INTRODUCTION

Chinese Art Now at the Freer and Sackler

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THIS SERIES OF ARTICLES on early Chinese art at the Freer Gallery of Art is inspired by the complete reinstallation of its Chinese collections which is currently underway.\(^1\) The first new galleries—dedicated to ancient China—are now open and feature archaic jades and early bronzes, great strengths of the Freer collection.\(^1\) Research and preparations are well underway for other Chinese galleries. Opening over the next eighteen months, these additional spaces will focus on early Buddhist sculpture, secular objects resulting from the exchange of styles across Asia from the 6th to the 8th centuries, and later works that reflect the tastes of the literati as well as the accomplishments of imperial patrons and workshops of the Song through the Qing dynasties (960–1911).

Such a comprehensive approach to planning the public presentation of Chinese art in the Freer has happened only twice before: first when the museum opened in 1923; and second when the museum reopened in 1993 after extensive renovations.\(^2\) Preparations for this third undertaking have reached beyond object research to involve studies of the original design of the Freer Gallery and the content of its rooms, institutional traditions, and interpretive strategies past, present and future. Throughout, work has been guided by the twin principles of aesthetic inspiration and academic research, the dual interests of the gallery’s founder, Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919). When complete, the reinstallation will feature six galleries, each dedicated to a subject well-represented by Freer holdings and a classic topic in the history of Chinese art. With an emphasis on masterworks and on creating harmony between the building and the art, the Freer installation stresses the emotive potential of a gallery visit.

This project is being framed in the broadest possible terms and includes new thoughts on the Freer’s relation to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, the second Smithsonian Institution museum dedicated to Asian art and the Freer’s “next door neighbour”. The two galleries are administered and curated by a shared staff.\(^3\) When it opened in September 1987, the Sackler’s permanent collection was dominated by early Chinese and ancient Near Eastern objects, areas of existing strength in the Freer. Although the Sackler’s collection has grown and diversified very quickly over the twenty-four years since it opened, the potential for duplicative displays in the area of Chinese art remains a concern. Thus, at least for Chinese art, new principles have been defined for the types of permanent collection installations and special exhibitions most appropriate for the Sackler. In some instances, these displays will complement the presentation of the collection strengths in the Freer and in other cases they will supplement them by addressing subjects that are not well represented in the Freer. Approached in this way, the two museums will function more meaningfully as a pair and allow visitors to experience the breadth and depth of Chinese art in different ways.

A recent example of a Sackler presentation that complements the Freer is “Echoes of the Past: The Buddhist Cave Temples of Xiangtangshan”, a special exhibition co-organised by the Sackler and the Smart Museum of the Univer-
Installation view showing two cases in the Freer's new archaic jade gallery which addresses the late Neolithic Liangzhu culture and illustrates its influence on other Neolithic and Bronze Age societies.

The reinstallation of the Chinese collection developed first as an initiative of the Board of Trustees of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Galleries, and their advice and suggestions throughout the planning process have been extremely helpful. Special thanks must be given to the sponsors of the project including: John and Julia Curtis, Peggy and Richard M. Danziger, Mr and Mrs Michael Feng, Mr and Mrs Hart Fessenden, and Jane and Leopold Swergold. Additional support was provided by Dr Susan Beningson, the Sylvia and Alexander Hassan Family Foundation, Inc., H. Christopher Luce and Tina Liu, Diane H. Schafer and Dr Jeffrey A. Stein, and Miss Elizabeth C. Ridout.

To mark the reopening of the Freer Gallery of Art in 1993, Thomas Lawton and Linda Merrill co-authored Freer: A Legacy of Art (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution). This publication, an engaging and thorough survey of the history of the gallery beginning with its founder, Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919), is an invaluable resource for any research into the institution and its collections.

Although they share a staff, the two galleries operate under different founding agreements and regulations. According to the wishes of the Freer’s founder, for example, that museum can neither borrow nor lend works of art for display making loan exhibitions in the Freer impossible; it recently became possible, however, to show Freer works for limited periods of time in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, which is permitted to present its collection with loans from other owners. The catalogue was made possible by Fred Eychaner and Tommy Yang Guo, with additional support from Furthermore: a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund.
sity of Chicago (2). This monographic show was inspired by efforts to reconstruct an important Northern Qi (550–577) Buddhist cave site that was severely damaged in the early 20th century when scores of figures and fragments were removed to sell on the international art market. Based upon research and innovative uses of three-dimensional scanning technology, guest curator Katherine Tsiang of the University of Chicago’s Center for the Art of East Asia was able to identify the original location of over one hundred sculptures now housed in museums worldwide. In the Sackler presentation, thirteen important pieces in the Freer collection were combined with fifteen additions on loan from other museums in the United States and the United Kingdom to illustrate the original context of the images thus clarifying their intended meaning. In the coming months, the Freer Xiangtangshan sculptures will return to the Freer Gallery for reinstallation in its new Chinese Buddhist display where they will provide the centrepiece in a show dedicated to stylistic comparisons with earlier and later examples of devotional sculpture.

Interpretive approaches for the new Freer installation have been influenced by the growing utility of digitally-based learning and the ability to reach “virtual visitors” who may only know a museum through its website. Among other things, the web offers a vehicle for instantaneously sharing new research on the collections. A recent achievement in this area is the museum’s “Song and Yuan Dynasty Painting and Calligraphy” bilingual resource, which captures and makes available almost one century of research on eighty-five works in the Freer’s collection including many of the most important examples outside China. Spanning the 10th through the 14th centuries, the works illustrate a range of themes, compositions, and stylistic conventions and feature more than ninety examples of Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) calligraphy in the form of attached frontispieces, inscriptions and colophons. Many of these works have assumed near-iconic status in the study of Chinese brushwork. Despite their exceptional quality, however, most are being thoroughly published for the first time on the website. This pioneering project enables internet users around the globe to study these artworks in their entirety and, through the comprehensive documentation of all associated texts and accessories, gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for one of the world’s great artistic traditions. Since these works are not regularly on view and research relating to them extends far beyond what might be offered in a gallery setting, the growing web resource provides incomparable access to the collection.

Developing from new research and new thoughts linked to the Freer reinstallation, the articles in this issue of Arts of Asia differ from those published in 2006, which celebrated the centennial of Charles Lang Freer’s initial gift of his collections to the American people. Now, five years later, the following four essays range from issues related to collection-building—a chronicle of Charles Freer’s 1910–1911 trip to China and the later importance of C.T. Loo (Loo Ching-Tsai, 1880–1957) as a primary source for gallery purchases in the 1920s and 1930s—to historical issues of display and the results of current scientific research on one of the gallery’s most famous masterworks. Taken together, these reports and commentaries reveal once again the radical notions that surrounded the opening of the gallery in 1923 and illustrate how those founding ideas continue to inspire and shape new directions for the future.

4See Katherine R. Tsiang, Richard Born, and J. Keith Wilson, eds, Echoes of the Past: The Buddhist Cave Temples of Xiangtangshan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2010. Major funding for the exhibition was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Leon Levy Foundation, the Smart Family Foundation, and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation. Additional support for the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery presentation was provided by the Cotsen Foundation for Academic Research.

5The website can be found at http://www.asia.si.edu/SongYuan/default.asp. This project was made possible by generous financial assistance from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

Installation view of the Sackler presentation of “Echoes of the Past” showing three Northern Qi (550–577) bodhisattvas that originally occupied spaces on the central altar in Cave 2 at southern Xiangtangshan. The figure at the left is in the Freer collection (F1968.45) while the two at the right are on loan from the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (C150 and C113)