

Arts in Mind

Local Bonanza of Asian Art

By Lauren Elliott

San Francisco's Asian Art Museum is home to a stunning collection of treasures and antiquities from the Far East. American businessman Avery Brundage donated his formidable collection to SF with the condition that a museum be built to honor and celebrate it. Fifty years later "The Asian" occupies a singular domain in the realm of Museums across America.

Mill Valley resident Michael Knight is the head of the Chinese Department, and Deputy Director of Strategic Programs and Partnerships. I was fortunate to be able to sit with him and ask him a few questions.

What is your educational background?

I did a Ph.D. in Chinese Archeology at Columbia University.

What sparked your interest in Chinese Archeology?

As 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 Bachelors 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 they 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.

The Asian's core collection was donated in 1930. Currently, the museum has a 17,000-piece collection, spanning a 6,000 year history, and representing the major cultures of Asia. Is it 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. Freer and Sackler Galleries does 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, they 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 education program, basically directed at the schools.

Changing the subject: Do you speak Mandarin?

Yes, not like I used to (laughs)! 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.

And back in the 80s in China, were there was a lot fewer people speaking English?

Not too many spoke English, plus I was working on an archeological 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 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 unique, but it is easily approached material. It's a good collection, but there are other areas that are much much stronger, like the 2300 Chinese Bronzes. The archaic Bronzes is 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 thirties, and he bought it sometime in the thirties or forties. He ended up with some amazing pieces.

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

Contemporary is interesting. Chinese contemporary in the international style is interesting. It started gaining popularity in the late eighties. There were things going on before then, but in the late 80's 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 \$7,000,000. 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 \$10,000,000. 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.

