“If, during my long career, I have met with a certain commercial success, I must say that what I feel most proud of is my collection of Japanese and Chinese works of art…” Alfred Baur

NOTHING SEEMED to incline Alfred Baur (1865–1951) to become a renowned collector of Chinese and Japanese arts. Born in 1865 in the village of Andelfingen, north-east of Zurich (Switzerland), close to the German and Austrian borders, he studied at the school of industrial sciences in Winterthur. On completing his studies, he joined the company Volkart Frères and after an initial training period in Manchester, he was sent to its trading post in Colombo (Ceylon) when he was just nineteen years of age. After working for eleven years at Volkart’s, Baur moved to the Marinitsch company where he joined the tea production and export division. At the same time, he bought a plot of land in Palugasweva, on the west side of the island, and turned it into a coconut plantation where he experimented with a mix of organic fertiliser of his own concoction. As his plantation’s reputation grew, he decided, in 1897, to found his own company, which he named “A. Baur, The Ceylon Manure Works” and to market his fertiliser to help modernise the country’s agriculture. From a small stall in the trading district of the local town, his business was to expand into a thriving industrial production plant. In 1906, having spent twenty-two years of his life in Ceylon, Alfred Baur returned to Switzerland and settled in Geneva, his wife’s home city. Through the mediation of managers, he continued to direct, develop and diversify his businesses, which he visited regularly. Some years later, in 1915, he purchased a property of twenty-eight hectares a few kilometres from Geneva where he built a lavish home (1) that would house his collections of Japanese and Chinese art until his museum opened in 1964.

From the end of 1906, like many art lovers of his time, Baur took an interest in Japanese art by buying such fashionable “curios” as netsuke, sword guards and lacquer boxes. Objects of this nature reflected the taste of the period, which was inspired by the large World Exhibitions and the passion for Japonism. These curios were an indication of the direction his collection was to take. His early purchases included snuff bottles, which he would continue to buy for over thirty years.¹ A primary criterion in his

¹For details on the collection, see the article by Estelle Niklès van Osselet in this issue.
selection of objects was excellence, whatever the material used, and he therefore preferred works which displayed technical and aesthetic perfection. A second criterion was the size of the piece, which he preferred small so it could more easily be enjoyed at home. During the forty-five years of his life as a collector, Alfred Baur refined his taste through the expert advice of his antique dealers, extensive reading, and visits to museums and private collections in Europe. He made his first purchases from dealers in Geneva, Basle, London, Paris, Hamburg and Berlin. Between 1906 and 1924, he had continuous dealings with Thomas Bates Blow (1854–1940), a British expert and collector then living in Japan and who was well known in England among collectors of Japanese art. Blow made purchases on Alfred Baur’s behalf in both Japan and England, but also ordered pieces in Japan to be specially made for him. From 1909, Baur succumbed to the fashion for Japanese prints and, through Blow’s mediation, bought several triptychs by Utamaro, Eizan, Eishi as well as a landscape by Hiroshige. In 1920, Blow suggested that Baur create a “small and representative collection” of prints to be conserved “in a portfolio” and consequently sold him a series of 250 prints.

Blow was not only a dealer but also an advisor who visited Baur in Geneva at regular intervals and supplied him with books on Japanese art and catalogues from private collections. However, with the exception of the prints, little remains in the Baur Collection of the acquisitions made through this particular dealer as Alfred Baur became more exacting in his choices and decided, in 1928, to part with a great many of them. The collector also had dealings with the Swiss expert Gustave Loup, based in Tianjin, and the pair was to remain close. In 1923, Alfred and Eugénie decided to take a long trip in Asia, passing through India, China, Korea and Japan. During a Chinese cruise lasting four months on board the vessel Kamo-maru, the couple visited Hong Kong, Canton, Shanghai and Peking (2). For their stay in Japan, Thomas Blow had given the Baur a letter of introduction to an art dealer he knew well named Tomita Kumazaku (1872–1953), who resided in Kyoto. Tomita offered his services to the Baur as a guide and on their arrival in April 1924 took them on a tour of Kyoto, Kobe, Amanohashidate, Hakone, Nikko and Matsushima. This meeting with Tomita marked the start of a new chapter in the formation of Alfred Baur’s collections.

