China Then and Now

Looking at Chinese Art
Through the Perspective of Long Island Collectors

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FOR OVER three and a half centuries, the greater New York region has been the focal point of collecting Chinese art in America. From the personal and commercial inventories of 17th century Dutch settlers of Breuckelen (now Brooklyn, in western Long Island), recent studies have revealed that holdings of “China Wares” were highly treasured by families, and passed down through generations.1 By the 19th century, traders, diplomats, missionaries and artists (among others) based in New York travelled to Asia where they amassed collections of Chinese objects, such as export ceramics, textiles, jewellery and furnishings. After World War I, focused collections of Chinese masterpieces became a phenomenon, not only in American museums, but among private industrialist collectors, many of whom lived, at least for part of their lives, in what became known as the “Gold Coast” of Long Island’s Nassau County, a short distance from New York City.

Throughout the 20th century, Long Island collectors assembled some of the most dazzling compendia of Chinese paintings, sculpture, porcelains and other decorative arts ever known in the West, setting American tastes in Asian art for the better part of a century. Many of these spectacular works were ultimately bequeathed to America’s major museums, where they form the core Chinese holdings of these institutions.2 Today, the zeal for Chinese art has reached an unprecedented peak in the United States, with international museum exhibitions and frenzied private sales and auctions, centred in New York, testifying to the widespread desirability of China’s rich and diverse artistic legacy.

In autumn 2014, visitors have a rare opportunity to explore the history of collecting in the New York region at the Nassau County Museum of Art, with the special exhibition “China Then and Now”. This exhibition presents exemplary works of Chinese art spanning three millennia, in three discrete, but contiguous, sections. The first two sections focus respectively on selections of early Chinese Buddhist sculpture acquired by Dr Arthur M. Sackler (1) (1913–1987), who resided in New York and Manhasset, and Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasty porcelains assembled by Childs Frick (2) (1883–1965) of Roslyn Harbor. A third section brings the exhibition up to the present day, exhibiting a monographic installation of contemporary ink paintings by the artist Liu Dan (born 1953), lent by some of today’s leading private collectors of Chinese art in America.

1See Deborah Krohn and Peter N. Miller, with Marybeth De Filippis, eds, Dutch New York, Between East and West: The World of Margriet van Varick, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009, especially Appendix I.
2Interest in early American collectors of Chinese art has recently been the focus of several essays in the volume Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China, ed., Jason Steuber, with Guolong Lai, Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2014.
Standing Buddha
China, Northern Qi period (550–577)
Marble with limestone base
103.1 x 55.8 x 15.5 cm
Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York; Sackler Collections (S3516)

Before turning to some of the exhibition highlights, it must be mentioned that the Nassau County Museum of Art is housed in the former Georgian-style residence of Childs Frick and his family (3), a fact little known to most visitors. As the original site of display for the family’s Chinese porcelains, the museum provides an ideal setting for the exhibition, which aims in part to contextualise how American collectors of yesteryear appreciated and displayed their Chinese treasures, and also to call attention to the pride of place afforded to Chinese art in the leading estates of Long Island.

“China Then and Now” opens with a group of eleven large-scale stone sculptures once in the collection of Arthur M. Sackler, which exemplify the monumentality of early Buddhist art in China. By situating these objects in a Long Island mansion, this installation aims to recreate a context similar to that in which notable collectors, like Sackler, enjoyed and studied Chinese art and culture. A marble Buddha from the Sackler Collections (4) survives in remarkable condition, making it one of the most compelling objects acquired by the collector. Typical attributes distinguish this figure specifically as a Buddha Shakyamuni, or Historical Buddha. He stands with eyes downturned in a meditative state, his right hand held in abhaya mudra (“fear not” gesture) and his left hand downturned in varada mudra (gift-bestowing gesture). His ample monastic robes cover both shoulders and knees; a protuberance (ushnisha) emerges from his head; and his earlobes are elongated. The elegant, simplified folds of the drapery with an almost fungal-shaped hem are hallmarks of Dingzhou-style sculptures produced in Hebei province during the Northern Qi period (550–577).

