

# Asia and the White Cube:

## A Project for Revitalizing Asian Art in Museums

Asian Art >  
General

In January 2003, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, California, will reopen at a new location, with new acquisitions. After five years of intensive reorganization of the collections, the new museum promises to provide an alternative to modernist models of viewing Asian art in a museum context.

By Kristy Phillips

To many Asianists in the West, the modern museum stands as an institution that is historically lacking in its ability to present Asian cultures by (re)presenting Asian objects within the guise of master narratives and essentialisms that tend to deny Asia's vast diversity. Too often it seems as though Asian cultures become artefacts in museums – dead or dying victims of dated scholarship and substantialized visions of an Asia that only exists 'over there'. In the last few decades, however, marked changes in museology have taken place in attempts to recast Asia and its objects, and to make it more accessible to communities that increasingly reflect the reality that Asia, in fact, exists globally. The new Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, California, plans to revisit the presentation of Asian art and foster a new model for Asian art museums in its innovative techniques of display, pedagogy, and integration of contemporary art.

The Asian Art Museum has, since the 1960s, been one of North America's largest museums dedicated exclusively to the collection and presentation of Asian art. Thanks to an original core collection donated by industrialist and arts enthusiast Avery Brundage, the Asian Art Museum now owns more than thirteen thousand objects from throughout Asia. In January 2003, its prestige will undoubtedly grow, as the institution will move to an expanded facility in San Francisco's Civic Center. The museum will literally be remaking itself when it moves into a 1917 Beaux-Art style former library in the heart of the city, as part of a USD 160.5 million renovation project. The 'New Asian' will reflect five years of research and detailed collaboration between curators and scholars in their attempts to make Asia more accessible to the public, and to present Asian art as part of contemporary living traditions.

Designed by Italian architect Gae Aulenti, the creative force behind the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the new museum will enable approximately 15 to 20 per cent of the museum's collection to be on display. Selections from the museum's extensive Chinese collections will include an entire room devoted to Chinese jades, as well as the earliest dated bronze image of the Buddha, dated AD 338, a renowned pilgrimage piece for art historians of Asia.

The galleries will also include never-before-seen objects from the collection, such as a Qing lacquered throne, a nineteenth-century silver-sheathed *howdah* from South Asia, *wayang golek* puppets from Southeast Asia, and a jewelled bronze sculpture of the Buddha from Cambodia (twelfth or thirteenth century). Gallery by gallery, the new institution will feature either new Brundage objects on view or some of the almost one thousand recent acquisitions from the Lloyd Cotsen Japanese Bamboo Basket Collection, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Southeast Asian Art Collection, and other donors.



Basket entitled *The Shimmering of Heated Air (Kagerō)*, Japan, circa 1958, Shōno Shōunsai (1904-1974). Bamboo. The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Lloyd Cotsen Japanese Basket Collection.

### Organization of the galleries

The opportunity to organize a new museum from scratch meant that curators at the Asian Art Museum were able to consolidate the strengths they saw in international museum collections of Asian art, and to innovate new methods of presenting the collections. These conditions also meant that curators could think of the museum as a whole and work together to integrate common themes into the overall organization of the museum.



Throne for a Buddha image, Burma, 1850-1900. Wood, gilt, glass inlay, lacquer, and raised lacquer. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Gift from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Southeast Asian Art Collection, R2002.27.1.

Collaboration among curators also occurred in the development of didactic materials, which will employ a standardized nomenclature to provide continuity and clarity for visitors. Thus, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara will be identified as such in both the South Asian and Chinese galleries, but the name Guanyin will be bracketed in the latter to reflect the transmission of ideas across geographical distances, yet also acknowledge their distinctive meanings and visual forms.

Buddhism and its transmission throughout Asia will act as an introduction to the museum collections, bringing together issues of patronage and trade. Although individual galleries will be organized traditionally by geography, region, and chronology, one primary thread linking all of the galleries will be intercultural trade and exchange, including the movement of religions, artisans, and materials with an emphasis on cross-cultural connections rather than on individual artistic styles. Other sections of the museum will be devoted to specific artistic interactions between cultures, such as the cross-cultural development of ceramics between Persia and China.

