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Behind the scenes with M.V.'s Asian art expert

By
Mill Valley Herald

San Francisco's Asian Art Museum is home to a stunning collection of treasures and antiquities from the Far East. The late art collector and philanthropist Avery Brundage donated his formidable collection to San Francisco with the condition that a museum be built to honor and celebrate it. The museum has a 17,000-piece collection spanning a 6,000-year history and representing the major cultures of Asia. "The Asian" occupies a unique place in the realm of museums across America.

The following interview is with Mill Valley resident Michael Knight, the head of the Chinese Department and deputy director of Strategic Programs and Partnerships.

What is your educational background?

A Ph.D. in Chinese archaeology at Columbia University.

What sparked your interest in Chinese archaeology?

When I was an undergrad, there was a fine art requirement, and what fit into my schedule more than anything else was a course in Chinese art history. The professor said, "You know you're pretty good at this; you should consider this as a career." So I got my bachelor's degree with a focus on Chinese art history. I'd had no exposure to Asian art at all prior to that.

Was Columbia the leading university for Asian art studies at the time?

I went to Columbia because it gave me the best package - I was a Presidential Fellow and got paid to go to school [laughs]. Those were some of the best years of my life.

You grew up in the Pacific Northwest, so after graduate school in New York City, what came next?

My first year out of graduate school I taught for a year in New York City, then I went to the Seattle Art Museum. Seattle's is one of the better Asian art collections. It's a mid-scale collection. It's not a Boston [Boston Museum of Art] or a Cleveland [Cleveland Art Museum] but for the West Coast, it's one of the best.

Is the museum the definitive Asian art collection in the West?

There are certainly other museums in the U.S. that have bigger collections, or broader collections, but the Asian is the only stand-alone Asian art museum in the country. The Freer and Sackler Galleries do that, but they're part of the Smithsonian. It's unique in that it's a stand-alone institution dedicated to Asian art. So there is good and bad to that: We rely on Asian art for all attendance, all of our draw. The Cleveland or the Met can put up a Van Gogh show and it pays for everything for the year. We don't have that option.

Is educating the public a big focus for the museum?

We have a big education department. Bank of America recently gave us a significant donation to support our educations program, basically directed at the schools.

Changing the subject, do you speak Mandarin?

Yes, but not the way I used to. I spent a good amount of time in Taiwan and China after college and had a project at the Seattle Art Museum throughout the '80s that took me to China quite a bit. So being in an environment where you have to speak Chinese makes you speak Chinese.

Back in the '80s in China were there a lot fewer people speaking English?

Not too many spoke English, plus I was working on an archaeological project, so I was with a specialist who had no background in English at all.

You recently returned from Shanghai. Do you go often and why were you there?

As the head of the Chinese Department, I go three or four times a year. We had a big exhibition last summer, "Court Arts of the Ming Dynasty," the Shanghai Museum, partly in recognition of the Beijing Olympics. And then in 2010, we're doing a project with the Shanghai because they're doing a world exposition then. We're marketing their expo and they're marketing our show. They are organizing the show, and then it will come to the Asian, then on to the Peabody Essex.

These shows of 2008 and 2010 - they must be big efforts to mount?

They're big efforts. One of the differences between the Asian and other museums is that in a standard museum a curator does a big exhibition once every six to eight years. I do one every second or third year. It's a lot of work. We have a small staff. In other institutions you'd have time to do research on the collections, publish and do other things. We research and publish in our spare time.

In your opinion, what are some of the most treasured pieces in the museum's collections?

On the Chinese side, most popular is the jade. It might not be the most treasured or the most unusual, but it is easily approached material. It's a good collection, but there are other areas that are much, much stronger, like the 2,300 Chinese bronzes. The archaic bronzes are a great collection. Another great collection is the ceramics. The ceramics and the bronzes in the Chinese collections are certainly the strongest, and there are a lot of them. We've got the earliest-date Buddha from China, period. There's no other that's dated any earlier, so that's pretty amazing. And we have a number of pieces like that.

The bronzes and ceramics, are they part of the original collection from Avery Brundage?

Yes, Avery Brundage. The art got out of China in the '30s, and he bought it sometime in the '30s or '40s. He ended up with some amazing pieces.

Is the market for contemporary Chinese art as hot as the art media would have us believe?

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Contemporary is interesting. Chinese contemporary in the international style is interesting. It started gaining popularity in the late '80s. There were things going on before then, but in the late '80s it was basically an export item. At that time in the West, artwork from Asia was something new and novel and exotic and the big buyers were the European buyers, the American buyers. The Chinese have gotten into it now and the whole Chinese market is exploding. Ten years ago the highest price paid for a very, very major Chinese painting was $7 million. There was a 16th-century hand scroll, not a particularly big work, that sold recently at an auction house in Beijing where the markets are now for over $10 million. Ceramics are the same way - the market has just exploded, and a lot of the buyers are Chinese. There's a fair amount of change going on; the whole system is new and very "wild west" and there's a very interesting demand for Chinese art, in China and elsewhere.

Lauren Elliott is a parent in the Mill Valley School District. "Arts in Mind" is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education.

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