

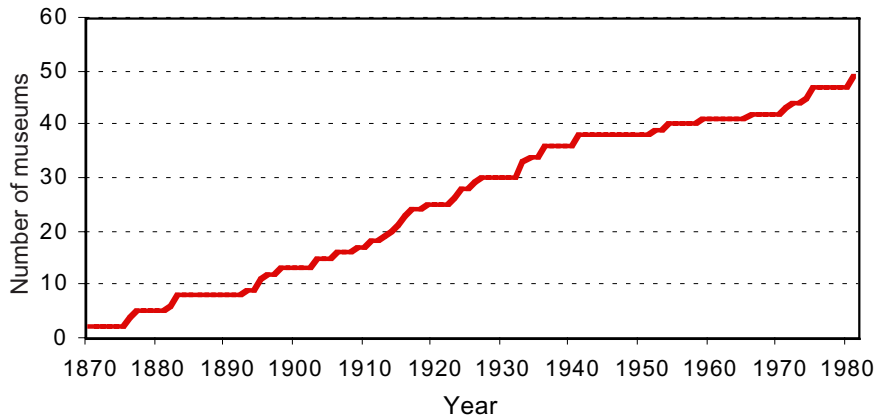
The Asian art affair: US art museum collections of Asian art and archaeology

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Over the past four decades an increasingly acrimonious debate has developed over the role played by antiquities collecting in the destruction of the world's archaeological heritage. The archaeological community has argued persuasively that worldwide many archaeological sites and monuments are being ransacked in the search for saleable antiquities, and as a result many Western governments have been persuaded to pass laws or ratify international conventions that aim to regulate their trade, and thus ameliorate the destruction at source. Not everyone, however, agrees with the analysis, or with the remedy. Most collectors and dealers protest that the link made between collecting and looting is grossly overstated, and that most of their purchases are from old collections or are chance finds. Some have gone so far as to justify the trade on the grounds that art trumps all else.

Museum acquisition policies are crucial here. Their purchases make a direct impact on the market, and the acquisition of material through gift and bequest has a similar, if more delayed effect. Colin Renfrew understood this when, as a trustee of the British Museum in 1998, he supported the adoption of a policy which forbids the acquisition of objects that are thought to have been illegally excavated or traded. But aside from creating demand, museums can also act as ethical arbiters. When museums decide that certain categories of objects should not be acquired, many private collectors follow suit, particularly if they intend for their collection to end its days in a museum. Thus it is important that many museums — as long ago as 1970 in the case of the University Museum of Pennsylvania — have now adopted policies similar to that of the British Museum that forbid the acquisition of unprovenanced objects, the reason being that without provenance it is not possible to know whether an object was first acquired by illegal or destructive means. Some museums, though, take a contrary view, and maintain that absence of provenance is not evidence of theft, or, even if it is, that they are acting in the public interest by acquiring material for study and display that would otherwise be lost from view.

The debate over collecting has been characterized throughout by a paucity of hard data and a lack of serious historical analysis. Furthermore,



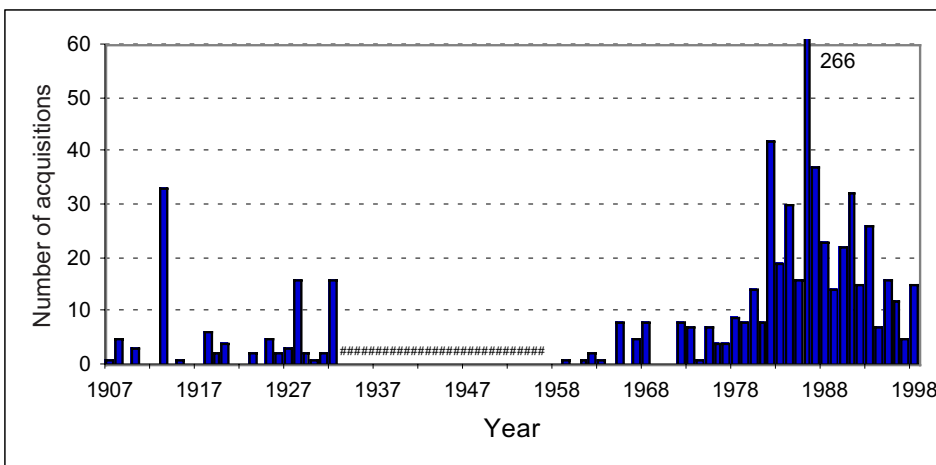
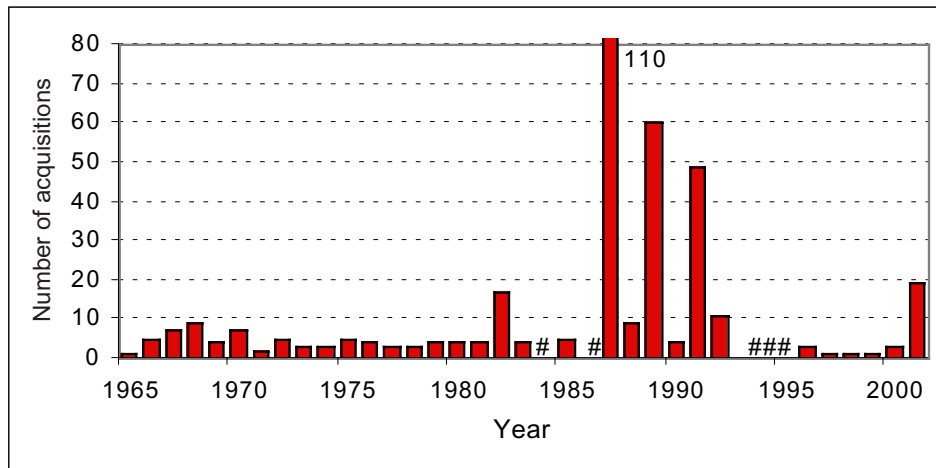
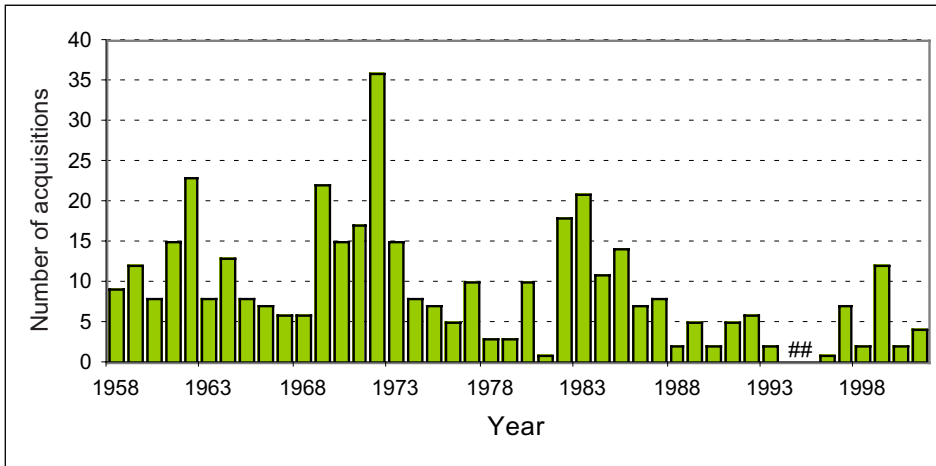
Asian collections, or, more accurately, collections of material originating east of Iran, have rarely figured in the debate, though there have been many reports of the damage being caused there by what can sometimes be violent looting. In view of this lacuna, we offer here a preliminary history of Asian collecting by American art museums. We chose art museums in the United States for three reasons:

first, the number of museums there that collect Asian material increased steadily through the twentieth century (Plate 7.1); second, the individual holdings of each of these museums also increased (Plates 7.2–7.4); finally, most if not all major private collections are ultimately acquired by museums, so that a study of collecting by art museums effectively encompasses all collecting.

As we will show, the first private collectors and museums appeared in the United States during the late nineteenth century with interests that focused largely on Chinese and Japanese decorative arts, together with paintings and prints. A taste for older, more archaeological material developed during the early twentieth century, but there was still no real demand for anything that was not Chinese or Japanese. The 1949 communist takeover in China, however, and the subsequent breakdown of trade with the United States, together with a steadily increasing demand, forced dealers and collectors to look elsewhere, and a brisk trade developed in material from South and Southeast Asia and, at a slightly later date, the Himalayas. Finally, the opening up of China since the 1980s has caused a resurgence of the Chinese market.

Before adding flesh to this summary, we want first to define the limits of our enquiry and to clarify (and justify) our terminology. It is a well-established convention in the collecting literature that almost anything from Asia that can be collected is referred to as ‘art’. However, this is hardly a convention we are comfortable with, as the term ‘art’ is notoriously polysemic and, in consequence, difficult to evaluate or criticize. At root, ‘art’ means skill, and a ‘work of art’ is thus a finely-crafted object, and may be viewed as such by a conscientious museum specialist. However, to the collector, the term ‘work of art’ can often mean a human creation of great and perhaps transcendent beauty, a work of genius even, though it is impossible to evaluate the truth of this in any useful way. Thus we think that use of the term ‘art’ without further modification is obfuscatory, and that its broad and uncritical application to describe almost anything that is collected has rendered it meaningless, which is why we want to avoid using it when we can. To our eyes, Asian objects are often quite extraordinarily beautiful and of

7.1 Increasing number of art museums in the United States acquiring Asian archaeological material through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



7.2 Total annual acquisitions of archaeological material from China, South Asia and Southeast Asia by Cleveland Museum (1958–2001). # indicates quantity not known.

