

Art Dealers, the Rockefellers and the Network of Chinese Art in America

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The first half of the twentieth century was a momentous era for the formation of major collections of Chinese art in the United States. An often invisible agent in this process was the international art dealer, who channeled into America the most significant Chinese collections outside China. The crucial role of Chinese art dealers, however, has not been comprehensively examined, partly due to the scarcity and dispersal of available research materials.

The Rockefeller Family Archives at the Rockefeller Archive Center holds a rich and unique collection of materials, consisting primarily of correspondence between major international art dealers and Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the world's leading collectors of Chinese antiquities. These materials are important not only because they illuminate the modes of transaction in the dealer-collector-museum network, a largely obscure field of study in

Chinese art, but also because they reveal the place of origin, properties, provenance, and market value of many important Chinese art objects.

Dealer-Dealer

From the 1910s onward, a small community of international dealers of Chinese art thrived in New York City. Select objects were offered to Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller by prominent dealers, including C.T. Loo & Co., Yamanaka & Co., Ralph M. Chait, Ton-Ying & Co., Parish-Watson & Co., and Duveen Brothers, Inc., Dikran G. Kelekian, and Edgar Worch.¹ These dealers, in their transactions with Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller, both cooperated with and competed against one another. Expert dealers such as C.T. Loo and Sadajiro Yamanaka acted as consultants for other dealers. For example, after the dealer Edgar Gorer submitted a yellow porcelain vase to Mr. Rockefeller in 1915, different opinions about its authenticity arose among New York dealers. To verify its authenticity, Gorer showed the vase to C.T. Loo and other dealers.² In a business that relied heavily on secretive and exclusive operations, art dealers competed with each other for their clients' favor. Before the 1930s, Duveen Brothers, Inc. and Parish-Watson & Co., Inc. were among Mr. Rockefeller's major suppliers of Chinese ceramics, and the dealer C.T. Loo was acutely aware of his firm's inferior status. In 1929, C.T. Loo sold a group of Ming ceramics to Rockefeller with a total value of \$7,000,³ but Parish-Watson made three sales of Ming and Qing ceramics to Rockefeller with a total value of \$269,000.⁴ It is no

¹ "Rockefeller" in this article refers to "John D. Rockefeller, Jr."

² "Copy: Facts appertaining to the Great Yellow Old Chinese Beaker"; E. Gorer to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (JDR Jr.), March 8, 1915, folder 1319, Re. Yellow beaker, 1915-1916, box 133, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

³ C.T. Loo to JDR Jr., December 18, 1929, unnamed binder with JDR Jr.'s Chinese porcelain purchase vouchers), box 159, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁴ Vouchers of Parish-Watson & Co. Inc to JDR Jr., January 2; May 17; November 26, 1929, unnamed binder with JDR Jr.'s Chinese porcelain purchase vouchers, box 159, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

surprise that as Loo and Rockefeller negotiated over the price of a porcelain vase, Loo referred to Duveen Brothers and Parish-Watson with both envy and acrimony: “I must ask you generously to see if you could change your offer and please think that if this vase was owned either by Duveen Bros. or Mr. Watson they will never sell it unless they got the proper price.”⁵ In the small circle of Chinese art, one dealer’s activities often affected the entire market. It was, therefore, crucial for the dealer to carefully guard his business secrets. For example, as Rockefeller and Loo negotiated over a porcelain vase, Rockefeller became suspicious of the vase’s authenticity and wanted to consult other dealers. In response, Loo expressed his preference that the vase not be shown to other dealers because “whenever a dealer knows this vase has been offered to a collector they will lose their interest in securing it for themselves.”⁶

Dealer-Collector

The Chinese antiquities that magnate collectors such as the Rockefellers amassed have formed the core of major Chinese collections in the United States.⁷ Aware of the role of this elite private power in the shaping of the collection of and taste for Chinese art, dealers carefully observed collectors’ preferences and pursued them on a regular basis. For instance, a large part of dealers’ offers responded to Mr. Rockefeller’s keen interest in Chinese porcelains made

⁵ C.T. Loo to JDR Jr., November 27, 1932, folder 1370, C.T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁶ JDR Jr. to C.T. Loo, December 23, 1918; C.T. Loo to JDR Jr., December 24, 1918, folder 1370, C.T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁷ These collections include Charles L. Freer collection at the Freer Gallery of Art, Grenville L. Winthrop collection at the Sackler Museum at Harvard University, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Denman W. Ross collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Alfred Pillsbury collection at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and Richard Eugene Fuller collection at the Seattle Art Museum.

during the Ming and Qing dynasties. From 1930 to 1935, the frequency of correspondence between C.T. Loo and the Rockefellers was at least six times per year.⁸

