THE FORMATION of the Asian art collection of the Denver Art Museum is closely tied to people who were attracted to Asian art and wanted to share their fascination with others. The visual arts of lands and cultures far from the Rocky Mountains found a haven in Denver, where the museum displayed its collections and presented programs to increase awareness and appreciation of Asian culture. The Asian art collection—past and present—gives testimony to many individuals who supported the museum in its effort to bring Asian art to Colorado. Like the city of Denver, the Asian art collection has had boom periods of great progress, and with the expansion of the Denver Art Museum complex in 2006, the Asian art collection is once again poised for growth into the future.

The Denver Art Museum traces its origins to the Artists’ Club, a small group of Denver professional artists who formed an art club in 1893 to encourage opportunities for exhibiting artwork. Although the Asian art department of the Denver Art Museum did not find a regular home until 1956, the Asian art collection itself dates back to a group of Chinese and Japanese objects designated for the people of Denver in 1913 by one of the Artists’ Club members, Walter C. Mead (1). Mead’s donation formed the nucleus of the Asian art collection, which was initially displayed in the Denver Museum of Natural History in City Park. In the early 1930s, the Mead Collection was moved to two galleries on the fourth floor of the Denver City and County Building, where the Denver Art Museum was first located (2). As the Asian art collection increased in size, it was transferred to its own building in 1956. The Oriental Museum, as it was known, remained until 1968, when the structure was demolished in preparation for construction of the Denver Art Museum’s North Building.

The Asian art collection has occupied the fifth floor of the North Building since it opened in 1971. It is displayed in an area designated as the Jesse and Nellie Shwayder Galleries for Asian Art. Born in Black Hawk, Colorado, Jesse Shwayder (1882–1970) was one of eleven children. In 1903 he opened a luggage shop and in 1907, married Nellie Weitz (1886–1977). In 1922, he started a luggage manufacturing company that later became Samsonite Corporation. After his death in 1971, shares in the firm went to the Jesse and Nellie Shwayder Foundation, a non-profit trust for charitable and educational purposes. In the late 1960s, the Shwayder Foundation, Samsonite Corporation, and the children of Jesse and Nellie Shwayder (4, 5) continue to be associated with museum’s Asian art galleries.

The Shwayder Galleries encompass 22,000 square feet of space and display changing selections from the museum’s collection and selected loans. These galleries were completely reinstalled in 1993 in celebration of the Denver Art Museum’s 100th anniversary. Seven geographic galleries devoted to the arts of China, India, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, Southwest Asia, and Tibet and Nepal dominate the floor plan. They are connected by three thematic galleries that include objects associated with the Scholar’s Tradition in East Asia, Everyday Traditions in South and Southeast Asia, and Buddhist Art. A grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities enabled the education and Asian art and departments to originate the interpretive components for the installation.

In addition to support from donors, patrons, businesses, and foundations, the Denver Art Museum has relied on the efforts of its staff and volunteers to accomplish its goals. In May 1933, Dr Konai K. Miyamoto (1877–1963), a dentist and a member of Denver’s early Japanese community, was named honorary curator of Asian art (3). Miyamoto was then president of the Japanese Association of Colorado and one of the leaders of the Japanese community who reportedly met with Colorado Governor Ralph L. Carr (1887–1950) to discuss the possibility of harm coming to Japanese residents after the outbreak of World War Two because of anti-Japanese sentiment. Carr urged racial tolerance and protection of the basic rights of Japanese-Americans, a view that is generally thought to have cost him his political career.

In 1948, with private funds from the capital improvement program, the museum began to acquire several buildings on West 14th Avenue across from Civic Center Park. Denver architect Burnham F. Hoyt (1887–1960) designed the remodelling of these buildings. The first re-
modelled property was an old electrical factory that became the Schleier Memorial Gallery, named in honour of Rachael M. Schleier (1858–1930), whose bequest funded the renovation. The museum next acquired a corner property with a garage that became the Children’s Museum. In 1954, a new art gallery was built adjacent to the Schleier Memorial Gallery to house the Samuel H. Kress Collection and other museum collections.

