ASIA WEEK in New York

TUYET NGUYET and ROBIN MARKBREITER

OUR COVERAGE of the many functions and events during the Spring 2008 Asia Week in New York, began with the champagne reception and private exhibition of The Regal Collection and Asian Works of Art at Doyle New York Auctioneers & Appraisers. This was held on Friday March 14th, from 4–6 pm.

Founded in 1962, Doyle New York offers approximately forty sales each year in a variety of categories such as fine art, jewellery, furniture and decorations, attracting a broad base of buyers and consignors from around the world. At the event it was a pleasure to meet Kathleen M. Doyle, Chairman/CEO; Marley Rabenstein, Consultant Appraiser in Asian Works of Art; Andrea Blunck Frost, Senior Vice President, Director of European Furniture and Decorations; and Louis LeB. Webre, Senior Vice President, Marketing and Media. There is a family atmosphere and camaraderie at the company. Ms Doyle feels privileged to be part of a company with a reputation for expertise, integrity and service. Her objectives are to “achieve maximum prices at auction, while coordinating and simplifying the process of appraising and liquidating estate property and private collections”. They are committed to providing expert valuations and personalised services designed to meet the individual needs of clients.

The Regal Collection of Asian Works of Art comprised almost 200 lots, representing over a century of acquisitions by two generations of the Regal family of Pennsylvania—Arthur F. Regal and Florence de Guise Regal, and their son Vernon R. Regal. At the private viewing Marley Rabenstein and Andrea Frost kindly brought out the cover lot, a Chinese famille-rose moulded porcelain vase with five boys clambering over it. Decorated at the shoulder with a ribbon-tied sash, the gilt Qianlong seal mark and period vase sold at Doyle’s March 18th auction for US$361,000.

For the first time Asia Week in New York stretched into two weeks. As a consequence some buyers and collectors from Europe and Asia could not attend the early part. In 2007 The International Asian Art Fair preview was on March 22nd. In 2008 the fair’s benefit preview for Asia Society was 6–9 pm on March 14th. Easter was very early this year, March 21st to 24th, so the dates of the fair were changed to align the event more closely with Sotheby’s and Christie’s Asian art sales in New York (see the Saleroom News reports on pages 134–141). These took place on March 17th to 21st when the major collectors and dealers (especially from China and Hong Kong) were in town.

With the Park Avenue Armory unavailable for the late date change and the number of exhibitors reduced to thirty-one from fifty-four in the previous year, it meant fair organisers Anna and Brian Haughton had to act quickly. They were resourceful in finding the new venue, a Georgian-style building, only three blocks south of the fair’s old home.

We were anxious to attend the benefit preview arriving at 6 pm to be greeted by Asia Society President Vishakha N. Desai and Benefit Chairs Reiko Takahashi Lee and Chong-moon Lee. At first glance the presentation of the fair was rather bewildering as there were three levels—basement, ground floor and first floor—which could be accessed by staircases on both sides of the entrance corridor. Although well staged, some visitors did not want to climb up to the first floor to see displays and others were unaware that there were more exhibitors in the basement. This was a pity.

Many guests dressed beautifully for the occasion and celebrities such as Martha Stewart were spotted in the crowded ballroom. The booths were noticeably smaller and the corridors narrower than at the old Armory. There was no tribal art in this year’s fair and less contemporary art. There were still great things to see, and with fewer booths it was easier to cover the whole fair. Having a different section this year for contemporary art worked well. The fair re-focused on Asian antiquities—the main dealers were of Chinese and Japanese works of art.

In our interview with the Haughtons they said, “The important thing this year was to have the fair to ensure its stability. We only knew about the change of date for Sotheby’s New York sales at the end of September 2007. We were very lucky to have a venue in this location. Next year Easter will be later and Sotheby’s are saying the dates for their sales in 2009 will be the same as in 2008.

