THE ASIAN ART collection of the Walters Art Museum contains many remarkable objects brought together through the passions of William (1819–1894) and his son Henry Walters (1848–1931) and through the generosity of other American collectors, Baltimore residents, and dear friends of the institution. Our founders and each of their later supporters were guided by the twin goals of amassing a first-rate collection and, in turn, sharing that collection with the public so that they may enjoy, discover, and learn about the world. Beside the arts of the ancient world, Europe and early America, the Asian collection, comprising over one-fourth of the total number of objects held by the museum, stands out as a treasure trove within which new discoveries are made on a regular basis by lay people and scholars alike (1, 2).

The foundations of the collection were formed under the watchful eyes of William and Henry Walters. As 19th and early 20th century entrepreneurs, William and Henry possessed both an acute entrepreneurial sense and a deep-seated love of the arts. Their first encounter with Asian art took place in Europe while taking refuge from the American Civil War. Neither William nor his son would ever travel to Asia, but this first exposure to Chinese and Japa-
The earliest Asian purchases, and still a vital part of the Walters collection, were Chinese porcelains made during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. The collection was perhaps the first, and certainly the largest in the United States by the time of William’s death in 1894. It was documented in the book, Oriental Ceramic Arts, produced by William Walters and written by Dr S.W. Bushell. The book took about eight years to complete and included colour reproductions of over one hundred pieces and text that set the bar for all later English-language publications on Asian ceramics. Sadly, William would die before the final version of the publication was completed.

Following in his father’s footsteps, Henry supplemented, expanded and refined the collection through the first three decades of the 20th century. He added Japanese works and broadened the Chinese collection to approach a more encyclopedic presentation of East Asian art. Through purchases at the international expositions and through dealers located in Paris, London and New York, Henry managed to acquire many important and interesting works. Though he spent his time in Manhattan rather than Baltimore, Henry remained tied to the city in which his father had made his fortune. The foundations of the present collection became the property of the Walters Art Gallery (now officially the Walters Art Museum) through Henry’s generosity when he bequeathed all of his collections and his museum building to the city of Baltimore in 1931 “for the benefit of the people”.

The early curators and registrars of the museum kept the collections in a manner that reflected Henry’s taste and approach to gallery installation. William had built a gallery behind his Baltimore townhouse to showcase his collections. While no longer extant, that early gallery inspired Henry to build, on the adjacent lot, his own museum in which to exhibit the collection. Opened in 1909, this building still houses many of the museum’s European collections (3). Following Henry’s instructions the galleries were filled with cases for the display of art from around the world. Visitors, who were welcome to enter for a small fee, would walk past mahogany and glass cases to discover vases, cups, bowls and other exquisite examples of Asian decorative art (4). These were accompanied by European baroque paintings adorning the walls and monumental sculpture filling the halls.

In 1974 a new museum building was erected beside the 1909 museum building. This brutalist structure gave the museum a great deal of additional space and enabled the installation of significant Asian pieces that had been relegated to storage since they were purchased six or even seven decades earlier. A new awareness of the Asian collections resulted from this exposure and it became apparent that the collection deserved more attention and study than it had been given up to that time.

As a result in 1986 a curator specifically charged with overseeing the Asian collections was hired. Baltimore native Dr Hiram W. Woodward, Jr, at that time teaching at the University of Michigan, was selected to fill this important role. Under his watchful eye the Asian collections were given a degree of respect and intellectual scrutiny
that would certainly have made William and Henry Walters proud. Dr Woodward’s expertise in Southeast Asian art, an area that had not attracted the attentions of the Walters during their lifetimes, led to the successful acquisition of several important collections of Thai, Vietnamese and Cambodian art. These acquisitions greatly expanded the Asian holdings and began what would be two decades of significant growth.

In 1991 the museum was given oversight responsibility for a grand house located on the corner of Mt. Vernon square, directly behind Henry Walters’ 1909 museum building (5). With the help of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the house, now known as the Hackerman House in honour of Mr and Mrs Willard Hackerman who gave the building to the city, was transformed to display the museum’s Asian collections. The house was attached to the museum complex and refurbished to serve as gallery and office space (6). Construction of additional gallery space between the house and the rest of the museum opened the possibility for even further expansion of the Asian collections.

With the magnificent gifts of Indian, Himalayan and Tibetan art made by Baltimoreans Berthe and John Ford in the early years of the 21st century the collections once again grew in a direction that the Walters had not actively pursued. In combination with several smaller gifts of exquisite examples of Indian sculpture and a few carefully planned purchases of important South Asian works, the museum’s South and Southeast Asian collections came to rival the Chinese and Japanese collections the founders had originally amassed. Following a major gift from the Doris Duke Foundation of Southeast Asian art, Dr Woodward took emeritus status to focus his attentions on research and the pursuit of more personal goals.

With Dr Woodward’s change in status, the museum sought a new curator as it worked to install its recent acquisitions and gifts. Thinking strategically and planning for the next decade, the decision was made to hire in the area of East Asian art. Dr Robert Mintz, then teaching at Seattle University, was brought on board to address these earlier collections and to build the East Asian holdings in areas that had for many years been waiting for new attention.

Observing that the Asian collections are both continuing to experience dramatic growth and inspire an ever-growing number of visitors to the museum, the modernisation of the Asian galleries and the continued thoughtful expansion of the Asian collections are among the top priorities for the museum. With the installation of the Ford collection in the sunken galleries connecting the Hackerman House to the rest of the museum, the Walters is now looking forward to the next decade when re-installations and expansions will allow for more galleries dedicated to the arts of painting, print-making and calligraphy. These changes will provide our most important assets, our visitors, a place to experience and learn about Asia’s rich artistic heritage. It is with great pride and unlimited excitement that we move forward to celebrate the arts of Asia and strive to offer our visitors experiences that meet or surpass their wildest expectations.