Dealers approached the Rockefellers by letter, sent them photographs and catalogues, and invited them to visit galleries or exhibitions. When the Rockefellers showed interest in certain objects, antique firms such as C. T. Loo & Co. and Yamanaka & Co. often had them delivered to their homes or offices. This technique allowed the Rockefellers to develop an intimate relationship with the object. For example, during the Rockefellers' visit to Paris, C. T. Loo allowed them to take two bronze pieces back to their hotel Plaza-Athenee for their study and enjoyment over the weekend.⁹ Often in direct contact with sources of supply, dealers were able to inform the Rockefellers of the place of origin, provenance, dating, and condition of the objects they offered. It is noteworthy that dealers often emphasized information that would enhance the prestige of the objects and avoid associations with questionable operations such as looting. For instance, in 1921 C. T. Loo's firm sent Mr. Rockefeller a report about a bronze statue, suggesting its royal connection.¹⁰ In the 1916 transaction of a porcelain Guanyin statue, Loo notified Rockefeller that the statue was sold by the chief monk in a temple for the construction of a new hall.¹¹

⁸ The statistics also include correspondence between secretaries of Loo and JDR Jr. on their behalf.

⁹ JDR Jr. to C. T. Loo, November 17, 1930, folder 1370, C. T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹⁰ Marion Wheildon to JDR Jr. June 1, 1921, folder 1370, C. T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹¹ In this notification, the dealer C. T. Loo was also aware of Mr. Rockefeller's effort in philanthropic causes around the world. C. T. Loo to JDR Jr., December 9, 1916, folder 1370, C.T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

In the bargaining process, the Rockefellers often received discounts from dealers.¹² Mr. Rockefeller knew well that dealers were often in need of cash.¹³ In the negotiation over six pieces of porcelain in 1935, Rockefeller's proposal of immediate cash payment led C.T. Loo to accept Rockefeller's counteroffer.

It was the custom of dealers to give Mr. Rockefeller an exchange privilege.¹⁴ Mr. Rockefeller exchanged objects with dealers as a way to improve his collection.¹⁵ For example, when Loo offered him a black Kangxi porcelain vase for \$30,000 in 1932, Rockefeller proposed that, since the price was rather high, he would consider the purchase of the vase partly in cash and partly in exchange for some duplicate pieces that he had.¹⁶ After a few rounds of negotiation, the transaction was completed with the agreement that Rockefeller would pay \$20,000 in cash and give Loo a Ming reticulated vase in exchange for \$4,750.¹⁷

The Rockefellers not only exchanged objects with dealers, but also helped finance and advertise their business. For instance, Mr. Rockefeller helped Yamanaka & Co. manage its financial problems by guaranteeing to defer part of its rent for three years.¹⁸ C. T. Loo

¹² C. T. Loo to JDR Jr., January 12, 1949, folder 1370, C. T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹³ Joseph Duveen gave Rockefeller cash discount. He wrote to Rockefeller, "In common with other business men today I am in need of a large sum of cash and, should you be willing to consider the purchase of the four busts as a cash transaction, I am prepared to reduce the price quoted to you by ten percent." (J. Duveen to JDR Jr. January 6, 1932, folder 1325, Duveen Brothers-Dreyfus Collection, 1930-1951, box 133, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC).

¹⁴ Unidentified person to M. Miya, December 21, 1928, folder 1446, Yamanaka 1909- 1940, box 144; C.T. Loo to JDR Jr., February 5, 1935, folder 1370, C.T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹⁵ K. Nagakawa to JDR Jr., October 3, 1933, folder 1446, Yamanaka 1909- 1940, box 144, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹⁶ JDR Jr. to C.T. Loo, November 22, 1932, folder 1370, C.T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹⁷ C.T. Loo to JDR Jr., December 16, 1932, folder 1370, C.T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹⁸ K. Tanaka to JDR Jr., May 17, 1932, folder 1446, Yamanaka 1909- 1940, box 144, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

ingeniously turned the Rockefellers' impressive family gallery into his show room by placing his objects in their collection and by bringing his buyers to visit their home. Dealers also took advantage of the visibility of the Rockefellers' important art acquisitions in the press. For example, Mr. Rockefeller's acquisition of a rare bronze from C. T. Loo stirred a media sensation.¹⁹

Dealers offered collectors not only objects but also services. With extensive social networks and market knowledge, dealers acted as middlemen between collectors and received commission for their brokerage.²⁰ Dealers also served as consultants and educators for the Rockefellers. In 1916, C.T. Loo urged Mr. Rockefeller to collect Chinese lacquers and sculptures: "they are most interesting and decorative as well as artistic and as this is the first showing of really fine lacquers the price is very low," he advised. "I desire extremely that you become interested in fine Chinese sculpture as it had only a very short period and it is no longer allowed to leave China-so that I am anxious for you to see the best things which come to this country."²¹ Duveen Brothers, Inc. performed installation, shipping, and restoration services for the Rockefellers.²² Ralph M. Chait appraised the J.P. Morgan, Henry C. Frick, and other collections.²³

¹⁹ "Old Bronzes Shown in Paris: Rare Statuette Bought by Rockefeller Exhibited at Academy," *New York Times*, June 20, 1926.

