CHRISTIAN DEYDIER
in an
INTERVIEW WITH TUYET NGUYET

ARTS OF ASIA

Christian Deydier is a world-renowned sinologist and author of numerous reference works on Chinese gold and archaic bronzes. His gallery, located at 30 rue de Seine, 75006 Paris, France, specialises in archaic bronzes and works in gold from the vast field of Chinese archaeology. Christian Deydier was a scholarly researcher before he became an art dealer and, with his expert eye, tracks down the most unusual, beautiful and rare objects for exhibitions in his gallery or at major international fairs like the Paris Biennale. Since 2008, Christian Deydier has been exhibiting in New York during Asia Week, first at The International Asian Art Fair, and then at Friedman & Vallois Gallery.

TUYET NGUYET—Welcome to Hong Kong. You have brought sunshine to us and I am most grateful. We met around twenty-five years ago at one of the first auctions in China. Already you had established a reputation as one of the most important and well-informed sinologists from Europe. Last night, as I read your biography, I was wondering what are the differences between the awards you received from the French government?

CHRISTIAN DEYDIER—I have four awards from the French government. The green colour award is the Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres which was received in November 1996. It is given out by the Minister of Culture for all types of people involved in the arts. In January 1996 I received the Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur which is red colour. This is a major award created by Napoleon Bonaparte and is given to soldiers for acts of bravery during war or for civilians who do something important for France. In October 2010 I received the Officier du Mérite National which is blue colour. This award was created by General Charles de Gaulle and it is given to people who served France in administration or recognition for heading important French organisations. For example, as President of the Syndicat National des Antiquaires from 2002 to 2008 I developed the French art market and I was in charge of changes at French auction houses. In November 2006 I received the Officier de la Légion d’Honneur. Officier is a higher level than Chevalier. There are 20,000 Officier in France. Commandeur is even higher but you usually only get this award when you are very old.

TN—You are very young to receive the important Officier de la Légion d’Honneur. Why did the French government give you this award?

CD—I worked a lot for the French government in the arts. I helped them and gave considerable advice about art. I was in charge of the Syndicat National des Antiquaires and all the fairs about arts. I helped to create some changes in the tax laws to assist individuals who wish to donate to museums.

TN—That is wonderful. Have you been successful?

CD—Yes, for some laws, but not for everything. I also worked hard to promote sensible legislation relating to the export of antiques, as well as being heavily involved in the Paris Biennale to bring it to an important level. I have also given art to French museums. I have given around seventy pieces to the Musée Guimet and sixty pieces to the Musée Cernuschi. They include Neolithic objects, a set of Warring States bronze bells, ancient wood, lacquer, gold and silver artefacts. You can see my name listed in the descriptions. In fact I have given a lot of pieces. I also participated in official trips to China with Jacques Chirac.

TN—I heard you helped former President Jacques Chirac to form his collection of Chinese art. Is that correct?

CD—Yes, I helped him and I also know the current President Nicolas Sarkozy. I was the person who organised the first meeting between the two gentlemen after Mr Sarkozy was elected to power in May 2007. I made an appointment with both and took them to the Musée Guimet. Very often we have lunch together.

TN—Are they friends?

CD—I think their relationship is more like a father and a son. When Chirac was in power he always pushed Sarkozy during his time as Minister of the Interior. As a result Sarkozy learnt every part of the government which made him stronger and better prepared for leadership.

TN—Is Chirac that good a leader?

