ASIAN ART

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KHMER ARTEFACTS RETURNED TO CAMBODIA

In March, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in Phnom Penh announced the completion of the repatriation from the United Kingdom of 74 artefacts connected to the Latchford collection in the UK. The large collection of objects was returned to the National Museum of Cambodia by the estate of Douglas Latchford. The works were returned under a 2020 agreement between the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and the family of the late Douglas Latchford, an art collector and dealer, who had been accused of smuggling antiques out of Cambodia. Smaller returns were made by the estate in 2021 and 2023. The return is considered one of the largest and most significant repatriations of Khmer antiquities to Cambodia.

During the civil conflicts of the late 20th century, statues and other artefacts were stolen from Koh Ker and many other archaeological sites in Cambodia – they then entered the international art market through an organised network. Local teams of looters would remove the statues from the original sites, before transporting them to the Cambodia-Thailand border, where they were transferred to brokers, who in turn transported them to dealers in Khmer artefacts located in Thailand, particularly Bangkok. Then dealers would sell the artefacts to local or international customers, who would either retain the pieces or sell them on the international art market.

The late Bangkok-based antiquities dealer, Douglas Latchford, sold these antiquities to individuals in the Western art market, including private collectors and Western museums. Many of these objects have now been repatriated to Cambodia. In 2019, Latchford was charged by the US Attorney's Office with wire fraud conspiracy and other crimes related to selling looted Cambodian antiquities on the international art market. The indictment was dismissed due to Latchford's death in 2020.

National Museum in Cambodia has received 74 artefacts looted during the country's brutal civil war and further conflict in the 1980s. Photo: KT/Chor Sokuthea

The works returned in March span the pre-Angkorian era to the height of the Angkorian Empire and include finely crafted sandstone and metal sculptures, as well as ritual objects. Among the most notable pieces are two early Angkorian sandstone sculptures dating back to the first half of the 9th century, during the reign of King Jayavarman II. Latchford had claimed that the statues originated from Phnom Kulen. The male and female figures, often referred to as a 'divine couple', are regarded as exemplary works from the formative period of the Angkorian Empire. Based on available evidence, the female figure is considered a rare masterpiece of the Kulen style.

The group also includes a sandstone head of Brahma and a statue of a *yaksha* (or *rakshasa*) from the Koh Ker temple complex. Koh Ker was the capital of the Khmer Empire for a brief period, between 928 and 941, under its founder King Jayavarman IV. The head of Brahma was originally attached to a body enshrined in a major temple, reflecting the cosmological vision and refined artistry of the Koh Ker style.

Another significant piece that has been returned is a bronze sculpture in the Bakheng style, representing an outstanding example of the early development of Khmer iconography.

A spokesman for the ministry said the achievement reflects Cambodia's sustained and determined efforts to recover, safeguard and restore its ancestral cultural heritage for future generations.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

OLDEST STENCIL ART FOUND ON SULAWESI, INDONESIA

A stencilled outline of a hand found in Indonesia is now considered the world's oldest known cave painting, according to recent research. It shows a red outline of a hand whose fingers were reworked, researchers say, to create a motif which indicates an early leap in symbolic imagination as a specially modified, narrow, 'claw-like' fingers, indicating a deliberate, complex, and artistic choice.

The stencil found in the Liang Metanduno Cave on Muna Island in South Sulawesi has been dated to at least 67,800 years ago – around 1,100 years before the previous record, a controversial hand stencil in Spain. The find also strengthens the argument that our species, Homo sapiens, had reached the wider Australia–New Guinea landmass, known as Sahul, by around 15,000 years earlier than some researchers argue. Over the past decade, a series of discoveries on Sulawesi has overturned the old idea that art and abstract thinking in our species burst suddenly into life in Ice Age Europe and spread from there.

Cave art is seen as a key marker of when humans began to think in truly abstract, symbolic ways – the kind of imagination that underpins language, religion and science. Early paintings and engravings show people not just reacting to the world, but representing it, sharing stories and identities in a way no other species is known to have done. Professor Adam Brumm of Griffiths University in Australia, who co-led the project, explained that the latest discovery, published in the scientific journal *Nature*, adds to the emerging view that there was no awakening for humanity in Europe. Instead, creativity was innate to our species, the evidence for which stretches back to Africa, where we evolved. 'When I went to university in the mid to late 1990s, that's what we were taught – the creative explosion in humans occurred in a

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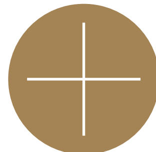
DJAMEL TATAH

by Olivia Sand

Over the past decades, Djamel Tatah has continuously developed his practice regardless of the trends and tendencies. Concentrating on the human figure, his subjects dialogue with us, and as a patient listener, lead us to pause and reflect. Based on our own references, each of us comes up with a different narrative, mirroring our past, our convictions or our dreams. A master at bringing together layers of colours to create this atmosphere that is so unique to him, Djamel Tatah (Franco-Algerian, b 1959) is a careful observer of the world surrounding him, from the representation of the individual that drives his practice, to groups of people, their movements and interaction. By suggesting new narratives, he belongs to what Albert Camus (1913-1960) described in the novel *Noces* (1938), when speaking about painters, 'they alone have the privilege of telling the body's story'. In the interview below, he looks back at his practice, highlighting the milestones that led him to become the painter he is today.



WATCH
Djamel Tatah
discuss his work

Djamel Tatah in his studio, 2025. Photo: Studio Djamel Tatah

Asian Art Newspaper: You have lived in different cities, relocating your studio on various occasions. Where are you presently based?
Djamel Tatah: For now, I am in Montpellier, in the South of France. To me, this is temporary because I tend to follow a nomadic lifestyle, with nothing ever being permanent. At this stage of my life, I would like to have more space and move closer to nature somewhere in France. I have come to realise that as time goes by, I need to develop my work while being surrounded by my archives, as well as older works, to move forward. Perhaps, the time has also come to hire an assistant to help organise the studio in a different way, providing a new vision. Ideally, I would love to move approximately 300 km away from Montpellier, remaining within range of various large cities.

AAN: This is in sync with the idea 'we become the craftsman of our own thoughts', which seems to be your leitmotif.
DT: This sentence accurately translates my thoughts and I firmly believe it. It probably came about as I was discussing the nature of art and more specifically the craft of being an artist, which in my opinion no longer exists. However, one can become the architect of an idea or a thought: as art is a language, one can come up with tools and techniques to develop and give shape to it. This resonates with the reason why we make art, which is to develop a visual language.

AAN: Speaking of visual language, has your language always been figurative, focusing on the human figure?
DT: From the start, I have always intended to develop a language centred on the human figure while interacting with all the great masterpieces from the past, starting with the Lascaux caves. In addition, I am very interested in the evolution of modern painting, especially in terms of abstraction, ranging from Barnett Newman (1905-1970) to Mark Rothko (1903-1970), and Agnes Martin (1912-2004). Their craft and language have nurtured my practice towards developing my relationship to the human figure. In a way, I like to say that my work is about abstract figuration: it is not about psychologies, the otherness of the flesh or the representation of natural flesh – neither skin colour, nor race, etc. For me, it is an attempt, not only to have a relationship with painting or the world, but also a universal and humanistic experience. In my case, I simply cannot do without the human figure because, as a starting point, I want to echo certain representations of everyday life, of my own life, of my relationship to the world, of my social, political, emotional, and intimate existence.

All these aspects come together in my relationship to the figure, which is at the core of my practice. I developed this relationship even further based on my own discoveries and encounters with other artists, quickly identifying what was working and what was not. Today, I have completed around 650 or 700 paintings and, needless to say, I am firmly rooted in a practice that always evolves around the human figure.

AAN: This process has the advantage of providing you with a starting point, and yet, it depends on how you proceed from there: some artists recount that they sit for hours in front of the canvas despite having a starting point.
DT: That happened to me not too long ago with a painting addressing the topic of the 'Massacre of the Innocents'. I had already tried completing such a piece around 2004, but over the past two years, with everything taking place, I truly wanted to embrace that theme, not by judging who was right or wrong, but rather from the angle of the human barbarity that constantly keeps repeating itself. The massacre of innocent people was a theme that deeply resonated with me. I was however facing the question of how I was to stage it today. It felt complicated, but I believe I found a way.

AAN: In your artistic journey after art school, was there a triggering element, or detail, which was crucial in putting the architecture of the painting into place?
DT: Actually, a family photograph had that triggering effect. It was a family portrait depicting my father, my mother's brother, and her brother-in-law, taken upon their arrival in France. Such photos of families who had immigrated were quite common at the time. Back in the early 1980s, I was working on the human figure in a more elaborate way, closer to the way Matisse painted than to what I am doing today. During my studies, the trend was free figuration, and I truly wanted to be part of it and embrace it. I had a lot of energy, but I did not quite know where my practice was taking me. Ultimately, it was this specific photograph which led me to complete a painting that changed everything. It happened on a day I was questioning myself, thinking I ought to work with this photograph.

The painting, per se, did not turn out to be particularly nice, but it was very effective in pointing me in the right direction: I took certain poses seen in the photograph and then things fell into place into something beyond photography. I was also interested in cinema, especially in the filmmaker Michelangelo Antonini (1912-2007), to explore feelings and silence. Through this one photograph, I also discovered the German portrait and documentary photographer August Sandler (1876-1964) and the way he addresses and captures every social class. Based on all these sources, I slowly drifted towards photography, relying on it as an amateur, feeding my imagination and inspiration. When I arrived in Marseille, I saw a magnificent exhibition entitled *Cinema, Painting, Cinema* with works that I found fascinating: there were objects created by Michelangelo Pistoletto (b 1933) – his mirrors implying all the considerations linked to scale – works from the *Shadows* series by Andy Warhol (1928-1987), questioning repetition. As such, the 1980s and 1990s were a very fertile ground to integrate into my practice all the devices I am using today.

> *I am firmly rooted in a practice that evolves around the human figure*

AAN: Can you describe the photograph of your family you are referring to?
DT: Actually, they were three picture ID photographs. These pictures were part of the steps all immigrants who had just arrived in France had to go through to start the process for their papers. Once that was done, the photographer suggested taking an additional picture with all of them together, to be sent back home to reassure family members that all was well.

AAN: From then on, did the human scale become a standard process for your painting?
DT: Once I started focusing on full-size figures, it all came together very quickly, especially after seeing Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings* and Barnett Newman's (1905-1970) colour field paintings.

AAN: It seems that the most challenging part in the painting is creating the background as it is setting the atmosphere and providing the light. How so?
DT: My relationship with abstraction is to paint something figurative, but in an abstract way. Feeling and capturing the atmosphere or the ambiance of a painting is part of experiencing the piece. From my perspective, it all comes down to mastering the various layers. It is not about me painting and completing 'something', but about having all the pieces coming together in a very empirical way. The process may seem to repeat itself, but it does not. It is a perpetual mutation based on the atmosphere of the moment.

AAN: As it is, the painting is reminiscent of fresco and carries a sense of timelessness. How did wax, which encourages that association, make its way into the painting?
DT: It stems from discussions and exchanges with artist friends. While I was still a student at the École des Beaux-Arts, I was looking for a way to achieve a matte effect. As I was struggling, an artist friend recommended I try wax. I tried it, thinking it was not bad. I left the medium aside for a while and three or four years later, I came back to it, this time using a different type of wax. This process is the essence of craft as it is important to identify the proper tool. For example, when speaking, we use words and when switching language, we translate them, relying on the proper filter. The medium itself has become a vehicle or a translator as it absorbs light. This specific wax absorbs light and redistributes it in a very distinct way according to the time of the day. A painting exhibited under natural light will not look the same at 8am or 5pm. The experience is completely different.

AAN: So, you are creating a magic based on the way you apply colours.
DT: I sometimes enjoy being a little controversial, and on that note, I like saying that my work is 'radical impressionism'. Jokes aside, and more seriously, I have a lot of respect for these artists, but regarding my pieces, I consider them a little impressionistic since I work with light. This is also true for the painter Robert Ryman (1930-2019), who did the same thing, so I am not the first artist to have a special relationship with light.

AAN: The way the painting is constructed truly invites the viewer to

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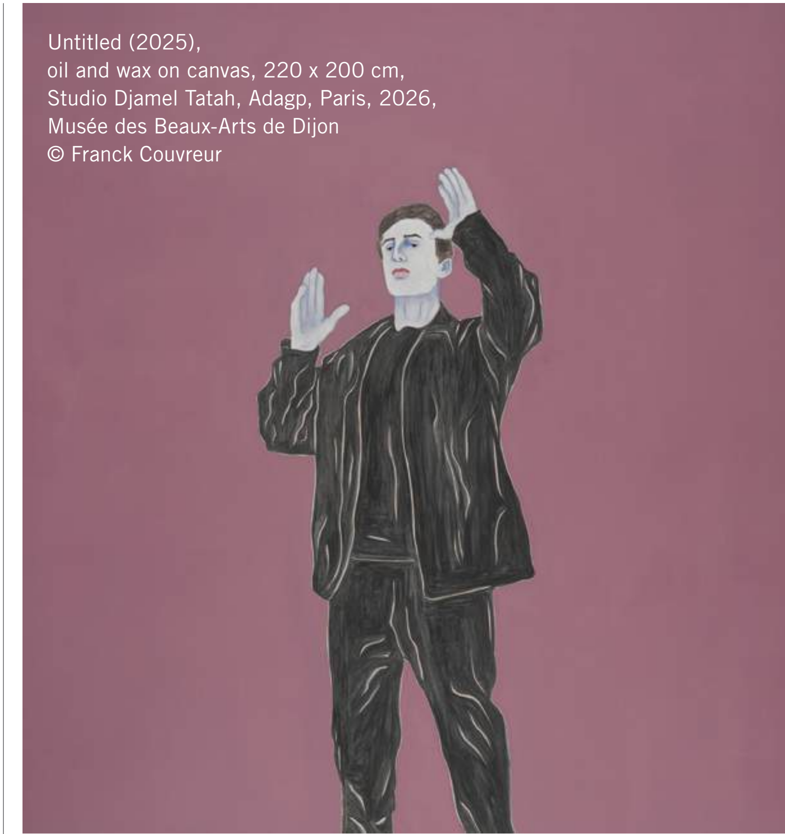
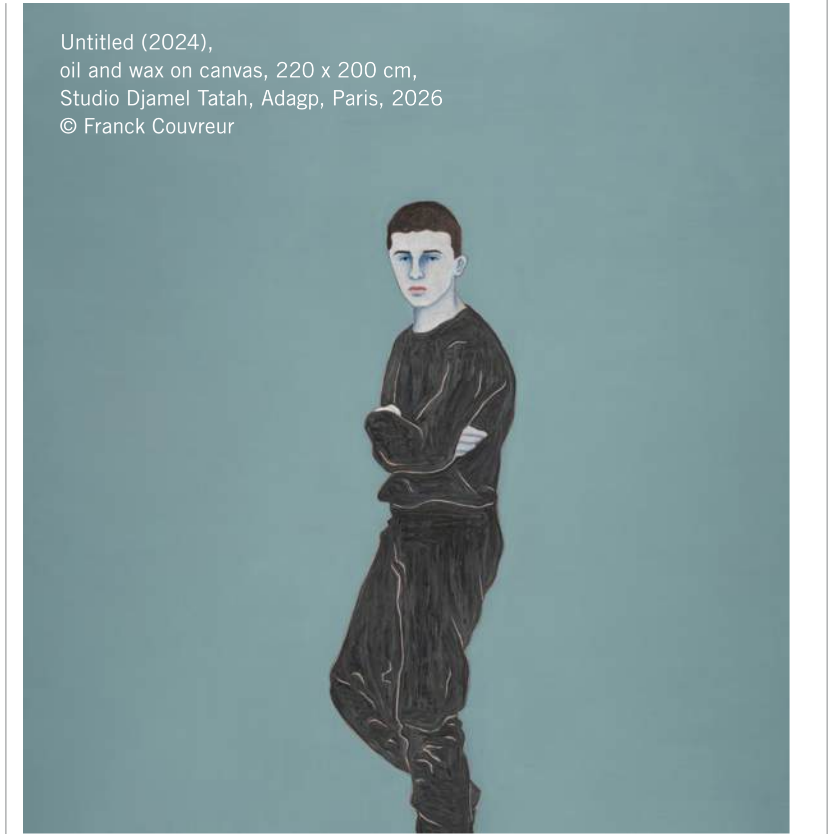


Untitled (2025),
oil and wax on canvas, 220 x 200 cm,
Studio Djamel Tatah, Adagp, Paris, 2026,
Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon
© Franck Couvreur



Untitled (2024),
oil and wax on canvas, 220 x 200 cm,
Studio Djamel Tatah, Adagp, Paris, 2026
© Franck Couvreur

Untitled (2025)
(after Eugène Delacroix young orphan girl in the cemetery),
oil and wax on canvas, 200 x 220 cm,
Studio Djamel Tatah, Adagp, Paris, 2026
© Franck Couvreur

NEWS IN BRIEF

small part of Europe. But now we are seeing traits of modern human behaviour, including narrative art in Indonesia, which makes that Eurocentric argument very hard to sustain'. The oldest Spanish cave art is a red hand stencil in Maltravieso cave in Western Spain, dated to be at least 66,700 years old - though this is controversial and some experts do not think it to be that old.

NEW DIRECTOR FOR LOUVRE, PARIS

The Louvre has named Christophe Leribault as its new director. The seasoned cultural leader has been director of the Palace of Versailles since 2024, having previously helmed Paris's Musée d'Orsay and Musée de l'Orangerie.

Leribault replaces Laurence des Cars, the museum's first female director, whose resignation was announced yesterday. She had faced heavy criticism amid the fallout from the shocking US$102 million heist of France's crown jewels on 10 October 2025, which exposed the museum's inept and outdated security system.

Leribault, 62, has headed several of France's best-known cultural institutions. He joins the Louvre from the Château de Versailles, where he has been director since 2024, and previously led the Musée d'Orsay and the Musée de l'Orangerie, both in Paris. He was the deputy director of the Louvre's graphic arts department from 2006 to 2012.

France's ministry of culture said in a statement: 'Leribault's priority will be to strengthen the safety and security of the building, the collections, and people, to restore a climate of trust, and to carry forward, together with all the teams, the necessary transformations for the museum.'

NEW DIRECTOR FOR ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM, CANADA

The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) is pleased to announce the appointment of Nicholas R. Bell as Director & Chief Executive Officer (CEO), effective July 2026. Originally from Vancouver, BC, Bell comes to ROM from Glenbow in Calgary, Alberta, where he has served as President & Chief Executive Officer since 2019. As ROM Director & CEO, Bell will lead the Museum's finances, operations, and capital expansion projects; foster a culture of creativity and innovation; and advance the strategic vision of Canada's most visited museum.

WORLD HERITAGE FUND, NEW YORK

The fund has announced that it will commit more than $7 million in support of 21 new projects launching in 2026. These investments advance work at sites included on the 2025 World Monuments Watch list – its nomination-based advocacy programme – while supporting new phases of conservation, planning, and training at additional heritage places across five continents.

WMF's 2026 financing supports locally led preservation efforts that address urgent challenges, ranging from climate change and natural disasters to unsustainable tourism and the loss of Indigenous knowledge. The projects reflect WMF's commitment to solutions that strengthen communities, cutting-edge technology, and long-term academic partnerships. This year's project includes Safdar Jang's Tomb, an 18th-century Mughal mausoleum set within one of Delhi's few spatially intact *charbagh* gardens. Altered layouts, environmental pressures, and climate risks threaten the historic garden design and water systems.

NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART FOR DUBAI

Dubai is set to welcome the Dubai Museum of Art (DUMA), which will be located on the banks of the Dubai Creek, a natural saltwater inlet in the city. Designed by Japanese architect Tadao Ando and developed by the Al-Futtaim Group, the curved, five-story structure is inspired by seashells and pearls, and will seemingly float on the water. Comprising galleries, libraries, as well as recreational and cultural spaces, the forthcoming institution will host exhibitions, educational initiatives, artist talks, panel discussions, and even art fairs. Though a construction timeline is yet to be announced, DUMA is expected to enrich Dubai's art scene and strengthen the emirate's status as a global cultural hub. In a statement, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, vice president and prime minister of the UAE and ruler of Dubai, described the museum as 'a new beacon for the city'.

MORI ART AWARD, JAPAN

At the final screening for the Mori Art Award 2026, the International Jury selected Katayama Mari as the winner of the inaugural Grand Prize. Mori Contemporary Art Foundation (MoriCAF) hopes that the award both serves as a showcase of the current state of Japanese contemporary art and leads to further international success for the winner. The Grand Prize winner receives prize money of ¥10 million and the opportunity to hold an exhibition of their work, jointly organised by MoriCAF and Mori Art Museum. The other finalists also receive prize moneys of ¥1 million each.

Katayama Mari's practice centres on the daily lived experience of her body, which she treats as a living sculpture, mannequin, and social lens. Combining photography with sculptural objects sewn and made by hand, her work reveals and challenges social norms regarding what is natural, artificial, and correct. Katayama's practice also encompasses the High Heel Project, which advocates freedom of choice. Wearing high heels custom-made for her prosthetic legs, she is active as a singer, model, guest speaker, and more.

Untitled (2020),
oil and wax on canvas, 200 x 200 cm,
Studio Djamel Tatah, Adagp, Paris, 2026
© Franck Couvreur

step into the work and be part of it, even more so as the background features warm and welcoming colours.
DT: Based on the human scale and the way I paint the characters, I want to make sure that there is an interaction with the audience, that they can step into the pictorial space and develop a certain empathy with the figure.

AAN: In a time when we are saturated with images, it is most refreshing to see a painting that invites the viewer towards experiencing silence and to ponder questions we are all facing, namely the ones Gauguin was already asking, 'where do we come from, who are we, and where are we going?'
DT: That is a topic I am very drawn to. When I started out as a painter, I also discovered myself through the act of painting and I immersed myself into my work, not only finding out new aspects about myself, but also identifying what exactly I wanted to tell the audience. In my case, I do not want to abruptly strike the viewer, nor do I want to delve into expressionism, which is not my world. I quickly came to realise that I wanted to complete works that breathe silence and calm, requiring time to be truly understood or appreciated. I felt that my challenge was to make sure my work could resist the test of television. I would view it as a true success, if between television and one of my paintings, people were to choose my work of art. It is a real challenge as this trend with a life saturated by images seems to keep accelerating. I am mainly referring to television, because up to 20 years ago, there was no internet. Therefore today, we are witnessing an era which is complete madness when referring to the flood of images on social media. Our brains are processing an incredible amount of information, and I simply do not know where this is going to take us. That is why I believe it is even more important to continue with my work and offer a comforting space through my paintings.

AAN: You depict loneliness with a certain neutrality. You could have opted for a more tormented representation, in the continuation of Egon Schiele (1890-1918), for example. However, you managed to have your subject matter exuding this neutrality, without its psychological weight. It seems to be a challenge to represent the gaze, which should be neutral, yet inviting.
DT: Absolutely. I need to establish a certain distance between the subject and the viewer, but the gaze nevertheless must be inviting. Even though there are few times the subject is directly looking at the viewer, in most cases, the viewer gets into the painting based on subtle means, and not through aggressive devices.

Untitled (2014), oil and wax on canvas, 250 x 200 cm, Studio Djamel Tatah, Adagp, Paris, 2026 © Franck Couvreur

AAN: This neutrality is also visible in terms of titles as most of your works are untitled.
DT: The interpretation of my pieces remains completely free. However, based on feedback from people who have seen my work, they end up making associations of their own. As such, I do not need to title my work as, following the viewers' comments, the associations they make are completely in sync with my undertaking. There are no strange or unconventional interpretations.

AAN: It comes down to introspection, to the outlook towards others, towards the world, towards time. We could go on for hours ...
DT: Definitely. My paintings truly need to be experienced by the viewer. That is essential for me.

AAN: When it comes to experience, you also taught a few years back at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. What precisely did you try to pass on to your students?
DT: I encouraged them to be as honest as possible with themselves and with what it was, they wanted to share with the world. In addition, I felt it was important they identified the reasons why they were drawing, painting or completing a work of art. My role was also about helping them to develop and gain a certain independence, especially when it comes to experimenting. As such, they have become their own best researchers and advisors.

As a young artist, the challenge is not about creating when you are in your twenties or thirties, but about creating something that lasts and to have a practice that with some luck, can carry on for 60 years. The idea is that these artists find within themselves something to develop, be this in the form of an experience or an artist's statement. That is the most relevant thing I can do for them. In that sense and more recently, there was an exhibition in Montpellier featuring young artists

> *“I discovered myself through the act of painting”*

who had worked with me in my studio. The included artists by no means replicate my style in any way but have their own practice. While I was teaching at the Beaux-Arts, I quickly realised that you cannot teach an artist anything: at most, you can have discussions with him. This is precisely how I conceived of my class, creating an atmosphere that was prone to exchanges. It was simply wonderful. For 15 years, I was at the Beaux-Arts for two full days every other week, with students introducing and explaining their work, leading to fantastic discussions among their peers. I later stopped teaching as I felt it was time to move on, but it was a very rewarding experience.

AAN: As a member of the faculty, art criticism with students was quite time consuming. Looking back, how do you relate to your own time as a student at the Beaux-Arts?
DT: I stopped the curriculum at the end of the fifth year, without presenting a thesis to the jury. During the summer, I had to keep a job to earn a living and back then, the diploma was not a priority. That does not mean that these diplomas do not carry a real value: I put considerable energy into helping my students get their diploma, but in my case, I had a different approach. In addition, it was not easy interacting with my professors and at the time, I followed my own path. As a result, I have no school diploma. As to my practice, I already did back then what I am doing today, simply not in as nice a way. Looking back, I am a big advocate of self-education, which is something I tried to implement in my studio with my students.

AAN: Regarding the photos you rely on to develop your painting, are these from the internet or pictures you have taken yourself (with a camera or selfies)?
DT: For a very long time, all my paintings were exclusively based on photographs I had taken myself. Over time, I started using photos I found in the media, followed by photos from the internet, sometimes bringing parts of such recent pictures together with photographs I have taken over 20 years ago. I have also relied on movie sites or paintings where I extracted a figure, transforming it and staging it in a different setting for my composition.

AAN: Do you faithfully follow the photograph, or do you make adjustments?
DT: Sometimes, I do edit the photograph, especially if the clothes are not in tune with the composition. There is no realism, so to speak, leaving me with endless possibilities.

AAN: Are you sketching the main features on the canvas before starting?
DT: I have been drawing on the computer since 1995. First, I start my composition by making a drawing that I subsequently project on the canvas. I project a drawing and not a photo, which is an important distinction. With the drawing, I make all necessary adjustments, reinterpreting, remodelling and transforming various aspects from the original photo. I draw with chalk, which the computer converts in very thin lines, and then add small detail by pencil. It is only then, that I start painting.

AAN: In art, there is always this belief that aesthetics is essential. In regard to the faces of the figures you depict, is beauty an important factor?
DT: I rely on faces from daily life that I then transform. I am not looking for actual beauty per se or models: the face by itself simply needs to work and hold up with the rest of the composition. However, I ignore and erase all psychological features.

AAN: Is that the reason why there are no self-portraits in your practice beyond a single very early piece?
DT: It was my priority that every piece be not seen as a self-portrait, burdened with psychological representations. I therefore erased myself completely as a subject matter, thus liberating my compositions. Ultimately, however, I came to realise that every painting is a self-portrait, even if it represents someone else. I thus don't feel the need to paint myself or to be recognised through my pieces.

AAN: You have frequently been quoted as saying that painting silence was a political act. Can you elaborate further?
DT: Completing a painting where silence is omnipresent is sometimes a political act because, in my opinion, the only way to face and respond to dreadful political actions is through silence. Speaking up louder and louder against a violent political act is feeding violence. Therefore, a painting – through its silence – becomes a political statement. In a way, my train of thought is in line with Gandhi because revolutions only ever led to death. I am quite

Untitled (2015), oil and wax on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, Studio Djamel Tatah, Adagp, Paris, 2026 © Jean-Louis Losi

proud that some of my statements like 'painting is a ridiculous act' meaning that to make good art, one cannot be afraid of looking ridiculous – provide grounds for discussions. Beyond that statement, I also said that the basic fact of representation is inevitably political because whatever one depicts belongs to the world. Let us take the example of the Swedish painter Hammershøi (1864-1916), painting people in a room or Bonnard (1867-1947) capturing his wife in a bathtub while bombs were falling. In my opinion, these are political actions.

AAN: And we need to keep in mind that having the works being slightly more explicit may result in censorship.
DT: Absolutely. Politics is a tremendously complex subject and as an artist, I find myself unable to answer or explain every single topic, be this communism, capitalism, Nazism, or Russia. It involves very powerful psychology. Following one or two victories, a politician can dismantle 150 years of social conquests and subsequently within fifteen years, everything can be taken apart. Let us take the example of Obama, whose legacy is dismantled by Donald Trump. There is a great deal of complexity in politics. It is precisely with my paintings being so harmless that they ultimately become political.

AAN: Speaking of politics, there have been lively discussions leading to changes in artists scheduled representing their country at the upcoming Venice Biennale. The political aspect has taken on an overwhelming dimension. As such, it seems that art can fill the gap and provide some comfort in this violent and unpredictable world.
DT: I fully agree. Making art is one way to maintain all the poetic achievements stemming from human beauty, essentially from human thought and every other positive feature from humanity. I am referring to human sciences, poets, painters, artists, movie producers, writers, theatre people: these are the ones preserving the true values and who are anchored in democracy. They preserve these values while keeping a sharp critical sense. Politicians should increasingly refer to and get inspiration from artists.

AAN: When things escalate towards extreme situations, people either revert to faith or to something where they find beauty, which as you said, can be poetry or music, for example. Surprisingly, most school systems around the world remove art from their curriculum at an early stage, closing the door for the next generation on a world full of resources.
DT: There are two things schools should teach: art as a practice, as well as the history of human sciences, and art history. In my opinion, these two subjects are as important as mathematics, or learning to read and write. These subjects are not a vacation or a hobby; they require serious and hard work.

AAN: While working on your figurative practice, has your relationship towards the world, yourself, and time changed over the years?
DT: My vision or relationship to the world has not changed much. I was born and grew up under difficult social conditions, with both of my parents being illiterate. My father brought his family from Algeria to France where he was working in a mine. This condition affected me from a young age, and I became very much aware of the various classes in society. I never forgot from where I came. This is why I wanted to build a practice with a human dimension. It is not because I had a more difficult childhood that I cannot be like Camus, Sartre, Picasso or Matisse. I am giving myself every right to exist, even if it is a struggle. I am not complaining about it, but that is simply the way humanity is.
I am not the only one who had to navigate through life this way, there are millions of us. In that sense, my relationship to the world has not changed however had it changed, I would have played a political role. As such, it may be a political act, but not a political role. There is a subtle distinction between both as a political role may lead to being used or exploited for someone else's agenda, which is not the case with a political act.

AAN: Are you returning to Algeria on a regular basis?
DT: While I was a student, I went there every year and before that, I had been there together with my parents. After that, I returned several times on my own: I would drop off my mother in her village and would pick her up again and in between, I would travel by myself, discovering the country further. In the late 1980s, there was a rise of the Islamic movement, and I started wondering who I was, asking questions about my identity as many other young people did. I came to the conclusion that I had this dual culture that I considered an asset for France. Algeria remains my parent's country, but as their son, with my heritage, I consider myself a hybrid individual. That is the reason why I like talking about mutation, emphasising that I am a mutant. I am one of many. That is also why my upcoming exhibition in Dijon this May is entitled *Djamel Tatah: repeat, mutate.*

AAN: You seem generally not too fond of retrospectives. Why is that?
DT: Even though the upcoming exhibition features early and later pieces, it is indeed not a retrospective. I believe most artists, regardless of their age, seventy-five or ninety, consider it bad timing when it takes place during their lifetime. Who wants to see a chronology of their life when it is not over yet? In my opinion, that is simply not possible. In addition, perhaps it puts unnecessary pressure on the curator, making it difficult to achieve a satisfactory result.

AAN: Earlier, you referred to 'performing arts'. How did dance make its way into your paintings?
DT: I must have been around nineteen years old, when I met with a friend who was a dancer in front of the theatre. He was very enthusiastic about the performance taking place that day. He urged me to come with him, entering the theatre after the intermission since neither of us had tickets, so we simply sneaked in. The performance was Pina Bausch (1940-2009) in *Café Müller* (1978). As I started working on the human figure, I looked at various things from photographs to slow-motion movements, but the Pina Bausch performance somehow stayed in the back of my mind. As I lived in Paris, I later had a theatre subscription, and I discovered many talented dancers.

AAN: Your paintings are often described as 'simple yet refined'. How do you see them?
DT: It is complicated. If we refer to the archetype of the painting, then it is about going straight to the point within the image, and only feature what is absolutely necessary. As a formal consequence, an archetype calls on sobriety. In that case, I agree with that statement. However, I deliberately do not want to put too much information in whatever I am representing, but instead, I want to focus on the bare minimum. The archetype ultimately remains based on what it represents, and therefore, it does not disappear but remains as a basic scaffolding.

AAN: What artists or works are you responding to, even if they are radically different from your own practice, formally or content wise?
DT: There are quite a few. I love Kiki Smith (b 1954) and Kendrick McFarlane an American artist (b 1990, Chicago), who are just fantastic. I also greatly appreciate African-American artists such as Kerry James Marshall (b 1955). I knew them all long before they became stars. These friendships are a reflection of my existence, my childhood, my youth and my culture as a teenager. As Arabs in France, we all danced to the music of James Brown on the main square with the ghetto blaster fully turned on, before rap became popular. Cassius Clay was our idol. We strongly identified with the social condition of African-Americans, listening to them a great deal, like the Black Panthers for example. I have known their music since the age of ten. Once I began being interested in visual arts, I started researching and expanding my knowledge. Some of these people have become very fashionable now, and some of them are bound to stay while others may not. African-American artists have brought so much to enriching our history, our way of thinking. Of course, there is also some speculation, but that is irrelevant in the bigger scheme of things.

AAN: On a final note, the French postal service issued a stamp featuring one of your works. How did that come about?
DT: I had been invited for an exhibition in Marseille, which had been designated capital of culture around 2003. The French postal service issued a stamp on that occasion, and since I once lived in Marseille, and people there obviously appreciated me, my work was selected. My piece depicted a reflecting figure, very reminiscent of Marianne. A large banner featuring the painting was installed outside the police headquarters in Marseille for a year. I am quite familiar with police headquarters as I was living in France with a resident permit until the age of thirty-one before becoming a French citizen. I was thus even more determined to make a statement with that specific piece.

● Djamel Tatah's solo exhibition Répéter- Muter is on view at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon & musée national Magnin from 22 May to 20 2026

Untitled (2012), oil and wax on canvas, dyptich, 250 x 400 cm, 2 x 250 x 200 cm,ht Studio Djamel Tatah, Adagp, Paris, 2026 © Jean-Louis Losi, Emerige - Laurent Dumas

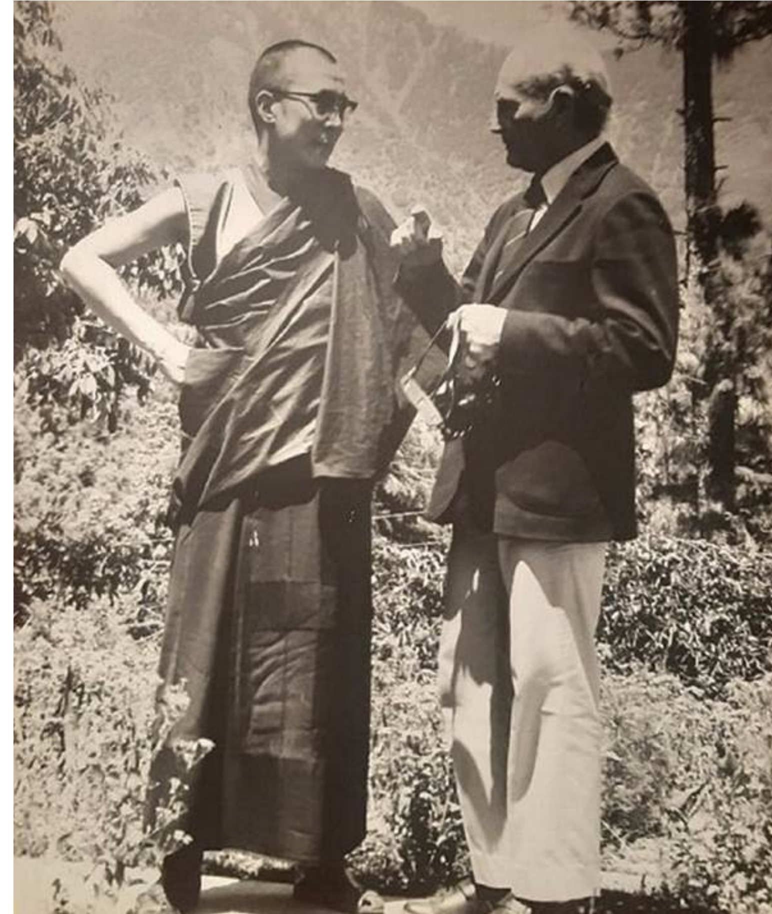
TIBET

Lost World Found

Eighty years ago, in 1946, the Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer (1912-2006) first reached Lhasa. Harrer had escaped a British internment camp in India with Peter Aufschnaiter (1899-1973) to begin their epic 21-month journey through the Himalayas, crossing over 60 mountain passes, to reach freedom in Tibet. He was to record these experiences in the book *Seven Years in Tibet* (1953), which was made, in 1979, into a Hollywood film. The mountaineers had been interned by the British during the Second World War, due to their Austrian nationality, just after an abortive attempt to climb Nanga Parbat in the Western Himalayas.

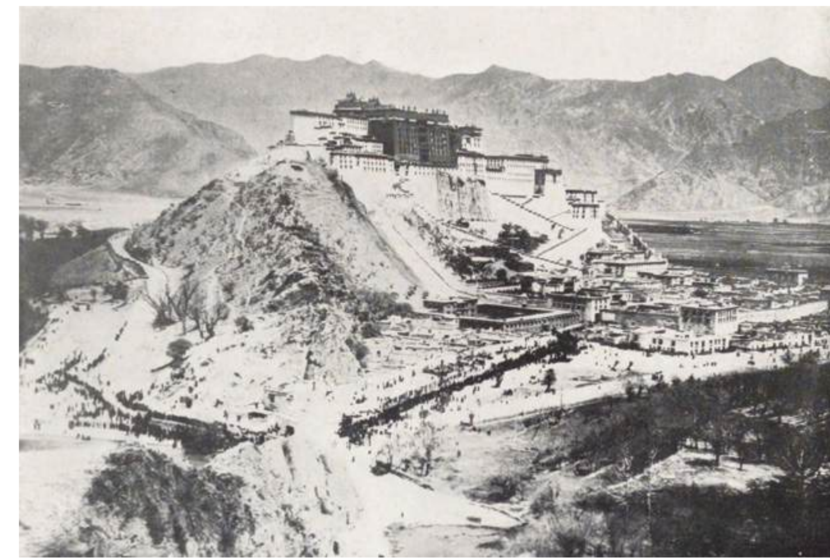
On 15 January 1946, they set out on the last part of their journey – the last march towards Lhasa. Harrer recalls in his book, 'We turned a corner and saw, gleaming in the distance, the gold roofs of the Potala … This moment compensated us for much. We felt inclined to go down on our knees like the pilgrims and touch the ground with our foreheads'.

