

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB and Santa Barbara Museum of Art Collaborate on Rare Exhibition of 17th-Century Chinese Paintings

From humble beginnings in an undergraduate art history seminar at UC Santa Barbara, a small exhibition of 17th-century Chinese paintings blossomed into a collaboration between UCSB and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art that showcases nearly 60 paintings drawn from private and public collections, including the National Palace Museum in Taiwan.

"The Artful Recluse: Paintings, Poetry, and Politics in 17th-Century China" features works from a period that spans the late Ming and the early Qing dynasties -- one of the great epic eras for Chinese art, and Chinese painting in particular. Pieces were collected from five public institutions, in addition to the National Palace Museum; six private collections in the United States and Taiwan; and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's permanent collection.

"It started out as an undergraduate project with a few graduate students, and, in the end, became this beautiful collaborative effort between the university and the museum," said Peter C. Sturman, professor of art history and co-curator of the exhibition.

The seed for the exhibition was planted about three years ago when Sturman talked to Susan Tai, Elizabeth Atkins Curator of Asian Art at the Santa Barbara Museum of

Art, and co-curator of "The Artful Recluse," about putting together a small show at the museum and involving his students so they could get some hands-on experience with the process. "We decided to do a show on 17th-century Chinese art, and we were very fortunate because the museum has a few pieces -- maybe 10 in all -- and there is a major collection in town that was available to us," Sturman explained.

Other pieces were available from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), where one of Sturman's former students (and also a former student intern at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art) was an assistant curator of Chinese and Korean art, as well as from a private collection in the Los Angeles area. "So we put it all together and stood back and looked at what we had," Sturman recalled. "And then we went into the gallery space, which consisted of two small rooms. We recognized that what we had was more important than what this space could accommodate."

Tai presented the proposed exhibition to the museum's Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Director Larry Feinberg, who suggested they go really big -- and, if possible, produce a hardbound catalog. That, in and of itself, changed the nature of the project. "It's not just students learning how to put together an exhibition," Sturman said. "It becomes serious scholarship."

Several scholars in 17th-century art and history contributed essays, Sturman noted, and a group of 16 graduate students from UCSB, UCLA, and New York University completed most of the catalog entries.

With the go-ahead for a larger exhibition, and with Tai's assistance, Sturman began looking further afield for paintings to include in the exhibition. "We approached the Honolulu Academy of Arts, who have some very good pieces they were happy to lend to us," he said. "We approached the art museum at the University of Michigan, the Stanford University Cantor Art Center, and we approached private collectors."

The real coup, however, happened quite serendipitously when Sturman and his wife, Hui-shu Lee, an art history professor at UCLA, met with the director of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. "I was hoping she would help give us an introduction to a private collector who had a painting we wanted to borrow," Sturman explained. That didn't work out, but in the end, she offered to lend pieces from the museum. "And that was an amazing opportunity. It's like borrowing pieces from the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.," he said.

The National Palace Museum lent a set of paintings that consists of 12 scrolls, which, together, fill virtually an entire wall of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art exhibition. "They're by Shitao, a famous artist we were planning to represent in the show. He's probably the single most famous Chinese artist of the 17th century, and only two of these large sets of paintings exist in the world," said Sturman.

In determining an overarching theme for the exhibition, Sturman looked to one of the pieces borrowed from LACMA -- a long hand scroll titled "Invitation to Reclusion." "I noticed how the idea of the recluse and the idea of going into hiding seemed to be particularly prevalent in these paintings," he said. "It's a common theme in Chinese art of all eras. As the exhibition developed, the pieces coalesced in a way we never anticipated. This idea of reclusion was useful not only as an umbrella theme, but the more we looked into it, the more we realized it was a truly significant theme during the 17th century."

A symposium related to the exhibition will take place January 11 and 12 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. The conference, "Image and the Imaginary in 17th-Century China," is sponsored by UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, with additional support provided by the Office of the Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts; the Department of History of Art and Architecture; the Santa Barbara Museum of Art; and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange.

The exhibition continues through January 20, after which it will travel to the Asia Society in New York City, sans the piece from the National Palace Museum.

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