

Society for Asian Art Newsletter



September - October 2026

No. 5

What Your Support of the Society for Asian Art Means

Did you know that the recently re-installed artwork, *Collected Letters* by Liu Jianhua, was commissioned by the Society for Asian Art as a 50th anniversary gift to the museum? Liu is one of China's best-known contemporary ceramic sculpture artists. The work comprises of approximately 2,000 pieces of white porcelain formed into letters of the English alphabet and components of Chinese characters, suspended from the ceiling of the second-floor Loggia. The artist provides only the building blocks of words, leaving it to viewers to create meaning. The artwork's location is especially apropos: the space offers an opportunity for dialogue with the original engraved literary quotations on the Loggia's walls, dating to the building's previous incarnation as San Francisco's Main Library. *Collected Letters* was unveiled to Society members at a reception on March 20, 2016.

Over the years, the Society has contributed towards the acquisition of more than 240 objects in the museum's collection. Your support, whether it is with a [donation](#) or an [annual membership](#), means that the Society can continue to support the museum that we all love.



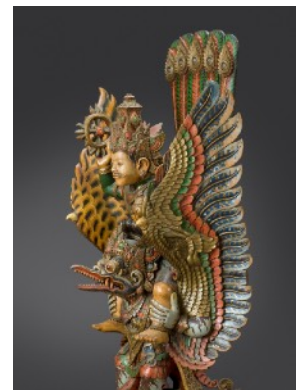
Collected Letters, 2016, by Liu Jianhua (Chinese, b.1962). Porcelain with glaze and monofilament. *Asian Art Museum of San Francisco*, Acquisition made possible by the Society for Asian Art in honor of the 50th anniversary of the Asian Art Museum, F2016.2. © Liu Jianhua. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Artist Liu Jianhua at the unveiling of *Collected Letters* on March 20, 2016. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Garuda in Bali

Sept. 18, 2026 – Jan. 4, 2027

Hambrecht Contemporary Gallery

Don't miss this special exhibition on the divine part-bird, part-man Garuda. The epitome of loyalty and courage, Garuda has always held profound significance in Indonesia, especially on the island of Bali. Featuring remarkable Balinese wooden sculptures and traditional paintings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the exhibition traces Garuda's legendary exploits, capturing both the mastery of Balinese artists and the enduring spiritual resonance of a protector deity who remains central to Indonesian culture today.



Detail of the Hindu deity Vishnu riding Garuda, approx. 1840-1940. Indonesia; North Bali. Colors and gold on wood. *Asian Art Museum*, Acquisition made possible by the Connoisseurs' Council and the estate of K. Hart Smith, 2010.18.1. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

The Society for Asian Art is an independent nonprofit organization that provides programs on Asian art and culture and supports the Asian Art Museum.





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UPCOMING EVENTS (Subject to Change)

Jan. 22 - Feb. 5, 2027

Saudi Arabian Odyssey from the Desert to the Sea

Registration will be announced via email in the fall.

May 12 - 23, 2027

Himalayan Heritage: Journey to Nepal and Bhutan

Registration will be announced via email in September.



WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following new members, who joined the Society in June and July. We are thrilled that you have decided to join us, and hope you find our programs and events interesting and engaging. Please don't hesitate to ask questions and give us feedback. Welcome!

Veronica & Thomas Devitt
Tham Phan
Anne Schmitt
Christina Wong



SOCIAL MEDIA

To submit photos or videos of SAA programs for use in our Social Media channels, please email them to Social Media Committee Chair, Grace Kim Kostal, at gracekostal@berkeley.edu.

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September - October 2026, No. 5

Edited by Janet Constantinou
and Susan Lai

Published bimonthly by
Society for Asian Art
200 Larkin Street
San Francisco, CA 94102
www.societyforasianart.org
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ARTS OF ASIA FALL 2026 LECTURE SERIES

Unknown Makers, Lasting Beauty: Rethinking Fine Art Across Asia



Left: Bottle with fish design, approx. 1450–1550. Korea. Stoneware with painted decoration over white slip (buncheon ware). Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection, B65P63. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.
Right: Temple hanging with Buddhist scenes (pidan), 1920–1950. Cambodia. Silk, ikat technique. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. David Buchanan, 2007.11. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

When: Fridays Sept. 11 to Dec. 11, 2026 (No lecture on Oct. 23 & Nov. 27.)

