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## Imagining the Orient: Early Collecting at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

### Introduction

First established as the Art Association of Montreal in 1860, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) is one of the oldest encyclopaedic museums in Canada. Created in 1860 with the aim of fostering the arts with annual exhibitions and the establishment of a school of design, by the 1880s its council was composed of Montreal's financial elite of the booming railway and bank business. The Association was born out of the intent of a small group of art lovers to comfort and promote their imperialist vision of the world and to set Canada, then part of the British Empire, as a worthy peer among the countries securing the right to collect, display and impose aesthetic values on the rest of the world. In 1912 these collectors found a grand location for their magnificent art gallery that would symbolically seal their ritual of citizenship.

At the time, economic and political power was strictly in the hands of the Anglophone Protestant business leaders connected to the railway expansion, who were pivotal in the shaping of Canada as a nation. These "merchant princes"<sup>1</sup> exhibited a social homogeneity, a common culture and a great sense of entitlement,<sup>2</sup> which contributed to the design and construction of several of Montreal's architectural landmarks within the well-known "Golden Square Mile",<sup>3</sup> with the museum at its core. Their wealth evidently did not stop there; expansive art collections, ranging from European and Canadian to Asian were amassed and later trickled into the same museum they helped establish.<sup>4</sup> Most collections, however, did not follow the fate of analogous assemblages in the United States, where donors instead sought to establish their personal memorial in local museums and made it possible for their collections to be properly maintained and preserved. Nevertheless, the newly established museum can be understood as a sort of ritual site, which in shape and purpose, emulated the form of a temple or palace, thus replacing religion and the aura surrounding royalty

with the cult of art. In this way, the new Canadian citizens performed a ritual in the building of the museum and its collections, compelled by their desire to be seen as civilised and civilising.<sup>5</sup> Traces of their passion not only for Western art, but also for "all things Asian" can be found in the museum reserves.



Fig. 1 Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion, exterior view; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; photo: Terry Rishel.

The MMFA adopted its current name only in 1949, though its collecting mission had changed much earlier, in 1916, four years after the inauguration of the classical building in Beaux-Arts style on the northern side of Sherbrooke Street (fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> Today it comprises five pavilions, the last inaugurated in November 2017, custodians of a large eclectic collection of more than 43,000 objects, including over 6000 Asian artefacts of different kinds. These acquisitions mostly date back to the first half of the twentieth century, between 1916 and 1952, thus providing an unexpected, yet fascinating time capsule of collecting tendencies and aesthetic preferences related to a specific historic period. The core, mostly Chinese and Japanese three-dimensional objects was assembled by a tightly knit group of wealthy English-speaking Montrealers who profited from the surge of Japanese and then Chinese arts on the North American market at the turn of the century. Following the manner and mission of the South Kensington Museum in London, our

museum was built to provide a window on a new, exotic world and thus educate the public in the appreciation of foreign aesthetics. The Asian collections were construed around a Canadian-specific perception of Asia, filtered through the colonialist lenses of the British Empire.

### The beginnings

It was during its Golden Age, from 1912 to 1947, that the Museum acquired the first Asian *objets d'art*. In 1916 the Art Association appointed Frederick Cleveland Morgan (1881-1962) chairman of the new museum's section that was to exhibit antiques and modern decorative works, including "all objects tending to the education of the designer and worker".<sup>7</sup> This decision would change the Association's orientation, morphing its profile from a purely western art gallery to a survey museum. Morgan fostered a real momentum: in a trend shared by many North American institutions of the time, a number of rich benefactors bequeathed their possessions, including several Asian works, to the newly established museum.



Fig. 2 Ross Ballard, Ashley and Crippe Photography, *Portrait of F. Cleveland Morgan*, gelatin silver print; Archives of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Photo Archives, MMFA.

Born to a wealthy family of traders, Morgan (fig. 2) was brought up exposed to the arts. Since 1843 his uncle (Henry) and then his father (James) had been importing merchandise from around the world. When he joined the family business, Morgan sold antiques and exotica that he purchased on his travels. In this way, he connected with dealers, connoisseurs and collectors who played a pivotal role in the initial promotion of Asian art on the international scene at the time. He had the curiosity and the means to purchase works of art that would not only serve as exotic *trouvailles* in fashionable interiors but also become valuable additions to his personal art collection and to the Art Association collection, which he considered as *his* museum. During his fifty-year tenure as director and curator, Morgan managed to purchase works and foster donations for over 7000 objects from all over the world. More specifically, his great interest in Japanese and Chinese art permanently shaped the museum's collections.

