



Revisiting “Asian Art”

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The Impossibility of Asian Art

In 399 CE, the Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian (c. 337–422) left the city of Chang’an (present-day Xian), to embark on an epic, 14-year pilgrimage. His travels took him first overland through Western China and Central Asia, across the northern portion of the Indian subcontinent to the Bay of Bengal, then by sea south to Sri Lanka, and eventually back to China via the islands of Indonesia.¹ Approximately two years after returning home Faxian published an account of his travels entitled *A Record of Buddhist Countries*. This text, one of the first such Buddhist travelers’ accounts and replete with careful descriptions of what Faxian saw, was influential at the time and remains important today to scholars and students of Asian studies. Art historians find in Faxian’s text rich descriptions of the centrality and power of objects within Buddhist rituals in all the locations he visited. He describes an image procession he witnessed in the Central Asian oasis city of Khotan (today in China) for which monks constructed a cart “more than thirty cubits high, which looked like the great hall (of a monastery) moving along.” At Khotan’s royal palace, the king

put off his crown of state, changed his dress for a fresh suit, and with bare feet, carrying in his hands flowers and incense, and with two rows of attending followers, went out at the gate to meet the image; and, with his head and face (bowed to the ground), he did homage at its feet.²

In a similar manner, Faxian records the importance of a seated statue of the Buddha at a monastery (*vihara*) in Sri Lanka that “the monks and commonalty reverence and look up to without ever becoming wearied.”³

Faxian's travels to Buddhist sites in southern Asia, his translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese, and his detailed descriptions of Buddhist practices place him at a particularly important historical moment for scholars of Asian art. As himself a scholar, not of art but of Buddhist culture, Faxian, like contemporary scholars, travels to important sites, gathers information about the visual images, the architecture, the local rituals, and reports on these things to his peers through explanation, presentation, and interpretation of texts and images. Because Faxian's reach was so great, and because Buddhism shapes many of the cultures and periods of Asian art, scholars of Asian art, regardless of their specialty, will at some point encounter Faxian's text in their research or teaching. And the ubiquity of image use across geographical areas of Asia evidenced in his writings – the fact that a fifth-century traveler from Xian was able to ascribe a similar import to images from the deserts of Central Asia and the island of Sri Lanka – suggests a shared visual culture that we today might study, following in Faxian's footsteps.

Yet if, on the surface, Faxian's travels and resulting textual observations suggest a unity – a shared experience – within Asian material culture, in that same text, he dispels any such idea. After describing the beauty and “solemn dignity” of a particular Sri Lankan jade statue of the Buddha, Faxian goes on to write (referring to himself in the third person):

Several years had now elapsed since Fa-Hsien [Faxian] left the land of Han [China]; the men with whom he had been in intercourse had all been of regions strange to him; his eyes had not rested on an old and familiar hill or river, plant or tree; his fellow-travellers, moreover, had been separated from him, some by death, and others flowing off in different directions; no face or shadow was now with him but his own, and a constant sadness was in his heart. Suddenly (one day), when by the side of this image of jade, he saw a merchant presenting as his offering a fan of white silk; and the tears of sorrow involuntarily filled his eyes and fell down.⁴

The places and people that Faxian encountered during his many years of travel were foreign to him, strange, and it was the sight of an object (the silk fan) so unmistakably Chinese that finally brought the homesick traveler to tears. If Buddhism links aspects of Asian culture together, then, bringing “Asia” together through Buddhism simultaneously reveals and produces crucial differences across the region. Thus, while all students of Buddhist art – whether third-century BCE north India, eleventh-century Japan, or fourteenth-century Myanmar – have to know the shared tenets of Buddhism (and even have to know Faxian's text itself), they also must acknowledge the diversity of culture which Faxian experiences on his travels. And if that diversity is evident even against a backdrop of the so-called “internationalism” of Buddhist art,⁵ then it is perhaps more emphatically so for the many other types of art – religious and secular – produced over millennia in the large and varied geographical zone classified as “Asia.”

Indeed, the geographical and temporal scope of Asian art far outstrips that found in other traditional segments of art history, most of which have boundaries

spanning a handful of countries and a handful of centuries at most. Asian art, by contrast, covers 30 percent of the Earth's landmass and 60 percent of the world's population, and investigates the history of this vast region over the course of the past five millennia. Like African art or the art of the Americas, Asian art is an unwieldy, sprawling object.