“Sometimes it is good to have a change and this venue challenged people to display in a different way. Every venue has its own pros and cons. No venue is the same and you use the best ingredients to make it beautiful. We tried very hard to maintain the quality of the fair and we have to keep up the standard.

“Christian Deydier actually called us up about doing the fair. He is a great addition with wonderful pieces and excellent knowledge. Kaikodo are also top dealers. They do not normally exhibit at art fairs.”

We enjoyed visiting exhibitors’ booths and talking with the owners. Unfortunately we only have room in this coverage to illustrate our photos taken at Erik Thomsen Asian Art, Oi Ling Antiques, Koo New York, Flying Cranes Antiques Ltd, Douglas Dawson Gallery, Tai Gallery/Textile Arts, Olyvia Oriental, M. Sutherland Fine Arts Ltd and Lesley Kehoe Galleries. The feeling was if possible it would be better for the fair to return to the Park Avenue Armory as next year’s venue.

The Haughtons also said, “Our fair is about finding new clients for exhibitors. Dealers who are here are very loyal to the fair’s concept and each other in order to support the art market. Perhaps next year the length of the fair might be one day less. If past exhibitors want to return to the fair we will be happy to welcome them back.”

In the morning of March 15th we were among the first to visit Robyn Turner and Susan Tosk at the Helmsley Carlton House for their second consecutive annual special exhibition at this location. In their inviting and comfortable setting, visitors felt relaxed and took time to view attractive Chinese
The International Asian Art Fair benefit preview. Theow H. Tow, Tuyet Nguyet, Reiko Takahashi Lee, Vishakha N. Desai and Chong-moon Lee

Andrea Blunck Frost and Marley Rabstenek with a Qianlong famille-rose porcelain vase. US$361,000

Christian Deydier, archaic Chinese bronze and works of art expert from Paris, France

Erik and Cornelia Thomsen displayed Japanese screens, ceramics and bamboo baskets

Oi Ling and Philip Smyth, Hong Kong dealers of Chinese antiques

Kaikodo owner Mary Ann Rogers and gallery manager Carol Conover

Jiyoung Koo and Richard Born, Senior Curator at Smart Museum, University of Chicago

Jean Scharfer, Flying Cranes Antiques, museum-quality Japanese Meiji period art

Douglas Dawson, ancient art from Indonesia, Southeast Asia and Japan
and Japanese works of art. At Susan Tosk’s display a beautifully engraved silver sake pot was spotted by Tuyet Nguyet’s daughter-in-law Nancy. A beginner collector, she is wise enough to know that the Japanese art market has finally started to recover, and was delighted to be the proud owner of a finely made Edo period vessel—her first piece of Japanese art. We also enjoyed looking at Robyn Turner’s collectible and attractive Chinese jades and snuff bottles. 

John and Fausta Eskenazi’s annual exhibition of their latest acquisitions was held at Adam Williams Fine Art Ltd. A rare Cambodian limestone figure dating from the Pre-Angkorian period, mid-7th/early 8th century, which probably represents the god Hari Hara, took pride of place in the exhibition, being one of fewer than ten known Prasat Andet style sculptures. It is one of the last in private hands, having been in the same European collection for over twenty years, and selling to an American private collector for a US dollar seven-figure sum. Another American private collector bought a terracotta roundel of Vishnu Garudasamudra made in Bengal, eastern India, during the Gupta period, 5th/6th century.

Among the many special pieces presented at Subhash Kapoor’s Art of the Past 1242 Madison Avenue gallery, most admired was a Gandharan schist with red gesso depicting the story of the Birth of Siddhartha. Readers can compare this Kushan period 2nd-3rd century frieze with an example in the collection of the Sackler Gallery, Washington D.C.

There is no doubt that Edith and Joel Frankel made Korean art better known during Asia Week in New York by showing the main portion of the Julian and Vance Hall Collection of Korean Art. This collection was assembled while the Hall’s were serving in Seoul, Korea for the US State Department, from 1958 through 1967. Visitors at the Frankel’s opening were attracted by celadons, white wares and a 13th century Mebyong scroll design vase.

