



SOCIETY FOR ASIAN ART

Volume 21 Number 1

# Lotus Leaves



Fall 2018

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For more than sixty years, we have offered a wide range of innovative, high-quality educational and cultural programs, along with social (and culinary) events where participants share their knowledge and enthusiasm. SAA's popular, Arts of Asia Lecture Series, open to all, is the core of the museum's docent-training curriculum. We sponsor foreign and domestic travel, visits to private art dealers and collections, in-depth study groups, special lectures by leading scholars, literature courses and symposia. Some of our programming supports specific exhibitions.

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# Chinese Gardens in the United States: Past, Present, and Future

by Patricia J. Yu

One of the Qianlong emperor's (r. 1736–1795) precious possessions was a handscroll painting attributed to the Yuan master Ni Zan that depicted the Lion Grove Garden (Ch. *Shizilin*) in Suzhou. It was so treasured by the emperor that he left traces of himself in colophons and seals upon the painting's surface. The Lion Grove Garden itself became a favored stopping point on his numerous Southern Tours—he visited it no less than five times between 1757 and 1784. Just as he left traces of himself upon the painting of the garden, he also left his traces on the site of the garden—his pronouncement of “truly delightful!” is still preserved in golden letters within the garden's

Pavilion of True Delight (Figure 1-1).<sup>1</sup> Although he could not physically transport the Lion Grove Garden back to Beijing, he did the next best thing: he copied it within his imperial palace-gardens of the Yuanming Yuan (Garden of Perfect Brightness) and the Bishushanzhuang (Mountain Hamlet for Escaping the Heat). Through these acts of replication within the imperial built environment, the Qianlong emperor laid claim to the pieces of his empire seen on his journeys.

At the same time, on the other side of the world, Sir William Chambers was designing a landscape for his imperial patrons at Kew Gardens in London. The most prominent feature within the garden then and today is Chambers' Great Pagoda, standing ten stories tall (163 feet high), and ornamented with eighty brightly-colored dragons perched upon its eaves.<sup>2</sup> Completed in 1761, the Kew Pagoda was contemporaneous with many other chinoiserie follies being constructed in gardens across Europe, but it holds the distinction that its designer had actually personally seen pagodas in China. Before beginning his career as an architect and landscape designer, Chambers sailed to Canton twice, in 1743 and 1748, as a supercargo for the Swedish East India Company.<sup>3</sup> While in Canton, he could not have avoided seeing the pagodas that defined the Canton skyline. He leveraged his experience as a credible eyewitness



Figure 1-1: Pavilion of True Delight in Lion Grove Garden, Suzhou. Photo by author, 2017.



Figure 1-2: Sir William Chambers, General Plan of the Gardens at Kew, 1763. Watercolor and ink, 53 x 121 cm. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1925. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Acc. no. 25.19.44. ©Creative Commons.

to Chinese architecture and landscape in his 1757 publication *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils*.<sup>4</sup> Soon after, he was commissioned to begin work at Kew and instantiate the global aspirations of the British Empire through garden design.

A plan of Kew Gardens shows the Pagoda at the southern end (right side of the plan) flanked by the Mosque and the Alhambra. (See [Figure 1-2](#).) At the northern end of the garden (left side of the plan), separated by an expanse of lake and “wilderness,” are a cluster of structures that include the old palace, the Orangerie, the Great Stove that heated the greenhouse, an aviary, classical temples and two chinoiserie pavilions. How do we make sense of the seeming eclecticism at Kew? Although many of the structures designed by Chambers no longer exist, views of the garden in 1763 are illustrated in engravings published in *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew* (1763)<sup>5</sup> and in a set of watercolors of the same views which are now held in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Let us consider *View of the Lake and the Island from the Lawn at Kew* ([Figure 1-3](#)). We are standing upon the northern lawn and

looking south across the waters of the lake and the wilderness. To our right is the pedimented classical Temple of Arethusa, the water nymph who transformed into a spring to escape the amorous clutches of the river god. According to myth, her spring flows beneath the sea. To our left is the domed classical Temple of Victory, dedicated to a British victory over the French in 1759. Straight ahead, directly across the water is the Great Pagoda. In this view, Chambers has located the structures of antiquity—both East and West—within the purview of the British imperial landscape.

If we map this view of the garden onto the plan of the garden, we create a circuit. We move from the old palace block, i.e. “home,” across the water—a movement symbolically facilitated by Arethusa’s seaward-flowing stream. We skirt the wilderness and emerge among the Pagoda, the Alhambra, and the Mosque. By returning through the Temple of Victory, we declare British military strength and also her successful foreign forays to bring back exotic goods and domesticate them within the British landscape. The material translation of Chinese structures in Kew Gardens served to both support Chambers’ claims to knowledge about



Figure 1-3: William Marlow (artist) and Sir William Chambers (architect), View of the Lake and Island from the Lawn at Kew, 1763. Watercolor, 28.4 x 45.2 cm. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1925. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Acc. no. 25.19.38. ©Creative Commons.

China as well as express the British Empire's contemporary aspirations to expand their trading empire into China.

## Bringing China to America

When Chambers traveled to China in the eighteenth century, foreigners like him were limited to the factories of Canton. In the aftermath of two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) and the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, the interior of China was further opened to diplomats, missionaries, and travelers. One such person was American diplomat Willard D. Straight (1880–1918), who arrived in China in January 1902 to work for the Maritime Customs Service, and later served in diplomatic positions in Korea and Mukden. He left China in 1912 and served as an expert on the Far

East for J.P. Morgan and Company. Throughout his professional career, he advanced American political and commercial interests in the Far East, and was instrumental in implementing the Open Door Policy and supporting the investment of American capital in China.<sup>6</sup>

During his time in China, Straight closely observed the people and environment around him, which impacted the design of his New York estate when he returned to the United States. He commissioned Beatrix Jones Farrand (1872–1959), one of the founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects, to create the garden for his estate. Farrand's watercolor design of Straight's estate at Old Westbury, Long Island, New York, shows a bird's eye view of the garden plan and architecture (Figure 1-4).<sup>7</sup> The front half of the walled, T-shaped (or should we say kimono-shaped?)



Figure 1-4: Beatrix Jones Farrand, Sketch of Garden for Willard Straight, Esq., n.d. Watercolor on heavy paper, 12 x 28 in. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley. Reproduced with permission.

garden combines the geometry of European parterres with the colorful, painterly effects of English cottage gardens. The plan narrows to a long reflecting pool, anchored at either end by red latticework chinoiserie pavilions, some with round moon gate openings, a key feature that Farrand will repeat later. In the watercolor, white sculptural figures appear around the edge of the pool. A photograph from 1923 by Farrand, entered into an architectural exhibition in Philadelphia, depicts what appear to be white plaster reproductions of small standing bodhisattvas arranged by the pool.<sup>8</sup>

The arrangement of the Buddhist sculptures does not attempt to replicate the formal hierarchal arrangement of Buddhist icons in a temple setting. Rather, the placement of the statues as two rows facing each other evokes multiple visions of antiquity, from both the Chinese and the Greco-Roman tradition. While Straight was still stationed in Asia, he met his future wife, Dorothy Whitney, on a group excursion to the Ming tombs, where monumental figures of officials and animals form a Spirit Way.<sup>9</sup> The placement of white sculptural figures on either side of a long pool also serves to make the Buddhist figures into Eastern substitutions for Classical statuary found alongside peristyle pools in Roman villas. Willard Straight's garden served as a precursor

to another Asia-inspired garden designed by Beatrix Farrand: the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Garden in Bar Harbor, Maine. The patrons of both gardens sought to create impressions of Asia in their domestic space that recalled their travels there, but did not tie themselves to replicating exact Chinese spaces. Rather, they sought to create new ensembles from their memories of Asia.

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (1874–1948) was another American who was inspired by the Spirit Way of the Ming tombs and recreated an impression of it within her garden. Rockefeller arrived in Beijing in 1921 and embarked on a three-and-a-half month tour of Asia. Her travels inspired the collection of many Asian antiquities upon her return to the East Coast, including a set of Korean stone tomb figures in 1926. In the same year, Rockefeller contacted Beatrix Farrand to design a garden that would house the figures. The two women worked closely together to decide on the garden layout, its architectural forms, and the positioning of the sculptures.<sup>10</sup> In a letter to her sister Lucy, Abby wrote, "I am having great fun with the new garden, Mrs. Farrand is helping me, and fortunately she likes Chinese sculpture. We are going to put the Korean (Ming tomb sort of) figures along one side making a walk by the garden into the woods



Figure 1-5: Beatrix Jones Farrand, Garden Wall and Figures. Black and white photograph, 5.4 in. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley. Reproduced with permission.

beyond.”<sup>11</sup> A photograph from Farrand’s project records shows the tomb sculptures arranged in two facing rows along the garden’s western edge, which would later form the garden’s “Spirit Path” (Figure 1-5).