Among the rarest sculptures in the exhibition is a standing bodhisattva (5), dated by style and form to the brief era of Northern Zhou rule (557–581). Distinguishing characteristics include the squarish face, columnar torso and detailed ornamentation, including an elaborate crown and layers of incised jewellery. The sash encircling the hips and knotted through a bi-shaped element is known from other stone sculptures of this era. Few stone or metal sculptures dating to the Northern Zhou exist outside China. Given proscriptions on Buddhism during the Northern Zhou era, it was long believed that monasteries, including their artworks, were destroyed, and that material evidence of a vibrant Buddhist culture in Xi’an and western China were thus lost. However, in the last several decades, archaeological finds have revealed the survival of this era’s vast output. This object was rediscovered in 2006 in Columbia University’s collections, where it had languished unnoticed in a professor’s office for many years.

The site of Tianlongshan is known primarily for its network of Tang dynasty (early 8th century) monastic grottoes, among the most beautifully decorated and situated in all of China. A head of a bodhisattva from Sackler’s collection (6) may have been a part of a sculpture group from the site, however it bears the characteristics of an even earlier era, similar to the sculptures in Tianlongshan’s Cave 16, which dates to the Northern Qi period (6th century). Based on the dimensions of this head, it may be surmised that the original figure was much larger than life size. The sculpture exhibits substantial wear—evidence of centuries-long exposure to the elements. Nonetheless, the extant polychromy, most visible at the base of the crown, and the precise execution of subtly smiling lips, hint at the original

3Columbia University featured a special exhibition and catalogue of Sackler’s Chinese sculptures: Leo Swergold and Eileen Hsiang-ling Hsu, et al., Treasures Rediscovered: Chinese Stone Sculptures from the Sackler Collections at Columbia University, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University in the City of New York; New York, 2008; Arthur Sackler’s collections now in the Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., have been widely published, including several essays in past issues of Arts of Asia; see especially the January–February 2006 issue.
Standing Bodhisattva
China, Northern Zhou (557–581) to early Sui dynasty (581–618)
Limestone with traces of pigment
147.0 x 45.1 x 22.9 cm
Art Properties, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Sackler Collections (S4432)
impact of this remarkable work. The simplicity of the full-cheeked face—soft, yet planar—radiates blissful contemplation and divine compassion, which made bodhisattvas among the most popular subjects in Mahayana Buddhist sites, such as the cave temples of Tianlongshan.

A mortuary bed fragment from Sackler’s collection (7) provides a different perspective on early Chinese culture. Intended as a furnishing for an elite tomb, mortuary beds were produced as supports for the sarcophagi of the deceased. Many examples are known from the Han (206 BC–AD 220) to the Tang (618–907) dynasties, although few survive intact. The Sackler fragment represents a bed’s front base, carved in a single piece of grey limestone and supported by three feet. Its incised decoration includes panels depicting mythical creatures (spirits which would protect the dead in the afterlife), framed by borders of stylised vine scrolls and wave patterns. In contrast to the sculpted divinities from the Sackler Collections presented above, the iconography of this mortuary bed fragment is not “Buddhist” in the strictest sense; rather, it derives from a traditional visual vocabulary popular in royal and other elite tombs.

While some American collectors of the mid-20th century, like Sackler, had wide-ranging interests in Chinese art, including sculpture and painting, earlier local collectors favoured ceramics, especially blue and white wares in all their variety. The second section of “China Then and Now” focuses on the Childs Frick collection of Chinese ceramics, mostly dating to the Ming and Qing dynasties. Eighty of the 220 blue and white porcelains amassed by Childs Frick and bequeathed to the Frick Collection—the
New York City museum housing the family’s world-renowned art treasures—are for this special exhibition returned to the very location which they once adorned. This reunion greatly enhances our understanding of the Frick family’s taste in collecting decorative arts and, for the first time, presents highly valued, but little known, works in the Frick Collection to a wider audience.

Kaijun Chen explores the collection of Chinese ceramics amassed by Childs Frick and his wife, Frances, in detail in a later article in this issue of *Arts of Asia*. Here, a brief taste of this section of the exhibition is offered together with a few highlights.

