Where Is the East?

Asian Objects in American Museums, from Nathan Dunn to Charles Freer

Steven Conn

As objects from China and Japan made their way into American collections during the nineteenth century, museums faced the categorical problem of how best to classify and display them. For some, these objects belonged in the category of "fine art"; for others, they belonged more properly in the category of anthropology or ethnology. By the 1920s, this debate had largely been resolved in favor of "art." At stake, of course, was the larger question of how Americans would ultimately view the cultures that produced the objects.

IN 1929 Benjamin March published the results of a national survey he helped conduct at the behest of the Carnegie Corporation. March was curator of Asiatic art at the Detroit Institute of Arts, and his study inventoried collections of Asian objects displayed in American museums. Given his own institutional position, March chose, not surprisingly, to focus his attention on collections in *art* museums, ostensibly because of "the increasing interest among them in the Far East."[1] He was pleased with what he found. From tiny collections, such as the 33 objects at the Baltimore Museum of Art, to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), which held more than 92,000 pieces, March reported Asian objects in museums large and small, in cities of all sizes from coast to coast.

March's survey, however, reveals something else as well. What March called "undoubtedly the most distinguished general collection of Chinese material in the country" was found not in an art museum at all but rather in the Department of Anthropology at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History. In addition, the "preeminent" assemblage of Chinese sculpture in the country, according to March, sat in the galleries of the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania. And Asian objects numbering 9,000 resided in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan's Museum of Anthropology—a collection larger than all but a very few art museums.[2]

The choice March made to focus on art museums was not as innocent or self-evident as it would appear. By doing so, he had taken sides in a debate, almost one hundred years running, over whether Asian objects—especially those from China and Japan—should be categorized as fine art, anthropology, or something else altogether. Objects from Asia had presented American museums with significant conceptual problems throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth

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[1] Throughout this essay I use the words *objects, material,* and *artifacts* more or less interchangeably. I do so precisely because they are vague terms and underscore the confusion concerning how to categorize Asian cultural production. Benjamin March, *China and Japan in Our Museums* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), p. 2.

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[2] March, *China and Japan*, pp. 34, 50, 87.

centuries. As Craig Clunas has pointed out, " 'Art' is not a category in the sense of a preexistent container . . . rather, it is a way of categorizing, a manner of making knowledge."[3] Choosing sides in this debate meant sorting out questions such as what kinds of objects should be collected and displayed; how those objects should be organized and arranged; and within which intellectual frameworks those objects (and by extension the cultures that produced them) should be understood.

Beyond the institutional question of which types of museums would display these objects lay the much more vexing question of how the cultures that produced the objects would be represented through the displays. Susan Stewart, James Clifford, and others have discussed how cultural identities are constituted through the acts of collecting and display.[4] This concept was particularly true in the nineteenth century, when Western societies were engaged in aggressive nation-building enterprises. To see Asian objects as anthropological meant understanding those cultures within the frameworks that were being developed primarily to understand non-Western and so-called primitive peoples. For those who classified Asian objects as art, who were dazzled by the achievements of Asian cultural production, Asian cultures could be understood in the same category as the great occidental civilizations such as Greece, Rome, and their descendents.

This essay investigates some of these questions by sketching an exhibitory history of Asian (again, largely Chinese and Japanese) objects in American museums at a few critical moments from the mid nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. As we shall see, the frameworks of neither anthropology nor art history, which were the only two available in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, worked completely when attempting to understand Asian cultural production. As a result, for American museum visitors, it was not at all clear where to find the East.

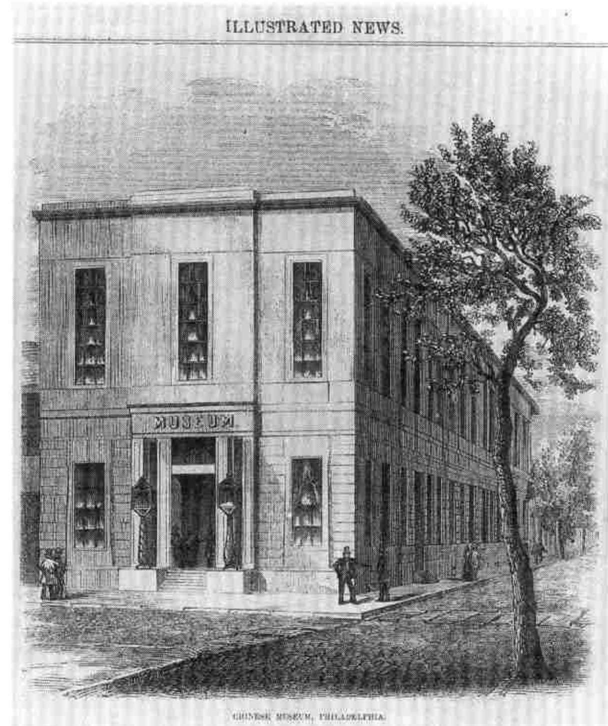

Fig. 1. Chinese Museum, Philadelphia. From *Illustrated News*, June 4, 1853. (Historical Society of Pennsylvania.) Although Nathan Dunn's museum in Philadelphia had long been closed by the time this image was rendered, his was the first systematic attempt to exhibit Asian objects in the United States.

Asian Objects Become Fine Art

March would seem to have chosen sides wisely. By the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, the debate about how to classify Asian objects had been resolved—though by no means entirely—in favor of fine art. There is a standard celebratory and largely teleological narrative that describes this triumph.

As traced by Warren Cohen, among others, the story begins in 1838 in Philadelphia, where merchant Nathan Dunn opened the first museum of Chinese objects in the United States (fig. 1).[5]

[3] I use the term *Asia*, when in fact I largely mean China and Japan. I do so because of my sense that people at the time had little interest in, or cognizance of, southeast Asia or the Korean peninsula. The Indian subcontinent presents another case altogether, but I will not touch on it here. Craig Clunas, "Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art," in Tani E. Barlow, ed., *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 418.

[4] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

[5] For an account of Dunn's museum, its origins and its fate, see John Haddad, "The Romantic Collector in China: Nathan Dunn's Ten Thousand Chinese Things," *Journal of American Culture* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 7–26; Warren Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture: A Study in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

By 1841 Dunn's museum had folded (and was relocated to London), and the narrative jumps to 1876 and the Centennial International Exhibition, also in Philadelphia. There, both China and Japan exhibited material—but in the main building, not Memorial Hall, which was the fine arts building.

Seventeen years later in Chicago, at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, Japanese objects (though not Chinese) were exhibited in the Palace of Fine Arts. At long last, some Asian objects were being properly recognized as fine art; thus begins, in this narrative, what Cohen has called the "golden age of Asian art collecting."[6] With Boston's Museum of Fine Arts taking the institutional lead, many American art museums began accumulating and displaying Asian objects, bestowing upon them the cultural status associated with fine art like the Gainsboroughs and Rembrandts.

The process of placing Asian objects into the category of fine art reached a climax shortly after the First World War. In 1919 construction was completed on the new Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C., the first museum in the country with Asian art at its center—the first since Dunn's at least. The Freer opened to the public in 1923 and was directed initially by John Ellerton Lodge, who had worked first (and continued to do so) with the Asian collections in Boston.

The Freer's location on the Mall was heavy with significance. Located in the growing cultural complex of the nation's national museums and next to the Smithsonian's original Castle, the Freer signaled to Americans that Asian art as art had arrived. With Lodge presiding over a twin empire in Boston and Washington, "East Asian art [became] part of American culture."[7] March's conclusion in 1929 that most major and many minor art museums collected and displayed Asian objects has only been amplified over the course of subsequent years.