Among the archaeological relics he acquired first for himself and later bequeathed to the museum, is an unassuming ancient Western Zhou bronze *gui* vessel that provides an interesting tale of migration (fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Bronze ritual food vessel (*gui*), China; vessel, 10<sup>th</sup> century BC, lid; 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century CE; 24.6 x 31.6 x 24.2 cm; MMFA Cleveland Morgan Bequest [1962.Ed.35a-b]; photo: MMFA, Christine Guest.

Its individual voyage through time and space reflects the fluctuations of aesthetic values and changes of fruition from China in the tenth century BCE to Canada in the twentieth century CE. Over the centuries, the vessel was subjected to various

permutations: besides the formulaic inscription cast in the cavetto, its surface presents a dense artificial patina. A teak bell-shaped lid with a carved jade knob stylistically datable to the Yuan dynasty was added much later. Haphazard findings, textual research and the literati obsession with antiquity from the Song to the end of the Qing dynasties led to a widespread fascination in China for ancient bronzes. Its original function unknown, our *gui* was cherished as a memento from a distant past and re-using it to burn incense must have conjured up an idealised historical continuity. As illustrated in imperial inventories, it would have found its place on a Buddhist altar table, together with tall vases and candlesticks. In fact, in the Qing dynasty ancient ritual vessels were often “up-cycled” into contemporary luxury goods, signalling a reverence to the past. Morgan purchased the bronze on 12 March 1913, from the antiques dealer Yamanaka and Co, in New York. He had been introduced to Sadajiro Yamanaka by Sir William Van Horne, the Montreal railways magnate, known for his large collection of Japanese ceramics, whose influence on the MMFA’s incipient collections is discussed below.

Morgan visited Yamanaka’s shop on several occasions to purchase Asian antiques for the museum. As clearly stated in Morgan’s diaries, the *gui* was bought just a few days after Prince Gong’s historic sale at the American Art Association in New York in 1913, from 27-28 February to 1 March. Morgan was emphatic about the affiliation with this sale, though the lot number for the *gui* is missing. Since the piece was bought a few days after the actual sale, it could indeed be related to that important collection.

Even if such illustrious provenance has to be further substantiated, the history and purchase of this vessel are intriguing.<sup>8</sup> During the Qing dynasty the *gui* was up-cycled into a memento from a distant past. Once in Montreal, it was again down-cycled: it was almost forgotten in the museum’s vaults as its artificial patina did not look “right” for display. This vessel’s wondrous journey illustrates the global circulation of Chinese “things” and how they were consumed in different chronological, cultural and spatial contexts, their appreciation ever-shifting and

adapting.

### Obsessive and compulsive

Legend has it that Morgan’s passion for Asia would have not been the same, had he not enjoyed strolling at night. This was how he first met William Van Horne (1843-1915) (fig. 4), president of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the earliest Canadian collector of Japanese art, who walked his dogs around the Golden Square Mile every night. Legends and dogs aside, it was Japanese art that brought them together: Van Horne became Morgan’s mentor. Yet surprisingly, given their friendship and common interest, Van Horne never expressed any desire to donate his Asian collection to the newly formed museum, but was instrumental in the shaping of its collections, setting the example for an entire generation of Montreal collectors. Almost thirty years after his death, in 1944 his daughter Adaline donated a conspicuous part of his Asian ceramics to both the MMFA and the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto.

