The Arts of Asia at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge: Past, Present and Future

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THE FITZWILLIAM Museum in Cambridge, which celebrates the bicentenary of its foundation in 2016, is an extraordinary treasury of art (1). The largest of the eight museums of the University of Cambridge, its collections include a superb array of European paintings, drawings and prints, remarkable for their breadth, representativeness and quality, ranging from mediaeval times to the present day, as well as impressive holdings of European sculpture, furniture, ceramics and the decorative arts. The museum is also the home to important antiquities and archaeological material, encompassing ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, and the ancient Near East, while our Islamic ceramics and metalwork are also significant. More unusually, the museum has an Armoury, an internationally significant collection of coins and medals, and an important Library of rare books and manuscripts. Indeed, the Fitzwilliam Museum has one of the best collections of mediaeval illuminated manuscripts in the world.

Perhaps less well known are the works of art of Asian origin in the collections of the Fitzwilliam Museum. The largest group comprises the Chinese works of art—pottery, porcelain, bronzes, jades and jewellery, including a particularly impressive polychrome wood sculpture of a seated Bodhisattva (2), Northern Song period, dating from the 12th century—which are displayed in a large gallery on the ground floor of the museum. While another gallery is dedicated to the arts of Korea (3), a fine assembly—said to be the finest Korean collection in any British museum, rich in the subtle celadon wares of that country—many of them given to the museum by Godfrey St George Montague Gompertz CBE in 1984 and 1989. A group of Japanese works of art are also displayed in the Chinese Gallery (4), where examples of wares from Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand can also be studied. However, most of the museum’s collection of export porcelain, Chinese and Japanese, is displayed in the Lower Marlay Gallery (5), alongside pieces made by their European counterparts. This display, much augmented by loans of export wares from the heirs of Mr Soame Jenyns, formerly Keeper of Chinese Art at the British Museum, and other lenders, includes the three large Qing (1644–1911) vases, from a garniture of five (6) presented by Sir Anthony de Rothschild through the National Art Collections Fund in 1948, which were broken by a visitor in 2006 and expertly reassembled by a freelance conservator, Penny Bendall. They are one of the most notorious, and popular, exhibits in the museum, and a speeded up video of their reconstruction can be viewed on the museum website. A distinguished assembly of Indian arms and armour, mainly collected by Robert Taylor, an official in the East India Company, and including pieces probably from the celebrated Armoury at Tanjore, fill several cases in the Armoury, and there are also several Japanese armours. There are Oriental fans in the Fan Gallery and a few pieces of Chinese and Anglo-Indian furniture in the picture galleries (including a spectacular ivory inlaid desk made in Murshidabad for Sir Thomas Rumbold, 1st Baronet, who served as the Governor of Madras in 1770–1780). A single case of Gandhara sculpture can be found in the Ancient Near East Gallery on the ground floor of the Founder’s Building. The general visitor will, however, seek in vain for a permanent display of a selection of our important Mughal and other Indian miniature paintings, Japanese woodblock prints, netsuke carvings, inro boxes etc, or indeed Asian coins (apart from a few specimens in a case in the Islamic Gallery)—there simply is not the room, nor the right conditions, to display everything.
Perhaps the most curious deficiency is the lack of an Indian Gallery in the Fitzwilliam Museum, such as one might expect to find in a museum of this size and scope. This is a historical accident: while the Fitzwilliam Museum has Indian miniature paintings, coins, arms, and some sculpture, a more comprehensive array of the arts of the Indian subcontinent can be found in our sister museum, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Downing Street. This is probably because of the prejudices of Sir Sydney Cockerell, whose magisterial twenty-nine year reign between 1908 and 1937, established the parameters of what the Fitzwilliam Museum collected, and did not collect. Thus, while Cockerell enthusiastically acquired exquisite Mughal miniatures, or Hellenistic-inspired Gandhara sculpture, other potential acquisitions, more unusual or exotic but no less interesting, were firmly directed down the road to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Indeed, it is known that the collection was actively “weeded” to ensure that Cockerell’s personal vision of what was artistically desirable was preserved—a huge ivory model of the Taj Mahal was deaccessioned and banished to a museum in London (which eventually presented it to the nascent State of Pakistan). It is almost as if any statue or image of a deity with more than two arms was exiled to the ethnographical collections in Downing Street!
Three large Qing vases, from a garniture of five, Chinese, Qing dynasty (circa 17th century), presented by Sir Anthony de Rothschild through the National Art Collections Fund in 1948

