



CASVA

Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

Interpreting the Art of China

Over the past decade, support for scholarship in the field of Asian art at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts has increased exponentially, and several events have made significant contributions to that expansion. In 1998, the distinguished Sinologist and Japanologist Lothar Ledderose of the University of Heidelberg delivered the forty-seventh A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts. This was the first time the Mellon Lectures had been devoted to the art of Asia. The publication of Ledderose's research as *Ten Thousand Things*:

Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art in 2000 by Princeton University Press — in the Bollingen Series, established by Paul Mellon — marked a turning point in art history (fig. 1). *Ten Thousand Things* (translated into Chinese in 2005) is one of those rare books that changes a whole field of study, altering cultural understanding. Ledderose's hypothesis that the Chinese modular system allowed for the mass production of paradoxically unique objects provided a powerful theory of Chinese creativity as a whole — that it imitated the duplicative processes of fertile nature. The thousands of individualized, life-size terracotta warriors made for the First Emperor of Qin in the third century BCE, and discovered only in 1974, provided a key example. Ledderose also looked beyond these, however, at mass production in such areas as bronze ritual vessels, temple design, the manufacture of porcelain, and the development of printing technologies. He even argued for the combination of modularity with spontaneity in Chinese painting and calligraphy.

This year's sixty-first Mellon Lecturer, Professor Craig Clunas of the University of Oxford, also turns to China for his subject. His starting point is a statement by Ernst Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* — the best-selling volume based on Gombrich's own 1956 Mellon Lectures — about how the mind of the beholder completes the forms so briefly suggested by the brush in Chinese painting. Where Ledderose studied mass production of unique, hand-made objects, Clunas thinks about the production of different meanings in painting, whether from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) or the People's Republic of China, according to the responses of

the individual viewers. In the not so distant past, art historians in the West felt free to talk about a general category of “Chinese painting.” Yet Clunas insists that, just as in cultures with which we are more familiar, different audiences produce different kinds of art; different ideal viewers — whether gentlemen, emperors, merchants, the nation, or the people — are in turn constructed by the works of art directed toward them. (fig. 2).

These two series of Mellon Lectures represent, in the words of the founding proposal made to the Gallery's board of trustees in 1949, “the results of the best contemporary thought and scholarship bearing upon the subject of the fine arts,” and the lecturers were beyond question “of exceptional ability, achievement, and reputation.” CASVA's own mission is broader, however, and supports scholarship on the art of the world at all levels of experience, with a special commitment to scholars in the early stages of their careers as well as to underrepresented fields.

It is now hard to imagine that in 1998, the year of Ledderose's lectures, CASVA, then in its nineteenth year, had had only two fellows from Asia (one each from Japan and the People's Republic of China). To remedy this record, and building on the success of earlier initiatives in Latin America and eastern and central Europe, Dean Henry A. Millon proposed that the Starr Foundation support a program of short-term senior fellowships for scholars from Asia. The grant was awarded, making it possible to bring nine fellows, five of whom came from the People's Republic of China, to spend two months at the Center and two months traveling to collections in the United States.