What this narrative stresses is the development of an aesthetic sensibility that gradually, but inevitably, permitted Americans to cultivate an appreciation for the masterworks of Asian art in much the same way that they learned to appreciate the finest works of Western art. Pioneers such as Charles Freer and Ernest Fenollosa (for a time Asian objects curator at Boston's MFA) helped develop for Asian objects an apparatus of scholarship and connoisseurship similar to that upon which the study and evaluation of Western art depended. Once Asian objects had their own attendant framework—stylistic schools, chronological progressions—the objects themselves could be treated as art.

While this story is true, it is also too much a teleology. That is to say, whatever may have been the case at an earlier time, we now categorize Asian art as fine art proper. What remains to be explained, therefore, is how American museums arrived at that obvious and inevitable conclusion. Part of that narrative must address the fact that for Asian objects to come to rest in the category of fine art by the 1920s, they had *not* to be classed as something else. In the United States, as March's survey inadvertently reveals, that other choice was to classify the objects as anthropological or ethnological. As much as an evaluation of the objects themselves, the debate between where Asian objects belonged hinged on larger questions of how Americans perceived and "invented" the cultures that produced them.

Nathan Dunn's Collection of "Curious Things"

By all accounts, Philadelphia merchant Nathan Dunn had an extraordinary appreciation for Chinese culture. His business led him to Canton in 1818, and he did not return permanently to the United States until 1832. He claimed to have access to Chinese people and Chinese objects unparalleled for a Westerner. That access to an otherwise off-limits world came, at least according to reviewer E. C. Wines, because Dunn did not participate in the opium trade and was therefore trusted and respected by local Cantonese. "Most Americans," Wines told his readers, "who trade in China are more or less engaged in the opium traffic, which is contrary to the laws of the Empire. Mr. Dunn was never interested to the amount of a dollar in that illicit commerce."[8] Dunn was also a Quaker, and his aversion to dealing in opium may have been tied to his faith.

Dunn publicized his virtuous business endeavors doubtless to help portray his collection as an act of high-minded, cross-cultural understanding. In the 1830s there was considerable work to be done in that direction. As an anonymous writer observed in the *American Journal of Science*

[6] Cohen, *East Asian Art*, p. 35.

[7] Cohen, *East Asian Art*, p. 87.

[8] E. C. Wines, *A Peep at China in Mr. Dunn's Chinese Collection* (Philadelphia: Printed for Nathan Dunn, 1839), p. 10.

and Arts, "It would be difficult to name a subject that has puzzled the learned world so much and for so long, as the accurate delineation of the character of that wonderful and unchanging people, the Chinese." Dunn hoped to rectify the situation when he returned to Philadelphia, bringing with him his collection of roughly 10,000 objects. He spent $50,000 assembling the collection and then laid out an additional $8,000 to install it in a gallery. On December 22, 1838, Dunn opened his museum to the world. It holds the distinction of being the first systematic collection of Chinese material exhibited publicly in either the United States or England.[9]

The results of Dunn's work astonished. From written descriptions, the museum was truly an impressive operation. Visitors entered a double-colonnaded salon 160 feet long and 63 feet wide with enough objects to occupy "hours, nay days and weeks." The rest of the museum's galleries contained everything from paintings and furniture to models of boats and natural history specimens. In between these displays was "a street with sedan and bearers" and a "silk mercer's shop." As one reviewer gushed, Dunn had brought to Philadelphia, "*everything* that was characteristic or rare, whether in the natural history, or natural and artificial curiosities and manufactures." Though the museum has left scant historical traces—and the collection itself has long since been dispersed—we can deduce two things about Dunn's exhibition strategy. First, it is clear that his goal was to be encyclopedic. According to one journalist who toured the museum when it relocated to London in 1842, "On every side are works of art; the evidence of the idol worship of China, of her commerce, her manufactures, her paintings, her carvings, her silks, satins, embroidery, implements, coins—everything in short that can tend to illustrate her domestic or public life."[10]

This encyclopedic approach to collecting mirrored the model that had been developed by Charles Willson Peale when he established the nation's first important museum in 1784 in Philadelphia (and indeed, Dunn's collection shared space with the remnants of Peale's museum). What Peale reveals to us when he pulls back the curtain in his 1822 self-portrait, *The Artist in His Museum*, is a diverse collection that includes everything from fossils to stuffed birds to portraits of the most eminent contemporaries. Dunn's collection of "everything that was characteristic or rare," and his attempt to use a museum as an encyclopedic repository was squarely within the most reputable museum practices of the early republic. Second, the response to Dunn's museum reminds us of the epistemological power that objects held for viewers in the nineteenth century. Simply put, knowledge about a variety of subjects inhered in the objects associated with that body of knowledge. As a writer for the *Chinese Repository* (a journal published in Canton) reviewing Dunn's museum described it, "There are several means employed to impart knowledge of distant and strange countries." One is to write narrative history; another is to exhibit a panoramic view. But the best way "is the one . . . which Mr. Dunn affords his visitors." By encountering actual objects, "the visitor must feel as if he were examining a country, where the breath of life and the noise of instruments had suddenly ceased, and every object animate and inanimate had been left unchanged and indiscerptible." As Dunn himself put it on the title page of his catalogue: "Words may Deceive, But the Eye cannot play the Rogue."[11]

Through an encyclopedic scope and a belief that objects were the source of knowledge about the larger forces that produced them, be they natural or cultural, Dunn made it clear that his ambition was to reproduce China metonymically through the museum, letting the objects stand for the culture whence they came. A visit to the museum, according to Wines, was a substitute for a trip to China itself. In fact, Wines believed that the museum would give a better idea of China

[9] "Nathan Dunn's Chinese Collection at Philadelphia," *American Journal of Science and Arts* 35 (1839): 391. John Haddad writes that the East India Marine Society had a large collection of Asian material on display in Salem, Massachusetts, but indicates that it was a random assortment (Haddad, "Romantic Collector in China," pp. 17–18).

[10] For descriptions of the museum, see Wines, *Peep at China;* "Nathan Dunn's Chinese Collection at Philadelphia," pp. 391–400; Nathan Dunn, *"Ten Thousand Chinese Things": A Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese Collection in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Printed for the proprietor, 1839); and Haddad, "Romantic Collector in China." "Review of William Langdon's 'Ten Thousand Things,'" *Chinese Repository* 12, no. 11 (November 1843): 563.