CD—Yes. In fact I see him nearly every day because he lives next door to my gallery and he likes art. He enjoys coming into the gallery and sitting with me. There are always collectors coming into the gallery so they can talk about art and life in general. Either in September or October we are planning a trip together to Hong Kong and Shanghai. I went with Mr Chirac to Shanghai in November 2009 to meet China’s President Hu Jintao. In May this year I was with President Sarkozy in Beijing and then Shanghai for the official dinner to launch Expo 2010. He is eager to learn and understand Chinese culture and civilisation. It is important for Chinese leaders to see that President Sarkozy not only comes to China to make business relationships, but also to gain knowledge about the country. The Chinese are very proud of their culture. For our Shanghai Expo visit the delegation had no commercial objective. It was only about art and the Chinese were very happy as we went to Beijing and took the First Lady to the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, as well as Xi'an for the terracotta warriors. It was Carla Bruni’s first visit to China. Similarly, when I went to China with Chirac, he was retired. Even so President Hu Jin Tao waited outside in the garden to receive Chirac. Usually when we go on official meetings the visiting delegation and its leader will wait in an official room for the Chinese President to arrive. We never saw the President of China waiting for his guest before.

TN—Why did President Hu Jintao wait in the garden like that?

CD—He likes Chirac for his appreciation of Chinese history and culture. After the one hour meeting we had a private dinner. There were only twenty-four in our group which is very rare.

TN—What kind of food did you have?

CD—We had Chinese food and everything was wonderful. We had all types of seafood, melon and shark’s fin soup, and Peking duck. Throughout the dinner President Hu referred to Chirac as his
Christian Deydier was interviewed by Tuyet Nguyet on June 29th, 2010 at the Mandarin Oriental, Hong Kong

President Jacques Chirac honouring Christian Deydier with the Légion d’Honneur

Silvio Berlusconi and Christian Deydier at the Paris Biennale in 2008

Christian Deydier as a child with his father Henri Deydier and mother Eliane Maisonneuve

Christian Deydier and President Nicolas Sarkozy admiring a Tang dynasty camel

Christian Deydier with Gilles Beguin from Musée Cernuschi
“Lao Punyao” or “dear old friend”. After dinner a special telephone line was prepared so that Chirac could speak with former President Jiang Zemin. They talked for forty-five minutes about our visit to China as well as many other things. It was wonderful. I am very often on such trips to China, India and the Middle East. On one occasion President Chirac took me to Turkey. In May 2009 I accompanied President Sarkozy to Abu Dhabi to lay the foundation stone for a new museum that will be a part of the Louvre.

TN—What is the purpose of this museum?

CD—In the agreement the Louvre will loan important artworks to the museum in Abu Dhabi. At the same time the new museum will develop its own collections through purchases and receive assistance and advice from the Louvre. The museum in Abu Dhabi will display art from all over the world and it is scheduled to open in 2013.

TN—That is a very exciting project. Has the museum started buying and from where?

CD—The museum buys from everywhere in the world. They bought in America, Switzerland, France and in auctions. They have around twenty-five advisors. At the moment the focus is on important French Impressionist and Flemish paintings. They have only purchased a few Chinese works of art such as a Warring States inlaid bronze and a Northern Qi stone head. At the opening in 2013 the museum will have around three hundred pieces on exhibit.

TN—Would you be able to sell your collection of unique early Chinese bronzes to the museum?

CD—I want to keep them in my private collection. If I sell them what will I do with the money? I have already given a lot of pieces to museums and I need to keep some for me and my children.

TN—How many children do you have?

CD—My daughter is twenty-five years old. My son is thirty-five years old. I have two granddaughters from my son. They are five and three years old. My son is a director of a Swiss bank in Paris. My daughter is a gemologist.

TN—With their qualifications surely you do not need to support them anymore?

CD—I still help my daughter. One time she found a beautiful stone and asked me to buy it because she did not have the money. She said we would share the profit if we make any. After she bought the stone she said we had to mount it, so I paid to make it into a ring. Afterwards she came to see me and was wearing the ring on her finger. She said she liked it very much and did not want to sell it. So there was no profit!

TN—That is an amusing story. What are the difficulties you have faced as an art dealer?

CD—Actually, I have been so involved with the French dealers’ association that people forget that I am a dealer. Collectors think of me as the art advisor to the French President. I am a Chinese art researcher but also a Chinese art dealer. Giuseppe Eskenazi explained to me that I would become a good dealer the day I sell my collection. I like to keep special pieces for my own enjoyment and therefore do not always have money to buy. Next week I will try to sell one of the pieces from my collection. I showed it to a collector who is interested in purchasing it.

