Asia Week 2010 in New York

Arts of Asia Report

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ASIA WEEK NEW YORK is undoubtedly one of the most exciting events for Asian art and antiques. From March 19th to 26th we visited over thirty-five gallery exhibitions, three museums, five auction houses and the Arts of Pacific Asia Show featuring some sixty exhibitors of Asian art. We even found time to attend a concert by the New York Philharmonic at Lincoln Center. New York is among the best places to visit for a vacation—there are plenty of activities and fine restaurants—and when there are blue skies and sunshine the city looks glorious.

As we gear up to print our *Arts of Asia* May–June 2010, 40th anniversary issue, we have added extra pages in the magazine to include our timely coverage and exclusive photographs from Asia Week. Although it has not been possible to mention all our activities in New York we are confident readers will find useful this report of some of the important events that we enjoyed.

Many dealers had robust sales with abundant crowds arriving from around the world. There was a palpable buzz throughout the week everywhere Asian art was on view. On March 19th we visited the exhibition “Chinese Ceramics in Black and White” at J.J. Lally & Co. in the Fuller Building. Twenty-two of the thirty-seven objects presented were sold prior to the official cocktail reception. James Lally said, “When the catalogue comes out clients start making enquiries. At the moment the Chinese art market is so strong that it feels somewhat overheated. When you look at Ming and Qing porcelain there are record prices in the market. We are a little concerned how this can be sustained. It is a dilemma for museums and collectors who now have to pay two or three times more for a Chinese work of art than a few years ago. The motivation for buying art should be for the aesthetics and connoisseurship—individuals should be getting value in the object and not buy purely for speculation. The Chinese art market will continue to go up as there is greater wealth and education in China. It will only continue to grow in strength since the demand has increased tremendously while the supply has remained relatively the same.”

Susan Ollemans Oriental Art, I.M. Chait, Mika Gallery and Prahlad Bubbar Ltd also exhibited at the Fuller Building. Prahlad Bubbar started collecting art twenty-five years ago. He said, “As a teenager I was drawn to art”. Prahlad’s family comes from Indore, the largest city and commercial capital of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, but he also lived in Italy and studied in America. After completing college he returned to India to work for his family’s steel business. However, his true calling was Indian art so he completed a Masters in Asian art at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Initially he dealt in Indian art more generally, but now specialises in Indian paintings. He said, “Over the past few years leading collectors in Europe and America have offered me pieces to sell and I try to have the very best quality. I decided to settle in London because it has always been a very good place for serious art dealers. It is the perfect meeting point between Asia and America. London is still the academic centre for Asian art.”

After seven years in the Fuller Building, Carlton Rochell felt it was the right time to move to a new location. He looked relaxed and happy in his spacious and comfortable gallery at 42 East 74th Street. During our visit there was a constant flow of guests coming to see the Indian paintings and Southeast Asian works of art in the exhibition “Selections from the Robert and Bernice Dicke Collection”. Carlton said, “Our clients love it here and the setting is more intimate. We are handling a collection for a family and have received an international response. Our being here in a private location has not changed our business one bit. With this collection alone we have picked up two or three new clients. It has been fantastic. We have some wonderful things at the moment and I see no reason for that not to continue. The pieces are displayed in a setting similar to our clients’ homes. Now after three months of being here this is definitely the operating model we very much prefer. There is little walk in traffic for high-end Asian art. It takes knowledge and understanding to buy at this level. We have
to cultivate and educate our clients and build up a relationship with them. To address our core business of museums and high-end collectors this private setting is more suitable. I have been in this field for twenty-five years and I want to work with people I have known for a long time. This new gallery is a great environment for me to do that.”

London dealer John Eskenazi’s annual New York exhibition of Indian, Gandharan, Himalayan and Southeast Asian sculptures at Williams, Moretti and Irving Gallery attracted strong interest from many East Coast buyers, one of whom acquired a stone sculpture of Ganesha, dating from the 10th century, eastern India, for a six-figure sum. Every year John never fails to impress and always puts on a high-quality show. Other notable sales included a standing Buddha from Vietnam, 3rd–4th century, which sold to a European contemporary art collector. An Indian private collector acquired a bronze figure of Shivakami from South India, 8th century, a six-figure sum; and a bronze head of a Buddha from Thailand, Ayutthaya period, 16th century, found a
new home in America.