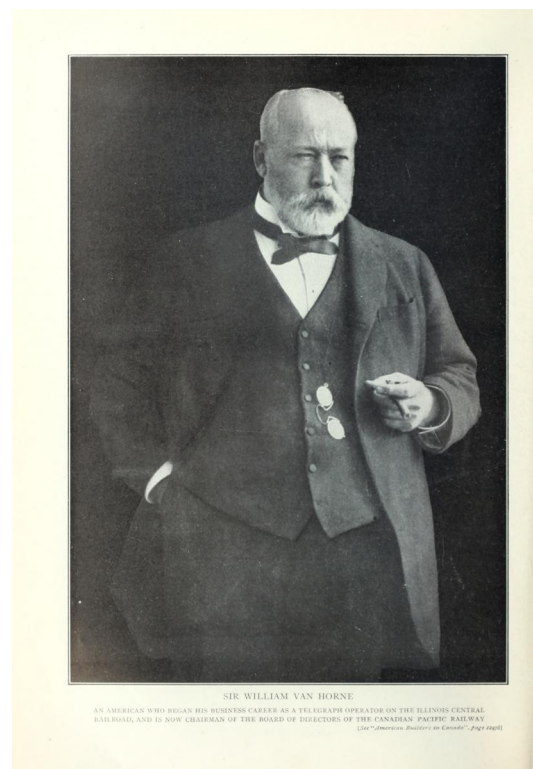


Fig. 4 Sir William Van Horne, *The World’s Work*, vol. XIX, no. 3, January 1910, p. 12406 (public domain).

Van Horne, like many of his American contemporaries, became susceptible to the “Japan craze”, an interest that stemmed out of the Aesthetic Movement for Decorative Arts, encouraged by the sudden import of Japanese arts and crafts in America at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The charm of Japan reached American shores in the late 1860s.<sup>10</sup> The painter John La Farge, who was a close friend of Van Horne, published *An Essay on Japanese Art* in 1869.<sup>11</sup> At that time Japanese art was mostly perceived as exotic and marginalised, its decorative aspects strongly emphasised at the Centennial Exposition of Philadelphia in 1876.

Van Horne’s collection was wide-ranging in both quantity and quality: his large mansion included thousands of artefacts, ranging from Japanese export ceramics to Chinese furniture and Anatolian rugs. But his inquisitive mind had a strong penchant for Japanese domestic pottery. His inventory, which he carefully compiled with hand-drawn illustrations and beautiful watercolours, mentioned thousands of objects, including bowls, bottles, water jars, tea caddies and sake cups originally intended for the tea ceremony (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Stoneware tea container (*chaire*), attributed to Kenzan, Japan, early 18<sup>th</sup> century; 6.8 x 4.9 cm; MMFA Adaline Van Horne Bequest [1944.Ee.17a-b]; photo: MMFA, Christine Guest.

His preferences were evidently informed by his contemporaries, fellow promoters of Japanese art, and influenced by a second wave of Japonisme, which considered domestic pottery quintessentially Japanese.<sup>12</sup> Thus, not only his friend John Lafarge, but also Edward Silvester Morse, the dealer Matsuki Bunkio and most importantly, Ninagawa Noritane with his seminal catalogue of Japanese ceramics, the *Kwanko dzusetsu*, which Van Horne often followed to the letter.

Van Horne belonged to a small number of self-proclaimed connoisseurs who were intrigued by the Far East (as it was called) in a moment when Japan was finally opening its doors and marketing itself as a modernised country on the international arena. Prints, enamelled porcelains and all sorts of decorative bibelots, often labelled as “bric-à-brac”,<sup>13</sup> were variously proposed in Montreal as appropriate decorative complements for the homes of the rich and wealthy, thanks to firms like Henry Morgan and Co, which was co-owned by Cleveland’s uncle and father. It was during this time of fascination with the *Orient* that the Association headed by William Van Horne first included Chinese and Japanese objects in its loan exhibitions, reflecting the interest of its members who never set foot in Japan but got a glimpse of this exotic land through magazine subscriptions and sporadic export sales.<sup>14</sup> The Asian arts may have been perceived as pure and original when compared with, for instance, Academic French painting of the time.<sup>15</sup> In its arbitrarily defined qualities, the Orient, and more specifically Japan, was by certain eager collectors defined and “contained” by taxonomically categorising its arts.<sup>16</sup>

### “Men of means and arbiters of taste”

Van Horne’s trails were followed by his friend, Donald Alexander Smith (Lord Strathcona 1820-1914) (fig. 6). By the time “things Japanese” started being consumed in North America, their friendship was already sealed; both men were involved in shaping and setting an “elegant symbol of Canada” and felt a moral duty to “contribute to forming culture in the young nation of Canada.”<sup>17</sup>

Donald Smith, Baron Strathcona and Mount Royal, Canada’s High Commissioner to the United



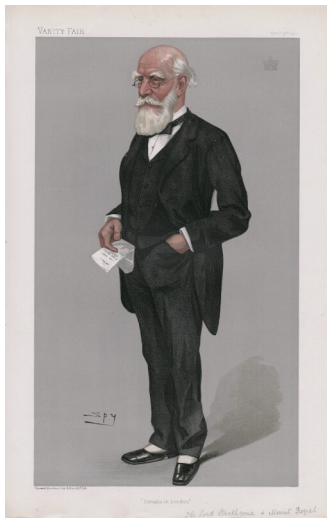


Fig. 6 Spy [Sir Lesley Matthew Ward] (1851-1922) "Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal", *Vanity Fair*, 19 April 1900 (public domain).