TN—Do you put pieces into auction?

CD—No, I do not.

TN—Why do some dealers prefer to consign to auction?

CD—Unfortunately, collectors from mainland China do not buy enough privately. They prefer to buy at auctions because they find it exciting and feel more comfortable about pieces when they see competition for them in the room. They will then think the pieces are desirable. This can also be the same for collectors in Europe. Sometimes they are more at ease paying a higher price rather than a lower one. I have seen rich Chinese collectors outbidding competitors simply to show their greater wealth and power. Mainland Chinese who have made money very quickly like to buy expensive art and jewellery at auctions so people will know the value of their items. In Europe, families with “old money” are more discreet and buy top quality items for their own appreciation. They do not want their names or prices disclosed. Chinese collectors can get carried away when bidding at auction and pay too much. They may face a problem if they want to sell in the future. Of course, the winner is the consigner. Items sold at auction can fetch much higher prices than if they were offered privately. This has been the case for Chinese imperial works of art and paintings.

TN—So why don’t you follow this trend?

CD—I have always done things my way. I feel that when mainland Chinese collectors become used to buying art then they will start buying more privately. Buying art is still very new for many of them. Right now it is like going to a casino and they enjoy it. They may not always trust their dealer and that is another reason why they prefer to buy at auction. Collectors may give a dealer 5% to 10% commission when buying at auction. However, if the dealer buys from another dealer on the collector’s behalf, the collector may not understand what terms have been agreed.

TN—Why doesn’t the collector come to you directly?

CD—Usually collectors remain in China as they are too busy. They look at photographs. It is very rare that they come to Paris to see us. In some cases collectors ask me to bring pieces to Hong Kong to show them and their advisors. If there is interest I have to do the deal through the advisor who will get a commission.

TN—How much commission do you have to give?

CD—After bargaining it can be 15%. They even ask for more. In fact Chinese advisors get commission from both sides. They get the commission from the collector and from seller. If we do not agree to give such commissions then there is no sale.

TN—How do mainland Chinese advisors find wealthy collectors?

CD—It is just relationships. For example, I know one mainland Chinese collector who lived in the same building as a Chinese art dealer and they became friends. As the collector became very rich so did his art advisor. It is as simple as that, but the advisor had very little art knowledge. The advisor does not offer the collector any guarantee. It is a new market for collectors in China and it needs time to develop.

TN—When and where will you next exhibit?

CD—I will be exhibiting at the 25th Biennale des Antiquaires which will be held at the Grand Palais in Paris from September 15th to 22nd, 2010. After that I will be exhibiting in New York in April 2011.

TN—How about at your gallery in Paris?

CD—Perhaps I would also like to arrange a show in my gallery in February 2011, but it really depends on whether I can find good pieces. Now the prices are so expensive and nobody knows what prices ancient Chinese bronzes will fetch in the future. The next benchmark will be set at Christie’s New York sale of ancient Chinese bronzes belonging to Anthony Hardy. The Sze Yuan Tang Archaic Bronzes from the Anthony Hardy Collection was formed over the last thirty years and I expect a new price level will be established for such objects. Buyers in China still do not know what to look for in Chinese art. They tend to buy an object because it is big and impressive with good provenance. However, there are times when they cannot recognise an exceptional piece. So with my long years of experience in Chinese bronzes I can still buy wonderful examples.

TN—In 1974 why did you decide to study at Tai Ta University, Taipei, Taiwan?