It was noticeable that collectors, curators and Asian art enthusiasts, from all around the world as well as America, were in town, thus confirming the resurgence of confidence in the art market. Art of the Past at 1242 Madison Avenue held the exhibition “Ikṣita: Behold—Masterworks from South and Southeast Asia”. Gallery owner Subhash Kapoor was proud of his rare and important bronze matched pair of the Shiva Nataraja and his consort Uma Parameshvari, South India, Tamil Nadu, Chola period, 12th–13th century. He said, “It is quite amazing that the divine couple have not only survived together as an original set, but also remain in complete states, with their flaming prabhās and lotus pedestals”.

Asian Art Dealers New York (AADNY) invited us to a reception at the Rubin Museum of Art (RMA) to celebrate Asia Week New York 2010 and to honour the museum’s co-founders Donald and Shelley F. Rubin. The AADNY and RMA put on a vibrant event at 150 West 17th Street. The youthful crowd was a breath of fresh air and it was also nice to catch up with collectors, dealers and friends among the over three hundred guests, including Feng-Chun Ma, René Scholten and his attractive wife Margriet from Brussels, and New Jersey collectors Dr Richard and Ruth Dickes. They all felt Asia Week New York was livelier this year and this is partly thanks to AADNY coordinating thirty-one special gallery openings across Manhattan on March 20th and 21st. The gallery cocktail receptions were well attended by collectors and museum curators, and they returned to their favourite galleries throughout the week.

AADNY co-founders Joan Mirviss and Jiyoung Koo were thrilled with the positive feedback from their participating members and visitors. In Joan’s welcoming speech she took a few moments to tell guests about the group of dealers and how and why they came into existence and developed. She said, “Many of our members were at one time or another participants in the International Asian Art Fair that for many years was the pivotal anchor for Asia Week New York, some of us having exhibited there since its inception in 1996. When the 2009 fair was cancelled in late 2008, Jiyoung and I, with early support from John Eskenazi, immediately began to plan an alternative way to give ballast to Asia Week New York and to re-establish the pre-eminence of New York as the centre of the Asian art world. We thus inaugurated our group of Asian art dealers.”

AADNY has grown from sixteen participants in 2009 to thirty-one world-renowned dealers in 2010. The group has certainly achieved a lot in a short period and has already begun plans for an even more incredible Asia Week for 2011. To join AADNY, dealers need to be established and have operated a viable business for over five years. Dealers should also be recognised by their peers as being at the top level in their field. Ideally AADNY wants to include dealers from different fields. Joan said, “They do not have to be from New York City. After making a commitment to join, the dealer is responsible for finding a space in town to rent during Asia Week. We wanted to do an event with scholarly dealers and next year we plan to expand the size of our organisation. We really need nine months to properly prepare and with the help of experienced professionals we want to execute our plan to have sponsorship and corporate institutional support. Currently we are discussing with the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Japan Society for next year’s opening party reception. We are happy with our current thirty-one world-class dealers, but we can still grow our membership and welcome established dealers to contact our group if they wish to participate next year. We could go up to fifty dealers.”

After a good night’s rest, the next day (March 20th) we spent over two hours with Robyn Turner and Orientations Gallery at their joint Chinese and Japanese art exhibition at Helmsley Carlton House. We thoroughly enjoyed looking at all the attractive objects on display in their elegant setting. The comfortable large suite rooms received natural sunlight and it was a very pleasant way to enjoy handling and discussing art with the gallery owners and other collectors as well. We were surprised that the time passed so quickly and almost did not make our next appointment.

When we arrived at Fletcher-Sinclair Mansion/Ukrainian Institute for the Japanese Art Dealers Association (JADA) exhibitions we were immediately drawn to the stunning pair of six-panel Japanese folding screens, Tales of Genji, by Kano Shosho (died 1601), ink, colour and gold leaf on paper, Momoyama period (1585–1615). The exceptional screens belong to Leighton R. Longhi and we were curious to know how much they cost, but Mr Longhi did not want to disclose this information as the screens were not for sale. We also admired
Erik Thomsen’s pair of six-panel screens, *Roosters and Chicken among Bamboo*, ink and colour on gold leaf, Edo period, 17th century. Onlookers commented favourably on these screens and liked the theme and workmanship. At Judith Dowling’s section we were instantly attracted to an exquisite 17th century Japanese *zushi* (travelling shrine) created by the monk Jozan Tankai (1627–1719), considered one of the best carvers and designers of Buddhist sculpture of his period. This personal shrine of the Bodhisattva Jizo is in his Japanese form as the compassionate helper of all in trouble, as well as the saviour of little children. He is also the divinity to whom women pray for the blessing of maternity and is the patron of travellers. Up to that point we did not own any Buddhist art from Japan, so we were excited to purchase the shrine to help complete our Buddhist art collection from Asian countries.

