Bridging Past and Future: The New Chinese Art Galleries at the Brooklyn Museum

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The Brooklyn Museum houses a nearly encyclopedic collection of Asian art. It is one of the oldest and largest art museums in the United States with roots that extend back to 1823 and the founding of the Brooklyn Apprentices’ Library. It is the second largest museum in New York City, with roughly 1.5 million objects. Brooklyn gathered objects from many sources including curator-led collecting expeditions to China, Japan, Korea, and India in the early 20th century and gifts from Brooklyn collectors such as the Avery collection of Chinese Imperial cloisonne donated in 1909 and Japanese prints and screens from the Pratt family which founded the Pratt Institute of Art. The Brooklyn Museum has a history of innovative collecting, specializing in areas such as Korean art and contemporary Japanese ceramics well before other American museums.

Our former Chinese galleries displayed works of art in a very traditional way, chronologically and by material. However, housed in the heart of Brooklyn, the Museum’s audience is a reflection of the diversity of its borough and city. Recent visitor surveys reveal that 58% of our visitors are under the age of 45, and many are first-time visitors. Brooklyn is a center for the contemporary art world and many of our blockbuster exhibitions focus on contemporary art as did our recent summer retrospective of the artist Ai Weiwei. To bring our visitors into our new Asian galleries it is important to use our traditional art forms as a platform for
contemporary dialogue. That being said, building a collection of contemporary Chinese art is difficult given the heat of the current market and our limited acquisitions funds, and this has become one of our greatest challenges as it has for most other museums.

This presentation will introduce some of Brooklyn’s masterpieces and the history of our collection as well as explore our growing contemporary Asian art collection and how it will be incorporated in the new re-installation of the Asian galleries, scheduled to reopen in 2016. This is a unique time in our museum history as we have the opportunity to redesign our physical space around our art collection and not force it into a pre-existing configuration. Some of the new physical features in the layout and design of our new galleries pose both exciting opportunities and great challenges for us. This includes a long interior wall, with clear glass going half way up and then completely open, which will allow visitors to see our new Chinese galleries on the second floor from the first floor of the museum, and from a new staircase that is being built. It will allow us to choose certain large works as “come hither” objects to draw our visitors up to the Chinese galleries, but at the same time we still have questions as to which objects to place there and some possibilities will be shown in our discussions.

The presentation will discuss different ideas we have on reinterpreting these new galleries and welcomes all opinions and discussion on repositioning our collection for the future.

Some of the issues for brainstorming during the workshop include:
• How to incorporate contemporary Chinese art into what is primarily a traditional art collection? We can juxtapose contemporary works with their earlier inspirations to create a dialogue across generations. At the same time, how do we make sure it helps tell our story about the traditional works.

• Should we follow traditional displays where objects were shown chronologically and by type? Or is it better to organize it by theme? Which format, or what kind of combination will help tell a better story to engage the audience?

• Do we need maps in the Chinese galleries? Should they be on labels or didactic panels or in digital format?

• What sort of digital presence should we have in the new galleries? iPads/interactive touchscreens/cellphone tours or QR codes?

• Should labels be bi-lingual? Given word limits for labels, should the tombstones for each object have both Chinese and English? Should only the didactic panels be bi-lingual? Should it be on the label or just accessible by cellphone?

• How to get a younger audience into galleries of traditional Chinese art? How to use the reinstallation as a way to “reboot” our galleries and position them for the future?

• How to get the audience to keep coming back given our lack of resources which make permanent collection rotations difficult? One way I have been exploring is to focus on acquisitions and donations of contemporary works
on paper which have to be rotated because of light sensitivity so that there can be changes in the gallery, but that too has a cost implication.

• The advantages and disadvantages of a dense versus a more spare, elegant display given the space constraints of the galleries and that we can only very rarely rotate objects.