CD—At Tai Ta University I studied jingwen, the earliest known form of Chinese writing as it appeared on oracle bones and tortoise shell in the Shang dynasty from the 15th to 12th century BC. When I studied Chinese language and civilisation at the University of Paris my teacher from China advised me that if I really wanted to properly learn and practice Chinese then I would need to do it in China. At that time there were lots of difficulties entering China and once in the country there were many restrictions moving from one town to another. Therefore my teacher made arrangements for
Ritual *jiu*o wine cup, bronze and a carbonated substance, Shang dynasty, pre-Anyang period, 14th century BC, height 20.2 cm

Ritual *fangjia* vessel, bronze, Shang dynasty, Anyang period, 12th century BC, height 36.3 cm

Archaic *jia* vessel, bronze, Shang dynasty, Anyang period, 14th-12th century BC, height 47.5 cm

Archaic *fanghu* vessel, bronze inlaid with silver, Warring States period, late 5th-early 4th century BC, height 49 cm
three students from my university to go to Taiwan. In Taiwan I met Professor LeFevre who encouraged me to study jiaguwen and oracle bones. In 1976, at the age of twenty-six, my first work *Jiaguwen, Essai Bibliographique et Synthèse des Études* (The Oracle Bone Inscriptions, A Bibliographic Essay and Synthesis of Studies) was published by l’École Française d’Extrême, the prestigious French institute of Asian archaeological research.

TN—What were your ambitions when you returned to France?

CD—After my studies the plan was to pursue a career as a curator at the Musée Guimet or at a research institute in France focusing on Chinese civilisation. I enjoyed looking at the pieces so I was always visiting art galleries and auctions. One day at a French auction house I met Mr Moreau Gobard, a distinguished expert in Far Eastern art and I asked him whether I was the son of Henry Deydier. He said he knew my father, a curator at the museum in Vientiane, Laos. My father was a specialist in Buddhism and Sanskrit, wrote books about Gandharan art and Laos, and at the same time worked for the French army. In fact I was born in Vientiane, but after my father passed away my family returned to France. My mother’s name was Eliane Maisonneuve. She was the daughter of Adrien Maisonneuve, the founder of the famous publishing house “Adrien Maisonneuve”, who published major studies about Asia at the time.

TN—What an interesting story. Now I understand why you are interested in art. So how did you become a dealer?

CD—From September 1978 I worked for Mr Moreau Gobard, a specialist in Vietnamese and Cambodian art. I continued to focus on Chinese art and in 1980 I was named as an expert to the Hôtel Drouot public auction house. That same year L’Office du Livre in Fribourg, Switzerland, published my book *Les Bronzes Chinois* (Chinese Bronzes). It was the first general publication to appear on this subject. The book was also translated into English and German. Mr Gobard said I should visit London and introduced me to Giuseppe Eskenazi. He advised me that if I wanted to learn about Chinese art and to become a serious dealer for Chinese art then I had to live in London where the market is. So in 1983 I took up residence in England. Giuseppe helped me a lot when I moved to London. In 1987 I opened my London gallery called Oriental Bronzes Ltd. In fact the name, which was recommended by a friend of mine, was a mistake as people thought I was selling Persian art. In the French language “Oriental” refers to Middle East, while “Extrême Oriental” means Far East. So we made a mistake with the name and that is why since moving back to France I simply used the name Galerie Christian Deydier.

TN—Why did you close your London gallery in 2005?

CD—There were changes in regulations governing provenance issues for Chinese art. Also when I initially moved to London I planned to stay five to ten years. I actually returned to Paris in 2006 after nineteen years away. My mother was also seriously ill. When I returned to Paris I was very well received by French dealers as I held the position as President of the Syndicat National des Antiquaires. They treated me with a lot of respect.

TN—Was this part of your plan?

CD—Actually, in this business, it is all about luck. You need to have good timing and be at the right place to find good pieces. You also need to meet the right people.

TN—What is more important: luck or timing?

CD—Both! They are related. I think I have a lot of luck. Exceptional pieces came to me and I do not have any explanation for this.

TN—When was your first visit to Hong Kong?

CD—About thirty years ago. I always wondered whether I should have opened a gallery in Hong Kong rather than in London.

TN—That might have been a very good idea. Why didn’t you do it?