On reaching Lhasa, they were not met with hostility but with remarkable kindness from officials and locals alike, despite their status as uninvited foreigners without passes in a 'closed' city to foreigners. Tibet had traditionally kept its borders closed to outsiders for centuries with successive governments tightly controlling entry, prohibiting most Westerners from entering. They initially began their life in Lhasa with Mr Thangme, the 'Master of Electricity', his young wife, and their five children. Their permission to remain in Lhasa was initially at stake until it was greatly helped by an invitation from the 14th Dalai Lama's family to visit them at their residence. The visit was a success and eventually led to Harrer forming a friendship with one of the Dalai Lama's (b 1935) brothers, Lobsang Samten. It was through Lobsang Samten that Harrer learnt that the Dalai Lama was taking an interest in his activities, recording that 'he had often watched me through his telescope as I had worked in the garden'.



The 14th Dalai Lama and Harrer in Austria at the opening of the museum in 1992

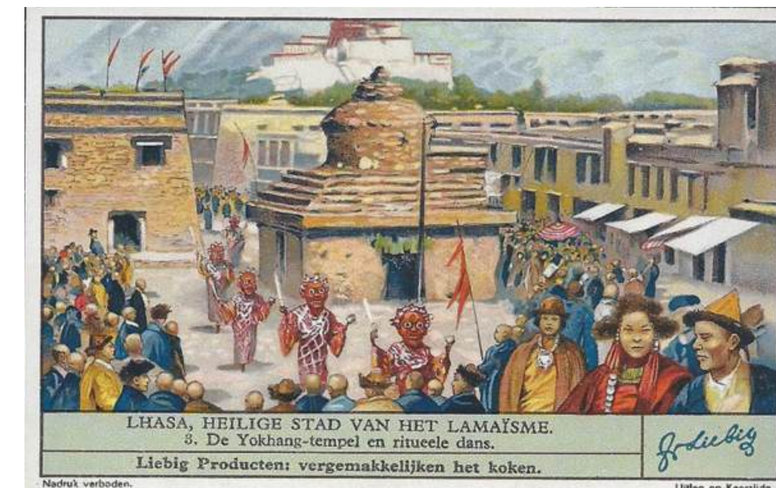
> *Gleaming in the distance, the golden roofs of the Potala*



Photograph of the Potala Palace and surrounding area circa 1932

Peter Aufschnaiter working in Lhasa at Chogpari Hill

Drawing of Phawa (Paba) Monastery in the Gyirong district by Peter Aufschnaiter



Colour advertising trade card depicting Lhasa in the 1930s, depiciting 'exotic' or 'distant' cultures. This imagines a ceremony taking place at Jokhang monastery, the spiritual heart of Lhasa. Published by Liebig (a meat extract company famous for producing Oxo), it shows the growing public interest in the region.

After settling into life in Lhasa, Harrer explains after a trip out of the capital he had a bold idea, 'When I got back to Lhasa it was already winter. The small tributary of the Kyichu was already frozen – and that caused us to think of something new. With a small group of friends, including the Dalai Lama's brother, we founded a skating club'. Harrer goes on to explain as the Dalai Lama could not see their activities from the Potala, he sent Harrer his cine camera to film the action. After the film returned from processing in India, Harrer went to the Potala to deliver the result in person. He reminisces, 'Through this film I made my first personal contact with the young ruler of Tibet. It seems curious that a product of the 20th century should have been the starting-point of a relation which despite all conventions eventually became a close friendship'. This was also the start of their informal friendship – Harrer conversed with the young Dalai Lama, teaching him English, as well as about life in the West, engineering principles, films, and international politics. The Dalai Lama also talked about their first meeting in an interview in 1992 (at the opening of the Heinrich Harrer Museum in Austria) that he had learned of Harrer's existence from his elder brother and asked that Harrer should help him with his film projector and cine camera.

Fascinated by the Tibetan way of life, Harrer set about documenting the rich cultural heritage of the city. He records in *Seven Years in Tibet*, 'Lobsang Samten told me that his brother [the Dalai Lama] wished me to film different ceremonies and festival scenes for him. He always sent me the most precise instructions'. These cine films and numerous documentaries on Harrer's life in Tibet are now housed in a museum in Austria. A 1956 documentary film directed by Hans Nieter also explores Harrer's escape from India and life in Tibet, including about 20 minutes of 16 mm footage taken by Harrer himself of the young Dalai Lama and daily life in Lhasa, *Seven Years in Tibet* produced in 1958 (a DVD of this documentary is still available).

Peter Aufschnaiter with local dignitaries during his time in Lhasa

The reproduction of part of the Lingkhor at the Heinrich Harrer Museum in Austria

WATCH
A Lasting Friendship: A Film of His Holiness, The 14th Dalai Lama, and Austrian explorer, Heinrich Harrer, in Hüttenberg, Austria, 1992

The Himalayan Hotel in Kalimpong, India

The two Austrians, who were complete opposites, settled into life in Lhasa – Harrer was gregarious, sociable, and ambitious, whilst Aufschnaiter was quiet, reserved, and scholarly (he had already studied Tibet during his years as a lead mountaineer). Aufschnaiter was an agricultural scientist and a cartographer as well as an experienced mountaineer. His own less-well-known book, *Eight Years in Tibet*, includes many of his photographs and sketches.

Other foreigners occasionally visited Lhasa at this time – with government permission. Aufschnaiter corresponded with the well-known Italian archaeologist Giuseppe Tucci after meeting him on a visit to the city, as well as befriending the handful of other foreigners living in Lhasa, among them the Scottish diplomat and Tibetologist Hugh Richardson (1905-2000), the British and then Indian government's last political officer to be stationed in Lhasa. Hugh Richardson's extensive, historically significant photographs of Tibet (taken between 1936 and 1950) are primarily held by The British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. Many of these images are available online through The Tibet Album project, which documents British interaction with Tibet during the 20th century. Richardson also informally communicated with the Dalai Lama through Harrer and Aufschnaiter, which allowed him to send messages and gifts.

In an interview, Harrer explained the Tibetans' faith and devotion to their leader, 'The Dalai Lama is the living Buddha, a child, but the heart of the concentrated faith of thousands. Pilgrims would arrive from all over to see the Dalai Lama at least once in their lives'. In the spring the Dalai Lama and his entourage would leave the Potala in a great procession for the official summer palace, Norbulingka, marking the beginning of the warm season. The Norbulingka, in a western suburb of Lhasa on the banks of the Lhasa River, has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2001 as part of the 'Historic Ensemble of the Potala Palace'.

Another important cultural and religious event in the Tibetan calendar is The Golden Procession, a major Tibetan Buddhist ceremony that starts on the 30th day of the second Tibetan month of the ceremonial year, when a set of sacred objects, including texts and *thangkas*, are paraded around the Potala Palace. The procession stems from a 17th-century vision of the Fifth Dalai Lama, who saw a golden rosary surrounding the Potala Palace. The ritual serves to spiritually protect the Potala Palace, the official winter residence of the Dalai Lamas.

Another major highlight were the ceremonies and festivities that marked the Lunar New Year – Losar. While often close to the Chinese New Year, Losar is calculated differently based on the Tibetan calendar. The first three days include the main celebrations, featuring prayers at monasteries, wearing new clothes, family gatherings, and watching the sacred masked dances performed in monastery courtyards – *cham*. These performances, portraying such topics as the triumph of good over evil, involve complex choreography, masks, and costumes and are closely associated with the festival calendar during the year. These events were held in the courtyards of monasteries such as Tsurphu and Samye around Lhasa during significant periods such as Losar (falling between February and March) and the Saga Dawa festival (the auspicious fourth lunar month in Tibet falling between May and June, which celebrates the birth, enlightenment, and *nirvana* of the Buddha).

To record such important events, Harrer took over 2,000 photographs during his time in Tibet. A selection of 200 of these photographs, published in an album in the 1990s, *Lost Lhasa: Heinrich Harrer's Tibet*, documents nomadic, feudal, and monastic life of Tibetans well into the 1940s and 50s – a time capsule of a disappearing way of life. These were the last years of the old Tibet, before the Chinese invasion in 1951, a world now mainly lost. In May 1951, the Tibetan representatives were forced to sign an agreement, which in exchange for nominal self-governance, Tibet agreed to be part of China.

Harrer eventually left for India in 1951 because of the worsening relations with China and, en route back to Europe, stayed at the famous Himalayan Hotel in Kalimpong, in the Indian Himalayan foothills. The hotel was originally the family home of the MacDonalds. David MacDonald had been the interpreter on Francis Younghusband's expedition to Tibet in 1904, and 20 years later, he turned the family home into a hotel that became the favoured stay for Everest-bound mountaineers, travellers, and spies heading north to the Tibetan plateau. Over the years, many famous names found hospitality with the MacDonalds, such as Sir Charles Bell, George Mallory, Hisao Kimura, Alexandra David-Néel – and Heinrich Harrer. It was here that the Harrer started to write his first book *Seven Years in Tibet* before returning to Europe.

By 1952, Harrer had returned to Austria, settled back into European life where he remained active as a writer, international explorer, and public figure. In his hometown of Hüttenberg, he built a museum dedicated to his experiences in Tibet and the other expeditions and challenges he experienced around the world in Indonesia, Africa, and South America. The museum includes a complete floor that is dedicated to Tibet, plus a reproduction of part of the Lingkhor, the pilgrim's five-mile circumambulatory trail around Lhasa that winds up a rock in front of the museum. This route around the city was used by Buddhist pilgrims to gain merit and the chance of a better rebirth – it is particularly auspicious to complete during the Saga Dawa festival on full moon day, when merit is believed to multiply by 100,000. The museum was opened by the 14th Dalai Lama in 1992.

Sadly, the Lingkhor that encompasses the Potala Palace, Chagpori Hill, and numerous temples has now almost disappeared due to the modernisation of the city. Happily, echoes of this older Tibetan world are scattered across museums, libraries, institutions, monasteries, and heritage projects, allowing this lost world to still be found.

- Seven Years in Tibet by Heinrich Harrer, 1953, English version published by Rupert Hart-Davis
- Return to Tibet by Heinrich Harrer, Weidenfeld Nicholson, ISBN 0297783173
- Eight Years in Tibet by Peter Aufschnaiter, 2002, edited by Martin Brauen, Bangkok: Orchid Press, ISBN 9789745240124
- Seeing Lhasa by Clare Harris and Tsering Shakya, catalogue for the Pitt Rivers exhibition Serindia, ISBN 1932476040, includes early photographs and descriptions of life in Lhasa by foreigners, including images from The Tibet Album
- The Tibet Album, organised by the University of Oxford, tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/album
- Heinrich Harrer Museum, Hüttenberg, Austria, huettenberg.at

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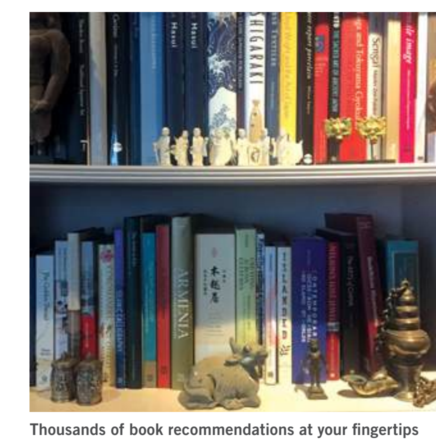

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The Dragon King Presenting a Jewel to Fujiwara no Hidesato by the Sanseisha Company, designed by Kawanabe Kyosai and modelled by Takamura Koun, 1879-1881, bronze and rock crystal, Dallas Museum of Art, Foundation for the Arts Collection, The John R Young Collection, gift of M Frances and John R Young, the work shows the transition of Japanese armorers to fine artists after the abolition of the samurai class

Articulated model of a spiny lobster by Norihisa, 1870, iron, private collection. Photo: courtesy of Gavin Ashworth

Kettle, 15th century, iron, The Ann & Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Museum: The Samurai Collection, Dallas. Photo: Michel Gurfinkel

Saké fountain by Okamura Sugaji, about 1825-50, bronze, tin, gold, silver, shibuichi, and shakudo, private collection. Photo: courtesy of Julia Featheringill

SAMURAI TO THE IMPERIAL COURT

Two major exhibitions are currently exploring Japanese culture in April – this one in Dallas, the other in London. Each explores different aspects and influences of a cultural phenomenon – the life and art of the *samurai*. In Dallas, the show traces centuries of metal art in Japan through more than 90 works of art drawn from the Dallas Museum of Art's significant holdings and other leading collections, including the Ann & Gabriel Barbier-Mueller Museum Samurai Collection. The exhibition looks at the technical mastery, innovative spirit, and aesthetics of works produced over the centuries. A survey that spans samurai arms and armour, imperial court commissions, and enamelled vessels, as well as figural sculpture.

Metalworking has been an integral part of Japanese culture for over 2,000 years, dating back to the 3rd century BC, when techniques originating in China were transmitted to Korea and Japan. By the Edo period (1615-1868), during the age of the samurai, metalworking became a revered art form through increasingly refined craftsmanship in sword and armour manufacture. Presented in five thematic sections, the exhibition highlights Japanese metal artists and their virtuosity in metalworking from the late Muromachi period (1336-1573) to the Meiji period (1868-1912), featuring works representing a variety of metals and techniques, from iron, bronze, silver, gold and mixed metals, to casting and cloisonné enamelling. 'While metal craftsmanship has a very long tradition and has played a significant role throughout Japan's history, less is known about the artists behind these works and their many technical innovations,' explains Dr Jacqueline Chao, The Cecil and Ida Green Curator of Asian Art, continuing, 'The works of art in the exhibition offer a deeper view into the profound ingenuity, aesthetic diversity, and cultural significance of these artists and their art forms.'

All of Japan's traditional industries had to adapt to the social and economic upheavals that accelerated in the late 19th century with metalwork being particularly affected. The arts of casting bronze, forging steel, and working with gold and silver were closely connected with some of the most distinctive and traditional aspects of everyday life and beliefs during the Edo period (1615-1868), such as casting Buddhist bronze sculpture for temples. Although craftsmen in Japan had always been recognised for their skills and the quality of their work, the exhibition begins with an overview of different metals, Japanese casting, metalworking, and decorative techniques. It then continues with a section that explores innovations in metalworking in samurai culture, featuring important examples of samurai arms and armour from the 16th to the 19th centuries, and the decorative metal objects, such as sword fittings, that were made by metalsmiths from the 1700s onward during a time of peace.

Works on show includes a rare saké fountain by Okamura Sugaji depicting an idealised image of Mount Horai, the legendary isle of the immortals, as well as a *jjizai okimono*, or fully articulated model of

Vase with Yatsude (Fatsia Japonica) by Hattori Tadasaburo, circa 1912-20, enamel and silver, private collection, courtesy of Bonhams & Butterfields, London. Photo: Steve Gyurina

a spiny lobster, created with the same hammering and riveting techniques used to produce samurai helmets and body armour. These sculptures were largely produced by highly skilled armourers and metalworkers who had lost their traditional livelihoods.

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and after the samurai class had been dissolved, the right to wear swords in public was abolished in 1876. As a result, many highly skilled metal artists lost their patrons and had to find new ways of supporting themselves, turning their attention to creating other forms of metal art of the highest quality. However, the samurai had for centuries commissioned fine decoration for the fittings of their swords, in particular the sword-guards (*tsuba*), which were often works of art. The Hirata School, productive well into the 19th century, was famous for the most coveted of these sword fittings. It was a former samurai, Kaji Tsunekichi (1803-1883) from Nagoya in Owari Province, who is credited with the renaissance of Japanese cloisonné manufacture, resulting in a 'Golden Age' for Japanese metalwork, at a time when there was a growing emphasis on decorative crafts.

Craftsmen adapted their expertise in metal forging, riveting, and casting, they began to create detailed, realistic, and often articulated sculptures for the growing interest in things Japanese from the West. The methods used to hammer, shape, and articulate plates of armour for movement could be directly applied to crafting the shells, scales, and joints of animal figures, such as crabs, lobsters, dragons, and insects.

The next section presents decorative metal objects made by metalsmiths during the Meiji period (1868-1912). The idea of Japan and the growth of interest in the country by the West stems from this time – works of art imported from the country showed time-consuming perfection and a painstaking and patient execution of craft, objects showing a new aesthetic and sense of the use of space in design. In the Meiji era, due to the march of science and industrialisation, this skill and taste was able to be married with a remarkable progression in techniques in the fields of metalwork, lacquerware, and cloisonné objects. The government played a vital role in the development of these technical skills by encouraging and sponsoring education and technical schools. National Industries Exhibitions were organised in all the main cities of Japan to encourage competition and growth in domestic and export industries. The first National Industrial Exhibition was held in Tokyo in 1877, featuring products appropriate for the integration of Western technologies into Japanese industries. After more than 200 years of isolationism, Japan was opening to contact with the West and modernising under a new emperor.

This, coupled with the Meiji government's encouragement of innovation in metalworking, led to a wide range of new forms and decorative techniques to be featured in exhibitions across Japan, as well as in World's Fairs during the period.

Another part of the exhibition features several important pieces, including an incense burner shaped like a falcon perched on an anchor by Sano Takachika that once belonged to Emperor Meiji, and several works made by metal artists who were appointed as Teishitsu Gigeiin (Artist Craftsmen to the Imperial Household), the highest official title given in the Meiji period to artists in recognition of their exceptional mastery in traditional Japanese arts and crafts.

Also on show are examples of brilliantly coloured Japanese cloisonné enamelling, showcasing works from each of the five artist companies that executed imperial commissions of cloisonné enamelling during the Meiji period.

To end the exhibition on a high note, the Dragon King of the Sea bronze-cast sculpture, recognised as the most significant Meiji period bronze sculpture in North America, is celebrated for its fine workmanship. It is just one of many examples of the DMA's important collection of Japanese metalworks featured in this exhibition.

● Until 6 September 2026, Dallas Museum of Art, dma.org

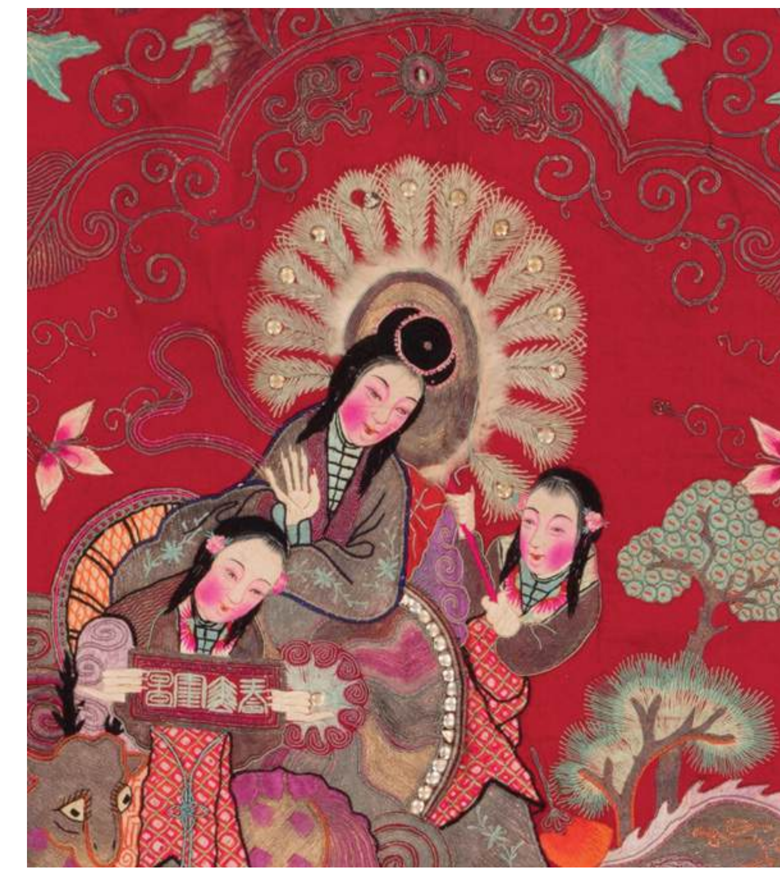
PEACOCK POWER

In celebration of Singapore's 60th anniversary of independence, the Asian Civilisations Museum is exploring how the peacock has been depicted across cultures and its enduring role as a symbol of beauty, power, and divinity in Asia. Featuring over 100 exceptional works from the National Collection and important lenders, *Peacock Power* spans diverse mediums, from ceramics to textiles. The exhibition traces how the image of the peacock travelled across Asia, inspiring sacred imagery, luxury ornament, and everyday adornment. Peranakan art, shaped by the convergence of multiple influences, is the ideal starting point for this journey, inviting the viewer to consider how motifs move between contexts, revealing the networks that connect peoples and how artistic traditions evolved through exchange.

