



from the
EAST

to the
WEST

Asian art has found a happy home in San Francisco, where all and sundry come by to procure the best of 'Mysterious Asia'. And world-renowned French impressionist, Dilley, talks about the passions that drive him.



Asian art collections are popular with all the different nationalities, but specific races will be especially drawn to exhibitions which reflect their own roots.

Since 1966, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, situated within the lush gardens of Golden Gate Park, has hosted some of the most impressive art exhibitions the city has ever witnessed. In 1975, when Avery Brundage bequeathed his remaining art holdings to the 'Asian', it became one of the largest museums outside Asia devoted exclusively to Asian art. Continuing to acquire important works, the collection contains over 12,000 objects spanning 6,000 years of history and representing over 40 Asian nations. For more than two decades, the museum's extensive repertoire has featured prized art collections from China, Mongolia, Japan, Korea, India and Tibet.

According to Michele Ragland-Dilworth, Public Relations Manager for the 'Asian', "The Asian population of the city is comprised of several culturally diverse groups. San Francisco's overall Asian population is currently estimated at 28 per cent, and is expected to rise to 39 per cent by the year 2000. The museum is a nexus for these unique and diverse groups, and provides a variety of exhibitions and educational programmes targeted at showcasing cultural similarities and differences."

Walk down any Bay-area street, and it doesn't take a genius to discover that San Francisco is a dynamic mixture of high-octane cultures. But, remembering that a large percentage of Californians were born elsewhere, migrating to the 'Sunshine State' in search of something different, it's apparent Asians have had a significant impact on the changing landscape of the San Francisco art scene.

The city's proximity to Asia and its large population of Asian immigrants could not help influencing the local population. If for no other reason, the influx of Eastern aesthetics would have provided alternatives to an all too familiar European cultural heritage. A number of homegrown artists working during the abstract expressionism years of the '40s and '50s, were drawn to Eastern philosophies and religions, particularly Zen Buddhism, while many were inspired and influenced deeply by the compositions and techniques of Asian painting and calligraphy.

"Asian art collections are popular with all the different nationalities, but specific races will be especially drawn to exhibitions which reflect their own roots. However, everybody loves archaeological exhibitions such as the Terra Cotta Warriors of X'ian," reckons one of the museum's curators.

The curator went on to explain that Jade or Jadeite attracts good crowds, while sculptures and miniature paintings from India are also popular. Recent exhibitions of textiles, folk arts and woodcuts from Japan have been well received, while similar artworks from Korea are interesting because they are new and different.

Perhaps, due to the high percentage of San Franciscans who can relate to the 'Hippie Movement' or the high-profile, Tibet sympathiser, Richard Gere, Tibetan exhibitions continue to draw record crowds. These exhibitions which include Buddhist art, tanka paintings, sculptures and bronzes, appeal to a wide range of visitors.



COMMERCIAL ART

According to Sam Bernstein, President of S Bernstein and Co. Jade and Oriental Art, "San Francisco has been a gateway to the Pacific since 1849. Due to the Chinese presence and noted Asian scholars, San Francisco's interest in Asian arts has been strong for over a century."

Sales of Chinese ceramics have been active recently because of the abundance of good material and the increasing numbers of American and Asian collectors.

Recently, however, Bernstein notes that the increased interest in a number of Asian arts is due to several key factors. He believes that San Francisco is witnessing the dawn of a decade of interest in Asian art. Because values have risen on such items as Asian antiquities, jade, porcelain and furniture, collectors are now

taking interest and buying. There has also been a shift away from expensive European antiquities towards more reasonably priced Asian objects. Due to the high six-figure price-tags of quality works, collectors have been increasingly frustrated with buying classical Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities. By comparison, a top-level, museum-quality Sung dynasty bust can go for one-quarter the price of its European counterpart. In addition, the increasing interest of Taiwanese, Hong Kong, Mainland Chinese and Singaporean collectors seeking to own elements of their heritage and culture, is bringing more buyers into a market that is already heavily populated with Americans and Europeans.

Sales of Chinese ceramics have been active recently because of the abundance of good material and the increasing number of American and Asian collectors. Everything, from Neolithic pottery to 18th-century ceramics, finds buyers. In the USA, however, Sung dynasty ceramics seem to do well while Chinese monochromatic pieces sell in Asia.

As a cultural material, jade continues to increase in price. In addition, jade transcends art and has intrinsic value as a precious commodity. Because jade can be graded, its value is more uniform than many Asian arts and enjoys a well-established tradition of buying and selling. Of particular interest to recent collectors have been scholarly-related materials including brush washers, water pots and brush rests. The recent sale of a Burmese jadeite *koro* (incense burner), which fetched US\$1 million on auction,



served as a wake-up call for the market, signalling that jadeite can command top dollar.

Chinese furniture, especially Ming and Ching antiques, also fetch high prices and are enjoyed by a wide audience. Having compared prices of Chinese antiques in Macau and Hong Kong to prices in the USA, the mark-up on good pieces can exceed 500 per cent. Unfortunately, due to the proliferation of forgeries, collectors are apprehensive when buying antique Chinese paintings, and the whole market has lost its lustre. Contemporary art, however, is increasingly in demand as American and Asian collectors, predominantly American-born Chinese, queue to get their hands on major works. Several artists come to mind, not the least of which is C C Wang, a scholar and artist residing in New York, whose paintings fetch upwards of US\$100,000. Other contemporary artists working in Asia whose paintings sell for between \$5,000 and \$10,000 are Wang Yi Dong with his realistic style, Yu Shao Fei, whose paintings border on photo-realism, and the whimsical and humorous paintings of Qi Zhi Long. Since the late '80s, contemporary Chinese art has continued to lure avid collectors.

With an increasingly interested public and an abundance of Asian art in public and private collections, the city of San Francisco provides a nexus for collectors and connoisseurs of fine Asian art. As the city thrives at the epicentre of shifting tectonic plates and intertwining cultures, it is a volatile and exciting period for the people and arts of San Francisco.

BY: GREGORY BURNS