A two-storey building that had housed the headquarters of the Teamsters Union was then converted into a home for the Asian art collection. Providing 10,000 square feet of exhibition space, the Oriental Museum (6) opened in 1956 with objects from the Walter C. Mead Collection of Chinese and Japanese art and the Guthrie-Goodwin

---

9 Guanyin, China, 900s, polychromed wood, 17 in. high. Walter C. Mead Collection by exchange, 1946.4

10 Shiva, King of Dancers (Shiva Nataraja), India, Tamil Nadu, Chola dynasty, 1100s, bronze, 36 7/8 in. high. Funds from Dora Porter Mason bequest, 1947.2

Collection of South Asian art, contributed by Harry B. Goodwin (1876–1971) and his wife Mary Guthrie Goodwin (died 1956) in 1946 and 1948 (7, 8). At the 1956 opening of the Oriental Museum, the museum’s collection was augmented with Chinese art borrowed from two collectors—Paul Anderson, who lent Chinese figures and ceramics, and Richard Pritzlaff, who provided Qing dynasty ancestor portraits. As the museum’s own collection grew, these items were returned to their lenders.

As mentioned, a donation from Walter C. Mead (1866–1951) formed the foundation of the Asian art collection. Mead travelled twice around the world collecting objects, including Chinese and Japanese ceramics, Japanese netsuke, sword fittings, lacquer objects, and prints. Not long after 1915, when he initially pledged his collection to the people of Denver, Mead gave US$5000 toward a US$300,000 art museum proposed by Denver Mayor Robert W. Speer (1855–1918) to be located on Civic Center. Mead specified that Denver “should possess and enjoy a suitable building specially devoted to the public exhibition of works of art.” The final transfer of the Mead Collection was completed in November 1937, when the museum received full title to 624 objects, predominantly from Asia. With such a large collection, questions arose concerning relative quality and duplication of materials. In the mid-1950s, the museum sought the advice of two noted Asian art scholars—John A. Pope of the Freer Gallery, Washington, DC, and Sherman E. Lee of the Cleveland Museum of Art—to verify items of high quality in the Mead Collection. As a result of this selection and refinement process, the museum acquired a 10th century polychromed wood Chinese Guanyin (9), obtained by exchange from H. Medill Sarkisian (1909–1993), a Denver art gallery owner.

Dr Otto Karl Bach (1909–1990) played a significant role in the creation of the Asian art collection. As director of the museum from 1944 to 1974, he formulated a coherent plan for institutional growth early in his tenure and stuck to it tenaciously. With an astute appreciation for Asian art, he acquired a bronze image of Shiva Nataraja in 1947 that remains a signature piece of the collection (10). The crowning achievement of his directorship occurred in 1971, when he consolidated the museum’s collections from five separate buildings under one roof, the glass-tiled North Building designed by Gio Ponti and James Sudler. In 1946, Bach named H. Medill Sarkisian as honorary curator of Asian art. Sarkisian, who was recognized for his many services to the Asian art department, gave numerous objects to the museum, sometimes jointly with his sister, Mrs René (Justine) Rodriguez (1906–2000). In 1977, Sarkisian facilitated the museum’s acquisition of the Charlotte Hill Grant Collection of Chinese court robes for the textile art department.

Another donor and major patron of the museum was Colorado native, Charles Bayly Jr. (1897–1954). He served as president of the museum and briefly as its acting...
director in 1944 prior to Bach’s appointment. At his death in 1954, Bayly left the museum a bequest of unrestricted funds and his Denver home. A subcommittee of the board of trustees elected to trade the Bayly house for objects that H. Medill Sarkisian had previously placed on loan to the museum.3 This trade enabled the Asian art department to add substantially to its collection and bolster its holdings for the opening of the Oriental Museum in October 1956. Among the objects acquired in the exchange was a fragmentary representation of a winged figure that once formed part of a wall relief in the Northwest Palace of the Assyrian king Assurnasirpal II (reigned 883–859 BCE) at Calah (Nimrud), situated south of Mosul in Iraq (11). Originally painted with bright colours, the entire relief panel probably depicted a second winged figure to the left of a central tree to create a symmetrical composition characteristic of Mesopotamian art.