In Peranakan culture, the peacock symbolises good fortune, luxurious beauty, and prestige. This is most evident in Peranakan wedding ceremonies, where peacocks prominently featured alongside other auspicious symbols like the phoenix. Together, these birds suggest the pairing of male and female energies, reflecting the yang and yin principles of Daoist belief that inform Peranakan wedding symbolism. The association of the peacock with courtly rank also aligns with the practice of treating the bride and groom as 'king and queen for the day'.

Peacock feathers also have a role in faith. Prized since ancient times for their iridescence and alluring 'eye' patterns, peacock feathers were used in ritual objects, textiles, and ornament. Focusing on the bird's most mesmerising features, the exhibition examines them in an array of contexts, uncovering their dual symbolism: in sacred rituals they serve as emblems of purity, prosperity, and good luck, while for the ruling elite they are markers of sovereignty, status, and splendour. The birds are a pervasive motif in Indian art, appearing from ancient cave paintings and Indus Valley artefacts to Mughal miniatures and contemporary designs, symbolising royalty, beauty, love, and divinity. They are featured across various mediums like paintings, sculptures, textiles, and jewellery, and are often linked to Hindu mythology, such as the god Kartikeya's mount, and national and religious significance.

Peacocks are also closely associated with Hindu gods themselves. The god Kartikeya (Murugan or Skanda) has a peacock, named Paravani, the primary mount of Kartikeya, the god of war and commander of the gods' army. Here, the peacock symbolises the god's victory over ego and sensual desires; in iconography, it is often shown gripping a snake (representing ego/desires) with its claws. The bird is also associated with Krishna, who is an avatar of the god Vishnu, and is consistently depicted with a peacock feather (or *mor pankh*) adorning his crown or headband. This is a prominent symbol of his connection with nature, his playfulness, and purity. In some households, peacock feathers are associated with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and fortune, and it is considered auspicious to keep the bird's feathers at home to bring prosperity. Elsewhere in India, the peacock is also a common motif in Pichhavai paintings, the large


Birthday hanging of the Daoist goddess Magu with a halo of peacock-like feathers, China, early or mid-20th century, silk, silk floss, gold threads, sequins, Peranakan Museum

devotional painted pictures from Rajasthan, often associated with love and the divine love of Radha and Krishna, and designed to hang in Hindu temples of the Pushtimarg tradition. One of the most infamous diamonds in history is closely linked to peacocks – the Koh-i-Noor. The diamond came from India's alluvial mines thousands of years ago, sifted from the sand. According to Hindu belief, it was revered by gods like

Altar cloth (tok wi) with peacocks and peonies, Java, 20th century, cotton, gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp. Altar cloths were hung at the front of Peranakan altars to honour deities and ancestors

Krishna. Although it is impossible to know exactly where the Koh-i-Noor came from and when it first came into the possession of kings, there is a definite point at which it appears in the written record. The original Peacock Throne, commissioned by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in 1628, was dismantled and broken up for its valuable gems after Nadir Shah conquered Delhi in 1739. After Nadir Shah's assassination in 1747, the throne likely disappeared completely during the ensuing chaos. The Koh-i-Noor diamond arrived in the UK in 1850. Following the British annexation of the Punjab in 1849, the diamond has been part of the British crown jewels, and was first exhibited to the public at the Great Exhibition in 1851. Today, there are numerous interested parties and countries claiming ownership and the right to repatriate the stone.

One of the deities most closely related with the colourful bird is the Hindu deity Kartikeya (also known as Sri Murugan), who is widely revered in southern India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka, and who rides a peacock as his mount. During the festival of Thaipusam, devotees honour him by carrying *kavadi* decorated with peacock feathers, one of which features prominently in this exhibition.

Over the centuries, the peacock has become a universal symbol that transcends faiths and borders: a creature of the divine realm, and an emblem of beauty and power on earth. In Buddhism, peacock feathers symbolise wisdom, and the transformation of poison (or negative emotions) into a form of beauty (enlightenment), as well as the Bodhisattva path of compassion to navigate the suffering of the world. This symbolism stems from the belief that peacocks can eat poisonous plants and venomous snakes without coming to harm; instead, these toxins are thought to enhance the brilliance of their plumage. This is a powerful metaphor for a Bodhisattva, who can take the suffering and defilements of the world and transform them into something beautiful and beneficial on the path to liberation. These feathers can be seen as the unfolding of wisdom, much like when a peacock displays its tail.

They are also used in various Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhist rituals, such as sprinklers for consecrated water or as decorative elements for ritual items, symbolising protection and purification from defilements.

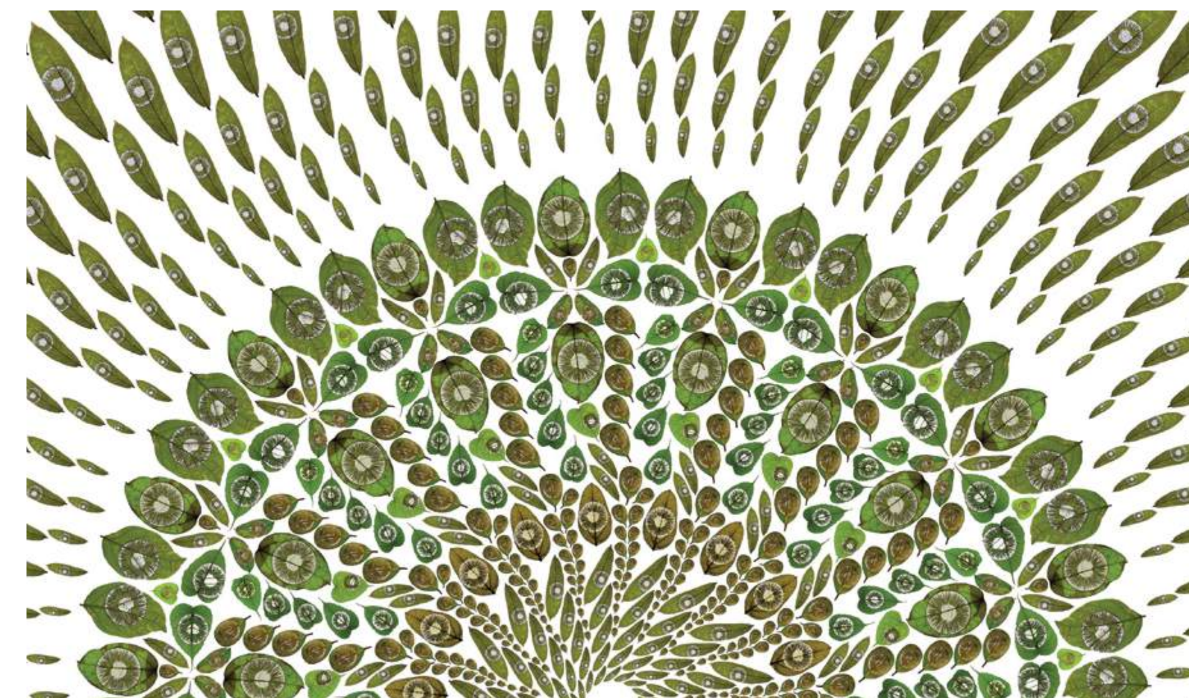
Its image graces the throne of the Amitabha Buddha (the principal Buddha in Mahayana Pure Land Buddhism), evokes paradise in Christian and Islamic art, and continues to inspire artistic and spiritual expression across Asia. They are also closely associated with the deity Mahamayuri (the Peacock Myoo), who is associated with protection and curing illnesses. The deity is a prominent female Wisdom King (one of the five Vajra-rajas) and Bodhisattva in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, revered for protecting against poisons, diseases, and disasters and popular in Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan Buddhism.

This long representation of the bird symbolises its enduring beauty, opulence, and admiration across Asia, with their graceful forms inspiring and influencing artists and craftsmen through centuries of trade and exchange. The motif appears across many forms of media, from luxury objects to everyday adornment. In textiles, peacocks enliven textiles across southeast Asia and are a favourite motif in Javanese *batiks*, especially those from Pekalongan – a cosmopolitan port shaped by generations of cultural interaction.

The exhibition closes with a newly commissioned work, Thousand Eyes by Ernest Goh. Through a contemporary lens, Goh reflects on the peacock's enduring symbolism across cultures, linking the 'thousand eyes, of its tail to fallen leaves as sacred vessels, inviting reflection on both cultural heritage and present-day ecological concerns.

● Until 30 August, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, nbh.gov.sg/acm

Groom's wedding jacket, Malacca, early or mid-20th century, silk, gold thread, Peranakan Museum


Thousand Eyes (2025) by Ernest Goh, Singapore, etched leaves, digital print on paper. In the Hindu epic the Ramayana, a peacock uses its feathers to shelter Indra during his battle with Ravana and is rewarded with a thousand eyes

Worshippers at Kitano Tenmangu Shrine in Kyoto, the head shrine for over 12,000 Tenjin shrines

LEGENDS OF A SHINTO GOD

Over thousands of years, Japan has evolved its own ancient religious belief – Shinto – the way of the gods. Like other animist-like beliefs around the world, Shinto evolved from rituals of respect for that in nature which was neither understood nor explicable: the movement of the sun and heavenly bodies, violent events of earthquake and thunderstorms, the passing of seasons, and the circle of life and death. Over the centuries, such rituals, particularly those of marriage, coming-of-age or other life events, became codified into a more or less similar form at shrines throughout the country. In many areas in Japan where there are forest glades, giant trees, strange rock formations and caves – mysterious places where the atmosphere changes and a sense of the presence and power of resident *numina* – a simple band of rice-straw or a heap of pebbles – point to the intuitive reverence of those who have been before, marking for others that the place is sacred.

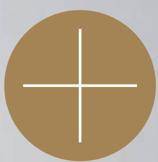
Compared to monotheistic faiths such as the Abrahamic faiths, Shinto is free of dogma, piety, sin, or guilt, passing no judgement on human pleasures such as drinking saké or feasting, showing a take-it-or-leave-it attitude that demands neither adherence nor commitment. Most Japanese also follow Buddhism – and in some cases – newer religions that have appeared in the last century or so. Shinto differs from monotheistic faiths in that it considers that the presence of countless deities allows for a pluralism of thought and belief, so it has no concept of an absolute truth, which by its nature leads to the duality of believers and non-believers.

In the Japanese mind, Shinto is associated with life, fertility, and purity, while Buddhism is concerned with reincarnation, some sort of life after death, and how ethical behaviour might ease one's chances. One is life-affirming with engaging, high-energy festivals while the other is contemplative, even metaphysical. The two beliefs live happily side by side and almost every temple has a Shinto shrine tucked away in a corner somewhere. Having been raised with Shinto and Buddhism, and the ceremonies that each present through every stage of life, some Japanese regard monotheistic religions as interesting but too culturally distant to be committed to. According to some surveys, many Japanese today have no faith, or are areligious (60-80% report no personal religious relief), but look upon Buddhist and Shinto practice as central to their national history and culture.

Yushima Tenjin Shrine in Tokyo is popular with students asking for academic blessings or favours

Sacred tree (goshinboku) wrapped in sacred rope, shimenawa, separating the divine from the human world

Seated Tenjin, 1259, Kamakura period (1185-1333), wood with colour, 94.9 x 101.5 x 68.8 cm, Yoki Tenman Jinja, Sakurai, Nara Prefecture, Important Cultural Property. Exhibited in Shinto: Discovery of the Divine in Japan, see Asian Art Newspaper April 2019. Photo: Nara National Museum


WATCH
Moriyaso Ito
discuss Shintoism
in Japanese Life

Seated Tenjin, 1261, Kamakura period (1185-1333), wood with pigments, height 83.5 cm, Egara Tenjinsha, Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture, Important Cultural Property. Exhibited in Shinto: Discovery of the Divine in Japan, see Asian Art Newspaper April 2019 Photo: Nara National Museum

Shinto does not believe in a supreme creator of the universe, and in ancient times the physical and spiritual worlds were considered as one. The first *kami* (spirits) were those of Heaven and Earth, symbolically the source of all power and life, and from Heaven came male and female deities who produced further kami, as well as the land of Japan, its people and unique nature. However, what Shinto does share with other faiths around the world is its ancient basis in mythology and reverence for power. Most of the earliest kami were manifestations of great force such as rain, wind, seas and rivers, but gradually expanded to include those that had a positive or helpful influence over human lives. Some of these kami are not necessarily friendly and have to be kept in a good mood by various ceremonies.

The deities venerated in Shinto are difficult to define and are certainly very different from what other cultures regard as 'gods'. Reputedly numbering more than eight million, kami inhabit the same world as humans – not some supernatural, non-physical realm – and share our emotional failings and moral imperfections. Simply, they are objects, natural forces, or beings – living or departed – with an extraordinary power to inspire wonder and respect.

This object of veneration can take varying forms. The Hanaguri Shrine in Okayama Prefecture has a mountain of over 7 million nose-rings preserved from slaughtered cattle, where prayers are offered to thank their spirits for providing meat. There are also the many boisterous festivals held every year at shrines throughout Japan, in which nearly naked young male performers engage in some sort of choreographed rough behaviour and muscular competition, often involving water or mud.

Shinto prayers are offered to discarded needles, knives, and other objects that have been useful to human life. Another example is the special ceremony that is always performed to appease the earth spirit before the construction of any building in Japan.

A highly popular Shinto ceremony in Japan is Hatsumode, the first shrine visit of the New Year, where millions of people pray for good fortune. Then, in the autumn, Niiname-sai is a traditional autumn harvest festival where the emperor offers new rice to Shinto deities, asking them for a bountiful harvest and praying for future prosperity.

The revered kami, Inari-sama, has thousands of shrines dedicated to them as the deity of agriculture, grain, and specifically rice. Because of this, Inari is intrinsically connected to the rituals of planting and harvesting, making them a central figure in the November Thanksgiving Day. Shrines range from the main temple Fushimi Taisha in Kyoto to small structures in the corner of a farmer's field. Many have an image of a white fox, the messenger of Inari-sama, holding a key to the rice house.

Historical personae were sometimes appointed as official kami with shrines of their own. They were deified in respect of their having an extraordinary talent or having done great deeds for the nation. Prominent among such kami is Sugawara no Michizane (845-903), who was a brilliant scholar and politician of the Soga clan who rose to prominence at the Kyoto court, inspiring envy among his peers. Through intrigues by the Fujiwara clan, he was falsely accused of wrongdoing and exiled to Kyushu in 901, where he eventually died in despair. Victor Harris, in the catalogue to the Shinto exhibition in 2001, explains what happened after the scholar's death: 'Thereafter the capital, Kyoto, was wracked with storms and other calamities, and it was decided that the *onryo* (the restless and avenging spirit of Michizane) was the cause. His spirit was appeased by sanctifying a shrine to him, and the storms stopped. By imperial decree he was nominated Temman Kitano (Tenjin), worshipped as the deity of learning. Shrines to Tenjin are found all over Japan and visits to the shrine are virtually mandatory for any parents with academic aspirations for their children. During the Heian period (794-1185), Tenjin came to be identified with the Buddhist saviour Kannon (Guanyin in China, or Sanskrit Avalokitesvara).

Kitano Tenmangu Shrine, Kyoto

On show at Kyoto National Museum until June is an exhibition that explores the Shinto shrine of Kitano Tenmangu, located in northwestern Kyoto, which is the headquarters of the many Tenmangu and Tenjin shrines found across Japan. These are dedicated to Tenjin, the deified incarnation of the erudite Heian-period aristocrat Sugawara no Michizane (845-903), who is worshipped as the Shinto God of scholarship, the arts, and warfare.

In 2027, Kitano Tenmangu will host the Hanmantosai, a festival in which thousands of lanterns are lit to commemorate the 1125th anniversary of Michizane's death. To mark this occasion, the Kyoto National Museum is organising a special exhibition showcasing treasures related to Tenjin worship from shrines across Japan. At its heart are 17 National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties preserved over centuries in Kitano Tenmangu Shrine.

For this important exhibition, the *National Treasure Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Tenjin Shrine (Kitano Tenjin engi emaki),* Jokyu version, is being exhibited in full for the first time in history, with every scene on display at some point during the exhibition. Other slightly later versions of the *Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Tenjin Shrine,* including the Koan, Mitsunobu, and Mitsuoki versions, all designated Important Cultural Properties, will also be on view, depicting scenes of the origin of the Kitano deity and shrine.

The exhibition also features works recently uncovered through joint research by the Kyoto National Museum and the Kitano Cultural Research Institute, as well as masterpieces passed down in Tenmangu and Tenjin shrines and temples across Japan. Through these objects, the exhibition explores the diverse and previously underexplored dimensions of Tenjin veneration, revealing the significant role it has played in shaping Japanese culture.

● Kyoto National Museum, until 14 June 2025, knm.org.jp

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Woman's firefighting jacket and hood, wool, satin-weave silk appliqué, and silk- and gold-thread embroidery, Japan, 1800-50, John C Weber Collection. Photo © John Bigelow Taylor

Suit of armour and helmet, iron, silk, wool, leather, gold and lacquer, Japan, 1519 (helmet), 1696 (armour) and 1800s (textiles), purchase made possible by the JTI Japanese Acquisition Fund © The Trustees of the British Museum. During a long period of peace after 1615, the samurai and the government and never saw battle, but the highest-ranking still required a splendid suit of armour as a symbol of status.

SAMURAI

This new exhibition at the British Museum aims to dispel some of the myths, and reveal the facts, that swirl around the *samurai*. All the elements you would expect from an exhibition on these iconic Japanese warriors and their life is here – with some unexpected connections and discoveries. Surprising facts such as half the samurai were women and samurai, although a uniquely Japanese phenomenon, were not restricted to Japan as they also interacted with China and Korea, as well as in Europe and Southeast Asia.

To start this exploration, the show traces the evolution of the samurai over the past 1,000 years – looking at how their image and surrounding myths were created. The *bushi* (fighting man) or *musha* (warrior), which later evolved into the samurai (the elite class that served their daimyo or feudal war lord), appeared at the end of the 9th century. It was then that they formed small armed groups around the provincial nobles in the service of the imperial court in Kyoto. This nascent class developed in regions distant from the influence and control of the emperor and court during the 10th to the 12th centuries, which allowed them to establish their own networks of loyalties and dependencies. Eventually, the influence and power gained by this new warrior aristocracy led to the samurai also gaining political power that enabled them to form a feudal military government, *bakufu*, at the end of the 12th century.

From this period to the last quarter of the 16th century (the Kamakura (1135-1333) and Muromachi period (1392-1573), infighting was fierce between the various clans, which created a consistent state of war in the archipelago, threatening the country's economy and its population. This Sengoku period (1467-1568), when the *daimyo* (the feudal lords at the top of the samurai class) fought bitterly to maintain their territory and control, took action to control Japan. The success of Ieyasu Tokugawa at the Siege of Osaka (1615) saw the end of the Warring States period to herald a long era of peace, allowing the samurai to move away from the battlefield to serve as government officials, scholars, and patrons of the arts.

