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Essay: Old China Hands

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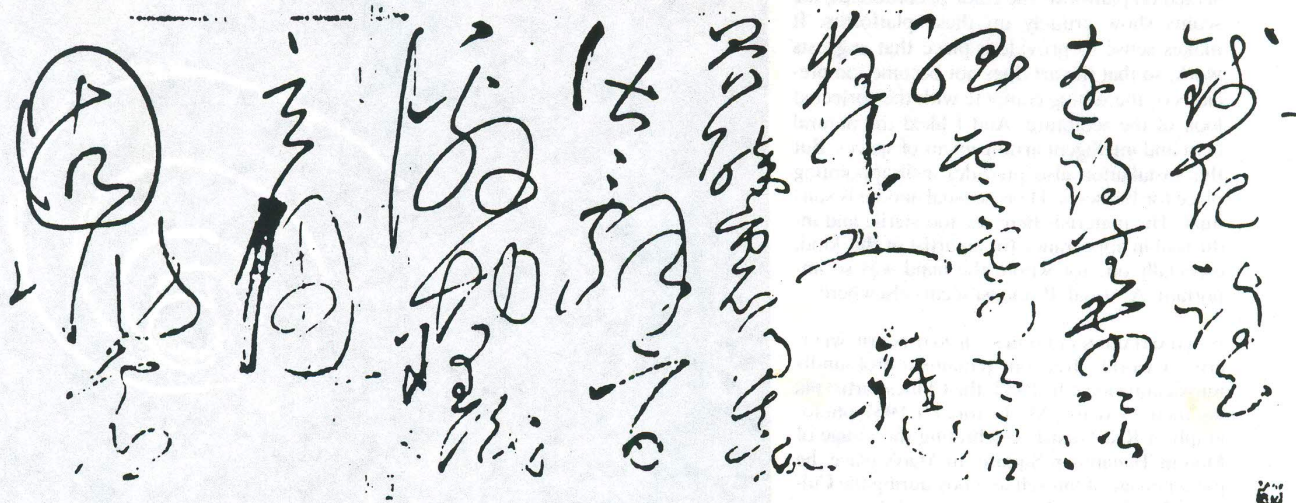
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ART MARK STEVENS

Old China Hands

Amid roiling conflicts in the Taiwan Strait comes the Met's "Splendors of Imperial China," a magnificent reminder of a pre-liberation nation.



An inspired autobiographical essay written by Huai-su, a monk and a tippler, in A.D. 777.

IMAGINE SENDING A SHOW TO CHINA CALLED "Splendors of Europe" that included 500 great works, ranging from an Etruscan sarcophagus to a Velázquez portrait. The show would be both a delight and an absurdity, too large and not large enough, equally a recognition of supreme achievement and a scholar's skate across history. Something similar is true of *Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures From the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, which displays nearly 450 works ranging in date from the Neolithic period through the eighteenth century. You could well find yourself reluctant to linger for fifteen minutes over a sublime piece of early calligraphy when you know that you still have another millennium to go.

Yet this exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum contains so many great works of art, of such visual power and serious aesthetic interest, that it renders any complaint foolish. Moreover, Chinese culture has a whispering continuity over the centuries that Western culture lacks, so that artists separated by 2,000 years may almost seem to be village friends; there is an odd but exhilarating intimacy a show of this scale can, paradoxically, convey. Of course, no review can possibly take the measure of Chinese art through the millennia, and I won't try. The exhibition comes with two catalogues, one a quick study, the other a large and handsome work of scholarship.

But the exhibition also has a historical poignancy that is rich, dark, and haunting—and worth thinking about. China today is much in the news, as Beijing fires missiles into the water off Taiwan. And it will be increasingly in the news as a society of more than 1 billion people asserts itself and, quite possibly, comes

to dominate the next century. In a variety of ways, laying out these great works of classical Chinese culture—"like a patient upon the table," said a wry Asian friend of mine—illuminates some of the most painful and important cultural fissures that now cut across, divide, and disturb the world.

To begin with, the collection of the National Palace Museum symbolizes China's cultural patrimony and embodies, in a vivid and ongoing way, the fraught question "Who and what is China?" Three times in the twentieth century, the collection has undergone a profound change of circumstance, as if in confused answer to that question. Composed mainly of the imperial holdings of the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1911), it was finally opened to the public in the years following the revolution of 1911. (In 1913, one of J. P. Morgan's partners began negotiations with the imperial family to purchase the core of the collection, but Morgan, then president of the Met, where presumably the works would have been housed, died before the deal went through.) Then the Japanese invasion of China in 1931 led to more than a decade of desperate and heroic efforts to save the art from destruction. The collection was often moved—escaping by just a day, for example, the infamous "Rape of Nanking" in 1937.

