Reinterpreting the Chinese Architectural Galleries at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

One of the most distinctive aspects of the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s Chinese collection is its unique architectural interiors. Purchased in the late 1920s from Beijing, the 18th century scholar’s study, the 17th century Reception Hall and the 15th century ceiling from the Zhihua temple were the vision of Fiske Kimball, director from 1925–1955. An architectural historian, Fiske Kimball actively purchased these interiors and others from around the world for the museum as he saw them not only as works of art in themselves, but as settings in which to provide historical context for the display of art. While this vision fits in with today’s museum rhetoric and mission, the reality and the practicalities of showing works of art in architectural settings rather than in a ‘white box’ has its challenges. While the impact of ‘experiencing’ these architectural galleries is not disputed, how can important works in the collection be displayed in the space following the institutional strategic plan of making the museum experience more engaging and relevant to visitors? This presentation will discuss current ideas on reinterpreting these specific galleries and welcomes opinions and discussion on how successful different approaches may be.

Totaling nearly 7,000 works, the strengths of the Chinese collection aside from the unique architectural interiors include early ceramics and tomb figurines, Song ceramics, Ming and Qing works of art, enamels, lacquers, porcelains and furniture with good representative works in painting, Buddhist and Daoist art and works made for the export markets. Much of the collection was gifted by early donors or acquired by the PMA’s first Oriental curator, Horace Jayne, protégé of Langdon Warner who was director from 1917–1923. Warner continued to advise in museum purchases and was instrumental in acquiring the Chinese period rooms. The present arrangement of the entire suite of Chinese galleries aside from the three period interiors mentioned above includes galleries on early archaeology and tomb art, early Buddhist sculpture, ceramics from the 9th to 13th centuries and Qing works of art. While loosely arranged thematically as well as chronologically, limited gallery space does not allow for certain strengths of the collection to be permanently displayed. A rethinking of the architectural interior galleries therefore is in order especially as spaces where furniture, painting and Ming imperial arts can be shown.

**Chinese Reception Hall**

The 17th century Reception Hall was part of the palatial complex of a Ming eunuch serving the Chongzhen emperor. Originally five bays (45 feet) wide and 26 feet high at the tallest point, the building was installed in the PMA in a reduced footprint, but this does not diminish the immediate experience of being immersed in the vast interior space. Presently, the architecture takes center stage: Lights have been judiciously installed between rafters to keep the integrity of the building, and light levels are kept low to preserve the original pigments decorating the beams. The lack of lighting however poses the problem of how to display other works of art in the space. The tall ceiling makes it a possible gallery where large paintings and furniture can be comfortably displayed, yet currently only some cases to display works of art and cabinets are
placed around the perimeter of the hall. While the collection is not able to provide or furnish what a 17th century Reception Hall would have looked like, the current thinking is to use the space to display the collection’s strength in Ming dynasty works, including paintings, furniture, porcelains, lacquer and gold. Can a balance be met in highlighting the vastness of the architectural interior whilst also utilizing the space as a gallery in which to display other works of art?

**Buddhist Temple Ceiling Gallery**

The early 15th century ceiling made from lacquered and gilded wood originates from the Zhihua Hall of the Zhihuasi (Temple of Wisdom Attained) in Beijing. The gallery where the ceiling was eventually installed was originally conceived as ‘where objects of a religious nature would be appropriately displayed and the interior would approximate very closely the religious atmosphere of a Chinese temple’. The original display included an altar set-up in front of wooden sculptures placed in front of a wall painting that come from disparate sites. Instead of loosely trying to recreate a setting that will never be accurate – research on the Zhihua Hall where the ceiling originates show that it originally housed Shakyamuni, Amitabha and the Medicine Buddha as well as the Eighteen Luohan – would it not be better suited to use the space to display our collection of Buddhist material? The other question relates to the interpretation of the ceiling. How much technology should feature in the galleries? Current thinking is that technology used judiciously in the form of an iPad or tablet would allow visitors to experience and explore the ceiling in new ways: showing details of the ceiling that can’t be seen with the naked eye, experiencing the space of the Zhihua Hall as it is today and including contextual information such as how the ceiling came to the PMA, the history of the Zhihua temple and the special music that the temple is known for.