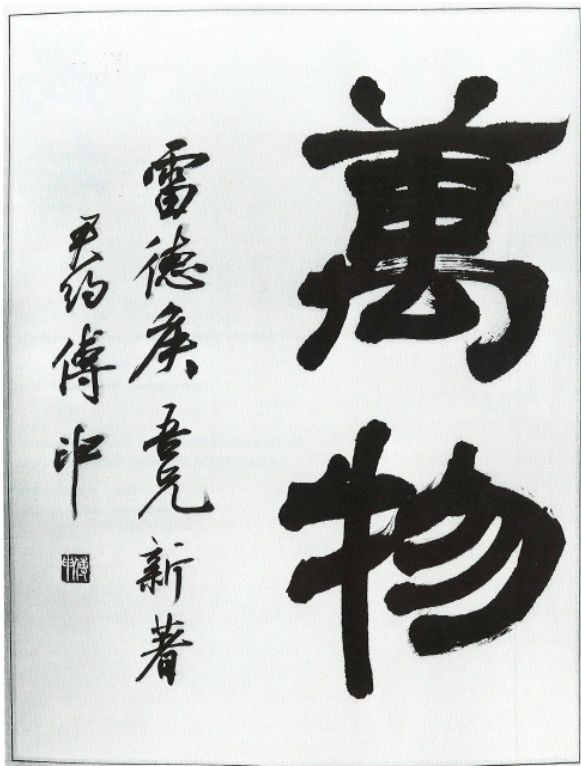


Fig. 1. Fu Shen (b. 1937), calligraphic frontispiece for *Ten Thousand Things* (1997), ink on paper, ©National Gallery of Art, reproduced with permission of Lothar Ledderose.

Fellows in the Starr program— active from 1999 to 2006— benefited from the increasingly sophisticated study of Asian art they found here. CASVA's selection committee for the fellowship involved colleagues from across the United States, who were also helping to develop outstanding graduate programs in which the arts of Asia are studied as vigorously as anywhere in the world. Two new fellowships at CASVA, made possible by the New Century Fund, helped support this national growth: the two-year Ittleson and A. W. Mellon predoctoral fellowships for graduate students specializing in a field other than Western art. Of the forty-two predoctoral students who have received these fellowships, eleven have worked on Chinese topics, and are having an impact in the field.

These recent alumni may be distinguished from many of their professional predecessors in the United States by their linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary preparation. It was once common practice, as Craig Clunas points out, to approach Chinese art as the expression of a set of absolute formal values— often related to those then applied in the formal analysis of Renaissance or Gothic art— while reading philosophical and critical texts only in translation. Now, command of Chinese, Japanese, or other Asian languages, already of growing importance when Gombrich wrote, is essential. The eleven former CASVA fellows learned Chinese in a variety of ways: at a public high school in Vermont, as a mother tongue, from within an immigrant family, and at a university in Italy. This variety of educational backgrounds represents another important change.

Not so long ago, just as American art was studied for the most part only by American students, the majority of scholars of Chinese art in the United States were of Chinese origin. Inspired by the remarkable new discoveries being made in China, they often identified their interests with archaeology rather than with art history in the wider sense. Today, through the work of CASVA's

board of advisors and fellowship selection committees and programs, the ideal that it is vital for all scholars in art history to have an opportunity to debate and test their work on a daily basis with those studying other cultures has truly been realized in the case of Chinese studies. Among our current board of advisors, Marcia Haufler and Eugene Wang are specialists in the arts of China. In addition to the Mellon Lecturer, two senior fellows and one predoctoral fellow are working on Chinese topics. Professor Sonya Lee, University of Southern California, adopts an ecological and environmental approach to a group of major religious monuments, the cave temples of Sichuan. Professor Jennifer Purtle, University of Toronto, is examining the urban cosmopolitanism of Mongolian colonial rule of Chinese cities in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (fig. 3). And Di Yin Lu, a graduate student in history at Harvard University, is looking at the history of the Shanghai Museum from 1949 to 1996, analyzing the creation of both a national canon and a market for antiquities after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Each of these projects adopts methods from a new global art history, including GIS mapping, statistical analysis, cultural anthropology, and colonial theory, in ways that enrich the whole field. At the same time, the encounter with the unfamiliar world of Chinese art history has revived interest among fellows working on European and American art in such issues as reception, historical and philosophical context, political patronage, the power of institutions, and even connoisseurship and formal analysis, all of which have risked becoming overly familiar and, perhaps, stagnant. Understanding the long and complicated history of Chinese culture and viewing it through other lenses may put in perspective the presentism of much current interest in contemporary global art. • Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*



Fig. 2. Chen Shizeng (1876–1923), *Viewing Paintings* (1917), hanging scroll on paper, Palace Museum, Beijing



Fig. 3. Kublai Khan giving his golden seal to the Polos at his new capital Cambaluc, from the *Livre des Merveilles*, c. 1413. Ms 2810, f. 3v., Bibliothèque National, Paris, France, ©Art Resource, NY