The Rockefeller garden suspends the geographic distinction between East and West and the temporal distinction between antiquity and modernity. The Spirit Path’s straight alleé of Korean tomb figures leads the eye to a sixth-century Buddhist stele. Turning from the Spirit Path, a vase-shaped “Bottle Gate” open to the sunny Oval Lawn, which in turn flows into a sunken flower garden. Two towering spruce trees guard the circular Moon Gate set into the north wall, leading to the Maine forest beyond. We see that in addition to displaying Rockefeller’s collection of sculpture, the garden also incorporates elements of Chinese garden architecture into the garden design, most notably, the Moon Gate. From Farrand’s design sketches, we can see that she explored a few options for the north wall (Figure 1-6). The topmost sketch is likely the earliest design, when

the bottle gate was still being considered for the north wall before eventually moving it to the southwest corner between the Spirit Path and Oval Lawn. The bottommost sketch from June 1929 envisions the Moon Gate in a more elaborate architectural setting with a hipped and tiled roof. A few months earlier, news had arrived from Beijing that sections of the Forbidden City walls were being demolished, and that tiles and roof ornaments were available for sale.<sup>12</sup> Farrand and Rockefeller ultimately settled on a final design for the Moon Gate that is similar the middle design. The roof tiles from the Forbidden City Rockefeller purchased were used on the enclosing garden wall and South Gate instead.

The moon gate is a common feature of Chinese gardens. Its circular form serves to transition from one space of the garden to another, or it frames a particular view. In keeping with the winding nature of Chinese gardens, moon gates are rarely situated along an axis, and alternately reveal and conceal what lies beyond them. The Rockefeller Moon Gate operates in balance between East and West garden design principles. Unlike in the Chinese garden, the Rockefeller Moon Gate directly faces down the north-south central axis and is flanked by a matched pair of service gates. By placing the Moon Gate behind two large spruce trees, however, Farrand adheres to Chinese gardening principles that obscure lines of sight. The Gate also fulfills its traditional framing function by framing the trees from one side and also serving as an architectural halo for a gilt-bronze Shakyamuni Buddha sculpture installed just beyond it.

The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Garden did not try to replicate a Chinese garden. Rockefeller and Farrand collaborated to create a new space that spoke to Rockefeller’s New England roots as well as a space that testified to her travels in the Asia and her identity as a cosmopolitan patron of the arts. Through careful architectural study, Farrand recreated the forms of Chinese garden architecture and added to their authenticity by incorporating tiles sourced from the Forbidden City itself. The Rockefeller Garden was possible because of the creative energies of two remarkable women who took advantage of the simultaneous upheaval

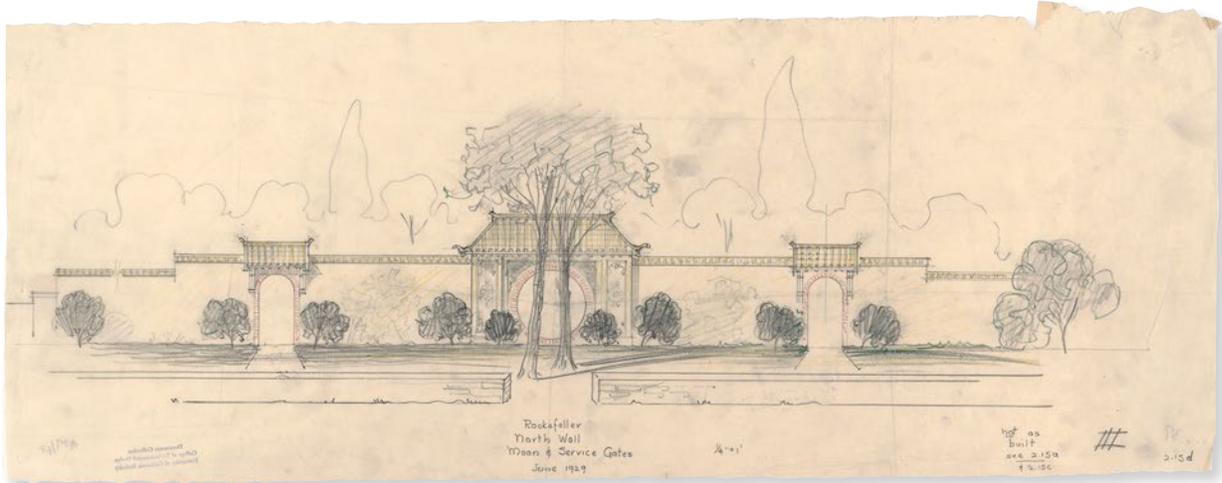
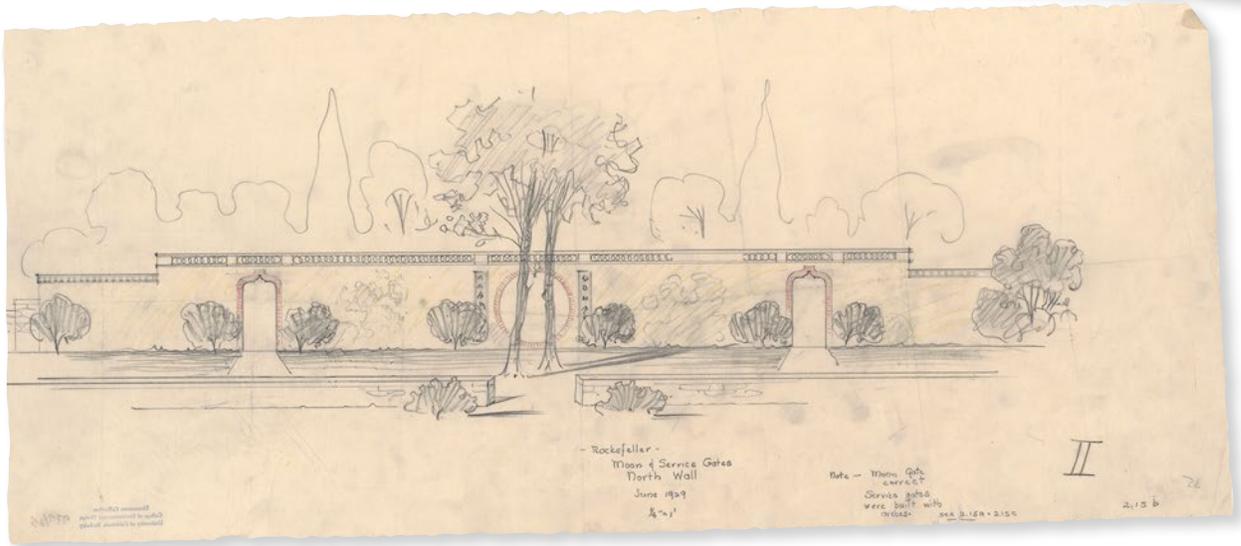
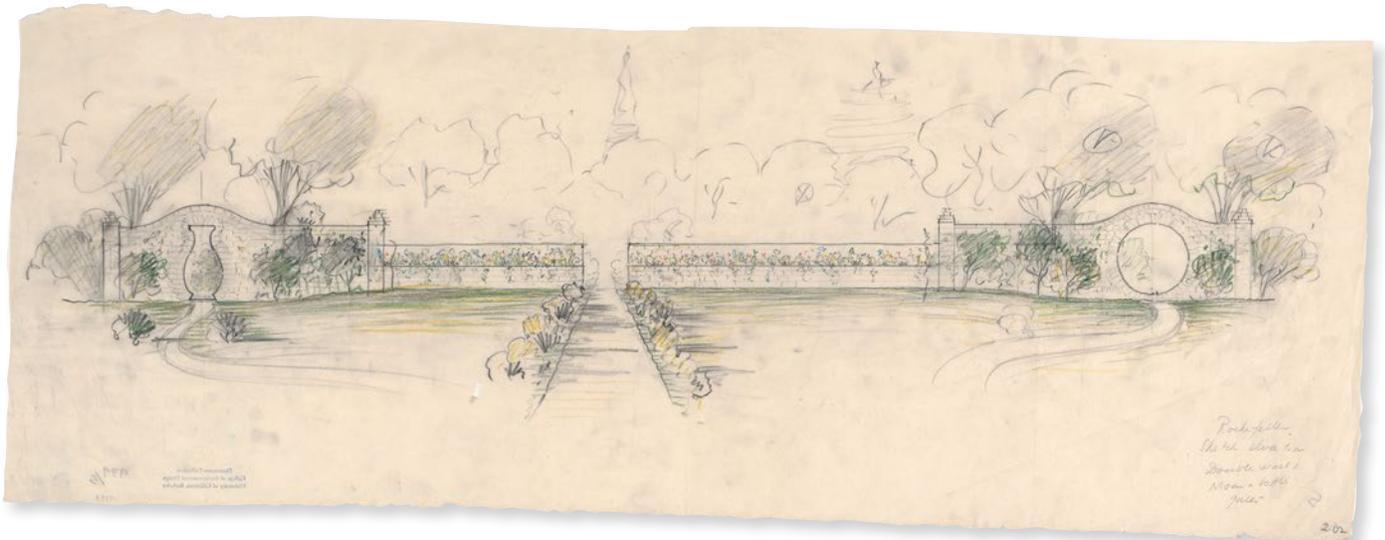


Figure 1-6: Beatrix Jones Farrand, Rockefeller— sketch elevation double wall, moon and bottle gates. Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 1-7: Assembled corner roof eaves (supported upside-down) at the Suzhou Garden Development Co. Ltd. Photo by author, 2017.

and modernization happening in China that made architectural fragments, large-scale sculpture, and art objects available for purchase by American elites in the early twentieth century.