7.3 Total annual acquisitions of archaeological material from China, South Asia and Southeast Asia by Boston MFA (1965–2001). # indicates quantity not known.

7.4 Total annual acquisitions of archaeological material from South and Southeast Asia by the Metropolitan Museum (1907–32, 1959–98). # indicates quantity not known.

high technical virtuosity, but this does not mean that we consider each and every one to be a masterpiece — an encapsulation of genius.

It would have been possible to carry out an exhaustive survey of the many meanings of ‘art’ that are implied in the literature, and to have formulated precise definitions, but that would have taken us outside of our chosen project. Instead, we have decided to study what in general terms would be thought of as ‘archaeology’, and which we will label as such: objects

that have been removed from the ground or from standing monuments. Thus we have tended to exclude from consideration all paintings (though not frescoes) and prints of all dates, including illuminated texts, and all three-dimensional objects that were made after the year 1400. This is rather an arbitrary date, chosen because it roughly coincides with the establishment of the Ming Dynasty in China. It could be argued — justifiably — that our archaeological definition includes much that is not archaeological, most notably the striking pottery of the Chinese Song Dynasty, which has been collected and traded since the time of its manufacture. The use of the year 1400 to demarcate art from archaeology is also not a practice that we would consistently adhere to — a Ming Dynasty shipwreck for example would be an important archaeological find. We feel, however, that in the main our 1400 watershed is a valid one for our present empirical purpose of studying the history of collecting, not least because it is also a cut-off date used by many collectors (Safrani 1986, 146).

'It is like the lifeblood of Japan seeping from a hidden wound'

The American affair with Asian art and archaeology began in the second half of the nineteenth century at a time when trade with China and Japan was on the increase. A nascent cultural élite became increasingly aware of the remarkable quality of Chinese and Japanese decorative art when what was thought to be 'real art' — European old masters — seemed to be secure in European collections and therefore unobtainable in the United States. Other genres of art were discovered or rehabilitated too, and art museums were established in several cities and universities, including Boston, New York, and Chicago. Private collectors also appeared, people such as William T. Walters in Baltimore who started assembling a large collection of Chinese porcelain and Henry O. Havemeyer in New York who first collected Japanese decorative art before moving on to porcelain. Also in New York was the important collector and dealer Samuel P. Avery, who did much in the United States to nurture the growing appreciation of Chinese ceramics. However, the most influential collectors at this time were to be found in and around Boston.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) was incorporated in 1870 and opened its doors to the public in 1876. Its first president was Martin Brimmer, who realized that good-quality European paintings would be hard to come by, but was also quick to recognize the opportunities offered by homegrown American paintings, classical antiquities, and the arts of Japan and China (Whitehill 1970, 13). Boston MFA contained a small collection of Chinese and Japanese objects from the start, but it was not until 1880, when William S. Bigelow loaned 482 Japanese objects for exhibition, that the public was able to see Asian material there in any quantity. He loaned a further 509 objects in 1881. Bigelow had probably started collecting Japanese material while resident in Paris, sometime between 1874 and 1879, before first visiting Japan in 1882, in the company of Edward S. Morse. Morse was a zoologist who had begun

collecting Japanese pottery after taking up a teaching position in Tokyo in 1878, and after his return to Boston in 1881 his lectures inspired others to follow his example. Bigelow stayed in Japan until 1889 and after his return home was appointed onto the board of trustees of the Boston MFA.

Ernest F. Fenollosa was a contemporary and friend of Morse in Tokyo, teaching philosophy there from 1878 to 1890. He accumulated a large collection of paintings and prints that he sold to Charles Weld in 1886, who then deposited them with the MFA. Weld subsequently bequeathed this collection (by then known as the Fenollosa-Weld collection) to the museum in 1911. Fenollosa himself returned to Boston to be appointed Curator of the Department of Japanese Art at the MFA in 1891, a post he held until leaving in 1896. The acquisition of the Bigelow and Fenollosa-Weld collections meant that already by 1890 the Boston MFA's Asian collections were of international standing, with more than 4000 paintings and 8000 objects, largely of Japanese origin (Whitehill 1970, 73). They were boosted in 1892 by the purchase of Edward Morse's collection, and by 1900 Boston had the most important collection of Chinese and particularly Japanese art in the United States, and probably outside East Asia (Cohen 1992, 28).

Morse, Fenollosa and Bigelow were lucky to be collecting in Japan at a time when Japanese society was undergoing the trauma of rapid modernization. Many families and temples were forced to sell off their possessions in order to survive, and what came to be seen as traditional, and thus backward-looking objects were devalued. Yet, already by the 1880s, the opinion was growing in Japan that something should be done to stop the flow abroad of what were coming to be seen as 'national treasures'. It was an opinion shared by the American collectors, who were at heart Japanophiles. Morse has been quoted as saying in 1882 that

Many fine things of Japanese art are now on the market, like those we are buying. It is like the lifeblood of Japan seeping from a hidden wound. They do not know how sad it is to let their beautiful treasures leave their country (from a quote in Whitehill 1970, 109).

Eventually, in 1884, the Japanese government passed a law which placed restrictions on the export of selected pieces of cultural heritage. By the end of the decade the supply of Japanese material to the US market was beginning to dwindle, and as prices rose collectors began to look elsewhere, and particularly to China.

'We were not archaeologists. We were not historians'

Chinese art of the Ming and Qing Dynasties — porcelain first, and later paintings — was first collected in the United States during the nineteenth century. Most of this material was available for purchase from already established Chinese and Japanese collections, or was manufactured specifically for export. There were also some Neolithic and Bronze Age objects in circulation — jades and ceremonial bronzes — that had been collected by

Chinese emperors and high-ranking officials from Han times onwards (Rawson 1992a, 74–6; Vainker 1992, 246–7); in 1874 the Frenchman Théodore Duret wrote that early bronzes were available in China, though expensive, and that those of the Shang Dynasty were most in demand (quoted in Debaine-Francfort 1999, 130–31). Few of these bronzes reached Europe or North America before the twentieth century, and no exceptional pieces were seen in the United States until the 1920s (Pope *et al.* 1967, 6; Rawson 1993, 68). Nevertheless, some did eventually find their way into museum collections, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, for example, has one bronze that was first published in 1845 (Berger 1994, 84). Stone sculpture was poorly regarded by Chinese collectors, and they can have made little contribution to market supply.

After 1900, archaeological material began to appear on the market in ever increasing quantities. Large construction projects, particularly railroads, opened up ancient cemeteries and other sites, and as the Qing Dynasty began to disintegrate under the continuing impact of European imperial ambition, more collections were sold, and theft and grave robbing became increasingly common (Cohen 1992, 57). A series of European adventurer/archaeologists — thieves to the Chinese — even struggled through to the area of Chinese central Asia to find and remove Buddhist sculpture, manuscripts and wall-paintings. Aurel Stein arrived first for Britain in 1900, and was quickly followed by the Germans, Russians, Japanese and French (Hopkirk 1980).

The situation in China worsened after 1911 when the last Qing emperor was toppled by a disorganized army coup and the country slipped into anarchy. Looting accelerated and not even imperial tombs were safe as they were blown open by warlords in desperate need of cash (Murphy 1995, 47). In 1928, some semblance of order was restored by the Nationalist government, and in 1930 it implemented the Law on the Preservation of Ancient Objects, which outlawed any excavation by foreigners or export of archaeological objects (Murphy 1995, 80). But passing a law is one thing, enforcing it is something much more difficult. The political situation in China was parlous. The Japanese occupied Manchuria in 1931, and in 1937 they launched an all-out attack on China itself. Soon thereafter, the whole of South and East Asia was dragged into World War II. No effective protection of archaeological heritage was possible during this period, and before Pearl Harbor at least material continued to flow out of the country.

In 1903 the Boston MFA's Department of Japanese Art was renamed the Department of Chinese and Japanese Art, and in 1905 the Japanese-born Okakura Kakuzo was appointed adviser, and subsequently served there as Curator from 1910 until his death in 1913. Okakura had been a friend of Fenollosa in Tokyo during the 1880s, and before leaving Japan for the United States he was instrumental in ensuring the adoption there of the 1884 law (Cohen 1992, 43). Ironically, once at Boston, the growing scarcity of Japanese material forced Okakura to look to China for acquisitions, where he had a

growing range of archaeological material to choose from. Between 1907 and 1913 he bought a large number of objects, including jades, stone sculpture, bronzes and pottery, many of which dated to before the tenth century AD (Whitehill 1970, 356). Yet important as Okakura's purchases were at this time, during the first two decades of the twentieth century the Japanese and Chinese collections of the MFA grew largely through the generosity of its long-time supporter Denman W. Ross (Whitehill 1970, 358–9). At the time of an exhibition held at the MFA in 1932 to celebrate both the occasion of Ross's 80th birthday and his beneficence over the previous 49 years, it was reckoned that he had provided the MFA with approximately 11,000 objects, which included 4006 textiles and 6162 other objects to what was, by then, known as the Department of Asiatic Art (Whitehill 1970, 438–40).