[11] There are important connections between American and European museum practices; on Asian art in British museums, see Clunas, "Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art." The debate between art and anthropology also seems to have taken place in England in the nineteenth century. For more on object-based epistemology, see Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. chap. 1. "Review of E. C. Wines, *A Peep at China*," *Chinese Repository* 8, no. 11 (March 1840): 583–84. Dunn, "*Ten Thousand Chinese Things*," title page.

than a visit to the country because foreigners were permitted to see only a small part of Canton: "It is no longer necessary to measure half the circuit of the globe, and subject one's self to the hazards and privations of a six months voyage on distant and dangerous seas to enjoy a peep at the Celestial Empire. This is a gratification which may now be enjoyed by the citizens of Philadelphia . . . and by the citizens of other parts of the United States, at no greater peril of life and limb than is connected with locomotion by means of our own steamboats and railroads." The result, in Wines's estimation, was "China in miniature."[12]

Dunn offered his museum as exhibit A on one side of the debate about how China and the Chinese should be viewed by Westerners. Americans certainly saw China through two sets of lenses. Through one, the Chinese were like most other non-Western people—backward, primitive, and unprogressive. This perception grew in the 1830s and 1840s, when events of the Opium War in China seemed only to prove the point. The Chinese, however long their empire may have lasted, had finally succumbed to the technological and commercial superiority of the West. While some might feel squeamish that opium had been the driving force behind Britain's defeat of China, most simply took the lesson of events to demonstrate that China could not compete with the West. For some, the Chinese had "all the self-complacent vanity of half civilization." For others, Jesus was the cure for China's ailments, its "wretchedness and degradation" attributable entirely to a "false religion." For these Americans, "reception of Christian ideas and institutions alone is needed for their regeneration."[13]

Through another set of lenses, this hierarchy of Western superiority and Chinese inferiority was confronted by troubling facts that could not be ignored. The sheer immensity of the Chinese empire astonished people, embracing "not far from one tenth of the land of the globe, and full third part of its inhabitants. It includes the widest range of climates . . . its commercial resources are incalculable." Beyond these physical facts, China had all the trappings Westerners looked for when they defined civilization; this much was obvious and unavoidable. The Chinese possessed a continuous record of their history far beyond any Western civilization, and they had produced dazzling works of art and literature. The very language, then as now, simply left Westerners stammering. As one writer put it, "How the Chinese classics were ever written is a profound mystery; but 'there were giants in those days.'"[14]

What Wines called the three greatest inventions of civilization—printing, gunpowder, and the compass—all came from China, "whatever mortification the statement may inflict upon our vanity." Looked at this way, China was "interesting in its relation to the philosophy of human progress." As one writer reminded readers, "We see there the highest stage of civilization which has yet been attained by any nation independently of Christian institutions."[15] This, then, was the defining dilemma: through which lens to view the Chinese? The problem vexed people in the 1830s, and it would continue to do so through the mid twentieth century. Such were the parameters within which Americans sought to understand China and display Chinese objects in American museums.

It was in the midst of this discourse that Dunn's museum opened. By constructing China in miniature and by insisting that the objects on display were not ill-gotten through the opium trade, Dunn used an encyclopedic museum to argue that China deserved a place in the front rank of civilizations. For some this seemed obvious. The displays made clear that the Chinese deserved credit for considerable accomplishments in many areas. Remarking on the exhibit of "agriculture and other instruments," one writer mused, "Here is a study of Chinese manufactures perfectly novel to an American, who will be surprised to find that the most simple operation which he has been taught to believe can be performed only by an instrument of a certain form, is equally well executed by another of totally different figure." Wines agreed, concluding his review of the museum by asserting that " whoever attentively examines the immense Collection of Chinese Curiosities . . . will need no further proof of the ingenuity of the Chinese in arts and manufactures. In several branches of labour, both agricultural and mechanical . . . they have never been surpassed; and in some they are unequalled by any other people." Even Chinese law, a description of which Dunn provided in the museum, compared favorably to that in the West.

[12] Wines, *Peep at China*, pp. 12–14.

[13] *North American Review* 47, no. 101 (October 1838): 404; *North American Review* 67, no. 141 (October 1848): 269.

[14] *North American Review* (1838): 404.

[15] Wines, *Peep at China*, p. 96; *North American Review* (1848): 270.

Wines quoted an essay from the *Edinburgh Review* that certainly makes Chinese law sound appealing even in our own day, "We scarcely know any European code that is at once so copious and so consistent or that is nearly so free from intricacy, bigotry and fiction."[16]

But the encyclopedic display Dunn featured in his museum did not persuade everyone that the Chinese had produced art. Wealthy New York collector Philip Hone, who came to Philadelphia in January 1840 to see "the famous Chinese museum," viewed the museum as "an immense collection of curious things." Likewise, William Langdon, who published an expanded museum catalogue in London, believed that Dunn's collection demonstrated that the fine arts had not attained "the perfection that belongs to them in the enlightened nations of Christendom." What makes these criticisms particularly interesting is that Dunn had not intended his museum to be an *art* museum as such. Indeed, the art museum as we know it today in the United States is largely a product of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Dunn's model was a synoptic, encyclopedic museum like Peale's; the Metropolitan and the Art Institute of Chicago belong to a later generation. Lawrence Levine has wonderfully demonstrated that the boundaries that delineate highbrow from lowbrow in American culture were fluid in the nineteenth century and only ossified in their current form at the turn of the twentieth century. The two-sided reaction to Dunn's Chinese objects—the impulse both to be dazzled and to denigrate—suggests that part of what may have helped define what constituted fine art in the nineteenth century was an ethnocentric reaction against Asian cultural production. As one writer concluded in 1848, "The genius, art, and taste of the classic ages have, indeed, left memorials by the side of which China has absolutely nothing to exhibit."[17]

Art, as the definition began to take shape in the mid nineteenth century, would be seen to be exclusively a Western achievement. In Dunn's museum, visitors found that the Chinese could be credited with certain accomplishments, technical and otherwise, but not apparently with artistic achievement. To draw from Edward Said and others, though they have worked in a different context, the Occident defined itself as much as it defined the Orient when it created the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion around the category of art. Scholars through the century would develop a scholarly apparatus designed in part to reify this distinction between East and West.[18]

Dunn demonstrated that China could be constituted through the same encyclopedic techniques that Peale had used in the late eighteenth century to construct a museum image of the United States. But in so doing, Dunn's museum only raised questions about how Chinese culture and civilization would fit into the emerging framework of categorical knowledge. As the nineteenth century wore on, however, the model of knowledge as an encyclopedic whole dissolved and was replaced with one where knowledge was parsed into finer and finer disciplinary units. This only compounded the problem of where to fit Asians and their civilizations. As one writer put it, "In what category to place them must puzzle the psychologist."[19] It puzzled the rest of America as well.

Asia at the Fair: 1876 and 1893

Dunn's museum had a spectacular but brief life, both in Philadelphia and London. By the late 1840s, Dunn was dead and the collection had been dispersed in ways that are still unclear. The museum had at least two American imitators: Peter's Chinese Museum in New York and Boston's Chinese Museum. Each drew on the prestige of Dunn's venture by claiming to be even bigger. In addition, P. T. Barnum acquired a large Chinese collection for his New York museum but decided that exhibiting Chinese people would be an even bigger draw.[20] With these exceptions, however,

[16] Wines, *Peep at China*, pp. 90, 96; "Nathan Dunn's Chinese Collection at Philadelphia," p. 395.

[17] Hone and Langdon are both quoted in Cohen, *East Asian Art*, p. 11. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). *North American Review* (1848): 270.

[18] On the question of orientalism, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Edward Graham, "The 'Imaginative Geography' of China," in Warren Cohen, ed., *Reflections of Orientalism* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1983). On the relevance of Said to China scholarship, see Gail Hershetter, "The Subaltern Talks Back: Reflections on Subaltern Theory and Chinese History," *positions* 1 (1993): 103–30.

[19] *North American Review* (1838): 404.

[20] On Dunn's London experience, see Haddad, "Romantic Collector in China." "The Chinese Museum in Boston," *The Merchant's Magazine and Commercial Review* 14, no. 4 (April 1846): 347–49; on Peter's Museum and Barnum's display, see John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 113–23.

Fig. 2. Japanese display, Centennial International Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876. (Free Library of Philadelphia.)

Americans would have to wait until 1876 before they could again see a large, synoptic collection of objects from Asia.