## Seeking Authenticity

The Cold War called a halt to Sino-U.S. relations during the decades of Maoist China, but Nixon's pivotal 1972 visit to meet Mao face-to-face signaled the beginning of a thaw. Mao's death in 1976 and the subsequent re-opening of China to foreigners ushered in the next phase of Chinese garden construction: the "authentic" Suzhou garden. Three notable examples are: The Astor Court in the Metropolitan Museum, New York; the Lan Su Chinese Garden in Portland, Oregon; and the Huntington Library's Liu Fang

Yuan in San Marino, California. All three gardens were designed and constructed in collaboration with the Suzhou Garden Administration and its affiliate companies.<sup>13</sup> In addition to designing and constructing Chinese gardens overseas, these same companies also work on the restoration of historic Suzhou gardens, the creation of private residential gardens, and garden design for urban spaces (Figure 1-7).

In 1976, the Met acquired a collection of Ming dynasty Chinese furniture. The new acquisition, combined with the need to reinstall the museum's collection of Chinese paintings prompted a discussion about the best means of introducing and displaying the objects. Trustee Brooke Russell Astor, remembering a childhood spent in Beijing, suggested the creation of a period-appropriate garden court in the museum's north wing, a rectangular space measuring 40 by 59 feet. The next



year, Wen Fong, the Special Consultant for Far Eastern Affairs, made a study trip to China and in consultation with garden experts there, decided that the best course of action was to construct a replica of the similar-sized Late Spring Studio courtyard from the Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets in Suzhou.<sup>14</sup>

Astor Court makes several convincing claims to authenticity. First, in contrast to the blending of styles we saw in the early-twentieth century gardens, Astor Court is a direct replica of a Suzhou garden space. Second, it claims authenticity of building materials and construction techniques. Reports on its construction emphasize the use of traditional *nanmu* wood, a type of cedar that grows in southwest China and was used extensively in Qing imperial building projects. The construction of Astor Court also initiated the reopening of the former imperial kilns in Lumu, Suzhou, which had supplied the Qing court with its distinctive blue-grey tiles fired from locally sourced clay. All the construction components were made in China by craftsmen trained in the techniques of traditional architecture. Twenty-seven craftsmen and engineers from the Suzhou Garden Administration assembled the Garden Court.<sup>15</sup> The completed garden courtyard, according to the Met, “provide[s] an authentic setting for the display of Ming-dynasty furniture and an area of rest and contemplation in the center of the Far Eastern galleries....[T]he Astor Court adds a new dimension to our understanding of artistic life in traditional China.”<sup>16</sup> The act of constructing a Chinese garden replica was also an act of valuing and preserving traditional practices, an act of cross-cultural collaboration, and an act of museum pedagogy.

Within the context of the museum space, Astor Court serves several functions. It serves as a zone of spatial transition between galleries defined by geography—entrance through its moon gate announces passage into China. It serves as an architecturally appropriate display space for the Chinese furniture collection. It itself is also an object for study to educate the public about Ming garden courtyards. Interestingly, its object description in the museum’s online catalog dates

it as “17th century style” and lists its period as “Ming (1368–1644).”<sup>17</sup> While it is well known that Astor Court is a replica, it is curious that the Met’s online catalog does not mention this aspect of its identity. It would be just as correct to label it as “20th century” and “contemporary” to point to it as a space made for the needs of an encyclopedic art museum, born from the nostalgia of a trustee, inspired by trans-Pacific academic exchange, and made possible by the restoration of diplomatic ties between the U.S. and China.

In the 1980s Portland, Oregon and Suzhou established sister city ties. One result is the Portland Classical Chinese Garden which opened to the public in September 2000. Its Chinese name, Lan Su Yuan, meant Garden of Awakening Orchids, but also combined the city names of Portland and Suzhou. Also created in collaboration with the Suzhou Garden Administration, the Portland garden shares similar claims to authenticity as Astor Court: materials sourced from China, including five hundred tons of rock; the participation of sixty-five Chinese craftsmen to complete and assemble the garden; and the inclusion of Chinese plant species.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Astor Court, however, the Portland garden does not attempt to replicate a preexisting garden space in Suzhou, but adheres to the principles of Suzhou garden design to combine the elements of water, rocks, and architecture into a new garden retreat occupying one full city block in Chinatown.

From the outside, little of the garden can be seen, except for the rooflines and the flashes of garden that peek through latticework windows set in the white walls. A narrow doorway leads you into the Courtyard of Tranquility, the first of a series of courtyard spaces. Straight ahead is a quatrefoil-shaped doorway that offers a tantalizing glimpse of the covered corridor that leads to the Knowing Fish Pavilion. To the left is the large Hall of Brocade Clouds; when you cross through the hall and stand upon the stone-paved viewing terrace, you are treated to a view of the central lake and the six-sided Moon Locking Pavilion that sits upon its waters (Figure 1-8). Zigzag bridges connect the pavilion to the



Figure 1-8: Moon Locking Pavilion and Tower of Cosmic Reflections (teahouse) after the rain. Lansu Garden, Portland. Photo credit: Seth Healy. Used with permission.

north and east shores. The winding bridges and corridors present constantly shifting perspectives and also cut across the lake to divide the water into three rhythmic sections. Shaped doorways and windows frame specific views and offer transitions between one scene and the next. The garden's guidebook even includes a cut-out window and encourages visitors to "hold the window above up to your eye to frame a specific view of the garden. In Chinese gardens, windows are designed to draw your focus toward something special."<sup>19</sup>

It may not be an exact replica of any specific Suzhou garden, but we can identify clear affinities between its design elements and those in its sister-city gardens. For example, the Moon Locking Pavilion shares the same form and position within

the garden as the Pavilion in the Heart of the Lake in the Lion Grove Garden (Figure 1-9). Both are comprised of a central lake feature surrounded by pavilions in a variety of shapes and sizes. And like its Suzhou counterparts, the Portland garden is situated in the middle of a busy urban city, but nonetheless successfully creates a space of retreat that feels larger on the inside than it appears.

In a review of the Portland garden for the professional journal *Landscape Architecture*, urban designer Mark Hinshaw praised the garden for its adherence to traditional design principles, but his main point of admiration was not in regards to the authenticity of a captured past; rather, he implicitly argued that the pedagogical value of the garden resided in the possibilities that Chinese garden principles could offer to



Figure 1-9: Pavilion in the Heart of the Lake, Lion Grove Garden, Suzhou. Photo by author, 2017.

solve contemporary urban problems. He noted that the City of Portland approved the garden as a revitalization project for Chinatown and that its completion was a “profound demonstration of how we can lovingly work with nature to create spaces within our cities that are suffused with intense, emotional impact....In our culture, we have so often treated our land as disposable, expendable, exploitable. We cover immense amounts with asphalt, slathering petroleum products over the earth....[T]his garden reaffirms that we have the capacity to blend nature and culture, to create places that nurture the soul, that cleanse the mind.”<sup>20</sup> Located in downtown, the Portland garden asks its visitors to not only contemplate the moon’s reflection locked in its waters, but also the structure of the city beyond its walls (Figure 1-10).

The Portland Classical Chinese Garden also serves as a performance venue and has hosted performances of Chinese opera (Figure 1-11).

These performances educate the public on traditional theatrical forms and also give visitors a taste of how Chinese literati used and experienced a garden space. In one sense, these performances are about replicating an authentic experience of the traditional past. On the other hand, the Portland garden also hosts cultural performances by Thai dance groups, Japanese Taiko drummers, and many other cultural performances, especially during Asian Heritage Month.<sup>21</sup> In this context, the garden facilitates the celebration of the local community’s multicultural roots, where their performances are less about replicating the past than continuing heritage practices into the present.

The Liu Fang Yuan, or Garden of Flowing Fragrance, is the newest addition to the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California. It opened to the public in 2008 after completing 3.5 acres, and plans to expand the garden to a full 12 acres. The Huntington Chinese garden was also created

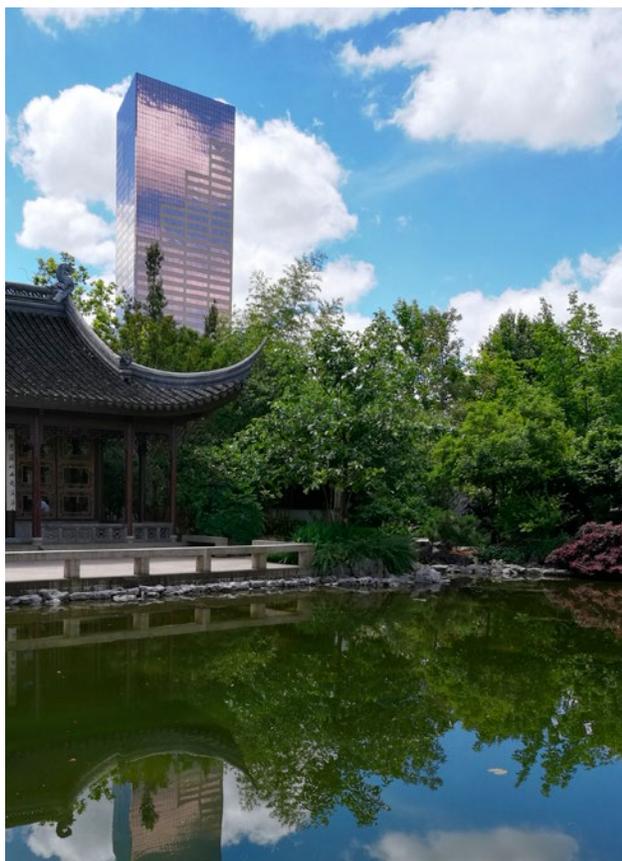


Figure 1-10: Hall of Brocade Clouds and U.S. Bancorp Tower. Lansu Garden, Portland, OR. Photo credit: Seth Healy, 2017. Used with permission.

in collaboration with the Suzhou designers and craftsmen who worked on the Portland garden; the expansive grounds of the Huntington allowed the Liu Fang Yuan to occupy a space much larger than one city block.<sup>22</sup> Rather than city skyscrapers being reflected in the central lake, old California oaks and the San Gabriel Mountains are borrowed into the scene (Figure 1-12).