Kingdom from 1896 to 1914, was in many ways an important figure of the new nation, and shared more than a collecting penchant with Van Horne: both were New World capitalist imperialists who rapidly ascended to the elite thanks to their involvement with railways. Their art collections positioned them as "men of means and arbiters of taste",<sup>18</sup> worthy of the power they held. Their self-entitlement trickled through the public display of their collections, showcasing a carefully staged medley of Asian and European artworks as a reflection of the encompassing nature of the Empire to which they so proudly belonged. The way in which their collectables were displayed (or not) in to guests visiting their respective homes gives us a glimpse of their self-invested role: while Japanese export ceramics and Old Master paintings shared the more opulent public spaces in their homes, hundreds of Japanese ceramic tea caddies (*chaire*) were tucked away in their private *cabinets de travail*, conspicuously absent from public view. Seemingly identical – yet a world apart to the expert eye – these brown-glazed tea caddies had become the ultimate erudite pastime.

When collecting tea caddies, Van Horne and Strathcona shared a *modus operandi* rooted in contemporary Victorian imperialism. Already by the mid-nineteenth century, collecting in a scientific taxonomic way was understood as a masculine prerogative distinct from mere accumulation.<sup>19</sup> Such

collecting was in tune with the contemporary acquisition and organisation of information about objects from other areas of the world in which the British Empire had colonial aspirations. Their eventual display in the British Museum shaped the fantasy of the Empire. Exhibitions of Asiatic material morphed into tangible proof of territorial and cultural hegemony of the Empire.<sup>20</sup>

Japanese export ware, mostly Satsuma and Arita ware, played a different performative role from domestic pottery, and were confined to being mere contemporary adornments sealing the owner's status. On the other hand, the large number of small domestic tea caddies called for a more nuanced interaction between Van Horne and Strathcona. The compulsion for collecting tea caddies trickled down to our museum's director Cleveland F. Morgan, who was a generation younger but knew Strathcona and considered Van Horne a mentor.

Their common fixation with small "containable" Japanese domestic pots rather than brilliant porcelain was an aesthetic propensity shared by many European collectors. Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, keeper of Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography, at the British Museum, from 1866 to 1896, had provided an antecedent for collecting Japanese domestic ceramics, by writing pioneering books on the subject and eventually bequeathing his extensive personal collection to the museum, including a large number of tea-caddies.<sup>21</sup> Franks shifted the emphasis from porcelain, debased as export material to pottery, representative of domestic taste.<sup>22</sup>

Like our Montrealers, Franks never set foot in Japan, yet like our fellows, he managed to accumulate an impressive quantity of pottery and porcelain by acquiring them locally. Like him, Van Horne and Strathcona went beyond mere accumulation, as they sought a systematic and rigorous approach in their attempt to "contain" Japanese art.

Yet all three men seemed to strive to be as impartial and scientific as possible when categorising their self-contained easy-to-handle tea caddies, and tried not to be swayed by passion or beauty, a characteristic Cleveland Morgan reiterates in his memoir letter in honour of Van Horne in 1915.<sup>23</sup> They

embraced what they designated as the true essence of Japan. Small objects were preferred perhaps because they could be “contained”, their “Japaneseness” captured by careful study of their body, glaze and signature marks, and the assessment of their “authenticity”. Small, easy to manipulate and secure in their hands, *chaire* tea caddies became the tangible experience of their fantasy of Japan: small, containable and sensual.

As for their exposure to Asia, both Van Horne and Strathcona were mostly armchair travellers, who led a lifestyle shared by several collectors in the western world. Like the frères De Goncourt, their home was where they harboured their passion and desire for Asian objects in private seclusion, and where these materials were commoditised as “representative” of the sensual Other.

Their idea of containable Japanese objects trickled down to the MMFA, as *chaire* were among the first objects to be collected, perhaps as a tacit tribute to Van Horne’s obsession. Morgan saw Van Horne as his mentor, and followed him not only in collecting tea caddies but also in skilfully painting them (figs. 7-8).