Although both China and Japan made showings at Philadelphia's Centennial International Exhibition in 1876, the Japanese took the opportunity to bring themselves to the world's attention in a way that the Chinese did not (fig. 2). Consequently, although China's exhibits excited some "curiosity and interest," it was Japan's displays that drew the greatest attention. Japan's geo-political position had shifted since 1858 and the forced "opening" of the country by Americans. The Japanese were now willingly, and successfully, pursuing a progressive—that is to say, Western—course of development, and thus their cultural production was more sympathetically received. As a consequence, "many European and American arts and sciences have since been introduced." In addition, "the youth of Japan have been sent abroad to America and to European countries to be educated."[21]

The Japanese government hoped in a deliberate and self-conscious way to make a big impression in Philadelphia. They had made their first showing in an international exhibition three years earlier in Vienna; in 1876 they chose objects valued at roughly $200,000 and spent another $400,000 on their transport and display in Philadelphia. In addition, the Japanese commission to the fair published, in English, a forty-two-page primer on the history, customs, and politics of Japan for distribution at the exhibition. The result was a triumph. James McCabe wrote a large illustrated history of the fair, and the Japanese exhib-

[21] Frank Leslie, *Frank Leslie's Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition, 1876* (New York: By the author, 1877), pp. 244, 248.

Fig. 3. Japanese bronze vase, Centennial International Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876. (Free Library of Philadelphia.)

its in the fair's main building left him breathless. Of a particular work in bronze, he assured readers that it "cannot be reproduced by the most skillful artificer in either Europe or America" (fig. 3). Porcelain "attained perfection in Japan before it was known in Europe," and the display of porcelain pieces in Philadelphia "surpasses in beauty of form and ornamentation the combined exhibit of every other nation in the building." He concluded his tour through these galleries by telling readers that "the visitor who makes even a hasty inspection of the display . . . must amend his ideas of Japan. We have been accustomed to regard that country as uncivilized, or half-civilized at best, but we find here abundant evidences that it outshines the most cultivated nations of Europe." At Philadelphia, as Neil Harris has observed, "the Japanese made their first entry into the popular consciousness."[22]

Just as Japan's exhibits in 1876 reflected a newly ambitious relationship with the West, China's reflected a country still falling in Western estimation. The Chinese display in the main building was less than half the size of Japan's, and McCabe felt that "every part of the enclosure is of the gaudiest character" (fig. 4). He acknowledged some "exquisitely carved articles in ivory" but was otherwise condescending in his assessment. Far from finding the Chinese the equal of European civilization, McCabe concluded by saying, "A number of almond-eyed, pig-tailed celestials, in their native costumes are scattered through the enclosure, and you may for a moment imagine that you have put the sea between you and the Exhibition and have suddenly landed in some large Chinese bazaar."[23]

By 1876 Japan's cultural stock may have been rising, both absolutely and in relation to China, but it had not yet reached the plateau of fine art. The exhibition in Philadelphia represented a snapshot of nineteenth-century industrial progress and reflected ideas about how the world should be classed or categorized. In addition to the exhibits from foreign nations and from each of the states, the fair included those of industry as separate from agriculture and fine art as separate from technology. In this schema, fine art did not include Japanese, or indeed any Asian objects—not in the fine art building and its annex or in Frank Leslie's official guide, *Masterpieces of the Centennial International Exhibition*. Leslie could not quite resolve how to describe Japanese art. "The grotesque in art," he reported, "seems to be a part of the very nature of the Japanese . . . not only in the dragons and other unknown creatures delineated, but in caricatures of domestic life which are exceedingly comical." Japanese objects were certainly admired by visitors in 1876 but not in the same space as fine art.[24]

For Japanese objects, the final ascension to art would have to wait until 1893, in Chicago. Japan had been among the first countries to respond to the call for exhibits at the World's Columbian Exposition and eventually spent more than

[22] *The Empire of Japan: A Brief Sketch of the Geography, History, and Constitution* (Philadelphia: William P. Kildare, 1876). James McCabe, *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1876), pp. 415–17. On the Japanese exhibits in 1876, see Sylvia Yount, " 'Give the People What They Want': The American Aesthetic Movement, Art Worlds, and Consumer Culture, 1876–1890" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1995), pp. 72–85. Neil Harris, "All the World a Melting Pot? Japan at American Fairs, 1876–1904," in Akira Iriye, ed., *Mutual Images: Essays in American-Japanese Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 46.

[23] McCabe, *Illustrated History*, pp. 418–19.

[24] Frank Leslie, *Masterpieces of the Centennial International Exhibition* (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Barrie, 1876), pp. 249–50. In a similar vein, Thomas Eakins's 1875 masterpiece, *The Gross Clinic*, was relegated to the medical exhibits.

Fig. 4. Chinese display, Centennial International Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876. (Photo, Free Library of Philadelphia.)

$600,000 on displays. The Japanese built their own pavilion, and the country was fully represented in almost all of the major buildings in the White City, from mining to fisheries, including the Palace of Fine Arts. People certainly acknowledged that "the art exhibit of Japan differs, of course, from that of other countries," yet there it was, in room 24 of the Palace, between Spain and Holland. This is not to say that the Japanese were not subjected to sneers, racialist jibes, and other small condescensions. Still, the exhibits at the fair had the effect on many visitors of admitting the Japanese to the family of civilized nations, which was underscored by their inclusion in the fine arts building. The title character of the popular novel *Uncle Jeremiah and Family Go to the Fair* overhears two women discussing the Japanese exhibits: "I don't see the use of sending missionaries to Japan. I don't believe they are so very bad at all. I don't believe that anyone who could make such lovely things could be a very wicked heathen."[25] Such were the cultural stakes for Japan in 1893.

China by contrast, smarting at the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act ten years earlier, refused to sponsor an exhibit in Chicago. Falling still in the West's estimation, China was not represented on the fairgrounds proper but out on the midway as an ersatz Chinese village. Having spiraled into chaos and civil war by 1893, the coun-

[25] *Rand, McNally, and Co.'s Handbook of the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: By the company, 1893), p. 156. The quote from *Uncle Jeremiah* appears in Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 50.

try was described by some Western writers as an "empire in catalepsy," undergoing a "vivisection." One included China as one of three "rotten cultures."[26] From great empire to village, the display in 1893 stood almost metaphorically for what had happened to China in the eyes of the West by the 1890s.

With their public sanction in Chicago, Japanese objects became the vehicle through which American collectors first established Asian material as fine art, and Japanese culture became the avenue through which Americans would develop an appreciation for the whole region. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston took the lead in collecting and displaying Asian art, most importantly under the impetus of William Sturgis Bigelow and Ernest Fenollosa in the 1890s. (By contrast, the Metropolitan Museum of Art did not hire a specialist curator for Asian art until 1915.) It is surely not coincidental that Freer began his career as a collector of Asian objects in 1894 with a group of Japanese prints.

While Japanese objects were making their debut as fine art in 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition also presented the emerging discipline of anthropology to a broad public for the first time. Conceived as the scientific study of human culture, anthropology represented a new field of knowledge, growing from roots in history, archaeology, ethnology, and natural science. As the Smithsonian's Otis Mason exclaimed, "It would not be too much to say that the World's Columbian Exposition was one vast anthropological revelation." The discipline not only had its own building at the fair but was the subject of a great International Congress of Anthropology there in late August. The fair offered anthropologists an unprecedented opportunity to present their work to the public and thus to legitimate the discipline itself.[27]

Anthropologists, in part emboldened by their triumph in Chicago in 1893, set about the task of creating large museum collections. The White City gave birth directly to the Field Museum of Natural History, which, at its founding, had a large anthropological section. Simultaneously, the University of Pennsylvania had formed its own museum of anthropology and archaeology in the 1890s. The Field Museum located anthropology under the larger umbrella of natural history, but Penn's was the first major museum in the United States devoted exclusively to these fields. Both museums, and several other anthropological collections as well, included Asian objects. Chicago's 1893 World's Fair thus signaled the appreciation of Asian objects as both art and anthropology.