When railroad tycoon Henry E. Huntington (1850–1927) first established his estate in the early twentieth century, San Marino was not known for its Chinese population. The demographics of the city, however, have changed drastically since the 1980s. San Marino is now more than fifty-percent Asian with the majority being of Chinese descent.<sup>23</sup> The local community of Asian-Americans contributed to funding of the Huntington Chinese garden, and many of their names appear within the garden itself—inscribed upon the board of donors at the entrance, or upon the rocks inside. The Huntington also enlisted



Figure 1-11: Opera in the garden. Lansu Garden, Portland, OR. Photo credit: Seth Healy, 2017. Used with permission.

the calligraphic and literary talents of prominent members of the Sinosphere—from Los Angeles to Taiwan to China—to provide the poetic names and inscriptions for each scene.<sup>24</sup> The names strike a balance between being comprehensible to the non-specialist while also alluding to Chinese literature and philosophy for the specialists. For example, upon entering the garden, the visitor is in a small forecourt named “Another World Lies Beyond” (Ch. *bie you dong tian*) (Figure 1-13). The formal qualities of the forecourt indeed hint at another world lying beyond: a moon gate offers a glimpse of another courtyard; a small stream trickles in from under the dividing wall, but its origins are a mystery; a corridor twists away and beckons the visitor to follow it and find out what “lies beyond.” A student of Chinese literature would recognize the allusion to Tao Yuanming’s (365–427) story of “Peach Blossom Spring,” where he follows a mysterious stream lined by blossoming peach trees upriver and discovers a utopia—another world—behind a mountain cave.



Only when you complete the circuit to the other end of the Huntington Chinese garden do you discover that the origin of the garden's water is a babbling brook among a woodland of blossoming peach trees (Figure 1-14).

The circuit of discovery is one experienced by many of the garden designers and garden visitors discussed here, from the early Western travelers to China to the Chinese immigrants who came to American shores. In tracing the history of "Chinese" gardens built overseas, we trace cross-cultural movement and exchange and explore the multifaceted reasons for constructing a Chinese garden outside of China. Rather than simply trying to "cultivate the past" and replicate an "authentic" Ming-dynasty experience,<sup>25</sup> these constructed spaces utilize the form of the past to serve the needs of the present and project our aspirations for the future. In the writings about Chinese gardens, Astor Court in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is often cited as the first "authentic" Chinese garden built outside of China.<sup>26</sup> Earlier gardens with Chinese elements were not "doing it wrong." Rather, they articulated a different logic for their inclusion of Chinese features and expressed a different socio-

political relationship between the site of the original (China) and the site of the new garden.

## Coda: The National China Garden at the U.S. Arboretum

The latest Chinese garden slated for completion in the U.S. will also be the first Chinese garden that occupies a national space: the U.S. National Arboretum. The project was first proposed in 2004 as a joint project between the United States Department of Agriculture and the People's Republic of China's Academy of Forestry; in 2011, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Chinese ambassador Zhang Yesui signed a Memorandum of Understanding to construct a classical Chinese garden on a 12-acre site in the Arboretum's northeast corner.<sup>27</sup> In design, the National China Garden is divided into four zones and will replicate famous scenes and structures from Yangzhou.<sup>28</sup> The garden's construction will be funded by the People's Republic of China at an estimated cost of \$100 million in the hopes that the garden will "enhance friendship, understanding, and relations between

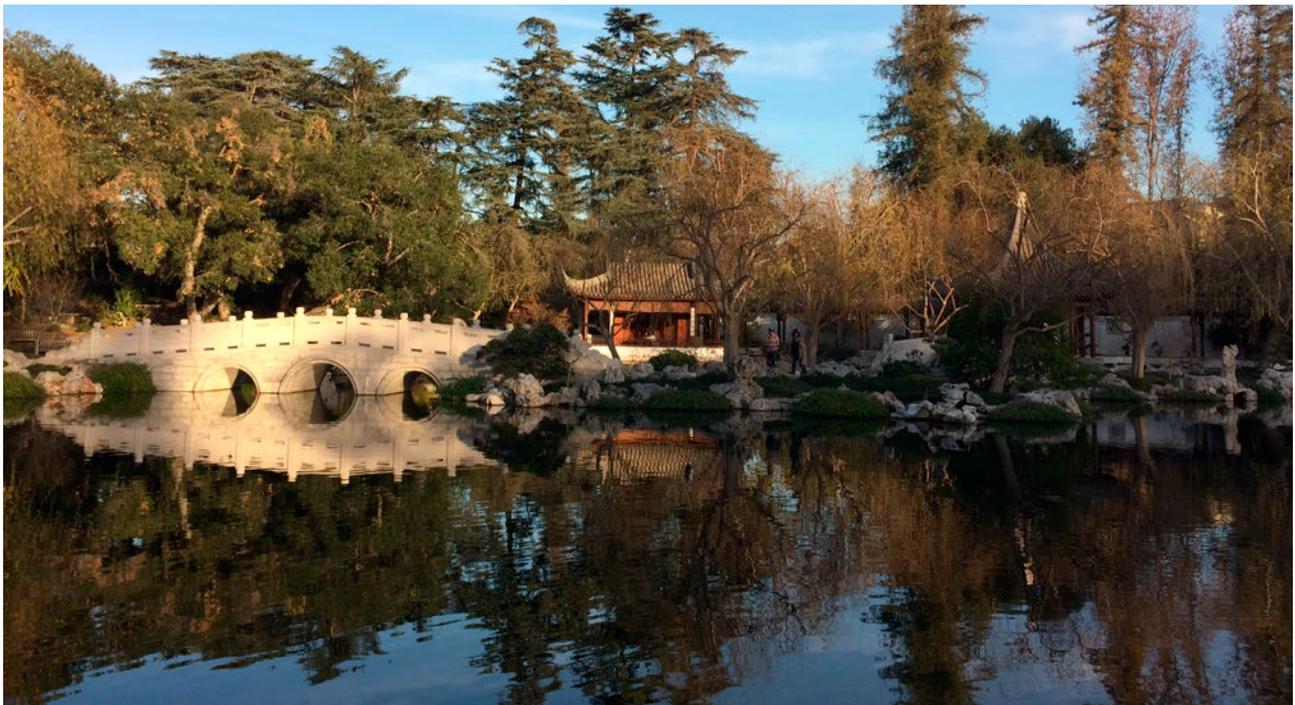


Figure 1-12 and Cover: The Jade Belt Bridge and the Love for the Lotus Pavilion. Liu Fang Yuan, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, CA. Photo by author, 2018.



Figure 1-13: Another World Lies Beyond. Liu Fang Yuan, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, CA. Photo by author, 2018.



Figure 1-14: Liu Fang Yuan, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, CA. Photo by author, 2018.



the people of both countries.”<sup>29</sup> When finished, the National China Garden will likely serve as a space of diplomatic performance between U.S. and Chinese officials. It remains to be seen if the National China Garden, if completed, will herald a new phase of Sino-U.S. cooperation.