Tomita Kumazaku’s sure, refined taste, as well as his understanding of Baur’s exacting requirements, meant that an affinity was quickly established between the two men. When he arrived in Vancouver, Baur wrote to Tomita to thank him for his assistance and request new acquisitions for his collections. Tomita replied on 20th June in his own, sometimes rather broken, English, saying: “It is very kind of you to trusting me to continue the purchase some outstanding pieces for your collection, I will try my best to meet your confidence”. This letter marked the start of a partnership based on trust and a correspondence that was to last more than twenty-five years. While on a trip to London, Tomita visited Baur in Geneva in October 1924 bringing with him objects “never shown to anybody abroad”. He returned to Switzerland two months later with netsuke, lacquerware and sword fittings, and was to make regular stays in the city to catalogue Alfred Baur’s collections.

During his visit to Japan, Baur had bought more than seven hundred objects, dispatched in forty postal parcels and four chests shipped by boat. All of these items belonged to the same fields which he had already acquired through Thomas Blow: sword fittings, lacquerware, netsuke, Satsuma ware and cloisonné. The trip further stimulated the collector’s passion for Japanese art, and Tomita encouraged him to select only the best. Before making a purchase from Western dealers, Baur would generally consult Tomita, who often warned against European experts “who have a poor knowledge of Eastern art”. Tomita gradually became Baur’s almost exclusive advisor and was to have a guiding say in most of the objects in the collections. Alfred Baur was fascinated by Japanese art but he never made an attempt to collect it systematically, and was not overly concerned by the criterion of antiquity. He held on to the objects that most appealed to him and also took an interest in contemporary artists, from whom he bought and ordered pieces: most of the Japanese works in the museum date from between the mid-18th and early 20th century. It was only in 1933 that Baur began to attempt to complete his set of prints, when he wrote to Tomita, “I have the feeling that my Japanese collection would not be complete if it did not include Japanese prints. Thus your collection of two hundred triptychs provides me with the opportunity to satisfy this wish.” From Tomita’s personal collection, he was also to buy more than one hundred Buddhist altar cloths known as ko-uchishiki. One of Baur’s very last Japanese acquisitions was a group of tobacco pouches with pipes, bought from a Swiss collector in the spring of 1935.  

Alfred Baur seems to have broached Chinese art through snuff bottles and jades, which fascinated him. In his letters to Tomita between 1924 and 1928, however, he showed no particular interest in Chinese art outside of these two categories. But in 1928, when he sold off some of the pieces he had bought from Thomas Blow, his outlook changed. He became drawn to Chinese ceramics and began to build a new collection that was to become his primary interest. This project was probably hatched around July 10th, 1928, during one of Tomita’s brief stays in Geneva. Through his

---

2 For information on the antiques dealer Gustave Loup, see the article by Estelle Niklés van Osselt in this issue.
3 For details on the Japanese collection, see the article by Helen Loveday in this issue.
3 Jun ware jar
Song dynasty, 11th–12th century
Height 11.6 cm

5 Jun ware bowl
Jin or Yuan dynasty, 12th–13th century
Diameter 12 cm

4 Peach-bloom vases
Mark and reign of Kangxi, circa 1710–1722
former employment at Yamanaka & Co. in London, Tomita had detailed knowledge of the famous British collections and had seen a large number of pieces. On his return to Japan, he had also been given access to Japanese collections which had been carefully handed down from generation to generation. To judge from their correspondence, it seems that during his Geneva stay, Tomita suggested that Baur purchase an exceptional example of Chinese ceramics, a spotted celadon vase that was then in his shop. Baur accepted with great interest but, due to a mistake made by one of the employees, the piece was actually sold to a famous British collector, Sir Percival David, another of Tomita’s customers.

In a letter dated July 26th, 1928, the Japanese dealer offered to bring “a very few fine china” to Geneva from London on his next visit on 17th August and mentioned for the first time “your proposed China collection”. In reply to a letter written on 3rd August, Baur replied, “I shall be greatly interested in being initiated into this branch of miniature pottery”. And on 9th August, Tomita explained his thinking: “At this moment, I made up my mind that the new proposed collection of Chinese ought to be strictly kept only to very ‘unique pieces’ such as secured as above (the spotted celadon vase). Of course in this case there would be rather few pieces to be collected...” On 12th August, Baur replied: “I am very pleased that a good start has been made in this new branch of collecting ‘China’. As regards future acquisitions I agree with you that we should confine ourselves to acquire only ‘unique pieces’ instead of starting a collection which is common to so many others in this line. I consider your advice a very good one and am sure that I shall have much more satisfaction with a collection consisting of outstanding quality only. It is therefore unnecessary that you should bring with you representative pieces of ordinary quality.” On 13th August, he reasserted his decision with a telegram: “Agree buying only finest china”.