Eskenazi Ltd returned to New York for their twelfth yearly exhibition held at PaceWildenstein. This time the show was “not thematic nor chronologically compact”. Giuseppe Eskenazi decided to “concentrate on those categories which may now be loosely described as works of art” as well as the long tradition of Chinese Buddhist sculpture, expressed in a variety of materials”. We liked the Tang period glazed earthware rabbit and Han period three gilt-bronze bear supports, as well as the early to mid-18th century jade rhyton or pouring vessel featured on the cover of the exhibition catalogue.

It has been four years since Berwald Oriental Art opened in New York on the 19th floor at 5 East 57th Street between Madison Avenue and 5th Avenue, which is regarded as one of the best locations in town. The gallery space recently doubled when the company took a ten year lease on the 20th floor of the building. The renovated two levels, connected by a grand internal staircase and accessible by elevator, were completed just in time for Asia Week visitors to enjoy. The improved and enlarged area permits spacious displays of large pieces.

John Berwald travels around the world to find good pieces and says, “It is incredibly hard to get things from China. The
market for Chinese art is very strong and I also feel the Beijing International Chinese Antiques Fair that took place at the end of last year is a big leap forward for China.” We asked John to explain the difference between buying art from dealers and auction houses. He had the following interesting comments:

“When you buy from a dealer one hopes the collector will build a personal relationship for ten to twenty years. The dealer then knows the collection and can work more closely to help build it. Auction houses have helped to promote the art market. They attract mainland buyers who at the moment prefer to buy from them. I feel the two areas are separate and operate in different ways. There is no competition and each area has different pressures.

“At auction the specialists have to work very hard to collect material, produce a catalogue and sell on a given day. I think Nicolas Chow at Sotheby’s selects material carefully. He has a concern for his auctions and wants to have good sales rates. He is very good and does not overly promote ordinary things. The auction houses and dealers world combine but they are still very separate. Buying from both groups is a different experience.

“I think we are all very lucky as the Chinese art business is amazing. Chinese art is globally based. It is globally in demand. There are buyers from all over the world and the future looks very good. I believe there will be more Chinese collectors in the future. The mainland Chinese dealers will become very knowledgeable and can become the top dealers in the world. They study hard and view carefully. It is a really good market at the moment and if a very rare piece becomes available it will sell for a very high price.”

China 2000 Fine Art, also located in the same building, had an exhibition of painting and calligraphy by important 20th century Chinese artists, fine Chinese furniture and scholar objects. We found the group of scholar stones particularly relevant as Sotheby’s Hong Kong was having a special sale of twenty-seven scholar stones on April 11th, 2008. China 2000 was also thrilled to invite Priestley and Ferraro back this year for Asia Week with their collection of early Chinese ceramics and sculptures. Arriving at the same time while we were visiting the owners Leon and Karen Wender, were Dr David A. Cofrin accompanied by Arts of Asia contributor Jason Steuber and Phyllis Delaney from the University of Florida’s Harn Museum of Art.

It took serious visitors at least one full day to view in detail the many exhibitions in the Fuller Building. Carlton Rochell Asian Art did not disappoint their clients, staging another intriguing exhibition. We went back a couple of times to study the fine Indian and Khmer art. The serenity of the Khmer late 12th/13th century, Bayon style sandstone head was most appealing, however we failed to buy it as the price was above our budget. We also liked the Indian 9th century sandstone Uma-Mahesvara illustrated on the cover of Carlton’s catalogue.