The very idea of "Asia" as a unified land or singular culture arises not from any physical or material reality, but rather from political, cultural, and economic relations of power, in order to sustain an idea of a unified Europe.⁶ As Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen explain, "of all the so-called continents, Asia is not only the largest but also the most fantastically diversified, a vast region whose only commonalities – whether human or physical – are so general as to be trivial."⁷ Even when the definition is narrowed from the "continent" of Asia (the Mediterranean to the Pacific) to the Asia of popular imagination and practice (South, Southeast, and East Asia) this "vast and heterogeneous swath of terrain from Afghanistan to Japan . . . still lacks the unifying features that are expected to characterize a human-geographical region."⁸ The scholars conclude that Asia is "little more than a flattering mirror to Europe, conceptualized more by its supposed lack of Europeanness than by any positive attributes of its own."⁹ In their study of world geography, they go on to show how Asia and the correlate concepts of "the Orient" and "the East" shift over time, but always remain defined in relation to Europe, "the Occident," and "the West."¹⁰

The boundaries of Asia and Asian art have shifted over the past century, always in negotiation with prevailing power relations, and often with strong undercurrents of the Orientalist production of Asia just beneath the surface. During the early twentieth century, "Asian art" referred almost exclusively to pre-modern works from India, China, and Japan, but within that framework included a wide variety of media, from swords to textiles. These artworks were valued for their aesthetic beauty, expert craftsmanship, reverence for tradition, and spirituality – qualities seen as lost or lacking in contemporary industrialized Euro-America. Art historian Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) extolled the beauty of Japanese art, while his colleague Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) highlighted the sophisticated spirituality of Indian art, even explicitly comparing it to medieval European art to demonstrate its legitimacy.¹¹ These combined efforts legitimized Asian art: artworks that decades earlier had been ignored, unknown, or, in the case of Hindu imagery, debased as "monstrous," within Europe and North America, now were seen as fine art worthy of study.¹²

In Asia, colonialism and rising nationalism in both India and Japan brought the art historian Okakura Tenshin (or Kakuzo, 1862–1913), and the artist-poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) together in Calcutta in 1902 to counter the primacy of the West with the idea of pan-Asianism.¹³ While Tenshin was motivated by the nationalism of late Meiji period Japan, and Tagore by Bengal's *swadeshi* movement (an anti-colonial campaign to favor Indian-made goods), both men saw Asia's spirituality as a strength in contrast to the West's materialism.¹⁴ Yet, this loose attempt to unify Asian art and politics ultimately participated in the

Orientalist production of “Asia,” defining Asian art by what European art lacked, thus confirming Asia’s difference from Europe and enabling it to serve merely as a reminder of Europe’s superiority.

As a result of the early focus on the spiritual and the ancient in Asian art, temporal and geographic areas of study have long depended on what enabled a proper mirror for Europe or what supported a constructed vision of Asia. Some areas of study, like Chinese painting, fit nicely into a Hegelian understanding of progress and history, or easily fell into formalist analysis in parallel with European painting and connoisseurship studies. Others, like the sculptural program of the Hindu temple, compared nicely with Gothic cathedrals, and could fit into Coomaraswamy’s rhetoric linking medieval spirituality across geographical and temporal boundaries. Buddhism, seen within textual studies as a legitimate, philosophical religious tradition with an easily identifiable singular figurehead, also drew the attentions of art historians and collectors, aided perhaps by the Gandharan region’s aesthetic affinities with ancient Greek and Roman sculptural traditions.

After World War II, the collection and study of Asian art intensified, particularly in North America, but also within Europe and parts of Asia as well. “Asian art” gathered more objects, sites, and information under its broad umbrella, but at least initially the discipline remained fairly conservative, focusing on the ancient and the spiritual, and arguing for the legitimacy of the discipline by asserting that Asian art indeed had a history. Exemplifying this conservatism is Sherman E. Lee’s (1918–2008) *A History of Far Eastern Art*, one of the major textbooks used in survey courses of Asian art history from the time of its original publication in 1964 through the release of its fifth edition in 1994.¹⁵ The book’s title pulls in several directions. First, it asserts that Asia has a history, a claim that mid-century art historians would wish to make against those who located history and development solely within Europe. Second, the title doubly distances the material in this book from that of the West: not just Eastern art, but Far Eastern, a term that echoes the romantic visions of the exotic East. In doing so, the title itself can be understood to reinforce the Orientalist underpinnings of Asian art, even as it argues for the existence of history outside of Europe. Finally, the book’s presumptive comprehensiveness reinforces the unity of Asia and the possibility that it could be encapsulated in one text. (The current volume’s title also falls into many of these problems. We discuss this directly below.)

The comprehensiveness and unity presumed in Lee’s title could not, of course, be delivered in the book. Its lacunae provide a cross-section of Asian art’s own gaps in the middle of the twentieth century, and demonstrate what needed to be left out in order for a coherent, singular narrative to emerge. Excluded from the book are any modern or contemporary works, any Korean art except gold-work and ceramics, and most Islamic, Jewish, and Christian art from the continent, despite long traditions of art production from these religious communities in Asia. Aside from a single example of Islamic art, the Southeast Asian material focuses almost entirely on medieval Buddhist and Hindu works.¹⁶ Lee

includes five pages on Mughal painting, but no examples of Mughal architecture (not even the Taj Mahal). These exclusions present Asian art as a unified field, with a focus on traditional, carefully crafted, spiritually endowed objects (privileging "Eastern religions" such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Daoism), utterly distinct from Euro-American artistic traditions. These lacunae also enable a singular narrative as Asian art develops consistently from Stone and Bronze Age cultures of the region, through the spread and "international influence" of Buddhist art, to the rise of national styles in India, Indonesia, China, and Japan, each one peaking at various points in time (but all pre-1850) before finally slipping into "ossification."¹⁷ The point is not that Lee's work deserves to be singled out for criticism – to the contrary, the longevity of the book's printing serves as a testament to the text's success as an important document for the study of Asian art – but rather that it exemplifies the Orientalist underpinnings of Asian art history into the late twentieth century.