Fig. 7 Oribe-style tea caddy (*chaire*), ink or black and white watercolour, by F. Cleveland Morgan, Montreal 1881-Montreal 1962; 41.1 x 30.5 cm; MMFA Private collection [13.2017]; photo: MMFA, Christine Guest.



Fig. 8 Oribe-style tea caddy (*chaire*), with ivory lid, Mino, Japan, Edo period, early 17<sup>th</sup> century; 11.3 x 6.5 cm; MMFA Cleveland Morgan Bequest [1962.Ee.43a-b]; photo: MMFA, Christine Guest.

By the mid-1940s, hundreds of *chaire* were stored in our reserve. All had been owned by Van Horne, Strathcona or Morgan, reflecting a taxonomic obsession that was shared. It is not the only taxonomic obsession represented in our holdings.

### Incense and politics

Taxonomic in spirit and acquired frantically in a short period of time, the museum’s collection of almost 3000 Japanese incense boxes datable to the Edo period reflects an obsessive behaviour comparable to Van Horne’s. Like Van Horne, the French statesman George Clemenceau (1841-1929) was deeply fascinated by the latter phase of Japonisme and its emphasis on domestic pottery.<sup>24</sup> Clemenceau was so taken by incense boxes (*kōgō*) that he acquired them all in less than 10 years in the 1880s on the Parisian secondary market.

In 1938, Clemenceau’s destitute heirs sold them to Joseph-Arthur Simard, a Quebec entrepreneur who was in France to negotiate the sale of armaments to the government. The *kōgō* were hastily shipped to

Montreal and kept in storage until Cleveland Morgan persuaded Simard to donate them to the MMFA for its centenary anniversary in 1960. It would take more than 10 years before Yutaka Mino would properly recognise the collection and start promoting it internationally.<sup>25</sup> Thanks to Mino, the collection is now considered an invaluable corpus for the study of ceramic production of the Edo period (1603-1868) for shapes, materials and kiln attributions.

A well-known political figure in literary and artistic circles in Paris, Clemenceau frequented not only Edmond de Goncourt and Gustave Geoffrey, but also eminent connoisseurs of Japanese art, such as Edward Sylvester Morse.<sup>26</sup> He also associated himself with the influential art critic Philippe Burty, whose *kōgō* would eventually join Clemenceau's collection (fig. 9).<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 9 Incense box (*kōgō*), Japan, Edo period, 19<sup>th</sup> century; 5.7 cm; MMFA, gift of Joseph-Arthur Simard [1960.Ee.141]; photo: MMFA, Jean-François Brière.

Traditionally, *kōgō* would have contained small aromatic pellets burnt in preparation for the tea ceremony to purify the air in the room. Even when no incense was used, a *kōgō* would always appear in the set of utensils, either placed in the *tokonoma* alcove or on the floor, connected to the other objects in the room. As they were always associated with the tea ceremony, their value depended essentially on their connection to a specific tea-master or clan to whom

they once belonged. Out of context, they lose their original *raison d'être*. In the West, while still considered part of the tea ceremony, *kōgō* have been appreciated for their aesthetic qualities rather than their historic value. It is surely in this way that Clemenceau perceived them. No Japanese collector would have collected such a large number of *kōgō* without their historical and functional contexts.

Clemenceau's collecting obsession can be understood within the same realm of sensorial appreciation that Van Horne and his friends experienced on this side of the Atlantic at more or less the same time: the fantasy of an exotic Japan to hold, touch and contain in your hands.

### “The mirror of Japanese life”

In addition to the Asian *bric-à-brac* objects that were exhibited at the Association, from the 1880s, Japanese prints and paintings were also being shown.<sup>28</sup> In 1902 an exhibition of Japanese watercolours was organised by Matsuki Bunkio, a dealer who had supplied both Van Horne and Morgan on several occasions. In 1908 the exhibition and sale of Ukiyo-e prints from the Edward Colonna collection raved the public in New York. Before New York, the prints were exhibited in Montreal and featured in local newspapers as “The great masters of ukiyo (sic) whose prints and paintings mirror Japanese life.”<sup>29</sup>

During the exhibition in Montreal, the American expert of Japanese art Ernest Fenollosa was invited to give a lecture at the museum. Our director Morgan started acquiring prints from Colonna soon after the exhibition. Edward Colonna is, of course, best known in the context of Art Nouveau as a German designer who collaborated with Siegfried Bing (1838-1905) on his *Maison de l'Art Nouveau*, in Paris from 1897 to 1913. Few people know that Colonna worked for William Van Horne in 1889 as an architect for the Canadian Pacific Railway and as personal decorator for Van Horne's new home on Sherbrooke Street. After his Parisian experience, Colonna came back to Canada and continued selling the prints he had collected while working for Bing. Between 1909 and 1913 Morgan acquired a considerable number of prints, as well as some paintings and ceramic objects from Colonna.