**Patricia J. Yu** is a doctoral candidate in the history of art department at the University of California, Berkeley. Her dissertation is about the Qing imperial garden Yuanming Yuan (Garden of Perfect Brightness) and how it has been reinterpreted, reproduced, and copied in modern and contemporary China. She was a pre-doctoral fellow at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, in 2017–2018. She is currently the Mellon Graduate Curatorial Intern in the Asian export art department at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. [patriciajyu@berkeley.edu](mailto:patriciajyu@berkeley.edu)

### Notes

1. Ye Tian and Hai Fang, “Research on the Historic Appearance of the Lion Grove from the Yuan Dynasty to the Republic of China,” *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 37, no. 1 (Jan/Mar. 2017): 5, 11.
2. William Chambers, *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew in Surry* (1763), Farnborough, England: Gregg Press, 1966, 5. The dragons—which did not survive the eighteenth century—have now been restored through 3-D printing technology and have been reinstalled upon the pagoda.
3. John Harris, “Introduction,” in *Sir William Chambers: Architect to George III*, edited by John Harris and Michael Snodin, 1–10, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, 1.
4. William Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils*, London: Published for the author, 1757.
5. William Chambers, *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew in Surry* (1763), Farnborough, England: Gregg Press, 1966.
6. James J. Lorence, “Straight, Willard Dickerman,” *American National Biography Online*. Last updated Feb 2000. Accessed May 07, 2016. <http://www.anb.org/articles/06/06-00631.html>.
7. Beatrix Farrand’s papers and project records are in the Environmental Design Archives (EDA), University of California, Berkeley. EDA Coll. 1955-1, FF189. The Straight garden is no longer extant.
8. “Pool and Garden House for Mrs. Willard Straight, Old Westbury, N.Y.,” c. 1923. EDA, Coll. 1955-1, Box 22, folder II:44.
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# The Sogdian Belt and Road

by Albert E. Dien

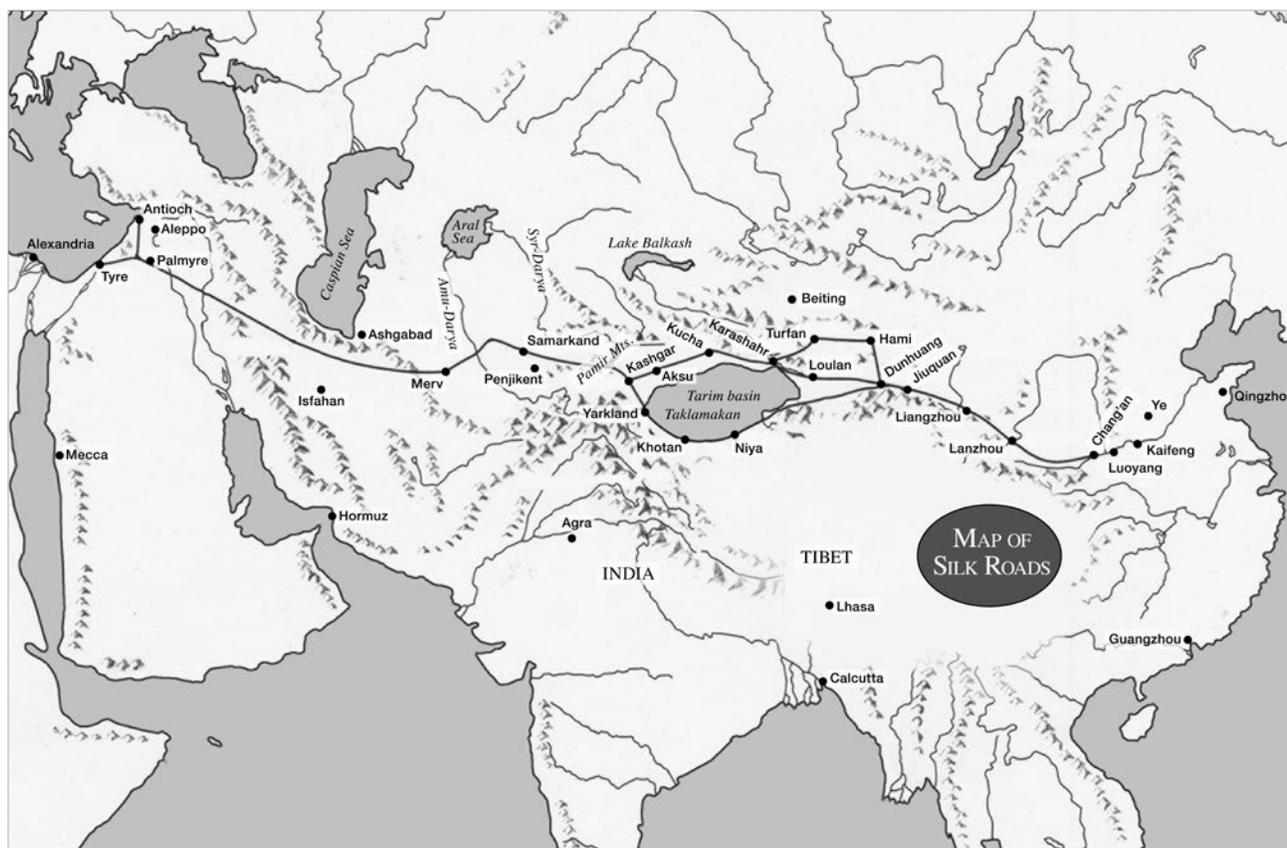


Figure 2-1: Map of Silk Roads, courtesy of author.

History is often said to repeat itself, even though it undergoes significant changes. How else to explain China's recent policy termed the One Belt One Road (*Yi Dai Yi Lu*) initiative? This is a proposal by the Chinese government to develop close relationships with the nations that stretch across the Eurasian continent, described as "a bid to enhance regional connectivity and embrace a brighter future," although it is seen by some as an attempt by China to dominate the economic sphere through a China-centered trading network. Announced in 2013 and followed in 2017 by a ceremony that welcomed the heads

of twenty-eight states, it involves the expenditure by China of billions of dollars in infrastructure investment. Almost daily one reads of China's establishing economic ties with one country or another, whether it is the Czech Republic in Central Europe or Sri Lanka in South Asia. The nomenclature, One Belt One Road, ties this together. One Belt refers to the overland route; One Road to that by sea. There is a clear and intentional echo of the historical route Silk Road (*Sichou zhi lu*) (see [Figure 2-1](#), Map), but there are significant differences between the ancient and modern routes.



Merchants came to China by sea in ancient times. A hoard of Sassanian gold and silver objects was found on the extreme southern coast of Guangdong, perhaps of the late fifth century CE. We know too of the trip that the Buddhist monk Faxian made by sea on his return from Ceylon in 413 CE, when the winds caused his boat to end up hundreds of miles off course at Qingzhou, Shandong, rather than landing in Guangzhou (Canton). By the Tang dynasty, we know that Guangzhou had become an extremely important port. When it was captured by the rebel Huang Chao in 878 or 879, there was a massacre of foreign merchants, including Moslems, Christians, Jews, and Magians (Zoroastrians), which Arab sources number as either 100,000 or 200,000.<sup>1</sup>

At the period with which we are primarily concerned, the first half of the first millennium CE, most trade was conducted by land. The earliest commerce seems to have been carried out by Indians whose caravans came over the mountain passes into the southern Tarim Basin and thence to China. A stone inscription written in Sanskrit during the late Han found at Luoyang may represent a trace of such contact. In the Buddhist sutras, there are many parables of caravans led by men entitled *sārvavāha*, “leader of merchants,” intending to reach a distant land of many treasures. These *sārvavāha* led their followers through many dangers, even giving up their own lives, so that their followers would become devotees of the Buddha. In the translations of sutras into Chinese, the term *sārvavāha* was transcribed as *sabo*. We may assume that trade with China was carried on by just such caravans. By the third century the Indians seem to have been largely replaced by Sogdian merchants. The term *sabo* continued in use and came in time to be pronounced *sabao*. A number of recent archaeological discoveries in China indicate a major presence of Sogdian merchants and caravaneers on the Silk Road who established colonies throughout Central Asia and in China itself.

The term “Sogdian” refers to an Iranian population that spoke Sogdian, an Indo-Iranian language, and who from early times occupied the

part of Central Asia that now comprises portions of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, an area situated between the Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya Rivers.<sup>2</sup> This is a dry, semi-arid land, traversed by a few tributaries of the Amu-Darya from which water could be diverted into agriculture, and thus support large and small settlements of an oasis culture. Trade and agriculture were the economic bases of important cultural centers. There were a number of decentralized city-states, dominated by elites of knightly landowners lording it over large, irrigated estates, and rich merchants who were on a social par with the nobility.

Russian archaeologists have excavated a number of the Sogdian cities, including Penjikent (“Five Cities”). Penjikent was a city on a bluff overlooking the Zarafshan River, about 65 kilometers southeast of modern Samarkand, on what was the Silk Road. Once a thriving metropolis, it was destroyed by the Arabs in the early 8th century. Remnants lingered until the 9th century when, eclipsed by Samarkand and Bukhara, it was abandoned to the desert. Penjikent was divided into two parts, the *shahristan* or citadel, and the city proper. On the hill were the citadel, the palace of the ruler, several temples and the richer houses. The rest of the city, below, contained houses of the landed aristocracy, the merchants, and shops. About every third house had superbly executed murals and wood carvings, indicating an extraordinary level of wealth. The houses were two to three stories high and had many rooms, including principal halls, resembling the palace on the hill on a smaller scale.

Murals found in the temples and other houses aroused great interest when they were first reported. The murals include religious themes, including one believed to depict Zoroastrian burial rites. Some mourners are shown cutting their faces, a Central Asian practice, also reported among the Central Asian Turks. The genre scenes illustrate national epics, including those of the heroes Sohrab and Rustam. They also depict battles between knights, hunts on horseback, holiday entertainments, processions, nobles sitting at banquets, holding their goblets



Figure 2-2: Brick tile with design of a Central Asian dancer, approx. 860–870. China; Xiuding temple, Anyang county, Henan province, Tang dynasty (618–907). Earthenware. *Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60S74+, photo © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

in a delicate manner, and a harpist (which is said to be the most beautiful painting in the world), and other subjects. These panels refer either to specific events or represent the ideal of the good life of the wealthy Sogdian. The clothing is

Persian or Sassanian, and there are Indian and Hellenistic traces in the renderings. From these we can gain a glimpse of the elegant, prosperous, and vibrant society which had developed here.<sup>3</sup> (See [Figure 2-2](#), a possible Sogdian dancer.)