By the late 19th century, their hereditary status had been abolished, and the myth of *bushido* – promoting patriotism and self-sacrifice – was promoted. This emphasis helped the samurai myth that has evolved into the globally recognised image that continues to inspire writers, film makers, and artists today.

> *The samurai are a uniquely Japanese phenomenon*

Helmet with butterfly crest, iron, lacquer, silk, Japan, 18th century, National Museum of Japanese History. During the civil wars of the 1500s distinctively designed helmets became popular and continued to be so during peacetime in the Tokugawa period.

To explore this long history, the British Museum's exhibition looks at their world in three sections to explore the samurai class's rise to power, the times of peace during their domination, and the aftermath – the myth and legacy of samurai warriors and their way of life. This evolution explores how they rose from mounted guards to the nobility during the 12th century to their subsequent ascent as military leaders and administrators of Japan until the end of the 19th century.

During the peace of the Muromachi period, many samurai became devoted to the Way of Tea (*Chado* or *Chanoyu*). The tea ceremony has its origins in the late 15th and 16th centuries, when celebrated tea masters became established in elite Japanese society. The way of tea was literally shaped by the architecture of the 15th-century Silver Pavilion (now Ginkakuji Temple) in Kyoto, by pioneering the *shoin* (study-style) for tea, built by the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa as a retirement villa in the eastern hills of Kyoto. Although the ritual of the tea ceremony originally featured Chinese ceramics and utensils, the influential tea master, Murata Juko (d 1502), who transformed the tea ceremony in the late 15th century, initiated a taste for the imperfection of Japanese utensils that evoked a simple, unpretentious beauty (*wabi*). Murata believed that upon entering his small and austerely appointed tearoom, the trappings of daily life, particularly one's status, must be discarded, as each participant was considered equal.

Murata also imbued his tea ritual with performative elements from Noh theatre and the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, which placed an emphasis on the communal nature of life. The most striking element of the ceremony was that participants were often required to use the same tea bowl. These were authentic rustic wares from Japanese or Korean kilns rather than luxurious porcelains from China. As a result, tea bowls became the most prominent utensils of Murata's *wabi-cha*, with the most spectacular examples coveted by the wealthy merchants of Sakai and powerful daimyo seeking to express their own prestige and power. For the samurai, the 'way of tea' would become essential to their lifestyle and essential for cultivating their own aesthetic sensibilities.

Initially the samurai practiced these elaborate forms of tea in great splendour, at times involving huge gatherings, with tea identifying contests, or day-long events in which meals and *saké* were also served. During the Sengoku period (1467-1615) Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), two of Japan's most powerful daimyo, were both ardent collectors of tea utensils – Nobunaga is known to have awarded prized tea bowls to his vassals for loyal duty in battle. Under samurai patronage, the celebrated tea master Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591) developed the simple, more intimate and rustic form of tea practice that survives today in modern tea lineages.

These elite tea ceremonies, of course, were not attainable by all of the samurai. However, the 'way of the warrior' (bushido) did apply to all levels of the warrior class and was not limited to the handling of weapons and military skill and discipline. It also attached fundamental importance to the arts of the scholar and culture. In earlier periods, like most Japanese of their time, the samurai followed Buddhist religious teachings as well as the practices of Japan's native religion, Shinto. In response to the anxieties of a turbulent age in the 13th and 14th centuries, a new Buddhist sect known as Pure Land rose to prominence. The name refers to the western paradise of Amitabha, a powerful and compassionate Buddha to whom the samurai were devoted. The attraction of Pure Land Buddhism lay in its reliance on a simple, expedient device for salvation: recitation of a short prayer, invoking the name of Amitabha. By the 12th century, another, a quite different sect appeared, which attracted many samurai adherents – Zen Buddhism. Zen stresses seated meditation and pondering of *koan* – paradoxical statements or questions – as practices leading to enlightenment. This patronage of the samurai class continued throughout the period of rule by the Ashikaga shoguns, accounting for the great concentration of Zen temples in Kyoto, where the emperor and court held power. The art of ink painting was also later associated with samurai life, as in addition to their military abilities, most elite samurai were expected to be versed in the cultural arts.

Minamoto no Tametomo on the Isle of Demons by Katsushika Hokusai, hanging scroll painting, ink and colours on silk, Japan,1811 © The Trustees of the British Museum. As the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) progressed, samurai and townspeople alike became fascinated by legendary warriors of the earlier civil wars. The painting, commissioned to celebrate completion of a serialised novel, shows Tametomo challenging the island's wild inhabitants to test their strength.

Jinbaori (surcoat), pheasant and drake feathers mounted on hemp, with Chinese silk, Japan, 1570-98 © The Trustees of the British Museum. In the late 1500s, Toyotomi Hideyoshi rose from foot soldier, more peasant than samurai class, to the highest rank in the land, thanks to his military ability and political skill. He became a trusted general of the warlord Oda Nobunaga. After the latter's demise, Hideyoshi forged alliances, built palaces and castles, and received the title 'regent'. This jinbaori (surcoat), with a target design, supposedly belonged to him. Originally protective garments to be worn over armour, jinbaori became statements of the personal taste of the wearer.

Duck and Man (2025) by Noguchi Tetsuya, commissioned by the Trustees of the British Museum © Noguchi Tetsuya Photography © The Trustees of the British Museum

Takeda Shingen by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, from the series 100 Heroic Generals in Battle at Kawanakajima, 1845-6, woodblock colour print © The Trustees of the British Museum

Set of archery equipment, wood, lacquer, leather, gold, metal, bamboo, feathers and silk, decorated with Tokugawa mon, Japan, 1800-1900 © The Trustees of the British Museum. The superior social status of the samurai derived from their identity as warriors, so they needed to maintain their military training even during peacetime. In earlier centuries archery had been the primary mode of combat (rather than swordsmanship), and it remained an essential military skill.

By the Edo period (1603-1868), Japanese society had adapted some concepts of Chinese origin and saw itself as ideally made up of four categories: warriors (*shi*, whereas in China this term designated literate civil servants), peasants (*no*), craftsmen (*ko*) and traders (*sho*). The culture of the samurai also aligned with this assimilation of class into Japanese life. Other assimilations include 'warrior Buddhism' that could blend with Shinto, the ancestral religion of Japan. This meant that the samurai shared similar practices with Buddhist monks: the way of tea (chado), the way of fragrant woods (*kodo*), or incense, and the way of flowers (*ikebana*). However, it was in the field of literature and poetry that shoguns, daimyo, and other samurai, distinguished themselves the most. By learning Chinese characters, they also appropriated poetry from the continent and, in imitation of the imperial nobility, devoted themselves to a new type of Japanese poetry – the 31 syllable *waka* and *haiku*.

This emphasis on cultural skills grew from the samurai's need to govern lands they had acquired through warfare. Literacy was required to rule effectively, as these skills were needed to draft documents with at least rudimentary knowledge of calligraphy and literary conventions. The ability to participate in courtly arts like classical Japanese verse (waka) strengthened the samurai's authority, lending dignity and bringing prestige to warriors who frequented aristocratic and court society. Like the aristocracy, samurai often attended social gatherings where poems were recited, written, or exchanged.

Among other pastimes, high-ranking samurai were often connoisseurs of painting. Shogunate patronage of painters and artisans advanced the visual arts throughout the period of military rule, as daimyo and samurai vied to fill their mansions and castles with screens and paintings, as well as beautifully decorated objects for daily use in their newly built castles.

Samurai children were expected to prepare for life by studying Chinese and Japanese literature, as well as Confucian texts, alongside martial skills like archery and horseback riding.

Apart from daily life and aesthetics, the exhibition also pays attention to the important role of women in the samurai class. The exhibition catalogue explains that women from this class were expected to acquire an education befitting their role as wives and mothers. Although women made up half the social class during the Tokugawa period, they did not play an extensive role or have much representation in popular storytelling, with the exception of the celebrated female warrior Tomoe Gozen, whose story is told in the *Tale of the Heike*, which recounts four occasions when she appeared in battle. Tomoe appears in the Edo-period woodblocks

Portrait of Ito Mancio by Domenico Tintoretto, oil on canvas, Italy, 1585, property of Fondazione Trivulzio, Milan

prints that are on show in the exhibition, *Tomoe Gozen Defeating Uchida Saburo Ieyoshi at the Battle of Awazu* (1780-1819) by Katsukawa Shun'ei and *Evening Glow at Awazu* (1852) by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, both showing the heroine dressed in samurai armour. Other duties, apart from those of domestic life and child rearing, included participating in the fire watch. Fires occurred so often in Edo, a city built of wood, that they were called the 'flowers of Edo'. The shogunate established fire-fighting companies, with high-ranking samurai responsible for raising the alarm, supervising fire fighting and evacuations, and preventing looting. Women living and working in Edo Castle were similarly trained and needed to protect the women's quarters, where men (apart from the shogun) were banned. On show is a female fire-fighting coat, 1800-1850, for use in the women's quarter at Edo Castle.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, one fascinating period in Japan's history is explored – the introduction of the Catholic faith to the country. The Spaniard Francis Xavier (1506-1552), one of the founders of the Jesuit order, was the first of the notable priests who arrived in 1549 to find a country of complex politics and competing war-lords, with a litany of bloody hostilities breaking out from time to time. He spent barely two years in the country but managed to convert most of the inhabitants of Hirado Island (near Nagasaki) to Christianity – a trend continued under the efforts of further visiting priests – and by 1570, some 26,000 were followers of the faith.

Relations with the Japanese elite improved even more as the Jesuit Luis Frois (1532-1597) found himself on the right side of the powerful and otherwise murderous warlord, Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) who, though having no religious convictions of his own, permitted and encouraged Christian endeavours in the Imperial capital Kyoto and other parts of the country under his control. The faith flourished, possibly because it offered a message of peace and goodwill at odds with the warring sentiments of the time, and because it was associated with the much-admired and prosperous Portuguese trade and their scientific know-how. During the latter part of the 16th century, Nagasaki grew from being a small fishing village into a sizeable town under Jesuit administration with churches, seminaries and hospitals, to became known in Japan as 'little Rome'.

In 1582, the first Japanese diplomatic mission, known as the Tensho Embassy, was sent to Europe under the sponsorship of three daimyo who had converted to Christianity and the management of the Jesuit Head of Mission in Japan, Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606). The participants were four well-born, educated Japanese Christian boys together with servants and an interpreter who set sail on a voyage that took over two years, stopping en route at various Portuguese outposts in China and India, arriving in Lisbon as summer was ending in 1584. One of the party was Ito Mancio (1570-1612). The party travelled through Spain and on to Rome, and were well-received everywhere, meeting royalty, dukes, and even a couple of popes, all the time recording their experiences and observations before returning to Japan in 1590. The visit attracted great interest across Europe and, in Venice, Ito even had his portrait painted by Domenico Tintoretto (1560-1635), this painting is included in the exhibition. Their embassy also brought diplomatic gifts, including suits of armour.

Interest in the samurai continues, with their stories being fabricated, idealised, glorified, and adapted for many purposes. This exhibition explores myth and fact alongside each other to consider what is truth and what is myth, through 280 objects and digital media from their own collection as well as from 29 national and international lenders. It dramatically reveals the many identities of Japan's warrior class across the centuries, going beyond the predictable arms and armour, by showing paintings, woodblock prints, books, clothing, ceramics, and photographs. Shown alongside these traditional artefacts are examples of film, television, manga, video games and art, including a newly commissioned work by the contemporary artist, Noguchi Tetsuya (b 1980), bringing the samurai story up-to-date for another generation of enthusiasts.

• Until 4 May, the British Museum, London, britishmuseum.org

SEEKING PROFIT AND POWER

Philadelphia and the China Trade

Eager to prove itself worthy of trading on the world stage as a newly formed nation 250 years ago, America – and especially Philadelphians – embarked on the risky venture of trading with China by entrusting private citizens with the work of establishing trade and diplomatic relationships with the Chinese. Merchants saw dramatic opportunities to make money, building some of the fortunes that helped expand Philadelphia's role as a major port and city. To celebrate the country's 250th anniversary in March 2026, Independence Seaport Museum (ISM) is showing *Seeking Profit and Power: Philadelphia, China Trade, and the Making of America*, an exhibition taking into account the latest scholarship that features approximately 150 rarely seen objects from its collection ranging from ship logs and cargo manifests to examples of Chinese export porcelain, Chinese silks and sample books, as well as portraits of American and Chinese merchants, some of which are exhibited for the first time.

Museums and private collections have also loaned objects to ISM for the exhibition to help tell the story of early American trade in Asia as it is uniquely positioned share this journey through its mission and location on the Delaware River, where Philadelphia's China trade vessels launched and the first cargoes were unloaded in the late 18th century. Peter S Seibert, president and CEO of ISM, explains, 'When the United States declared its independence from Great Britain, we also separated ourselves from the rules and regulations that governed overseas trade. As we came together as a nation 250 years ago, we also stepped out onto the world's stage for the first time to become a new global power'.

Guest curators Susan Gail Johnson and Brett Palfreyman explore this story in five essential themes: Making a Nation focuses on why the US opened direct trade with China; Making it Work illustrates the technical and logistical feat of travelling the route from Philadelphia to China; Making Money shows the broad range of commodities the new nation could trade for sought-after

A Tea Hong at Canton by an unidentified Chinese artist, 19th century, China, gouache on paper, gift of Phillip Byrd in memory of Mrs Phillip Byrd

Teapot made for the Shipley family of Philadelphia, unidentified maker, 1750-70, manufactured in Jingdezhen, China; decorated in Canton, China, porcelain, gift of Harvey Stokes Shipley Miller in memory of J Welles Henderson and in honour of Hannah L Henderson

Chinese tea, porcelain, and other goods; Encountering Each Other explains how the two cultures learned about one another through the goods that they traded; and the final section, The Old China Trade, explores the end of the era and the place it still holds in American memory.

By the mid-18th century, the Canton System (1757-1842) had been designed as a means for China to control trade with the West by

Whampoa Reach, unidentified Chinese artist, circa 1815, China, oil on canvas, acquired through exchange, courtesy of Friends of the Museum

focusing all trade on the southern port of Canton. Implemented through several imperial edicts, it was finally firmly established when the Qianlong Emperor (1711-1799) responded to perceived threats from abroad and confined all maritime trade to Canton. This allowed for a concentration of export workshops and shops to be established on China's south coast. From the late 17th century onwards, Chinese merchants, known as *hongs*, managed all the foreign trade in the port. Once the Canton System had been implemented, the hongs, or the 13 Canton Factories, were organised into the monopoly, or guild, called the *cohong*.

By 1715, the British East India Company had set up office in Canton, quickly followed by Dutch, French, Danish, Swedish and in 1784, American interests were also registered. Views of these 'foreign factories', as they are known, are beautifully recorded in one of the staples of the China Trade, porcelains, as well as oil and

Bowl, ship with American flags, unidentified maker, circa 1790s, manufactured in Jingdezhen, China, decorated in Canton, China, porcelain, acquired through exchange, courtesy of Friends of the Museum

watercolour paintings of the period. Many of these were created as souvenirs to be taken home to Europe and played their role in documenting rather than idealising China.

Among the selection of objects that visitors can see in the exhibition is a rare letter carried by Captain John Green (1735-1796), a Philadelphian and former officer of the Continental Navy, which introduces him as a citizen of the United States and requests that he be treated 'in a becoming manner' and allowed to do business in China as he saw fit. Green captained the *Empress of China*, the first trading ship to make the journey to China (and back) setting sail from New York Harbor on 22 February 1784, only five months after the Treaty of Paris ended the Revolutionary War. The ship, largely funded by Philadelphians, carried ginseng roots and Spanish silver dollars. In addition to this sea letter, Green brought with him a copy of the Declaration of Independence as well as copies of the several treaties made with the different European powers. He was instructed by Daniel Parker, the ship's owner, to present the documents as necessary to prove that he was representing a legitimate, if newly formed, independent nation. This illustrates that early Americans saw the *Empress*' voyage as not only a private effort by merchants to make money, but also a quasi-diplomatic mission to introduce the new United States as a nation worthy of conducting trade on a global scale. Approximately 15 months after the *Empress of China* left for the Pearl River, she returned home, arriving in May 1785. It was a successful voyage and began a new era of relations with one of the youngest nations in the world and one of the oldest.

Other objects in the exhibition point to the volume of trade established in certain desirable Chinese goods, such as export porcelains made specifically for the West. On show is a porcelain bowl newly acquired by the ISM, on display for the first time, that dates to circa 1790s, with a motif of a ship with American flags. Made in Jingdezhen, China, and decorated in Canton, this bowl shows how Chinese artisans customised porcelain for the new American market. Classic designs for the export market featured generic, idealised Chinese landscapes with pagodas, bridges, willow trees, and rivers. Customised orders, such as armorial porcelain, personalised motifs or monograms, were also produced in huge quantitites to serve the growing demand from the West.

Although Chinese ceramics were already well known outside China as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907), and had reached Europe by the early 14th century, it was only after the opening of the sea routes to the East by the Portuguese in 1513 that the export of Chinese porcelain began to expand and become a global commodity. During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the export market became increasingly important, initially with the production of celadons and underglaze-blue porcelains. Once Europeans started trading and commissioning porcelains to bring back to the West, they quickly became the first truly global commodities. The markets were concentrated in different regions at different times, but the influence of this trade was sustained for centuries, especially in Europe and later the United States.

A punchbowl in the exhibition depicts a ship outfitted with an American flag that closely resembled the flag of the British East India Company, with which the Chinese were familiar. Although some pieces of custom porcelain featuring just a coat of arms, initials and the like, more elaborate examples such as this feature intricate hand-painted imagery. It is likely that the motif was copied from a print rather than painted from 'life' in port. While the original owner of this bowl is unknown, it was custom-made for a wealthy American, likely a merchant, and would have been part of a larger set that may have been divided and dispersed to various family members through the generations. Another porcelain punch bowl (circa 1784) featuring scenes of the Canton Hongs adorning the outside and with a probable image of the ship *Empress of China* on the inside has been loaned from The Dietrich American Foundation. The decoration on the bowl depicts the Danish, French, Imperial Austrian, Swedish, English, Dutch, and American flags flying before their respective trading houses along the Pearl River waterfront.

Lacquer sewing box, unidentified maker, circa 1800, Canton, China, lacquer on wood with ivory accessories, acquired through the generosity of Hannah L Henderson

Houqua (1769-1843), in the style of George Chinnery (1774-1852), circa 1825, Canton, China, oil on canvas, gift of Mrs Brannan Reath III

Society of the Cincinnati Dinner Plate, owned by George Washington, circa 1784-1785, manufactured in Jingdezhen, decorated in Canton, porcelain, enamel, and gilt, gift of Mr and Mrs Herbert L Pratt in memory of Florence Gibb Pratt, 1961, courtesy of The Society of the Cincinnati, Washington, DC

Also on show is a saucer owned by Martha Washington from the collection at George Washington's Mount Vernon. Dutch merchant Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest (1739-1801) arrived in Philadelphia from Canton on April 24, 1796, with 'A Box of China for Lady Washington'. It features a chain of 15 wide green links outlined in black joined by smaller gilded links outlined in red, each of which contains the name of a state.

No exhibition on the China trade would be without paintings documenting the period, and this exhibition is no exception. Among the portraits on view is one of the best-known examples of Wu Bingjian, known as Houqua (1769-1843), who was regarded as one of the most respected of the Hong merchants of Canton and was once the richest man in the world. Houqua commissioned portraits of himself for his American trading partners and gave them almost in a manner of giving someone a business card. There are several paintings of Houqua in existence in both museums and private collections; ISM's oil on canvas (circa 1825) descended through the family of Benjamin Chew Wilcocks (1776-1845). A key player in the development of trade relations with China, in 1813 Wilcocks was commissioned as the consul in Canton, serving until 1822, after which he remained in Canton until 1827 as a merchant before returning home to Philadelphia, where he continued to invest in the China

Punch Bowl, 1784, porcelain, manufactured in Jingdezhen, decorated in Canton, courtesy of Dietrich American Foundation

trade. This particular painting is reproduced in the style of the English painter George Chinnery (1774-1852), who spent the last 27 years of his life on the China coast and Macau following time spent in India and who had become a popular artist of the China trade companies.