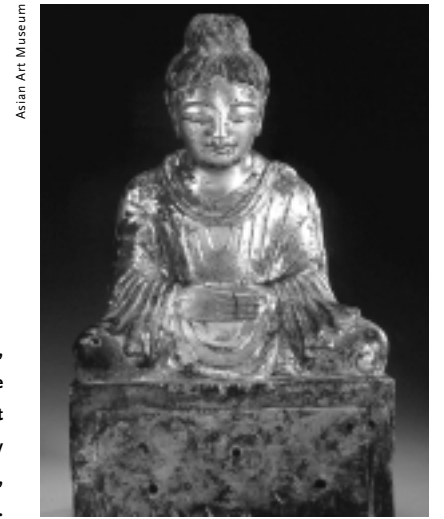
Given the community's increasing interest in Islam and its visual culture, curators have also chosen to introduce the museum's collection of pre-Islamic and Islamic art within the overarching themes of trade and transmission. Consisting mainly of bronze-age ceramics, Luristan bronzes, and ceramics, metalwork, and decorative work from the Islamic period, the museum will also articulate the spread of Islam through Asia and explore its related practices and aesthetics in China, Indonesia, and India.

### Academic contributions

Asian scholars across the United States were involved in developing labels and organizing the presentation of objects throughout the new Asian Art Museum galleries. A large grant from the National Endowment for Humanities enabled the museum to hold a series of meetings and individual consultations with academic researchers in order to discuss current debates in scholarship and methods of interpretation, and how best to present the advances of academic research for public consumption.

As a result of this collaboration, the educational outlets of the museum, including wall texts, detailed informational cards, video and audio aids, and a resource centre, will aim to provide

Seated Buddha, China, dated 338, late Zhao dynasty, gilt bronze. The Avery Brundage Collection, B60 B1034.



information about exhibits at several different levels of difficulty and depth, depending on the background knowledge and interests of visitors. The objective of this approach is to enable visitors to learn more about objects with each visit to the museum, rather than be confined to wall text information.

### Expanding the parameters of Asian art

In the past five years, the Asian Art Museum has been inundated with requests from the community to include more contemporary content in the museum's exhibitions. Meeting this demand has meant that curators have had to educate themselves about contemporary visual cultures, and integrate the work of twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists into programmes that traditionally have barely extended their artistic perspectives into the modern age.

The museum has made efforts in the past to attract travelling contemporary shows such as *At Home and Abroad*, a 1997 exhibition that featured the work of contemporary Filipino artists, or more recently in 2000, *Alienation and Assimilation*, featuring art from South Korea. The new Asian Art Museum plans to step up their mandate of presenting the museum as an institution of living art with programmes like 'Asia Alive', featuring daily interactive performances, artists' demonstrations, and informal concerts. This is a clear deviation from modernist museum models that position visitors as passive viewers and receivers of fixed art historical taxonomies.

As a further statement about the New Asian's innovative approach to display, the museum's first exhibition in October 2003, featuring Korean art, will further enforce this agenda of integrating past narratives of Asian art with contemporary visual culture of the present and future. Two exhibitions of Korean art will run concurrently: one will feature Buddhist and court arts between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, while the second will present contemporary art from South Korean artists with the cooperation of the National Museum of Modern Art in Seoul. The juxtaposition of these two exhibitions will challenge prevailing formulae for the presentation of Asian art, and hopefully raise questions about its conceptual 'location' in time and space. Contemporary art shows will continue to be a regular aspect of the new museum's programming, with future shows presenting the work of the late Thai artist Montien Boonma and San Francisco Chinese artist Li Huayi.

Given the opportunity to refashion itself in the age of the 'post-museum' (Hooper-Greenhill 2000), the new Asian Art Museum's approach to Asian visual culture and pedagogy clearly intends to challenge archetypical narratives that have defined Asia as part of a linear continuum, rooted in an ephemeral, spiritual past. The incorporation of trade and themes of artistic transmission in permanent displays, and the reflection of current scholarship and its mandated integration of contemporary artistic expression perhaps set the stage for a new museum model and for new ways of making Asian art accessible and interpretive to a diverse public, without diluting its many complexities. ◀

– Hooper-Greenhill, Eileen, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London and New York: Routledge (2000).



Kristy Phillips, MA is a doctoral student studying the art history of South Asia at the University of Minnesota. Her dissertation research focuses on the National Museum of India and constructions of nationalism and Indian identity in the post-Independence era. phil8632@umn.edu

### Note >

The author conducted interviews with Emily Sano, Director of the Asian Art Museum, and Forrest McGill, Chief Curator of the Asian Art Museum.