Among other important donors were Harry and Mary Goodwin. In the mid-1940s, the Goodwins of Grand Junction, Colorado, contacted the museum about donating a collection of South and Southeast Asian material that Mrs Goodwin had inherited from her brother, Walter Guthrie. Guthrie had represented Standard Oil in India for many years and furnished his home with Indian, Nepalese, and Tibetan art. The Guthrie-Goodwin Collection began with an initial gift in 1946. After the death of his wife, Mr Goodwin continued to purchase Indian sculpture for the museum, and he donated a final group from his collection in 1971 when he was ninety-four. Among the objects in the Guthrie-Goodwin Collection is a Nepalese brass lamp dated to 1821 (12). In addition to the date, the inscription on the base of the lamp identifies the donor as Daanadatra. Idealised images of the donor’s deceased father, his mother, and stepmother are shown in prayer below the cups of the lamp. The presence of human figures is rather unusual as most Nepalese votive lamps bear the image of a single deity.4

---


4 Lewis Wingfield Story. “Building a Collection” in *The Denver Art Museum: The First Hundred Years* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 1996), pp. 100–101. Schuyler Cammann, associate curator of the Oriental department at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, was called upon to evaluate the Asian material owned by Sarkisian before it was exchanged for real estate.

Irene Littledale Downs (1911–1986) was an active volunteer at the museum beginning in the early 1950s. Her connection with the museum came through her friendship with Charles Bayly Jr. She began collecting Indian art during two trips to India with H. Medill Sarkisian in 1957 and 1958. She continued to acquire pieces on subsequent visits to India into the early 1980s, stating that she attributed her love of Indian things to her Parsi grandmother. In addition to acquisitions made in India, she purchased a number of fine stone objects from Nasli Heeramaneck, a fellow Parsi and noted New York art dealer. In 1964, she gave her collection of Indian art to the Denver Art Museum, including a fine Chola period sculpture of Nandi, the bull associated with the Hindu deity Shiva.

In 1958, Bach hired Mary C. Laniu as curator of Asian art. She oversaw the Oriental Museum and strengthened the museum’s collection, particularly in the area of medieval Indian sculpture. She took leaves of absence in 1959 and 1966 to pursue graduate studies at the University of Hawaii and another in 1961 for research in India on a Fulbright Fellowship. She developed close ties with collectors outside of Colorado and cultivated their support. Laniu left the museum in 1969 to accept a teaching position in the Art and Art History Department of the University of Denver. She was followed as departmental curator by Robert J. Moes (1969–1973) and Ronald Y. Otsuka (1973–present).


The Asian art galleries in the North Building were installed by Robert Moes, who incorporated Pan-Asian Collection objects with those belonging to the museum. During his years at the museum, Moes concentrated on strengthening the museum’s collection of Japanese and Korean art. He opened the museum’s first exhibition of traditional Japanese painting in 1973 by bringing together works by Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754–1799) from throughout the United States. This provided visitors a rare opportunity to examine scrolls and screens by one of Japan’s highly regarded “eccentric” painters. Moes left Denver in October 1973 to assume a position at the Brooklyn Museum. He was replaced by Ronald Otsuka, who came to Denver from New York, where he had received his graduate degree from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, as a student of Alexander Soper, Stella Kramrisch, and Richard Ettinghausen.

A mutual friend in Denver introduced Mary Laniu to Harold P. Ullman (1899–1976) and his wife, Jane F. Ullman (1908–1991). The Ullmans, who lived in Santa Monica, California, had travelled in South Asia and built a significant collection of sculpture from India, Nepal, and Indonesia. Working with Laniu, Otsuka organised an exhibition of the Ullman Collection, which led to its eventual donation to the museum. Gifts from Mr and Mrs Ullman and their son and daughter-in-law, Dr and Mrs Edwin F. Ullman, included a Nepalese Uma-Maheshvaramurti, depicting Shiva, his wife, their children, and various attendants in a mountain setting.

