Asia and the White Cube: A Project for Revitalizing Asian Art in Museums

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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 rescue 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 resist 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 fourteen 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 1957 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 rescue Asia more accessible to the public, and to present Asian art as part of contemporary living traditions.

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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, artists, 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, Islamic bronzes, and ceramic, metalwork, and decorative work from the Islamic period, the museum will also articulate the spread of Islam through territories and informal concerts. This is a clear deviation from modernist museum models that position visitors as passive observers and receivers of fixed art historical saxons.

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 Hua.

By Kristy Phillips

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.

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

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 took a broad, thematic view of the museum as a whole and work together to integrate common themes into the overall organization of the museum.

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Buddhist Seated Buddha, China, dated 1315, late Yuan dynasty, gilt bronze. The Avery Brundage Collection, B60 81949.