Textiles were also a popular choice for traded goods, and an example of Chinese silk made particularly for the female marked is a burgundy-coloured embroidered shawl, made and purchased in Canton in the mid-19th century, of Chinese silk crepe and embroidered with silk floss. Shawls such as this were fashionable accessories for well-dressed Philadelphia women at that time. At the end of the 18th century, shawls became essential 'must-have' luxury accessories for European and American women, driven by a fascination with Oriental fashion and the desire for warmth over lightweight neoclassical garments. Although Indian shawls were popular, the popularity of Chinoiserie in the West prompted the Canton trade to cash in on the demand. This shawl was purchased by Rodney Fisher (1798-1863) for his wife, Eliza Bella Fisher (1808-1880). Fisher was a prominent Philadelphia merchant and the unofficial United States consul in Canton from March 1825 to 1827. ISM acquired the Fisher collection, of which this shawl was included, from a direct descendant of the family.

While there are many stories to be celebrated as America celebrates its 250th anniversary this year, the role Philadelphia played in shaping the new nation's trade ambitions with China is less known. *Seeking Profit and Power: Philadelphia, China Trade, and the Making of America* actively explores this important and unique aspect of the anniverary's narratives. The exhibition encourages visitors to discover the engaging story of America's ealy trade with China and the history of the international China trade in general.

● Until 3 January 2028, Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia, phillyseaport.org

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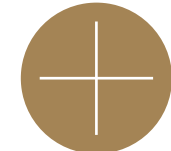
Battle of Rama and Ravana from The Ramayana, early to mid-18th century, Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu, India, found in Indonesia, mordant dyes on cotton. 100 x 530 cm

GREAT TALES IN ASIAN ART


WATCH
The Living Legend: Ramayana Tales from Near and Far

> "Asia is host to a hoard of rich storytelling traditions"

Asian myths, tales and epics cover worlds of heroes and heroines, villains, royalty and common people, good over evil, loves lost and goals attained. These grand narratives are highly adapted to visual and decorative arts with some of the best-known tales such as the Indian *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and the Japanese *The Tale of Genji* being popular examples that have been popular for centuries and have morphed in the 21st century world of gaming, webtoons, and animé. These grand narratives remain integral to Asian cultural identity and remain relevant to contemporary audiences because of their enduring themes. These can include such topics as 'the impermanence of all things', as well as the eternal interchange of *dharma* (correct, virtuous or moral action) and *adharma* – the opposite. These centuries-old tales remain relevant because they continue to elucidate spiritual and cultural elements which have defined these cultures for hundreds and thousands of years.

An exhibition *Great Tales in Asian Art* at the Art Gallery of South Australia explored two dominating themes – love and warfare. 'Love' includes images of enduring love with spiritual implications such as that between Krishna and Radha exemplified in the Bhagavata Purana and celebrated by exquisite miniatures and textiles. 'Love' also implies impromptu affairs and specifically the dissolute court life of Kyoto pervading The Tale of Genji, portrayed in superb screens and woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*).

Other topics covered explore conflict, wrathful deities that are terrifying exponents of harmful magic, and cataclysmic battles between good and evil. Such warfare and tales of battle form the climax of the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics, whose popularity spread to Southeast Asia and beyond. Also expressing conflict, is the Japanese *The Tale of the Heike*, written in the 14th century, which records political conflict between two medieval Japanese clans, which led to centuries-long civil war and the rise of the *samurai* and their culture.

Themes of love and warfare are, of course, present in Western and other cultures, but it is the way in which they are told and the cultural context in which they are created that makes them so different. For example, the Hindu epics explore and highlight elements that are so particular to the South Asian cultures for whom they were created that they have in some ways come to define the identity of the culture and people who read them and it is hard to imagine what the culture would look like without them.

Battle scenes from The Tale of the Heike, early 18th century, Kyoto, pair of six panel screens, colour, gold on paper, each 154 x 348 cm

These stories have also influenced contemporary art forms and continue to influence visual arts, dance, drama, literature, film, comics, as well as such specialist forms as Japanese *manga*. *Noh* plays are also still hugely popular in Japan. The costumes and music are essential to the dreamlike atmosphere of Noh plays where boundaries of time and identity are blurred, so costumes are classed as 'moving scenery' due to their visual impact when seen on the bare stage. Noh evolved from folk theatre and its status advanced during the 14th century when the retired shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu supported the work of the actor Kan'ami and his son, the playwright Zeami (circa 1363-1443). The aesthetic ideal of *yugen*, often translated as 'quiet elegance' is used to describe the subtleties of Noh, whose theatre seemingly suggests a reality beyond the known world'.

Also in Japan, scenes from The Tale of Genji (*Genji Monogatarai*) were often used to decorate screens and other objects. Famous for the extreme refinement of its court art and its artistic flourishing, imperial Japan in the Heian period (794-1185) gave birth to this major work of classical Japanese literature. Written in the 11th century, Heian period (794-1185) by a woman, the poet Murasaki Shikibu, it is considered the first psychological novel in history, and has been the source, since its creation a 1,000 years ago, of an extremely rich iconography as evidenced by lacquerware, prints, fabrics, kimonos, sculptures, paintings and luxury objects inspired by the tale.

The novel narrates the life and romantic intrigues of Imperial Prince Hikaru Genji, who cannot claim the throne. The text seduces with its plot, rich in twists and turns, with the attractions of the main character and hundreds of others who appear there. The keen sense of observation demonstrated by Murasaki, mixed with deep reflections on love and the ephemeral feeling of things that we find throughout the work, supported by the author's deep erudition on the culture and history of China and Japan have continued to seduce readers over the centuries. The multitude of scenes described in the work can partly explains the enthusiasm of artists for the work since the 12th century, as particular attention is paid to the contexts of events and places as well as the seasons, essential elements that became important in Japanese pictorial art.

The main theme alludes to the impossibility of permanent happiness from romantic love and the fragility of human life or *mono no aware*. This phrase is used by Murusaki over a thousand times in Genji. In the 2015 exhibition, an elegant early 17th-century pair of six-panel screens illustrated three different chapters from The Tale of Genji, each scene separated by gold clouds. Two panels on the right depict the meeting of the Shining Prince and the 'Lady of the Misty Moon' (a member of a rival court faction from that of the author, Murasaki). The tryst follows a cherry blossom-viewing banquet, the novel describing the encounter. Genji approaches her singing: 'Peerless the night with a misty moon'. He happily caught her sleeve. 'Oh don't! Who are you'? (She replied. He continues): 'You need not be afraid. That you know so well the beauty of the deep night leads me to assume you have with the setting moon nothing like a casual bond!'

Scenes from three chapters in The Tale of Genji, 17th century, single six-panel screen, colour and gold on paper, 91 x 232 cm

Images and literary descriptions of changing seasons and homage to nature continually appear in Asian art forms, particularly in those of East Asia. Seasons and the associated flora and fauna associated are essential to artists and authors conveying emotion throughout Asia. For example, in The Tale of Genji, the changing seasons and associated seasonal imagery, such as falling flowers or cherry blossoms allude to the rise and fall of Genji himself and set the mood for many of the chapters. In this way the Shining Prince, despite his amorous proclivities, becomes heroic.

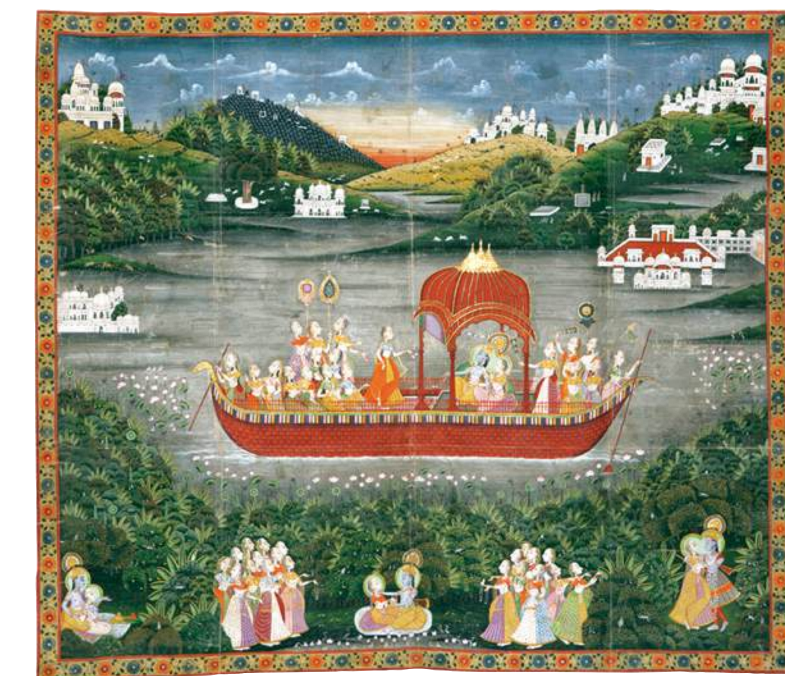
While Genji immortalised Heian society at its height, The Tale of the Heike ends with its defeat in 1185. It is an epic account of the struggle for the control of Japan between the Heike or Taira and the Minamoto in the five-year Gempei War. With the establishment of a new military-run government and warrior culture by the victorious Minamoto Yoshitsura, the most popular hero of Japanese legend, the medieval era began. It was first compiled in 1240, covering a span of 90 years, as a collection of oral stories designed to be recited by travelling monks, who chanted them to the accompaniment of the *biwa* (lute), as a series of nightly instalments. Since it was heard, rather than read, the story became familiar among the peasantry of Japan.

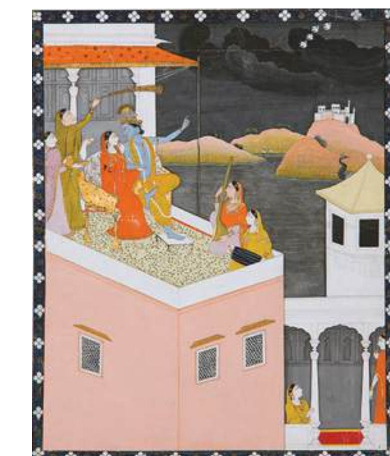
While it is primarily a samurai epic focusing on military values of courage, loyalty, and hierarchical leadership, conversely it also promulgates Buddhist teachings. That enduring theme – the impermanence of the material world – is intrinsic to the story, and the fates of the characters involved are preordained by the benevolent or malevolent deeds of their previous lives (*karma*). The tragic downfall of the Heike or Taira family happened because they sowed the seeds of their own destruction with their arrogance and dissolute, self-absorbed court. In fact, the central figure, Taira no Kiyomori, is described as so proud, ruthless and evil, 'so consumed by the fires of hatred', that even in death his feverish body would not cool when immersed in water.

Frequently people in The Tale of the Heike sought enlightenment, atoning for previous sins by entering religious life. It begins and ends as an elegy, with the tolling of temple bells, mourning defeat and death. This narrative is considered one of the great classics of medieval Japanese literature, and provided inspiration for many later creative works ranging from Noh plays, woodblock prints and an early 18th-century, six-panel, screen *Battle Scenes from The Tale of the Heike* (shown in the Australian exhibition), which depicts heavily armed samurai attacking an urban settlement and charging on horseback across a black lake.

The *Taiheiki,* or *Chronicle of Great Peace,* was written in the late 14th century and covers the period from 1319 to 1367, a time of war between the Northern Court of Ashikaga Takauji in Kyoto and the Southern Court of Emperor Go-Daigo in Yoshino. The warfare was very significant as it led to the extinction of the Southern Court of the Japanese Imperial line, which to this day is seen as legitimate, and the Northern Court as pretenders. The tale also documents the fall of the powerful and historically important Hojo clan.

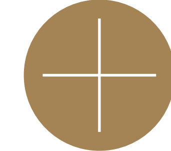
Noh kimono with autumn grasses design, 1910-20, silk, metallic thread, natural, synthetic and resist dyes with supplementary weft brocade, hem to collar 158 cm, sleeve to sleeve 133 cm


Krishna and Radha on the Jamuna River, early 20th century, Kishangarth, Rajasthan, cotton cloth, pigment, gold and mica shellac, 231 x 254 cm


Krishna and Radha watching the rain clouds, Month of Bhadon, 1805-20, Jangra Himachal Pradesh, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 30.2 x 24.2 cm

A colour woodblock on paper (*nishiki-e*) in the Australian exhibition simultaneously depicted a battle from the 14th century Taiheiki and a late 16th century military hero. This print was created in 1861 during the Edo period (1615-1868), when the Shogunate enacted strict censorship rules prohibiting print makers from publishing images about current events, unorthodox theories, scandals and erotica. Fortuitously this print slipped under the wire.

Moving to Southeast Asia, another great tale is represented in another form by the 12th-century dance *Calon Arang*, which has become an important part of Balinese heritage. It is a spectacular, highly dramatic affair, performed in extravagant costumes. Calon Arang was a widow, whose evil magical powers caused disease and crop damage. Her beautiful daughter could not attract a husband due to her mother's reputation. This so enraged the witch that she took revenge by kidnapping a young girl who was to be sacrificed to the goddess Durga. In addition, the village was engulfed by a huge flood in which many died, and disease ensued. And then, Calon Arang morphed into Rangda, queen of the graveyard ghouls.


WATCH
The Tale of Genji: Imaged and Reimagined

The Ghost of Genji's love, Yugao, by Tskioshi Yoshitoshi from the series One Hundred Aspects of the Moon, 1885, Edo period, colour woodcut on paper, 33 x 22.3 cm

However, *dharma* (good) triumphed when King Airlangga heard about the disasters and sent his advisor's disciple to be married to Calon Arang's daughter. The situation appeared to normalise. However, Ratna's husband discovered a book of magical incantations owned by his mother-in-law. A terrific battle ensued in which Calon Arang was defeated because she had lost the support of the goddess Durga. To represent this tale, a 19th-century wooden sculpture from Bali illustrated the forces of good and evil in conflict.

This leads us neatly on to the South Asian element of Great Tales, characterised by the perpetual dance between dharma and adharma. Themes of love and warfare persist, continuing to entertain modern audiences, particularly the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the *Bhagavata Purana*, whose epic tales have bequeathed an enduring legacy. An early mid-18th century textile illustrates the battle between Rama and Ravanna from the Ramayana. It was created in Andhra Pradesh or Tamil Nadu but found in Indonesia. Another fine example of tales represented in three-dimensional form is a beautiful mid-13th century bronze from Tamil Nadu depicting Rama holding a bow, described in the Ramayana.

These Hindu myths bring valour, violence, and battles as well as duty, compassion, and fateful love. An epic poem in Sanskrit by the Hindu sage Valmiki, the Ramayana explores human conduct as an allegory for philosophical and spiritual values. This transcendence is achieved by the exercise of dharma, including patience, selfless service and devotion. Specifically, it depicts the duties of an ideal king, Rama, his ideal servant, Hanuman and his followers. The Ramayana's enduring legacy is not only an important influence on visual art and later Sanskrit poetry, but it has also become fundamental to the cultural and spiritual consciousness of India and Nepal, and Sri Lanka, spreading southeast in indigenous versions to Cambodia and Lao, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar, with Jain and Buddhist adaptations.

The other great mythological and didactic epic poem is of course the Mahabharata, developed between 400 BC and AD 200, as an illustration of the cycle of dark and light. It is regarded by Hindus as primarily an exposition of dharma (codes of conduct in this context), including that of a king, a warrior, people living in calamitous times, and those seeking *moksha*, liberation from *samsara* or rebirth. It is also an historic tale. The central narrative is the story of the struggle for sovereignty between two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Its authorship is attributed to the sage Vyasa, who was also the grandfather of the cousins. Incidents in the Mahabharata have been depicted in countless creative ways, including of course – Indian miniature paintings and the sculptural reliefs at the temples of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom in Cambodia.

Several pieces in the exhibition illustrate the 10th-century Bhagavata Purana which promotes *bhakti* (emotional loving devotion) to God through the incarnation of Krishna. Divine and human love are united in his relationship with Radha. A bronze mid-15th century sculpture from Tamil Nadu depicts Krishna holding a flute, and an 18th-century watercolour shows him playing the flute. Enthralled by his music, Radha and other women cattle-herders (*gopis*) are drawn from their houses fainting in ecstasy. The sound of his flute has caused them to abandon their worldly concerns and become one with him in mystical union. This bhakti ultimately leads to knowledge of the Inner Self, to bliss and liberation.

Wilmana,19th century, Klungkung, Bali, wood, traces of natural pigment and gold leaf and metal, 152 x 73 cm

• Great Tales in Asian Art was held at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 2015-16, agsa.sa.gov.au

LOOKING BACK TOWARD THE FUTURE

Celebrated editor, publisher and art collector Larry Warsh recently gifted 56 works of Chinese photography to the Kemper Art Museum at Washington University in St Louis. The museum is displaying 43 of these works, all made between 1993 and 2006, to the public for the first time. The show explores how a generation of avant-garde Chinese artists used large-scale photography and ephemeral performance art to visualise changing urban and social landscapes, capturing and criticising Westernisation and the disappearance of authentic Chinese history and culture. The photographs employ a diverse range of photographic methods unique to this moment in Chinese history.

Warsh began collecting Chinese photography more than two decades ago, during a trip to Beijing. 'These artists were grappling with some of the most critical issues of their time, and yet their work remains little seen, both in China and in the West. It is important for me to help shine a light on this critical transitional moment in the history of Chinese art.' The gift complements the Kemper Art Museum's 2022 acquisition of Ai Weiwei's *Illumination* (2019), which was made possible by the William T Kemper Foundation to further the museum's goal to curate a more globally distinct collection. Though Ai is not featured in *Looking Back Toward the Future*, several of the 14 artists, including Rong Rong, Zhang Huan and Cang Xin, were associated with the East Village Beijing. The short-lived creative enclave took inspiration and its ironic nickname from Ai's time living in Manhattan, NYC's East Village, then a notable centre for contemporary art.

Eckmann, who curated the exhibition, notes that, in the years following the Tiananmen Square democracy protests, the violent suppression by government forces and the forced closure of the Beijing National Gallery's *Avant-Garde* exhibition – all of which took place in 1989 – much of this work was considered provocative. 'Arrests were frequent,' Eckmann remembered. 'A 1994 police raid completely dismantled the East Village, and many artists were forced to go underground or flee the country. The work still has not received the attention it deserves, especially considering the Chinese and Chinese-American population at WashU and in the St Louis community. The Kemper Art Museum is honoured to showcase these historically significant works.'

The exhibition is divided into three interrelated thematic sections: The Presence of the Past, East and West, and Performance and the Body. Together, they explore how, for the first time in the history of Chinese photography, avant-garde artists engaged with the medium's conceptual and expressive potentials to chronicle, critique and reflect on China's global transformation and its increasingly powerful market economy.

The Presence of the Past, which opens the exhibition, visualises artists' often ambiguous efforts to evoke and memorialise China's distinctive cultural heritage amid rapid erasures of the nation's histories and the rise of a globalised, ultramodern built environment. They also turned to the camera as a tool to record changes in the lived experiences of individuals and families. Zhang Dali's photographs of Beijing juxtapose demolition sites, which he marked with graffiti, against contemporary and traditional towers. Wang Jinsong's *Standard Family* (1996) examines the generational echoes of population control while his *100 Signs of Demolition* series (1999) collects spray-painted examples of the Chinese character (*chai*, or demolish), used to mark buildings for destruction. Weng Fen's *Girls in Hoods No 4* (2004) pays homage to his native Hainan, a rapidly urbanising island province, through a haunting figure framed by dramatic expanses of ocean and sky. Hai Bo, pairing old and new photographs of the same sitters, reflects on the passage of time and the absence of those who have died. Finally, Zhang Peili's *Continuous Reproduction 25 Times* (1993), here represented by an early frame, steadily degrades a Mao-era photograph of smiling peasant girls to invoke the decreasing power of communist ideology.