Outside Boston, other museums were beginning to stir. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York had been incorporated in 1870, but at first, and in sharp contrast to Boston, its Asian collections grew only slowly. Something like 1300 pieces of Chinese pottery were purchased from Samuel Avery in 1879, followed by the acquisition of the Japanese pottery of Charles S. Smith and, in 1902, the Heber R. Bishop collection of Qing jades (Tomkins 1970, 167). More gifts and bequests from benefactors such as the Havemeyers, Altmans, John D. Rockefeller Jr and others followed, but the museum did not avail itself of specialist expertise in the way that Boston did and its approach was somewhat passive (Wen 1975, 131–2). A Department of Decorative Arts was established in 1907, which housed the Asian collections until the creation of the Department of Far Eastern Art in 1915.

In Chicago, the Art Institute was incorporated in 1882, and owed the early growth of its Asian collections to the Buckingham family — the sisters Lucy Maud and Kate Sturges, and their brother Clarence. Early acquisitions included Clarence Buckingham's collection of 1400 Japanese prints in 1913, many of which he had bought from Fenollosa, and in 1900 Samuel M. Nickerson's gift of 1300 Chinese and Japanese decorative pieces. In 1922 Kate Sturges Buckingham started collecting Shang, Zhou and Han ritual bronzes for the museum (Pearlstein 1993, 7–8).

The key figure during this period, however, was probably Charles L. Freer. Freer started collecting Japanese prints in 1892, but later disposed of them before going on to buy a large number of Chinese and Japanese objects, often in East Asia, which he visited four times between 1895 and 1909 (Lawton & Merrill 1993, 57). He became a friend of Fenollosa, who wrote in 1907 that the strength of Freer's collection lay in its pottery and paintings, but that bronzes and sculptures were poorly represented (Lawton & Merrill 1993, 148). The pottery was largely celadon, not porcelain, but otherwise at that time Freer's collection was still very much in the nineteenth-century mould. Freer visited East Asia for the last time in 1910–11, as afterwards his poor health confined him to the United States until his death in 1919.

During Freer's last visit to China in 1910 he visited the Longmen Caves

where he took photographs and made rubbings of sixth-century Buddhist sculpture, but did not attempt to remove anything (Cohen 1992, 60). His reticence might have been out of respect for the integrity of the monuments, as he seems to have become aware at this time of the threat posed to Chinese archaeological heritage by indiscriminate collecting. In 1913 he lobbied the US Government to ban the import of Chinese antiquities of uncertain provenance (Cohen 1992, 58), he also tried — unsuccessfully, for lack of funds — to establish an American School of Archaeology in Beijing.

After 1911, Freer's collecting branched out to include Chinese jades (many of Neolithic date), sculpture and ritual bronzes, thereby making good what Fenollosa had reckoned to be his collection's weaknesses. In 1912, he exhibited 175 objects at the Smithsonian which included nine small bronze images and several pieces of stone sculpture, some bronze mirrors and a bronze ritual vessel, all from China (Lawton & Merrill 1993, 213). By 1916 he was able to loan several pieces of Chinese stone sculpture to an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, together with a group of Shang down to Han bronzes which he had bought jointly with Agnes and Eugene Meyer Jr in 1915 from the European collector Marcel Bing. This is said to have been the first time that such good-quality bronzes had been exhibited in the United States (Lawton & Merrill 1993, 224). By the time of his death, Freer owned 58 bronzes (Pope *et al.* 1967, 1).

In 1904 Freer had offered to bequeath his collection to the Smithsonian Institution and his offer was accepted in 1906. Work commenced on the construction of a gallery in 1916, and in 1923 it opened its doors to the public as the Freer Gallery of Art. The first Curator of the Freer Gallery, John Ellerton Lodge, was appointed in 1920. Lodge had been trained at the Boston MFA by Okakura, and had been curator of Chinese and Japanese Art there since 1915. He stayed at Boston until 1931, but remained with the Freer Gallery until 1942. Like Freer, Lodge deplored the damage being caused to Chinese archaeology by unrestricted collecting, and in 1926 refused the chance to buy a collection of archaeological bronzes from a Chinese warlord (Cohen 1992, 81, 84). Nevertheless, the position of Freer and Lodge was an ambiguous one. While they seemed to recognize the damage being caused to archaeology by unrestricted collecting, they continued to buy material from dealers. In 1920, for example, Lodge purchased some Buddhist reliefs for the Boston MFA from the dealer C.T. Loo (Cohen 1992, 81). Perhaps, like some modern museum curators, they took the view that once material was out of the ground the damage was done, and that by purchasing it at that point they were acting as a safety net, rescuing what they could for posterity.

A far less ambiguous figure at this time was Langdon Warner. Warner too was trained by Okakura, and he had been earmarked to head Freer's ill-fated American School of Archaeology in Beijing. Warner had already visited China several times before 1923, when he secured a position at Harvard's Fogg Museum. He set off for China again that year, and eventually arrived at

Dunhuang, in the southern Gobi desert on the route of the old Silk Road, where there were more than 400 rock-cut Buddhist temples of fifth-century date, richly decorated with painted reliefs and frescoes. Warner proceeded to remove eight of these frescoes for transport back to the United States, and his Harvard sponsors (Hopkirk 1980, 209–21; Cohen 1992, 95–6). He returned to Dunhuang for more in 1925, but was out of time. Chinese xenophobia reached new heights when the British fired on demonstrators in Shanghai, and foreign archaeologists were no longer welcome in China.

New museums continued to open during this period, notably the Cleveland Museum of Art (1913), the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City (1933), the Seattle Art Museum (1933), the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (1934), and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (1936). The Cleveland Museum of Art intended from the start to build a strong Asian holding. Freer was a trustee and its first director, Frederick A. Whiting, proposed that the museum should specialize in South Asian material, which he believed would be reasonably easy to obtain as there was, at that time, little competition (Cunningham *et al.* 1998, 9). To make good on their intentions, J. Arthur MacClean, who had worked at Boston's Department of Chinese and Japanese Art since 1903, was appointed curator in 1914. China was not overlooked, however, and the services of Langdon Warner as a field agent were secured in 1915. At first, the collection made little headway, and until the early 1920s it grew as rather a hodge-podge of Chinese objects, largely pottery, including 212 pieces donated by Worcester R. Warner in 1917.

William T. Walters died in 1894 and bequeathed 1800 pieces of Chinese pottery to his son Henry, who continued to expand the collection until in 1934 it found a permanent home in Baltimore's Walters Art Gallery. By this time, the collection was composed largely of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century porcelain, which betrayed the its nineteenth-century origins, but it did include a small number of Han and Song pieces (Wood 1987).

The Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City opened in 1933 and built up an important collection of East Asian material during the 1930s by careful buying in a depressed market. Lawrence Sickman acted as their agent in China and it was estimated in 1964 that Sickman had managed to buy between 50–60 per cent of the Nelson-Atkins collection (as it was then constituted) in the 1930s — 1500 pieces in 1933 alone (Cohen 1992, 104).

Thus during the years 1900–30 American collecting expanded to include Chinese alongside Japanese, and archaeological material alongside decorative craftwork and paintings — antiquities alongside antiques. While Morse and Fenollosa had been content to build up an impressive collection of near-contemporary Japanese ceramics, people like Okakura, Freer and Sickman developed more eclectic tastes, and took a greater interest in the archaeological jades, bronzes and sculpture of China. Yet there was a price to pay. Looking back on this period in 1943 the pioneering Swedish archaeologist Johan G. Andersson, who worked in China from 1914 to 1925,

wrote regretfully that:

Owing to the demand which we had created for these prehistoric relics, the Mohammedans had collected them in their hundreds in the old cemeteries. They had dug planlessly right and left, and when different parties came into conflict they had fought regular battles, in which one day a man with a spade had struck off the hand of his opponent. The consequences had been that the official in charge of the district in question had sent soldiers to see that no further excavations were made.

I now clearly understood that as a result of our purchases a most deplorable spoliation of graves in these prehistoric cemeteries had taken place ...

It soon became clear to me how many hundreds of graves containing burial ware of unique size and beauty had been looted by a desecration which had for all time rendered impossible a scientific investigation of the connections between the various objects in the graves ... (Andersson, quoted in Debaine-Francfort 1999, 133).

But the art museums weren't listening. In 1932, Denman Ross had put forward the opposing view:

In collecting we proceeded regardless of archaeological or historical considerations. We were not archaeologists. We were not historians. We were simply lovers of order and the beautiful as they come to pass in the works of man ... (Ross, quoted in Whitehill 1970, 439).

