

Tsai I-Ming: Master of The Leshantang Collection

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By Marian Ang | Sep 25, 2023

Encompassing treasures of Chinese art from imperial porcelain to classical and modern paintings, Tsai I-Ming amassed a breathtaking collection over nearly half a century. We take a closer look at the story of the extraordinary man behind The Leshantang Collection.

One of the celebrated connoisseurs of Chinese art and antiques, Tsai I-Ming assembled a collection that reflected his own bold and generous spirit. Born in the Zhejiang province in 1927, Tsai fell under the spell of Chinese antiques in middle school. It was sparked by a visit to the house of a classmate's older brother – the eminent Shanghainese collector J. M. Hu, who was also one of the founding members of Hong Kong's highly respected Min Chiu Society. Tsai recalled a respectful hush descending upon the group of noisy schoolboys when they encountered the precious and elegant classical antiques in Hu's house for the first time. A seed was sown in his mind, and although unable to afford such beautiful objects for a long time, Tsai was struck by an indelible pride in his Chinese cultural heritage.

‘Spanning a millennium of artistic production, the collection represents a connoisseurial depth and art historical breadth with few equals in the world of Chinese art today.’

– Nicolas Chow, Chairman of Asia and Chairman and Worldwide Head of Asian Art, Sotheby's



Portrait of Tsai I-Ming.

On one of his many business trips to Hong Kong in the early 1970s, Tsai chanced upon a signboard for one of Sotheby's earliest auctions in Hong Kong in the lobby of the Mandarin Hotel, where he always stayed during his visits. His interest was reignited by this serendipitous encounter, and he spent the next few years immersing himself in the realm of auctions and Chinese antiques, hungry for knowledge, observing and learning before he finally began to assemble his own remarkable collection in the refined Shanghai tradition. He was seized with happiness that he was finally able to fulfil his dreams in his middle age. With boundless curiosity and an exacting eye, Tsai acquired works with "the keenest attention to their beauty, quality and condition, and to their relative rarity", noted Julian Thompson, the late former chairman of Sotheby's Hong Kong. A voracious reader and auto-didact, Tsai adopted a sanguine philosophy, only buying what he loved, understood and could afford, never hesitating to turn down anything that did not fulfil these requirements regardless of who offered it to him.

'Mr. Tsai I-Ming and his wife have a great love of their country, its culture and its ceramics. They have their own insight and fine judgement.'

– Geng Baochang, Palace Museum, Beijing

Porcelain was Tsai's first love. His finds included an extremely rare, large Junyao blue-glazed flowerpot originating from the collection of J.T. Tai, which became The Leshantang Collection's centrepiece until it was sold at Sotheby's Hong Kong in April 2008. Pieces from Edward T. Chow's legendary collection also found their way into The Leshantang Collection via sales at Sotheby's Hong Kong in 1980 and 1981. The

starting point for Tsai was always aesthetic, followed closely by curiosity, and there was one favoured miniature Yongzheng cup that his son Bobby recalled prompted the question, “What kind of hands could have made such a small thing? Those of a 5 year-old girl?” This constant appetite to learn more, together with the requirement that the object embodied the essence of Chinese culture in its own way, resulted in The Leshantang Collection bringing together a diverse and fascinating group of objects spanning jades, bronze wares and wood carvings amongst them.



An Outstanding and Possibly Unique Famille-Rose and Doucai Moon Flask, Seal mark and period of Yongzheng | Estimate: 20,000,000 - 30,000,000 HKD

The story of how The Leshantang Collection welcomed its first Chinese paintings is a particular testament to Tsai's unique spirit and energy. At a Sotheby's Hong Kong auction in 1981, Tsai was struck by the vivid colour and meticulously detailed, realistic style of Zhang Daqian's *Dragon Maiden Worshipping Buddha* (1948). Executed in the Dunhuang mural painting style, it depicts the Buddhist tale of the Dragon Maiden, who attains supreme enlightenment by offering a precious pearl to the Buddha. The purchase sparked Tsai to embark upon a quest to meet the artist himself and ask him about the unusual captivating red pigments seen in the painting. Zhang shared his secret – an ore found near Dunhuang that turned a vivid red when ground up. Tsai's zeal deeply moved Zhang, and he showed his guest one of his most

treasured works, *Red Robe Avalokiteshvara*, painted in parts using the same vivid red pigment. Awestruck by what he saw, Tsai's passion and sincerity won over Zhang, convincing the master to sell this masterpiece to him.



Zhang Daqian, *Dragon Maiden Worshipping Buddha*, 1948 | Estimate: 10,000,000 - 20,000,000 HKD



Xiang Shenmo, *House of Heavenly Fragrance*, 1628
 | Estimate: 12,000,000 - 15,000,000 HKD

Tsai christened his beloved collection “Leshantang”, an epithet derived from the Confucian saying “The wise find joy in water; the benevolent find joy in the mountain” (see *The Analects of Confucius*). “Benevolence” was a lifelong mission of Tsai, who strongly believed that the key to being a successful collector is to assume the responsibility of helping, sharing with and educating others. When he believed that a collector’s family were in financial straits, he would bid up prices on their precious items in the hope that the family would be adequately supported by the sale, regardless of whether he was the winning bidder or not. When a museum shared his interest in the same painting at an auction, Tsai acceded to the curator’s request not to bid for the painting so that the museum could acquire it for their permanent collection with their limited funding. Rueful about the loss of such a good painting, Tsai nonetheless found a lot of joy in his ability to help those whose paths crossed his own.

By the early 1980s Tsai had developed connections with the Forbidden City in Beijing, and was invited to become the chairman of the Chinese Culture and Fine Art Association. Tsai always made his collection readily available to students, scholars and fellow collectors, and lent works to many exhibitions. He realised that finding the right platform would help to promote Chinese art and facilitate academic and intellectual exchange, and in 1992 he became a founding member and chairman of the Ching Wan Society, a prestigious collectors' circle akin to the Min Chiu Society, where collectors could share and discuss their passion for art.

Tsai passed away peacefully in 2021 at the age of 95, bringing an end to a golden chapter in Chinese art collecting. The Leshantang Collection - Treasures of Chinese Art from the Tsai I-Ming Collection at Sotheby's Hong Kong is the celebration of a brilliant life, whose benevolence, commitment and integrity stood side-by-side with an indomitable passion for art and culture.

About the Author

Marian Ang is a Hong Kong-based art writer and researcher, and a regular Sotheby's contributor.