CD—Perhaps in those early days I was not confident enough in my knowledge. Today I have the confidence, but do not have anything more to prove. Hong Kong was also far away from my family in France so I was unsure about such a significant move. Anyway I have no regrets and I enjoy my life. I have enough money to buy what I like and I am happy to have my wonderful Chinese art collection at home.

TN—What is your advice to collectors?

CD—if you have knowledge then trust your first instincts. When I make a mistake it is because I do not follow my first feeling. Once you have good knowledge you will also be able to feel something in your heart. However there will always be some people who do not have the “eyes” to judge. If you have the “eyes” you can make improvements to make them stronger. But you must have the “eyes” from the beginning. Some collectors do not understand the qualities of important pieces. We can show them wonderful pieces but instead they buy inferior objects. In other cases they think poor quality pieces are wonderful and I have to advise them not to buy them as they will be very disappointed when they receive the item at home. When they ask me to bid on their behalf for items I do not necessarily agree with then I bid anonymously. I do not want people to see me buying such lots. I would prefer to buy smaller objects of superior quality.

TN—Can you explain to me what Shang dynasty archaic bronzes are regarded the most desirable?

CD—I always liked Shang bronzes. The best archaic Chinese bronzes in terms of the shape and design were created during the Anyang period (1300–1028 BC). Those pieces represent power bestowed from Heaven to the King. According to some scholars the design of those ritual bronzes had religious meaning to ancient Chinese people. The motifs included cicadas, snakes, owls and nocturnal creatures, and some believe there is some connection between death and resurrection.

TN—What is the meaning of the barbaric mask?

CD—We are not sure. It could be a mythical animal which has some form of connection between the dead and the living. During this time people believed that when you die there is a mythical creature, half-bird and half-human, which takes your soul to the afterlife. This all belongs to a very important primitive religion and ancient ancestral worship.

TN—How did bronzes change during the Zhou dynasty?

CD—During the middle Zhou dynasty this religion disappeared and this was reflected in the design of bronzes. The bronzes were made to commemorate a special occasion and had inscriptions. In my opinion Zhou dynasty bronzes are more decorative and do not have the spiritual qualities like those made during the Shang dynasty.

TN—What happened during the Warring States period?

CD—New materials were introduced and inlaid bronzes were created for kings and aristocrats. I love Anyang bronzes the best and appreciate their primitive and technical designs which few people understand. Anyang period represents the birth of Chinese bronzes. During the Han period the importance of lacquer took over. Lacquer as a material was twenty-five times more expensive than bronze.

TN—Which is the best Chinese bronze you have ever sold?

CD—One of the best examples I have handled was a Shang dynasty bronze 200 vessel. I bought it from the Neiraku Museum in Nara. When you look at the design from the front it is a bird, but when you look from the side it is a human face. This is the half-bird half-human person who takes the dead to the afterlife. It is a very important piece and is now in the Musée Cernuschi. It is one of the major bronzes to have come on the market. It cost Euro1.5 million and we sold it four years ago. In the field of Shang dynasty bronzes if you take the top ten then I would have handled five of them. I have sold to all the greatest collectors and museums in the world.

TN—During this trip to Hong Kong have you found any good bronzes?

CD—This time I did not. I only found exceptional fakes. For example I saw a bronze and thought it looked exactly like one I had seen in a museum in China. However when I held it in my hands I could immediately tell it was a fake because the weight was too light. That is the only way to tell. When I checked the design everything was perfect. Then I looked under a magnifying glass and I
Zun vessel, bronze Shang dynasty, 13th–11th century BC, height 27.5 cm. Musée Cernuschi Collection

One of a pair of chariot fixtures cast in the form of a ram, bronze inlaid with gold and silver, Warring States period, 5th–3rd century BC, length 17.8 cm

could not find any deep corrosion. Before I came to Hong Kong I heard about these high quality fakes and I am sure some dealers will make mistakes and buy them. What the fakers do is make a mould from the original bronze. When they make the first casting it is good, but when they use the mould a second time the casting will not be as good. I know one man who makes fake bronzes. Each time he makes two pieces of the same shape. One he would keep for himself and the other he will sell. I have seen his fakes at auctions and galleries. Anyone can make a mistake—that is why you have to pay special attention and be extremely careful. One of my teachers always said if you find an exceptional piece, first think it is fake and try to prove why it is a fake. This is the way to figure out whether the piece is genuine or a fake.