Thus the polarity which characterizes so much of the contemporary debate over collecting was already apparent by the 1920s. While Andersson spoke clearly for the importance of archaeological context, Ross answered for 'art'. Similar arguments and justifications are heard today. Few collectors or museums of this period, however, with the important exception of Denman Ross, showed any real enthusiasm for the material culture of South and Southeast Asia.

'They set themselves apart as men of vision and courageous taste'

The collecting activities of British military and civil personnel had already damaged the archaeology of pre-independence India before the end of the nineteenth century, so much so that in 1904 the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act was passed, with the explicit purpose of protecting monuments and exercising some control over the illegal trade in archaeological material. Yet despite this trade, Hindu sculpture was not highly regarded at the time, and was described as monstrous or idolatrous, or considered repellent on account of its eroticism (Tartakou 1994). Indeed, as late as 1918, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum felt it necessary to justify the acquisition of a black stone relief of Vishnu by arguing that a "heathen idol" may also be a work of art' (Breck 1918, 86). Buddhist sculpture fared better because of the Greek influence at play, and it was widely believed that the spread of a Buddhist figurative tradition from early first-millennium Gandhara had mediated the cultural impulse of Hellenism into India and China. But by the early decades of the twentieth century the Western eye had seen its own realist aesthetic shattered by the continuing blows of modernism, and had become more receptive to non-European styles of representation. The

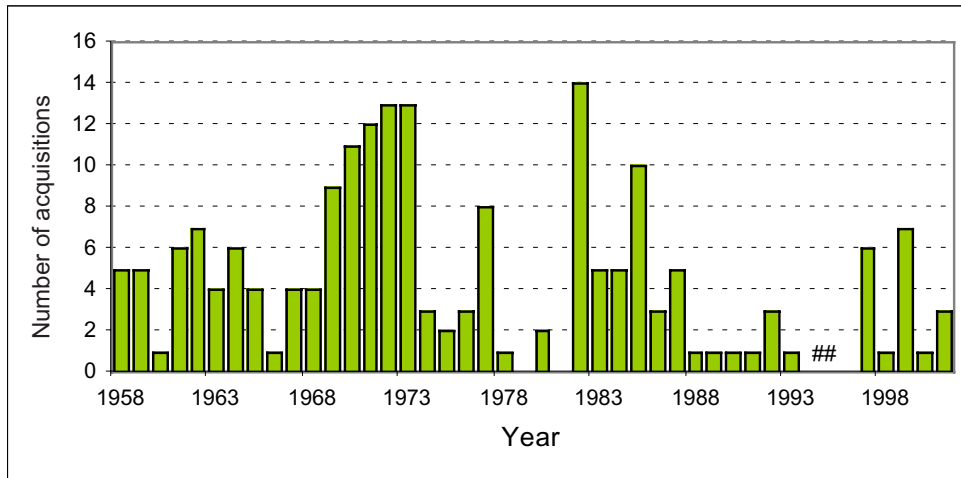
tide of appreciation began to turn in favour of Hindu sculpture, although it would still be some decades before it became a common sight in US museums.

The activities of Denman Ross have already been touched upon. He was unusual for his time, however, in that he showed a precocious interest in the art and archaeology of South and Southeast Asia, and in the Buddhist and Hindu sculpture of those areas. In 1913 the Boston MFA displayed material that Ross had bought in Europe the previous year, which included the usual Chinese and Japanese objects, but also some stone and bronze sculptures from India, Thailand, Cambodia and Java (Whitehill 1970, 138). Nevertheless, the bulk of Denman Ross's South Asian donations at this time were paintings. However, important as Ross was, his real coup came in 1917 when he acquired for Boston the Indian paintings and small bronze figures of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Ross also persuaded Coomaraswamy to follow his collection to Boston and become Keeper of Indian Art. Coomaraswamy set about increasing the Boston MFA's holdings, and between the years 1921 and 1930 many significant pieces were acquired, often the gift of Ross. These included 18 pieces of stone and bronze sculpture from Cambodia (Coomaraswamy 1925, 235).

Outside Boston, there was not much interest in the sculpture of South and Southeast Asia. Freer, for example, who had travelled widely in India in 1895, as far north as the Khyber Pass, does not seem to have been unduly enthusiastic about this material. His collection came to contain 134 Mughal miniatures, but his only other acquisitions were an ivory carving from Orissa and a piece of stone relief from Java (Lippe 1970, ix). Most of the South and Southeast Asian pieces now held by the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery were added after his death. In 1891 the *New York Herald* donated a Pala Indian stone sculpture to the Metropolitan Museum, and visitors to India during the early decades of the twentieth century like the artist Mr Lockwood de Forest used their connections to the benefit of the museum. The Metropolitan also made some early purchases of important Southeast Asian sculpture, but, like Freer and Lodge, showed an uncomfortable awareness of the destruction being caused at source. In 1915, a curator wrote of the regrettable vandalism then destroying archaeology and archaeological contexts in Asia, and of the vulnerability of pieces wherever there is a demand, 'unless strong government measures keep the natives as well as the explorers from defacing the monuments' (Bosch Reitz 1915, 262). When 33 fragments of 'Greco-Buddhist' Gandharan stone and stucco sculpture were purchased from Colonel M.C. Cooke-Collis, who had acquired them while stationed for 15 years near Peshawar, the museum regretted that no record had been made of findspots and the trouble this causes archaeologists in their study of such material (Breck 1913, 134). The acquisition of these pieces — including heads, hands, a face split from a head, and some complete Buddha images — marked the first time that a category for Indian Antiquities appeared in the *Bulletin of*

the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Things started to change during the 1940s. Denver Art Museum opened in 1933 and by 1937, through the generosity of Walter C. Mead, it had a large holding of Chinese and Japanese material. Then, in the late 1940s, it started to receive South and Southeast Asian objects from Harry B. and



Mary Guthrie Goodwin. The key figure in post-war years, however, was Sherman E. Lee. After three years at Seattle Museum, in 1953 he was appointed Curator of Far Eastern Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Cleveland had already purchased several significant pieces of South and Southeast Asian sculpture during the 1930s and 40s, but it was not really until the arrival of Sherman Lee, and particularly after Leonard C. Hanna's 1959 bequest provided the financial backing, that an ambitious programme of acquisitions got underway. In 1959 Cleveland started listing their acquisitions in their Annual Report, and they are shown here in Plate 7.5.

The expansion of Cleveland's South and Southeast Asian holdings was symptomatic of a more general shift in US collecting practices, at both individual and institutional levels, as established collectors of Chinese and Japanese material began to look further afield. Avery Brundage, for example, had started collecting Chinese objects, particularly bronzes, in 1935, but during the 1940s and 1950s his interests grew to include material from Korea, Japan, India and Southeast Asia (Shangraw 1986, 37). In 1960 he presented his collection to the San Francisco Art Museum, which changed its name to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, but Brundage carried on buying until by 1966 he had acquired 6000 objects, from all countries, and a further 3000 by 1975, the year of his death (Shangraw 1986, 30). At that time, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco contained nearly 300 objects from the Indian subcontinent (of all dates), 300 from the Himalayas, and 200 from Southeast Asia (Shangraw 1986, 42)

John D. Rockefeller III was stationed in Japan after World War II where he began collecting Japanese ceramics in 1951. In 1956 he established the Asia Society in New York to promote exhibitions of Asian material, and began collecting more seriously. In 1963 he appointed Sherman Lee as his artistic advisor. At the time of his death in 1978 his collection was bequeathed to the Asia Society and went on public display in 1981 when Asia House opened. It contained something like 138 archaeological pieces, of which 57 were from East Asia, largely China, while the remaining 85 were from South and

7.5 Total annual acquisitions of archaeological material from South and Southeast Asia by Cleveland Museum (1958–2001). # indicates quantity not known.

Southeast Asia, and the Himalayas (Leidy 1994).

But people like Brundage and Rockefeller were joined by a new breed of collector, who may in all fairness be called South and Southeast Asian specialists. Nasli M. Heeramaneck, for example, who was born in Bombay, opened a gallery in Paris before moving to the USA in 1927. He was a major dealer and collector of South Asian and Himalayan material, and in 1966 his collection was displayed at the Boston MFA. The catalogue listed 103 archaeological objects (Boston MFA 1966). Boston acquired nine pieces from the collection, with the remainder going to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

Norton Simon started collecting Asian material in 1971, and from the start he concentrated on South and Southeast Asia, and the Himalayas. By the mid-1970s he had acquired 150 pieces of sculpture, and by the 1980s more than 600 (Pal 1986b, 120; Campbell 2003, 7). Simon paid off the debts of the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art, which had been built in the 1960s, and installed himself and his collection there. Since 1975 it has been called the Norton Simon Museum of Art (Pal 1986b, 120; 2000).