It is likely that in purchasing Ukiyo-e prints, Morgan was influenced by the aesthetic propensities of some of the most influential architects of the day in Montreal. The Association's early acquisitions and exhibitions shed light on the relationship between Van Horne, Strathcona, Morgan, and Edward and William Maxwell, the two architects who were responsible for most of the new mansions in the Golden Square Mile.



Fig. 10 *Iwai Hanshiro IV as Shigenoi*, woodcut by Tōshūsai Sharaku (active 1794-1795); 33.7 x 23.5 cm; MMFA, F. Cleveland Morgan Bequest [Gr.1986(1962.Ee.95).63]; photo: MMFA, Christine Guest.

Not only did they build the museum, they also took an active role in the management of the institution. The Maxwells sat on our museum's nascent Library and Prints Committee together with Morgan. Thanks to their common interest in Edo period graphic art, a large number of prints entered the collection before 1920 (fig. 10).

#### **"An old China hand"**

Morgan's interest in Japanese art may have dwindled after Van Horne died in 1915, to make space for

Chinese art instead. Of course, the turn of the century and particularly the early decades of the twentieth-century were pivotal in the first large diaspora of Chinese works of art to the West. The American market for Chinese art grew immensely when transatlantic connections between Europe and the United States came into full swing.

International and universal fairs as well as the opening of new art collections in North America, including the Freer Gallery and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the MMFA and the ROM made this period remarkable. While world fairs with their colonialist undertones could have exerted some influence on the collecting habits of Van Horne and Strathcona, this was not the case for Morgan, who, a generation younger, would have relied on the expertise of internationally renowned promoters. When it came to Chinese art, Yamanaka Sadajiro (1866-1936)<sup>30</sup> and Ching Tsai Loo (1880-1957),<sup>31</sup> as well as Abel William Bahr (1877-1959), were instrumental in the shaping of many North American collections, including the MMFA's.

While both Yamanaka and Loo have been studied in depth and their contribution to the shaping of Asian collections in America has been thoroughly assessed, Abel William Bahr remains little known.<sup>32</sup> Bahr played an important role as one of those self-proclaimed experts, who felt imbued with the sacred mission of opening the western eye to Chinese aesthetics, while promoting his personal agenda. He was in the right place at the right time: as a Eurasian polyglot resident of Shanghai, he was the only dealer who could boast familiarity in both the eastern and western worlds. It is not surprising that in his unpublished biography Bahr would call himself "an old China hand, merchant, collector and traveler."<sup>33</sup>

Political turmoil in China enabled him to snatch important artworks from disgraced Qing officials. He went on to sell a large group of ancient jades to Berthold Laufer for the Field Museum, and some of his paintings ended up at the Metropolitan Museum, while the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum all purchased works from him between 1915 and 1950. It was only later in life in 1947 that Bahr moved with his family to Montreal,



although Morgan and Bahr had been friends since their New York dealings in the 1920s.

In a letter to Morgan, Bahr emphasises the importance of placing works in museums even if it meant selling them at a loss (!): “I have the greatest and best reason to have them in museums, for the simple reason that, one in the public museum exhibited is better than twenty in private homes, for the enlightenment of this phase of Chinese art.” As an



Fig. 11 Porcelain bowl (*qingbai* –pale blue-white glaze), Jingdezhen, China, Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279); 7.9 x 12.9 cm; MMFA F. Cleveland Morgan Bequest [1962.Ed.14]; photo: MMFA. Christine Guest.

“enlightener”, Bahr’s propositions to our museum included mostly pottery, bronze and textiles rather than paintings, possibly catering to our director’s preference for decorative arts (fig. 11).

