

Asia Week Is Highlighted by Robert Hatfield Ellsworth Sale

By William Grimes

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The piece was jade, a cylindrical Chinese cong from the sixth century B.C., and Lu Yizheng, a 33-year-old collector from Shanghai, was all over it. Nose to the stone, he followed the pinpoint beam of his small penlight, looking for imperfections, as four friends pressed against him for a closer view and loudly debated the merits. “This is the best of the jade I have seen,” Mr. Lu said. “The size and the quality are good; so is the provenance of the jade.”

Chinese dealers, collectors and art lovers have been out in force at Christie’s, which is auctioning the art collection of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth in five days of sales that begin on Tuesday, with a week of online sales to follow. Ellsworth, a revered connoisseur who died last year, amassed one of the finest private collections of Asian art in the West, and the presale estimates total \$35 million. Jin Zhao, who collects Tang and Song dynasty porcelain in a small way, flew in from Tianjin, China, hoping to pick up one or two pieces. “It’s worth it,” he said. “This is a very great collection.”

The Ellsworth sale puts a giant exclamation point on Asia Week, an annual event that makes New York the prime destination for dealers, museum curators, scholars and collectors from around the world, a varied group that included sharp-eyed young collectors in down jackets and jeans, middle-aged dealers hunting their quarry in small packs, tweedy connoisseurs and Chinese women dressed up to Ming vase standards.

“It is the largest constellation of Asian art on the face of the earth,” said Jay Xu, director of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, who is leading a team of about two dozen curators, board members, collectors and donors to New York for a furious round of looking, meeting, greeting, publicizing and acquiring. “It is very rich.”

Mr. Xu was referring to the week’s events: the exhibits, often museum quality, at the more than 40 dealers who participate in Asia Week; the shows and lectures at institutions like Asia Society and the Japan Society; the two dozen auctions of Asian art at Sotheby’s, Christie’s, Bonhams and Doyle; and benefit parties like the one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to celebrate the centenary of its Asian art department.

But Mr. Xu could just as well have been talking money. In a good year, Asia Week accounts for about \$200 million in sales, as it did in 2014. In 2011, when Chinese

buyers were spending not just freely but in many cases recklessly, the sales figure reached \$250 million. This year's Ellsworth auction could have a similar inflationary effect.

Joan B. Mirviss, a week before Asia Week opened on Friday, said that she had already sold 75 percent of the 44 Japanese storage jars, ancient and modern, that she spent two years assembling for the exhibition "Tsubo: The Art of the Vessel."

Suneet Kapoor, a partner in Kapoor Galleries, a dealer in Indian art, said that Asia Week accounted for more than 50 percent of his annual sales. Other dealers attribute anywhere between one-third and two-thirds of their annual business to the event, which runs for nine days.

Less than 10 years ago, the market for Asian art in New York looked quite different. The International Asian Art Fair, held for many years at the Park Avenue Armory, went bust at the end of 2008, a victim of the economic downturn.

Ms. Mirviss and the Korean art dealer Jiyoung Koo hastily organized a confederation of 16 dealers, which they called Asian Art Dealers of the Upper East Side, to hold open houses that, collectively, would replace the art fair. At the same time, a half-dozen dealers making up the Japanese Art Dealers Association staged their own show, which has become an annual event.

From these beginnings, Asia Week quickly developed into its current hybrid form. "We are not an art fair," said Carol Conover, the director of Kaikodo Asian Art and the chairwoman of Asia Week. "We are something very different. The intimacy of a gallery is different than being on a floor in a big room."

The lack of a central location turned out to have advantages. "Doing it this way enables me to have my library here, to have private meetings with clients," Ms. Mirviss said. The concentration of galleries, especially along Madison Avenue in the 70s and 80s, makes it possible for buyers to cover a lot of ground quickly and to see art in intimate settings. The intangible reassurance of bricks and mortar, moreover, is no small thing in a market where trust counts for everything.

"In a way, it became more dynamic when it left the armory," Mr. Xu said. "You're hopping around New York to see all the offerings."

Not everyone is enthralled with the hustle and bustle. "In a way, I love it and hate it," said James Lally, who deals in Chinese art at his gallery, J. J. Lally. "Everybody shows up, but you can only spend 30 seconds with each person. It's difficult to maintain a polite relationship with your clients."

Asia Week has prospered in a decade dominated by bad economic news, thanks almost entirely to wealthy Chinese dealers and collectors, whose free spending

and deep pockets have led to the first Asia Week in Paris, scheduled for June, and a new branch of Art Basel in Hong Kong, which started on Sunday and will run for three days. “The dominant force is the Chinese buyer,” Mr. Lally said. “They buy 75 to 80 percent of the Chinese art at the auction houses.”

Kimberly Masteller, curator of South and Southeast Asia art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, said, “I have been amazed by how many young-looking agents there are, scouting for galleries, dealers and buyers in China.”

Dealers turn somersaults to please them. “It is hard to grasp what to display, to get it right,” said Michael C. Hughes, a dealer renting space in Shepherd W & K Galleries on East 79th Street. Known for Chinese snuff bottles, he has added a selection of colorful Chinese earthenware camels this year. “Tang sancai ware, which used to be dead, has picked up in the last year,” he explained. “The Chinese want it.”

They also want art from Nepal, Kashmir and Tibet, the regions through which Buddhism made its way to China. Mr. Kapoor said that he first noticed the trend about six years ago, when Chinese dealers began paying top dollar and then some for bronzes, in many cases regardless of quality. That has changed. “In the last three or four years we have seen collectors, some of them wanting to build museums,” he said. “They have really been educating themselves.”

And they have been showing up in droves. Francesca Galloway, a London dealer in Indian art showing at W. M. Brady & Company, on East 80th Street, put it bluntly: “If you’re a collector and you’re not here, you’re not in the game.”