ONE OF THE reasons we decided to attend Asian Art in London (AAL), held from October 29th to November 7th, 2009, was to support our longtime friend Roger Keverne, the Chairman of AAL. Therefore it is appropriate to start this report with a photo of Roger during the AAL Gala Party on November 3rd at The Joseph E. Hotung Gallery in the British Museum. In his welcome speech to approximately five hundred guests in attendance he said, “I think it is worth mentioning the importance of the British art market. It is the second largest in the world, comprising nearly 9000 businesses and employing around 48,500 people. Our Asian sector has remained consistently robust, with the Chinese, Indian and Islamic markets being particularly vigorous. Therefore Asian Art in London is as relevant and important today as at its foundation twelve years ago.”

The champagne reception at the British Museum was a great place to catch up with old friends and to make new friends as well. Present were participants of AAL, directors and curators of Asian art from museums worldwide, academic specialists, visitors and collectors. We were all given
the opportunity to visit the Sir Percival David Collection at the British Museum, for which devoted Arts of Asia readers will recall was the focus of the well-received May–June 2009 issue. The Percival David Foundation has always been a jewel in London’s crown and in its new home at the Sir Joseph Hotung Centre for Ceramic Studies, visitors can truly appreciate the entire collection in all its glory. Jan Stuart, Keeper of the Department of Asia at the British Museum, was delighted to hear our thoughts that the new installation looks gorgeous; we congratulate again all those involved in making these ceramics accessible to a much wider audience. I hope Arts of Asia subscribers visiting London will allow themselves the opportunity to study and admire the collection.

Of course, London has a very long history as a major international centre for Asian art. There was a definite air of excitement amongst collectors, dealers, auctioneers and members of museums and cultural organisations at the AAL Gala Party, as well as at openings at participating galleries and auction houses. It was refreshing to see people energised and in a buying mood. After a difficult year as a result of the global financial crisis, there is now a greater sense of optimism and people had a more positive outlook. Certainly London did not seem to be in any kind of recession—dealers reported that there was plenty of buying activity and enthusiasm.

Asian Art in London, as the annual event which unites London’s leading Asian art dealers, major auction houses and societies in a series of gallery selling exhibitions, was definitely a successful event in 2009. It was also complemented by important exhibitions at the leading museums, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Maharaja: The Splendour of India’s Royal Courts, which is truly wonderful and should not be missed.

Over a period of ten days we attended nearly every dealer exhibit and auction that took place in London covering all aspects of antique and contemporary Asian art—Chinese, Himalayan, Indian, Islamic, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese. As space is limited in this report we can only mention a few of the events. One of the most important was Marchant’s exhibition of Ming porcelain in their beautifully renovated gallery at 120 Kensington Church Street. Richard Marchant said, “It has taken five years to prepare and our aim for the present exhibition, the twelfth to include Ming porcelain, has been to use the Percival David Foundation as a benchmark for quality. It gives us therefore great pleasure that at least eight items of the present catalogue are similar to or duplicates of those at the British Museum.” Richard and Stuart Marchant were delighted when we told them how much we enjoyed visiting their tastefully renovated gallery. It was hard to believe that their major renovations project was completed in only nine months. With its brand new modern lighting, full height display cases and wall to wall bamboo flooring, the spacious gallery is an ideal venue for showcasing important collections.

Eskenazi Ltd at 10 Clifford Street always draws a large and distinguished crowd of art lovers. We were informed that close to one thousand people went through the doors of the impressive gallery on their cocktail reception evening to see the exhibition “Seven Classical Chinese Paintings”. Roger Kererune Limited and Berwald Oriental Art also have galleries on Clifford Street. Roger’s exhibition of Chinese bronze mirrors from the Warring States to Tang dynasty was one of the most talked about gallery shows in town. John Berwald has returned to his London roots having spent a number of years in New York City. In his new gallery at 17 Clifford Street he held an exhibition of recent acquisitions, including early pottery figures such as a fine pair of ferocious spirit guardians.

Pedram Rasti and Marco Almeida, Chinese Department specialists in London, were delighted that the Christie’s King Street saleroom was full of potential buyers on November 3rd, 2009. The sale delivered some spectacular prices, demonstrating that collectors in the current market are willing to pay for objects of great value. The demand continues for porcelain which is rare, fresh to the market and with good provenance as demonstrated by Lot 280, a Qianlong period enamelled famille-rose pink-ground model of a Buddhist stupa, realising £229,250 (estimate £60,000–80,000). The auction had a particularly strong, active presence from mainland China bidding aggressively as seen for Lot 185, a small Song dynasty Guanyao vase from The Plesch Collection, which achieved £193,250 (estimate £600,000–800,000). Christie’s sale of Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art totalled £5,707,275 (319 lots offered, 215 lots sold).

Bonhams London New Bond Street sale of Fine Chinese Art on November 5th, 2009 made £4,936,300 (313 lots offered, 235 lots sold). It included Bronze Age Chinese vessels from one of the finest old English collections, formed by the 2nd Lord Cunliffe from the early 1940s until his death in 1963. This was the most important group of early Chinese bronzes ever offered at Bonhams, the collection mainly comprised of classic funerary vessels dating from the 12th to 2nd century BC.

The Cunliffe sale drew international interest from private and museum buyers, attracted to exhibited and published bronzes which have remained unseen in private hands for over fifty years. In a packed saleroom, a few bronzes and other objects achieved more than ten times their pre-sale estimates. Lot 8, an archaic bronze inscribed ritual food vessel, went for £490,400 against an estimate of £40,000 to £60,000. Lot 3, an archaic bronze ritual wine vessel estimated at £20,000 to £30,000, sold for £378,400. An Imperial white jade “double dragon” seal, Lot 283, reached £305,600 against an estimate of £20,000 to £30,000.