The museum’s South Asian art collection was further advanced by two of Otsuka’s graduate-school friends from New York, who anonymously donated puppets, shrines, and story-telling paintings from India. These items, augmented by tribal and village bronzes from Dr Leo Figiel and his family, formed the heart of the Everyday Traditions Gallery (see “Popular and Traditional Art of South and Southeast Asia” by Mary C. Laniu). In the 1990s, the museum received additional South Asian sculptures and paintings from Mr and Mrs Edward W.M. Bryant of Washington, DC, and Drs Ann and Robert Walzer of West Redding, Connecticut. As president of the Nathan Rubin-Ida Ladd Family Foundation, Dr Robert Walzer also donated a Chinese wooden sculpture of a horse from the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE).

In 1974, May Willfley made a major gift of about eighty
Asian art objects in memory of her parents, A.R. Wilfley and Addie M. Wilfley. Lured by the silver boom in Leadville, the Wilfley family settled in Colorado in the late 1870s. May Wilfley developed her interest in collecting Asian art during her youth, when she travelled to the East Coast with her father, a successful inventor of mining equipment. Her gifts to the museum included a selection of Qing dynasty porcelains. A large pilgrim flask from her collection is decorated in underglaze blue with a lotus design (15). Its flattened spherical body derives from an earlier shape and reflects the antiquarian taste of the Qianlong period (1736–1795).

The Asian art department was enriched between 1974 and 1982 by gifts from Mr and Mrs George A. Argabrite of Malibu, California. Mr Argabrite (1902–2000) had grown up in Denver and retained a strong affection for the city although he moved to California in the 1920s. He and his wife, Katherine (Kay), began collecting Japanese art in the 1950s. They focused on lacquers, attracted by the elaborate techniques used in their creation. Their generous donation of lacquerware, ceramics, and metalwork included over eighty examples of lacquer boxes, containers, bowls, furniture, tray sets, and incense paraphernalia. One of the Argabrite lacquers is an 18th century writing box with a depiction of the Race at Uji River (16), an episode that occurred during the Genpei War (1180–1185).
Two mounted warriors in full armour ride midstream with the Uji Bridge in the lower-right corner. The planks of the bridge are missing, having been removed as a defensive measure against attack.

The death of Christian Humann in 1981 had a profound impact on the Asian art department, which relied heavily on loans from the Pan-Asian Collection to broaden its coverage of Asian art. With the sale of the Pan-Asian Collection to Robert H. Ellsworth by Humann’s estate, the museum lost over 600 items that had been placed on loan by Humann. This dire situation was relieved, however, by two factors—the hiring of Rose E. Lee as assistant curator in 1981 and the formation of the Asian Art Association (AAA) that same year. Under the guidance of Otsuka and Lee, the AAA, a fledgling support organisation for the Asian art department, undertook a fund raising campaign to purchase “back” as many Pan-Asian Collection objects as possible. Within months, donations of over US$500,000 and additional museum funds made it possible to keep several key pieces. Among them was a bronze image of Devi (17), an elegant foil to the museum’s Dancing Shiva. Other objects were purchased by private collectors for subsequent donation to the museum. In all, over a dozen works from the Pan-Asian Collection were retained.

The first object to be “saved” from the Pan-Asian Collection was a Gupta period image of Shiva (18). The four daughters of Jessie and Nellie Shwayder rose to the occa-
sion and made individual contributions toward its purchase. Robert Ellsworth, the new owner of the Pan-Asian Collection, donated another Indian sculpture, a 10th century tree goddess from Rajasthan, in memory of Humann (19), and an anonymous collector purchased and later donated a 10th century Khmer relief panel depicting Indra riding on his elephant (see “The Southeast Asian Gallery at the Denver Art Museum” by Emma C. Bunker). Although settlement of Humann’s estate required the sale of the Pan-Asian Collection, residual assets were later used by the Christian Humann Foundation to support the Denver Art Museum’s acquisition program. Among the additions to the collection funded by the foundation, then administered by Claus Virch in Paris, was a bronze seated Buddha from the Swat Valley in Pakistan (20), and prior to his death, Humann had donated a Chinese Ming dynasty table and a painting by the Taiwanese artist Liu Kuo-sung (21) as anonymous gifts.

