

Nationalism, Archaeology and Modern Art: An Anatomy of the 1938 Met Exhibition of Chinese Bronzes from American Collections

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Inspired by the great international exhibitions of Chinese art in Berlin 1929 and London 1935 of Asian art, American collectors amassed world-class collections of ancient Chinese art (bronzes and jades) between the two world wars. From 1938-39, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and two private galleries hosted three exhibitions which featured these great American collections. Also during this period, articles on Chinese bronzes and jades featured prominently in major American art newspapers for the first time. My larger research explores the sentiments—patriotic, profit-driven, humanitarian—behind the exhibitions and the impact they had on the American public. The exhibition was the first full-scale blockbuster defining Chinese bronzes to an American public through a Western lenses.

Alan Priest, the curator of the exhibition, was known for his flamboyance and eccentricity. He once presented imperial gowns excavated from the tomb of a Qing prince in a room at The Met made up to look like a tomb, complete with a full skeleton with one glass eye. The show proved so wildly popular that the sternest disapproval was swept away and the skeleton remained. As such, there were always multiple visions of these exhibitions—a sensational show to attract the public, scholarly interest in the real artifacts of the Bronze Age in China, showcase for Chinese “civilization”—a stance supported by the Chinese government at that time. In addition, Priest designed his 1938 exhibition to display clean lines and a simple, modern look. The bronzes were no longer ornaments to help decorate a fancy room, as Chinese “crafts” of ceramics and jade had done for some time, but instead were presented as the stars of the show, in simple cases and in elegant show rooms that emphasized the individuality of each bronze.

OUTLINE:

I. The Context

- a. Depression
- b. Japan vs. China, cultural offensives
- c. Moving Treasures of the Palace Museum
- d. Whitlock has an idea
- e. The Met proposal is shot down
- f. American collectors come through

II. The Exhibition

- a. The spectacular layout
- b. Not to be confused with a scholarly show
- c. The Curator Priest

III. The Response

- a. Top end: Scholarly interest
- b. American involvement in nascent Chinese archaeology
- c. Middle end: art journals
- d. Bottom end: socialite, critic, and Common Man.
- e. Connections with Modern Art?

IV. Epilogue:

- a. The Met acquires some bronzes
- b. Interest in Chinese bronzes continue unabated in the United States
- c. The 1973 exhibition at The Met from China, Great Bronze Age