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'The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan'

An Interview with Helga Wall-Apelt

In January 2006, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art and Florida State University (FSU) announced that Helga Wall-Apelt, a physician, art collector and philanthropist from Sarasota, would fund the setting up of the Dr Helga Wall-Apelt Gallery of Asian Art at the museum. Estimated to exceed US\$50 million in value, Wall-Apelt's multi-tiered contribution includes the promised gift of her collection, and will enable the museum to create a wing for the display and study of Asian art, as well as support curatorial staff, lecture and seminar programmes, research, acquisitions, exhibitions, publications and other activities related to Asian art and culture. The Ringling's West Galleries, which date from 1966, will be extensively renovated to accommodate the Asian art galleries and include a pavilion-style entrance and a tea garden. The Wall-Apelt gallery will also house the museum's existing holdings of Asian art, including the Koger Collection of Chinese Ceramics, acquired in 2002.

Wall-Apelt's gift is significant not only in the museum world but also in the field of US philanthropy as a whole – it is the largest received by the Ringling to date and the largest single donation to FSU. Two influential US online magazines, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* and *Slate*, singled out the donation of Wall-Apelt and that of Japanese-art collector Mary Griggs Burke to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts for special mention in 2006, even though their contributions could not be included in the annual list of top philanthropists because of difficulties in defining the dollar-value of artworks (Maria di Mento, 'How The Chronicle's Survey of Last Year's Top Donors was Compiled', in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 22 February 2007, www.philanthropy.com).

When *Orientations* spoke to Wall-Apelt at the end of last year, arrangements for the gallery appeared to be going full steam, with Amy Poster, formerly Lisa and Bernard Selz Curator of Asian Art at the Brooklyn Museum, appointed as consultant for strategic planning.

Orientations: Why were you drawn to Asia and its art?

Helga Wall-Apelt: This is a very sensitive question involving strong emotions from my childhood. My father passed away unexpectedly in 1955 when I was only 15 years old. My memory of him ultimately drew me to Asia and its arts. It was he who inspired my passion.

I remember my father sitting in lotus posture in his big leather armchair immersed in deep meditation. He had had an extremely successful career and been a well-recognized physician in Hanover – many of his patients were opera singers and industrialists. In the years preceding World War II, however, my father's medical licence was taken away and he became a recluse. The year he died he wanted to take me to India to visit his yoga master, whom he had never met, but with whom he was in constant telepathic communication. We did not make it to India, but my father left me an unusual standing bronze Buddha from Japan. As I don't know if my father ever collected other works from Asia, this piece is of great significance to me. It had an important influence on my collecting and remains close to my heart – it inspired a deep passion which I have sustained now for nearly 40 years.

O: When and why did you begin collecting? What qualities do you look for in a work of art?

HW-A: I started collecting soon after my father's death. Even though I was still in high school, I was already fascinated by the art and culture of Asia. The first work I bought was a seated



Helga Wall-Apelt in Bhutan, 2006

bronze Buddha depicted in the earth-touching gesture. At the time, I had to take a loan against the house where I was raised to purchase it, but I was impressed by the image and it remains one of my favourite pieces. It inspired me to look for ancient tradition, symbolic meaning and beauty in works of art, and I have gone on to acquire many more Buddhist sculptures. Nevertheless, other objects have become central to my interests,

especially Chinese jades. I was very fortunate to have access to other private collections, allowing me to assemble a dynamic collection of my own.

O: Why did you decide to establish a gallery for Asian art in Sarasota?

HW-A: I was first attracted to Sarasota in 1980 – it was and remains a centre for the arts. I was drawn by the rich cultural offerings in the area including the Sarasota Opera, West Coast Symphony, The Asolo Theater, and the many galleries and wonderful restaurants, in addition to The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

In 2000, I founded the not-for-profit Museum of Asian Art in Sarasota. The museum was loved by many, but it did not have enduring strength because of minimal funding. However, I wanted to keep the collection in Sarasota because the community had grown to mean so much to me. The city had become my home after 26 years, and I wanted to give something back. I had also envisioned sharing my collection in a way that would

have a larger public impact and offer exceptional educational programming opportunities.

O: Why did you choose the Ringling Museum as the recipient of your gift, and how has it enhanced the institution?

HW-A: In 2000, the governance of the Ringling Museum was transferred from Florida's Department of State to FSU, and funds were secured to restore the original Ringling buildings and later, through public and private partnerships, to build four new facilities by 2007. Before FSU became involved, the future of the Ringling Museum was uncertain, and the existing buildings were in a distressingly poor condition. The turnaround was remarkable, and I was very impressed with the renewed commitment to the future of the institution. I became very focused on working with the Ringling Museum and, in January 2006, donated the combined gift of my collection and the funding to develop the Asian art galleries in my name.

The Asian art galleries will bring balance to the Ringling's Eurocentric collection and draw respect and recognition from local, national and international communities. The Asian initiative will support an expansion of research as well as the study of Asia and Asian art at FSU.

O: Your gift to the Ringling comes at a time when state funding of museums is diminishing. Many institutions often find themselves in an awkward situation of having to turn away donations – if they accept gifts of art, they may encounter problems of finding sufficient resources to show, upkeep and store the works. You also had the foresight to make the gift multi-tiered to include an endowment and future financial support for the gallery. Can you comment on this?



