden, incorporating low terracing walls using shellstone, which is traditional in Romania’s Dobrogea region. The lake and its eponymous park surrounding it had been the subject of a major landscaping and development project, which included two artificial islands (one of which had an amphitheatre), a series of bridges, a narrow-gauge railway (complete with two tunnels), and other elements.

III. ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS

3.1. Structure and features

The Japanese Lantern of Constanta, as it is generally referred to, is a granite artefact mounted at surface level onto a concrete foundation in close proximity to the lake. It consists of six pieces (Fig. 2): a base, a cylindrical column-shaped pedestal, a base or platform for the firebox, the firebox itself, a capstone, and a finial. These components are assembled by being interlocked with each other and jointed with white cement mortar, which doesn’t fulfil a structural role. On its base, there was initially an inscribed marble plaque which disappeared and was later replaced with a metal one, which was also removed or stolen.

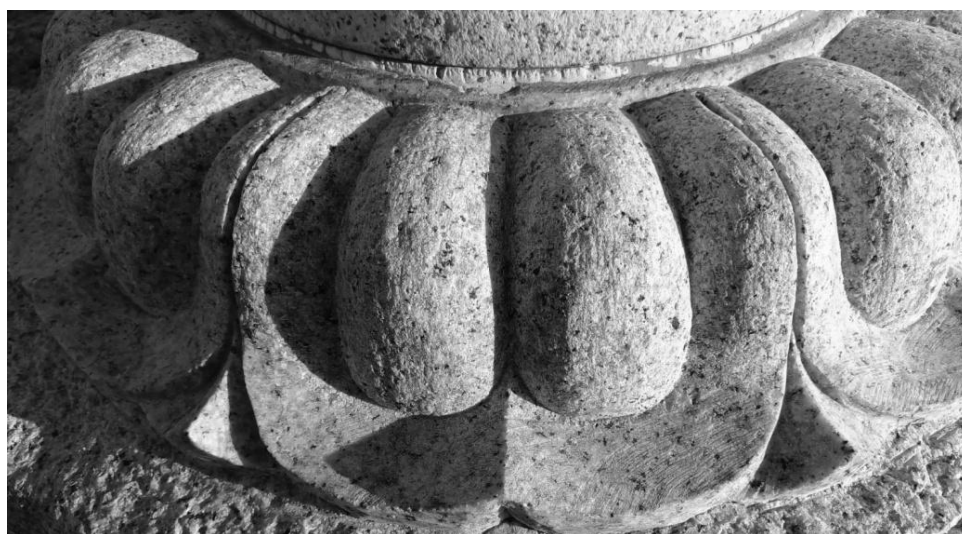


Fig. 1: Detail of base decoration.



Fig. 2: View of the lamp from different angles and its components. 1 – finial, 2- capstone/ roof, 3- firebox, 4- firebox platform, 5- shaft/ column-shaped pedestal, 6- base.



Fig. 3: Base element.

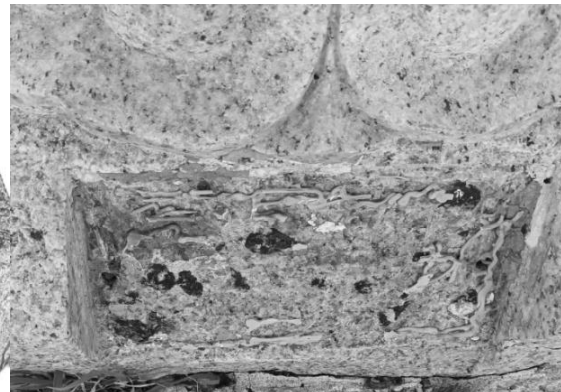


Fig. 4: Plaque niche with adhesive residue.

The lantern's ornamentation is in both low relief and high relief, predominantly the latter. It includes geometric shapes alongside floral and zoomorphic elements. Its structure and symbolism is strongly tied to that of stone pagodas.

The base is carved from a single block with an upward lotus ornament (kaeribana), as illustrated in Fig.1 and Fig.3. On its Eastern side, it bears an incised rectangular niche where its plaque was inserted. According to traditional Japanese practice, the rough side of the base is inserted into the ground. In this case, it was left visible in order to attach the inscription without modifying its decoration.

