



Plotting the Course for the ASIAN ART MUSEUM: An Interview with Director Dr. Jay Xu

Jay Xu leads one of the largest museums devoted exclusively to Asian art. He was previously the Art Institute of Chicago's Pritzker Chair of Asian and Ancient Art, the Foster Foundation Curator of Chinese Art at the Seattle Art Museum, and also performed curatorial work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Shanghai Museum.

We asked Dr Xu to discuss the place that Asian art has in the United States, the challenges that this institution has faced over the years, and his priorities as he leads this important museum into the future.

Director of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco since June 2008, Jay Xu has a clear focus, "To be a successful leader of a museum like this, a museum that highlights the art and culture of some of the greatest civilizations that have shaped our world, you have to be passionate and be able to communicate that passion. Exposing and explaining these cultures and their art is a labor of love, and truly very important."

"Just look at the importance of China, Japan, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan to America and the world. By helping people to understand the art and rich cultures of Asia, the Asian Art Museum is helping us to make better decisions in this world. When my team and I work to strengthen the Asian Art Museum, we are strengthening an institution in the center of San Francisco that makes a unique contribution to students and business leaders, to academics and art lovers, to tourists and citizens of the city. Leading this institution fulfills so many ambitions for my own career and I am very happy to be in this city, leading the Asian, at this particular time."

This does not mean that leading a museum in the midst of what has been dubbed 'The

Great Recession' is easy. "All museums and nonprofits have to work twice as hard with scarce resources, and we are no exception. Still, I believe that we can think our way out of this crisis."

The Asian's Place in the Community

In the last year, Xu's enthusiasm and sensibility has strongly affected one of the world's premier museums. The Asian Art Museum opened its doors in 1966 in Golden Gate Park as one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. In 2003 the museum moved to an expanded facility at Civic Center Plaza, across from City Hall, and near San Francisco's world renowned Symphony, Ballet and Opera. An architectural gem featuring a dynamic blend of beaux arts and modern design elements, the museum's \$170 million home is the result of a dramatic transformation of the city's former Main Library building by renowned architect Gae Aulenti (who famously reenvisioned an abandoned railway station as Paris Musée d'Orsay) Xu notes, "It was a marvelous achievement and they overcame remarkable obstacles. The field of Asian art has often

been neglected in this country, this despite the fact that Asian communities are extraordinarily important to the United States and the Bay Area. This museum's staff, board and the Asian Art Commission are making an important contribution to increased understanding and connection to Asia."

Xu notes that Asian communities are among the fastest growing communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, and points to strong east, southeast and south Asian communities such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, Indian and Pakistani communities. "San Francisco is a gateway between Asia and the Americas economically, politically and culturally. Our music, food, lifestyles, religious views and our art in San Francisco is much affected by Asia, and we use our collection and the expertise of our curators to help people to explore the ideas that Asian peoples have contributed to the world and this country throughout our history."

The Asian houses more than 17,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history. The Chinese collection constitutes the museum's largest department, with more than 5,500 objects spanning a 4,500 year period.

Plotting the Course for the ASIAN ART MUSEUM *(continued)*



The Japanese collection includes major Buddhist sculpture and superb decorative arts, textiles and basketry; while the Korean collection is the finest and most comprehensive collection of Korean art outside of Korea.

The arts of the Indian subcontinent include temple sculptures, reliefs, bronze images, jades, miniature paintings and wood carvings. The museum boasts the only gallery in the West devoted to Sikh art, while the Himalayas and Tibetan Buddhist World collection includes paintings, stonework, dry lacquer, bronze sculptures, textiles and rare scrolls from the Shalu and Ngor monasteries. The Southeast Asian collection includes one of the most important collections of Thai paintings outside of Thailand, a collection of ancient Cambodian stone sculpture, bronze and stone material from Angkor Wat, and works from Indonesia, Burma, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The West Asia collection features ceramics from the Neolithic period to the 19th century, Luristan and Islamic bronzes, miniature paintings and manuscripts.

According to Xu, "The museum has a stellar reputation as a world class institution for Asian art. My job is to bring this work to audiences in a way that they find engaging, indeed compelling. We have one of the best collections in the world, and my team is determined to bring the riches of this collection to the public."

A Bridge to the Public

But, in a highly competitive marketplace, with myriad for-profit and nonprofit organizations competing for attention and support, a world-class reputation and collection are not enough. With constrained resources, Xu set about developing a balanced exhibition schedule. "My predecessor had developed very good exhibitions that ran just before and just after I joined the Asian. I was very fortunate in that respect, and I built on this foundation. We pay very close attention to what is happening in the world today, and to the interests of our audience."

Over the last year, the Asian has staged a broad array of exhibitions, including:

- *Power & Glory: Court Arts of China's Ming Dynasty*
- *Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul*
- *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*
- *Lords of the Samurai*

Upcoming exhibitions include *Emerald Cities: Arts of Siam and Burma*, which is on view October 23, 2009 through January 10, 2010; and *Shanghai*, which will run from February 12 through September 5, 2010.

"I challenged my staff by asking 'How do we make ourselves more a part of the mainstream? How do we educate the public about the intimate connections between the American life they are living today and Asian art?' Our job is to create a bridge of understanding. We need to be creative in developing new support for our museum in a very competitive market, and we all need to think about what is exciting and interesting to the people of the Bay Area and tourists that visit the city."

A dedicated scholar and curator of Chinese antiquities Xu brings 26 years of rich experience in the museum world acquired at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Seattle Art Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Shanghai Museum. He also brought to the job of directing the Asian an innate sense of marketing. "We are similar to other businesses, museums and other nonprofits in the sense that we have our product and brand. We have unique exhibitions and programs, and our consumers know what we stand for. But as important as it is to have a superior product, it is equally important to market them. People need to be made aware of our work and exhibitions, and we need to generate excitement in the market. Product and marketing go hand in hand."

