

Collecting Art, Narrating Culture: Indian Art in John D. Rockefeller 3rd Asian Collections

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My research project at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) began with an interest in the personal art collecting practices of John D. Rockefeller 3rd (JDR 3rd) and his wife Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller (BHR), with particular emphasis on their Asian art collections, and specifically their Indian art collections. The history of these collections at the Asia Society has been well documented, however, my interests lay more in the pre-bequest history of the collections. This was pertinent to my larger interests in the history of private collecting of Indian art in America, particularly by individuals who played a multifaceted role in the greater understanding and appreciation of such art within the United States. While JDR 3rd was not a curator or scholar of art, he nevertheless situated his Asian art collection within his interests in the cultural sphere of Asia, particularly in the post-war era. Thus, even though JDR 3rd's art collecting was a private initiative, and his collection initially occupied a private space, (either in his home or office) he quickly saw the scope of art, as well as his own collection, in furthering American cultural understanding of Asia.

The first set of materials at the RAC that was of interest to me was therefore, the John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, primarily his private papers, for as mentioned above, his art collecting was a private endeavor, and did not take place under the aegis of any of the

organizations he founded nor stem from his professional role within those organizations. Within art collecting, JDR 3rd and BHR focused on two areas of particular interest to them—American painting, and Asian art. In both spheres they enlisted the aid of art advisors to guide them in their purchases, and in the case of the latter, it was the well-known Asian art historian and curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Sherman Lee, who steered the Rockefellers in their purchases.

Although Lee was based in Cleveland, he would make regular visits to New York, and spend time with JDR 3rd and BHR discussing individual objects that had been offered to the Rockefellers on approval by the handful of dealers specializing in Asian art. At times the objects themselves would be in the Rockefeller residence, and its various merits and demerits would be discussed at length.¹ At other times, the conversation was on the basis of photographs and descriptions from the dealers. Such discussions between Lee and the Rockefellers would often continue via correspondence, and the letters exchanged are revealing in terms of the kinds of preference both of Lee and the Rockefellers and their emphasis placed on certain elements rather than others.² Even when Rockefeller travelled, he sought Lee's advice on the dealers he should visit in places like London and Paris, which were the other centers from which he occasionally bought pieces of art. He was deeply grateful for Lee's input and acknowledged the same in a letter to him in 1966: "Our work together in regard to Asian art has been a source of pleasure and satisfaction to Blanchette and me. We greatly appreciate your interest in our collection and your wise and helpful advice concerning purchases. As you know, we rely very much on your judgment."³

JDR 3rd also received advice concerning Asian art from other leading curators of the day, including Laurence Sickman of the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, and more closely Aschwin Lippe of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Among the dealers, in London

JDR 3rd developed a close relationship with some in particular, including Adrian Maynard of Spink's, the leading London bookseller, as is evidenced by a series of correspondence with him over the years.⁴ Similarly, Alice Boney, the famous Tokyo-based dealer, would offer JDR 3rd works, most often by sending photographs. Although, in New York itself, JDR 3rd bought many of his pieces from the leading dealer in Indian art, Nasli Heeramanek, and later from Doris Weiner.⁵ It was JDR 3rd relationship with Heeramanek that was revealing, for this dealer realized his client's preference for sculptured works and offered him some extremely fine pieces.⁶ Besides the exchange of several letters between Rockefeller and Heeramanek found in the JDR 3rd Papers, entries from JDR 3rd diaries through the 1960s record several visits to Heeramanek's gallery/home in the Upper East Side.

The above-mentioned JDR 3rd Diaries were another section of the RAC that I spent considerable time perusing. Although JDR 3rd was not very descriptive, nor did he elaborate at length upon his art collecting practices and preferences in these diaries, which were more extensive in their recording of his professional and public roles, one still gets occasional glimpses of his private life. For example, even if he was not very effusive, his empathy and enthusiasm for his children's problems and progress is palpable in the records. Similarly, it was with particular interest that I read his descriptions of his visits to India. While most of these trips involved meeting officials and politicians who played a key role in areas of interest to him, such as population, agriculture, and development, he nevertheless encountered Indians involved in the cultural field and developed a deep sympathy for Indian art and culture. Some of the people he met in India, he would again cross paths with in America, and would develop closer relationships with. One such instance was with an illustrious couple, the scientist Vikram Sarabhai, and his wife Mrinalini Sarabhai, the dancer. JDR 3rd and Sarabhai wrote letters to one another and the

latter visited the Rockefellers at Pocantico Hills. Mrinalini Sarabhai would go on to perform at the Asia Society in events intended to showcase and introduce American audiences to Indian culture. Nevertheless, in his diaries one catches glimpses of where his interests had turned to art, and although he did not record having made any purchases in India, he did mention visits to Asian art dealers in London and Paris, and more regularly notes that his Saturdays were often spent “arting” with Blanchette. Together they would visit their favorite galleries or dealers, and often found themselves engaged for several hours at either Heeramanek’s or Weiner’s establishments.