Another major collection was assembled by the husband and wife team of Jim and Marilyn Alsdorf. Again, like Norton, but starting in the 1950s, they focused their energies upon acquiring objects of Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian provenance, and succeeded in building up a substantial collection. A catalogue of the more significant parts of their collection listed 276 archaeological objects, and this was not a complete account by any means (Pal 1997). It reported for instance that Marilyn Alsdorf had a personal collection of several hundred Ganesha miniatures, and was in the habit of offering them as gifts to friends and relatives (Pal 1997, xii).

By the 1950s–60s, the Metropolitan was increasingly aware that its Asian collections were lagging behind, particularly when compared to, say, the Boston MFA. This was an especially curious circumstance since the first half of the twentieth century had been a period of aggressive collecting for other departments in the Metropolitan, and since the 1940s New York City had been the main centre of a booming post-war Asian art market (Wen 1975, 131–2). Its South and Southeast Asian holdings were particularly poor. Although there had been notable early acquisitions of material from these areas, Cora Timken Burnett's 1957 bequest of four important Indian sculptures still brought the total available for exhibition to only around 20. As late as 1972, the collection included fewer than 50 objects, mainly acquired through bequest rather than systematic acquisition, with virtually none from Tibet and Nepal (see Lerner & Kossak 1994). This situation apparently reflected not only an atmosphere of benign neglect, but also insufficient public interest and active collecting in the museum's New York catchment area (Lerner 1984, 6–10).

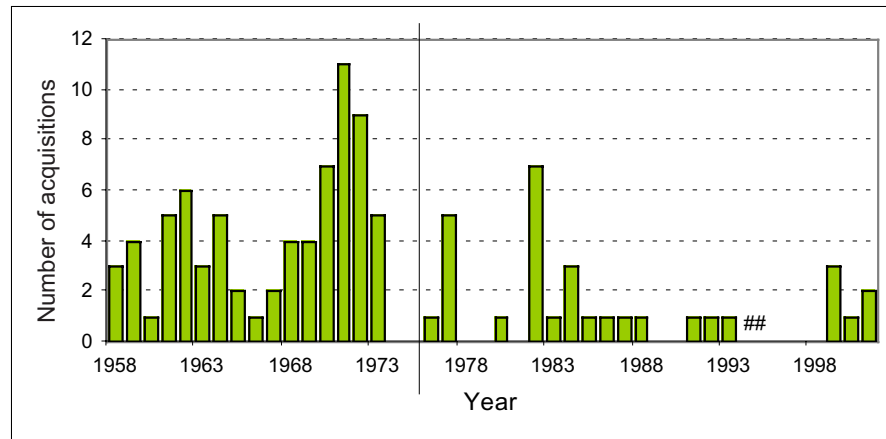
Increasing its Asian holding became the Metropolitan's top priority when in 1970 Douglas Dillon became President of the museum's Board of Trustees and appointed Mrs Vincent Astor as Chairman to the Department of

Far Eastern Art. A successful expansion programme began, under the leadership of Wen Fong, a leading expert on Chinese art and Princeton University professor, who was appointed special consultant in 1971 (Metropolitan Museum 1987). The Metropolitan's commitment to expanding its Asian collection was reaffirmed in 1975 by the appointment of Martin Lerner as Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art. Also in 1975, almost every departmental curator was prepared to give up their share of acquisition funds in order that the extraordinary Harry Packard collection of Japanese art and archaeology could be purchased (Wen 1975, 141–6). From the 1970s onwards the Metropolitan became increasingly active on the market, and also received several important benefactions, notably from the Eilenberg and Kronos collections.

Samuel Eilenberg began collecting while working as an academic mathematician in Bombay in 1953. A discerning and voracious collector until his death in 1998, he preferred three-dimensional objects and went to great lengths to acquire what he thought to be the best, even as supplies were dwindling, often searching out objects in 'uncharted countryside' during numerous trips to India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Thailand (Safrani 1986, 161). A large part of his collection was donated to the Metropolitan, and transformed the museum's holdings in two important areas: early material from South Asia and bronzes from Indonesia. By the time of the Metropolitan's 1991–2 exhibition of objects from the Eilenberg collection, published as *The Lotus Transcendent* (Lerner & Kossak 1991), more than 400 objects from the collection had been acquired by donation and purchase. In 1989, in return for donations the Metropolitan raised, through general funds and with contributions from other sources, nearly \$1.5 million to endow a visiting mathematics professorship at Columbia University in the collector's name (Nelson 1998).

More recently, through the 1980s and 1990s, the Kronos collections have been, year on year, one of the single most prolific donors to the museum's South and Southeast Asian holdings, and have been held up as an example of what collectors can achieve in the field of Indian and Southeast Asian art in a short period of time. Steve Kossak, founder of the collections, began to acquire in the late 1970s, inspired by an early fascination with the Asian galleries at Boston, and at Yale University where he studied the history of Far Eastern Art and Buddhism. By the time the Metropolitan Museum exhibited a selection of more than one hundred Kronos objects, a little more than ten years later (Lerner 1984), it was regarded as one of the major new collections. The exhibition was dedicated to new collectors of South Asian art, who were congratulated as 'by acquiring in a field that brought little social recognition, that taxed the intellect, and required a fresh aesthetic perspective, they set themselves apart as men of vision and courageous taste' (Lerner 1984, 9). Steven Kossak's close ties to the Metropolitan Museum were formalized when he was appointed Assistant Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art shortly

afterwards. By 1994, the Metropolitan boasted one of the most comprehensive Asian collections in the world and was profiting from an influential group of Friends of Asian Art which was dedicated to raising money for, and the appreciation of, new acquisitions and galleries (Metropolitan Museum 1993).

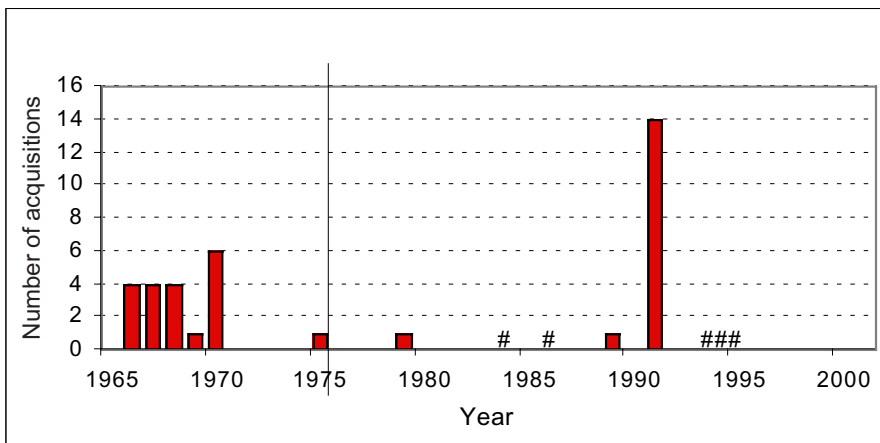


What is really startling about these post-war collections of South and Southeast Asian material is the speed of their assembly in the United States at a time when there were no pre-existing collections to draw upon, and when competition for material was intensifying as more and more museums were opening. Gone were the days when the Boston MFA might look on nervously at the collecting activities of the Metropolitan and the Art Institute of Chicago. By the time Norton Simon — who acquired more than 600 Asian objects in little more than a decade — took over at Pasadena there were something like 47 art museums in the United States which were actively acquiring Asian material on the open market. There also seems in this post-war period to have been a change in the relations of patronage that existed between private collectors and museums, a culmination perhaps of one that had begun decades earlier. Cohen (1992, 147) has pointed to an important contrast between the attitudes of Freer and Brundage, in that whereas Freer took endless pains to learn about the objects in his collection, Brundage would often leave them in storage, unwrapped, and apparently uncared for. ‘Freer loved the art he collected. Brundage loved being known as an important collector ...’. This is an important observation and one that might be more generally relevant. In the late 1800s and early 1900s there was very little museum expertise available, and often it was the collectors themselves, men like Fenollosa and Coomaraswamy, who were hired to provide it. By the 1950s and 60s this was no longer the case. ‘Asian Art’ was a well-established museum specialty with a mature professional structure. The art museum could provide the expertise if the collector could provide the money.

7.6 Annual acquisitions of archaeological material probably from the state of India by Cleveland Museum (1958–2001). The vertical black line marks the 1976 implementation of the Indian Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972. # indicates quantity not known.

‘The last which is likely to be brought here’

Like Japan and China before them, when the countries of South and Southeast Asia began to see their archaeological heritage flowing east across the Pacific, they looked for legal remedies. India’s Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904 was augmented in 1947 by the Antiquities (Export Control) Act, and again in 1958 by the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and



Remains Act. However, these laws were based on the British model of protecting archaeological sites or monuments of designated importance, and thus did not apply to the vast majority of sites that were being vandalized. It was felt that stiffer laws were necessary to staunch the outflow and the result

was the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972, implemented in 1976, which outlawed the unlicensed export of all archaeological material (Biswas 1999).