In less than a month, Alfred Baur had decided on the direction his new collection would take. He would “buy only outstanding quality as for the Japanese things” and, as he was often to repeat in his letters, “go in only for perfect pieces, which leave no regret afterwards”, adding that “The quality and the artistic value” would be his “only proper standard for valuing and acquiring pieces of art”. In November 1928, he decided to limit his acquisitions to what he called “Chinese porcelain-miniature pieces”, “to avoid to have too large pieces, which are unwieldy and difficult to handle or to place in show cases”. He fixed the maximum size to be 12 inches (30.5 cm), though he would reconsider in the case of “interesting pieces in shape”, or “the special quality of an article which warrants an exception being made”, “or to some extent break the monotony”. Nonetheless, he would at times be less demanding when pieces of “tip top quality” were difficult to come by in order to complete certain categories: “it will not do to become plus royal que le roi”, he stated. With the assistance and advice of his Japanese expert, Alfred Baur strove to create an ensemble of “representative pieces of all periods”, 756 in all, that illustrated “the best traditions of Chinese ceramic art”.

In December 1928, the collector received seven ceramics from Japan, among which were a Junyao bowl and a “peach-bloom” water dropper, two typologies which he would continue to search for thereafter (3). The Baur Collection now owns twenty-one peach-bloom porcelains, including the series of eight prescribed forms for the scholar’s table: the Guanyin vase, the water pot, the box for seal vermilion, the brush washer, the water coupe, the “three string” vase, the vase with a green dragon, and the vase with a moulded lotus-petal border (4). A shipment in January 1929 comprised eleven ceramics, including a pair of Junyao bowls (5) and a small tobi-seiji celadon dish (6). The rest of these first two batches were made up of Qing porcelains, both monochrome and decorated with enameled. The collection’s style was already taking shape and Tomita would continue to search for further pieces in Europe, China (Shanghai and Peking) and Japan, where he followed the auctions that were selling off the property of the former daimyos and other great collectors. Alfred Baur quickly came to value the elegance and simplicity of monochrome works, preferring them to the decorated pieces “which appeal more to the ordinary European taste”. He was fascinated by their harmony of form and colour, particularly by their variety and delicacy.

The monochromes of the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties are represented by a set of superb pieces, including some fine examples of Ding ware that Baur especially liked (7), Guan and Ge wares (8), Northern and Southern green ware (9, 10), as well as black-glazed ware from North (11) and South China with the so-called “oil spot” and “hare’s fur” effect, one of which is a bowl from the collection belonging to Count Sakai (12). Both incised and moulded examples of the bluish qingbai porcelains from Jingdezhen are represented, as well as various styles of Ming dynasty (1368–1644) ceramics. However, it seems that Baur, who often exhortied his faithful Japanese expert to avoid overly decorated pieces, was not attracted to ornate works even though he appreciated their extraordinary technical skill (13). Nevertheless, his series of polychrome porcelains is of exceptional quality and the choice of pieces remarkable, as can be seen, for example, in the beautiful wucai (14) and the rare set of bowls, dishes and ewers in kinsaikai style that reflect the Japanese taste of Tomita Kumasaku (15). As John Ayers has written, the different types of imperial ceramics from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) represent an exercise in taste that was remarkably ahead of its time. By focusing on Qing imperial monochrome-glazed wares, Alfred Baur enhanced his collection with a prestigious and, for a European collector, unique ensemble. From Langyao copper red (16), peach-bloom pink, and purple through the whole spectrum of blues (17) and greens (18) to “iron rust” and “mirror black”, the variety of colours and tones obtained by the Chinese potter for high-fired temperature glazes are all present in the Baur Collection. The low-fired radiant tones such as yellow (19), coral red, pink, apple or lime green, translucent or opaque pastel turquoise are also well represented.