Art vs. Anthropology

Benjamin March's 1929 survey suggests that the distinctions made in museums between art and anthropology were not simply a matter of choosing between different kinds of objects. Both the Field Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston collected approximately the same types of objects: jade, lacquerware, sculpture, ceramics, armor, and metalwork. These objects could, apparently, serve as object lessons for both art and anthropology. However, the distinctions between those object lessons were not obvious. At a superficial level, to find art in Asian objects might mean to appreciate aesthetic or, indeed, spiritual qualities, while to see those objects anthropologically might mean to see in them illustrations of the lifeways of those who made them. In fact, the MFA's Fenollosa and Boston collector Bigelow were both sufficiently drawn to the mystery and exoticism of Japan to convert to Buddhism. And Fenollosa used his knowledge of Chinese and Japanese art to elucidate Chinese and Japanese traits for readers of the *Atlantic*, a project with decidedly anthropological-sounding overtones. Likewise, Maxwell Somerville, who donated his collection of Buddhist objects to the University of Pennsylvania's anthropology museum, took to dressing as a Buddhist monk and sitting in the midst of his collection to chat with museum visitors.[28]

Put simply, Asian objects did not fit comfortably into the frameworks used for understanding art or for defining anthropology in turn-of-the-century American museums. Anthropologists of the late nineteenth century borrowed their understanding of human culture from the theories of natural sciences. Relying on the evolutionary metaphor, many who studied human culture felt

[26] For a discussion of the Japanese and Chinese participation in the fair, and for a larger discussion of the racial dimensions of anthropology at the fair, see Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, esp. pp. 48–52. "Empire in Catalepsy," *Spectator* 80 (April 9, 1898): 501, 502; "Vivisection of China," *Atlantic* 82, no. 491 (September 1898): 329–38; "Three Rotten Cultures: Roman, Chinese and Indic," *Spectator* 82 (March 18, 1899): 375–76.

[27] Mason is quoted in Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, pp. 55–58.

[28] Ernest Fenollosa, "Chinese and Japanese Traits," *Atlantic* 69, no. 416 (June 1892): 769–74.

that all cultures, like the development of organisms from lowest to highest, went through a progression from barbarism through savagery to civilization. In part, this framework helped those in the West understand the astonishing variety of the world's other cultures—cultures they encountered with more regularity and with greater intensity through imperialist and colonialist adventures. But Western anthropology also insisted that the world's cultures be understood hierarchically and that the contemporary West represented humanity's highest cultural achievement.

When the University of Pennsylvania's museum opened its permanent quarters late in 1899, it gave architectural shape to this framework for studying humankind. Walking through the fountain courtyard of the museum and up a broad flight of steps, visitors faced two great wooden entrance doors. Above those doors two figures carved in stone hold a medallion that is inscribed "Free Museum of Science and Art." The free part of the name was easy. Philadelphia mayor Edwin Stuart traded city-owned land to the university for the promise of a museum open to the public without charge. Science and art, which presumably defined what the visitor would find behind those wooden doors, proved to be more complicated. Passing through the doors of the new building, visitors found themselves on a landing. From the landing, they could ascend to the second floor, where, according to the museum *Bulletin*, they would find artifacts from the ancient Mediterranean world and objects secured by the museum's famous expeditions to the Near East. Should visitors choose instead to go downstairs from the landing, they would discover something of a hodge-podge: a collection of objects connected with Buddhism; "ethnological objects of Asiatic origin, material from central and South America"; and "collections illustrative of the life of the Colorado cliff dwellers, and other American aborigines and collections . . . recently brought from Borneo and adjacent islands."[29]

The symbolism in the design of the museum was not subtle: from the entrance landing, one *rose* to find the civilizations of the Near East and the Mediterranean but *descended* to find Native Americans from all parts of the New World, Buddhism, and objects from the primitives of Borneo. The division between the top floor, arranged with a geographic order, and the bottom floor, arranged randomly, was the difference between what was considered to be civilized and what was considered primitive. Rome, Greece, Egypt, Sumer—all had a direct, genealogical relation to the civilization of Europe and the United States. These societies had a history, and their cultural products could thus be considered as art. Other groups—those therefore without any discernible connection to Europe and the United States—had no history, as Westerners defined the term, and their cultural products could only be studied by the new science of anthropology.

These distinctions and the hierarchies that they reinforced worked admirably well to explain the differences between Americans and the indigenous tribes they had conquered and between Europeans and the African groups they colonized. But how did the model explain the cultures of China and Japan? Where in such a museum would one expect to find the East? After all, at the turn of this century Westerners continued to view the East with an admixture of awe, condescension, curiosity, and contempt. As an anonymous reviewer put it in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1910, "No one, we suppose, will accuse the East of anything very remarkable in the way of intellectual development . . . Eastern life has very little in it of what we call intellectual, save what it has occasionally borrowed from Western sources."[30]

On the other hand, the Chinese could lay claim to a legitimate history, punctuated with dynasties, major cultural epochs, events, and all of the chronological markers that define what history means in Western terms. More than that, Chinese history stretched back continuously far beyond any society in the West; its sheer scope made Western civilization seem insignificant. Finally, Asian objects, as records of this long history, demonstrated a level of technical and aesthetic accomplishment that made much of Western art seem crude (fig. 5).

In this way, China and Japan unsettled the easy dichotomies that formed the foundational core of early anthropology—dichotomies between those groups that had a proper history and those that had only an anthropological culture. Neither China nor Japan formed part of the Western lineage, and yet they clearly did not belong comfortably in the same category as the cultures

[29] *Bulletin of the Free Museum of Science and Art* (June 1899): 71; see also University of Pennsylvania Alumni Register (January 1900), pp. 4, 5, 7, for another description of the original layout of the museum.

[30] "Eastern Art and Western Critics," *Edinburgh Review* 212, no. 434 (October 1910): 456.