Since the several Sogdian principalities were politically more independent than not, they were unable to form a united front, and frequently fell prey to outside forces, such as the Seleucids, Bactrian Greeks, Parthians, Kushans, and then the nomadic Hephtalites. For a time, the Turkish khagans on the steppes supported the Sogdian rulers, protected Sogdian trade, and employed Sogdians as officials and diplomats as they negotiated with the Byzantine rulers. The stelae erected by the early kaghans in the 6th century were even written in the Sogdian language. The Chinese also became distant overlords in the 7th century, but even so, Sogdiana maintained its relative independence. This independence came to an end when their home fell to the Arab conquests of the 8th century.

Trading along the Silk Road was a key source of income for the Sogdians. The account of Samarkand in the official history the Tang (*Xin Tangshu*) adds the information:

“When a child is born, they give it a piece of rock honey to suck on and place sticky glue on the palms of its hands, desiring that it would have sweet words when grown and would latch on to valuable things as if glued to their hands. They write horizontally. They are good at commerce, love profit, and when twenty years old, they go out to other countries, they go wherever there is any profit to be made.”<sup>4</sup>

As the Sogdians became the major participants in the Silk Road caravans, their language became the lingua franca across Eastern Asia, their alphabet the source of later alphabets to the east, and they were a strong presence in the markets of the capitals of China.

Geographically, the easiest land route between the West and China would have been through the grasslands of Central Asia, but the slow-moving camel caravans presented too easy a target for the nomad tribesmen. Control of the steppes by Chinghiz Khan and the Mongol empire made travel by that route possible only for a relatively short time. The safer alternative

was through the Tarim Basin, in modern Xinjiang province. As described in an Arab source of the ninth century, “From China to Sogd, it is of about two months journey through almost impassable deserts, and through a country all covered with sand, where no water is to be found. It is not refreshed by any rivers, nor is there any habitation in the province.”<sup>5</sup> While the difficulties may be somewhat exaggerated in this account, the routes were formidable. The two routes skirted the edge of the basin of the terrible Taklamakan Desert, where rivers descended from the mountains that rimmed the basin and disappeared into the desert sands. These rivers supported a string of oases around the northern and southern sides of the desert, making it possible for caravans to traverse this bleak and barren terrain. One gains a sense of the scale of caravans travelling the routes from recorded events, such as when in 553 a governor of Liangzhou, Shi Ning (a Sogdian name) seized an illegal caravan consisting of 240 merchants, 600 camels, and 10,000 rolls of multicolored silks.<sup>6</sup> (See [Figure 2-3](#), a possible caravaneer.)

The Sogdians came as merchants to China, but many remained to settle down. (See [Figure 2-4](#), a possible Sogdian trader.) There is evidence of Sogdians at many places along the Silk Road: Khotan, Loulan, Kashgar, Kucha, Karashahr, Turfan, Beiting (Besbaliq), Hami (Yizhou), Dunhuang and so forth. Liangzhou, or Wuwei, or Guzang (all names for the same place) in the Gansu Corridor, was especially important in this regard. This was the political, cultural and commercial center of the area and so attracted a large community of Sogdians. In 439 the city was captured by the Northern Wei armies, a dynasty that then ruled northern China, and 30,000 households were taken en masse to the Northern Wei capital in central China. Among the captives was a large number of Sogdian merchants, and in 452 (some 23 years later!) a Sogdian king sent envoys to pay a ransom for their release. This did not discourage a continuing migration of Sogdians and the settlements flourished. To quote from an early sixth century, contemporary description of the



Figure 2-3: Foreign groom, China; Shaanxi province or Henan province, Tang dynasty (618–907). Sculpted low-fired ceramic figure with three-color glaze in green, brown and creamy white. *Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P536*, photo © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

capital, Luoyang, in the *Luoyang qiianji*:

“From the Pamirs westward to the Roman Orient, 100 countries and 1000 cities all gladly attached themselves to us; foreign traders and merchants came hurrying in through the passes every day. The number of those who made their homes there because they enjoyed the atmosphere of China was beyond counting; there were over 10,000 families of those who had come

over to our way of life. The gates and lanes were neatly arranged and the entrances packed tightly together. Dark locust-trees gave shade and green willows hung down over the courtyards. All the rare goods of the world were concentrated there.”<sup>7</sup>

This was an early attempt to capture the China market.

Although there is much literary evidence that testifies to a large Sogdian population in and around China, and many tomb stelae have been recorded, until relatively recently there was little other archaeological evidence of their presence. The remarkable discoveries of a number of burials of some leading Sogdian residents in China provide us with a glimpse into their lives, or how they preferred to be seen. These men, designated by the Chinese government as spokesman for the community, held the title of *sabao*, “caravan leader,” cited above. We do not know if the selection for that post was dictated or imposed by the government, or whether it was made by the community itself and then confirmed by the state. The *sabao* did not rotate to other posts, as did regular officials. The purpose of *sabao* appointments was to create for the Sogdian communities units, in modern usage, *danwei*, whose head was responsible to the government for the behavior of its members. The system of *danwei*, usually now translated today as work unit, is not a new concept in China. From the pictorial murals in the tombs of these Sogdian *sabao* thus far uncovered in China, we see depicted a luxurious style of life, drinking and feasting, with musicians and dancers providing entertainment for the deceased and his guests. But of course, such tombs were those of the elite. For what the ordinary Sogdian might have experienced to earn a livelihood, we must take a broader view in time and place, since there is so little detailed information for China in the Middle Period. This view helps us understand the nature of the Silk Road trade and why it lost its prominence.

The pre-modern Silk Road commerce has been defined as a “peddling trade.” According to J.C. van



Figure 2-4: Central Asian wine peddler, China; Henan province, Tang dynasty (618–907). Molded and sculpted low-fired ceramic figure with three-color glaze in green, yellow and brown. *Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60P521, photo © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Leur, international trade was basically a small-scale peddling trade. Those engaged in it were peddlers with valuable high-quality products who operated either independently, though perhaps joining with others into caravans, or acting as agents for an office in their home country, in an arrangement called *commenda*.<sup>8</sup> To see a vivid example we may follow the career of one such peddler, an Armenian

named Hovhannen, during the years 1682-1693, when he was a factor, that is, a commercial agent, for two prominent merchants in Isfahan, now in modern Iran. From his journal we can follow his route to the west coast of India, inland to Agra, then to Tibet where he remained for six years, and finally back to Calcutta on the Indian east coast. He dealt with as many as 174 articles of trade. He primarily



dealt in woolen cloth, selling a yard or two at a time, buying indigo to ship back to his home base, three camel loads at a time. At Lhasa he bought musk and as he neared the Chinese border, he included tea. In both areas he purchased gold as he sold his goods a bit at a time.<sup>9</sup>

While this sounds primitive, behind this activity was a rather sophisticated business environment. Hovhannes at first acted as an agent, but as he prospered, he operated using his own capital. He could entrust his goods to others to deliver (which implies enforceable agreements), he used bills of exchange, and he had to engage in complex currency exchanges involving many different coinages and measures. His efforts and his arbitrage must have been successful, as the profits recorded in his journal seem to range from 50% to 130%. Merchants of many countries participated in similar trade. Six English merchants on their way from Aleppo to Hormuz in 1583 met four Venetians on their way from Hormuz to Aleppo with 20 bales of cloves, long pepper, cinnamon, musk and ostrich feathers. There must have been hundreds of such merchants at any given time who formed a distribution network for a large range of products. They are derisively described in contemporary documents as “running and racing about as hungry folk,” or in a letter from Marseilles, “[i]n order to earn a little bit more they are willing to run to the end of the world, and they live so miserably that for the most part they only eat herbs.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the ordinary small Sogdian trader would have been a small, but canny peddler opportunistically buying and selling small quantities as he continuously travelled from market to market.

The traders had to anticipate a variety of contingencies to conduct business: seasons, weather, safety on the roads, taxes, demands for bribes, local customs, and local politics. Before every journey, the caravan merchant had to weigh his prospects: what would be the expected transport costs, the protection costs, and the risks on alternative routes against the possible sales prices he might collect at the final market. One route, for example, might be longer, but safer and involve fewer customs stations

where duties had to be paid. Hardest to predict were the costs of protection and risks, not only of robbers or rapacious tax-gatherers, but of the non-transparency of the market. Letters from merchants in the field reflect their nervousness about the unpredictability of the markets.

There is very sparse information about the commercial activities of the Sogdian traders once they arrived in China, nothing on the order of the journals kept by Hovhannes cited above. By chance, a letter dated around 311 and found in a watch tower of the Great Wall near Dunhuang is a report from an agent in Lanzhou to his home office in Samarkand, mentioning linen cloth offered as merchandise and the collection of musk to be sent back. But the information contained in the letter is primarily about the disasters brought about by the attack of the Huns (the Xianbei), on the Jin dynasty, which led to the establishment of non-Han states in the north leaving the Jin in control only of the south.

“To the noble lord Varzakk [son of] Nanai-thvār [of the family] Kānakk, 1000 [and] 10,000 [times] blessing [and ] homage on bended knee, as is offered to the gods, sent by his servant Nanai-vandak. And, sirs, [it would be] a good day for him who might see you happy [and] free from illness; and, sirs, [news of] your [good] health having been heard by me, I consider myself immortal.