While Lee's text itself might be said to represent an ossification of Asian art history, its publication coincided with new directions of study within the field, often in concert with the political exigencies of the post-war period. The 1950s and 1960s saw a growing popular and scholarly interest in more esoteric elements of "Eastern religions" such as Zen, Tantra, and goddess worship both within Asia and in the northern Atlantic,¹⁸ continuing the trend of emphasizing the spiritual in Asian art but expanding the types of art investigated under that rubric. Funding for the study of Asian art came from multiple sources, whether collectors, diaspora communities, or governments seeking to understand a region of the world where they might have political or economic interests. As a result, wars, while certainly destroying much cultural heritage, have often spurred interest in regions of Asia: the Japanese occupation of Korea produced a number of archaeological and art historical experts in both Korea and Japan; the US occupation of Japan supported the early inquiries of Japanese and American art historians and collectors; more recent US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have given rise to government funding and a greater interest in the art and antiquities of these regions in university departments and among scholars of all disciplines.¹⁹ The political impetus for the study of some areas of Asian art over others continues to shape the field, just as colonial concerns and anti-colonial activism earlier articulated the central questions and objects for Asian art.

In the past few decades, with so-called globalization and rising attention to multiculturalism, as well as the flourishing of contemporary art from Asia at auction houses and galleries, the definition of Asian art has vastly expanded to include the modern and contemporary periods and to encompass regions or types of art often overlooked in older approaches to the continent. Starting in the late 1980s, major scholarly publications began to address the art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Asia, moving away from earlier critiques that labeled this work as merely derivative and engaging instead in analyses that acknowledge the effects of the global colonial economic and cultural system during this period.²⁰ With several major exhibitions of contemporary Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian

art circulating in the 1990s and 2000s, the popularity of contemporary Asian art as well as the art of the Asian diaspora has spurred scholars to study the most recent centuries of Asian visual culture (see Machida and Mathur in this volume).²¹ Gradually scholars are filling in the temporal gaps, but the wealth of material on earlier periods still dwarfs that on these more recent eras.

Despite this expansion, Southeast Asia, Korea, the Himalayan regions, Mongolia and Manchuria, Central Asia and the Afghan cultural region still receive less scholarly attention than the canonical regions of India, China, and Japan. Even within these “primary” countries, internal peripheries remain marginal: tribal and rural art forms, art produced by women, the visual culture of regional minorities, and those cultures for which materiality is less important. Segments of southern India, for example, remain largely excluded from the canonical narrative that is centered on the northern regions of the subcontinent. Tibet and Nepal remain caught between India and China; Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia remain secondary, with their art often seen as derivative of China or India. Gradually these regions have gained more scholarly attention, and as they do, they reshape the fabric of Asian art in productive ways.

With the rise of interdisciplinary conversations within academia, historians of Asian art have adopted a broad range of methodologies, borrowing from the fields of anthropology, geography, literature, cultural studies, gender studies, and postcolonial studies, to explore an ever-increasing range of visual culture, whether south Indian textiles in Thailand, mosques in western China, Portuguese baroque churches in the Indian state of Goa, nineteenth-century photographs from Japan, or contemporary installation art by Vietnamese American artists. This methodological expansion drives the study of many geographical areas not traditionally included in Asian art’s canon, but even more crucially promises to shift the underpinnings of Asian art in fundamental ways.

The growing scope of Asian art is invigorating for the field, producing rich scholarship, and giving voice to underrepresented cultures. It also aids us in negotiating Asian art’s Orientalist foundations. Each new addition to the field undermines its unity. It is now abundantly clear that no central, coherent narrative can incorporate all of Asian art, nor can we maintain a crisp distinction between the mutually dependent and asymmetrically constructed categories of Asian art and Western art. We also recognize the ways in which new methodological approaches and new additions to the objects discussed within the rubric of Asian art necessitate fundamental changes in the way Asian art is pursued. We cannot merely add objects into the mix as if that would make it whole; we must accept the challenge to rethink the foundations of the discipline rather than presume we can just keep adding on.

Yet, if we recognize that Asian art developed as a particular construction within the history of art, that the immense regional scope rests upon long histories of othering, producing a region unified only in that it helps to shore up a similarly constructed, united “West,” why, then, persist with Asian art? Why not replace

Asian art with multiple geographically based categories?²² Or, why not break down Asian art even further into categories based on shared geography, time, and language, such as medieval north Indian art, Khmer art, or post-1945 Japanese art, which would be more equivalent to their European and North American counterparts and more in tune with how we as specialists are trained? Why, more to the immediate point, produce an edited volume such as this one that puts forth all of Asian art as a unified category alongside volumes on medieval art or contemporary art?

As the editors of this volume, grappling with these questions was more than just a rhetorical exercise. How could a volume entitled *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture* not simply reify unities and reassert the Orientalist presumptions on which the very category "Asian art" cannot help but rest? In her introduction to *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, Vishakha Desai acknowledges that the decision to keep Asian art a unified category has to do in part with convenience and with political visibility rather than any coherence.

[P]erhaps this was at least a convenient way to give weight to artistic expressions of 50 percent of the human inhabitants of our world that otherwise did not get enough attention. In other words, it was not an argument based on a philosophical justification but rather a marriage of convenience . . . There are enough common issues of traditional vs. modern, spiritual vs. political, collective vs. individual, authentic vs. hybrid, and other binaries for much of Asian art that it is worth while to see if we can come up with a better understanding of these issues together.²³

By keeping Asian art as a single category, we work from an extant, recognized position within the art historical scholarly community; we seek to strengthen that position and draw it in from the margins, where Asian art's place in art history departments and many museums, particularly in the northern Atlantic, still hovers.²⁴ But we must recognize that this "marriage of convenience" reifies the difference between a unified West and a unified East. The common issues Desai lists above are issues for all of art history and could just as easily apply to African art, European art, or Australian art – they do not make Asia separate or distinct. The persistence of Asian art as a category relies instead on long-standing presumptions about cultural difference, presumptions that have started to collapse under the weight of persuasive critique from theorists, historians, and art historians. Despite this, Asia remains linked together in our disciplinary landscape, and the existence of this volume and Desai's volume is certainly evidence of the immense weight of the Orientalist legacy for art history training, hiring, and publication in academe and the museum world.

Desai's delineation of the relatively weak reasons why we maintain this category reveals the uneasy core that defines the discipline. Whether in the introductory survey course or in the permanent galleries, Asian art refuses any master narrative or unifying essence. It is messy and vast and varied and impossible – and has to be, for to create a unified idea of Asian art is to reify the Orientalist underpinnings

of the very category “Asia.” Asian art, then, might be understood as a metonym for all of the history of art, and as an artificial space within which new questions and approaches to the discipline can be sought and explored. This volume cannot, could not, and perhaps should not encompass the landmass, population, diversity, and temporal scope of this nebulous object “Asian art,” despite the title and despite its position within the Companion series. But there are possibilities in this awkward, uncomfortable space between the covers of this book, perhaps even lessons to be learned for the discipline itself. For within the messiness lie possibilities – possibilities that pertain not just to Asian art, but to the discipline of art history as a whole.

The Many Possibilities of Asian Art

As suggested above, despite our constant struggle against the hegemony of the categorization that “Asia” represents, this vast, unwieldy, and somewhat arbitrary grouping of cultures and periods has produced a great deal of innovative and inspiring scholarly inquiry. Scholars of Asian art often rely on colleagues and methods from other disciplines to understand the visual culture of the regions and periods found under this broad rubric. We therefore often look to anthropology, history, linguistic studies, geography, archaeology, cultural studies, literature, religious studies, and many other disciplines to understand the visual and material cultures we study. Reflecting this aspect of the field, the scholars in this volume come from geography, conservation studies, anthropology, history, and archaeology, in addition to art history. They work in university and museum settings in South, Southeast, and East Asia and in the northern Atlantic, and present a wide range of experience in the field, some enjoying retirement, others just starting their careers. As a result, the volume presents a cross-section of the state of the field today, in all its diversity and multifarious methodologies. These essays demonstrate that precisely because Asian art remains a peripheral part of the discipline of art history, and precisely because Asian art history presumes to encompass such a vast geographical and temporal scope, those concerned to understand the visual culture of these regions have turned to innovative methods that have a great deal to offer to our colleagues in other regional and temporal specialisms.

Some of the issues addressed in the volume present new ways of looking at old questions. Several essays include discussions of art patronage, for example, a long-standing topic for art historical study. However, each time these well-established questions arise, they take on new twists. When a patron is, in Susan Bean’s essay, the organizer of a British colonial international exhibition, or a local neighborhood commissioning an ephemeral goddess image, how might that change the demands on a Bengali clay sculptor? When, as in De-nin Lee’s chapter, the patron images himself looking at images of himself, with his calligraphy included on the painting, how do we read the relation of patron, viewer, artist, and object?