### Consuming cultures

Assembled in the first half of the twentieth century, the MMFA collection provides an invaluable time capsule that allows us to appreciate the idea of Japan and China that was formed and consumed in Canada at the time. The colonialist gaze and faith in the supremacy of the Empire certainly informed our founders, dictating their tastes and later shaping our holdings. As was the case in many North American museums at that time, the materials available in the market dictated the types of artifacts that were purchased, while self-proclaimed cultural promoters and their dealings defined the appreciation of those materials and their value. It was indeed a clear case of “lost in translation” when objects devoid of their

cultural significance were re-interpreted and re-arranged according to local arbitrary criteria. Furthermore, as it was for Chinese porcelains, the great majority of these objects were easily carried, contained and appreciated for the tactile response, and were easily available on the European and American markets thanks to the continuous productive outpour in Japan. In fact, Western demand was titillated and satisfied by the ready availability of the objects.

The artefacts in the MMFA Asian collection show that when material objects are circulated in multicultural contexts their cultural definition is bound to change and acquire multiple layers of interpretation. The values placed on objects are highly subjective. Knowing the space and time-frame of the collection facilitates a critical re-interpretation. By acknowledging these early collecting practices as a product of the all-encompassing imperialist gaze toward the other, we can then understand the migration, interpretation and commodification of the Others conveyed through their materiality from cultural signifiers to commodities to art collectables.

### Endnotes

1. Donald Mackay, *The Square Mile, Merchant Princes of Montreal*, Vancouver 1987.
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Market for Symbolic Goods*, in: *The Field of Cultural Production*, New York 1993, p. 112-141.
3. The Golden Square Mile, also known as The Square Mile, is the nostalgic name given to the urban neighbourhood developed principally between 1850 and 1930 at the foot of Mount Royal, in the west-central section of downtown Montreal, where the Anglophone mercantile elite mostly lived.
4. Regrettably, some of these precious possessions were dispersed after the death of their holders for diverse socio-economic and political reasons. Art bequests were less possible in Canada due to the reduced circumstances brought on by Canada’s contribution of men and money to the British Empire as well as the introduction of personal income tax.
5. Carol Duncan, *Art Museums and the ritual of citizenship*, in: *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan Pearce, London / New York 1994, p. 282-283.
6. The Art Association of Montreal changed its name to Montreal Museum of Fine Art only in 1949; see Georges-Hebert Germain, *A City’s Museum*, Montreal 2007.
7. Germain 2007, *A City’s Museum*, p. 15.
8. Laura Vigo, *Asian Art at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts – The Renaissance of a Historic Collection*, in: *Arts of Asia*, vol. 42 no. 2, 2012, p. 124-133.
9. Laura Vigo, *Japan Contained: The Birth of the Asian Collection at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts*, in: *Obsession: Sir William Van Horne’s Japanese Ceramics*, ed. Ron Graham, Montreal / Kingston, Ontario 2018, p. 56-79.
10. Tomoko Nakashima, *Defining Japanese Art in America*, in: *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, no. 17, 2006, p. 245-262.
11. John La Farge, *Across America and Asia*, New York 1870, cited by Warren Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture*, New York 1992, p. 20.
12. Yuko Imai, *Changes in French Tastes for Japanese Ceramics*, in: *Japan Review*, no. 16, 2004, p. 101-127.