And, sirs, Armat-sāch in Jiuquan [is] safe [and] well and Arsāch in Guzang [is] safe [and] well. And sirs, it is three years since a Sogdian came from “inside” (i.e. from China). I settled (?) Ghōtam-sāch, and [he is] safe [and] well. He has gone to *kwr’yink*, and now no-one comes from there so that I might write to you about the Sogdians who went “inside,” how they fared [and] which countries they reached. And, sirs, the last emperor—so they say—fled from Luoyang because of the famine, and fire was set to his palace and to the city, and the palace was burnt and the city [destroyed]. Luoyang [is] no more, Ye [is] no more! Moreover, the Huns(?), and they... Chang’an, so that they hold (?) it(?)...as far as *n’yn’yich* and as far as Ye—these Huns [who] yesterday were the emperor’s [subjects]! And, sirs,



we do not know whether the remaining Chinese were able to expel the Huns [from] Chang'an, or [whether] they took the country beyond (?)."

The letter then presents a dismal financial report, including the statement:

"And, sirs, if I were to write to you everything about how China has fared, it would be beyond(?) grief: there is no profit for you to gain therefrom."

The letter concludes with provisions to be made for his son if the writer were not to survive.<sup>11</sup>

Even when the news was not so bad, there were the day-to-day issues of supply and demand. The decisions of when to buy depended upon supply, and there was no telling when the next load of goods might arrive, dropping prices. Or, when an expected caravan did arrive, the amounts available might not meet expectations. In 1555 the Venetian merchant Berengo reported from Aleppo that buyers were holding back because the caravan from Mecca was on the way and prices would drop once it arrived. But only 800 loads arrived (200 of pepper, 50-60 of cloves, 30-40 of ginger, 10-12 of mace, as well as indigo, lacquer and cotton material). An epidemic among camels had reduced the size of the caravan, and goods were being sent by another route so the Alexandria market would prosper. Nor do there appear to have been brokers or middlemen whose supplies would tend to even out prices. Merchants dealt directly with the producers. The perennial problem was the instability of prices and the non-transparency of the markets.<sup>12</sup>

Robbery was a risk, but precautions were taken. Large caravans positioned armed guards through especially notorious areas; smaller caravans hired extra guards, or joined up with other small caravans. Protection was an industry which operated at all levels, from the hiring of armed guards to payment of custom duties. Protection was necessary for the maintenance of the trade. It was not free. Protection had its price just as a camel did.

The merchant could usually anticipate the taxes to be paid on his merchandise in the larger markets, but transit costs at smaller polities could fluctuate adding to overall expenses. Controlling transit fees involved a variety of subterfuges, such as shifting heavier loads onto fewer camels when the transit toll was calculated on the basis of camel loads. But as a last resort, the merchant could also avoid excessive charges by taking a different route or resorting to a form of smuggling. Marco Polo, we are told, on returning to his home in Venice after years abroad, amazed his family with the quantity of valuables he had hidden sewn into his garments. All these choices, by the state and by the merchants, involved a shifting contest, a tug-of-war for profits. One trip could be a disaster, but on another, the merchant might slip through without any trouble at all.

I am reminded of an occasion when I led some tourists on a tour in Central Asia. Among the group were a few serious collectors of rugs. At one stop at an open market in Turkmenistan they made some exciting purchases. But we also met there a few off-duty customs inspectors who told us with obvious delight they would be waiting for us at the airport in Ashkabad. Fearing the worst as we approached the customs desk, we had the good fortune that the officials were called away to meet bigger game— a plane from Turkey was landing, full of passengers loaded with goods they hoped to sell for huge profits. We managed to slip through.

We have looked at those who went to China, but what was the impression that these visitors from far-off lands made on the Chinese themselves? By the Tang dynasty (618-906) Sogdian merchants as a specific identity had disappeared.<sup>13</sup> In a genre of fictional tales of the time, there were tales featuring so-called *Hu* (that is foreigners from the West) sometimes also termed Persian *Hu*, which would have included the descendants of the Sogdians. On the basis for these tales, as Edward H. Schafer remarked, "these reflect the dominant Chinese attitude toward the Persians, who . . . were held in popular belief to be primarily dealers in marvels, especially jewels of incredible beauty and power." Schafer noted that a Tang saying



for the incongruous was “a poor Persian.”<sup>14</sup> One short tale illustrates the Chinese view of the *Hu*.

“The Great Anguo [Tranquil State] Temple was the former residence of Emperor Ruizong (reigned 710-712) when he was a prince, so it had an esteemed status and a Buddhist place for making offerings (*daochang*) had been installed there.<sup>15</sup> The emperor once donated a precious pearl ordering that it be placed in the permanent storage area, saying it had an immense value. The priests kept it in a cupboard, not considering it to be of any value. In the tenth year of the Kaiyuan reign (722) the priests opened the cupboard to look over its valuables, planning to sell them to fund charitable work. When they saw the label saying it was worth hundreds of millions, they opened it but it was like a piece of stone, red in color, and in the dark gave off a slight glow extending for a few inches. The temple priests decided that it was only an ordinary object, hardly worth hundreds of millions, but they would sell it off. So they sent a priest to the city market to oversee its sale at that price. For the next several days those of superior status who displayed an interest and looked it over would say, “It is just a rock no different from a piece of rubble, why do you absurdly put such a price on it.” They would then walk off with a sneer, leaving the priest to feel ashamed. In the following weeks there were some who made enquiries and learned of its glow in the dark but felt a price of even several thousand would be too much. After more than a month a Western Region *Hu* came through the market looking for treasures, and when he saw the pearl he was overjoyed. He wore an insignia that marked him as being an eminent *Hu*. Through an interpreter he asked how much the pearl would sell for. The priest responded that it was hundreds of millions. The *Hu* stroked it and slowly left. He returned the next morning and again spoke to the priest through an interpreter, “The value of this pearl is really worth hundreds of millions<sup>16</sup> but I have been traveling for a long time, and at present I can

only offer you forty million to buy it, is that possible?” The priest was overjoyed and presented him to the head of the temple who agreed on the price. The next day the *Hu* brought the forty million strings of cash, made the purchase and prepared to leave. Then the priest was asked whether he had lost a great deal on the worth of the pearl and had bungled the deal. The priest asked the *Hu* where he had come from and of what use was the pearl. The *Hu* replied, “I am a native of Arabia. [Our] king at the start of the Zhenguan period (627-649) had established friendly relations [with China] and had presented the pearl. Afterwards our state had continually regretted [making that gift], so whoever recovered it would receive an appropriate [official] position. The search has lasted for seventy or eighty years, and now we have fortunately found it. This is a “water pearl.” Every time we had a military campaign we would dig out a pit of two feet deep and bury the pearl in it. Then a spring would emerge with enough water for several thousand men. Thus a military expedition would never lack a supply of water. After we lost the pearl the armies were always in distress from thirst.” The priest did not believe this so the *Hu* ordered that a pit be dug and the pearl placed in it. In an instant a stream gushed forth, the water flowing clear and cold. The priest drank some and was wonder-struck. The *Hu* then went off with the pearl, no one knowing where he went.”<sup>17</sup>

When we turn to the question why the transcontinental trade by caravan was replaced by sea, we need to recall that by the end of the fifteenth century the Portuguese had combined their caravals with a rudder and learned to utilize the shifting trade winds to enable their ships to reach the Orient. Their superior cannon fire soon cleared the sea lanes of local competition. The Portuguese gave way to the Dutch East Indian Company, who were succeeded by the French and then the English. These developments provided a number of advantages over the peddlers. The companies fixed and internalized protection costs, that is, the prices they offered included the costs



of the guns on board and the armed guards, as well as factoring in the losses expected from ships lost at sea. They reduced the risks faced by the peddlers in the non-transparency of the markets and short-term price fluctuations by monopolizing (or quasi-monopolizing) the trade. Peddling survived, of course, when the overland distances were shorter and the market relatively transparent, but where goods were especially burdened by protection costs and had long and difficult routes which intensified the non-transparency of the markets, the companies and the sea routes were more efficient.

More recently, the land route is making a return, not by camel caravans, but by rail. Twenty-five years ago I went from Beijing to Moscow when that route was first opening to direct travel by train. Because of different rail gauges huge cranes had to lift each railroad car from one side of the border to the other to settle onto a suitable undercarriage. There was a day's delay while it was decided which side, the Chinese or the Russian, was to supply the crew to perform that task. I also learned not to sit by the window as the train sped along because boys who lived along the tracks were very skilled at throwing rocks to break the glass panes. One Belt One Road seeks to resolve such impediments so that the overland route once more becomes a viable link between East and West. This time, the impetus is coming from the East.

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- The descendants of the Sogdians still live in their original home, modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Now they are Moslems, and all but a very few speak Turkish. It is archaeological discoveries in far off China that allow us to learn something of their past not recoverable thus far in their own home.
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- The temple was located in Tang dynasty Xianning, in the eastern part of Chang'an, modern Xi'an, Shaanxi. The temple was consecrated in 710, the first year of Emperor Ruizong's reign. See Morohashi Tetsuji, comp., *Daikanwa jiten* (Tokyo: Taishūkan shoten, 1955-1960) 3.3188d.
- The monetary value here is in terms of copper coins used as currency in traditional China. The coins were cast from copper alloys. A thousand of these coins would normally be strung together, termed a *guan*, but the number could vary to reflect the changing value of the metal. Below, the term *guan* occurs, thus making clear that the number of coins is being measured by such strings, not as individual coins.
- Li Fang, comp., *Taiping guangji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961) vol. 9. 402.3239.