Many scholars included here ask after the portability, ephemerality, invisibility, and malleability of the object as it passes from hand to hand, even perhaps, as Morgan Pitelka argues, fundamentally shaping the course of history as a human actor might. Lee's analysis of Chinese painting also addresses the movement of objects among patrons, reading inscriptional evidence on Chinese paintings to reveal to us the malleability of these works. Alternatively, as we find in Gregory Levine's piece, objects become dismembered and distributed around the globe, with Buddhist heads traveling to Paris under questionable circumstances to partake in an aesthetic revaluing of Asian art among collectors and in museum displays. In the case of the Parisian Buddhist heads, aesthetics leads the way, but in some contexts, archaeological evidence overwhelms other ways of understanding the ancient world, as Bonnie Cheng discusses in relation to the material culture of ancient Chinese graves. Sometimes the objects remain in place and the entirety of the architectural and ritual framing around them changes, causing new problems for art historical inquiry, as Sherry Fowler relates in her discussion of Buddhist bronzes in Japan. Resituating the art object, therefore, takes many forms and many meanings across the volume.

Graves are important repositories of material culture, but often the very questions surrounding death and the body do not easily rise to the surface. As Ashley Thompson argues, for Buddhism, "death" itself becomes a problematic category, complicated by extinguishment, nirvana, the ritual distribution of the ashes of the historical Buddha, and his subsequent representation in sculptural form. Death and the decaying corpse, precisely because they are not pleasant to look at, serve as loci for meditative and performative practices within some Japanese Buddhist contexts as well. Ikumi Kaminishi argues that as these images depict the female corpse, sexuality and gender become important rubrics through which to understand these paintings, themes found also in several of the essays in the volume.

Jennifer Purtle, for example, discusses the art of Guan Daosheng, asking after the ways in which women viewed one another's art and situating her discussion in the powerful relationships among women in China during the Yuan dynasty. Gender also centers Kaja McGowan's investigation of the problematic intersection of art history and textual study. She rereads a Javanese text describing royal journeys and argues that a feminist reading of the text, Javanese geographies, Tantric symbolisms, and related relief sculpture opens the door to a deeper and more accurate understanding of Javanese art and its royal ritual culture. At times, gender and sexuality emerge as secondary elements in the discussion, supporting larger questions related to intercultural subjectivities. Asian American artists often engage with gender, feminism, and sexuality, and Margo Machida's essay carefully situates these artists and their work within the larger history of Asian American culture, demonstrating the complex transnational flows within which these artists work. The British Indian Singh Twins anchor Saloni Mathur's essay, where gender and the idea of the twin map onto dualities of identity and cultural history embedded in the Twins' work.

Those more familiar with European or American art histories will find a great deal of anthropologically informed art history in this volume, the result of collaborations across the porous boundaries of material culture studies, ritual and performance studies, and art history. Some chapters, like Leedom Lefferts' discussion of two different types of ritual textiles in Thailand, explore the ways these objects bind communities together and mark life transitions. Others, like Jan Mrázek's discussion of the ineffable qualities of ritual Javanese knives, explore elements of objects not often discussed by art historians, despite the fact that we often work with things imbued with magical and spiritual powers. Rituals usually require spaces, and, in that vein, Elizabeth Moore asks after the multifarious use of space in the Shwedagon pagoda in Myanmar, elucidating its overlapping religious, cultural, and political uses. Kim Youngna's analysis of Seoul's urban fabric includes discussions of the use of that space, exploring the rituals grounding modern life in Korea, examining heroic historical sculptures, café culture, television, and the role of women in the city. And in order to understand historical retellings of Prince Shotoku's life through performances and images, Kevin Carr combines the observation of contemporary Japanese performances with careful historical and art historical analysis, drawing on techniques often associated with anthropology.

Ritual also informs Tamara Sears' discussion of the way monastic spaces in central northern India help us to understand the practices and hierarchies of historical periods, now difficult to reconstruct in the face of years of focusing on more prominent temple structures. Her work elucidates an area of South Asian art history often overlooked, something that Finbarr Barry Flood also does, uncovering our scholarly blind-spot in relation to Indo-Islamic culture and the borderlands of northwestern India, Pakistan, and present-day Afghanistan. Many of the scholars in the volume reassess our canonical approach to major works, whether Mughal gardens (James Wescoat), Ashokan material culture (Frederick Asher), Korean courtly painting (Kumja Paik Kim), or the traditional interpretation of Shiva Nataraja (Padma Kaimal). Still others ask where our knowledge and canon come from, with Cheng-hua Wang investigating the modern construction of Song dynasty painting as the pinnacle of Chinese art and Molly Aitken, Shanane Davis, and Yana van Dyke elucidating the painstaking process of connoisseurship in its contemporary form.

Perhaps because Asian art remains on the periphery of art history as a discipline, scholars working within this field often step past issues that elsewhere have represented major hurdles for the discipline. For example, several essays in the volume work on material that would easily fall into a "folk" or "ethnographic" category, whether Susan Bean's clay sculptures, Jan Mrázek's ritual knives, or Leedom Lefferts' undecorated monastic textiles. Kumja Paik Kim addresses this type of division head on, revealing a fundamental bias that labeled colorful Korean painting "folk" despite many works' production within a courtly context. Issues of artistic hierarchy matter little when studying some regions and periods of Asian art history, particularly those in which the canon remains less concrete than in the northern Atlantic.