²⁰ C.T. Loo to JDR Jr., October 24; October 28, 1949, folder 106, C.T. Loo 1945-1951, box 11, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

²¹ C.T. Loo to JDR Jr., March 3, 1916, folder 1370, C.T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

²² A. Adams to J. Duveen, January 8, 1923, folder 1330, Duveen Brothers 1914-1952, box 133, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

²³ Ralph M. Chait to JDR Jr., February 18, 1944, folder 102, Ralph M. Chait, 1941-1957, box 11, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

The Dealer-Collector-Curator Network

Chinese art collections in America in the first half of the twentieth century were largely shaped by a closely-knit network consisting of art dealers, collectors, and museum curators. The Rockefellers' contacts with leading dealers and curators illustrate the inner workings of this intricate web of relations. All players in this network were interconnected and interdependent; one player needed to deal not only with other players individually, but also to consider relationships between other players.

Dealers were well aware of the interaction between the Rockefellers and art museums. On the one hand, the Rockefellers were museum benefactors who funded museums' acquisitions or donated their collections to museums. The dealer Dikran G. Kelekian, for example, brought to Mr. Rockefeller's attention a large collection of Chinese ceramics on display at the Cleveland Museum of Art with the hope that Mr. Rockefeller would purchase this collection and donate it to the museum, which was unable to raise the necessary acquisition fund.²⁴ Dealers sometimes gave the Rockefellers discounts for objects that they would potentially purchase for museums. For instance, in 1921 C.T. Loo offered Mr. Rockefeller a Chinese gilt bronze figure of Guanyin at the price of \$40,000 with the message: "If, however, Mr. Rockefeller wishes to present this to a Museum (and by so doing gladden the hearts of several Directors whom we know) the price is \$35000."²⁵

On the other hand, the Rockefellers often relied on museum curators' expertise in making their acquisition decisions. Theodore Hobby, curator and specialist of Chinese ceramics at the

²⁴ Dikran G. Kelekian to JDR Jr., November 22, 1940, folder 1360, Kelekian, 1913-1959, box 136, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

²⁵ The bronze statue of Guanyin was finally acquired by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (C.400). Marion Wheildon to JDR Jr., June 15, 1921, folder 1370, C.T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, served as Mr. Rockefeller's long-term consultant. Dealers, therefore, often approached Hobby with their objects first, knowing that the Rockefellers would receive a report from him afterwards.²⁶ Dealers sometimes used prominent curators to add prestige to their collections. For example, when Mr. Rockefeller questioned Loo's dealership, Loo sent him a list of museum curators as his referees, including those at the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.²⁷

The Chinese Art Market

The transactions between Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller and leading art dealers reflect the changing market conditions for Chinese antiquities in America. Mr. Rockefeller's passion for porcelains made in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties is indicative of the prevalent taste of the Euro-American collectors in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. For example, in 1915 Mr. Rockefeller purchased Chinese porcelains from the Morgan collection through Duveen Brothers at the price of \$1,657,234.50.²⁸ By the 1940s, although Ming and Qing porcelains were still popular items on the market, their price had dropped tremendously, in John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s estimation. In reviewing an appraisal of his collection, he noted that "the values on certain, individual items are \$100,000, \$75,000... [and] that a large number of the items are valued at \$25,000 and more. I do not believe that any private

²⁶ T. Hobby to JDR Jr., November 3, 1932, folder 1354:10 West 54th Street: Theodore Hobby, 1914-1939, box 136, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

²⁷ C.T. Loo to JDR Jr., December 24, 1918, folder 1370, C.T. Loo 1916-1949, box 137, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

²⁸ J. and B. Duveen to JDR Jr., April 13, 1915, folder 1339, Duveen-Chinese Porcelains from Morgan Collection, 1915-1916, box 134, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

owner or dealer would today pay more than \$25,000 for any Chinese porcelain however rare or valuable.”²⁹ From the mid-1910s onward, early Chinese art dated prior to the Ming dynasty gradually gained recognition in America. In the mid-1920s, the market value of top-quality Chinese antiquities became comparable to that of the European Old Masters’ works. For instance, in January 1925, Mrs. Rockefeller spent \$175,000 to purchase from Yamanaka & Co. two Chinese gilt bronzes, one of which is dated 524 ACE.³⁰ In May 1925, Mr. Rockefeller paid Duveen Brothers, Inc. \$180,000 for the painting attributed to Sandro Botticelli, *Virgin with Child and St. John*.³¹

The materials concerning the transactions between international art dealers and Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. are valuable because they offer researchers a unique opportunity to study the activities of major dealers of Chinese art and the network of collectors, dealers, and curators in America in the first half of the twentieth century.

²⁹ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. memorandum, February 1, 1944, folder 1441, box 144, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

³⁰ The two bronzes are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (accession number 38.158.1a-n, 38.158.2 a-g).

³¹ Memo of special purchases, March 13, 1926, folder 1446, Yamanaka 1909- 1940, box 144, Homes Series, Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

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