Mirror, bronze, gold and semi-precious stones, early Tang dynasty, 7th century, diameter 31 cm

Ewer, white stoneware and gold, northern China, 10th–11th century, height 19 cm
Seated Buddha, bronze with green patina and traces of gilding, Cambodia, Angkor Wat period, 11th century, height 64.7 cm

Three-colour Tang dynasty sancai horse, height 68 cm, length 76.3 cm

TN—Why would he want to keep one piece for himself?

CD—Maybe one day he would like to show people the fakes he made during his lifetime. A man who makes a fake at this level is very proud and wants to show off.

TN—Where do you buy your important pieces?

CD—My important clients are in Europe. They include museums and private collectors. Now that I am travelling to America I am meeting more American collectors. The strongest Chinese art collectors in Europe come from Belgium and Switzerland.

TN—Where do you sell your important pieces?

CD—I buy them from Hong Kong but you need to have the right connections. I come to Hong Kong every month and I call my suppliers every two days. Sometimes when I come to Hong Kong I have to buy things I do not really want in order to buy the very good objects when they are available. I keep buying all the time.

TN—What do you do with the objects you do not need?

CD—I can give them to smaller dealers to sell or I can give them away as gifts. This makes everyone happy.

TN—At the Paris Biennale in September what will you display?

CD—We will only have very few pieces on display. Only seven pieces will appear in the accompanying catalogue and it will be very high level. This is what I like. I will show three archaic Pre-Anyang and Anyang bronzes, all with provenance. These are pieces I have known for a long time. I will have a group of sancai pottery pieces in three colour and blue coming from a very old French collection. I will have a pair of Warring States ram heads in bronze and inlaid with exceptional silver. We will have one Khmer 11th century bronze seated Buddha which was originally given to my father in the 1950s. I will have an exceptional three-colour glazed Tang horse. This is probably the best example to have ever come on the market. It is the horse from the British Rail sale. We are making a special catalogue just for this horse.

TN—How do you see the development of the Chinese art market in the future?

CD—I feel it will become more and more difficult for European buyers because the Chinese are very active and it is hard to compete against them. They are able to buy at crazy prices. I think this will be the situation for the next five years. After that maybe the Chinese will need to sell their pieces, but may find they bought for too high prices. The level will then have to come down and real collectors should find and follow the advice of specialists. Right now some Chinese buyers are behaving like gamblers. That is my feeling.

TN—Will the prices for Chinese art go higher next year?

CD—For archaic bronzes I feel the prices will double or be even more. The prices have already increased a lot over the last six months. Also they are still inexpensive in comparison with porcelain and jade. Archaic bronzes are rarer, so in general archaic bronzes are very reasonably priced at the moment. Only two bronzes reached over US$7 million in New York. Last year a top Anyang bronze would fetch about US$1.5 million. Now it is starting at US$2 million or more even at Hong Kong dealers. There are more collectors in China buying and that is why the prices are increasing like this.

TN—Over the last two years why did you decide to go to New York to exhibit?

CD—There are important collectors in New York and I thought it was good to go. However with the new protectionism laws in America soon we will be faced with some problems to bring in objects. We cannot continue to offer pieces with provenance because we have sold them. Sometimes it is also hard to provide accurate provenance because there is no photographic evidence or invoices despite it being in a family collection for generations. This is a real problem.

TN—Thank you very much for this enlightening and informative interview. I am sure that Arts of Asia readers will learn and benefit from reading about your personal experiences. We wish you great success during your exhibition at the Paris Biennale.