During the Chinese civil war, the Nationalists had no intention of letting this collection fall into the hands of the Communists: They took most of it with them to Taiwan in 4,000 crates. The implication was that they, rather than the mainland rulers, possessed the true spirit of China. Not surprisingly, Beijing does not now believe the collection belongs in Taipei. Without the ongoing hatred between Beijing and Taiwan, in fact,

this show would probably not have come to the United States, for it serves as a political card that Taiwan can play to irritate Beijing and curry favor here. (And even in Taiwan, protests have been staged against having the show travel to the U.S., lest Clinton then proceed to hand it back to the mainland.)

How grotesque, finally, that a collection that represents the subtle genius of a civilization, one particularly rich in philosophical musings about the ultimate meaning of existence, should have been subjected to this dark and tortuous history. How pathetic that the mainland Chinese—for whatever reason—can still not see these great paintings, works of calligraphy, bronze vessels, and exquisite porcelain vases. Thus a collection that embodies the inner cohesion of Chinese culture becomes a symbol of division.

The collection is just as telling as an illustration of the fissures between East and West. It comes to New York as an important survey of Chinese art, with a worthy academic purpose. This, of course, is how we pretend to bridge cultures: We learn our Mings and Sungs. We act responsible, authoritative, in control. That is our way. If we were truly interested in entering into the spirit of Chinese art, however, we might respectfully emphasize the imposing edifice of learning a little less—and an attitude of serious play a little more. We might learn *and* unlearn.

The great Chinese sages, after all, almost invariably emphasize the folly of trying to possess the world through the illusion of knowledge. They don't disparage learning, of course, but understand its place. Nothing is more elegant—philosophically elegant—than the way a great Chinese painter or calligrapher, having spent arduous years mastering his art, will momentarily let his brush drag awkwardly, lest his art become pretty with pride.

One of the greatest artists in the show, for example, is an eighth-century Buddhist monk named Huai-su. His line is as alive as any in art. In his calligraphy, you cannot distinguish freedom from control, learning from inspiration, man from nature. "Good calligraphy," he said, "is like a flock of birds darting out from trees, a startled snake scurrying into the grass, or cracks bursting through a shattered wall."

Huai-su's friends thought he did his best work while inebriated. It would perhaps be unreasonable to ask a museum to teach a visitor, in the interest of bringing together West and East, how to behave like a

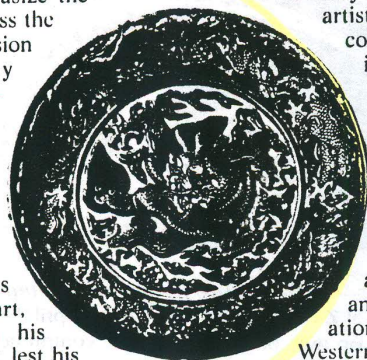
drunken monk—drunkenness is an honorable state in a spiritually disciplined temperament—but perhaps those at the show can find other ways to loosen up. Chinese space is rarely as fixed as Western space. It seems defined without being claimed, meandering without loss of direction. Even the great decorative objects, for all their vivid physicality, retain an immaterial quality. In the famous blue-and-white porcelain, the color has the fluidity of the sea and the sky. There is in this exhibit a polished jade disk from the late Neolithic Period of such ineffable color that it could almost be a circle carved from light, and a bowl in which cracks seem to clarify time.

The main catalogue of this exhibition is called *Possessing the Past*, a title that suggests a final fissure—one as important here as in Asia. If Chinese culture for centuries made a point of moving ahead by looking back, through reawakening a tradition that seemed eternal, there is no certainty that the China of the future will regard its past in a similar light. So much in modern culture, both East and West, conspires to break the present from the past—to settle the past in a museum, where "tradition" grows wan. Something owned, not possessed.

IN ALL LIKELIHOOD, THE ENORMOUS CULTURAL pressures in China will produce an upwelling of art. So far, however, New Yorkers have seen very little work by contemporary Chinese artists. At the Z

Gallery in SoHo, a Chinese artist named **Niu Bo** is now confronting many of the implications for contemporary China raised by the exhibition at the Met. Niu Bo, who is 36 years old, has built a work called *A Tale of Two Rooms and a Blind Man*, in which he creates a startling image—and a visionary reconciliation—of Eastern and Western ways of knowing.

Inspired by a work of Tibetan Buddhism, the installation contrasts two ways of seeing. It consists mainly of two rooms, one "Eastern" and entirely dark, in which visitors touch and sense objects without being able to use their eyes; the other, a white space that symbolizes in various ways the "Western" objective way of perceiving the world. The work is not static but active. A congenial blind man sits in the brightly lit room (on Saturdays) and asks visitors to describe what they have felt or sensed in the dark room, fashioning from clay the image of what he hears. In a dark room, I once heard someone say, the eye begins to see.



Ming Dynasty dish with dragon motif.

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