Buddha
Thailand, 15th century
Bronze
Height 62.2 cm
Promised gift of Dr Helga Wall-Apelt
The John and Mable Ringling
Museum of Art, Sarasota



Helga Wall-Apelt as a child
on the shoulder of her father
Gottfried Apelt in 1940

HW-A: I structured my donation in a multi-tiered format to ensure the museum could support the Asian collections with a building and an endowment. As it stood, even with the four new buildings completed in 2007, a permanent exhibition space for Asian works was not available. Additionally, the endowment was necessary to establish a curatorial position dedicated to the Asian collection as well as create educational opportunities in the field. As I intended the gift of my collection to become part of this rich cultural centre, I hoped my financial gift would support these two areas of concern.

I wanted to create a landmark with my donation and demonstrate that private money can make a big difference. I believe that one should commit to one's missions and goals in life; in the case of this collection, it was to establish it with a world-renowned institution so that the culture and traditions of Asia would be preserved and shared with generations to come. There seems to be a trend for collections to be dispersed and sold – I disagree with such a practice, and would encourage private collectors to keep their collection intact wherever possible. Collectors can have an extraordinary impact on education and museum resources in their own cities and communities by committing collections and funds to support the future of these institutions. I feel the collection will be well preserved because of my full involvement.

While state funding of museums may be changing, the Ringling Museum has the unique benefit of being part of FSU. The strong leadership and backing of the university are tremendous. I am confident the Ringling Museum will thrive with support and collaborations with other state museums.

O: What is your vision for the Dr Helga Wall-Apelt gallery and also for the position of Asian art in the Ringling Museum?

HW-A: The development of the Asian art gallery is still a very new concept for the Ringling Museum, and while there are many ideas and concepts under review, we are truly in the

beginning stages of this initiative. The contributions of our consultant Amy Poster have proved invaluable – she has been organizing focused exhibitions to ready the Sarasota community for this large-scale project. She has shared her experience and expertise by helping to assess the permanent collection of the museum and advising on the strategic planning of the Asian art initiative.

The galleries will be completed within the next three to five years and, over that time, designs and plans will be finalized, a specialist curator will be brought on board, programming and exhibitions will be expanded, and the Ringling Museum will begin to be recognized for its commitment to Asian art. I hope we can also expand the museum's collector's circle to include a significant group of Asian art enthusiasts so that the Ringling's holdings in this area will continue to grow.

O: Now that you've given your collection to the Ringling Museum, are you still personally collecting? Do you continue to collect in the areas that you are known for like jades, or are you expanding in new areas – how about contemporary art?

HW-A: I continue to collect Asian art and it will forever be one of the most important aspects of my life. My collection of jades and bronzes is very extensive but I am now transferring my focus to modern and contemporary art. On my new quest, I am



Brush holder and brushes
China, late 18th century (holder)
and 19th/20th century (brushes)
Nephrite
Height 40.6 cm, length 35.6 cm (holder)
Promised gift of Dr Helga Wall-Apelt
The John and Mable Ringling
Museum of Art, Sarasota

most interested in works that combine traditional and contemporary influences with beauty and harmony. As I have retired from my medical practice, I travel a great deal more throughout Asia and am familiarizing myself with the artists and museum communities that best exemplify my ideals.

O: Collecting antiquities can be quite problematic these days with the interests of lobby groups that call for heritage protection and the State Department's involvement. Do you feel this has had an impact on your collecting activities and that of the museum in any way? What are your views on the issues of provenance and the supposed illicit trade in some nations?

HW-A: My main purpose as a collector has always been to bring together works of art that can inspire, teach and preserve cultures.

I fear the illegitimate practices of some discredit this commitment. Provenance is a very important issue. I am very conscious of the US law and the UNESCO Convention in this regard. Although the US has ratified the UNESCO Convention and made it part of the federal law in the early 1980s, illicit trade unfortunately still persists. I believe that it is every collector's responsibility to be actively aware of the law both in their own country and the country of origin from which they are collecting.

O: Quite by coincidence, this interview runs alongside an *Orientations* issue focusing on the exhibition 'The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan', which opens at the Honolulu Academy of Arts on 24 February. We understand you visited Bhutan as part of the Leadership Committee of the Smithsonian Institution's 2008 Folk Life Festival. What were your impressions of the Himalayan kingdom and what will you like visitors to the events at the Honolulu Academy and the Smithsonian to take away with them?

HW-A: I believe Bhutan is the last Shangri-La on earth. I think it is very interesting that the predecessor of the current King defined gross national happiness as measuring prosperity through well-being rather than through consumption. As its people are practising Buddhists who care deeply for their tradition, culture and natural surroundings, I hope that technology will not undermine the values of its population and that Bhutan's character will remain sacred.

I am happy that exhibitions presenting a broad introduction to Bhutan and other less well-known cultures are coming to the US. The exposure is phenomenal, and will help to educate and inspire new audiences. It is something that I hope my collection at the Ringling Museum will also achieve.



Avalokiteshvara
Vietnam, Later Le period, late 17th-early 18th century
Wood with polychrome and lacquer
Height 92.7 cm
Promised gift of Dr Helga Wall-Apelt
The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota