

BOOK REVIEW

Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges

Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges, Steuber, J, and Lai G. Eds. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 327 pages, 2014

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The origins of this richly fascinating and very welcome volume on the history of collecting Chinese art, part of the David A. Cofrin Asian art manuscript series, lie in a symposium co-organized at the University of Florida in February 2009 by Guolong Lai of the School of Art and Art History at the University of Florida, and Jason Steuber of the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art in Gainesville, Florida. A dozen papers presented at or solicited following the symposium are brought together in this volume. They deal with the collecting interests and enthusiasms of private collectors and dealers and the vital role these individuals played in the formation, fostering and development of a number of major Western museum collections of Chinese art. These case studies also shed light on how the changing and evolving nature of taste, the art market, scholarship, and political conditions and legal frameworks have combined to affect collecting patterns over the past century. This volume explores that history of dealing, collecting, connoisseurship, curating, authenticity, provenance, traditions of taste, and the contextualisation of Chinese art across museum institutions in both North America and Europe, with a particular emphasis on the early and mid-twentieth century period. The editors of the volume have applied a conceptual grouping to the contributor essays, grouping them into three overlapping thematic sections dealing with Early Collections; Collectors and Connoisseurs; and Challenges in Collecting Chinese Art. Provenance comes much more to the fore in the Challenges in Collecting Chinese Art section of the book, but throughout this volume the theme of provenance recurs as an issue of central importance.

The first three chapters in this volume, in the Early Collections section, examine the formation of early collections in the United States and in Sweden. In chapter one, Elinor Pearlstein of the Art Institute of Chicago examines the story of Chinese art collecting in early twentieth century Chicago. Centred on collecting at two very different institutions, the Field Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago, Pearlstein brings to life the very active interest in

collecting early Chinese art among Chicagoan collectors during the early to mid-twentieth century, with a particular focus on the Buckingham collection of early bronzes, and the Sonnenschein collection of jades. Pearlstein elegantly illuminates the varied perspectives and roles played by influential and notable Chicagoan scholars, dealers, businessmen, as well as those of Chinese scholars and diplomats in the formation and development of these collections.

Deborah Del Gais evaluates the formation of the Chinese art collection at the Rhode Island School of Art and Design (RISD) Museum in chapter two. Del Gais's study demonstrates how the formation of this collection came about very consciously as a result of a quite systematic and deliberate policy of acquisition by the Museum's directors and donors under Louis Earle Rowe (1882–1937), director of RISD between 1912 and 1936. Del Gais describes how Rowe made bold and farsighted decisions regarding the acquisition of Chinese material in line with a vision of an encyclopaedic museum. Along with Miriam Banks (1890–1965), RISD's first curator, and with the support of Mrs Gustav Radeke (1855–1931) the then president of RISD, Rowe began actively acquiring Chinese archaeological, mortuary, and Silk Road material at a time when these types of material were for the first time becoming available to Western collectors.

In chapter three, Magnus Fiskesjö, director of the Stockholm's Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities (MFEA) between 2000–2005, describes the outcome of the competing scientific versus fine art paradigms at work in the formation and development of the MFEA over the course of the twentieth century. Opened to the public in 1926, the MFEA's early vision was initially informed by its founder the archaeologist and palaeontologist Johan Gunnar Andersson's (1874–1960) vision of scientific archaeology. This institutional vision shifted markedly in the 1960s with a change both in MFEA's administration and the integration of the Swedish national collections of Asian art into MFEA collections. Fiskesjö contextualises this significant shift in institutional role and self-perception by examining it against the wider fine arts as opposed to scientific principles of museum display and collecting which have taken place in Europe over the course of recent centuries

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and considers what this has meant in terms of the MFEA's changing approach to display didactics and catalogues.

A biographical focus comes to the fore in the next five chapters of the Collectors and Connoisseurs section. In chapter four, Amy G. Poster examines the fascinating career of R. Stewart Cullin (1858–1929), an ethnologist who became director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Palaeontology and from 1903 the first curator of ethnology at the Brooklyn Museum. Cullin's interests also included Native American cultures, and his collecting biases strongly informed the collecting of China in both institutions. Poster highlights Cullin's influence on the display of China, both of vernacular culture and fine arts, at the Brooklyn Museum.

Zaixin Hong's essay considers the role played by the art scholar and collector Florence Ayscough (1875–1942) in promoting modern Chinese painting in America during the early decades of the twentieth century. Ayscough spent her early years in Shanghai, becoming a serious student of classical Chinese literature and poetry, and later developing an avid interest in the modernist Chinese painting. Collecting leading modern Chinese painters such as Xugu (1824–1896) and Ren Yi (1840–1896) in Shanghai, Hong deftly illustrates how Ayscough's pioneering efforts resulted in the introduction to America of a then virtually unknown Chinese art form.

