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Showcasing a continent's art at Smith College

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Sopheap Pich "Seated Buddha — Abhaya Mudra," 2012. Bamboo, rattan, wire, plywood by Sopheap Pich, Cambodian, born 1971.

NORTHAMPTON — You've heard it before. The 21st century is going to be — already is — an Asian century. Corporations across the world concur. The US government, which has realigned its geopolitical thinking toward Asia, thinks so. And you can be sure that Asian leaders think so.

Everyone has done the math. Three of the world's four most populous countries, and seven of the top 10, are in Asia. Of the world's three biggest economies, two are Asian: China and Japan.

So what are the art museums of New England doing about it?

It's worth asking, if only because, between the Museum of Fine Arts, the Peabody Essex Museum, and the collections of several college museums — above all, Harvard and Yale — New England can boast some of the world's most prestigious collections of Asian art.

Unfortunately, not all of these institutions have been aggressive in moving with the times and bringing their collections up to date. Wedded from the start to a nostalgic vision of Asia, they sometimes seem stuck in an old idea of what Asian art should look like.

Asian art is alive, unpredictable, and unruly. It is neither useful nor advisable to sentimentalize it, as American and European audiences have done in the past.

This is why I went to see "Collecting Art of Asia," a show at Smith College Museum of Art. Smith is well known for having one of the finest collections of European and American art in the Northeast. In late-19th-century European art alone, it has the sort of collection — bubbling over with works by Degas, Bonnard, Monet, Manet, Morisot, Corot, and Courbet — that inspires acute envy in many more famous museums.

But it also has Asian art in depth. And for this it can thank not only an early stroke of luck, but more recently, an enlightened policy of collecting that does not seek to preserve Asian culture in aspic.

Smith's Asian collection got going a century ago, when the industrialist and collector Charles Lang Freer gave the first of a total of 45 Asian works to the college.

The year 1913 was freighted with significance, as Christopher Benfey points out in the epilogue to his seminal book about the exchange between New England and Japan, "The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan." The year marked the end of an older kind of relationship between East and West, and the beginning of a new, more ferociously modern one.

The Meiji era in Japan had ended the previous year, with the death of the emperor. An era of fertile relations between Asia and America also ended with the death, in 1913, of Kakuzo Okakura. Okakura was the author of “The Book of Tea,” a close friend of Isabella Stewart Gardner, and head of the Asian department at the Museum of Fine Arts. His circle of influence — on philosophers, collectors, writers, artists, and architects — was huge.

1913 was also the year that Ezra Pound discovered Japanese aesthetics, through Mary McNeil Fenollosa, the widow of the American scholar of Asian art (and Okakura’s friend) Ernest Fenollosa. Mary was looking for someone to sort through her late husband’s papers, which included many translations of ancient Chinese and Japanese literature. Pound took on the job. His exposure to Fenollosa’s manuscripts, writes Benfey, “changed the course of American literature.”

In the same year, Frank Lloyd Wright, who was profoundly influenced by Okakura’s “The Book of Tea,” received the commission to design the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, and Marcel Proust published “Swann’s Way,” the first volume of “Remembrance of Things Past.” Proust’s book includes, in its most famous passage, pungent references not only to tea but to Japan.

Modernism and Japan were henceforth inseparable.

Freer’s 1913 gift to Smith, comprising 12 carved wooden and lacquer panels, wasn’t much on the face of it. But it came with interest: specifically, Freer’s interest. Having been turned on to Asian art by James Whistler, and advised in his acquisitions by Fenollosa, Freer was more than just an avid collector. He was committed to education in Asian aesthetics.

He had already given the bulk of his collection of Asian and American art to the nation in 1906: The gift formed the basis of the Freer Gallery, which opened in Washington, D.C., in 1923. Now, his interest was as much in enlightening people about Asian aesthetics as in acquiring actual objects.

Until his death in 1919, Freer helped arrange for Asian scholars to visit Smith and deliver lectures, and he continued to donate work from his collection — not just to Smith but to Oberlin College, Williams College, and Harvard, too. He was planting seeds.

Other Asian things came in to Smith over the years, including from Freer’s friend, the painter Dwight Troyon, who played a major role in establishing the college’s museum of art. But for several decades the college’s focus reverted to European and American art.

It wasn’t until after World War II that Smith turned its attention back to Asia. Important works were given to the museum, and these gifts in turn stimulated others. An Asian Art Task Force was established in 2001, and an impressive roster of Asian art exhibitions has followed, ranging from archaic Chinese jades (2004) and Japanese tea wares from the 16th and 17th centuries (2007) to post-Mao art from China (2008) and contemporary art from Kyoto (2004).

The current show is notable for the fact that much of the space is given over to postwar and contemporary art. Admittedly, that’s partly because a lot of this work takes up more space. There is, for instance, a massive seated Buddha made out of bamboo by Cambodia’s Sopheap Pich, acquired last year.

There is also a “Rubber Man” by the Chinese performance artist, provocateur, and sculptor Pan Xinglei, who is based in Brooklyn, N.Y. The work, in floppy polyurethane, is cast from his own body and covered in graffiti-like Chinese characters.

A pair of photographs by the well-known Chinese “body artist” Huang Yan, a marvelous TV sculpture by South Korea’s pioneer video artist Nam June Paik, and a sweeping wall installation by Yong Soon Min (LP records and CDs arranged to evoke Hokusai’s “The Great Wave”) are also unusually large — at least compared to the lacquer writing boxes and tea bowls in the more traditional part of the show.

But the space accorded more recent art from Asia is also sending a clear message: Asian art is alive, unpredictable, and unruly. It is neither useful nor advisable to sentimentalize it, as American and European audiences have tended to do in the past.

The show covers two floors, each with a series of different-size galleries. There is also a room off to the side of the permanent collection galleries upstairs given over to recent videos from Asia.

One floor is given over entirely to prints by the likes of China’s Yue Minjun (he of the laughing self-portraits), Xu Bing (who riffs on calligraphy), and the mischievous Luo Brothers, and to Japan’s revered abstract artist Shinoda Toko.

Of course, waking up to the true breadth and complexity of recent art from Asia presents you with a new problem: how to develop a set of coherent collecting principles.

For a collection to accrue meaning over time it needs to have focus. Just calling it “Asian” does not amount to focus — you might as well call it “human.” So what is a college museum to do when it has limited funds, and is to a large extent dependent on gifts?

One strategy, which Smith seems to be pursuing, is simply to get active. You set up steering committees. You involve informed and interested parties, including scholars, academics, collectors, and curators, some of them from outside. You collaborate with other institutions. You organize shows. And you develop

relationships with living artists you rate highly — relationships which may then lead to gifts or future projects.

All the while, you remember it's about the art. The art has to be good.

In this way, you create focus, you create meaning.

“Collecting Art of Asia” is more than a stock-taking show that happens to mark 100 years of collecting. It's also a statement of intent. Not all the work in it is outstanding. But what is striking about it is how determinedly, how brightly, it looks to the future.

Museums with richer, and deeper, collections of Asian art, including Boston's MFA and Salem's Peabody Essex Museum, could profit from undertaking a similar exercise.

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