Most of the Chinese ceramics that Childs Frick’s heirs bequeathed to the Frick Collection date to the Kangxi era (1662–1722) of the Qing dynasty. However, there are also notable earlier examples, such as a Ming dynasty octagonal saucer (8). This impressive vessel, bearing a Jiaqing reign (1522–1566) mark on its base, epitomises the taste for blue and white ceramics. The freely drawn cavetto design features ducks languidly swimming amongst aquatic plants and flowers. Eight unpainted reticulated panels—covered in a clear glaze to reveal the white porcelain fabric—enhance the rim.

Perhaps even more unusual in the collection is a remarkable round covered porcelain box (9). Selected for its refined brushwork, this object features a medallion design, which is derived from similar motifs of interlocking palmettes and lotuses used to decorate tricolour (sancai) incised ceramics of the Tang dynasty, as well as metalwork and other decorative arts from across the Silk Road regions. Originally, the motif held significance as a Buddhist symbol. Its recurrence (albeit in stylised form) in this Qing dynasty porcelain, however, testifies both to the design’s longevity as well as its appreciation in non-religious contexts during later periods.

One of the most striking of all the Childs Frick’s Chinese ceramics is a Ming dynasty bowl (10) with an overlapping lotus petal design, embracing the lower portion of the vessel’s exterior. Once again, this object has been selected for exhibition primarily for its aesthetic impact. Its lotus motif is rendered even more abstractly than the stylised medallion seen in the round box with dome lid, discussed above (9). The dynamic execution of the painted design betrays an almost modern sensibility, and it is difficult to imagine that this key element would not have also been what struck its collector.

The third section of “China Then and Now” brings a contemporary perspective to the exhibition’s primary themes, showcasing select masterworks by the renowned Beijing artist Liu Dan (11). Today, Liu Dan is one of the few artists focusing on subjects such as landscapes and still lives, and works primarily in ink brush painting on a monumental scale. He ranks among those Chinese painters whose work is most sought after by collectors, especially in the United States. In his appreciation for the classical fine arts of China, Liu Dan shares a sensibility with the earlier American collectors. Nonetheless, Liu Dan’s paintings invariably offer a contemporary perspective on traditional forms and practices.

The 2002 *Winter Landscape (After Wang Wei)* in handscroll format is meant to be examined from right to left (12). At the very beginning, Liu Dan’s inscription explains how this painting was inspired by the work of the 8th century poet and painter, Wang Wei. A depiction of a small retreat is nestled alongside the river inlet near the centre of the painting; the bare trees, dry weeds and snow covered mountains set the scene in winter and emphasise the seclu-
The union between mountains, water and sky, the unusual forms of such naturally occurring masterpieces were placed in gardens or within the studio, and selected for personal contemplation or gifted to friends. Liu Dan presents an almost hyper-realistic representation of a scholar’s rock, one which engages the viewer in a way that no photograph could, by inviting the eye to explore the rock’s surfaces and crevices, rendered in exquisite detail through a masterful application of the ink medium.

With *Mingsha Diabolo* (14), in the Xiling Collection, Liu Dan presents a dreamlike landscape based on the artist’s exploration of the great Silk Road Buddhist caves and singing sands (“Mingsha Shan”) at Dunhuang. While none of the traditional figural wall painting and sculpture of the grottoes at the site expressly features in this painting, close contemplation of the complex mountain terrain depicted in the work reveals hints of human and animal forms. Thus, despite the effective impression that it conveys of a traditional Chinese landscape, *Mingsha Diabolo* is as much about perception—both that of the artist and that of the viewer—as it is about a particular site.

Whether considering classical sculpture, transitional ceramics or contemporary ink painting, American collectors based in New York and Long Island have long admired the historical significance and masterful craftsmanship of Chinese art. Through a sampling of remarkable objects, “China Then and Now” celebrates the passion of American collectors for the beauty of Chinese aesthetics and their deep respect for the history and culture of China. By showcasing these objects for the first time in Long Island, this exhibition, which runs from November 22nd, 2014 to March 8th, 2015 at the Nassau County Museum of Art, casts new light on a fascinating chapter in America’s engagement with China and its arts.

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2. Howard Rogers has kindly referred the author to one version of the composition, probably dating to the Ming dynasty and recently ascribed to the circle of Wen Zhengming, now in the Honolulu Museum of Art, 2725.1.