The Indian authorities also began to enforce their legislation. In 1976 the Indian government secured the return from the Norton Simon Foundation of an early Chola bronze Nataraja image that had been removed illegally from a temple at Sivapuram, in Tamil Nadu, sometime in the mid-1950s. Simon had bought it for one million dollars from the New York dealer Ben Heller in 1973 (Pachauri 2002, 274). In 1985 the Kimbell Art Museum returned another tenth-century bronze Nataraja which had originally been stolen from a temple in Tiruvilakkudi, Tamil Nadu, in 1978 (Shankar 2001, 34). Some museums seem to have taken note of this new law, and of the Indian readiness to enforce it. Cleveland’s acquisitions of Indian material tailed off after 1974 (Plate 7.6), and in 1985 its Director, E.H. Turner, who had replaced Sherman Lee in 1983, noted that Cleveland was firmly committed to observing India’s much needed laws (Turner 1985, 164). Boston’s acquisitions of Indian material seem to have diminished too (Plate 7.7), but, as already described, at the Metropolitan they actually increased (Plate 7.8), largely because the museum had missed out on the boom years of the 1950s and 60s. Nevertheless, an eighth-century sculpture which was stolen in Bihar between 1987 and 1989 was returned to India by the Metropolitan Museum in 1999, and in the same year, the Asia Society returned an eleventh-century sandstone relief to a provincial museum in Madhya Pradesh. In 2000 Mrs Marilyn Alsdorf returned a tenth-century piece which she found to have been stolen in 1967 from a temple in Uttar Pradesh (Shankar 2001, 35; Pachauri 2003).

Like India, the archaeology of Cambodia had suffered under colonial rule, in this case French, but this was nothing to what followed when, in 1970, its government collapsed, plunging the country into a civil war which lasted until the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975. During this time, and the terror that followed, Cambodia’s archaeological heritage was easy prey. Its ancient Khmer — an ethnonym misappropriated by the Khmer Rouge — temples and

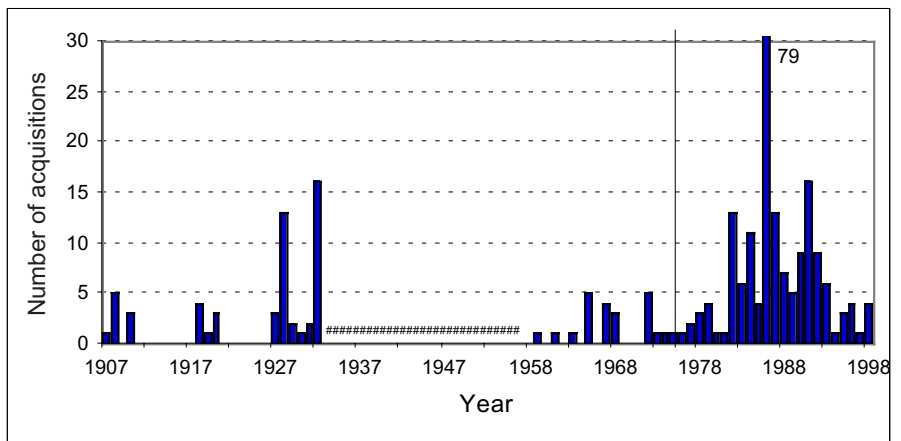
7.7 Annual acquisitions of archaeological material probably from the state of India by Boston MFA (1965–2001). The vertical black line marks the 1976 implementation of the Indian Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972. # indicates quantity not known.

other monuments of the ninth to fourteenth centuries AD were defaced as pieces of relief sculpture were hacked off and stone statues were severed at the feet, decapitated or otherwise dismembered for removal abroad. Museums and storage facilities were also ransacked. At the Dépôt de la Conservation at Angkor Wat many sculptures were broken or destroyed and a large number were stolen. In 1993 the International

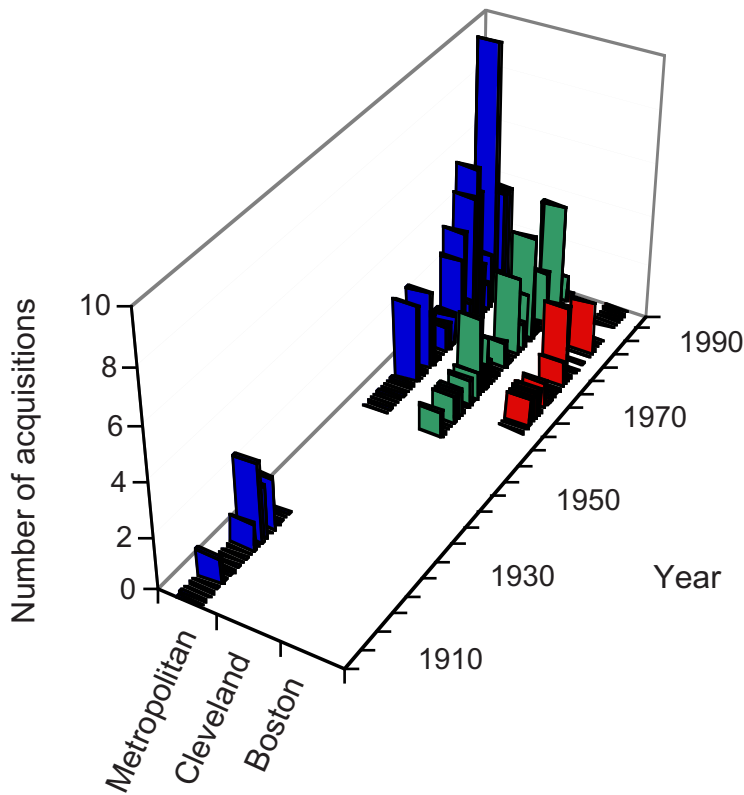
Council of Museums published an illustrated catalogue of 100 pieces that had been stolen from the Dépôt (ICOM 1993, revised 1997). One was discovered to be in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, and was subsequently returned to Cambodia in 1997. Two more pieces were discovered in the Honolulu Academy of Arts, and returned in 2002.¹ In 1999 the Cambodian government requested help from the United States to stop the plunder of its archaeological heritage under the terms of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and the US government complied by placing import restrictions on stone archaeological material of sixth- to sixteenth-century date. In 2003 the agreement was extended to include metal and ceramic objects.

It is heartening that museums and collectors are prepared to return objects from their collections when they are identified as stolen, but while this may result in good publicity for the collection concerned, the impact of returns upon the problem at source is minimal. This is because the chances of being caught holding a stolen object are slim. For an object to be identified as stolen, there must be proof, preferably documentary and particularly photographic, that can establish its original location and ownership. The objects stolen from the Dépôt de la Conservation at Angkor Wat, for example, were identifiable as they had been catalogued in the 1960s and photographs were available. Usually, though, such documentary evidence is not forthcoming. There are many monuments and temples in Asia that have never been adequately described and recorded, and archaeological material that is illegally dug from graves is, obviously, previously unknown. Countries or individuals may claim that material removed from such contexts is stolen, but without evidence it is impossible to substantiate the claim in a US court of law.

It is sobering to reflect that in 1925 Coomaraswamy was able to list only 39 pieces of Khmer sculpture in US museums, 18 of which were in Boston (Coomaraswamy 1925), yet by 1997 what was published of the Alsdorf collection alone contained 38 archaeological pieces from Cambodia and



7.8 Annual acquisitions of archaeological material probably from the state of India by the Metropolitan Museum (1907–32, 1959–98). The vertical black line marks the 1976 implementation of the Indian Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972. # indicates quantity not known.



7.9 Annual acquisitions of archaeological material probably from Cambodia by the Metropolitan Museum, Cleveland Museum, and the Boston MFA.

Thailand, largely bronze and stone images and some stone architectural fragments. It is also interesting to note the type, in an anatomical sense, of statuary that was being collected. Of Coomaraswamy's 39 pieces, 25 were stone heads, 5 were stone torsos, and 4 were bronze figures. Of the Alsdorf's 38 pieces, only 3 were stone heads while 11 were torsos, and there were 10 bronze figures (plus 1 silver). Clearly, since Coomaraswamy's time, it had become far easier to acquire complete statues. Indeed, Eilenberg's reputation as an astute collector was greatly enhanced by his canny ability to search out and acquire Khmer statues which retained their heads (Safrani 1986, 161). It is ironic too

that when in 1913 the Metropolitan acquired a stone head from the temple of Angkor Wat, it was described as 'one of the first three or four fragments of ancient Cambodian sculpture to reach America and the last which is likely to be brought here' (Friedley 1915, 219), yet from the late 1960s onwards Cambodian material started to enter museums in increasing quantities (Plate 7.9).

Most Asian objects that appear on the market do so seemingly out of thin air. They are hardly ever accompanied by any details of find circumstances or previous ownership. Thailand, however, provides us with an alarming exception to this otherwise convenient — for collectors — rule, and shows that more might be known about the provenance of objects than we are generally led to believe. In 1964 forty or more eighth-century Buddhist bronzes were recovered from an underground burial chamber in an abandoned temple precinct in the Prakon Chai district of Thailand, near the Cambodian border. Today, there are bronzes from this hoard in Asia House, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Norton Simon Museum, the Kimbell Art Museum and the Thai National Museum in Bangkok. The largest bronze from the hoard was a purchase-of-the-year by the Metropolitan Museum in 1967 (at which time it was referred to only as a pre-Khmer bronze of remarkable quality, size and rarity, with no mention of provenance: Wen 1968, 98). Another was bought by the museum in 1999 (Metropolitan Museum 1999, 83). It is reported that most of the rest have been moved

abroad but their whereabouts have not been revealed (Brown 1986, 67; Pal 1986b, 138). One wonders how the bronzes travelled from Thailand to the United States, and what intermediaries were involved, but the very fact that someone can identify individual pieces from the hoard leads us to suspect that there is a lot more known about this find than we have been told.