13. The title of the catalogue for the loan exhibition of 1881 at the Art Association of Montreal was: *Decorative Objects-Bric-a-Brac*, perhaps insinuating their not-so-fine-arts quality?
  14. Such as the seminal revue *Le Japon Artistique*, published in 6 volumes between 1888-1891 by the leading European dealer, Siegfried (Samuel) Bing.
  15. Elisa Evett, *The Critical Reception of Japanese Art in the Late Nineteenth Century Europe*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1982, p. 81.
  16. Joe Earle, *The Taxonomic Obsession: British Collectors and Japanese Objects 1852-1886*, in: Burlington Magazine, vol. 128, 1986, p. 864-873.
  17. Van Horne addressing as President of the Art Association of Montreal, in Alexandria Pierce, *Imperialist Intent, Colonial response: The Art Collection and Cultural Milieu of Lord Strathcona in Nineteenth-Century Montreal*, PhD thesis, McGill University, 2002, p. 29.
  18. *Montreal Gazette*, 4 December 1909.
  19. Craig Clunas, *Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art*, in: Positions: East Asian Cultures Critique, vol. 2 no. 2, 1994, p. 323.
  20. Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive, Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, London / New York 1993.
  21. Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere, *A.W. Franks, N. Ninagawa and the British Museum: Collecting Japanese Ceramics in Victorian Britain*, in: Orientations, vol. 33 no. 2, 2002, p. 26-34.
  22. Rousmaniere 2002, *A.W. Franks, N. Ninagawa and the British Museum*, p. 29.
  23. Vigo 2018, *Japan Contained*, p. 56-79.
  24. Philippe Burty, *Le Japon ancien et le Japon moderne*, in: L'Art, 4e année, vol. IV, no. XV, 1878, p. 242-243; Evelyne Possémé, *La découverte des grès de la cérémonie du thé par l'Occident», dans Céramique japonaise: sobriété et irrégularité*, cat. exp., Musée départemental Georges de La Tour, Vic-sur-Seille 2010, p. 35-41. Laura Vigo *Encense, Thé et Esthétiques: George Clemenceau et Sa Collection de Boîtes à Encens Japonaises* in: *George Clemenceau, La Tigre et l'Asie*, eds. Aurélie Samuel et al., Paris 2014.
  25. Mino Yutaka, *Boîtes à encens japonaises redécouvertes: la collection de kōgō de Georges Clemenceau*, Montreal 1977.
  26. Edward Sylvester Morse (1838-1925) visited Paris three times (1883, 1887, 1889) to discover the French collections of Japanese art. See Imai 2004, *Changes in French Tastes for Japanese Ceramics*.
  27. Vigo 2014, *Encense, Thé et Esthétiques: George Clemenceau et Sa Collection de Boîtes à Encens Japonaises*.
  28. MMFA exhibition files online. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/mbam-repertoire-des-expositions-depuis-1860,20-02-2020>.
  29. An entire page of the Gazette was devoted to the exhibition, *One hundred prints from the collection of E. Colonna of New York*, in: Montreal Star, 2 January 1908.
  30. Sonoko Monden, *Yamanaka Sadajirō*, in: *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, vol. VIII, ed. Hugh Cortazzi, Leiden 2013, p. 278-292 and also: Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560-1960*, Oxford 2007, p. 89; Roy Davids and Dominic Jellinek, *PROVE-NANCE: Collectors, Dealers and Scholars: Chinese Ceramics in Britain and America*, Oxon 2011, p. 454-456 and plate 167; Thomas Lawton, *Yamanaka Sadajirō: Advocate for Asian Art*, in: Orientations, vol. 26 no. 1, 1995, p. 85-86.
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  32. Laura Vigo, *Old China Hand, Merchant, Collector and Traveller: William Abel Bahr at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts*, in: Arts of Asia, vol. 47 no. 5, 2017, p. 114-123.
  33. Provisional title of his biography, written in 1954 by Charles Richard Cammell, editor of *The Connoisseur* magazine. From *A Finding Aid to the A.W. Bahr papers, 1919-1957 (bulk 1947-1957)*, at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives.
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### Summary

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts owns one of the richest and oldest collections of Asian art in Canada, strangely little known abroad. Over 6000 artefacts ranging from Neolithic pots to modern works were collected by a closely-knit group of Montreal wealthy industrialists connected to the railway boom, who were exposed to the first Asian (both Japanese and Chinese) material diaspora on the North American market in the late 19th-early 20th century. Even if the collectors' choices and the way in which they appreciated their newly acquired possessions were based on arbitrary aesthetic criteria, their inclinations well reflect the shared perception of otherness and the construction of a taste for the 'exotic' that pervaded North America in the late 19th century. Sir William van Horne, Lord Strathcona, Mabel Molson and Frederick Cleveland Morgan became informed collectors and then donors, shaping our museum for the decades to come. They unsurprisingly followed the western connoisseur's terms to define the Far East, manipulating its material cultures to favour continuity over change and unity at the expenses of diversity. Artefacts were interpreted as crystallised in

time and function. As it turned out, most objects were continuously used for various purposes – sacred or profane – and cherished in a large variety of contexts by different people, as in the case of a 9th century BCE ritual bronze *gui* container, later absorbed into an imperial collection and finally diasporated to the West to end up in our museum's holdings. This is the story of its wondrous journey.

### Author

Laura Vigo is Curator of Asian Arts at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where she has recently overseen the reinstallation of the permanent collections in the new wing devoted to World Cultures (Spring 2019). She holds an MA in Asian Arts and a PhD in Chinese Archaeology (SOAS). Invited professor at the University of Montréal (UdeM), her interests span from collection historiography to the challenges of decolonisation in cultural representation within encyclopedic museums.

### Title

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