

The Daghlian Collection: A Passionate Journey of Collecting Chinese Art

William Daghlian's apartment on West 107th Street in Manhattan resembled a museum that had been kept a secret for a long time. Every corner of the living room, bedroom, and study was covered with Chinese ceramics and sculpture, nestled together with volumes on Chinese art, and interspersed with African carvings. All the shelves in the bathroom and kitchen were also taken over by Chinese 'pots'. There was just enough room to squeeze a Steinway B Grand piano into the living room, so that Mr. Daghlian could practice, play, teach his private students, and hold his weekly music performance class.

Daghlian, as he likes to be called, has led a rich, cultural life. The survivors of his family were forced to flee Turkey after 1915 and made their way to Brazil in the late twenties, where he was born in 1941 to Armenian parents (father born in Turkey and mother in Syria.) He was raised in a home where Portuguese, Turkish, Armenian, Arabic, as well as English and French, were spoken. Consequently, Daghlian's ears and eyes were exposed to a kaleidoscope of interwoven cultures, and his curiosity about local and world histories led him to explore many civilizations through books and exhibitions.

His readings on Mao Zedong, China's leader from 1949 to 1976, sparked an interest in Chinese history. When Daghlian read Mao's obituary in the New York Times, Mao's quote "...in 1000 years even Marx and Lenin might appear rather ridiculous"¹ resonated with his own long-term thinking and his fascination with Chinese culture.

This interest in Mao and China was one of the reasons Daghlian began to collect Chinese art. For more than forty years, he read about Chinese art history, met art dealers, and amassed a collection of Chinese works of art. His passion for studying each and every piece in depth developed into a teaching collection of over 1600 pieces, spanning over 5000 years of Chinese history.

While seated on late Qing Dynasty (19th century) chairs, the only Chinese pieces from the collection still in his apartment, Daghlian talked about his life of collecting with France Pepper, Consulting Curator of The Daghlian Collection of Chinese Art.

HOW DID YOUR COLLECTION BEGIN?

I have had the collecting bug since my childhood. As an adolescent, the earliest piece I collected was a fragmentary Brazilian 18th century painting, which I later donated to the São Paulo Museum of Art.

When I arrived to New York in 1968 to further my music studies, I was flabbergasted by its possibilities. In addition to the great music schools, Carnegie Hall, Philharmonic Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, and the New York City Opera, there was the art world. Soon, I

¹ Fox Butterfield, *Mao Tse-Tung: Father of Chinese Revolution*, New York Times obituary, September 10, 1976.

started to visit museums, walk through the city and discover galleries. My curiosity and interest in the visual arts intensified. I had a good eye and began to dabble, acquiring small, inexpensive but attractive pieces of African, Pre- Columbian, East and South Asian, as well as American and European, art. The first Chinese artwork I bought was a modest Ming Dynasty (1368 -1644) literati painting on silk. It was not in good condition, but it was beautiful. That was in the early 1970s.

At the time, my friend Vera Penteadó Coelho, a São Paulo University professor, ethnologist, and curator visited me in New York and wisely suggested I focus on one culture. She said "you have a great eye, a group of pieces from different cultures is interesting, but if you concentrate on one, your collection will become important." Since I was already drawn to Chinese art and it was then affordable, I took her advice and began to concentrate on Chinese ceramics.

WHY CERAMICS?

Form!

In the 1970s in New York, as it appeared to me, interest in Chinese ceramics and works of art gravitated toward the elaborately decorated Qing Dynasty (1644 -1911) pieces, such as the Altman Collection at the Metropolitan Museum, the Frick Collection, or the large cloisonné collection on display at the Brooklyn Museum. I, on the other hand, probably influenced by Modernism, marveled at form, the elegance, clarity, and simplicity of Song Dynasty (960 -1279) ceramics, just as I admired the austere purity of the music of Webern. Also, since at that time few people seemed to be interested in Song ceramics, they were not expensive and were within my budget.

I was also drawn to Chinese Neolithic vessels and started to read Chinese history in order to have more context in understanding the ceramics. I began to visit the Asia Society and China Institute in New York. I did not look only at the high-end Madison Avenue galleries, but I also discovered small galleries where you could find hidden beauties. That was an eye opener! The first ceramic piece I acquired was a Song Dynasty six-lobed bowl with molded decoration.

DOES YOUR AESTHETIC IN MUSIC INFORM YOUR TASTE IN ART?

It is very hard to put into words, but there is a strong connection. I am a professional musician, teacher, and music producer (www.williamdaghlian.com), and my hobby is art collecting. They undoubtedly inform each other. I connect with 'qi', or energy ~ whether it is in music or in the visual arts. The inner tension of a piece is the most appealing aspect that I connect with. I also stress the inner tension of the harmony and rhythm in my music teaching. In August 2013, I visited Elza Feltrini, my first piano teacher, already in her nineties and lucid. She remembered my first lesson, and she remarked how from the beginning I understood harmonic tension. I was six years old.

When I see a piece of ceramic that is technically well made but does not have 'qi', it falls short. The same is true with music that is technically accomplished but still lacks that something. I have pieces like that for study purposes. When they are placed next to the

pieces that do have that energy, even if those 'qi' imbued pieces are not in pristine condition, they speak to me, they breathe, like a music performance that may not be technically perfect, but may have immense vitality.

WHAT WERE OTHER INFLUENCES IN YOUR COLLECTING?