The vertical shaft, which together with the base forms the pedestal, is a cylindrical element bearing three profiles: two echinus and an intermediary torus. Through its relative simplicity, it emphasizes the adjacent carvings. It is topped by the light chamber's platform which mirrors the base's lotus petal decoration (ukebana), and transitions to a hexagonal shape. The six sides of the platform are each decorated with stylized water waves.

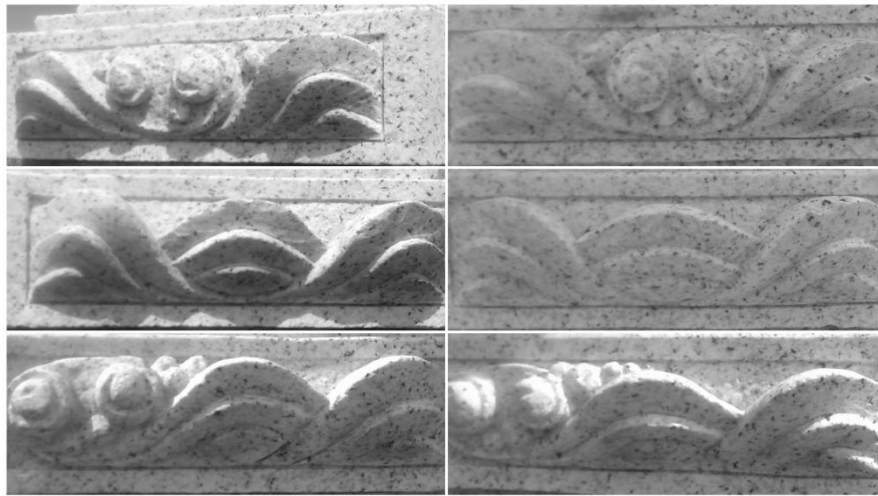


Fig.5: Reliefs on the firebox's hexagonal base symbolizing water.

The firebox or light chamber (Fig.6), perhaps the central element, is richly decorated with reliefs depicting water, flames, mountains, and a deer. It features three windows, one of which retains a small fragment of a stone lattice.

The capstone, commonly referred to as the roof or umbrella, has a practical purpose of protection. It also bears resemblance to a pagoda roof. However, like other artistic and architectural elements in Japan, its shape is also imbued with symbolism. In this case, the ornamental carving symbolizes air and wind.