Time: 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Pacific Time

Place: Samsung Hall, Asian Art Museum & Zoom Webinars

Please see schedule on the next page for any exceptions.

Fee: \$200 per person Society members; \$250 per person non-members for the series.

Advance registration must be received by SAA by Sept. 4, 2026.

We only accept drop-ins for individual lectures in Samsung Hall on a space available basis.

Drop-in fee is \$20 per person per lecture. All in-person fees are after Museum admission.

Instructor of Record: Natasha Reichle

Of the thousands of objects in the museum's collection, most were created by unknown makers. Many works are unsigned, and others have lost attribution over time. For generations, such pieces were categorized as "craft" or "decorative art," often excluded from the status granted to "fine art."

In the early twentieth century, Japanese thinker Sōetsu Yanagi challenged this hierarchy, drawing attention to the quiet beauty of functional, everyday objects. His ideas encourage us to consider anonymous makers with the same care and seriousness we reserve for named artists, and to recognize that insight and artistry are not limited to signed masterpieces.

This lecture series looks across Asia at both celebrated works and once-overlooked objects, exploring how ideas of art, value, and "fine art" have evolved — and how unknown makers created works of enduring beauty and significance.

Please visit our [website](#) for the most up-to-date information about this lecture series..

The Arts of Asia committee welcomes comments about our lecture series. Please email comments to info@societyforasianart.org.



ARTS OF ASIA FALL 2026 LECTURE SERIES

Speakers & Topics (Subject to Change)

Sept. 11, 2026

Lost Masters and Named Craftspersons: Artisans during the Han Dynasty

Anthony Barbieri, Professor and Interim Associate Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts, University of California, Santa Barbara

Sept. 18, 2026

Jingdezhen Ceramists and the Art of Porcelain

Ellen Huang, External Faculty Fellow 2026-2027, Stanford Humanities Center

Department of Humanities and Sciences, ArtCenter College of Design

Sept. 25, 2026

Japanese Bamboo Artworks and Bashōfu Textiles

Yuki Morishima, Associate Curator of Japanese Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

Oct. 2, 2026

TBD

Robert Mintz, Chief Curator, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

Oct. 9, 2026

Mingei in Japan and Post-War United States

Meghen Jones, Professor of Art History, Alfred University

Oct. 16, 2026

Beyond the Tea Bowl: Material Culture and Environmental History of Edo-Period Kyoto

Morgan Pitelka, Bernard L. Herman Distinguished Professor, Department of History, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Oct. 23, 2026 - No Lecture

Oct. 30, 2026

The Art of Wood in Korea

Yoon-Jee Choi, Assistant Curator of Korean Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

Nov. 6, 2026

The History and Impact of the 1000 Year Old 20 Foot Long Cast Bronze West Mebon Vishnu

Vasudha Narayanan, Distinguished Professor, Department of Religion, University of Florida

Nov. 13, 2026

The Arts of the Ainu People of Japan

Akiko Walley, Maude I. Kerns Associate Professor of Japanese Art, University of Oregon

Nov. 20, 2026

Fabrication and Forgery of the Art of Islamic Ceramics

Margaret Graves, Adrienne Minassian Associate Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture in honor of Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, Brown University

Nov. 27, 2026 - No Lecture

Dec. 4, 2026

Contemporary Art of Cambodia

Boreth J. Ly, Associate Professor in History of Art and Visual Culture, University of California, Santa Cruz

Dec. 11, 2026 - Koret Education Center

The Art and History of Cloth in Mughal India

Sylvia Houghteling, Associate Professor of History of Art, Bryn Mawr College



MEMBER EVENTS

New Chinese Museums with Jay Xu

When: **Saturday, Sept. 5, 2026**

Time: **10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.**

Place: **Koret Education Center, Asian Art Museum**

Fee: **\$15 per person Society members; \$20 per person non-members after museum admission**

China's museum scene has exploded in the past 10 years with an astonishing number of new museums being built in addition to the widespread expansion and remodeling of existing museums. Join Jay Xu, the very popular former director of the Asian Art Museum, as he explains what's driving all this museum activity and describes some of the most fascinating of the new and remodeled museums – many of which have been designed by the world's most exciting and innovative architects. Jay will also focus on key art objects showcased in these museums and will discuss Chinese museum projects being planned or currently in production.