Books played a major role. First, I would buy a ceramic and then look for books and catalogues that would help me better understand the piece. I also spent a lot of time in museums. In addition to New York, I visited the museums in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Miami, Atlanta, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cleveland, Boston, and many others, as well as abroad, when I travelled to Europe or Asia for work.

In the 1990s, I produced a CD in Tokyo, where I spent a month for the first time. I visited the Tokyo National Museum and every other museum that had collections of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese art. I also paid a lot of attention to Japanese folk art. Over the years, I visited Japan three times. The Korean and Japanese aesthetic for ceramics deeply influenced me. A piece that is not perfectly symmetrical, like a Joseon period (14th-19th century) vessel that has ash on it and looks dented appeals to me. My taste is idiosyncratic, I transferred that aesthetic to Chinese ceramics and started to buy some pieces that were not "perfect." After making that connection, I bought my first large "flawed" Yuan Dynasty (1271 - 1368) jar. Chinese ceramic connoisseurs would have rejected that crooked piece, but I saw beauty in it. History is also an important element. When I study a piece, I read as much as I can to understand its historical context, hence the library I amassed.

DID YOUR EARLIER LIFE IN BRAZIL INFLUENCE YOUR LATER COLLECTING?

In the late 1940s and 1950s, the São Paulo Museum of Art was being formed. I was fascinated by it and went there all the time. I saw Renaissance art, Old Masters, and Impressionist works. 20th Century European, American and Brazilian Modernism, and especially Cubism, especially interested me.

São Paulo was a lovely provincial city, and I had the good fortune to grow up there. At the time it was not as large as a cosmopolitan city like Rio de Janeiro, which then was the capital of Brazil, or Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, not that much happened in the cultural life of the city. Therefore, I was able to, as much as possible, hear most concerts, read most books, see every film, play, and art exhibition... I could see it all because not that much was happening in the place. Today, it is different. São Paulo is a very rich city and one of the largest in the world. It has become the financial and cultural capital of the country.

In São Paulo, I once came across a used German art book about Indian temple sculpture. I could not read the text, but it sparked my interest in the culture. Then, when I moved to New York, I found a gallery in Greenwich Village that sold Indian art and bought a 12th century limestone Kubera sculpture (Lord of Wealth), not an important piece, but just what I could afford. I still have a beautiful Post-Gupta period (6th century) Indian Buddha head that I bought around the same time. New York broadened my world. I was able to

incorporate and expand on everything I had grown up with.

Another example that comes to mind is a Japanese film I had seen in Brazil in the early 1960s, a drama about the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907). Then, when in New York I saw Tang figurines and ceramics, I began studying and buying them.

DID YOU TRAVEL TO CHINA?

I had an old piano student in New York, a niece of Jules Bache (a German-born American banker, art collector, and philanthropist.) She knew of my interest in Chinese art and suggested we travel to China. I told her I could not afford it, but she said "you have the knowledge and I have the money" and offered to take me to China for a month. That was in 2002-2003. I visited more than 60 museums and temples, traveled along the Yangtze River, explored the museums in Beijing, Xi'an, Shijiazhuang, Wuhan, Chongqing, Nanjing, Hangzhou and Shanghai, among others. I also went to kiln sites and met archaeologists and curators.

I was very fortunate to have had access to storage rooms and study collections in many museums. The opportunity to handle vessels and shards from all angles and to examine the bases of vessels was invaluable. This also allowed me to feel the proper weight of various types of ceramics. From this extraordinary experience, I gained a deeper perspective of my own collection.

WHY DID YOU COLLECT SO MANY PIECES RATHER THAN FOCUS ON FEWER, SELECT PIECES?

I never intended to build a collection of costly pieces or put together a collection for investment purposes. I did not have the financial means to do that, nor the interest in that approach. It was not my intention to sell it, I built it in order to learn, and I have many pieces of a same type for the sake of comparison. Just like in music, multiple performances of a single piece with different musicians, even the same piece played by the same performer in different occasions... change one element, and it changes everything. I enjoy the permutations in pieces, especially if they are subtle. Having several of the same type next to each other helps me understand and appreciate the ceramics with increased discernment.

Although ceramics make up the core of my collection, it also includes Buddhist stone sculpture, wood sculpture, Daoist, as well as Christian sculpture from Macau, seals and small works of art that are nice to handle. I explored many paths, made a lot of mistakes but learned from them and trained my eye. I also was lucky and came across great pieces. The collecting journey has been very enriching. I feel so fortunate to live in New York and work with what I love most and to have been able to put together such a collection that has been my close companion over the years. It was a pleasure to live with all these works of art.

HOW DO YOU HOPE YOUR COLLECTION WILL BENEFIT OTHERS NOW THAT IT IS AT QUEENS COLLEGE?

I believe in public education. That is why I made the gift of the collection, as well as of my extensive library, to the City University of New York (CUNY). I trust in its mission and am delighted that the collection is now at Queens College, a senior college and one of the jewels of the CUNY system. This is my contribution.

I have planted a seed. My expectation is that it will grow and will be studied and published. My hope is that students, faculty, and the public will learn from it and enjoy the pieces. It is a didactic, comprehensive collection and should be used as a teaching tool. Not just for learning ceramics, but it implies the study of art, history, anthropology, religion, and the philosophies of East Asia. If others can learn from my collection, research further and contribute new perspectives, it will be just wonderful. That would fulfill my goal.

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