

FUNG PING SHAN MUSEUM :

AN INSIDE VIEW

. By Beatrice Leung .

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. MICHAEL LAU,
THE CURATOR OF FUNG PING SHAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

TRIPOD: Dr. Michael Lau, how long have you been in charge of the Fung Ping Shan Museum?

DR. LAU: For more than twenty years.

TRIPOD: Can you give us some of the history of the Museum and its most recent developments?

DR. LAU: The Museum was founded thirty years ago by Professor Drake (林仰山) of the Chinese Department at the University of Hong Kong. He was a great lover of Chinese art and culture. After Professor Drake retired, it became the custom that his successor in the University's Chinese Department automatically became the director of the Museum as well.

In 1978, the status of the Museum was elevated from a departmental level to an independent institute under direct management by the University Authority. From that time on, the Museum has had more freedom to develop.

Since its establishment until now, the Museum's sole financial support has been from the University. Our budget covers administrative expenses, but there are no funds available for purchasing art works for display purposes. Nor do we receive assistance from any foundation. Fortunately, donations of items from concerned people are not lacking. From time to time they pass on to us their valuable collections. This gradual but steady accumulation of art works has made this Museum's present collection one of considerable scale and value.

Recent trends in our Museum's management have transformed it from



The
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a passive storage house of ancient artifacts to an active educational institute. Through selective displays of art objects, our visitors are led to a study of the history and culture of ancient times. Recently, we have also begun to sponsor cultural and educational activities with the purpose of arousing the interest of our visitors to a deeper investigation of the times, peoples and issues related to the articles themselves. This has become the main purpose for all our displays be they permanent or the temporary exhibitions.

Chinese porcelains, bronze, carvings, calligraphy and paintings make up the main items of our permanent exhibitions. The Museum has a very rich and complete collection of Chinese porcelains. We also have an excellent representation of prominent Chinese bronze pieces from the Shang and Chow Dynasties as well as bronze mirrors from every historical period, and an outstanding collection of bronze Nestorian Crosses. We try to make the best use possible of these valuable items by keeping them on permanent exhibition.

TRIPOD: How often are your special exhibitions held?

DR. LAU: Every other year we hold a large scale exhibition featuring the works of local painters. Each exhibition represents a milestone

in the history of art in Hong Kong. The general trends of Hong Kong's artistic development can be traced through observing the standards and tastes represented in each exhibition. We are also featuring bi-annual exhibitions of the ceramic work of local artists. The standard of creativity is high, and interest in ceramics on the local level is heightened by what can be learned from the displayed works of our contemporary ceramic artists.

TRIPOD: What relationship do you have with China and foreign countries?

DR. LAU: We work in close co-operation with mainland China and foreign countries, especially in recent years. In 1979, an "Exhibition of Siwan Wares" was held in our Museum. This exhibition had the largest number of items of Siwan ceramic wares ever to be displayed outside China. It was the first time that China consented to exhibit these treasures outside the mainland. In 1981 "An Exhibition of Ceramic Finds From Ancient Kilns in China" was highly acclaimed for its outstanding academic value. These archaeological discoveries not only pinpointed the actual location of the ancient kilns but also permitted verification, from soil depth, of the time of origin. This exhibition was first held in the United Kingdom at the request of the former British Ambassador to China, Sir John Eddis. It was made possible through negotiations between China and the British Museum and Oxford University. This remarkable exhibition was the first of its kind held outside China. On the return journey, a brief stop was made in Hong Kong and our Museum was granted permission to put these priceless objects on display.

TRIPOD: What effect did these two exhibitions have locally in Hong Kong?

DR. LAU: It is difficult to measure the direct impact over a period of time of the two exhibitions. But immediately after the "Exhibition of Siwan Wares" the price of Siwan wares on the local market went up considerably. It reflected an aroused interest in Siwan wares among our local people and has led more and more people to become collectors of Siwan artifacts. Would you not say that this was a positive stimulus?

We also understand that the "Exhibition of Ceramic Finds From Ancient Kilns in China" generated much interest in academic circles. The display was greatly appreciated not only by collectors of Chinese ceramics and porcelain but also by scholars. Because the date and place of origin of each piece is done with great accuracy, it offers hints

and clues to both collectors and scholars in solving related historical problems. Therefore, it can be said that this exhibition has had a deep and positive influence among collectors and scholars.

TRIPOD: The special commemorative publication of Siwan Wares published by the Fung Ping Shan Museum in 1980 for this occasion has an article on "A Study of the Connection Between the Ancient Kilns at Foshan-Siwan and Yangjiang - Siwan" written by the staff of Guangdong Museum. Some ideas are expressed in revolutionary and political terms. Are there political influences to be found in the art of Siwan ceramic making?

DR. LAU: Throughout the history of Siwan ceramics, there have been times when artisans were forbidden to make statues of a religious nature such as figures of Buddha and Kun Yin. There have been times when artists were ordered to concentrate on making statues of national heroes -- peasants, soldiers etc. -- and works based on the stories of national heroes. There were also times when they were left free to create statues of the traditional figures from folklore and history such as Li Pao, Du Fu and the Three Heroes in Turmoil (風塵三俠). If one traces this kind of development, one might discover that different kinds of figures were fashionable in the ceramic art of different ages. This has been the case in recent times when politics saturated all of Chinese life, and ceramic art had to follow the direction of local Communist Party Committee leaders. Artisans had to copy ready-made "models", and, consequently, creativity disappeared. Only statues of national heroes remained. This practice, of course, placed certain limitations on creativity in ceramic art. When the political tide ebbed, artisans soon returned to the policy of letting 'a hundred flowers bloom'. This can be clearly seen in the post-Cultural Revolution Period when the kilns again began turning out figures from an unbelievable variety of sources, even those figures in folk religion such as the popular characters of The Journey to the West (西遊記), the Pig and the Monkey King. At present there exists a more healthy atmosphere for artistic creativity because the artist's main concern is again focused on his art alone and he is free to choose his own themes.