While viewing at Doyle auctioneers on March 21st we examined Lot 61, a Chinese jadeite censer, catalogued as 19th century, height 6.25 inches (estimate US$6000–8000). When handling the piece we thought the relief carving with two lions flanking a flaming pearl and loose ring handles was pleasing. If the material was a deeper green it would have been even more desirable, but we knew it would make a high price since there was plenty of interest from mainland Chinese dealers. However, we never imagined this jadeite censer would fetch US$1,082,500 on the following day. It was a real surprise and the talk of the town during Asia Week New York.

We enjoyed catching up with our friends Karen and Leon Wender at their cosy gallery and viewed their exhibition “Embodi-
ments of Wisdom”. It was also nice to see Italian dealers Grata Somaré and Leonardo Vigorelli with their handsome son Tomaso at their exhibition “Ancient Art of Asia” held at Pace Wildenstein. They looked very pleased having sold many Southeast Asian art pieces, including all their Indonesian bronze sculptures.

Dr. Hugo Weihe, Christie’s International Director of Asian Art and Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, General Manager of Marg Publications, requested the pleasure of our company at a launch and brief introduction of the book Painted Images of Enlightenment: Early Tibetan Thankas, 1050–1450 by Steven Kossak with foreword by Pratapaditya Pal. Dr. Pal is one of the earliest contributors to Arts of Asia (his first article “Ruins of Tjandi Sewu” appeared in our July–August 1972 magazine) and it was very good to see him looking fit and lively.

On March 22nd we continued visiting galleries and made our way to Kang Collection Korean Art where we were warmly welcomed by Mrs. Kang and her son Peter. In their exhibition “Harmony and Nature: Auspicious Symbols in Korean Art” we enjoyed learning about Korean screens. The example we liked the best had already been sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Mrs. Kang is so pleased that her son has decided to work with her and will head the gallery. Peter told us he was in the middle of preparing a special exhibition of Korean contemporary art for the gallery.

During Kukado’s spring exhibition “Honored Guests”, gallery director Carol Conover was kept busy showing and selling art to important clients. Owners Mary Ann and Howard Rogers gave us a very warm welcome and said they have been doing well during Asia Week, but they expressed the difficulty of finding works of art for their stock.

In the evening, Susan Tosk and David Cole of Orientations Gallery kindly invited us to join them at the Asia Society cocktail reception. We were also able to view the Asia Society exhibitions “Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art” and “Arts of Ancient Vietnam: From River Plain to Open Sea”. Asia Society and exhibition curator Nancy Tingley deserve congratulations for arranging this fine Vietnamese art exhibition. The displays were fascinating and the huge stone sculptures looked most impressive. One of the best overseas exhibitions of Vietnamese art we have seen and a highlight of our New York trip, we are very proud of the show, which was the focus of our September–October 2009 edition.

During the reception we met Jane Portal and her husband R.G.W. Anderson, both formerly of the British Museum. In September 2008 Jane joined Boston’s Museum of Fine Art as Chair of the Department of Asia, Oceania and Africa. We were also approached by happy subscribers, including Mr. Niti Bhayana from New Delhi, India.

He said he could not prevent himself from coming up to say hello to us. He truly enjoys every issue of Arts of Asia and learns a great deal from the magazine.

On March 23rd we were pleased to see Doris Wiener as it had been a couple of years since we last met. She is still a youthful and energetic lady. In her gallery she offered a fine selection of ancient Indian and Khmer works of art, Jain paintings and sculpture. We met three mainland Chinese dealers who were keen to buy gilt bronzes.

Afterwards we went to see her daughter Nancy Wiener at 2109 Broadway and were impressed by the display of classical Indian and Southeast Asian sculptures in her gallery. What a special treat it was to see an impressive standing Shiva, polished grey sandstone, Khmer, early Angkor period, Baphuon style, 11th century, height 85 cm. Another rare object was a standing Buddha in wood from Vietnam, 8th–9th century, height 41 cm. Upon our request Nancy kindly showed us a group of gold rings and we were thrilled to purchase a stunning Indonesian gold ring depicting Gajalakshmi, Central Java, 9th–10th century. It is a fine addition to our collection of Southeast Asian gold jewellery.

It was a great pleasure to celebrate Ralph M. Chait Galleries’ 100th anniversary at their private reception and exhibition “The Hundred Antiques: 100 Years of Dealing in Chinese Art”. It was nice to see Allan S. Chait again as well as his charming wife and sons Andrew and Steven. Allan mentioned, “I always look to the future with great hope. I do not have a crystal ball but things always bounce back. Chinese art works so well in western homes and collectors have become more sophisticated. There is now a lot more exposure to Asian art and
younger collectors are interested. The problem for dealers is they have to replenish the material they have sold. This field is enjoyable because we have marvellous surroundings and we have a passion for the art. My sons have great integrity, give their honest opinion and spend a lot of time to help clients.” At the private reception we caught up with our long-time friends Alan and Simone Hartman and Roger and Miranda Keverne.

Kapoor Galleries celebrated their 35th anniversary in New York. We visited the new gallery on March 24th and attended their exhibition “Adoration of the Divine.” Ramesh Kapoor said, “I opened this new gallery for my son Sunet. He is doing a wonderful job and I am very excited for him. He has been working hard and the new gallery has already been successful. It is welcoming, spacious, on the street level at 1015 Madison Avenue and has good ambience. In this location we are now able to beautifully display important pieces and visitors have been impressed. Everything has worked out perfectly.”

Courage & Joy is Joe-Hynn Yang’s Chinese name and also the name of his new Asian art advisory located at 3 East 66th Street. Before setting up his company last year, Joe worked as a Chinese art specialist at Sotheby’s for nine years and at Christie’s for two and half years. Besides finding quality objects for his clients, Joe’s concept is to also focus on advisory. He explained:

“It was always the role of a gentleman dealer to develop clients, to teach and to learn with them. Recently the art market has been more focused on transactions. Courage & Joy is not only about dealing in Asian art, but also about beginning a dialogue on Asian art connoisseurship. Collectors in the East and the West want to know the true value of objects and what will hold its value. Most professionals feel that the buying spree is rather irrational in the current market and find it hard to explain why the prices at Christie’s and Sotheby’s are so high now. It is risky and inflated at the moment and a reassessment of the art market is necessary. Soon the market is going to split into two different directions. There are people who are bulls and there are the bears. There are people who want to push the market up. It is interesting that the bear believers are becoming more vocal having seen things becoming more irrational. Even so there are always opportunities to find good buys. There are still American and European collectors acquiring art at the highest levels and competing with Chinese buyers. In America the financial recovery is gradual on a wider level. There have been incredible results recently in the Modern and Impressionist sales in New York and London. This has positively fed into the Asian art market. I am generally conservative and take a cautious approach. Everyone can see that the mood during Asia Week has been more optimistic than three months ago. My aim is to continue to develop the market for early Chinese art, in particular three-dimensional objects in bronze, lacquer and ceramics, not so much on paintings and jade. I am also focusing on provenance and look for collections in America, Asia and Japan.”

Zetterquist Galleries, also located at 3 East 66th Street, exhibited Chinese ceramics from the Tang to Yuan dynasties. Eric Zetterquist has specialised in these wares, with a particular focus on Song dynasty ceramics, since the inception of his gallery eighteen years ago. Included in the exhibition was a fine group of Qingbai pieces with versatile decorative techniques and forms. Within short walking distance we visited Michael Hughes’ exhibition of Chinese works of art including snuff bottles. He has been a good friend of Arts of Asia for many years and he always finds exquisite snuff bottles for sale. He mentioned that he had a humble beginning as a dealer, but with the help of his loyal collector friends he hopes to expand his business in the near future.

Christian Deydier from Paris has for decades been a leading dealer of ancient Chinese art. In November 2006 he received the Officier de la Légion d’Honneur from the French government. For his New York exhibition he showed many important bronze and pottery objects. The example we found most fascinating was a receptacle for cowrie shells cast in the form of a ritual drum of green patinated bronze, China, Yunnan province, Dian Culture, 2nd–1st century BC, diameter 33 cm. The top of the vessel is decorated with an extraordinary festive scene of dance and music performances.