On the other hand, some aspects of the art object rise to the surface in Asian art that might otherwise go unnoticed in a European context. Acknowledging the continued ritual and spiritual power of many of the objects we study has started to change the discussion within Asian art scholarship, with the animation of the object and its ability to shape history and the lives around it taken seriously by several authors in the volume, including Ashley Thompson, Jan Mrázek, and Morgan Pitelka. Weaving together multiple ways of understanding these objects also proves challenging in this context. De-nin Lee's essay raises questions about how we might incorporate contemporaneous Chinese commentaries on paintings and painters, sometimes literally written on the painting itself, with a disciplinary understanding of the work of art as complete and whole rather than continually negotiated and reworked by many hands. How to speak to the discipline while honoring histories of engagement with the art that have little to do with the ways of viewing in the Euro-American context?²⁵ Part of the answer lies in challenging the discipline itself, and in seeking colleagues in other regional specialisms whose work engages similar questions. Demystifying and de-exoticizing Asian art history remain a challenge if we are to speak across geographical and methodological divides to incorporate the study of Asian art into the discipline, and the discipline into Asian art.

Indeed, these directions for the study of visual culture and art that arise within specific Asian art contexts do present real and potent possibilities for the discipline, opportunities to dialogue across regional and temporal boundaries, both within this huge category called Asia and across the globe. This volume presents some of those possibilities, but it does not seek to erase the awkward position, the discomfort embedded at the core of Asian art. The material in this constructed continent sometimes maps nicely onto parallel periods and types of art in Europe: for example, the long history of painters and criticism in Chinese painting. But we also study woven, undecorated textiles and sculptures meant to exist for a brief festival, only to be ritually immersed in the river at the festival's conclusion. Some of this work parallels colleagues' work in the Pacific or sub-Saharan Africa. Other work directly engages with the histories of the Mediterranean region, going back to trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus, the long history of cultural exchange across Central Asia, and long-standing sea travel throughout the Indian Ocean. We are anthropology and connoisseurship, chatting with one another. On one level, we are comfortable with our discomfort, open to anything, as the diversity of scholarship in this volume demonstrates. But Asian art isn't static, easy to encompass, or comfortable. It is, perhaps, an unruly companion.

Asian Art as a Traveling Companion

Like Faxian setting off on his travels, we didn't know what we would find when we invited colleagues to contribute to this volume. Faxian had some ideas about the Buddhists and Buddhisms he might find in Central and South Asia, but as

he traveled through the region, he remarked on many things ostensibly new to him and his audience: how the local kings and their subjects worshipped, what they built and sculpted, the way they understood the texts they ostensibly shared, and how they lived despite the shared experience of Buddhism in some form. Likewise, when sending out invitations to a range of colleagues, across regional and temporal specialisms, and in different institutional contexts around the world, we didn't know what we would receive in return. We had some ideas, we even proposed some themes at the outset, but we certainly didn't anticipate everything.

Now that we have returned home, so to speak, we recognize the white silk fan and the comfort it suggests, but we also recognize, as Faxian must have, the way in which our understanding of the field we participate in, and help to shape, has changed. Likewise, we offer these essays as an intervention and engagement with the field, not as a static reflection, and not as a "state of the field." As the title of the series suggests, it is a companion to Asian art, a traveling companion perhaps, but not always a calm, quiet, easy-going companion: less a faithful dog seated at your feet, ready to fetch the paper, and more a risk-taking friend, one whom you thought you knew quite well before setting out but who, in the end, turned out to be a little more radical than you thought, pushing you into situations and places you weren't quite prepared for when starting out the journey. Sometimes this companion proves quite charming, but at other times it produces a level of discomfort not uncommon on long treks across new terrain, even terrain that you may have covered before. This companion presents challenges both for scholars of Asian art and for those outside that wide field.

To navigate this terrain, and perhaps to offer a sort of guidebook, we have organized the volume into six thematic categories: "Objects in Use," "Space," "Artists," "Challenging the Canon," "Shifting Meanings," and "Elusive, Mobile Objects." Most of the essays would fit into several of these themes, and still other themes emerge as one reads, much as a traveler will return to similar experiences in utterly different times and places. We offer the set of themes, then, as just one option for approaching these chapters. The themes, in turn, fall into two broad sections. The first three – "Objects in Use," "Space," and "Artists" – operate on the surface as building blocks for the history of art anywhere: sculptures and paintings, architecture, and the people who created them. But as one reads the essays in these three sections, these ostensibly canonical and staid categories take on new life, encounter new challenges, and in the end emerge in different form. They are building blocks, perhaps, but they do not constitute a solid foundation. A better metaphor might be the flexible, malleable frame of a raft: a mobile, traveling, unstable support, one that can go anywhere, be repaired and reworked, and potentially transform the way we see the world around us.

