Rethinking the Display of Chinese Art in a Museum Setting: The Nelson-Atkins Museum as an (ongoing) Case Study

In this kingdom they make much of antique things; and yet they have no statues nor medals, but rather many vases of bronze which are highly valued...Other antique vases of clay or of jasper stone (i.e. jade) are valuable. But more than all these things are valued paintings by famous persons, without color, but in ink alone; or letters by ancient writers on paper or cloth, with their seals to confirm that they are genuine.

Matteo Ricci, cited in Craig Clunas, Superfluous Things, p.94

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art is currently in the processes of completing a strategic plan which will provide a vision for our museum for the next decade. The aim of the plan is to position the Nelson at the forefront of museological thinking and practice by taking advantage of recent studies of museum audiences, national demographics, and economic and social forecasts. Although this planning is still in process, it is already clear that the preordained outcome will be a shift from “object” to “audience,” a shift underpinned by our institutional imperative of increasing audiences. Surveys show that a visit to a museum is first and foremost a social activity and only secondarily an aesthetic experience. This newly received wisdom has already impacted our assumptions on how best to display Chinese art and has persuaded us to rethink a master plan for the Chinese galleries on which we were already working.

This paper will present our current (and still fluid) ideas regarding the Chinese galleries master plan. It implicitly poses a series of questions and possible answers about we should interpret and display Chinese art. What should be our mission in displaying/collecting Chinese art? How do we define the boundaries of Chinese art and should our displays include export ceramics and contemporary Chinese art (currently claimed by the Decorative Arts and Contemporary Art departments)? How should displays relate (if at all) to trends in scholarship and new narratives on the history of Chinese art-- should a museum display attempt in some way to echo or mimic the narratives found in Chinese art textbooks? Who should be our audiences? And how does one interpret an Asian culture for a Euro-American-centric public?

Comprising some 8000 objects, the Nelson’s Chinese collection is by no means the largest in the United States. It is, however, broadly representative of the main traditions of Chinese material culture. Indeed, our website proudly proclaims that the collection includes masterpieces from every historical stage and in every medium of China’s artistic activity (except, surprisingly, calligraphy). The nominal figure of 8000 objects is, of course, misleading, when compared with the limited selections that are currently on view. These comprise about 500 objects currently displayed in nine gallery areas—a Chinese Buddhist sculpture gallery with examples from most of the major Buddhist cave shrines; a long corridor displaying a variety of items, including cages and other paraphernalia for fighting crickets (very popular with the docents and kids), early
ceramics, mirrors, and Tang-Yuan silver; a small gallery for later porcelain; a Chinese furniture gallery; the main Chinese gallery displaying a mixture of ceramic tomb sculptures, tomb architecture, and Buddhist sculpture; the Chinese Temple gallery; a Chinese ritual bronze gallery and an adjacent one focusing on Han art; and the Chinese painting gallery.

The arrangement of these galleries currently lacks any coherence, with galleries of different media and of different eras frequently juxtaposed with each other. Moreover, the displays reflect the biases of Western collecting over the past century and the predilections of our visitors. It is interesting to compare the foci of these displays with what Matteo Ricci perceived as the most important elements of elite Chinese literati culture. Bronze ritual vessels, jades, ceramics, and painting are common to both, but our embrace of Buddhist sculpture would have seemed unorthodox to Ricci and his Chinese literati friends. Moreover, although our emphasis on ceramics reflects its centrality in China’s material culture, it is ceramic tomb sculpture, not celadons or porcelains that currently captures the attention of our visitors. They love our Tang figures of horses, camels, polo players, etc., but ignore the subtle tonalities and elegant modern forms of our Song ceramics. And while they gasp in awe as they enter our Chinese Temple and come face to face with our 12th century polychrome Guanyin of the Southern Seas, they often walk right past our Chinese scroll painting galleries without pausing.

Our master plan is intended not only to address the incoherence of our current galleries, but also to engage our audiences with the full historical sweep of Chinese material culture in its manifold aspects, including those not immediately appealing to a Western public. Our current design organizes the material in a chronological-thematic approach that draws some inspiration from the T.T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese art at the Victoria and Albert Museum but which also retains an overarching chronological framework. Although this approach is not in itself radical, we are contemplating introducing interactivities aimed not merely at “activating” the galleries but at allowing audiences to experience as far as possible the artifacts in the way they were used in traditional or ancient China. Our aim is that in most galleries there will be hands-on interactivity related to some aspect of the exhibited objects or their cultural or technological context. Such interactivities may include the opportunity to handle casting molds for ritual vessels, make rubbings, wield a brush, play weiqi, handle ceramic sherds, don (figuratively) court robes, or fit together sections of Chinese furniture joinery. Sound, including bell, Buddhist ritual, and qin music may become an integral part of the experience.

Since we are aware that such a heavily contextual approach runs the risk of turning the galleries into a theme park, the key will be to create a balance in the displays between the didactic devices and the individual artifact, to balance history with the aesthetic experience, doing with looking. We hope that our ideas will be further modified and refined during the planning process through the feedback from community groups, educators, curators, art historians, and sinologists.