In the mid-1980s, Richard H. Kimball and Julie M. Sgraves introduced the museum to a private collector of Chinese art. Sgraves had met him when she was curator of the H. Medill Sarkesian Collection at the University of Colorado Museum in Boulder. Sarkesian had known the collector’s father and thought that his family’s collection should be shown in Denver. This led to over one thousand objects from the Sze Hong Collection coming to the museum on loan. The breadth of the collection made it possible to present thirteen exhibitions featuring different portions of the collection. Among them was Pathways to the Afterlife: Early Chinese Art from the Sze Hong Collection, organised by Otsuka and Julia M. White, then assistant curator of Asian art, to coincide with the opening of the reinstalled Asian art galleries in February 1993.

Beginning in 1986, Otsuka and White began making frequent trips to Hong Kong to meet private collectors of Chinese art. Two years earlier, the People’s Republic of China and the United Kingdom had signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Under this agreement, Hong Kong would cease being a British Crown Colony and become a Special Administrative Region of the PRC on July 1st, 1997. With the encouragement and support of Frederick R. Mayer, then chairman of the board of trustees, and Lewis I. Sharp, museum director, the Asian art department arranged to receive loans from several Hong Kong collections, including those of Kenneth Chu and Betty Lo, Kai-Yin Lo, Robert Tang, Harold Wong, Henry and Maisie Wong, and Dr S.Y. Yip. These collections provided a wonderful opportunity to present temporary exhibitions and augment the Chinese art displayed in the Asian art galleries. Furthermore, the museum received gifts from Kenneth Chu and Betty Lo, Kai-yin Lo, and Harold Wong, who donated a Lotus painting by Zhang Daqian (1899–1983) in memory of his parents (22). The department also gratefully accepted artwork from Grace Wu Bruce, Mr and Mrs William K.M. Chak, Ever Arts Classic Chinese Furniture Ltd, and Hung-Lu Hei.

During the 1980s and 1990s, local Colorado residents

---


---

23 Snuff Bottle with Flowers, China, Qing dynasty, Jiaqing period, 1796–1820, porcelain with overglaze, enamels, 2 3/4 in. high. Anonymous gift in memory of Wei Huai, 1994.427ab

24 Storage Chest, Korea, Choson period, about 1872, zelkova, ash, burlwood and brass, 34 x 38 x 17 in. high. Gift of William H. Downs, 1932.10

25 Family of Tigers, Korea, Choson period, 1600s, ink and colour on paper, 23 x 14 3/4 in. Anonymous gift, 1995.250

also augmented the museum’s collection of Chinese art with ancient and contemporary material. Neva H. Farley (1899–1996) donated ancient bronze artefacts from the Malcolm F. Farley Collection. Her husband, Malcolm F. Farley (1896–1941), had gone to China in 1929 and was professor of English and head of the department of Western languages and literature at Fukien Christian University until 1939. He was one of the first archaeologists in China to explore the ancient kiln sites and pottery centres in Fujian province.6 Mr and Mrs Frank Fulai Cho, now residing in California, generously gave the museum paintings by Chen Qikuan (born 1921), Qi Baishi (1863–1957), and C.C. Wang (Wang Jiqian, 1907–2003). These paintings offered an opportunity to augment works already in the collection by contemporary artists from Taiwan—Fong Chung-ray (born 1933), Han Hsiang-ning (born 1939), and Liu Kuo-sung (born 1932)—that had been acquired in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1994, an anonymous donor gave the museum a collection of seventy-five Chinese snuff bottles, seals, and a seal paste box. These gifts were collected by Wei Huai (1882–1952) and donated in his memory. Born in Fuzhou, Fujian province, Wei was educated in China and France. He studied engineering in Paris, where he also learned about other forms of government. He felt that China needed not only modern technology, but also democracy to rejuvenate itself. Wei had a close friendship with Lin Sen (1868–1943), president of China (1932–1943), and with Chen Mu, who lost his life during the revolutionary period. The three friends diligently worked to bring democracy to China. Wei Huai’s collection reflects his taste
as an early 20th century Chinese scholar. One of his seals is inscribed, “Seal of Founding a New Nation”, to commemorate the first year of the Republic of China (1912). The snuff bottles in his collection are remarkably varied. Made of agate, amber, ceramic, chalcedony, crystal, enamel, glass, jade, and quartz, they include a porcelain bottle with enamel decoration of flowers (23). It has a mark of the Jiaqing period (1796-1820) underneath, inscribed inside its foot ring.