Colin Sheaf, Head of Asian Art at Bonhams and the company’s Deputy Chairman, said after the sale: “The message we heard today from Asian art collectors is that the recession is officially over as far as Chinese art collectors are concerned. The sale proves one of the great truths of auction-
erning, that the best and rarest items hold and exceed their value even in bad times. It has been a great pleasure to take a sale that so rously endorses the strength of the Asian art market.”

Bonhams London sale of Fine Japanese Art on November 5th, 2009 made over £1.7 million (377 lots offered, 246 lots sold) demonstrating that London is still the undisputed centre for selling and buying Japanese art. With well over 80% of the lots sold by value, the auction not only produced the best result to date for its recently-established department, but also one of the best results in London for a mixed-owner Japanese sale in almost a decade.

Amongst the highlights was Lot 240, a rare, unusual and elaborately decorated cloisonné enamel *goshojirō* (ox-drawn carriage). Attributed to Kawaguchi Bunzaemon of Nagoya, Meiji period, it sold for £252,000 (estimate £150,000–200,000). Suzannah Yip, Head of Bonhams Fine Japanese Art Department said, “We are absolutely delighted with the results. Although Japanese art has not undergone the same boom in popularity in recent years as its Chinese counterpart, nevertheless when really important and exceptional pieces come to auction, as illustrated in this sale, there is a knowledgeable and sophisticated nucleus of collectors ready to pay the highest sums. Unprecedented results were achieved across the board and we hope that this means that Japanese art, long admired for its extraordinary qualities of design and craftsmanship, is finally emerging from a long period of undervaluation.”

Robert Bradlow, Director and Head of Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art at Sotheby’s London, was delighted with the results of his sale of Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art on November 4th, 2009 which made £8,269,400 (319 lots offered, 153 lots sold). Lot 136, an Imperial Khotan green jade seal purchased by Littleton and Hennessy Asian Art Ltd for £3,569,250 (estimate £400,000–600,000), was the most expensive item sold during Asian Art in London 2009. The following day we had an exclusive interview with Richard Littleton, James Hennessy and Rubin Lien in their gallery at 1 Princes Place, Duke Street, St James’s. They explained that the jade seal is a powerful symbol of Imperial authority which can be traced directly to the Qianlong emperor. Furthermore, the seal’s impression corresponds precisely with that on a painting Littleton and Hennessy Asian Art Ltd had purchased in Paris.

During our discussion Richard and James said, “This is Emperor Qianlong’s 80th birthday seal. There is an infor-
Most of our clients we consider very good friends. Asian art is a true interest and we bring a passion to work day and night. It is an exciting field.”

We also had the pleasure of visiting Knapton Rasti Asian Art at 1 Princes Place. Their exhibition of 145 Chinese jade carvings from the Warring States period to the 20th century belonged to Californian collector Philip Cardeiro. Carol Michaelson’s foreword in the catalogue states “that the dating of jades is very problematic as there is no scientific method of doing so and the main dating criteria rests on stylistic grounds. The British Museum is now engaged in a research project which involves looking at the tool marks on jades under very high magnification. Through the methodology of a reliable recognition of the various techniques used at different historical periods it is hoped that eventually it will be possible to establish a chronology for the dating of jades themselves.”

Also deserving mention is Ben Janssens Oriental Art’s successful gallery exhibition at 91C Jermy Street. It featured an interesting group of Chinese lacquer pieces dating from the Yuan dynasty to the Qianlong period, but mainly from the Ming dynasty. All the objects in the exhibition were decorated using one of four different techniques—carved lacquer, tixi lacquer, tianqi lacquer, or mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer.

John Eskenazi Ltd offers first-class Indian, Gandharan, Southeast Asian and Tibetan art, collectors’ carpets and textiles. We had the great pleasure of visiting John’s gallery in London’s Little Venice, but visitors should make an appointment first. His elegant and comfortable gallery was ingeniously designed with flexible hidden partitions that adjust the flow of light and create a series of private rooms. John looked fit and happy after a wonderful experience with his family trekking for three weeks in Tibet. In his business he said it is easy for him to sell very good works, especially those from Cambodia. The problem is finding the objects; that is the reason why he usually has only one major annual exhibition during Spring Asia Week in New York, where he has many faithful American clients.

Finally, we end this report with our meeting with Anna Haughton. Following the closure of The Grosvenor House Art & Antiques Fair in June 2009, Brian and Anna Haughton have been approached by dealers, familiar with their international reputation as fair organisers since the 1980s, to put together a major new art and antiques event for London in June. We can now confirm that Brian and Anna’s new fair, Art Antiques London, will take place from Wednesday, June 9th to Wednesday, June 16th, 2010. It will be held in a purpose-built marquee in Kensington Gardens, opposite the Royal Albert Hall, and close to the site of the Great Exhibition of 1851. The fair will open with a Gala Evening and a private preview. Anna said, “We always looked for quality at our fairs. We also base our fairs on excellence because we want to attract true collectors and museums. The dealers we are working with are the leading specialists in their fields. It will be a serious vetted fair and there will also be lectures and workshops. We have received a lot of applicants from those who had stands at Grosvenor House. I would like to include sixty dealers, but it could be a little more. Some dealers only require small spaces so we want to make the floor plan flexible and can make more space if required. The cost for exhibitors will also be considerably less than at Grosvenor House.”

The art fair business is now up for grabs in London as three formidable organisations—Art Antiques London, London International Fine Art Fair at Olympia, and Masterpiece London—will be competing for market share. Arts of Asia will keep readers informed as new developments arise.