There were sixty-one Asian art dealers participating at the Arts of Pacific Asia Show, its 19th presentation in New York. This year organisers Bill Gaskey and Elizabeth Lees were able to make the fair feel spacious with wider aisles. Bill said, “Business and attendance is better and we are very happy to have new dealers participating such as Cynthia Volk, Ethnologica, Helena Markus Japanese Screens, and Jonathan Tucker and Antonia Tozer. Our show dates are right on top of the auctions and we also have a weekend to give working people a chance to visit. We have always had good attendance over the weekend. The stock market has recovered and I noticed a positive change in the art market since last November. New York was the first
city in America to enter into recession and now it is the first to get out. Things are picking up on the East Coast and the Chinese buyers have been fuelling the art market. In the 1980s the Japanese were the dominant collectors coming to the fair. Now it is the mainland Chinese buyers who are forming long queues at our entrance before the opening night party. The fair had its most well-attended opening night and there has been a constant flow of people since the first day.” At the show we were delighted to meet Karsten Tietz, a lawyer in his full-time profession, and enthusiastic and passionate collector/dealer in his spare time. In his booth he exhibited Thai, Khmer, Lao and Burmese Buddhist art. Flying Cranes Antiques Ltd, specialising in the arts of Japan, had one of the most attractive stands.

On March 25th we attended Christie’s sales which totalled US$60 million, the company’s second highest gross for Asia Week New York. The Chinese works of art totalled US$40 million, its highest ever in New York. Theo H. Tow, Deputy Chairman of Christie’s Americas and Honorary Chairman of Christie’s Asia said, “We have continued to attract an international and diverse range of buyers who look for exceptional and rare works of good provenance that are attractively estimated. Our total shows that the demand continues to be strong among worldwide collectors and reinforcing market confidence as we go forward into the year.” At the auction we met Roger and Miranda Keveren again who both feel that the prices for Chinese art and antiques will keep going up. Roger stressed, “There is a noticeable difference between connoisseurship and knowledge. For Chinese jade, white jade dominates the price regardless of the age.” Miranda added, “It is interesting that the auction market has become so strong. Dealers are doing well but it is increasingly difficult to find good pieces, so prices will continue to rise. Buying at times appears indiscriminate as some new Chinese buyers feel it is necessary to enter the market. While China maintains steady and high levels of growth, buyers are keen to make purchases. It will be interesting to see how this will change should the Chinese economy slow down.”

Our visit to New York was pleasantly rounded up with Eskenazi’s reception at Fletcher-Sinclair Mansion/Ukrainian Institute for the exhibition “Trees, Rocks, Mist and Mountains by Li Huayi”. Giuseppe and Laura Eskenazi and their very capable son Daniel were happy to welcome guests at the well-attended reception. The large-scale contemporary Chinese ink paintings of rocky cliffs and landscapes ranged from US$500,000 to over US$1.3 million. The Ukrainian Institute with high ceilings and great character was an ideal venue for providing the airiness and space required to display the impressive works.

Before arriving in New York City we spent a day in Washington DC. Top of our agenda was to see the Smithsonian’s Arthur M. Sackler Gallery’s temporary exhibition, “In the Realm of the Buddha”, on view from March 13th–July 18th.

This exciting Buddhist art show was in two parts. The first featured “The Tibetan Shrine from the Alice S. Kandell Collection”. The Tibetan Buddhist shrine room, on public display for the first time, has been acknowledged by practising Buddhists as a sacred space. It contains hundreds of works of Buddhist art from Tibet, Sikkim and Nepal created between the 12th and 19th centuries, including bronze sculptures, thangkas, ritual objects, prayer wheels, musical instruments, lamps, textile banners and painted furniture. Put together in a diminutive shrine room by Alice Kandell from New York as an expression of her appreciation of Buddhist culture, they could only be viewed from a standing balcony some ten feet away. Replicating the atmosphere of a Tibetan shrine room in a museum setting is quite an original concept. However, the room was surprisingly dark and increasing the lighting would have allowed visitors a clearer view of the two hundred objects on display. This is something that might be addressed for future public exhibitions.

Collection written by Tibetan art specialists Marylin M. Rieie and Robert A.F. Thurman, published in 2009 by Tibet House US, records with close-up photographs and detailed descriptions the objects in the collection.

The second part of the Sackler Gallery’s Buddhism exhibition was “Lama, Patron: The Great Situ Panchen” organised by the Rubin Museum of Art (RMA) in New York. Arts of Asia readers will recall the in-depth article of the same title written by Dr Karl Debrezeny and published in our March–April 2010 issue on the RMA. The exhibition is part of the Sackler Gallery’s “Asia in America” program showcasing the holdings of important American institutional collections of Asian art. Julian Raby, Director of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, was delighted to hear how much we enjoyed the Buddhist art exhibitions as well as our museum’s permanent Asian art collections. We learnt a great deal revisiting the cases of Chinese bronzes and jade from the Neolithic through the Shang and Han periods. This is an education we wholeheartedly recommend to our readers looking to buy authentic pieces. It is regrettable that there are many copies on the market in these areas.