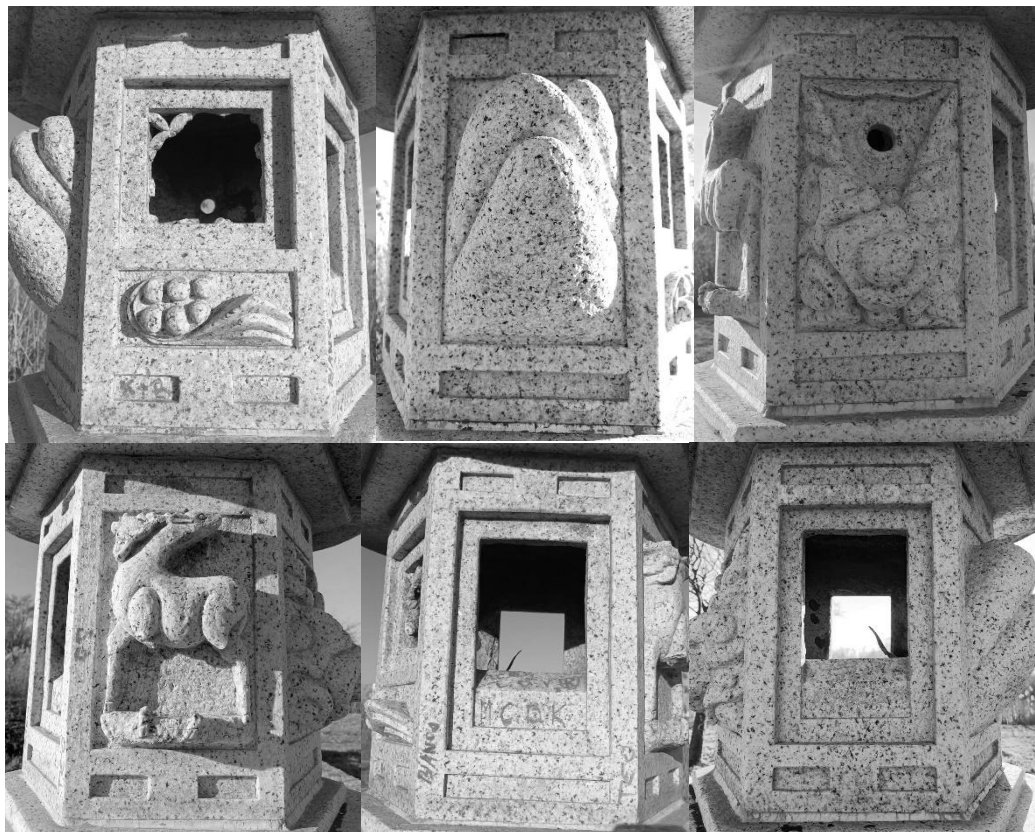


Fig. 6: The sides of the firebox.

The finial, called kurin or hōju, symbolizes a sacred wish-fulfilling jewel [7], which traces its origin to ancient India, where it was called cintamani (चिन्तामणि), which exists in both Hinduism and Buddhism [8]. The hōju is found here on top of the lotus flower ornament (ukebana).



Fig. 7: Left side: Ornamentation under firebox platform. Right side: Finial.

3.2. Physical characteristics and condition assessment

In regards to the method of its making, the lamp and its components appear to have been sculpted through both manual and mechanized processes. Due to the hardness of the granite, carbide-tipped tools were likely used. Tool marks from bush hammers, point chisels and flat chisels can be identified on the surface, along with semi-circular traces of electric cutting tools. The shaft appears to have been manufactured using a stone lathe, then adjusted and bush-hammered manually.

Based on the petrographic examination performed in situ, the material used is Inada Granite, a rock extracted in the Ibaraki Prefecture of Japan since the 19th century. Originally intended for railway works and pavements, it came to be used for architectural stonework such as on the Bank of Japan building in Tokyo, constructed in 1932 [9]. This same stone was also used in the Yokohama War Cemetery [10], built circa 1946.

The main dimensions of the lantern are summarized in Table 1 below. By comparing the measurements with the traditional Japanese shaku unit, it results that the object was likely designed directly using the metric system. Conversion into British imperial units indicates the total height's equivalent of 8 feet. However the other dimensions are inconclusive to indicate measurement in inches.

Table 1: dimensions of the object and its main elements.

Total height	2.44 m
Shaft	H=92 cm ø 31 cm
Firebox platform	H=38 cm
Facets of the platform's hexagon	H=11 cm L=36 cm
Firebox	H=42 cm
Firebox interior	H=27.1 cm ø 32.5 cm

Regarding its integrity, it remains in relatively good condition, mainly due to the high quality of the stone used. While granite is resistant to decay and erosion, the object has sustained damage due to vandalism and improper interventions. Currently, it is missing more than 90% of the stone lattice and the relief carving depicting a deer is missing two legs. The interior of the light chamber has fire damage and several other areas present chipping or spalling. On the eastern side, the shaft bears six drill holes of different diameters: two of ø10

mm and four of $\varnothing 5$ mm, Corroborated with two more drill holes of $\varnothing 10$ mm in the niche found on its base, it indicates these were made at an earlier date than the rest. These indicate the existence of two previous inscription plates. Furthermore, the niche formerly holding a plaque has residue of Portland cement, white cement, a synthetic adhesive and an unknown black polymeric residue, possibly a sealant. The southern side of the base has a diagonal fracture, possibly due to a pre-existing micro-fissure.

From a preliminary evaluation of the object, it doesn't currently pose any risk of instability. However, its isolated position makes it vulnerable to future vandalism, which is the primary risk. Also, the uncertain legal status of the lantern does not offer it sufficient protection from unauthorized and improper cleaning or repairs which pose the second-highest risk to its integrity.

3.3. Restoration and conservation strategies

In order to preserve its original purpose and aspect, a number of procedures can be undertaken:

- Cleaning operations to remove traces of graffiti, soot, and bio-colonization.
- Minor repairs to the mortar joints using a matching mortar.
- Replacement of the missing fragments by carving new matching pieces for the lattice (Fig. 8) and the deer relief.
- Replacing the missing inscription plaque with a new one, preferably hand-carved.