The Korean art collection began with the gift of a storage chest from William H. Downs in 1932 (24). Commonly known as a blanket chest, it was actually used for storing clothing. The elaborate brass decoration includes auspicious motifs of a bat, rooster, and coin; they symbolise good fortune, dawn, and wealth. Its lock-plate has two Chinese “double happiness” symbols, suggesting that perhaps the chest was part of a wedding dowry. A cyclical date corresponding to 1872 is engraved into its brass latch.7 The museum’s relatively limited holdings of Korean art grew dramatically in 1992 with a sizeable gift from Mr and Mrs Alfred H. Platt, and its representation of Korean painting was greatly enriched with the gift of a painting of tigers from an anonymous donor in 1995 (25).

Kay E. Black, a Denver native now living in San Francisco, was appointed as a departmental research consultant for Korean art in the early 1990s. Similarly, Emma Bunker and Mary Lanius both agreed to assist Otsuka as research consultants to provide the department with information about its collection. In addition to studying the collection, they played a direct role in developing the collection itself. In 1980, Mr and Mrs John B. Bunker contributed a Korean screen with poems, orchids, and rocks (26). The screen is inscribed with a cyclical date, most likely corresponding to 1823 or 1883. It was remounted in 2005 with support from the Hilliard Family Fund, and paper linings discovered underneath the paintings seem to indicate the latter date. Mary Lanius donated a Japanese painting of Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, shown standing on two cloud-borne lotuses (27). He welcomes the deceased into his Western Paradise, the Pure Land (Jodo), where faithful devotees are reborn.

John and Celeste Fleming were married in Japan in 1956, when Dr Fleming was stationed there with the

6 “Major Art Gifts to Hamline” in Hamline University Bulletin 58/1 [St. Paul: Hamline University, January 1968], p. 21.
United States Navy. They became infatuated with Japanese art and later formed a collection of Japanese screens that isentrusted to the museum for safekeeping and display. In 1963, they donated a pair of screens by Kikuchi Hobun (1868–1912) that depicts black crows on the right and white herons on the left (28, 29). Another resource at the museum is the Kimiko and John Powers Collection with over 300 examples of Japanese painting, sculpture, and lacquer. An exhibition of selected works from the Powers Collection was featured in Gal¬lather Family Gallery at the opening of the Frederick G. Hamilton Building in October 2006. In an interview, Kimiko Powers talks about her husband, John G. Powers (1916–1999), and discusses how they formed their collection (see "An Interview with Kimiko Powers" by Ronald Y. Otsuka).

The museum acquired a collection of pre-1900 Japanese prints as a gift from Dr William M. Snell in the 1930s, and Mrs Frederic H. Douglas donated another group of prints in the 1950s. Her husband, Frederic H. Douglas (1897–1958), had become the museum’s first curator of American Indian art when he joined the staff in 1929. The museum’s collection of 20th century Japanese graphics was significantly improved in the 1970s-1990s with gifts from Betty and Marshall Freedman, Henry G. Shearouse, Jr., and Mr and Mrs Mortimer H. Staatz. One of the prints in the Staats gift is the Eyebrow Pencil (30) by Isao Shimizu (1899–1952). A fine group of fifty-two Japanese prints and one album came to the museum in 2001 as a donation from Mr and Mrs Joseph Chapman. Their collection included several prints by Tsuikosada Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), a creative and innovative printmaker of the late 19th century.