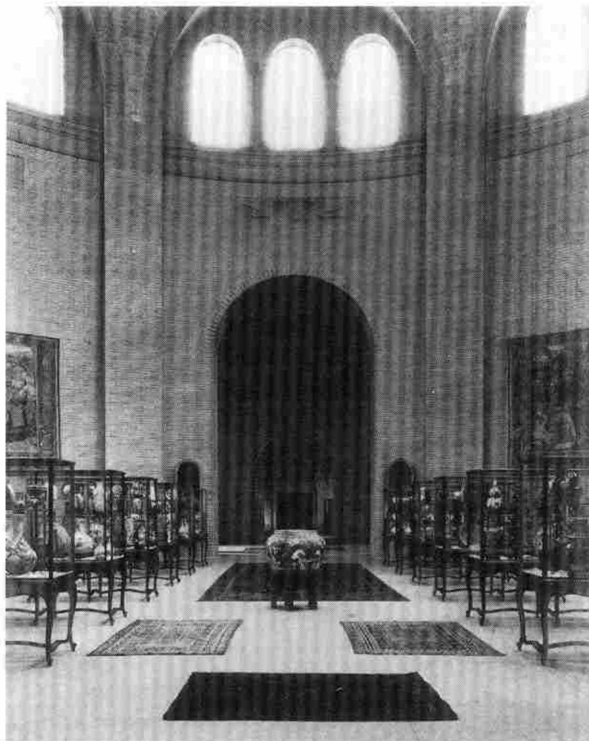

Fig. 5. Opening exhibit of Chinese porcelains and European tapestries, Harrison Hall rotunda, University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia, 1916. (University of Pennsylvania Museum, neg. no. 54-140751; Photo, Charles R. Sheeler.)

from Borneo. Both societies struck Westerners as existing within the chronological bounds of history and in the timelessness of culture—what the reviewer of Dunn's museum had, years earlier, called the "unchanging" Chinese. Both produced objects of art and science. Viewing Asian objects through an anthropological lens did not adequately solve the categorical problems first posed by Dunn's museum.[31]

Fine Art Triumphant

In 1915 Laurence Binyon authored "The Art of Asia," which appeared in *Atlantic Monthly:* "The art of Asia, with its revelation of so rich a world of beauty hidden so long from Western eyes, has in quite recent years assumed more and more of importance, and attracts new students and new lovers every day. It is a vast subject, as vast almost as the art of Europe." By the early years of the twentieth century, then, the discourse about Asian objects had shifted significantly since the days of Dunn. Asians were now seen as being capable of producing "beauty" and were now being given credit for an art history almost comparable in its scope and breadth with that of Europe. Binyon at one point compares Chinese painting with that of "rather exceptional artists like Botticelli." By this time, several American museums of fine art were collecting and displaying Asian objects as art. Perhaps the most dramatic institutional manifestation of this shift was the creation of the Freer Gallery in Washington (fig. 6). As Grace Dunham Guest, assistant curator at the gallery in 1927, stated in a series of articles for the *United States Daily,* "It is as a museum of Oriental art that the Freer Gallery takes its place among the few centers devoted to scholarly research in that field."[32]

Donated to the nation by Charles Freer in 1906 (after some distasteful squabbling), the Freer collection opened finally to the public in 1923 and signaled the ultimate acceptance of Asian objects into the category of fine art (fig. 7). The only collection to rival it was at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. According to journalist Agnes Meyer, the Freer "was the only place in the world where the entire development of Chinese pictorial design may be studied." Meyer also insisted, evincing a nationalistic pride born of years of feeling culturally inferior to Europe, that "if European scholars must now come to America to see the finest examples of Chinese painting, Chinese jades and bronzes" it was because of Freer.

Needless to say, the location of Asian objects more squarely in the category of fine art was not inevitable, nor was it complete. To the suggestion that Freer's gift might be used as the core of a new, national museum of art, Charles Moore, who was involved in redesigning the Mall, wrote dismissively to President Theodore Roosevelt: "Mr. Freer's collection is a special one. It can have no possible relation to such a general and indeterminate thing as a National Art Gallery."[33]

[31] "Nathan Dunn's Chinese Collection," p. 391.

[32] Laurence Binyon, "The Art of Asia," *Atlantic Monthly* 116, no. 3 (September 1915): 348. Grace Dunham Guest, "Collection of American and Oriental Art Exhibited at the Freer Gallery in Washington," *United States Daily*, July 8, 1927.

[33] Agnes Meyer, "The Charles L. Freer Collection," *The Arts* 12, no. 2 (August 1927): 76–78. On the creation of the museum and negotiations with Samuel Pierpont Langley of the Smithsonian, see Charles Lang Freer to Samuel Pierpont Langley, January 18, 1904, correspondence file "Gift to Nation, 1902, 1904, 1905," Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Freer Archives). Charles

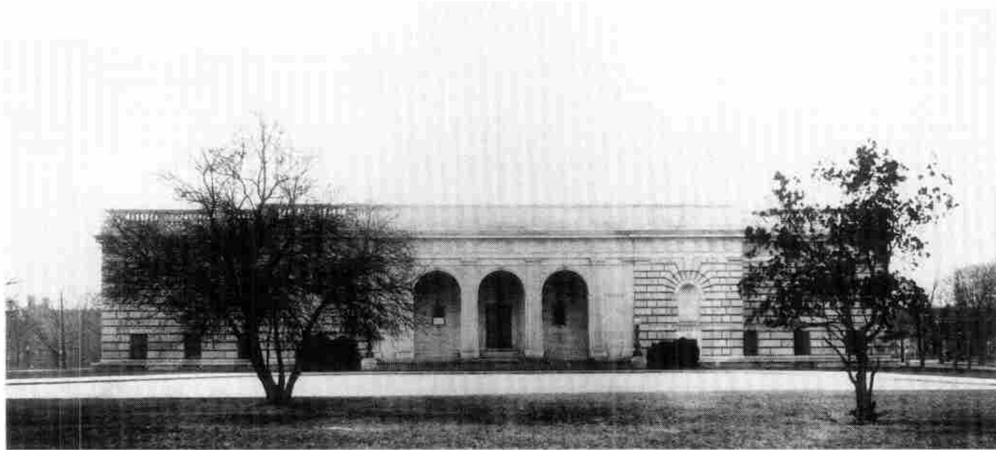

Fig. 6. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., ca. 1923. (Freer Gallery of Art.) The Freer Gallery, shown here just after it opened in 1923, gave Asian art a prominent place in the nation's cultural landscape.

However, despite such opinions, Asian art was being viewed more favorably.

The aesthetic movement that flourished in the United States in the 1880s and 1890s was an important point of entry for Asian objects into the American artistic consciousness. In 1882 Oscar Wilde made a celebrated tour of the country preaching the gospel of aesthetics to enthusiastic crowds. Enlisting artists such as John La Farge, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and Candace Wheeler, American aesthetes sought to spread beauty and art throughout the land, hoping that its effects would soften the edges of a hardened, industrial nation. James Abbott McNeill Whistler was a towering figure in the movement, and his admiration for Japanese art was tremendously influential. In fact, it may be fair to say that Whistler was among the first Western artists to incorporate Japanese motifs and elements into his work. Following Whistler's lead, a handful of aesthetes—Fenollosa and Freer prominent among them—shaped a discourse that insisted on seeing Asian objects as art. As Jeffrey Nunokawa has stated about this cultural moment, "In an early instance of Japanese exceptionalism the land of the rising sun . . . was apprehended by Western eyes as a palace of art."[34]

Among other things, these scholars and aesthetes created around Asian art the same scholarly apparatus that had developed around Western art in the nineteenth century. As Binyon sketched it, Japanese and Chinese painting "has developed within itself movements, corresponding to the movements in Western painting, and where a surprising amount of work that is centuries old seems modern in feeling and contemporary with ourselves." As I have suggested, the lines around the category of art were drawn in the nineteenth century to exclude Asian cultural production. Now Binyon suggested that those lines could be straightened and drawn parallel. Such collectors, critics, and aesthetes also helped to change the political context for discussing China and Japan. Japan could more easily be seen by the West as progressive because of its aggressive and successful campaigns of modernization. China, as we have already noted, languished in civil war and, therefore, in the estimation of the West at the turn of the century. Art appreciators, however, reminded Western readers that Japan owed a great cultural debt to China, and for this reason, if for no other, China was worthy of a cultural reappraisal. A writer for the *North American Review* could casually toss off that "nobody ever claimed for the Japanese originality of thought or

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Moore to Theodore Roosevelt, November 1, 1905, correspondence file "Gift to Nation, 1902, 1904, 1905." Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Archives.