The Fitzwilliam Museum was founded in 1816 by a bequest from Richard, 7th Viscount Fitzwilliam of Merrion (7), whose collections of books, manuscripts, Old Master paintings and prints and musical scores included no Oriental works of art. Rather, the Asian collections of the museum have since been built up by gift, bequest and occasional purchase. 19th century catalogues list displays of “Oriental curiosities”, but it was only in the early 20th century that the Asian collections began to assume their present character and range, encouraged by the acquisitive Sir Sydney Cockerell, who luckily did see the artistic value of Chinese and Japanese art. This, of course, coincided with the opening up of China and other Far Eastern countries to foreign influence, and the arrival of great quantities of Asian objects on the art market—not just export wares, but ancient objects from recent excavations. For instance, there were Chinese and Japanese works of art among the huge Charles Brinsley Marlay Bequest of 1912, while between 1922 and 1932, W.M. Tapp gave Chinese and Korean ceramics, and more Chinese ceramics came from the Reverend A.V. Valentine-Richards in 1933. In 1934, Reginald Cory bequeathed Chinese ceramics, jades, enamels, ivory, glass and lacquer, as well as a fine collection of snuff bottles. Forty-one Japanese drawings came from the bequest of the aesthete Charles Hazlewood Shannon and Charles Ricketts in 1937, while the museum’s collection of Chinese jades and porcelain was enriched by the collection of Cecil E. Byas in 1938 (the museum’s large and splendid Tang (618–907) mortuary horse (8), that archetypal trophy of a 1930s art collector, arrived from that source).

However, the most significant bequest of all came in 1941, that of Oscar Raphael, the first Honorary Keeper of the Oriental Collections, who, in addition to many gifts made in his lifetime and other bequests to the British Museum, left the Fitzwilliam Museum forty ancient Chinese bronzes, some 120 carvings in jade and other hardstones, and 126 specimens of Chinese pottery and porcelain, as well as works in gold and silver. The nucleus of the Fitzwilliam Museum’s superb Indian miniatures came via a bequest in 1946 from P.C. Manuk and Gertrude Mary Coles, via the National Art Collections Fund, of 135 Persian, Mughal and other Indian miniature paintings and drawings. An extraordinary menagerie of Chinese and Japanese export ceramic birds, animals and fish, formed by the Hon. Lady Ward, arrived in 1962, and Dr Sidney Smith enriched the collections with many Chinese porcelain pieces in the 1970s. The great Gompertz collection of Korean works of art mostly arrived in 1984, while a very complementary further group of Korean ceramics and bronzes was added by Professor and Mrs Plesch in 2010 and 2014.

Gifts continue to come in—such as almost thirty pieces of Blanc de Chine bequeathed by Mr Alan Green in 2010, and examples of Chinese and Japanese wares from Professor David McMullan of St John’s College in January 2016—building upon his many earlier gifts, such as the Arita jar and cover given in honour of the Directorate of Duncan Robinson in 2008. The recent bequest by Dr John Shakeshaft of St Catharine’s College, of his lifetime’s collection of over 700 examples of 20th century Studio Pottery, includes choice examples by the most celebrated Japanese masters, who influenced European potters, bringing the complex story of East-West influence round again to full circle.

The collection has also been augmented by occasional purchases. In 2015, the museum acquired a 16th century Chinese jade belt ornament (9) and a pair of 18th century red lacquer boxes in the form of pomegranate fruits (10), the latter once the property of HRH the Princess Royal, Countess of Harewood. These, somewhat unusually, were purchased outright with funds from a dedicated bequest. More often, funds for purchases are assembled from various sources and benefactors. The Friends of the Fitzwilliam Museum, founded in 1909 and the oldest Friends group of any museum in Britain, have funded the purchase of many Asian works for the collection—such as a 13th century gilt-bronze statuette of Vishnu from Nepal, in 1980, or the grant towards the purchase, in 1985, of the collection of
some 500 fans and fan leaves, European and Oriental, formed by Colonel Leonard Messel and his daughter, Anne, Countess of Rosse. This last acquisition was assisted by an additional grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, and some of the many generous grants made by the Art Fund (formerly the National Art Collections Fund) have been towards Oriental works of art. However, it is probably true to say that the great days for collecting Asian works of art are now over—particularly for a cash-strapped English museum. The soaring prices for Chinese works of art, in particular, make this more and more unlikely, whilst the strict UNESCO museum conventions on establishing a secure pre-1970 provenance would prevent us from embarking on a campaign to, say, collect seriously ancient Indian or Chinese sculpture.
Instead, the museum has made occasional ventures into contemporary Asian art—in 2013, the Friends of the Fitzwilliam Museum purchased Caroline Cheng’s mixed media work, *Prosperity* (11) of 2012, a long, black, hessian robe sewn with hundreds of unglazed porcelain butterflies (which had been the star of a Fitzwilliam Museum exhibition of recent ceramic works made in Jingdezhen), while Dr Cheng-Sheng (James) Lin, Senior Assistant Keeper, Applied Arts, is interested in forming a collection of contemporary Chinese lacquer work. Moreover, thanks to the informed enthusiasm of Craig Hartley, Senior Assistant Keeper (Prints) in the Paintings, Drawings and Prints Department, advised by the dealer Izzy Goldman, the museum continues to add judiciously to its important holdings of Japanese prints, which are the subject of very popular temporary exhibitions—most recently one on *shunga* or erotic prints (12). Indeed, the Fitzwilliam Museum must be one of the few institutions in Britain to collect these seriously. Another way in which the Fitzwilliam Museum can continue to acquire important Asian works of art is via the Government’s Acceptance in Lieu Scheme, whereby significant works of art are accepted in lieu of inheritance tax via H.M. Treasury, and allocated to British museums. The Fitzwilliam Museum has benefited many times from this enlightened and successful scheme, although not with specifically Asian works of art—although two offers of important Chinese objects from distinguished British collections formed in the 1950s are in the pipeline.