Visitors to “Treasures of Ancient Chinese Culture” at Gisèle Croës were treated to a presentation of some sixty pieces. A renowned expert on Chinese bronzes, Gisèle showed a remarkable gilt bronze and silver tall stand, pre-
Richard Littleton at Nicholas Pitcher’s booth of Oriental art

Visitor Alexandra Grais of Sloans & Kenyon Auctioneers

S. Marchant & Son’s large and elegant booth of Chinese ceramics and works of art near the entrance

Ian Alsop lectured on Newar sculpture

S. Marchant & Son at the New York Arts of Pacific Asia Show. Stuart, Natalie and Richard Marchant

Richard Littleton at Nicholas Pitcher’s booth of Oriental art

S. Marchant & Son’s large and elegant booth of Chinese ceramics and works of art near the entrance

sumably for an incense burner, late Warring States to Han period. Among the wonderful surprises were a white glazed stoneware ewer and a similarly glazed container in the form of a foreigner. Both had Oxford thermoluminescence tests dated Northern Qi to early Sui.

The J.J. Lally and Co. exhibition featured exquisite pieces from “Two Thousand Years of Chinese Sculpture”. At the gallery we were captivated by the beauty of a pair of large painted pottery court ladies and a gilt bronze figure of Bodhisattva Guanyin, both from the Tang dynasty, as well as a Song dynasty sandstone head of a Buddhist disciple. It is always informative to receive James Lally’s opinion on the current status of the Chinese art market and he kindly gave us his thoughts as follows:

“There is a growing interest in Asian art, but supply is dwindling so it is an increasing challenge to find good things. As a result good pieces have reached very high prices. There are occasions at auctions where prices escalate because people compete for them. For example gilt-bronzes in China have reached a new high. More and more there are good pieces going to China where the art market is expanding exponentially.

“Museums and collectors in America find it harder to compete with the Chinese bidders at auction in New York. The Chinese are more decisive buyers and are becoming more sophisticated collectors. In some ways Chinese collectors differ from Western collectors and may have new perspectives. For example they appreciate Chinese paintings and calligraphy which they regard as the backbone of Chinese art collecting.

“Our lament is to find good pieces and we have to try our best. In the previous two years during Asia Week we exhibited pieces from private collections. The objects for this current exhibition and catalogue took ten years to put together.”

Nancy Wiener has been an Asian art dealer since the early 1980s. She was congratulated by many visitors for staging a very important exhibition of museum quality antiques from India, the Himalayas and Southeast Asia at Leo Kaplan Modern in the Fuller Building. Two very rare pieces were a Vietnamese, Cham period (9th century), silver Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara; and a Khmer, Angkor Borei (late 6th century–early 7th century), bronze with green patina standing Buddha.

Ghangkhar Ah-Nhey Asian Art staged an enjoyable exhibition at the Fuller Building for the first time. It attracted a good number of visitors interested in buying Tibetan and Himalayan art, such as bronzes, textiles, furniture, carpets and thangkas. Their exhibition at Antiquorum Auctioneers’ room was one of the largest spaces in the Fuller Building.

On Sunday March 16th, taking a break from visiting galleries, we attended a fascinating talk on “Newar Sculpture of the Kathmandu Valley” by Himalayan art expert Ian Alsop at the Rubin Museum of Art. The talk was superb and we were especially interested to hear about Ian’s visits with living bronze makers, the tools they used and the lost-wax technique employed in their skilful commissions. Ian had taken excellent photos of the artists at work in their studios. After the lecture he answered intelligent questions from the enthusiastic audience.

We looked forward to attending the 17th annual New York Arts of Pacific Asia Show at Gramercy Park Armory on Lexington Avenue at 26th Street. The US$100 ticket for the 6–10 pm opening preview on Thursday March 20th included wine and hors d’oeuvres, illustrated catalogue and repeat admission. We arrived half an hour early and by 6 pm the queue went outside the building and around the corner of the street.

Organisers Bill Caskey and Elizabeth Lees weeded out smaller booths of lesser quality, reducing the number from eighty-five last year to seventy-five. By carefully selecting dealers and having larger booths, the show looked better. According to the organisers “there were over one thousand people at the preview and more qualified buying”. Visitors were grateful to see established dealers S. Marchant & Son, Robert Hall, Nicholas Grindley and Jan Van Beers who moved from the uptown fair. Knapton Rasti Asian Art and Imperial Oriental Art returned with big booths.