[34] Mary Warner Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). On Whistler and Japanese motifs, see Clay Lancaster, *The Japanese Influence in America* (New York: Walton H. Rawls, 1963), p. 34. Jeffrey Nunokawa, "Oscar Wilde in Japan: Aestheticism, Orientalism, and the Derealization of the Homosexual," *positions* 2 (1994): 51. For a discussion of Freer's enthusiasm for aestheticism, see Thomas Lawton and Linda Merrill, *Freer: A Legacy of Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993). For a larger discussion of the movement and its relation to consumer culture, see Yount, "Give the People What They Want."

Fig. 7. Gallery space, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., ca. 1923. (Freer Gallery of Art.)

religiosity of temper." For these writers, China could play Greece to Japan's Rome in the cultural construction of the West. "In a sense," wrote Binyon, "Japan owes everything to China."[35]

Beyond rescuing the reputations of Asian civilizations in the eyes of the West, Western Asiaphiles had another agenda that was better served by locating objects in the category of art rather than in anthropology. Implicit in the intellectual constructions of anthropologists was a stress on difference and distance. By studying exotic and primitive cultures and by putting those cultures on display for the public in museums, anthropologists underscored a sense of otherness and the notion that evolutionary progress had brought the West a great distance from its primitive origins. These stresses were, as we have suggested earlier, part of what made it difficult to place China and Japan within anthropological frameworks.

Those who promoted Asian objects as art wanted quite explicitly to stress sameness, commonality, and especially cultural cross-fertilization. Fenollosa was "an outspoken advocate of an East-West synthesis in the arts." His ideas about the connections between East and West shaped the way Freer organized his collection. Freer seems to have developed an enthusiasm for Eastern thought and culture and to have believed that elements of both could be beneficial to the West. As Meyer wrote, Freer "derived boundless happiness from his contact with Oriental lore" and "began to discover profound value for our turbulent era in the calm acceptance of the world which the Chinese sages possessed." His "definite ambition," she continued, was "to bring to the Occident and particularly to Americans the

[35] Binyon, "Art of Asia," pp. 359, 357. "New Books Reviewed," *North American Review* 197, no. 689 (April 1913): 567.

great philosophical, moral and aesthetic contributions which he discerned in their noble art traditions."[36] Son of the bustling industrial city of Detroit, Freer offered the timeless wisdom and calm of the East as an antidote to the hurly-burly of American life.

Freer did not necessarily view his assemblage as one primarily of Asian art. By the time he donated it to the nation, it was probably most notable for its group of works by Whistler, who was already an art-world celebrity. When the gallery was under construction, newspaper readers kept up with events through stories with headlines such as "Nation is Heir to Works of Whistler's Genius" and "The Freer Gallery Opens with Important Whistler Collection." In fact, much of the Chinese material in Freer's collection was added after Whistler's death in 1903, as if Freer used those objects to fill out the collection of paintings by his now-dead friend. Meyer, writing in 1927, just four years after the museum opened, claimed that the whole museum was "a memorial to the great friendship which existed between these two men, a memorial such as no painter and but few other human beings have ever been given." According to scholar Linda Merrill, "The Asian objects were meant to enhance the Whistlers."[37]

The significance of Freer's collection and the museum he gave to the nation then may not be that it signaled the elevation of Asian objects to the lofty of position of fine art equivalent to European painting. Rather, his purpose seems to have been to use Asian objects as a way of demonstrating a fundamental aesthetic connection among a handful of American painters—Whistler first and foremost, Dwight William Tryon, Thomas Wilmer Dewing, and Abbott Handerson Thayer secondarily—and the art of Asia. Freer always saw his collection "as constituting a harmonious whole." More than that, he may have surrounded his paintings with Asian objects as a way of giving the former a legitimacy and a pedigree of sorts. In this sense, his attraction to Asian art bears a resemblance to the fascination European modernists had for the primitive sculptures of Africa in the early years of the twentieth century. In both cases, non-Western artistic traditions served not only as the source of artistic inspiration—Japanese paintings for Whistler, African masks for Picasso—but to give definition to modernist aesthetics. And in both cases the definitions that emerged from the connection to non-Western traditions traded on a set of long-held stereotypes about those other cultures. Picasso's modernism was seen to be infused with the raw energy associated with the primitive; for Freer, modernism meant drawing on the harmonies, mysteries, and timeless qualities seen to be at the heart of the East. As Binyon observed: "We feel no veiling interval of time between the most typical Chinese paintings of a thousand years ago and ourselves. Of how much European art can we say this? How modern in spirit are the Chinese paintings."[38]

By displaying Whistler's paintings and Asian objects together, Freer demonstrated that Whistler's painting, whatever its relations to the art historical traditions of the West, was rooted in the history of art and thought in the East. As Freer told Smithsonian secretary Samuel Pierpont Langley in a letter, "My great desire has been to unite modern work with masterpieces of high civilization harmonious in spiritual and physical suggestion, having power to broaden aesthetic culture and the grace to elevate the human mind."[39] Freer's collection illustrated Binyon's point about the modernity of ancient Asian traditions and demonstrated that Whistler had connected with these spirits.

Freer used his museum to define a certain kind of modernism—one where Western painting, tired and hackneyed by the nineteenth century, would be reinvigorated through contact and inspiration from Asia. According to Fenollosa, the Freer collection "illustrates the most conspicuous fact in the history of art, that the two great streams of European and Asiatic practice, held apart for so many thousand years, have . . . been brought together in a fertile and final union." In Fenollosa's estimation, nineteenth-century painters (the Barbizon School, the impressionists) had made only a "superficial and unsystematic study" of Asian art; the deeper truths to be learned by students following Freer's lead might well help develop a "new canon to supplant our gray, academic traditions."[40]

[36] On Fenollosa, see Julia Meech, "Collecting Japanese Art in America," in Julia Meech and Gabriel Weisberg, *Japonisme Comes to America: The Japanese Impact on Graphic Arts, 1876–1925* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 47. Meyer, "Charles L. Freer Collection," pp. 69, 81–82.

[37] *Washington Intelligencer*, October 26, 1919; *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 5, 1923. Meyer, "Charles L. Freer Collection," p. 67. Linda Merrill, ed., *With Kindest Regards: The Correspondence of Charles Lang Freer and James McNeill Whistler, 1890–1903* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), p. 42.

[38] Freer to Langley, January 18, 1904, Freer Archives. Binyon, "Art of Asia," p. 354.

[39] Freer to Langley, December 27, 1904, Freer Archives.

[40] Ernest Fenollosa, "The Collection of Mr. Charles L. Freer," *Pacific Era* 1, no. 2 (November 1907): 57–66.

At the Freer, Asian art could be appreciated on its own terms, but that was not apparently what Freer intended primarily. Rather, seen as a context for contemporary American paintings, it pointed the way for a new artistic movement, embodying the essential truths of both East and West. His solution to the problem of how to categorize Asian objects was in fact less a solution to the larger question than it was an idiosyncratic way of institutionalizing a particular vision of American art using a particular vision of Asia.

As fine art museums took over the primary role of exhibiting Asian objects to the American public, the scholarly work of studying these objects moved, in the twentieth century, to departments of art history. There, Chinese and Japanese cultural production are taught, studied, and therefore legitimated, in the same institutional context as Western painting and sculpture. With the exception of archaeological remains, the study of Chinese and Japanese material culture is now conducted largely by art historians.