The book begins (and ends) with the object, something that in many methodological approaches grounds the study of art history, but the book insists on an important caveat: that objects are never static, or singular, or whole, but are themselves active elements producing shifting histories. We begin with "Objects in Use," in part to challenge the presumption that art is often without function.

The four essays in that section not only address the ways objects are used but also incorporate that use into their analysis, reshaping the way we think about the object, about context, about performance, and about the production of the object. Sometimes objects aren't used at all, and indeed that is what they are made for. From the object as the starting point, we move outward to "Space": spaces for the utilization of objects, spaces that produce specific behaviors, spaces that change the way we see the art around us, spaces that constantly and unabashedly change. These are not analyses of spaces as housing for rituals or frames for art: space here takes on a dynamic, living quality, both lived in and itself animated, often across major temporal boundaries. The third theme in this first half, "Artists," again asserts a canonical category, but one not often associated with Asian art: in some regions and periods, artists' names are lost, or more often the very idea of "artist" or "architect" does not fit and only misleads our study of the material culture in question. But in some periods and regions, artists do exist, often quite assertively, and this section explores different types of artists' interventions, the ways in which we as art historians seek out and identify artists, and how gender shapes artists' and viewers' practices.

The second grouping of themes – "Challenging the Canon," "Shifting Meanings," and "Elusive, Mobile Objects" – takes us from the raft's structural elements to some larger interpretive frameworks. Arising from our experience putting together *Asian Art* (Blackwell Anthologies in Art History, 2006), we wanted a section in this volume that enabled scholars to take on canonical assumptions about the field, to address elements of our understanding of Asian art that had calcified and perhaps become common knowledge without receiving the kind of interrogation they required. In the end, just about every essay in the volume fit into this category. The four chapters in Part V highlighted here address this issue head on, and do so in very different ways, whether taking on a particular period or type of art and deconstructing long-held views about it, challenging us to examine the objects and cultures that fall between our broad temporal, cultural, and geographical categorizations, or questioning philosophical presumptions that undergird our interpretations of the art we study. "Shifting Meanings" acknowledges that art always changes, as patrons change, as new politics emerge, as misunderstandings of earlier cultures percolate, and as masculinist, Eurocentric discourses blind us to other ways of seeing. In this section, the five authors show us how the meanings of the material culture we study alter over time and what the effects of those shifts can be. The final theme of the book returns us to the object, but highlights the ways in which the object slips out of our grasp, eluding our ability to fix it in time and place. From disembodied heads (and decapitated bodies) that travel around the world to the questionable existence of one of a set of Buddhist sculptures and on to the mobile, tactile, participatory experience of both Chinese handscrolls and ephemeral clay sculptures, this section destabilizes the object in productive and innovative ways.

As one travels on this raft, these themes highlight particular islands that one encounters in the archipelago of Asian art history. There are other islands. There

are large, varied and seemingly unending landmasses, rivers, and the tallest mountains in the world. We offer this itinerary as one among many, one that we find raises particularly salient issues for the directions Asian art is taking. Our “guide-book” includes the must-see sights and those off the beaten path. It is not an encyclopedic travel guide, not a gazetteer of each and every place and time along the way. Rather, it is an invitation to explore the scholarship that pushes at the boundaries of the field, whether that field is “Asian art history” or “art history.” As such, this volume does not purport to provide a neatly packaged, book-shaped answer to the question “What is Asian art history?” – for to presume to do so would be to fall into the Orientalist, Eurocentric construction of Asia as a unified, whole category in opposition to (and yet mirroring) Europe. Instead we have provided a companion, one that will not sit still and quietly maintain good manners, one that, to the contrary, will purposely rock the boat and challenge us to pursue new directions.

Faxian traveled regions that we now lump together as Asia. He wrote about what he discovered, translated the texts he brought back, suffered aches and pains, felt homesick, returned transformed, and, in turn, transformed the world’s understanding of religion, Buddhism, travel, geography, ritual, art, and many other things. His traveling companions died, left him, joined him, pursued other paths, kept him company, and no doubt challenged him from time to time. We see this volume as an on-going part of Faxian’s journey, a continuation but also a beginning, a shift in the conversation among Asianists and art historians. On this journey we can see some connections across our vast area of study but we also acknowledge the problematic heritage on which it travels, the shaky raft of wood and bamboo and electrical wire and bicycle parts, sometimes with a speedboat engine propelling us along, unflinchingly denying purity and authenticity while engaging in a project that seeks out emic understandings of the art we study.