Museum Visitors as Clients

One of the recent changes at the museum was moving their sponsor-supported free

admission day from the first Tuesday of the month to the first Sunday, allowing working class families to experience the museum. The program is currently being sponsored by Target. "Scholars and those who already have a passion for Asian art will make time to come and visit us, but to extend our audience we need to be sensitive to how everyone uses their time. We want to make it easy for families to visit our museum so that they can learn about the arts and cultures of Asia."

He continues, "Working people can not come in the middle of the week, but they can visit the museum on weekends. So we changed our sponsorship day from Tuesdays to Sundays, and more people have been able to visit the museum as a result. I have been so happy spending my Sundays with new visitors and learning about their interests, and I've been listening to everyone, from seasoned museum professionals and colleagues, to local children and their families, to the general public who happen to walk into the museum as accidental tourists. As my staff and I get to understand our audience, we can evolve our exhibitions and programs to better connect with them."

Xu concedes that more work needs to be done on developing a stronger base of on-going public support. One step in that direction is the museum's MATCHA program, a series of events targeted for young professionals held on six Thursday evenings throughout the year. MATCHA, named after the powdered Japanese green tea renowned for its rich and vibrant flavor, offers guests the chance to enjoy live performances, browse the galleries, mingle with friends



Plotting the Course for the ASIAN ART MUSEUM (*continued*)



over cocktails, create art, embark on special tours, or simply relax to music. Each event has a special theme—typically aligned with something new on view in the galleries—that is echoed in the programs, performances, and refreshments. Last year’s series averaged nearly 1,200 guests per event.

“We have to have a family-friendly institution that embraces people of all ages, and that is both intellectually stimulating and visually interesting. We also have to make the museum and its art more welcoming for younger audiences. The next generation is very important, and there is a lot of competition for attention. We need to work extra hard to connect young people to these institutions, our collections and the programs that we offer.”

Building a Strong Board Relationship

One of Xu’s many challenges has been building a strong relationship with his Board. “It is a logistical challenge and personal commitment,” Xu observes. The Museum is governed by both a 27 member strong Asian Art Commission, and a 65 member Board of Trustees. “Just getting to know everyone takes time, and people do not all have the same priorities and temperaments. I vowed to meet and talk to every one on an individual basis. It is extremely important to hear from each one about their experiences and how they see the future. It requires a big investment of time, which has been wonderfully rewarding in terms of the advice and the experiences they have shared with me. They have given me a lot of support and encouragement, and have given me a lot of space to utilize my talents. That said, I know I have to continue to earn their trust.”

Xu also comments on the wisdom of the Board in how they conducted their search for a new director. “There is a school of thought in the museum field, that in the face of financial challenges you should hire someone with a business background, a fundraiser, or a finance/operations manager, and then use curators to stage exhibitions and maintain the collection. Instead this Board sought

someone with an arts and curatorial background that was complemented by strong managerial skills and business instincts. They are helping me as I navigate fundraising and the financial complexities of running a museum with a \$17 million budget, 140 full time staff, and 500 docents and other volunteers.”

“I learned from some of the best and most successful museum directors in the field that fundraising is about building relationships and connecting people to the mission. If one does not understand Asian art, then how is it even possible to connect people to an Asian art museum? This Board understands that this institution is about the art, because these are people who themselves have a passion for the art. In selecting me they chose someone whose competencies and ideas complemented their own and those of the staff. It’s not just about a need, it’s about a cause. I am very grateful to have people on my side who think in this way, and am honored by their choice.”

The Future...

Xu has two key goals as he leads the Asian Art Museum into the future.

First, Xu is determined to have the Asian take on more of a leadership role in the field of Asian art by developing special exhibitions that are exciting, relevant, creative, innovative, and capture the public’s attention. He sees that part of the museum’s ‘public’ is academia, and part is not. “Special exhibitions need to have a vigorous scholarly content and the potential for inciting new ideas and challenging old ways of thinking. By developing a reputation for cutting-edge scholarship, we will help train future generations and we will attract the best and brightest to work with and for the Museum. Our exhibitions must also have a strong story to tell that the public can enjoy. We need to have a point of view, one that academics and the general public find exciting.”

Second, during his watch he plans to increase the endowment and improve the museum’s financial situation. “We need this museum

to be stronger financially and more self-sustaining, and we have a very long way to go.” His vision for accomplishing these prodigious tasks? “I hope to make the best possible use of our collection and our prestige to craft a group of projects and special exhibitions that funders feel they absolutely must support. People are ready to support truly effective organizations that both educate and entertain, and I want to be at the top of everyone’s list. This will take curatorial excellence and strong marketing.”

Xu plans to focus on art coming out of Asia, Asian art in interaction with the art of other continents, and the historical intersection of different cultures. He cites the influence of 16th Century European art that the Jesuits brought to Asia; the influence of 18th century Chinese art on European decorative arts, and the influence of Japanese prints on impressionists. “We live in a world in constant dialogue, particularly today. I want the Asian Art Museum to explore and expand the dialogue among Asian cultures and between various Asian and other cultural traditions.

Xu is enthusiastic about the possibilities of expanding the museum’s reach. “We are known for our traditional collection, but we are now in the middle of revamping our exhibits, in terms of contemporary art. We want to be able to make big statements in this arena through special exhibitions. We want to juxtapose contemporary and historical Asian art to illuminate how contemporary forms have evolved and to help connect Americans to the exciting developments in the arts in Asia.”

“It is a matter of passion. I like to say that Asian art is for every community. Our challenge is to develop an Asian Art Museum that every community wants to embrace.” ❖