Jay Xu was the Director of the Asian Art Museum from 2008 to 2025. He received his PhD from Princeton University in early Chinese art and archaeology. He has held curatorial positions at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Seattle Art Museum and has had hands-on experience at the Shanghai Art Museum. He is the first Asian American to be elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

From Libraries to the Dunhuang Library Cave: Exploring Historical Memory in Art with Xiaoze Xie

When: **Saturday, Sept. 26, 2026**

Time: **10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.**

Place: **Koret Education Center, Asian Art Museum**

Fee: **\$15 per person Society members; \$20 per person non-members after museum admission**

Renowned artist Xiaoze Xie will share the three-decade journey of his artistic exploration of history and memory, highlighting his ambitious projects on the history of banned books in China and the dispersal and loss of the Dunhuang Library Cave's cultural treasures. Through compelling images of paintings, sculptures, and multimedia installations, he will discuss the ideas, research, and creative processes behind these works. He will also reflect on his distinctive approach to integrating scholarly research with artistic practice, offering insight into the evolving direction of his recent projects.

Xiaoze Xie is an internationally recognized artist and the Paul L. & Phyllis Wattis Professor of Art at Stanford University. He received his Master of Fine Art degrees from the Central Academy of Arts & Design in Beijing and the University of North Texas. Xie has exhibited extensively in the US and internationally. His most recent solo exhibitions were at the Tsinghua University Art Museum in Beijing and the Asia Society Museum in New York City. Xie has participated in numerous group exhibitions including the 2026 Chengdu Biennale and the 2022 Wuhan Biennale. His work is in the permanent collection of museums across the U.S. and in 2022, Xie received the Asia Game Changer West Award from the Asia Society Northern California.



Sanxingdui Museum. STW932, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:New_Sandingdui_Museum_02.jpg.



Shanghai Museum East. Alexey Yakovlev, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shanghai_Museum_East.jpg.



Jay Xu. Photograph courtesy of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.



Left: *Cosmic Models: Reimagining the Library Cave at Dunhuang*, installation view at the Altar of Earth Park in Beijing, 2025. Photograph by permission of the artist.
Center: *Chinese Library No. 66, 2018*, oil on linen, 48 x 72 inches. Photograph by permission of the artist.
Right: Xiaoze Xie in studio. Photograph by permission of the artist.



MEMBER EVENTS

Chinese Eunuchs at the End of Empire with Melissa Dale

When: **Saturday, Oct. 24, 2026**

Time: **10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.**

Place: **Koret Education Center, Asian Art Museum**

Fee: **\$15 per person Society members; \$20 per person non-members
after museum admission**

Eunuchs were firsthand witnesses to the decline and fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911. As the emasculated servants of the emperor and his court, palace eunuchs provide an important lens for understanding the history of the imperial court and Chinese society as China transitioned from a monarchy to republic. During the reign of China's last emperor, Aisin Gioro Puyi, and on into the early years of the republic, emperor-eunuch relations deteriorated. As both sides struggled to find purpose and survive in a world in which they were now irrelevant, eunuchs were accused of stealing palace treasures and artwork, opening antique shops near the palace to sell them, and even plotting to kill the former emperor.

Dr. Melissa S. Dale is an Associate Professor of History and former Executive Director of the Center for Asia Pacific Studies at the University of San Francisco. She specializes in late imperial Chinese history, specifically eunuchs and Qing dynasty court life.



Eunuchs in the Grounds of the Forbidden City, ca. 1884 - 1924, Beijing, China. Gerow D. Brill papers, #1379. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. RMC2016_0068.jpg.



Eunuchs staged a protest in front of the Infantry Commander's office, 1924, Beijing, China. Wikimedia Commons. https://picryl.com/media/pd_china-19e4cc.



Melissa Dale. Photograph courtesy of the speaker.

Donations for Book Sale

We now accept books throughout the year for our annual Book Sale. So if you move, downsize or are tired of all the books collecting dust in your home, please donate them to our Book Sale. We are accepting books with Asian subjects only, be it art, culture, novels, history, travel, cooking, exhibition catalogs or others.

Due to space constraints, we are unable to accept book donations at the SAA office. You can drop off books on Fridays when the Arts of Asia lectures are in session. If you have a lot of books, we are happy to pick them up from your home within the Bay Area. Please contact the SAA office at info@societyforasianart.org or 415-581-3701.