Anticipating that the papers of JDR 3rd’s partner in passion for art, his wife Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller, might also contain clues regarding their preferences and ideas behind their collection, I looked over potentially pertinent material in them. There was however, little in the way of correspondence with BHR that was particularly illuminating on the matter of their art collection, although no doubt she played a formative role in it. One section of her oral history however, indicates that she had been introduced to the arts—primarily modern art—through her in-laws upon marriage, however, it was not until a visit to Japan when she was already in her forties that she realized how little she knew on the subject. BHR then enrolled at Columbia University at the age of forty-five and took courses in the history of Japan, as well as in art history. Tellingly she notes “And I always felt sorry for Mr. Rockefeller because he was doing the collecting while I was the one who was having the fun of learning about it. He, of course, didn’t have the time to do all that ...”⁷ Addressing the matter of their taste she noted that JDR 3rd and her tastes were similar, adding that, “Although I do feel that if he could have taken some of these courses he would have had a slightly different slant on some of things—getting a

little more of the historical importance of a certain piece rather than having to rely only on his own aesthetic reaction ...”⁸

Although JDR 3rd himself was not a formal student of Asian art, it is nonetheless important to note that through the initiatives of many of the organizations he founded and funded the study of Asian art and culture, both within America and abroad was greatly promoted. Just one example of this was through the Asian Cultural Program (ACP) of the JDR 3rd Fund. From the late 1960s through the 1970s, young scholars who would go on to become preeminent in the field of Indian art history had been funded through this organization to support their research into the field of Indian art. These included the likes of Pratapaditya Pal, B.N. Goswamy, Saryu Doshi, Michael Meister, Stuart Cary Welch, and Catherine Glynn, to name a few. Their reports and other correspondence, now among the JDR 3rd Fund Papers at the RAC, to the officers running the ACP, contain repeated appreciation of the opportunities enabled by this funding.

A more direct involvement of JDR 3rd and art in the activities of an organization that he founded was with the Asia Society, and particularly once the Asia House gallery opened. Beginning with a plan for traveling exhibitions of Asian Art, the Asia Society was involved in mounting some of the most important and innovative special exhibitions of Asian art in the 1960s, including some in the Asia House gallery when the society moved there.⁹ The Asia Society Papers, which are among the recent additions to the RAC collections, were the last set of papers that I had a chance to study.

Beginning with the exhibition “Masterpieces of Asian Art from American Collections,” curated by Laurence Sickman in 1959, of particular interest were the papers related to some of the groundbreaking exhibitions of Indian art that took place under its auspices including “Gods, Thrones and Peacocks” (1965) and “Master Bronzes of India” (1966). The former, curated by

Stuart Cary Welch, was notable for having included pieces from the collection of John Kenneth Galbraith, the eminent economist and former ambassador to India, as well as pieces from Jacqueline Kennedy's collection, while the latter included many pieces from the personal collection of JDR 3rd and BHR, such as bronzes, which were a particular passion of theirs. In 1970, the Rockefellers loaned a much larger selection of pieces for an exhibition focusing on their collection of Asian Art.

Finally, in 1974, JDR 3rd decided to give his private collection of Asian art to the Asia Society, thus giving the institution a permanent collection, and laying the foundations for the Asia Society Museum. He wrote a now famous letter to the Chairman of the Asia Society, George Ball, on the matter, stating his intent as follows:

Because of my recognition of the importance of United States-Asian understanding and cooperation, because of my belief in what the exchange of our cultures can mean in the enrichment of our individual lives, and because of my belief in the Asia Society as a means to carry forward these objectives, I increasingly became persuaded that the Society offered a promising and meaningful repository for the collection. Also, I have become persuaded that the collection would strengthen and make more effective the work of the Society in the years ahead, just at a time when, in my opinion, we have the opportunity of developing a new and more creative relationship with Asia.¹⁰

The move was made after careful consideration of all available options and at various moments in 1973, when JDR 3rd had spent time meeting individually with advisors, as well as members of the board of the Asia Society.

This decision, made just a few years before JDR 3rd's death, marks a culmination of several years of considering the future role that he envisaged for his collection. As early as 1966 he had asked Sherman Lee for advice on this matter.¹¹ Eventually he decided that his collection would best serve in illuminating and complementing the work and activities of the Asia Society

in informing American audiences of Asian culture through its historical forms which comprised his collection. The place for Indian art within this larger cultural framework of Asia harked back to earlier imaginings of the unity of Asian culture in America,¹² but also foreshadowed the connections between the countries and cultures of Asia that would continue to be forged in the wake of political and economic development and autonomy—an endeavor that JDR 3rd spent much of his life engaged in.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Rockefeller Archive Center for the research grant that afforded me a unique opportunity to access such important and interesting archival material. The research I conducted at the RAC in December 2012 will be invaluable for my dissertation in the History of Art department at Cornell University. In particular, I benefitted greatly from discussions with Mary Ann Quinn, and I deeply appreciate her suggestions and all the assistance she provided me in my varied requests across a range of archival collections. I would also like to thank Camilla Harris for her guidance through the administrative and other processes associated with my research visit.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ “Sherman Lee came to 1 Beekman in the afternoon. We had a long session beginning at 3:00 and running until 10:00, going over all our pieces of Asian art and classifying them A, B, or C. A meaning outstanding, B meaning good, and C meaning of a quality we really should dispose of.” JDR 3rd Diary entry, May 15, 1964, Folder 77, Box 11, Series 3, RG 5, Rockefeller Family Archives (RFA).

