

The Chester Beatty Library Asia in Ireland

Asian Art >
General

Growing up in New York, Chester Beatty began by collecting stamps and minerals. Over the course of his life, and as he travelled the world, the collection expanded. He developed an interest in Arabic manuscripts and collected outstanding biblical papyri of vital importance for the early history of Christianity. A journey to Asia in 1917 added Japanese and Chinese painting to his interests. Beatty built up a magnificent collection, including important Persian, Turkish, Armenian, and Western European items and high quality Burmese, Thai, and Nepalese manuscripts. When, in 1949, he moved from London, where he had spent most of his life, to Ireland, he brought his amazing collection along. Upon his death in 1968, the collection was bequeathed to a trust for the benefit of the public. It is now funded by the Irish government and is one of the country's national cultural institutions.

By Michael Ryan

The context into which Beatty moved his collection is an interesting one. Following a century or so of population decline and economic stagnation, Ireland had become a net exporter of people. The Irish diaspora (including some of Beatty's ancestors) had spread large communities of people of Irish descent throughout the world, a trend which only began to be reversed in the 1980s. While many individuals living in Ireland may have had extensive experience of the wider world, at home cultural preoccupations concerned the identity of the newly independent state.* The principal cultural issue revolved around the status of the indigenous Irish language (Gaelic) and as a result, in museums, Irish collections were stressed at the expense of those from elsewhere. For a long time, the Asian collections of Ireland's National Museum were only intermittently on exhibition, and some of them were until recently entirely unavailable to the public. In Irish universities, the study of Asian languages (other than Sanskrit) only began in the 1980s, largely at first as a module in business degree courses, while at about the same time Japanese appeared on the curriculum of selected secondary schools (high school/gymnasium equivalents).

Apart from the reaction of a discerning few, the reception of Asian art was disappointing. Indeed, Beatty's first exhibition in Dublin, of ukiyo-e, was dismissed in a national newspaper as being of little interest. Fortunately some enlightened people ensured that the appropriate legal conditions were put into place for the Library's continuance as a public institution, despite the small numbers of visitors. In 1999 the Library, in close cooperation with the relevant government departments, moved to an eighteenth-century building with a modern extension at Dublin Castle, which was more welcoming to the public and better equipped to preserve and present the collections.

A changing society

At this time, Ireland was changing; the economy began to grow rapidly and the demographic profile of the country, and of the city of Dublin especially, began to change sharply. In the early 1990s, there was a large influx of people from Western Europe, followed shortly by many from Eastern Europe. Then, in the last seven or eight years, African communities began to establish themselves and small groups of Asian émigrés began to expand. The most rapid growth has been in the Chinese population; the city of Dublin now has about 50,000 Chinese residents, of whom approximately half are students. The change in religious affiliation has also been marked. Ireland was, and in some ways still is, an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country with a relatively small

representation of other Christian churches. A variety of faiths now have a vibrant presence: the Muslim community in Dublin (mostly from the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia) is second only to Catholicism in observant membership in the capital, and Buddhist, Hindu, Ba'hai, and other belief systems are growing in support. The relevance of the Chester Beatty collection suddenly became obvious.

A changing institution

In the first year of operations at its new home visitor numbers increased tremendously, and they have risen each year since. The Library assumes the role of a portal through which the local population, especially Asian communities, can access cultural experiences. The Library is seen as a valuable contributor to intercultural understanding, which takes place primarily in the traditional manner of exhibitions, publications, and lectures. However, the small Education Department has found partnering of schools especially fruitful: a three-year scheme to twin the Muslim National (primary

Henna hand-painting, workshop with Irish school children, Outreach project, 2002



Japanese tea ceremony with Irish school children, Outreach project, 2002



All photos: Chester Beatty Library

level) School with inner-city equivalents has been a success. It has led to exhibitions curated by the children displaying their artwork in response to the collections and a series of storytelling sessions using the Silk Road as a linking theme, and the teachers and staff of the Library have seen a steady rise in confidence on the part of the children both in their work and their interactions with one another. There have been valuable children's cultural festivals and Irish, Japanese, and Chinese volunteer presenters have reached a wide audience. Traditional schools' visits now occupy a significant part of total visitor numbers, and secondary-school students in particular benefit from these. And there is a series of family days where parents and children attend workshops at which, for example, they learn about the tea ceremony, origami, calligraphy, Bedouin life, and so on.

The Library has been very active in promoting a widening of the curricula for schools in art history; students must now study at least one module of non-European art, religious education, history, and geography, and a broad, less Ireland- or Eurocentric view of the world is actively supported. We were especially pleased to see that the Library itself was the subject of questions in the art history examination of the final state examination. It is perhaps too early to measure accurately what effect the new Chester Beatty Library is having on contemporary Irish society, but on the whole it appears to be a beneficial one.

Has it all been plain sailing? The answer is, of course, no. Chester Beatty collected very little Judaica and the Library's exhibitions, which do not claim to be encyclopaedic, reflect this. Nevertheless, we have been heavily criticized for this imbalance and even in a couple of cases been accused of extreme anti-Semitism. The charge is unfair, but we are actively seeking partnerships so that we can increase the presence of the Jewish religion in our Sacred Traditions display.

Intercultural Programme for schools, sponsored by the Paul Hamlyn and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundations, 2002

Likewise, some members of the Muslim community have objected to certain images (of Persian and Turkish origin) being displayed, while other Muslim visitors have commented favourably on the fairness and balance of our Islamic displays. Clearly, the road to understanding and respect is a winding one, and we have much to learn. <

References

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Note >

* A dominion of the British Commonwealth until 1921, Ireland was an independent republic by 1949.

Alfred Chester Beatty

Alfred Chester Beatty was born in New York in 1875. Following his schooling in New York, Beatty graduated as mining engineer from Columbia University and then headed west to work in the mines of Colorado and Utah. He rapidly made his fortune, and in his leisure moments he became a considerable collector of books and manuscripts. After the death of his first wife, and suffering from ill health, Beatty left the United States and founded a new mining consultancy in London. In 1949 he decided to move to Ireland, and built a library for his art collection on Shrewsbury Road, Dublin, which opened in 1954. In 1957, Chester Beatty became Ireland's first honorary citizen. In 1993 the decision was made to move the Library to a new location in the city centre, and the Library opened on its new site on 7 February 2000. <