Denver has an extensive collection of bamboo art from China, Japan, and Korea. There are more than a thou¬

---

28 Kikuchi Hobun (1868–1912), Herons, Japan, Meiji period, early 1900s, ink, colour and gold on silk, 60 x 141 in. Gift of John and Celeste Fleming, 1982.183.2

29 Kikuchi Hobun (1868–1912), Crows, Japan, Meiji period, early 1900s, ink, colour and gold on silk, 60 x 141 in. Gift of John and Celeste Fleming, 1982.183.1

30 Shinsui Ito (1898–1972), Eyebrow Pencil, Japan, Showa period, 1928, woodblock print, 10 x 15 in. Gift of Mr and Mrs Mortimer H. Staatz, 1974.113

31 Hayakawa Shokosai V (born 1932), Tray Basket, Japan, Heisei period, 1997, bamboo, 4 1/2 in. high, 18 in. in diameter. Gift of Paul M. Hoff Jr and Hazel W. Hoff in memory of Paul M. Hoff Jr., 2001.667

32 Tray with Courtyard Scene, China, Ming dynasty, Jiajing period, 1547, lacquer, mother-of-pearl, 13 x 18 in. Asian Art Association acquisition fund in celebration of its 25th Anniversary, 2001.667

33 Shakya pratara (detail), Mongolia, 1800s, silk, beadwork, gold thread, 34 x 24 in. Funds from the Van Lant Art Department, Asian Art Association, and Premer Bank, 1986.9


sand bamboo artworks in the Lutz Bamboo Collection alone—gifts made between 1982 and 2004 by Mr and Mrs Walter E. Lutz, Tina and Michael Chow, and Adelle Lutz and David Byrne, and loans from Mona Lutz (see “The Lutz Bamboo Collection: Botanical Roots of a Love Affair” by Ronald Y. Otsuka). The museum also has significant examples of late 20th century baskets from the Hoff Collection. Many were made by artists whose fathers and grandfathers are represented in the Lutz Bamboo Collection. In December 2001, Paul M. Hoff III and his sister, Hazel W. Hoff, donated a group of contemporary Japanese baskets in memory of their father Paul M. Hoff Jr. (1933–2001). Dating between 1969 and 2000, the baskets in the Hoff Collection include works by Hayakawa Shokosai V (born 1952), Tsukakosai (born 1919), and Maeda Chikuhosai II (born 1917)—three bamboo artists who hold the title of National Treasure, the popular term for a Holder of an Important Intangible Cultural Property, an honour bestowed by the Japanese government on those who preserve traditional Japanese arts. One of the baskets by Hayakawa, who lectured at the museum in 2004, is a low, circular tray with a cruciform pattern woven in three layers (31).

Founded in 1981, the Asian Art Association marked its twenty-fifth anniversary in April 2006. In addition to offering successful educational and travel programs, it assisted the department in acquiring over twenty artworks. In commemoration of its silver anniversary, it purchased a mother-of-pearl initial black lacquer tray of the Ming dynasty, dated by inscription to 1547 (32). There are very few dated Ming mother-of-pearl lacquers; therefore, this tray provides valuable information about Chinese artforms. Earlier, the AAA had helped the department acquire a Mongolian appliqué thangka that depicts Shakyamunika, an Indian scholar who lived around the 7th century. The images of animals, red flowers, and a tree are unusual in thangka from China or Tibet and indicate its Mongolian origin, as does the presence of beadwork (33). Sponsored by the AAA and others, three monks from Seraje Monastic University in southern India created a Hayagriva mandala at the Denver Art Museum in September 1996 (34). Hayagriva is regarded as one of the Great Protectors of Buddhism. In his letter, Ven. Jampa
Tegchhog, the abbot of Seraj, offered the sand mandala to the museum “as a token of spiritual gift and as a basis of blessing and faith for the people of Denver and also to protect the people and environment from disease and natural calamities and evil elements”.

