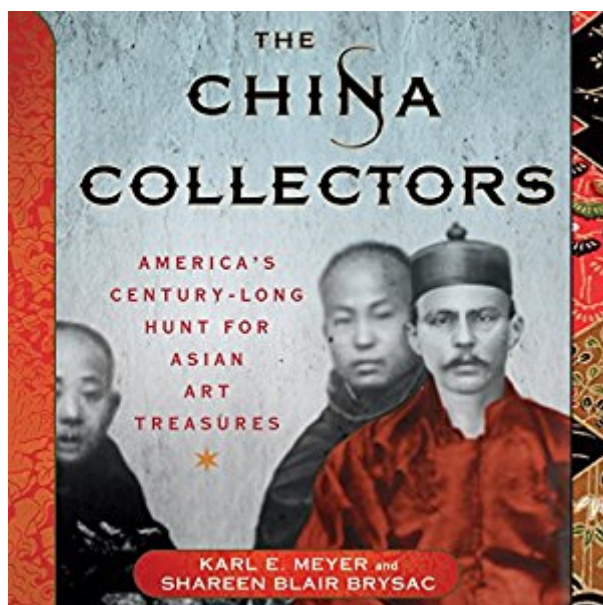


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# The China Collectors: America's Century-Long Hunt For Asian Art Treasures



## Synopsis

Thanks to Salem sea captains, Gilded Age millionaires, curators on horseback and missionaries gone native, North American museums now possess the greatest collections of Chinese art outside of East Asia itself. How did it happen? *The China Collectors* is the first full account of a century-long treasure hunt in China from the Opium Wars and the Boxer Rebellion to Mao Zedong's 1949 ascent. The principal gatherers are mostly little known and defy invention. They included "foreign devils" who braved desert sandstorms, bandits, and local warlords in acquiring significant works.

Adventurous curators like Langdon Warner, a forebear of Indiana Jones, argued that the caves of Dunhuang were already threatened by vandals, thereby justifying the removal of frescoes and sculptures. Other Americans include George Kates, an alumnus of Harvard, Oxford, and Hollywood, who fell in love with Ming furniture. The Chinese were divided between dealers who profited from the artworks' removal and scholars who sought to protect their country's patrimony. Duanfang, the greatest Chinese collector of his era, was beheaded in a coup, and his splendid bronzes now adorn major museums. Others in this rich tapestry include Charles Lang Freer, an enlightened Detroit entrepreneur; two generations of Rockefellers; Avery Brundage, the imperious Olympian; and Arthur Sackler, the grand acquirer. No less important are two museum directors, Cleveland's Sherman Lee and Kansas City's Laurence Sickman, who challenged the East Coast's hegemony. Shareen Blair Brysac and Karl E. Meyer evenhandedly consider whether ancient treasures were looted or salvaged and whether it was morally acceptable to spirit hitherto inaccessible objects westward, where they could be studied and preserved by trained museum personnel. And how should the US and Canada and their museums respond now that China has the means and will to reclaim its missing patrimony?

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a thoroughly fascinating book about Chinese art -- and more about men and women from America and Europe who collected it (sometimes through looting, especially in the early times) and brought it to collections and museums in the United States. We read about the adventurers, diplomats, curators and others who entered China a century ago and discovered Chinese art that was not recognized in the West. Famous collectors, like J.P. Morgan, Charles Lang Freer and the Rockefellers play important roles, as do Chinese counterparts and suppliers of art like C.T. Loo. We learn about how major museums in Boston, New York, Kansas City, Washington, DC, and elsewhere -- developed what now constitute major collections of Chinese and other Asian art. We also learn about how the Freer Gallery, and later its pair the Sackler Gallery, on the National Mall came about (one of the most entertaining chapters focuses on the life of Arthur M. Sackler). All of this placed in an historical context: the two World Wars, the Great Depression, and naturally Mao's revolution in China all greatly influenced the collecting of Chinese art by Westerners and the commercial and cultural exchanges more broadly. I took a long time reading this book. Partly, it was because I didn't always find the appropriate time to focus on the book (instead, I found myself reading a number of novels in between). Partly it was because I often felt the need to look up particular cultural periods or art works in a reference volume (for this I used Michael Sullivan's gorgeous *The Arts of China, Fourth Edition*). But partly it was also that some of the book was a bit tedious. In particular, I found the early parts of the book on the Boston Brahmins and Harvard in the late-1800s a tad unnecessarily detailed.

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