Another Thai site that raises awkward questions is prehistoric Ban Chiang. From 1968 through into the 1970s it was badly damaged by locals digging for pots and other artefacts to sell to US servicemen at the nearby Udon Air Force Base, or to dealers who travelled up from Bangkok (Thosarat 2001, 8–10). Examples of Ban Chiang pottery and other objects are quite distinctive and can be readily identified, and today pieces are to be found in most museum collections, although many are suspected of being fake (Vitelli 1984, 145–6). Again though, nothing has been made public about the circumstances of their removal from Thailand and their subsequent trade.

‘The gods are leaving the country’

The South Asian collections that have been built up since World War II are also noteworthy on account of their Himalayan, and particularly Nepalese, material. Coomaraswamy had collected a couple of Nepalese pieces which went to Boston in 1917, but it is believed that Nepal was only brought to public attention by the 1964 Art of Nepal exhibition which was held at Asia House (Pal 1986a, 7), and that the large-scale trade and collecting of Nepalese material followed soon after. Certainly by 1966 the Heeramanek collection contained a quantity of Nepalese sculpture, and more was acquired by the Rockefeller and Alsdorf collections, and Boston, Cleveland and Metropolitan museums substantially increased their Nepalese art holdings from the 1970s onwards (Table 7.1).

Museums and collectors have shown very little interest in the source of all this material, though it is now well-documented that it has been removed from temples and shrines. In 1989, for example, the German photographer Jürgen Schick produced a book entitled *Die Götter verlassen das Land*, which was published in an English edition nine years later as *The Gods are Leaving the Country* (Schick 1998). In this book Schick provides a photographic record of the appalling damage that is being done to the cultural heritage of Nepal as sculpture after sculpture disappears to feed the international market. He reports that since 1958 Nepal has lost more than half of its Hindu and Buddhist sculpture, and that since the 1980s the scale of plunder has reached ‘frightful proportions’. By 1998 most bronze images had been removed and their stone congeners looked set to follow (Schick 1998, 37–40). Schick includes many photographs of images now long gone, and a series of ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ photographs of pieces before and after theft or

Table 7.1. Pre-1400 stone and metal images from Nepal in various museum and private collections.

	Metal	Stone
Alsdorf (1997)	20	21
Boston (1965–2002)	2	0
Cleveland (1958–2001)	10	2
Heeramanek (1966)	16	0
Rockefeller (1979)	4	0
Metropolitan (1975–99)	27	5 (+29 unspecified)

vandalism. Much of what remains in Nepal is now embedded in concrete or obscured behind metal bars. Schick had intended to include more photographs in the English edition of his book, but in 1996 they were stolen from his publisher's office in Bangkok, together with the original slides of the German edition. The book clearly had someone rattled. Nevertheless, as a result of Schick's book, and also of Lain S. Bangdel's *Stolen Images of Nepal* (1989), in 1999 three stone statues and a severed head were returned to Nepal by a Los Angeles-based collector (Dixit 1999, 9).

'A continuous flow of previously unknown works of art'

The US occupation of Japan in 1945 offered new opportunities for collectors. Large quantities of Japanese material came onto the market as long-established family collections were sold off, and the Japanese government was in no position to protest as 'national treasures' were sold abroad in apparent contravention of its 1884 law (Cohen 1992, 133). Sometimes pieces that had previously been registered as 'national treasures' were deregistered for export (Cohen 1992, 137). Seattle Art Museum and Cleveland Museum of Art both acquired important Japanese material during this period (Cohen 1992, 134). Some large private collections were built up too. Harry C. Packard was stationed in Japan and stayed there after US occupation ended in 1950, ultimately building up a collection of 421 objects ranging in date from the Neolithic to the twentieth century, which he sold to the Metropolitan Museum in 1975 (Hoving 1993, 374–7).

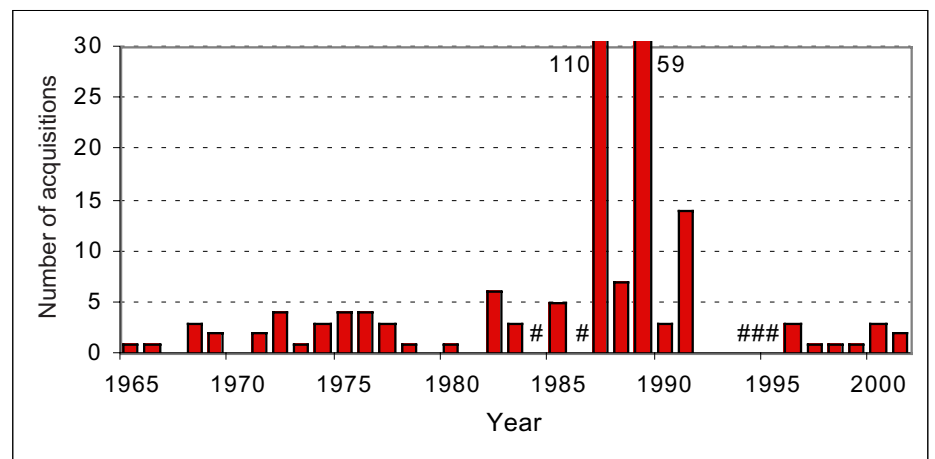
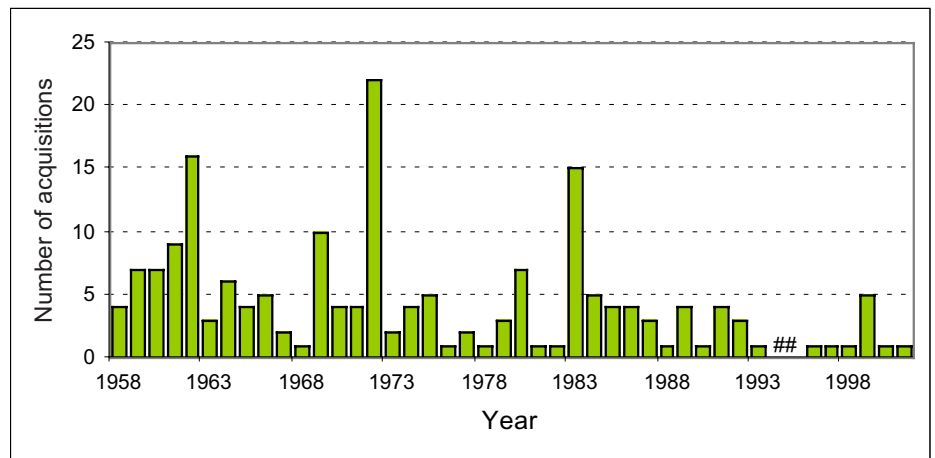
It is often said that the US market in Chinese artefacts was effectively stifled during the Korean war, when the US Government placed an embargo on trade with the communist People's Republic of China, and that the trade did not recover until the 1970s (Cohen 1992, 138; Pal 1986a, 6). This claim seems to be partly true, and partly not. Acquisitions of Chinese material by the Boston MFA and the Cleveland continued at a steady pace during the 1950s and 1960s, and through into the 1970s and 1980s (Plates 7.10 & 7.11), and some remarkable private collections were assembled, notably by Arthur M. Sackler, who donated it to the Smithsonian in 1987. Clearly, much of the available material was from already established American collections. Boston acquired several collections of Chinese and Japanese material in the 1940s and 1950s, most notably that of Charles B. Hoyt, who had been collecting Chinese material since 1910 (Whitehill 1970, 533), while in 1950 the Art Institute of Chicago acquired the Sonnenscheins' collection of over 1000 Neolithic to Bronze Age Chinese jades that had been assembled during the 1920s and 1930s (Pearlstein 1993, 9). But not everything came from old collections, some material was new. For example, Sackler's Shang bronzes were definitively published in 1987 (Bagley 1987), and the catalogue entries provide extensive bibliographies for each piece. Yet out of a total of 103 bronzes only 26 have a published bibliography that goes back to before 1950. In 1997, looking back over the post-war period, commentator Souren Melikian wrote about China

that 'No other country since WWII has yielded such a continuous flow of previously unknown works of art, with so many of them matching or, sometimes, exceeding in splendour the greatest to be seen in museums' (Melikian 1997).