Towards the end of his life, Alfred Baur no longer considered his collections only a source of personal pleasure but as a legacy for future generations. He was encouraged in this assessment by the fact that he had already lent three of his treasures to the International Exhibition of Chinese Art at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1935–1936 (one of which was the tobi-seiji celadon dish), a series of Japanese triptych prints to the Art Museum in Zurich in 1936, and his best Chinese porcelains and most of his jades
6 Longquan brown-spotted celadon dish
Yuan dynasty, 13th–14th century
Diameter 16 cm

7 Ding ware bowl
Song dynasty, 11th–12th century
Diameter 19.5 cm

8 Guan or Ge-type dish
Southern Song dynasty, 13th century
Height 10.2 cm

9 Yaozhou ware ewer
Song dynasty, 11th–12th century
Height 25.2 cm
10  Longquan celadon zun vase  
Song or Yuan dynasty, 13th–14th century  
Height 18.5 cm

12  Jian ware tea bowl with iridescent markings  
Song dynasty, 12th–13th century  
Diameter 12.5 cm

13  Blue and white guan jar  
Ming dynasty, reign of Yongle, early 15th century  
Height 22 cm

11  Black-glazed dish with rust markings  
Song or Jin dynasty, 12th–13th century  
Diameter 22 cm
14 **Wucai bottle with “garlic head” mouth**
Mark and reign of Wanli (1573–1619)
Height 46.6 cm

15 **Kinrande-style ewer with aubergine glaze**
Mid-16th century
Height 30.1 cm

16 **Sang de boeuf bottle**
Reign of Kangxi (1662–1722)
Height 41 cm
17  Gourd vase with Guan-type glaze  
Mark and reign of Yongzheng  
(1723–1735)  
Height 20.1 cm

18  Celadon vase with birthday greetings  
Mark and reign of Qianlong  
(1736–1795)  
Height 42.6 cm

19  Yellow-glazed lotus dish  
Mark and reign of Yongzheng  
(1723–1735)  
Diameter 29.2 cm
to the reopening of the Musée Ariana in Geneva in 1938. Concerned about the future of his collections, and wishing to make them available to all art lovers, Baur began in the 1940s to look for a suitable building in which they could be shown to the public in a manner which yet retained the intimate feeling of a living space. Considering the negotiations he had undertaken with the City of Geneva to be taking too long, he bought a town house (20) in the Trançées district, dating to the beginning of the 20th century, where he could create a museum in which visitors “will not have the impression of a museum, but that of a Wohnhaus (private house), where all the artwares can be examined at leisure”. He thus set up the bases of the first Swiss museum dedicated to Far Eastern cultures, one in which he hoped that both beauty and contemplation could be enjoyed in full.

He was also determined that his collection should be displayed in an intelligent and aesthetic manner. It was his conviction that objects can be the means of coming into contact with and learning about people and places which lie beyond our usual field of experience. To perpetuate his vision, he set up three separate institutions: in Colombo, the company A. Baur & Co. Ltd, which continued to grow and represent the interests of Swiss businesses, and in Geneva, the Fondation Alfred et Eugénie Baur, which contributes large sums to cultural and charitable institutions, as well as the Fondation Alfred et Eugénie Baur-Duret (Collections). He also understood that publications are essential to the dissemination of information about a collection and so he included a requirement to this effect in the foundation’s statutes. Even before the Baur Collections were opened on October 9th, 1964, the curators had already begun work on the first volumes of the series of catalogues which were to cause a sensation in the art world, to the extent that the Daily Telegraph in England remarked that “The Catalogues of the Baur Collection have in a few years, become legendary among students of oriental art and collectors”. In its presentations and exhibitions, the Baur Foundation continues to respect the mandate of its founder to promote the arts of Asia.