The middle section, East and West, shows how Chinese artists critiqued and contested the growing influence of Western culture and consumerist values. In *Hello Mr Hong* (1998), Hong Hao slyly inserts himself as a Westernised businessman into an image of upper-class consumption. *For Long March in Panjiayuan B* (2004), Hong digitally assembled an elaborate photo collage of memorabilia and propaganda associated with the Long March, a still-celebrated tactical retreat by Communist forces during the Chinese Civil War. Hong acquired these items not from historical archives, but at the famous Panjiayuan Beijing flea market, popular with international tourists, highlighting the changing cultural importance of this once-powerful visual iconography.

Wang Qingsong, working with a Beijing film studio and frequently casting himself as protagonist, constructed highly stylised photographic sets that suggest futuristic stage or film performances. In *Prisoner* (1998), Wang firmly grips Coca-Cola cans stacked to resemble steel bars. Tong Dazhuang's *Untitled* (2006), from the *Round Digital Collage* series, mixes scores of notable portraits, variously sourced from cartoons, glossy lifestyle magazines and historical photographs, including from China's history, into receding concentric circles. For *Chinese Landscape* (1998), *Zhouzheng Garden*, and *Liu Garden*, Hong Lei photographed a classical garden designed to mimic a pastoral setting, then digitally transformed the scene with blood-red water, clouds and streaks – a symbolic reference to the wounds of modernisation.

The third and final section, Performance and the Body, demonstrates how artists used experimental photography and challenging performance art as tools of self-expression. In doing so, they expanded photography into other sensorial realms such as taste, smell and touch. Cang Xin's *Communication* series depicts the artist tasting various physical objects – a book, a leaf, a turtle shell, a portrait of Mao. For *Tattoo* series, *No 6* (1997), Qiu Zhijie, a classically trained calligrapher, paints bold, literati-style characters onto his face, body and surrounding surfaces. Huang Yan's Chinese *Landscape Tattoo* series (1999) shows the artist's chest, arms and hands covered by a traditional mountain scene. Delicately rendered by his wife and fellow artist, Zhang Tiemei, the image metaphorically links body and landscape, as well as individual and national artistic heritage. These impactful works demonstrate how Chinese avant-garde artists uniquely employed their bodies to challenge traditional art and explore the self.

Zhang Huan's *Foam* (1998) series show the artist's face slathered in white bubbles with family photos held in his mouth. Zhang appears again in Rong Rong's *East Village Beijing No 11* (1994), from the East Village Beijing series. The portrait shows Zhang preparing to perform *12 Square Meters*, a famously gruelling test of physical and mental endurance. Coated in honey and fish sauce, the artist would remain perfectly still, ignoring the buzzing flies, his stoic demeanour a powerful aesthetic meditation on, and counterpoint to, the violence of the Cultural Revolution.

Liam Otten

● Until 27 July, Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St Louis, kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu

Photographic print (1999) by Huang Yan (b 1966), from the Chinese Landscape series, 1999, Chromogenic print, ed 1/12, 19 7/8 x 24 1/8 in, gift of Larry Warsh, 2024, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St Louis

Colour photograph No 6 (1997) by Qiu Zhijie (b 1969), from the Tattoo series, 4/10, 70 7/8 x 55 1/8 in, gift of Larry Warsh, 2024, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St Louis. Photo: courtesy of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon

Prisoner (1998) by Wang Qingsong (b 1966), colour photograph, 4/10, 70 7/8 x 37 5/8 in, gift of Larry Warsh, 2024, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St Louis

Photographic print (1999) by Cang Xin (b 1967), from the Communication series, chromogenic print, ed 1/10, 39 3/8 x 32 7/8 in, gift of Larry Warsh, 2024, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St Louis

2000 107A (2000) by Zhang Dali (b 1963), chromogenic print, 9/10, 35 1/2 x 23 1/2 in, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St Louis

HYAKKO 100+ Makers from Japan

This exhibition explores the beauty of everyday things made in Japan. Over 2,000 hand-crafted objects made by 120 artists, craftspeople, and self-taught makers from across Japan celebrate the skills and aesthetics of Japanese contemporary craft. Featured are works in clay, glass, wood, leather, metal and bamboo – from ceramic matcha bowls to metal teapots and *urushi* lacquerware trays. Each item bears traces of its maker's surroundings, with roots in tradition while at the same time reflecting innovation and individuality.

During his many discussions with the makers of the objects in the exhibition, the curator, Nagata Takahiro, noticed key words that came up in their conversations – words that express value, expressions, or sensations that express their works – such as *kawaii* or *wabi-sabi*. Although these words have become recognised and have merged into a popular 'international' language, in this case kawaii does not mean 'cute' but rather conveys a sense of 'rightness' or 'yes, this feels good'; wabi-sabi refers to the beauty found in simplicity and imperfection alongside the recognition of the beauty of the flow of time.

The *Hyakko* in the title of the exhibition is a new hybrid word created by the curator from two Chinese characters: *hyaku* and *ko*. Hyaku means 100 but here it suggests many – many makers, many materials, many ways of paying attention; ko has several meanings including makers and techniques.

The works are not presented as 'art objects' but rather they reflect personal use, form, or function. In Japan handmade and mass-produced items live side-by-side in the home. All these items are used in the home, highlighting seasonal rhythms and family life. This exhibition does not highlight a single technique or figure but rather shows the collective strength of making and crafting domestic objects in Japan today.

● Until 10 May, Japan House, London, japanhouselondon.uk

Installation view of Hyakko: 100+ Makers from Japan, London
Photo: Jeremie Souteyrat

ART AND AESTHETICS FROM CHINA'S FORBIDDEN CITY

The Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna is showing *Art and Aesthetics from China's Forbidden City* in the Golden Hall of the Kunstkammer. Jointly curated by the Palace Museum and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, the exhibition brings together 76 works of art presented in dialogue with works from the Kunstkammer's own collections, they explore the aesthetics of Chinese court life in the 18th century, highlighting the parallels and contrasts between East and West in their artistic expressions of power, culture, and ideals of life during comparable historical periods. Most of the objects, including imperial jade carvings and porcelain treasures, are being shown in Europe for the first time. The exhibition celebrates the 55th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Austria in 2026.

The notion of imperial workshops, *Zaobanchu*, was slow in codifying. The Huizong Emperor (1082-1135), of the Northern Song dynasty, had put his personal stamp on which kilns were preferred, as had Kublai Khan in 1278, who moved the imperial kilns to Jingdezhen, when the Yuan dynasty was established. Later, during the Ming dynasty, designs from various bureaus housed within the palace were transmitted to production centres such as Jingdezhen.

It was not until the Kangxi Emperor (1661-1722) that imperial workshops were established within the Palace in Beijing where they produced bespoke works of art, rather than porcelains. Pink enamels, for example, were introduced at the end of the Kangxi reign by Jesuits, and one of them, Giuseppe Castiglione, aka Lan Shining, worked as an Imperial painter at court. The 18th century was also an important period of invention, design, and innovation, and it was the Qianlong Emperor (1736-1795) who made the greatest use of these new trends within and without the Zaobanchu, demonstrating his proclivity to have the new, the elegant, and the exotic for his personal and court use, and as imperial gifts.

Focusing on the theme of harmony in diversity', the exhibition explores these achievements of 18th-century Chinese court art and craftsmanship. The artistic philosophy of the time emphasised both aesthetic effect and symbolic meaning while aspiring to the highest standards of workmanship. The artworks, ranging from jade, porcelain, lacquerware, and enamel objects to clocks, illustrate the Chinese court's aesthetic principle of 'using objects to convey meaning' by exploring such themes as the scholar, decorative, and functional works of art.

At the centrepiece of the exhibition is a gilt-bronze filigree *ruyi* sceptre with jade inlay that demonstrates not only the extraordinary craftsmanship of Chinese filigree work but also carries the auspicious meaning of 'happiness and blessings'.

● Until 6 April, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, khm.at

Gilt-copper filigree ruyi sceptre with filigree and jadeite inlay
© The Palace Museum

Qianlong-marked blue glass snuffbottle, 18th century, Beijing
© The Palace Museum

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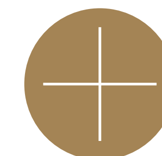
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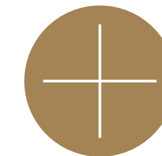
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THREADS OF LIFE

Threads of Life is Berlin-based Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota's first major solo exhibition in a London public gallery. The intricate takeover sees the artist weave immersive works from floor to ceiling across the Hayward Gallery's top floor, following recent critically acclaimed exhibitions in Beijing, Osaka, Tokyo and Paris. Accompanied by new large-scale sculptures, drawings, early performance videos and photographic documentation, Shiota's signature weblike works respond to the gallery's iconic brutalist architecture in a truly atmospheric presentation.

Shiota is a leading figure in the international art scene who returns to the Hayward Gallery for the first time since her participation in the group show *Walking in My Mind* (2009). Best known for her large-scale installations which engulf ordinary objects – such as shoes, keys, beds, chairs and dresses – within huge structures of woollen thread, her work explores the body, memory, consciousness and the fragility of existence. Predominantly using red, black or white wool, her evocative pieces make visible the intangible connections we make throughout life. The resulting works are immersive and deeply emotive, often drawn from personal experiences that expand into universal human concerns such as life, death and relationships.

During Sleep (2002), performance/Installation: with performers sleeping during the opening; beds, black wool, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne, Switzerland. Photo: Sunhi Mang © DACS, London, 2026 and Chiharu Shiota

Installation view of Chiharu Shiota: Threads of Life. Letters of Thanks (2026). Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of the Hayward Gallery. © DACS, London, 2026 and Chiharu Shiota

The Key in the Hand (2015), installation: old keys, wooden boats, red wool, Japan Pavilion at 56th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy. Photo: Sunhi Mang © DACS, London, 2026 and Chiharu Shiota

The exhibition features new iterations of Shiota's past monumental installations, including *The Locked Room* (2016) and *During Sleep* (2002). As if painting three dimensionally in a space with string, these delicately woven structures allude to the shared experiences that interconnect us while creating a cocoon-like area that encloses visitors as they walk through it. Additionally, Threads of Life includes documentation of Shiota's early performances, which probed the boundaries between the body, life and nature, as well as her latest collaboration with writer Yoko Tawada. For Tawada's daily series *The Trainee* (2023-24), published in Japan's *Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper, Shiota created around 400 watercolour and charcoal drawings, each stitched with her signature red threads.

Chiharu Shiota comments on her work in London, 'This exhibition reflects the often-hidden connections between us, with each thread becoming a trace of our shared existence, weaving visible forms from the invisible threads of life. Through my work, I try to make sense of life and its uncertainties; each installation has grown from personal experiences, such as losing my father, facing death and questioning what it means to be human. While we live our lives separately, we are, at the same time, deeply connected. With this exhibition, I want to highlight the marvellous aspects of ordinary existence.'

- Until 3 May, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London, southbankcentre.co.uk
- Catalogue available

WOMEN OF INFLUENCE
The Pattle Sister

Unknown photographer, photograph of figures in the garden of Little Holland House, circa 1858, collection of Watts Gallery Trust

This exhibition brings to life the legacy of seven extraordinary Anglo-Indian sisters whose influence rippled through the worlds of art, literature, photography, and society. Nicknamed 'Pattledom' by the writer William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), the sisters' world was one of rich cross-cultural exchange, where Anglo-Indian heritage, European influence, and artistic experimentation converged in a vibrant social sphere that defied Victorian convention.

Whilst the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) is today the most celebrated of the seven Pattle sisters, this exhibition uncovers their collective impact through artistic experimentation, intellectual exchange, and the creation of an extraordinary cultural salon at Little Holland House in Kensington. Here, artists, writers, scientists, musicians, and politicians gathered each week, drawn into the orbit of the dynamic Pattle women and the visionary painter G F Watts, who lived and worked amongst them.

The Camerons had been living in London after their return from India in the 1840s, becoming part of the artistic and cultural society. They then moved to the Isle of Wight in 1860, where they lived next door to the Poet Laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892). Julia would finally move to Ceylon after much persuasion, to be with her husband and sons, who had left for the island years earlier. However, at the time, she was leading her life as one of England's best portrait photographers. Her extraordinary rise as a photographer came by chance. The gift of the camera in December 1863 from her daughter came at the age of 48 – at a moment when her husband Charles and sons were already in Ceylon. She viewed her work as a professional – vigorously copyrighting, exhibiting, publishing, and marketing her photographs. Within 18 months she had sold 80 prints to the Victoria & Albert Museum, established a studio in two of its rooms, and made arrangements with Colnaghi's to publish and sell her photographs.

- Until 4 May, Watts Gallery, Guildford, wattsgallery.org.uk

WHAT WE LEAVE BEHIND

This solo exhibition by Samantha Yun Wall, winner of the 2024 Betty Bowen Award, comprises 16 drawings and paintings exploring the themes of loss, identity, history, and introspection. Born in Seoul, South Korea, and based in Portland, Yun Wall is a visual artist whose dynamic black-and-white works explore duality, memory, and connection, and reflect her experience navigating transcultural identity as a Black Korean immigrant.

Inspired by the artist's search for belonging through traditions and folklore rooted in her Korean ancestry and family, the works reflect on how our past is instrumental in shaping who we are. Using delicately layered ink, conté crayon, and charcoal on Claybord or Dura-Lar, Yun Wall introduces subtle surreal elements that puncture time and space, such as a watchful eye embedded within a flower or a realistically rendered hand reaching into the viewer's space. Works such as *What We Leave Behind* are inspired by a Korean folk tale in which the Pasque flower symbolises a grandmother who passed away without the loving care of her grandchildren, a story of melancholy, loss, and remembrance.

'Creating these works has brought me closer to a sense of belonging within myself and revealed that belonging is not always a place, but a feeling,' the artist explains.

Out of Place (2022) by Samantha Yun Wall, conté crayon, charcoal, and ink on Dura-Lar, 60 x 80 in © Samantha Yun Wall. Photo: Mario Galluci

'As I looked back into my Korean lineage, I was reminded that while we are shaped by the past, we cannot always find the answers we seek. When people move through the exhibition, I hope it sparks curiosity and leads people to discover that the discomfort of the unknown can offer grounding, joy, and connection.'

Diaspora No 7 (2025) by Samantha Yun Wall, ink and conté crayon on clayboard, 20 x 16 in © Samantha Yun Wall. Photo: Mario Galluci

The exhibition's newest works draw from the women in Yun Wall's family whose lives and legacies, though unknown to her, have helped shape her sense of identity. Overlapping female silhouettes, as seen in the title work *What We Leave Behind,* suggest both absence and presence, revealing how their influence persists across generations. At the same time, these figures act as portals to imagined spaces and layered timelines, blurring the boundaries between past and present.

- Until 4 October, Seattle Art Museum, saam.org

REFRAMING SILK
Giacomo Caneva's Photographs of the 1859 Expedition to China

Curated by Giulia Pra Floriani and Marta Boscolo Marchi, the exhibition is the result of a collaboration between the Regional Directorate of National Museums of Veneto – Museum of Oriental Art and the Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. It comprises 32 photographs by Giacomo Caneva (1813-1865), original prints from 1859, from the Vanzella collections in Treviso and the Pini collections in Como, that document the journey of the Friulian aristocrats Giovanni Battista Castellani and Gherardo Freschi, who travelled to India and China in search of disease-resistant silkworms to help revive European silk production, devastated by the spread of pébrine.

Departing from Trieste on 11 January 1859, the expedition arrived at Pointe de Galle, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), on 5 February, where the party split up. Part of the group continued to Calcutta, while the remainder travelled on to Shanghai, Hangzhou, and finally Huzhou, Zhejiang province, arriving in April. After collecting silkworm seed and a brief stop in Japan, Castellani, Freschi, Caneva, and the other members of the expedition returned to Italy via Ceylon.

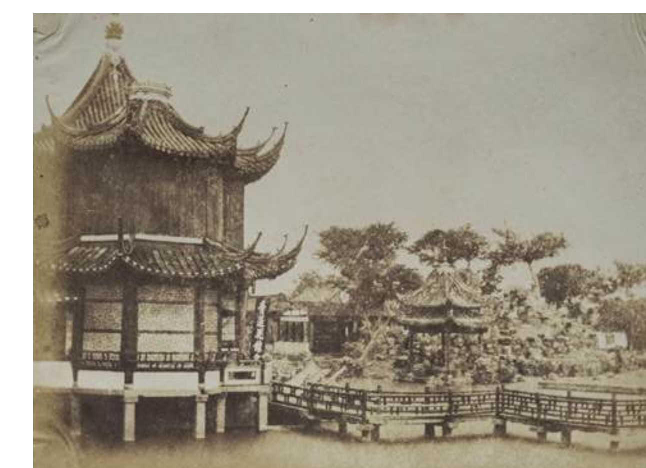
In the 1850s, Chinese silk production was a cornerstone of the economy, comprising 20-30% of total exports. Despite European competition and the impact of the pébrine epidemic (starting around 1845), China maintained a high volume of, mostly, hand-reeled, labour-intensive production, though it faced challenges from industrialising, faster-produced, and more uniform European and Japanese silk. While European and, later, Japanese industries adopted machine-reeling, Chinese production in the 1850s continued to rely heavily on traditional hand-reeled methods. In China, sericulture was largely a labour-intensive, family-based industry, often serving as a supplementary, rather than a primary occupation. The raising of silkworms was an important part of the Chinese economy for thousands of years and took advantage of seasonal changes in labour needs, allowing rural families to generate additional income before the spring rice crop was planted. As silk production was so labour-intensive and frequently required the attention of the whole family, attention to raising silkworms could only be given outside the busy agricultural calendar. In areas where silk has been traditionally important, most rural households could only devote 30 to 40 percent of their land to silk production, meaning less than half the land would be given over to mulberry trees and tsericulture.

The Daotai of Shanghai Wu Xu, Shanghai by Giacomo Caneva, 1859, salted paper from a paper negative, Como, Pini Collection

Giacomo Caneva, self-portrait, circa 1850, oil on canvas, Treviso, Vanzell Collection

In 1859, Shanghai was one of the most important ports for the export of silk bolts and garments made of silk, with Hangzhou being one of the major textile centres of the Qing-dynasty empire (1644-1911), along with the cities of Nanjing and Suzhou, where the fabrics commissioned for the imperial palace were manufactured. Huzhou was renowned to produce a very soft satin and crepe damask, while Hangzhou produced damask, silk gauze, crepe, and taffeta, originating from the Neolithic Liangzhu Culture, where early silk threads were discovered in Qianshanyang. Huzhou was known as the 'Hometown of Silk' and had become a national sericulture hub by the Ming dynasty (1369-1644), with its high-quality *jili* silk winning international gold awards at the first World Expo, officially known as the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in London in 1851.

In Huzhou, Castellani began a dual-breeding programme of Chinese silkworms with imported Italian silkworms, to study their growth, taking into account Italian and Chinese differences in raising the worms, bringing in the help and expertise of a local silkworm maker. Relatively few surviving images by Caneva document this experimentation, however, some images were used to create engravings that were later published in a volume by Castellani in 1860. Other prints from this experiment circulated in international publications such as the French magazine *L'Illustration*.