But no account of the Asian art in the Fitzwilliam Museum can pass over in complete silence the loss of eighteen examples of Chinese carved jade and hardstone, stolen from the museum in a major burglary in April 2012. This serious incident, which is still the subject of an active international police investigation resulting in multiple arrests and convictions, cannot yet be discussed, but we hope that, in time, the jades—which, thanks to James Lin’s lavishly illustrated catalogue, *The Immortal Stone: Chinese Jades from the Neolithic period to the Twentieth Century* (Scala, 2009), are fully published and extremely well known—will be found and returned to the Fitzwilliam Museum. However, the loss of the precious jades forcibly reminds us how the public interest in, and the commercial value of, Chinese works of art has increased beyond all recognition, with all the additional risk and responsibility that brings.

One purpose of this essay has been to demonstrate how the display of Asian works of art in the Fitzwilliam Museum has been somewhat haphazard and variable. The Chinese Gallery, an addition to the museum by the architects Smith and Brewer in 1931, is handsome enough, with its huge windows and lofty bronze-framed glass cases. However, the plentiful natural light makes it inadvisable for any organic materials—such as lacquer, ivory, paintings, textiles or polychrome wood—to be on display for any length of time. Thus, only bronzes, ceramics or hardstones can be shown, giving a distorted impression of the collection, and the objects, set out in serried rows on glass shelves, have

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11 Mixed media work, *Prosperity*, 2012
By Caroline Cheng (born 1963)
little interpretation and inadequate lighting or environmental monitoring. A similar situation occurs with the Japanese and Chinese export wares in the Lower Marlay Gallery, housed in even less suitable cases supplied in the 1980s. The Korean Gallery, equipped with purpose-built cases in 1990, is at least smart and fit for purpose, but it is an oasis, or dead-end, and entire areas of the collection—such as lacquer or textiles, or our Oriental manuscripts (to be the subject of a scholarly two-volume catalogue now in preparation by Marcus Fraser)—are completely hidden from view. Nowhere can you experience the wonder and grandeur, or significance, of the art of the Far East. In short, the display of the Fitzwilliam Museum’s Asian collections is seriously in need of a complete review.

Indeed, many of the displays of the Fitzwilliam Museum are in need of attention. This is why, in November 2015, the museum commissioned the architectural firm MUMA to work with the museum on a series of feasibility studies towards a Fitzwilliam Museum Masterplan, looking at the entire museum site, with a view to providing extra galleries for our permanent displays, improving visitor facilities and staff accommodation, and creating a fit for purpose gallery for temporary exhibitions. These, such as the acclaimed “The Search for Immortality, Tomb Treasures from Han China” in 2012 (13), are hugely popular with the public, and an increasingly essential part of the life of any museum. An essential element of this study for the Masterplan—still in progress—is the provision of better galleries for the display of our permanent collections of Asian art. One idea, already mooted, is a great Gallery of the Arts of Asia, combining our various collections in a single sweep or narrative, combining bronzes and ceramics with textiles, paintings and works of art in other media. However, key to any redisplay must be to fully understand the collections in the Fitzwilliam Museum. The Fitzwilliam is not an encyclopaedic museum, such as the British Museum or V&A, nor could it, or should it be. However, thanks to the enthusiasm of Cambridge benefactors and curators over 200 years, we have superb and wide-ranging collections of rare and precious objects wrought in the Far East, that speak of the fascination of Western collectors with the Orient.