² An example of the discussion surrounding the purchase of a Chola bronze went as follows:

“Enclosed are photos, some better than the ones I sent you, of the bronze here in Brussels. I have stopped off between Paris & Amsterdam to see it and I can only say the following:

1. It is genuine.
2. It is unique in many of its representational details, notably the knot at the back of the head; the fact that it is cast in one piece plus the base.
3. Sculpturally it is extremely fine, vigorous, much movement and finely proportioned.
4. It is very early, c. 900 A.D., with still some Pallava features.
5. Height 76 cm.
6. Price, after much argument, discussion etc. \$50,000 (reported to have been purchased in Tanjore) ...”

Sherman Lee to JDR 3rd, April 14, 1965, Folder 403, Box 47, Series 2, RG 5, RFA.

³ JDR 3rd to Sherman Lee, December 12, 1966, Folder 407, Box 47, Series 2, RG 5, RFA.

⁴ “I was interested that you were off on another trip to India. Please do not hesitate to bring to our attention any piece which you may run into which you feel is truly outstanding, even if we already have something of the same general type and character. Always we are glad to improve the quality of our collection.” JDR 3rd to Adrian Maynard, August 14, 1969, Folder 438, Box 51, Series 2, RG 5, RFA.

⁵ By the late 1960s, as Heeramaneck’s career was winding down, Doris Wiener was fast becoming one of the leading dealers of South Asian art in New York. In a letter to JDR 3rd from 1969, referring to his recent purchase of a Chola bronze she opened with: “My husband and I would like to express to you how pleased we are that the Surasundari maiden has joined a most distinguished collection. She is a rare beauty.” Doris Wiener to JDR 3rd, January 2, 1969, Folder 412, Box 48, Series 2, RG 5, RFA. By the early 1970s JDR 3rd was realizing that his collection was becoming unwieldy, he wrote the following to Doris Wiener: “As I have mentioned to you before, one of the problems which I have faced increasingly with my small collection is the disproportionate number of Indian bronzes. This, of course, has come about primarily because so many really good bronzes have become available. However, it is a matter of concern to me, as I have wanted to have a reasonably balanced collection representing Asia broadly.” JDR 3rd to Doris Wiener, March 19, 1971, Folder 412, Box 48, Series 2, RG 5, RFA.

⁶ The correspondence between the two men included exchanges such as the following: “Let me say first how much we appreciate your interest in our collection of Oriental art. Already we have bought from you some significant pieces and we look forward to continuing to work with you in the years ahead. What means particularly much to us is your willingness to speak frankly as to the quality of the pieces—whether or not you feel they measure up to our aspirations of eventually having a collection which would be small, but would hopefully only include the best which is available.” JDR 3rd to Nasli Heeramaneck, June 5, 1963, Folder 405, Box 47, Series 2, RG 5, RFA. “My wife and I were very happy that you and Mrs. Rockefeller came to see our latest and finest acquisition. It was a fresh pleasure and satisfaction to show you these objects, as both you and Mrs. Rockefeller seemed so appreciative of their quality. It is my aim & desire to be able to show you objects of the very finest quality.” Nasli Heeramaneck to JDR 3rd, September 2, 1969, Folder 405, Box 47, Series 2, RG 5, RFA.

⁷ BHR Oral History, p. 3, Folder 116, Box 16, Series 3, RG 53, RFA.

⁸ BHR Oral History, p. 4, Folder 116, Box 16, Series 3, RG 53, RFA.

⁹ A seven-page memorandum for “A Plan for Traveling Exhibitions of Asian Art,” The Asia Society Inc., November 1, 1968, Folder 2724, Box 290, Series 200 R, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives (RF).

¹⁰ JDR 3rd to George Ball, January 31, 1974, Folder 413, Box 48, Series 2, RG 5, RFA.

¹¹ JDR 3rd raised the question of the future of his collection with Sherman Lee in September 1966. In response Sherman Lee submitted a memorandum outlining possibilities for the ultimate placement of JDR 3rd’s Oriental collection. In it he listed four options—giving the collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the creation of a private museum of Oriental art, the creation of a gallery or museum in connection with the Asia Society, and finally, giving the collection to another museum in a metropolitan area.

Sherman Lee to JDR 3rd, November 8, 1966, Folder 41, Box 8, Series 3, RG 5, RFA.

¹² The Japanese scholar, and later influential curator of Asian art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Okakuro Kakuzo, wrote extensively on the theme of Asia at the turn of the century. His seminal work, *Ideals of the East*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1904, famously began with the statement “Asia is One.”