The creation of a museum to house the Baur Collections required extensive architectural refurbishment followed by several enlargement and renovation projects. Furnishing a place where “objects might be seen in the same way a collection can be seen in its collector’s home” was no easy task. The transformation of the house was entrusted to a team of architects from Geneva, Tréand father and son, and to an art historian and interior decorator from Basle named Christoph Bernoulli. Once the general layout had been finalised, the decision was taken to fit out the spaces like private drawing rooms. Everything in the interior that smacked overly of ornamentation was removed and replaced by simple lines. This logic also dictated that a series of purely functional stand-alone display cabinets placed in the rooms was not acceptable. They had to be incorporated as much as possible into the framework of the building and rendered inconspicuous so that maximum attention would be focused on the works. The presentation had to be attractive but not distracting. Each floor was given its own style: for the Chinese works, cases in oxidised metal on the ground floor (21) and, on the first floor, in mahogany, similar to the display in Alfred Baur’s villa (22); and for the Japanese Collection on the second floor, in white pine. Louis XVI panelling was fitted in the former library that today holds the Chinese jades (23). The miniature garden was laid out anew in simple style, and the atmosphere in the house was given a more personal tone by adding seats, flowers and antique furniture suited to the spaces. The need for an extension was however soon felt and the enlargement of the building began in 1970 from plans drawn up by Jacques Perret, a Genevese architect. The construction of the corner tower—a successful imitation of the pre-existing architecture—made it possible to create a new room with a paved floor and a small pool that opens onto the garden, and to expand the exhibition spaces on the first and second floors (24).

In 1995, further work was begun to fit out the basement and build new underground spaces. The aim was to create storage rooms, a conference room for lectures on Far Eastern art given by History of Art Department at Geneva University, and four temporary exhibition rooms. Each year, the latter are used to display treasures from the reserves or for loan exhibitions from private collections and museums in Europe, America, China, Japan and Korea. The architectural work was commissioned from Daniel Baillif and Joël Jousson from the firm Baillif & Loponte, and the museographical design from Alain Gruber. The refined luxury characteristic of the upper floors was retained in the basement floor with marble flooring, dark cherry or pale maple woodwork, simply-designed display cases and modern iron railings on the stairs. Careful thought was given to the colour of the walls so as to set off

---

1 The Rietberg Museum in Zurich did not open until 1952.
all the different types of objects on show. To enhance the terrace and offer visitors a natural space which harmonises with the collections, a Japanese garden was created in 2004 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the opening of the Baur Collections. It was designed by Pierre Rambach, an architect and co-author of publications on the art of Far Eastern garden design. In 2008, the age of the furnishings and conservation problems caused by the lack of wall insulation convinced the Foundation Board to undertake new refurbishment work on the second floor, devoted to Japanese art. Responsibility for the design was given to Bassi & Carella of Geneva and the layout in the display cases to Nicole Gérard. The result is characterised by the same restraint, elegance and excellence of all the previous renovation work which has contributed to the unique atmosphere of the museum.5 Taking advantage of the closure of the museum, some refurbishment was also carried out in the rooms dedicated to Chinese art.

Alfred Baur specifically requested that objects not be added to his collections, which he considered as complete and harmonious. The statutes of the Baur Foundation do however allow gifts and bequests to be accepted provided that they are not incorporated into the “Baur Collections”. Consequently, the museum has been endowed with several important donations: Chinese lacquerware dating from the 14th to 18th centuries by the Virginia and Edward Chow Foundation (25); a Japanese screen by Albert Dollinger; the collection of 17th century Chinese export ceramics by Mr and Mrs Blum, recovered from the Hatcher junk (26); the collection of Chinese ceramics dating from between the 1st and 17th centuries intended for the Southeast Asian market, donated by Ambassador and Mrs Charles Müller (27); a set of kimonos, coats, jackets and *obi* from the Sato Mariko Collection; Chinese garments given by Mrs Maset and Mrs Bozonet; the Patricia Gorokhoff Collection of Chinese export fans (28); and the Former Sekkaku-an Collection devoted to the arts of the Japanese tea ceremony, donated by Philippe Neeser. As a result of these new acquisitions, the Foundation Board decided to give a more suitable name to the establishment—Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art.

5 See the article by Helen Loveday in this issue.
25 Black lacquer lotus dish
End of Yuan to beginning of Ming dynasty, 14th century
Diameter 17.5 cm
Virginia and Edward Chow Memorial, 1995

26 Blue and white porcelain jar
Height 19 cm
Mr and Mrs Blum donation, 2002

27 Qingbai bottle
Yuan dynasty, circa 1300–1330
Height 31 cm
Ambassador and Mrs Charles Müller donation, 2004

28 Brisé fan
Canton, circa 1820–1830
Carved mother-of-pearl
Patricia Gorokhoff donation, 2011