# Ashurbanipal at the Asian Art Museum

by Bob Oaks



Figure 3-1: Ashurbanipal statue cast by Fred Parhad. Photo by Robert Oaks.

Walking to the Asian Art Museum from the Civic Center BART/Muni station often means passing the statue on the south side (Fulton Street) of the museum of the ancient Assyrian King Ashurbanipal. You may have wondered just who this man was and why a statue of him exists in that location. (Figure 3-1)

While his birth date is uncertain, Ashurbanipal reigned as the last major king of the Assyrian Empire from 668 to 630 BCE. This empire, which covered most of ancient Mesopotamia at its height included most of the modern nations of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, much of Egypt, and parts of Iran, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and Turkey. While the empire can trace early origins back as far as 4000 years ago, its greatest period from 972 to 612 BCE is often referred to as the Neo-Assyrian Empire. (See Figure 3-2 map.)

Like his predecessors, Ashurbanipal was a warrior king whose army used overwhelming force to control his subjects and neighbors. His capital at Nineveh (now in Iraq) contained many monumental alabaster bas-relief decorations on his palace walls mostly depicting lion hunting and other martial activities. Many of



Figure 3-2: Map of Assyrian Empire, courtesy of British Museum.



Figure 3-3: Sculpted reliefs depicting Ashurbanipal hunting lions, gypsum hall relief from the North Palace of Nineveh, c. 645-635 BCE, courtesy of British Museum.

these carvings are now in the British Museum in London. ([Figure 3-3](#) and [Figure 3-4](#))

Unlike his predecessors, most of whom were illiterate, however, Ashurbanipal in addition to being a warrior was proud to consider himself a scholar, knowledgeable in the fields of omen reading, divination, mathematics, and language and literature. He built one of the great libraries of the ancient world within his palace in Nineveh. In the mid-nineteenth century Austen Henry Layard, a young British diplomat, and an archeological team from the British Museum discovered 25,000-30,000 cuneiform clay tablets, many of which were simply fragments spread across a room to the depth of one foot. Layard also discovered the “Palace Without Rival”, built by Ashurbanipal’s grandfather King Sennacherib (reigned 705-681 BCE). ([Figure 3-5](#))

Shipped to the British Museum, the archeologists did not specify (as they certainly would today) which fragments were found together, making it difficult to reconstruct and decipher them. One group, when translated, was an epic poem about a king named Gilgamesh, who may have ruled more than a millennium earlier. This epic includes a story, similar to the Old Testament flood story, tells of a man who, instructed by a god, builds a boat and fills it with animals before a great flood sweeps the earth. The names are different, but the story is so similar to that in the Old Testament that the translator, George Smith, excited by his discovery, “jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself.”<sup>1</sup> The Epic of Gilgamesh is regarded as the earliest surviving great literary work. ([Figure 3-6](#))



Figure 3-4: Stone wall panel. Relief showing return from the hunt; men carry a lion, a hare, a bird and bird nests. Palace of Nineveh, courtesy of British Museum.

The Assyrian empire did not last long after Ashurbanipal's death in 630 BCE. Civil wars and struggles for the throne weakened the empire and made it ripe for conquest by Babylonians and Medes (from present day Iran). Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BCE, the empire divided between the two conquering empires, and the Assyrians no longer had a homeland of their own.

Yet, their culture survived as a stateless clan, united by language (Aramaic), religion (they were among the earliest groups to adopt Christianity), and culture. For over 2000 years they survived in what eventually became the Ottoman Empire. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they were increasingly subjected to ethnic and religious persecution. Large numbers perished in World War I. Persecution of those remaining led to a diaspora to Europe, Australia, North America

and elsewhere. Those who remained in the region into the current century were eventually caught up in the Iraq War and Syrian Civil War swelling refugee camps in a yet unfinished saga.



Figure 3-5: Illustration of a hall in an Assyrian palace from *The Monuments of Nineveh* by Sir Austen Henry Layard, 1853, courtesy of British Museum.

II

**M**any Assyrians emigrated to the United States throughout the twentieth century. The largest concentrations are Detroit and Chicago, but there are significant pockets in California, particularly in the Central Valley near Turlock, and of course there is a sizable population in the Bay Area, and that brings us to the story of the statue on Fulton Street.

In the 1980s, in order to promote their arts, local Assyrians established the Assyrian Foundation for the Arts. The president, Narsai David, owned a well-known East Bay restaurant bearing his name. He later became involved in radio and television and is currently Food and Wine Editor for KCBS radio in San Francisco. It was this organization that commissioned the statue as a gift to the city

of San Francisco from the Assyrian community. They selected Fred Parhad, an Iraqi born artist of Assyrian descent, to cast the statue. Even though he spent a very brief period the University of California at Berkeley, Parhad was essential self-taught after spending several years in New York studying the Metropolitan Museum’s Assyrian collection.

Parhad recently explained how he made the statue:

...The statue was originally molded in clay, as one piece, eight feet tall. A plaster mold was made of the clay figure and from this a plaster casting was made, duplicating the clay original. The plaster of the statue was rendered in six sections as altogether it weighed far too much to maneuver. The



Figure 3-6: Fragment of a clay tablet, which tells the story of the flood from the Epic of Gilgamesh, 7th century BCE. courtesy of British Museum.



Figure 3-7: Working the plaster version. Photo courtesy of Fred Parhad.

head and upper shoulders were one part, then the chest area, then the lower trunk with the legs and arms separate. It is next to impossible to carve or mold such detail as there is in clay but fairly easy to carve plaster. When the plaster was finished, rubber molds were made of each section and from these waxes were made of the entire figure which were then cast in bronze using the very ancient technique of lost-wax casting still used today. After casting each section was finished and then all the sections welded together.

([Figure 3-7](#), [Figure 3-8](#), [Figure 3-9](#))

The method was the same as many of the bronzes in the Museum's South Asia gallery. It was sculpted in Parhad's East Bay studio in Kensington, California and cast in Mexico City. Ashurbanipal is portrayed as holding a lion cub—a symbol of royalty—and a book or clay tablet—homage to his library. The tablet's cuneiform

inscription, written in old style Assyrian by Dr. Turan Tuman, reads:

Peace unto heaven and earth  
 Peace unto countries and cities  
 Peace unto the dwellers in all lands  
 This is the statue presented to the City of  
 San Francisco by the Assyrian people in  
 the 210th year of America's sovereignty

Around the base of the statue as you face it is Ashurbanipal's name in Assyrian cuneiform on the left and in Aramaic on the right. There is also a description of the king's exploits and a list of all the people who contributed to the project.

When finished, the statue created controversy. This is San Francisco, after all, where few projects escape controversy. Some Assyrians complained that it didn't look like Ashurbanipal. He probably never held a lion cub, never wore a skirt like the statue's, and had no crown. It looked more like Gilgamesh some suggested. Parhad, who admit-



Figure 3-8: The finished plaster version of the head. Photo courtesy of Fred Parhad.



Figure 3-9: The casting process. Photo courtesy of Fred Parhad.

ted to artistic license, wanted to incorporate both the ancient Assyrians' lion hunting prowess and their king's intellectual interests. He also wanted to incorporate as many Assyrian symbols and motifs into this work because he suspected he might never get another opportunity to produce an Assyrian statue.

The next issue involved the placement of the statue. Parhad, David, and others in the Assyrian community wanted to place it on the front steps of the San Francisco Public Library (which of course is now the Asian Art Museum). The City Arts Commission accepted the gift, but some members objected to putting it on the library's steps. It was "gaudy" some said; others feared it would create a precedent for other groups who might want to have their own statues on the library steps.

As a compromise, the statue was placed at the library's side entrance on Fulton Street and dedicated in the spring of 1988. A little over a year later the Loma Prieta earthquake severely damaged the library, leading the city to build a

new one across the street, and to convert the old building into the Asian Art Museum. So today, Ashurbanipal appropriately gazes across the street at the library and, though not officially part of the Museum's collection, complements the Museum's West Asia collection.

The British Museum in London is presenting a major exhibition "I am Ashurbanipal king of the world, king of Assyria," from November 8, 2018 to February 24, 2019. For more information on this exhibition and on Ashurbanipal, see [http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats\\_on/exhibitions/ashurbanipal.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/ashurbanipal.aspx).

**Robert Oaks** is a docent at the Asian Art Museum (class of 2004), a historian, and a past editor of *Lotus Leaves*. He appreciates the suggestions and support he received for this article from Fred Parhad and Narsai David.

#### Note

1. Amanda H. Podany, *The Ancient Near East, A Very Short Introduction*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014), 110.



# Society for Asian Art

The Society for Asian Art was founded in 1958 to encourage the study and appreciation of the arts of Asia. Its first objective was to help in the acquisition of The Avery Brundage Collection.

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Design: Suzanne Anderson-Carey

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