Notes

- 1 For further discussion of Faxian and a map of his travels, see Sen, “The Travel Records of Chinese Pilgrims,” 24–33.
- 2 Fa-Hsien [Faxian], *Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*, ch. 3.
- 3 Ibid., ch. 38.
- 4 Ibid., ch. 38.
- 5 See, for example, Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*. Part Two of the book is titled “The International Influence of Buddhist Art.”
- 6 See Said, *Orientalism*.
- 7 Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of Continents*, 37.
- 8 Ibid., 41. Academic departments and scholarly organizations (like the Association of Asian Studies) generally separate so-called “West Asia” from South, Southeast, and East Asia. These lines, reinforced by a broad and problematic division in the discipline between Islamic art and Asian art, raise further issues with the continental

framework we interrogate here. Finbarr Barry Flood's work in this volume and elsewhere (Flood, *Objects of Translation*) has pointedly investigated the interstices of these broad categories; some curatorial departments integrate or physically connect the Islamic and South Asian areas (e.g. Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Royal Ontario Museum).

- 9 Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of Continents*, 41.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 We echo Vishakha Desai's argument – see Desai, *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, vii. See also Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, and Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*.
- 12 For the history of European reactions to Indian imagery, see Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*.
- 13 Coomaraswamy, Fenollosa, and Tenshin all became curators at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Tagore and Tenshin met again in 1913 in Boston.
- 14 For more information on the two men, their ideas and friendship, see Bharucha, *Another Asia*.
- 15 Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*, first edition in 1964, revised in 1973, fourth edition in 1982; fifth edition in 1994. We could not confirm the date nor the existence of a third edition. Many art historians have turned away from Lee and now divide the Asia survey into two segments, East Asia and South Asia. Others combine several regionally focused textbooks, use anthologies, or draw together readings independently. The other single textbook often assigned is John LaPlante, *Asian Art*.
- 16 He includes just a single example of Islamic art (a relief sculpture from a mosque) – and only then because it replicated the older, "Hindu" *wayang* style of Indonesia. Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art* (5th edn.), 284.
- 17 This narrative can be glimpsed in the general layout of the book, which is divided into four parts: Part One: "Early Culture and Art: The Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Early Iron Age," Part Two: "International Influence of Buddhist Art," Part Three: "The Rise of National Indian and Indonesian Styles," and Part Four: "Chinese, Korean, and Japanese National Styles and Their Interplay." No artwork made post-1850 is included, and many later periods, such as Qing dynasty China, are covered only briefly. Lee writes in the preface that he has left out later works done in "conservative modes" because "their persistence beyond a certain point can only be called ossification." Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art* (5th edn.), 8.
- 18 Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Global Transformations*, we use the phrase "northern Atlantic" to describe with more precision the geographic area often labeled "the West." Using northern Atlantic enables a shift away from the oppositional west/non-west while it also points specifically to the eastern seaboard of the United States, the UK, and western Europe, instead of broadly gesturing to a compass point.
- 19 See Nelson, "Politics of Ethnicity in Prehistoric Korea." Additionally, Hyung Il Pai's various publications on the historiography and politicization of Korean archaeology in relation to the Japanese occupation shed new light on these questions.
- 20 John Clark's *Modern Asian Art* represented a major step towards including these periods in the study of Asian art. Partha Mitter has written several volumes focused on eighteenth- through twentieth-century South Asia. Other work focusing on the nineteenth century includes Mathur, *India by Design* and Screech, *The Lens within*

the Heart. Recent works that reconceptualize twentieth-century Asian art in terms of national or global politics include Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art*, which looks at contemporary Thai paintings, as well as Laing, *The Winking Owl* and Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China*, the latter two both examining art from the People's Republic of China.

- 21 Machida, *Unsettled Visions*; Chang *et al.*, *Asian American Art*; Chiu *et al.*, *One Way or Another*; Minglu, *Inside Out*; Munro, *Japanese Art after 1945*; Poshyananda, *Contemporary Art in Asia*; Sambrani and Jain, *Edge of Desire*.
- 22 Lewis and Wigen, for example, propose the following division: Islamic Central Asia, Lamaist Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia. Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of Continents*, 187.
- 23 Desai, *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, ix–xi.
- 24 Art history curricula at institutions like the MS University in Vadodara, India, provide students with a strong grounding in European art history, alongside the study of India's visual culture. In some ways, the curricula at institutions like this offer a space to provide a more balanced view of global art history than entrenched institutions in the northern Atlantic.
- 25 Just as the solution to the lacunae in Asian art lies not in filling in all of the gaps, the solution to different ways of seeing and thinking around the globe is not to dredge up emic, somehow authentic, precolonial and premodern ways of approaching the art objects and replace art historical disciplinary approaches with premodern ones. We do, however, wish to take seriously the contributions "Asian art" makes to the discipline of art history, shaping it in ways that are productive for the entire discipline. Rather than a bifurcated world of "Western" art history against "Other," somehow more authentic art histories, we here seek to challenge the extant discipline by offering essays that speak to it, within it, and for it, but do so from a platform that sits on its margins. For more on these issues, see the essays engaging with James Elkins' and David Summers' arguments in Elkins, *Is Art History Global?* See especially Gupta and Ray, "Responding from the Margins."

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