That fine art won the day over anthropology in the debate over where to place Asian objects reflects only partly a resolution to the categorical debate on-going since the 1830s. It reflects as well anthropology's movement away from the study of objects altogether. As a discipline, anthropology spent its formative years in museums and grew by collecting and studying objects. Most of the prominent ethnologists/anthropologists in the last quarter of the nineteenth century—Franz Boas, Frederick Putnam, Stewart Culin, to name three—had connections to museums. In those museums they shaped the study of an anthropology that was dependent on objects.

By the first quarter of the twentieth century, however, anthropology was leaving its museum nest and roosting more and more in university departments, particularly under the influence of Boas. By the First World War, according to Curtis Hinsley, the concerns of museums and academic departments had drifted far enough apart to make interactions between them "rare." By 1920 roughly half of the professional anthropologists in the United States made their institutional home in college and university departments, and that was the direction in which the traffic would continue to flow. In short, anthropologists ceased to be much interested in objects of any kind.[41]

Further, neither China nor Japan proved to be fertile anthropological fields in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, none of the papers published from the 1893 anthropological congress at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago dealt with Asia. Perhaps because neither China nor Japan existed in direct colonial relationship to a Western power at this time or perhaps because early anthropologists preferred to study cultures that were more easily and recognizably primitive, Western anthropologists did not much venture into the Asian field.

Thus as Asian objects became more thoroughly the province of art museums and art history departments, they found their homes there not necessarily because those places were intellectually more hospitable but because anthropologists had ceded them and moved on to other concerns. And as a consequence, as Clunas has noted, objects that once were seen to embody anthropological information were now discussed in terms of "influences and trends": "Objects transferred from the domain of 'ethnography' to that of 'art' typically find diachronic links privileged at the expense of connections with others that have failed to make the transition." By the First World War, even Penn's anthropology museum conceded that its Asian objects were no longer in the category of anthropological "science" but had jumped across the divide into the realm of art. Echoing the ideas of Freer and other aesthetes, authors of a new handbook of oriental art told visitors that schools of Asian art were "destined to exert a steadily growing influence upon the esthetic ideals of Occidental lands." And it concluded, if the point needed making, "It is for this eminently practical reason, as well as for its own intrinsic interest, that the field of Oriental art is so important to us."[42]

And yet the fit of Asian objects into the category of art, defined as it originally was in specifically

[41] As long ago as 1954 the Wenner-Gren Foundation sponsored a conference at the University of Pennsylvania Museum to consider the place of museums in the history and future of American anthropology; see Daniel Collier and Harry Tschopik, "The Role of Museums in American Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 5 (October 1954): 768–79. For more on the relationship between anthropology and museums, see Curtis Hinsley, "The Museum Origins of Harvard Anthropology," in Clark Elliott and Margaret Rossiter, eds., *Science at Harvard University: Historical Perspectives* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1992), p. 121; George Stocking, "Philanthropoids and Vanishing Cultures: Rockefeller Funding and the End of the Museum Era in Anglo-American Anthropology," in George Stocking, ed., *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life*, chap. 3. On Boas's museum career, see Ira Jacknis, "Franz Boas and Exhibits: On the Limitations of the Museum Method of Anthropology," in Stocking, *Objects and Others*, pp. 75–111.

[42] Clunas, "Oriental Antiquities," p. 419. *Handbook, Section of Oriental Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1917), p. 3.

Western terms, is by no means snug. In the twentieth century, as comprehensive art museums increased their holdings of Asian objects, they tried to arrange them into their own evolutionary display strategies. Depending on an individual museum's holdings, objects are usually arranged so that visitors can follow the progressive development of art from the ancient Mediterranean (Egypt, Greece, Rome) through medieval Europe, the Renaissance and baroque periods, and so on, concluding with impressionism, post-impressionism, and modernism. The Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), which opened in 1928, may best exemplify this model. As designed by director Fiske Kimball, the museum was to showcase an evolutionary understanding of art history created by walking on a "main street" through the galleries. This "Pageant of Art" would illustrate "European art from the time of Christ onward to the most vitally modern of contemporary work, or, in Asia, from the austere beginnings in India and China down to the last flowering of the delicate art of Japan," giving visitors "a vivid panoramic history of the art of all ages." The evolutionary metaphor, according to Kimball, stood behind this method of organization, which complemented the period rooms. "It seems to me that the evolutionary order, and the placing together of all products of a single civilization and art, reinforcing one another by their cumulative effect, is interesting and advantageous."[43]

Such a neat and comprehensible narrative enables visitors to walk through the history of art. But once again, in museum practice, Asian art tends to confound this arrangement. Asian art cannot necessarily be placed into the same chronological, formal, or stylistic categories used to organize Western art. It also does not necessarily fit into the same categories of media. Ceramics are generally viewed as decorative art when made in the West but as high art when produced in Asia.[44] While Kimball included Asian art in his evolutionary vision, in fact, the Asian galleries at the PMA sit at the end of one wing, thematically disconnected from the rest of the collection. In art museums of the late twentieth century, it was still not always clear where to find the East.

By the time March published his survey in 1929, art had won the debate. Although anthropological collections still contained significant numbers of important objects, art museums became the primary home for Asian sculpture, ceramics, jade, and the like. In the foreword to March's book, E. C. Carter was quite clear about the political implications of this victory: "Our museums, in holding up before the American people a true picture of the life, the art, and the techniques of the orient, are fulfilling an educational purpose much needed in our day by providing 'a reminder that these orientals are no sinister barbarians but a race founded in deep wisdom and culture.' " He went on to commend American art museums for encouraging "a sympathy . . . toward the oldest of living civilizations."[45]

The institutional decision to place Asian objects in art museums reflected an intellectual shift in the way Americans viewed the cultures that produced those objects. By conferring the status of fine art on the objects, American museums thus elevated Asian culture and helped shape a popular view of Asia that, while surely not equivalent to that in the West, was more elevated than that of the rest of the world's non-Western people.

Such were the stakes in the contest between art and anthropology. To be associated with art meant wisdom and culture, for which the American public ought to have a sympathy. These were the virtues that anthropology could not necessarily bestow upon the creators of these objects. But neither category of knowledge could comfortably embrace Asian cultural production. If an anthropological understanding did not do justice to the civilizations of the East, then an art historical system of meaning that stressed aesthetic, spiritual, and formal qualities did not, perhaps, leave room for an understanding of the people and social forces that created the objects on display. In the end, art became an effective way of transforming the Chinese and Japanese from the barbarians of the nineteenth century to civilized, if still exotic, players on the world stage by the end of the twentieth.

[43] I generalize here. On the one hand, many small art museums consist largely of single collections, reflecting the taste and idiosyncrasies of the collector. On the other hand, the Metropolitan coalesced as a collection of collections. "Philadelphia's Great Art Museum," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 29, 1927; "New Museum Plan is Pageant of Art," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 11, 1927. Fiske Kimball, "Museum Values," *American Magazine of Art* 19, no. 9 (September 1928): 480–82. Kimball Collection, PMA Archives. The completion of Kimball's "main street" had to wait until the 1990s. For a variety of reasons, legal and otherwise, it was only then that the PMA could undertake a major reinstallation of its holdings and complete the walk.

[44] At the new art museum in Shanghai, objects are arranged so that medium is privileged over chronology or geography. The major galleries are organized by ceramics, jade, lacquer, painting, and so on.

[45] Carter is quoted in March, *China and Japan*, pp. v–vi.