

Asian Art in the Undergraduate Curriculum: An ASIANetwork Initiative

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Art, and Asian art in particular, can serve as a window into other worlds, a vehicle for religion, a device for political legitimacy, a marker of a specific time and place, a mode of personal expression, all in addition to being seen as a part of the greater corpus of Asian cultural achievements. As such, Asian art can be a powerful pedagogical tool. In recognition of these facts, beginning in 2000, ASIANetwork colleagues from many disciplines made the sometimes startling discoveries that our schools hold a broad range of Asian art, including random objects collected by missionaries and politicians, souvenirs that caught the attention of scholars and travelers in Asia, and stunning collections of Asian art carefully collected and held in ASIANetwork institutions' archives, museums, libraries, faculty offices and dusty basement storage.

ASIANetwork Initiative

After some preliminary surveys, conference panels on pedagogical uses of art, and explorations of electronic and print technologies, the ASIANetwork Board of Directors applied to the Henry Luce Foundation for support to survey, assess, document, photograph, when necessary provide vital conservation data, and finally publish a volume on pedagogical uses of art collections in ASIANetwork schools. The Luce Foundation responded with enthusiasm and generous support, and Stan Mickel graciously agreed to take on the logistical challenge of managing the project. A Steering Committee was formed, with Mary-Ann Milford as the Board's representative on the committee, Karil Kucera the editor for

the image database being assembled, and Paul Nietupski and Joan O'Mara rounding out the committee's membership as co-editors for the volume that will be one of the project's end results.

The project was designed to identify collections in ASIANetwork schools, to provide a framework for the information gathered in this research, and lastly to provide a means to disseminate and share the materials with a wider audience. In order to assess what was in those collections, professional art historians were sent as consultants to evaluate them and to advise ASIANetwork schools about issues of conservation, documentation, and preservation of their collections. Three rounds of consultancies began in 2004 and are due to end in early 2008. Each consultant wrote up an evaluation of the

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collection surveyed, and in turn each ASIANetwork school provided a selection of high-quality digital images for inclusion in the planned pedagogically-oriented volume and database. The final round of consultancies has been scheduled, and all



"Rainy Night at Kudan Hill" located in the Special Collections, Charles E. Shain Library, Connecticut College

of the data will be compiled by early spring 2008.

Toward the Final Phase

The ASIANetwork-Luce Asian art initiative will provide contributing schools with a new awareness of their heritage, and highlight the schools' connections to Asia. Their collections will be conserved, archived, and displayed professionally, and their provenance made public. This project goes further, however, because each school will contribute photographs and data about their collections for the production of a book designed to bring the interdisciplinary study of Asian art into our classrooms. Images will be made available

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in digital format through an on-line, searchable database. The targeted deadline for publication of the book is March 2009; on-line access to all of the digital materials from the collections will be available to the public at that time as well.

Writers for individual chapters in the book project were selected from among the consultants and members of the Steering Committee whose expertise will enable them to write about the art represented in the collections being surveyed. Over the course of Labor Day weekend, 2007, the chapter authors assembled for a pre-writing conference at the House Mountain Inn, located near Lexington, Virginia. There, building on

the reports filed after the first two years of consultancies, a meeting was held to discuss the overall plan of the book and database, and to establish points of contact and diversity between the different chapter.

The meeting was an outstanding success, with the authors recognizing the wide variety of collections of Asian art represented within the scope of the project thus far. Clearly, many objects were gathered over broad spans of years for a wide variety of motives, and sometimes included works of little artistic value, but of great pedagogical use. There were also discoveries of objects of significant artistic merit, sometimes to the surprise of the holding institutions. Likewise, the stories of the collections themselves were often fascinating, with some collections being acquired under extraordinary circumstances or within momentous historical contexts.

A Fascinating, Useful Tool

With the final art collections now being identified and catalogued, in 2008 the project will move toward building a significant pedagogical tool that will be of use to teachers and scholars in many disciplines. The design of the book project is intended to spark creative use of art objects in the liberal arts college classroom. Based on the ASIANetwork collections consulted, the book will be arranged geographically, utilizing a variety of disciplinary approaches.

The book will open with methodological considerations about collecting in general, and what the project has revealed about ASIANetwork schools and what remains unknown. Each chapter thereafter will address general geographic areas, a specific medium, or a specific pedagogical approach to art. A

chapter on Chinese art, for example, will highlight the heritage of Chinese bronzes and the evolution of their use in different periods, and will also focus on the many Chinese paintings in the ASIANetwork college collections. A chapter on Japanese art, with focus on cultural contexts and expressions, will explore the role of aesthetics in Japan's cultural heritage. Uses of Japanese and Chinese prints will be dealt with in another chapter, with a consideration of modernism and what this

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means in an Asian construct. South and Southeast Asia are included, with recognition of Hindu art as a living expression, and of art in service of religion. The interface of art and religion in Tibetan and Himalayan regions will also make up a chapter, along with another chapter on the pedagogical uses for much of the material culture encountered in the collections.

The ASIANetwork-Luce Asian art project has come a long way and is now entering its final phases. What began as a pedagogical experiment years ago has grown into a full-scale project involving scores of people from schools across the country. The book and database promise a high quality and useful pedagogical and research tool for years to come.

To view images of art pieces discovered at participating schools, go to the ASIANetwork website, click Luce Asian Art Project under the Quick Picks list, then click Online Image Database on the right hand side of the page.



Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker, Karil Kucera, Joan O'Mara, Karen Mickel, Teddy Amoloza and Stan Mickel at the Asian Arts in the Undergraduate Curriculum pre-writing Conference held at House Mount Inn, Lexington, Virginia