Bridge near the Teahouse with Willow Motif (Huxin ting), Yu Garden (Yu yuan) by Giacomo Caneva, Shanghai, 1859, salted paper from paper negative, Como, Pini Collection

Two farmers feeding silkworms by Giacomo Caneva, Huzhou, 1859, salted paper from paper negative, Como, Pini Collection

Giacomo Caneva favoured the calotype technique, using paper as a support, for both practical and aesthetic reasons. This was an early photographic process patented by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1841, producing a paper negative to create multiple positive prints, which uses silver-iodide coated paper, developed with gallo-nitrate of silver, resulting in a distinct, soft, hazy, and fibrous image, paving the way for modern photography. In his 1855 treatise, *On Photography: A Practical Treatise* by Giacomo Caneva, a perspective painter, stated that 'glass plates were suitable for reproducing details, but they produced images of ancient monuments that appeared new, while paper negatives best represented 'all the roughness, the coarseness, and the immense variety of tones in nature.'

Caneva captured not only landscapes and monuments (now partly lost) but also glimpses of daily life and people. An important part of this group of photographs are the portraits of local aristocratic ladies and local officials who facilitated the presence of Europeans in the areas closed to foreigners in a China ravaged by the Second Opium War (1856-1860) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864).

The bicentennial of the discovery of photography is being celebrated over a period ranging from 2024 to 2027, with major, year-long, commemorations planned in France from September 2026 to September 2027. This event honours Niépce's pioneering achievements in France between 1824 and 1827.

As part of these celebrations, this exhibition presents Caneva's photographs not only as historical documents of the late Qing empire, but also as evidence of a network of commercial and scientific exchanges between Italy and China in the second half of the 19th century.

- Until 26 April, Museum of Oriental Art, Venice, orientalevenezia.beniculturali.it

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VISHNU'S COSMIC OCEAN

One thousand years ago, a sculpture of the Hindu god Vishnu was located on a tiny island at the centre of an enormous lake in Cambodia. The island was remote – accessible only by boat despite its location within the largest metropolis of the preindustrial world, the city of Angkor. In the story of Vishnu creating the universe, he sleeps on a coiled serpent floating in the primordial ocean and dreams the universe into existence. Nowhere else has this story been more perfectly captured than at this island-temple called West Mebon.

Surrounding West Mebon, the vast reservoir of West Baray was both a functional and spiritual hub for Angkor communities, used for irrigation and religious practices. It remains the largest hand-cut reservoir on earth. The island-temple West Mebon, West Baray, and the surrounding agricultural systems reveal the creativity and engineering skills of their 11th-century makers.

The sculpture of Vishnu was discovered in 1936, when a Khmer villager found it broken and buried at West Mebon. A villager named Chhit Lat had a dream that the Buddha commanded his help in being released from the earth. Chhit Lat travelled to the nearby island-temple West Mebon and, reaching the central platform, began to dig. After digging approximately one metre into the earth, he discovered the head of the colossal sculpture of Vishnu. Chhit Lat alerted the French Curator of Angkor, Maurice Glaize, who confirmed the monumental extent of the discovery. Since then, the

WATCH
Awkun to see how director PraCh Ly captures the essence of the temple, the reservoir, and the surrounding community

Unearthing the Vishnu in 1936. Photographie École française d'Extrême-Orient © EFEO Right: Reclining Vishnu, Khmer, Angkorian period, second half of the 11th century, West Mebon, Angkor, Siem Reap province, Cambodia, bronze, height 123 cm, National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Cambodia © Thierry Ollivier

large fragment of the upper body has been displayed as a masterpiece of Cambodian art. Only now – after decades of scientific research and a yearlong technical study and conservation project by a team of international experts – have many of its smaller fragments been reattached, revealing the sculpture's large scale.

In Indian philosophical systems, time is cyclical. The universe goes through periods of creation followed by periods of destruction, only to be born anew. Vishnu's cosmic story begins with destruction: a tremendous flood (*pralaya*), Vishnu floated on the flooded ocean in a state of transcendent meditation (*yoga nidra*). When he could no longer contain his energy, it burst through his navel as a lotus stalk with a shining bud. Bright as the sun, the bud illuminated everything, and as it blossomed it revealed the god Brahma. With four heads giving him panoramic vision, Brahma created the universe,

Reconstruction of Vishnu's serpent pedestal on the eastern landing platform (originally on the central platform) in 2025.
Photo: Emma Natalya Stein

beginning with gods, demons, and all the lesser gods and followed by humans, animals, fruits, grains, flowers, and herbs, as well as many sacred teachings. Brahma then encouraged procreation, and generations ensued. Vishnu reclining on the serpent Ananta (whose name means 'Endless One') recurs as a central cosmological motif throughout Hinduism.

Unmatched in scale, complexity, and artistry, the figure of Vishnu reclining on the serpent Ananta was most likely produced by Angkor's royally sponsored bronze foundry. When complete, Vishnu's body was covered in gleaming gold; his lips were red with cinnabar; his eyebrows, beard, and moustache were black with lead; and his eyes glinted with silver. Why this Vishnu was made and who commissioned it remain a mystery. Some scholars have associated the great bronze Vishnu with King Suryavarman II (r 1113-50), builder of the temple Angkor Wat. Others firmly place the sculpture within the reign of Udayadityavarman II (r 1050-66), or his brother Harshavarman III (r 1066-80), as the style closely matches 11th-century bronzes and the royal foundry was most active during that time.

Casting this large bronze sculpture required multiple teams of experts. Using the lost-wax technique, artisans poured molten metal over a clay core, creating segments for on-site assemblage. Rectangular-shaped patches fill the sculpture's many flaws. Analysis suggests the sculpture was cast by Angkor's royal bronze foundry. Artisans gilded the surface with local Khmer gold and imported Chinese mercury. Heating the mixture evaporated most of the mercury and adhered the gilding more securely than foil gilding. More than a pound of gold and ten pounds of mercury were required for the massive ensemble. While buried, rough green corrosion formed on the sculpture's surface. Once excavated, salts interacted with Cambodia's humid climate and caused further corrosion. Recent study, cleaning, and treatment in France will ensure the sculpture's ongoing preservation. Conservators at the National Museum of Cambodia will carefully monitor the sculpture and treat any active corrosion.

Vishnu's Cosmic Ocean explores and celebrates this monumental Vishnu, its original temple site, and the extraordinary surrounding landscape. The great bronze Vishnu of West Mebon is here on loan from the National Museum of Cambodia.

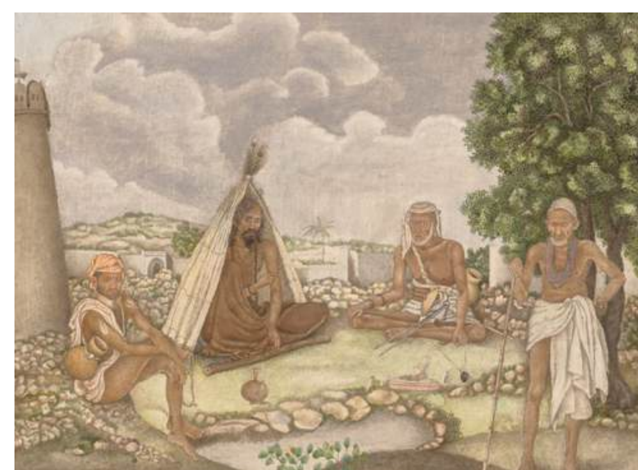
● Until 7 September, National Museum of Asian Art, Washington DC, asia.si.edu

Auction Preview

THE COLLECTION OF MARY AND CHENEY COWLES

Assembled over the course of five decades, the collection stands as a testament to the passionate and scholarly eyes of Mary and Cheney Cowles. The sale comprises 86 lots, featuring paintings from India, as well as examples of calligraphy from across the Islamic world. The majority of the works are Mughal paintings, dating from the 16th to the mid-19th century, including an illustration to the 'Third' *Akbarnama* and important folios from the Ardeshir Album. The sale also features Deccani and Company School paintings, among them a notable folio from the Fraser Album.

A top lot comes from the celebrated Fraser Album, a series of paintings that stand as one of the finest visual records of life in early 19th-century India. *Ascetics Encamped Outside a Walled Town, Haryana*, circa 1816 (est £120-180,000). Commissioned by William Fraser (1784-1835) and his brother James Baillie Fraser



Ascetics Encamped Outside a Walled Town, Haryana, opaque and transparent pigments on paper, circa 1816, 30.8 x 41.3 cm, est £120-180,000, Christie's

(1783-1856), the paintings are an unmatched record of the social, cultural and everyday life of Delhi's rural and urban residents. William and James Baillie Fraser were Scotsmen who served in India. William Fraser, the younger son of Edward Fraser of Reelig, Inverness, arrived in India in 1801 and rose through the ranks of the East India Company's political service. His deep engagement with local communities and landscapes, especially around Delhi and Garhwal, exposed him to a wide cross-section of society. In 1814, his brother James joined him in India as a merchant in Calcutta. The brothers travelled through the Himalayas and on that trip, James Fraser, himself an accomplished amateur artist, began to record the landscapes, monuments and people he encountered in drawings and paintings, which are reflected in his diary entries. In their attempts to record all that they saw, William also hired local artists to 'take the likenesses of several of the servants and the Ghorkas'. The Fraser brothers' initial commissions included portraits of nautch dancers seen at social gatherings. Whilst James returned to Calcutta in 1816 and later to Scotland in 1820, William continued to commission works over the next several years.

Another highlight is a Mughal-period painting depicting the *Angel Greeting Tobias*, circa 1600 (est £30-50,000), hitherto unpublished, is brilliantly executed, with realistic portraiture and the ubiquitous European-inspired landscape typical of Akbar's court. It stays relatively loyal to the story, except for Tobias' dotted wings and his shoes, tinted with the same eye-catching blue pigment used for the archangel's cloak. This

The Emperor Jahangir with a Falcon, ascribed to Bishan Das, the margins attributable to Inayat, Mughal India, circa 1620, calligraphy circa 1635, opaque pigments with gold on paper, folio 39 x 25.4 cm, est £120-180,000, Christie's

The Angel Greeting Tobias, Mughal India, opaque pigments heightened with gold on paper, 16.8 x 9.2 cm, est £30-50,000, Christie's

iconography and Tobias' translucent shawl attributes a sense of holy elegance to his figure. The lamb next to the river of oxidised silver, looks remarkably similar to, and may have been inspired by, the wolf on the title page of the Polyglot Bible presented to Akbar by the Jesuit priests in 1580.

Mary and Cheney's keen interest in Islamic calligraphy forms a core part of the collection. The auction includes a selection of Qur'an folios from across Islamic history, alongside calligraphic exercises by renowned masters such as Husayn Zarin Qalam and Mir 'Ali alKatib.

● 28 April, Christie's London, christies.com

Islamic Arts Diary

by Lucien de Guise

WINNERS AND LOSERS

Fun is not always the first word that comes to mind when the Islamic world is mentioned. As a Canadian institution, the Aga Khan Museum is able to find an amiably contrarian way of looking at global cultures. The latest exhibition in Toronto is filled with whimsical insights from start to finish – including the engaging exclamation mark in the title *Game On!*.

Here is a comprehensive view of games and sports that includes the art and crafts of many cultures across time and geography. One look at the lenders will reveal how thorough the curator (Bita Pourvash) has been in making this a definitive exploration of a concept that has been tried before but never with this much attention to detail. The institutions which have helped turn this into a serendipity of creative expression include the obvious contenders – such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum and the Aga Khan collection itself – in addition to the less predictable contributions of the University of Manchester Library, the Musée Vivant du Cheval and the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

Women playing chess, India, circa 1805-15, courtesy: Rijksmuseum

Four tiles forming a backgammon board, Iran, Isfahan, 17th century, courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The range of contents is as much a delight as the source institutions. There are miniature paintings of women playing chess in early 19th-century India alongside the manlier virtues of wrestling matches in 17th-century Iran. Bringing the survey right up to date, or at least up to the 1960s, is the intriguingly electronic Reunion chess set. Originally made by a student at the University of Toronto, it was played in 1968 at the Sight-sound-system festival at Ryerson University (TMU) by John Cage and Marcel Duchamp. Perhaps not the last word in Islamic culture, but spot on for the host country.

Chess, of course, is one of many games popularised in the Islamic world and then exported to Europe and elsewhere. Its progress was not always smooth. Banned in Christian Constantinople of the 7th century, and then in Fatimid Egypt during the eleventh century, this is a pastime often associated with gambling. Playing cards have had an equally chequered history in much of the Islamic world and remain objects of suspicion.

There is much more than chess and cards on offer in Toronto. Backgammon was a long-time staple of Muslim communities, as well as enjoying popularity in countries such as England. Mancala also features prominently, albeit less well known to many. A native game to Egypt, possibly going back six millennium, it is another diversion intended for two players.

Even more mysterious than the second part of the exhibition, with its games of 'Mind and Strategy' is the third section of the exhibition, The Quest: Games of Virtue and Growth. These include pursuits such as *shatranj-i 'urafa*. Often translated as the somewhat unchallenging snakes and ladders game, the version pursued here is known as the 'chess of gnostics'. The mystical element is promoted further with its connection to that 13th-century Sufi legend Ibn Arabi.

From the mind and spirit it is but a short leap into the physical realm of wrestling, falconry and polo. Rather than a board to look at, this section is all about painted representations, and it is another impressive selection. Iran would seem to be the champion in this arena, and still is to some extent, with wrestlers in particular held in high regard. Inevitably, the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp, Iran, circa 1525-30, is a star attraction, perhaps less for the chaotically vigorous polo being played than for the exceptional importance of this book. It is the most lavishly illustrated version of the work, which happened to be celebrating its 1,000th anniversary when Shah Tahmasp decided to celebrate with a virtuoso rendering of a tale that is central to Persian identity. The lender to this exhibition is the Metropolitan Museum, fortunate to have 78 of the 258 original illustrations. The act of dismembering this book, by the collector Arthur Houghton in 1959, is considered by many to be an act of vandalism. His aim was stated as being to let as many people as possible view it, and in that he was proved right.

This is an exhibition committed to more than showing some wonderful works alongside the quirkier elements of Islamic art. Game On! demonstrates how sports and games function as a universal language: 'connecting people, transmitting ideas and reflecting creativity across cultures and generations'.

As a bonus, in a year that is supposed to be marked by vibrant global sporting events – rather than more senseless wars – this exhibition offers a timely exploration of the values at the heart of play. These encompass everything from collaboration and strategy to creativity and the joy of bringing people together. Complementing the exhibition is the Great Canadian Jersey, part of Rogers Communications' 'This Is Our Game' campaign, will be on view this summer. Created from patches donated by fans across every province and territory and handcrafted by designer and former OHL player Cameron Lizotte, the patchwork jersey celebrates the diversity of Canada's hockey community in a single, unifying emblem of the game. This is the sort of add-on that other museums of Islamic art would barely consider, but the Aga Khan Museum is an institution uniquely located in a part of North America that is winning a lot of friends while its southern neighbour is losing them.

● Game On! at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, from 3 April to 7 September 2026

Bahram Gur Wrestling before King Shangol of India, folio from a manuscript of the Shahnameh, Isfahan, Iran, 1666-67, courtesy Aga Khan Museum

Games board, carved wood, 19th century, Iran, courtesy Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

Chess manual (1890-91), Iran, courtesy Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

A NEW LOOK AT NIGERIA

Without wanting to get too political, there is a connection between the verbal abuse that Canada has experienced recently and the bombings that Nigeria endured on Christmas Day 2025. The perpetrator seems to lack any understanding of either Canada or, more obviously, of West Africa.

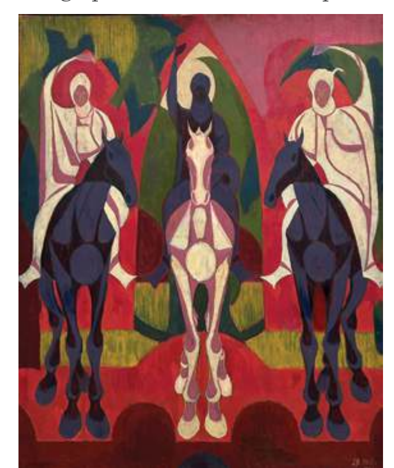
Nigeria is a complex nation with religious dynamics that go back a long way. The exhibition *Nigerian Modernism* at Tate Modern does not try to explain geo-politics but it is a wonderful starting point for understanding the many cultures of this huge country. It explores the rise of modern art in Nigeria before and after national independence, touching on the numerous movements that arose from shifting cultural and political identity.

Nigeria was established as a British colony in 1914. By this time, prosperous African kingdoms and societies had been profoundly altered by decades of military campaigns and colonial exploitation. Under British rule, artists continued to find innovative ways to express their own ideas, histories and imaginations. They also sought inspiration from local cultures. Artistic and religious traditions from the region's many ethnic groups included the Fulani-Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba peoples. Christian and Islamic practices were very much part of the situation.

Jumaa (1961) by Uche Okeke, oil on board, view of Muslims on their way to Friday prayers, Tate Modern

In 1960, when Nigeria gained independence from Britain it experienced an economic boom as well as an appalling civil war. In the aftermath, artists established new visual languages in their search for a postcolonial identity with no tradition of formal arts education. To make it worse, Christian mission schools pressured Nigerian converts to destroy traditional religious objects and encouraged the depiction of Christian stories. Muslim missionaries were no less ardent.

The exhibition shows all the movements and many of the individuals who created a distinctively Nigerian identity out of unpromising beginnings. Despite the much-discussed religious divisions, there is very little sign of sectarian schools of art. There are some works with a clear Christian message – and they do not come much clearer than Ono Brakpeya's *Last Supper and The Fourteen Stations of the Cross* – but they were made for devotional rather than divisive purposes. Similarly, there are no strident propaganda messages promoting the distinctions between Islam and Christianity. There are not even any of the Arabic calligraphic works that make up so much of the contemporary art in the Islamic heartlands of West Asia.



Fulani Horsemen (1962) by Jimo Akolo, oil on canvas, the Fulani reputation has been turned from warriors to terrorists in recent years, Tate Modern

The rivalries that were stoked during the Biafran War of 1966-70 are not much in evidence here. The religious element of Christians versus Muslims is now thought to have been greatly exaggerated although memories of news reports live on among American politicians old enough to recall the scenes of famine and other atrocities. A name that is still coming up is Fulani, usually accompanied by the word terrorist. This Muslim grouping is shown at Nigerian Modernism in a quite different light. Like everything else here, they are simply people. In its own gentle and unassuming way, this exhibition shows that art has the power to explain to those who want to learn. There will be disappointment for those looking for evidence of willful persecution of Christians or militant Islam on the march.

● Nigerian Modernism at Tate Modern, London, ends 10 May 2026

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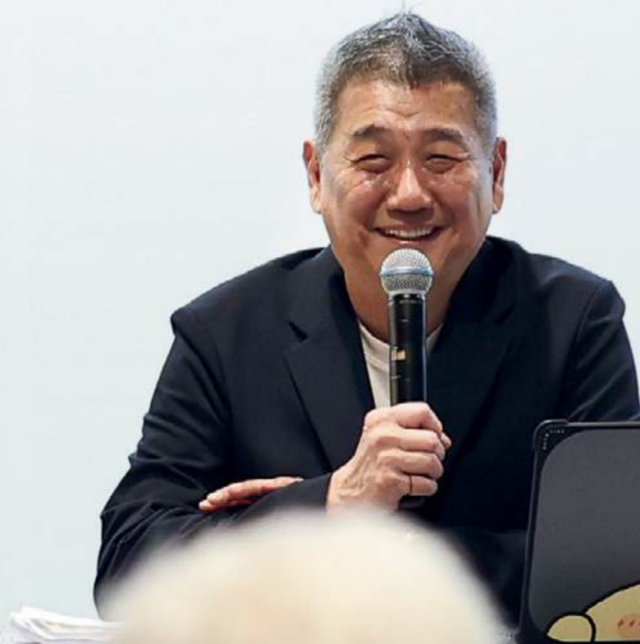

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