In the story of twentieth century Chinese art dealing and collecting the name of the New York dealer C.T. Loo (1880–1957) is among the most preeminent. In chapter six, Daisy Yiyong Wang looks at the fascinating role Loo played in the formation of the Chinese art collection at the Freer Gallery during the first half of the twentieth century by drawing upon that institution's rich archival resources. Wang thoughtfully addresses the many complexities of Loo as a dealer, not least his handling of material of dubious if not illicit provenance and ownership. Wang concludes on a positive note however, with the research and collaboration projects which have taken place between a number of Chinese and US institutions to use new digital technologies to reconstruct Buddhist stone sculptures from the cave temples at Xiangtangshan.

Guolong Lai's study of the collecting of Chinese bronzes at the Nelson-Atkins Museum unfolds around the differences in Western and Chinese approaches to collecting based on traditions of connoisseurship, scholarly taste and preference, and the influence that Chinese collecting practises came to exert on Western collectors. Lai uses two *gui* vessels and the historical debates which have taken place around their authenticity as the focus of his essay, revealing not only how taste and scholarship have developed and progressed, but also how techniques of scientific analysis have developed to uncover previously inaccessible knowledge about artefacts.

Concluding the Collectors and Connoisseurs section, Jay Xu looks at the collecting behaviours of the collector, and founder of San Francisco's Asian Art Museum, Avery Brundage (1887–1975). Brundage is a well-known and remarkable figure in annals of twentieth century Asian art collecting in North America, known not only as an astute and adventurous collector of Chinese art, but also as a

leading figure in the Olympic movement, and as a very successful businessman. Xu's essay focuses on one late Shang inscribed bronze vessel in the shape of a rhinoceros now in the Asian Art Museum collection, one of the most famous Chinese bronzes in the world, and a vessel which was both acquired by and likened in its qualities to Brundage himself. Beginning with the discovery of this bronze rhinoceros in Shandong in 1845, Xu echoes other writers in this volume by noting the different emphases evident in Western and Chinese collecting and scholarship—namely the Chinese preference for epigraphic scholarship in contrast to the Western emphasis on visual analysis.

The Challenges in Collecting Chinese Art section is introduced with Stacey Pierson's study of the influence of a 1910 London exhibition—*Early Chinese Pottery and Porcelain* at the Royal Academy—on the century of collecting tastes of Chinese ceramics since, and the fascinating way in which the influence of that exhibition has continued to play out to the present day. This exhibition marked a watershed in the understanding of categories of Chinese ceramics among collectors. Pierson demonstrates how taste—described as traditional or academic of the sort which defined Sir Percival David's (1892–1964) collecting tastes—has remained relatively unchanged while issues of provenance now affect the marketplace in dramatic new ways. This is evidenced in terms of the shifting meanings behind certain categories of ceramics, with 'imperial' being the most explicit example, and with the development in recent decades of new collecting taxonomies. Given the prominence and influence of ceramics as a category of Chinese art collecting, Pierson's essay is a very necessary contribution to this volume.

In chapter eleven Jason Steuber situates the relatively recent 1990 foundation of the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art; the formation of that institution's collection of Chinese art, which seeks to apply the highest standards of contemporary best practice to new acquisitions by relating them to current academic, museum, archaeological, and legal frameworks and disciplines. In doing so, Steuber illustrates the substantial evolution that has occurred in thinking around issues of provenance since the early to mid-twentieth century. Steuber very clearly demonstrates this shift with reference both to Harn's own collection, and to national and international guidelines on provenance.

Continuing with the theme of provenance, this volume is brought to a thoughtful conclusion with Nick Pearce's essay which highlights both the value and relevance of developing provenance research on Chinese art collections. Pearce uses the example of provenance research undertaken at the Burrell Collection in Glasgow through the innovative CARP (Chinese Art Research into Provenance) project, which resulted in the first online searchable database to deal with the subject of Chinese art provenance. Using case studies centred on the outflow of artefacts from China during the 1920s and 1930s Pearce illustrates how initiatives such as CARP can be used to illuminate and reconstruct both the activities of international dealer networks, and the movement and distribution of Chinese art artefacts among museum intuitions.

This is a richly detailed and scholarly volume comprised of thoughtful, incisive and finely grained essays, edited throughout to the highest standard, in which the curatorial perspective on collections' formation is prominent to a welcome degree. This is a particularly relevant collection of studies in an era when issues and challenges including those of provenance, of cultural patrimony, and of access in a Chinese art market of unprecedented size and dynamism have combined to comprehensively re-describe and redefine the collecting environment for museums and collectors acquiring Chinese art today. *Collectors, Collections &*

Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges provides a richly multifaceted and major contribution of unique scope and range to the history of Chinese art collecting. As such, this volume is required reading for anyone with a professional or scholarly interest in the history of Chinese art acquisition, collections' formation and development, or scholarship in North America and Europe over the course of the last century.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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