All proceeds from our annual Book Sale support the Asian Art Museum's C. Laan Chun Library, one of the more comprehensive research libraries on Asian art and culture in the country.



Across Eurasia with the Sogdians: Trade, Religion, and Cultural Exchange with Sanjyot Mehendale

When: **Saturday, Nov. 14, 2026**

Time: **10:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. (One hour lunch break)**

Place: **Koret Education Center, Asian Art Museum**

Fee: **\$30 per person Society members; \$35 per person non-members after museum admission. Advance registration must be received by SAA by Nov. 6, 2026.**

The Sogdians were an Iranian-speaking people from the great Central Asian cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Between the fourth and eighth centuries CE, they became the most influential merchants of the Silk Roads, establishing trading communities that stretched from Central Asia to China and beyond. More than traders, they served as cultural brokers, carrying not only goods but also artistic traditions, technologies, and religious ideas across Eurasia. Through their far-reaching networks, they helped shape the spread of Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, leaving a lasting imprint on the art, architecture, and urban life of the Silk Roads.

Dr. Sanjyot Mehendale is an archaeologist specializing in the trade, mobility, and cultural exchange networks of Eurasia, with a particular focus on the so-called Silk Roads. She teaches Central Asian and Silk Road art and archaeology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her current research examines medieval highland urbanism in Central Asia through the excavation of the site of Tugunbulak in eastern Uzbekistan, a collaborative project with Michael Frachetti (Washington University in St. Louis) and Farhad Maksudov (Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences).

This study group consists of a morning session and an afternoon session. **Please note that lunch is not included in the registration fee.** Attendees can purchase lunch in the museum café, and are welcome to bring food into the Koret Education Center.



Tomb of Sogdian Merchant Leader Shi Jun (Wirkak), Xian City Museum [Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain] <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=+Shi+Jun+tomb&title=Special%3AMediaSearch&type=image>



Banqueter Holding a Rhyton. Panjikent, Ancient Sogdiana, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg [Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain] [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Panjikent_mural_\(6th-7th_century_CE\)_\(3\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Panjikent_mural_(6th-7th_century_CE)_(3).jpg)
[search=+Shi+Jun+tomb&title=Special%3AMediaSearch&type=image](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Panjikent_mural_(6th-7th_century_CE)_(3).jpg)



Sanjyot Mehendale. Photograph courtesy of the speaker.



FALL 2026 LITERATURE COURSE

The Ramayana in Literature and the Arts with Forrest McGill

When: **Sundays, Oct. 11 & 18, 2026**

Time: **10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.**

Place: **Koret Education Center, Asian Art Museum**

Fee: **\$75 per person Society members; \$100 per person non-members for the course after museum admission**

Advance registration must be received by SAA by Oct. 4, 2026.

A lustful proposition accompanied by a gruesome threat. A violent, humiliating rejection. A retaliatory—and lascivious—kidnapping. A long search for the one kidnapped. A war of recovery. Slaughter. Victory. Glorification of the heroes. “Happily ever after”—or not.

Such an encapsulation bears something like the relation to the great seven-volume epic Ramayana as the AI-generated teaser “Mad prince seeks revenge, ghosts haunt, uncle dies, mother marries, tragedy” does to another profound tale.

This two-session series also can hardly do justice to the epic of Rama, but aims to provide entry points into its vast complexity. The sessions isolate and focus on five key turning points. At each, if the characters had chosen different courses of action, everything subsequent would have changed. The characters’ choices are motivated by some combination of love, lust, jealousy, revenge, pride, strategy, and above all the sense of duty—that is, adherence to righteousness (dharma).

The five key turning points are Prince Rama’s being sent into exile as a result of machinations within the royal family, the demon king Ravana’s abduction of Rama’s wife Sita to possess her and to punish Rama for harming Ravana’s kinfolk, Rama’s allying with one rival for the kingship of the monkeys in return for help in finding Sita, Rama’s killing Ravana in battle, and Sita’s having to undergo a trial by fire when her faithfulness to Rama is questioned.

While the focus of the sessions will be on the canonical Ramayana of Valmiki, other versions, from various parts of Southeast Asia as well as South Asia, will be considered. Additional emphasis will be on representations of the key turning points in the visual and performing arts.

Participants in the sessions will be encouraged to discuss and debate the ethical and emotional dilemmas the primary characters face.