The continuing movement of material out of China was almost certainly due to the emergence of Hong Kong as a major trading centre. At first the Hong Kong market was unreliable and awash with fakes (it still is), but did possess the advantage of being under British, and thus not communist, jurisdiction, and so open for trade. Sotheby's recognized the potential of Hong Kong when it started to hold auctions there in the 1970s, and is generally credited with using its name and expertise to establish market confidence (Goedhuis

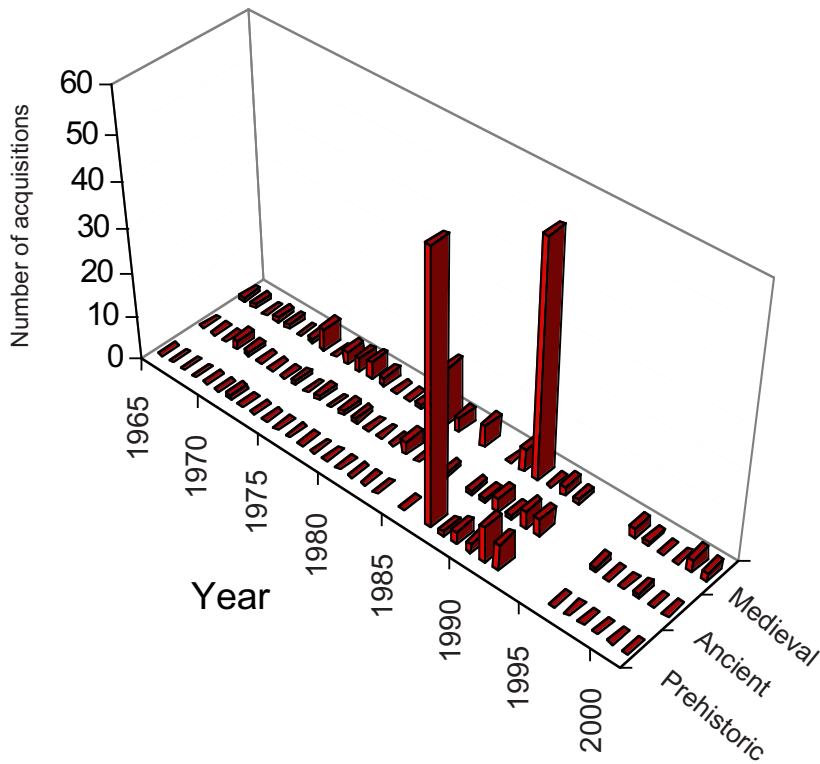
1997, 5; Norman 1988, 174). Since the Chinese economy started to open in the mid-1980s looting has taken off (Murphy 1995, 50–61; He 2001), and Chinese material has once again begun to flood through the Western market (Moncrieff 1999). The combination of rising unemployment on the mainland together with the unregulated Hong Kong market has proved disastrous for China's archaeological heritage. By 2002, a top New York dealer reported that 99 per cent of his material is from Hong Kong (Mason 2002).

This explosion of Chinese material, however, isn't reflected in the acquisitions of Cleveland Museum, which, if anything, have declined since the early 1980s (Plate 7.10). In part, this might be because of more stringent acquisition policies, but it might also reflect more selective collecting if the type of material appearing on the market is already well-represented in the museum's storerooms. At Boston, for example, the increased numbers of acquisitions in the late 1980s and early 1990s were due in part to the acquisition of Neolithic and Bronze Age objects, more than at any time previously (Plate 7.12), which might indicate that the museum was acquiring objects of an age not well-represented in its collection, and that later material was of less interest. It would be interesting to look at the types and quantities of Chinese objects acquired since the early 1980s by some of the more



7.10 Annual acquisitions of archaeological material from China by Cleveland Museum (1958–2001). # indicates quantity not known.

7.11 Annual acquisitions of archaeological material from China by Boston MFA (1965–2001). # indicates quantity not known.



7.12 Annual acquisitions of archaeological material from China by Boston MFA. The material is divided into three chronological categories designed to show the increasing emphasis on early acquisitions. Prehistoric = Neolithic–1500 BC; Ancient = 1500 BC–AD 250; medieval = AD 250–AD 1400. # indicates quantity not known.

recently-established museums.

Conclusion

The story of Asian collecting as told here clearly reflects the central roles played by art museums and their patrons. It also demonstrates the impact that a small number of wealthy collectors or energetic curators can make by pushing back the boundaries of what is considered good taste and by endowing or even establishing museum departments. It also seems likely that from the beginning of the twentieth century at least most of the

archaeological material collected was first obtained in destructive and often illegal circumstances as tombs were dug up and monuments defaced. There were at first, it is true, some Chinese objects to be had from old established collections, and some pieces of Cambodian or Indian statuary, but not many, and certainly not enough to supply the expanding market. The simple justification for this destruction has been that the objects collected are ‘art’, and that the public benefits from their collection and display. Clearly, as we said in the introduction, there are no objective criteria by which this claim can be assessed. At best it might be true, at worst, merely cant. The improving aesthetic fortune of Hindu sculpture shows that whatever else we can say about art as beauty, it is not an absolute quality, but one that is relative to the preconceptions of the viewer.

This study also throws some light on the history and effectiveness of export regulation. There is an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of statutory regulation in controlling the illegal trade in archaeological material, and the pro-trade lobby has consistently championed the so-called screening regimes of countries such as Japan and Britain, where only a few ‘important’ pieces are barred from export, against the total embargoes on export practised by countries like India (Bator 1982; Brodie 2002; contributions in Briat & Freedberg 1996). Yet, as the Indian experience makes clear, the government there did not enact strong legislation until 1976, when it became clear that its pre-existing screening system, based on the British model, had totally failed to protect the country’s archaeological heritage from a booming market. The case

of late 1940s Japan is also illuminating. While its export screening system worked well during pre-war years when the Japanese economy was strong and domestic buyers could compete on the international market, it proved inadequate when the economy collapsed in the aftermath of World War II. Clearly, for export screening systems to function effectively they need the support of a strong domestic economy, and are otherwise inappropriate.

The sources we have utilized for this study are those which are generally accessible; they include personal or institutional histories, catalogues of large collections and exhibitions, and some museum yearbooks. These sources constitute the public face of the Asian 'art' world, and a handsome one it is too. Museums, connoisseurs and philanthropists are shown working together to promote the public appreciation of Asian art — and by implication culture — through the media of display and publication. The books and catalogues are large, printed on good-quality glossy paper and profusely illustrated, usually in colour. From these sources we can learn about the material substance and style of objects and, for religious sculpture at least, their cosmological significance. We can also learn from what often amount to hagiographies something about the lives of great collectors and generous benefactors. What is not told is how the commercial structures that support the museum enterprise are configured and how they reconfigure through time. Yet these are the structures that connect art museums to the exigencies of the outside world, and their suppression allows the creation of a sanitized museum environment where the dubious origins of exhibited pieces are not allowed to intrude upon their contemplation as 'art'. Carol Duncan has gone so far as to liken the art museum to a ritual space (Duncan 1995, 7).

The distancing of art museums from the source of their material — in this case Asia — has been a gradual one. As we have seen, until the 1920s at least, collectors and curators, or their agents, would regularly visit China and Japan, but as the twentieth century wore on it became easier for collectors to buy in the USA. One reason for this is simply that large parts of Asia have at one time or another been dangerous places to visit (Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 70s, Afghanistan in the 1990s), or inaccessible (China from the 1950s to 1980s). Another reason is that dealers have moved closer to the demand, and it is now far easier to buy material in New York or even London than it was a century ago. But not only have museums become physically separated from the source of their collections, the nature of their connection has become less visible. In 1950, for example, the influential dealer C.T. Loo wrote disarmingly that in 1928–9 his company's Chinese agents had bought everything they could from a newly discovered tomb group and that most of the jades went to G.L. Winthrop, and ultimately to Harvard's Fogg Museum (Loo 1950). No museum today would be happy with this kind of publicity and specific details of commercial practices and the methods or sources of museum acquisitions are hard to come by. The mantra of 'commercial necessity' is endlessly repeated as the reason — in truth an excuse — for

keeping this type of information secret. At the end of the day, we can only know about the source of museum acquisitions from what the museums themselves choose to tell us, and usually that is not very much.

It is questionable to what extent any new understanding of Asian culture or history can be derived from objects that now lie stranded in museums, long removed from their original social and archaeological contexts. For example, most recent accounts — even those written by committed collectors and dealers — stress that our present understanding of Chinese archaeology is due to recent excavations in China, not to collecting in the USA. But one of the most profound consequences of the Asian art affair may be that it exposes a cultural hypocrisy of our own. Art museums enjoy public support because they are thought to embody a set of values or virtues to which most citizens can adhere or aspire. They include altruism, education and a commitment to self-improvement, but they are hopelessly compromised by an enterprise that ignores or tacitly condones the theft and destruction of Asian archaeological heritage.

A note on sources

We have focused a large part of our discussion on three museums: the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Cleveland Museum of Art. These happen to be three of the most important US art museums, but our choice was dictated solely by the availability of museum yearbooks, not by any preconceptions we held about the probity or otherwise of their acquisitions policies. Indeed, as our discussion should have made clear, their stance as regards the market has not always been uncritical, and has usually owed more to the disposition of individual curators than to institutional policy.

Note

1. See <http://icom.museum/list_thanks_angkor.html>.

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