The methodology should respect current standards in stone conservation, regardless of its status or lack thereof. This will ensure a correct groundwork for future protection measures and avoid costly or complex restoration necessities.

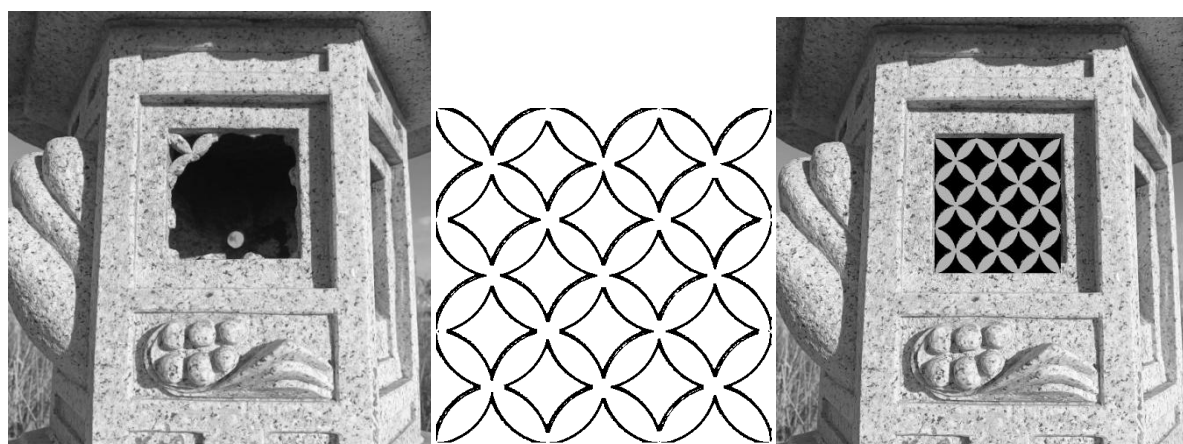


Fig. 8: Restoration proposal. Left: current state. Middle: design of original lattice. Right: Simulation of restored lamp. The intervention would retain all original material and utilize visually compatible granite. Dimensions of lattice: 12,5 X 12,5 cm, with 15 mm thickness, minus currently existing fragments.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Japanese Stone Lantern of Constanta is representative of cross-cultural heritage objects. With origins connecting it to India, it now belongs to Japanese culture but also to the history of this seaside East-European city. The restoration and conservation of stone, which is a rare occupation in this region, must be applied in order to preserve a work of traditional art which marks significant events from the past. While it is not a museum object or a historical monument, its preservation carries a similar importance, one which may still blend future stories into its own.

REFERENCES

- [1] M.A.E. <https://www.mae.ro/bilateral-relations/2047>
- [2] O contribuție la întărirea unității muncitorești internaționale. (1956, May 13). *Scînteia, Issue 3594*. p. 3.

- [3] Sarao, Karam Tej. (2017). *History, Indian Buddhism*. 10.1007/978-94-024-0852-2_169.
- [4] Chen, Huaiyu. (2019). A study on a stone lantern from Dongzhang village in medieval China. *Studies in Chinese Religions*. 5. 1-24. 10.1080/23729988.2019.1676085.
- [5] McAuley, TE (2016) Viewing a Myriad Leaves: Man'yō Botanical Gardens in Japan. *International Journal of Contents Tourism*, 1 (2). 1 - 16.
- [6] Rahman, Sumiya. (2024). Heian Period: Last Division of Classical Japanese History. University of Dhaka.https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383691251_Heian_Period_Last_Division_of_Classical_Japanese_History.
- [7] Conlan, Thomas. (2023). The Gods Are Watching: Talismans, Oaths, and Political Allegiance in Medieval Japan. *Medieval Worlds*. medieval worlds. 40-64. 10.1553/medievalworlds_no19_2023s40.
- [8] Tibetan Buddhist Encyclopedia. <https://tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Cintamani>
- [9] Geological Survey of Japan, Geological excursion. Tsukaba and Inada Areas. Field Guidebook (2004). <https://www.gsj.jp/data/openfile/no0414/guidebook.html>
- [10] Tsakonas, A., & Pieris, A. (2023). Eucalypts of Hodogaya: Organic cultural diplomacy at Yokohama War Cemetery. *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*, 22(22), 08-20. <https://doi.org/10.24135/ijara.v22i22.711>