Beside the Asian art department, the Denver Art Museum has four other curatorial departments that collect Asian art. Notably, the textile art department has superb examples of Chinese court robes of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) from the Charlotte Hill Grant Collection (35) and ikats from Central Asia, donated by Guido Goldman (36). The modern and contemporary art department has a growing collection of works by contemporary Asian artists. Gifts from the collection of Vicki and Kent Logan were featured in two exhibitions, *Full Frontal* and *RADAR* (see “China on the Radar: Post-1989 Chinese Art from the Logan Collection” by Thomas J. Whitten). The architecture, design, and graphics department includes decorative arts, ranging from export porcelain to contemporary furniture design, and the New World art department has fine examples of ivory carvings from Goa, China, and the Philippines (37).

Over the decades, the volunteer corps of the Denver Art Museum has held an annual fund-raising gala to support the museum’s art acquisition program. Called Collectors’ Choice, the benefit party has raised funds to purchase more than a dozen artworks for the Asian art collection. Among the Collectors’ Choice pieces acquired by the department are a Chinese camel of the Tang dynasty (38) and a Cambodian sculpture of Prajnaparamita.
acquired in honour of Emma Bunker. A representation of the Goddess of Transcendent Wisdom was a fitting tribute to Bunker, who has great knowledge of Cambodian bronze and stone sculpture. Cultivating her longtime friendship with Douglas A.J. Latchford, she encouraged him to donate and lend several major examples of Southeast Asian art to the museum (see “The Southeast Asian Gallery at the Denver Art Museum” by Emma C. Bunker).

Long without a steady source of funds for acquisitions, the Asian art collection has grown principally through donations—artworks contributed by more than 300 donors from the United States, Asia, Europe, and South America. Their gifts and the financial support of many others are gratefully acknowledged. Establishment of the Sam F. and Freda R. Davis Trust in 1995 provided the Asian art department with its first unrestricted funds to purchase Asian art. Among the objects acquired with the Davis Trust was a Cambodian sculpture of Surya.

A longtime departmental volunteer and staff aide, Bj (bee-jay) Averitt, has developed the museum’s Islamic art collection with single-minded determination. A museum member and volunteer since 1963, she was volunteer executive board president from 1966 to 1968 and staff aide in the Asian art department since 1976. Averitt developed an early interest in Islamic art after a childhood trip to Egypt. In 1958, she moved to Colorado with her husband, who worked for the United States Geological Survey, and she earned a graduate degree in art history from the University of Colorado, Boulder, in 1973. Over the years, Averitt has donated more than sixty Islamic art objects to the museum, many purchased by the Bj Averitt Islamic Art Fund. Greatly enriched through her generosity, the collection now covers a diverse range of Islamic art, including works from India, Indonesia, Armenia, and Africa as well as those from Southwest Asian countries. In 1999, Averitt gave a North African Qur’an leaf, written in kufic script with gold on blue vellum (39).

In 2001, William S. Jackson Jr. established an endowment for public programs called Curator’s Circle: Conversations with Collectors and Connoisseurs of Asian Art. The purpose of the Curator’s Circle lecture series is to invite speakers to share their knowledge, appreciation, and enjoyment of Asian art. Although the Jackson Endowment Fund does not directly support art acquisitions, it has stimulated collection growth by bringing Asian art specialists to Denver. In particular, collectors and contemporary artists have spoken at the museum, and this resulted in donated gifts and purchases of recent works by Machata Shunsai (born 1964), a Japanese lacquer artist, and Kim Yikung (born 1935), a Korean potter (40).

The cumulative efforts of dedicated individuals and organisations have made it possible for the Denver Art Museum to have an Asian art collection. The distance between Denver and Asia is great; however, connections made by people who love Asian art have steadily closed the expanse since 1915, when the Asian art collection of the Denver Art Museum was established.

References


