

An eye for fake antiques

Chinese University of Hong Kong Art Museum director Peter Lam is at the forefront of exposing crooked antique dealers. This Saturday, he will be in Kuala Lumpur to give a lecture on detecting fake Chinese antiquities.

FAKE Chinese antiquities have become so sophisticated that detecting them now requires high-tech equipment, and leading world experts like Peter Lam of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) are at the forefront of exposing crooked dealers.

Lam, the CUHK Art Museum director for the past 30 years, says that since very early in the history of collecting Chinese antiquities, fakes, forgeries and copies have surfaced.

"But the situation has become worse in recent years, following the opening up of China and the escalation of prices of good collectors' items," he says in an interview via e-mail.

Lam investigates and authenticates Chinese antiquities such as ceramics, glass, lacquer ware, enamelware, snuff bottles, wood and bamboo carvings and calligraphy rubbings.

The most spectacular fake exposed by this highly respected scholar and investigator was a purportedly 15th Century Ming blue-and-white basin.

Says Lam: "It was a large blue and white basin painted with very fluent and vigorous dragons and waves with an imperial 15th century Da Ming Xuande Nian Zhi mark (made in the Xuande reign of the Ming, 1426-1435). A companion piece is in the Percival David Foundation of Chinese art.

"Some eight years ago, it was donated to my museum. Quite a few ceramic experts from China were fooled by it. But the more I examined it, the more suspicious I felt. Hence, I ordered a TL (thermo-luminescence) dating test by drilling two holes at the bottom. It turned out to be less than 10 years old!"

An honorary professor at CUHK fine arts department, Lam has published and presented numerous scholarly works on Chinese ceramics, calligraphy rubbings and the deco-



True to his art: Lam sees it as a conflict of interest for museum directors or curators to acquire art objects for their personal collection. **Right:** The huge and priceless Imperial Qing vase painted with 10,000 *shou* (longevity) characters of different scripts.



orative arts. His research on Chinese ceramics include:

- Early greenware from Zhejiang
- Kiln sites of ancient China
- Guangdong wares of the Northern Song Period
- Archaeological finds from Pre-Qin Sites in Guangdong

- Jingdezhen Ware of the Yuan Dynasty
- Jizhou Ware of Jiangxi
- Jian Ware
- Yaozhou Ware
- Longquan Ware
- Qingbai Ware
- Jun Ware
- Ding Ware
- Imperial Porcelain

Lam, a graduate of the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, started investigating fake antiquities in the early 1980s when he was asked to build up the permanent collection of the CUHK Art Museum.

"I had to deal with the shrewd dealer-crooks. I needed to crack their tricks and learn not to believe anything at surface value. From time to time, the Art Museum (AM) is offered gifts of art objects. I have to scrutinise them first before proposing to the AM management committee to formally accept them. This is a dilemma that a responsible museum director or curator must face."

The "star" piece in the CUHK Art Museum collection is an imperial ceramic.

"It is a large blue and white vase of monumental size and fired to celebrate the 60th birthday of the Kangxi emperor in 1713. In China, the emperor's birthday was called the Feast of Ten Thousand Longevity. Hence, the exterior of this vase is meticulously painted with exactly 10,000 *shou* (longevity) characters of different scripts. Only two other similar pieces are known to be extant, one each in the Palace Museum, Beijing and the Nanjing Museum.

"Our piece was given by an anonymous donor who purchased it in London many years ago. At that time, he paid much more for the shipment of the piece to Hong Kong than for the item. Obviously, it was a looted piece from the Old Summer Palace when the French and British allies burnt down the palace in 1860."

As for collecting antiques for himself, Lam sees it as a conflict of interest.

"It is somewhat against ICOM (International Council of Museums) ethics for a museum professional to form a personal collection, although nowadays there is no law forbidding museum directors or curators from acquiring for themselves art objects.

"(But) I still see that there is some conflict

»Antique pieces that I am interested in are well beyond my means or budget. Those that I can afford are often of mediocre quality«

PETER LAM

of interest. For myself, perhaps my 'eye' is too 'high'. For those art and antique pieces that I am interested in, they are invariably well beyond my means or budget. And for those that I can afford, they are often of mediocre quality," says Lam, who adds that he gave up collecting the day he became a museum professional.

"This has been my house rule for well over 35 years. Whenever I buy any art piece, I always do it for my museum. Dealers and collector friends always say that I am very stupid!"

Lam will be in Kuala Lumpur on June 23 to address the South-East Asian Ceramic Society (SEACS), West Malaysia Chapter on "Detecting the Fakes: Dating and Connoisseurship of Chinese Ceramics".

At the lecture, Lam will share his own experiences on the issue of fake antiques, using language comprehensible to laymen but at the same time useful to serious collectors, dealers and experts. He will combine an art historian's approach with scientific techniques involving destructive or non-destructive analysis. Participants at the lecture will be allowed to bring objects of antiquities for him to examine.

This article is contributed by the SEACS West Malaysia Chapter.

NOTE: Peter Lam's lecture on June 23 is at the Central Market KL on the top floor of The Annexe Gallery. It is open to the public with a RM25 donation to the South-East Asian Ceramic Society (SEACS). Reservations required; SMS the Secretary at 6019-6620979.



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