Forrest McGill is the Asian Art Museum’s Emeritus Senior Curator of South and Southeast Asian Art. For more than 20 years, he organized major exhibitions such as *The Rama Epic: Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe and Beyond Bollywood: 2,000 Years of Dance in the Arts of South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Himalayan Region*. He has edited and co-edited numerous exhibition related catalogs in addition to giving lectures and writing articles about Asian art.

The [course syllabus with specific reading assignments](#) is posted on the program webpage.

Recommended for purchase:

1. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: The Complete English Translation*. Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, eds. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2021.
2. *The Rama Epic: Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe*. Forrest McGill, ed. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum. 2016. (Both are available in the Asian Art Museum store.)

General readings:

1. *Ramayana of Valmiki*: 3-43. Note the extensive glossary at the end. You will find it very useful because the text is filled with unfamiliar terms, and the main characters are called by a variety of names and epithets.
2. *The Rama Epic*: 23-35; 41; 101-117; 147-163; 199-213

For suggestions for further reading, see *Ramayana of Valmiki*, pp. 870-871. *The Rama Epic* has a very extensive bibliography, if you want to dive even deeper.



Rama and Lakshmana carried by Hanuman, detail of a pair of doors with scenes of the lives of Krishna and Rama, and other deities, 1960-1980. India, Odisha state. Paint on wood. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Gift of Dr. Joanna Williams, 2023.71ab. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.



Forrest McGill. Photograph courtesy of the speaker.



Left: Elephant Rock AlUla. Right: Barbara Porter. Photographs courtesy of Barbara Porter.

Save the Date

Jan. 22 - Feb. 5, 2027

Saudi Arabian Odyssey: From the Desert to the Sea

Take the road less traveled and join the SAA for a fascinating journey through the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a country untouched by tourism until relatively recently. The trip combines history, culture, archaeology, architectural wonders, and natural beauty. Led by distinguished Middle East archaeologist and art historian, Dr. Barbara Porter, we will explore a variety of venues, including UNESCO World Heritage sites, such as the Nabatean ruins of Hegra (Mada'in Salih) and historically strategic sites along the incense trade route, such as AlUla. We will also visit the holy city of Madinah, the JAX district of contemporary art in Riyadh, and significant castles and forts. Throughout the trip, we will be inspired by Saudi Arabia's stunning geographical diversity, including sandstone cliffs, dramatic rock formations, an ancient natural canyon, historic oases, and the crystal clear waters of the Red Sea. The trip will begin in the capital city of Riyadh in the historical heartland of Najd, and conclude in the port city and commercial hub of Jeddah, along the shores of the Red Sea, the historic gateway to Mecca.

Once the Society is assured that the trip can safely proceed, an email announcement will be sent to all Society members and newsletter subscribers.



Left: Baudhanath Stupa, Kathmandu, Nepal. Photograph courtesy of Signature Escapades.

Right: Buddha Dordenma, Thimphu, Bhutan. Photograph courtesy of Jojo's Adventures.

Save the Date

May 12 - 23, 2027

Himalayan Heritage: Journey to Nepal and Bhutan

Join the SAA for an unforgettable trip to the "Roof of the World." Mantled with the high Himalayas to the north, Nepal is a land of scenic splendor, age-old temples, diverse cultures, exotic wildlife and some of the friendliest people on the planet. We'll start in Kathmandu where we will be immersed in Buddhist culture, religion and art with our scholar, Swosti Kayastha. We also visit Chitwan National Park where we'll see many of the Nepali fauna in their natural habitat. What would a trip to Nepal be without going to Lumbini, birthplace of the Buddha. A short plane ride will take us to "The Land of the Thunder Dragon" - Bhutan where we will be joined by art historian, Ariana Maki, whose research focuses on the material and visual cultures that constitute South Asia and its borderlands, with particular expertise in Bhutan and the broader Himalayan region. She is a two-time Fulbright scholar to Bhutan. Ariana will introduce us to the arts and textiles of Bhutan and we'll visit museums, craftspeople engaging in their arts, and workshops. Buddhism is as important in Bhutan as it is in Nepal, so we will also see one of the largest seated Buddha statues in the world as well as either the iconic Tiger's Nest Monastery or Kyichu Lhakhang, one of Bhutan's oldest and most sacred temples (your choice). We will stay in 4 or 5 star hotels, which are walkable to sites. These two countries are not to be missed! This trip will open for registration in September and will be announced via email.