TRIPOD: Does the political influence act as a stimulus or does it suffocate artistic creativity in ceramic art?

DR. LAU: In ceramic art, politics can work both ways. Artistic development can be easily suffocated when political demands are too strong. But if the muse of the artist matches well a certain political line, the quality of his artistic work will not be hampered by its

political subject. For example, if an artist was commissioned to create a bust of Chairman Mao, the fact that just because Mao is the main theme would not jeopardize the artistic value of the work. On the other hand, if political demands are restrictive, and artists are expected to create not from personal inspiration but only from political expediency, their creative energies would then be suffocated, and a constant repetition of "models" would replace creativity. Generally speaking, whether politics stimulates or suffocates ceramic art creativity, depends very much on an individual artist, and no sweeping statements can be made.

TRIPOD: Has the Museum recently offered any exhibition on the works of contemporary Chinese painters?

DR. LAU: We've had an exhibition of the works of Li Xiong Cai, and a joint exhibition of four artists of the Southern Chinese School. These painters are: Li Xiong Cai Guan Shanyue, Yang Shenseh and Zhao Shaoang.

TRIPOD: A critic has remarked on the recent works of contemporary mainland Chinese painters exhibited in Hong Kong that much of the work seems like imitation, one artist copying another or copying from previous works. He said that they lack the expression of sentiments and concerns of most of the Chinese people. In these paintings, there is no evidence of questions which must be pondered by a race of people after a period of intensive suffering. Would you find this criticism also representative of the works displayed at your Museum?

DR. LAU: The works displayed at our Museum are the works of the Southern Chinese School which mostly depict themes of nature. The ways of treating these themes vary from one artist to another. Since I, myself, am not able to devote as much time as I would like to a close study of the exhibitions, I do not feel competent to judge whether there is such a tendency in the Chinese paintings displayed in Hong Kong. Actually, Chinese painting portrays very many different kinds of interior feelings. Take traditional Chinese paintings for example, the scenery and figures portrayed in these paintings, to a certain degree, are the revelation of the painter's world-view. If more critical imaginative and interpretative skills are exercised, the mentality of the painter can be evoked and revealed. It is possible for the painter to portray many conflicts and a variety of subtle attitudes that well might pass unnoticed when viewed by the untrained eye. Or it well may be that a work in itself is really very shallow in the expression of deep thought and sentiments as the critic you mentioned seems to indicate. Again, the judgement must be made on individual paintings; no generalisations can be made.



TRIPOD: Your Museum has a collection of nearly one thousand pieces of bronze Nestorian Crosses making it the largest collection in the world. Could you tell us something about this treasure?

DR. LAU: Fifty years ago, Mr. F. A. Nixon, the English Postmaster in Beijing, came across some bronze Nestorian Crosses which interested him so much that he started buying all the bronze crosses of this kind that he could find. His collection of over nine hundred bronze Nestorian Crosses became the largest in the world. When the collection came to Hong Kong, it was bought by a member of the Li Hysan family who presented it to the Museum as a gift.

From old records, it was understood that the places of excavation were near Baotou of Nei Monggol. But no one specific locale could be found. It is possible that they were dug up from many different places. The majority of the collection consists of Nestorian Crosses, while some of them might not share the same religious significance. One might say that identifying the exact source of this collection poses many questions for further research. It is known that during the Tang and Yuan Dynasties, Nestorian Christianity was quite widespread in China. There is evidence that these bronze crosses dating from the Yuan Dynasty had some direct connection with Nestorians. But there remain many problems yet to be solved. While these bronze crosses are from the Yuan

Dynasty, are there also bronze Nestorian Crosses from the Tang period? The usage of these crosses is also a riddle awaiting an answer. At the back of each cross there is a button-like addition thought to be used for the purpose of fixing it to another object. What are these objects to which the Nestorians fixed their crosses? The patterns and designs carved on the crosses seem to indicate that not every cross is directly connected to the Nestorian religion. For example, one design has the shape of a pipa (琵琶), which has little relation to Nestorian Christianity. The place of discovery is around Baotou in Northern China. One notes that the Nestorians came to China through Asia Minor along the famous Silk Road, the Ancient Northern Corridor, and yet there is no report from museums situated along this route of finding similar kinds of bronze crosses. This is another puzzle for historians and archaeologists to unravel.

TRIPOD: Are there any historians or archaeologists doing research on these crosses at present?

DR. LAU: The question of the bronze crosses came up when I had the opportunity to meet with curators on Mainland China. All of them replied that they had not seen our present collection. It was mentioned that some could be found in the Shanghai Museum. I have also been informed that a Mr. Brown, an American in New Jersey, has a collection of over six hundred pieces. It has not come to my notice, however, that any kind of specific research work related to these crosses is being carried out at this time. There is ample evidence that these bronze crosses have been definitely influenced by Nestorian teaching. Dualism was a fundamental doctrine of Nestorianism. The crosses have innumerable examples of duality in their patterns and designs; for example, birds with two heads as well as paired birds. Detailed materials on these bronze Nestorian crosses has yet to be published. We have each of them on film as a preparatory step to such further study. We are hoping that current studies of the art of the Middle East during the 13th and the 14th centuries might offer some hints and clues for resolving some of the riddles. Our present collection is certainly a valuable resource for scholars working in this field.

TRIPOD: We thank you, Dr. Lau, for taking this time out of your busy schedule to allow us and our readers to come to a greater appreciation of the valuable service offered by the Fung Ping Shan Museum to the community of Hong Kong.