Robyn Buntin from Honolulu said, “Everything was per-
Suneet and Ramesh Kapoor in front of a large repoussé seated Buddha from Tibet

Christopher Knapton and Nader Rasti had a good selection of Chinese works of art and jades

Detail of the cover for the show catalogue

Jason Steuber, Curator of Asian Art, Harn Museum of Art; renowned embroiderer Dr Young Yang Chung; Tuyet Nguyet and Phyllis Delaney, Director of Development, Harn Museum of Art

Tobias and Peter Hardt, 8th to 18th century objects from Tibet, Nepal, Burma, Thailand and India

Claire and Michael Chu, Chinese works of art and snuff bottles specialists

Georgia Chrischilles, founder of the Brussels Oriental Art Fair, offered Indian sculpture and gold jewellery

Cédric Curien from Marseille exhibited Chinese scholar’s objects

Paola and Renzo Freschi and Daniela Bellini with sculpture of Gandhara, India and Southeast Asia

Kazuo Funaguchi from Tokyo displayed Vietnamese ceramics and Cham stone

Judy and Robyn Buntin from Honolulu with Japanese painting and Chinese works of art

Kazuo Kuwabara, dealer in Japanese antiques and contemporary works of art
fect and we are very happy. We sold both Chinese and Japanese pieces. The most numerous buyers were Chinese collectors. There is a frenzy for Chinese art that perhaps will level off. American collectors are buying and we sold jade to an American collector. I feel Indian art will increase in value in the future. The fair is spacious, comfortable and the quality level has improved. We have been exhibiting at this show for fourteen years and have always done well in New York. In my opinion the single greatest factor for its success is the population of New York City.”

David Cole of Orientations Gallery had the following to say, “It had by far the largest attendance ever on Friday and Saturday. This event has been established as the must-see fair for Asian antiques.”

In our interview with Bill Caskey and Elizabeth Lees they said, “We feel honoured and privileged that so many good dealers have approached us to participate. We have been organising art shows for a long time, since 1985 in Los Angeles. Each year has been a learning process. Our first Asian art show in New York took place in October 1995, a year ahead of the uptown fair. Next year we are thinking of adding an extra set up date. This year we had lots of experts from museums, scholars and restorers on the vetting committee. We have raised the quality of this show.

“We are very happy to remain at this venue. The neighborhood is improving and there are many nice areas and restaurants nearby. The size of the fair is 25,000 square feet. We have more open areas and interesting walk through spaces at some larger booths giving it a more spacious feel. We plan to keep the same mix of exhibitors. We have some elements of contemporary art, but we are an antique Asian show.

“We have always asked for references from dealers. The difference now is we are getting more enquiries from dealers who are established. It is a good position to be in. We have had a lot of enquiries from top dealers who want to participate next year. We want to make gradual changes.

“Our Friday and Saturday attendance was the best we ever had. Our gate was up 25–30% on those two days. People who have gone out of town may return on Sunday night and hopefully will return to the fair on Monday morning. Knapton and Rasti have sold very well and are ecstatic. Nicolas Grindle has also sold furniture.

“Next year we expect to improve in the same way as before. After the reviews of this show appear we hope more collectors will come to see for themselves. We will keep to approximately seventy-two good dealers and are confident more people will want to visit the show.”

It is important to note that during Asia Week in New York the US economy was widely acknowledged to be in the early stages of recession. This has hurt the economies of Europe, Japan, and even China and Hong Kong. It was evident that some American, European and Asian collectors invested in the turbulent global stock market hesitated to buy expensive works of art. Despite good attendance at both Asian art fairs the level of buying looked less than the previous year. However auction houses, in particular Christie’s, had some wonderful results in sales for Chinese ceramics, works of art and snuff bottles, Japanese sculpture, and Indian and Southeast Asian art.