

TRAVEL

Sunnylands' art collection contributes to diplomacy

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The Annenberg Retreat at Sunnylands has been the site of two recent high-profile meetings between the presidents of the United States and world leaders. During the first meeting, between President Barack Obama and President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China June 7-8, 2013, the conference had a unique assist from Walter and Leonore Annenberg's collection of antique Chinese objects displayed throughout their onetime estate home.

Geoffrey Cowan, president of the estate's governing organization, The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands, commented during a news conference at the neighboring Sunnylands Center and Gardens on May 30, that the exceptional Chinese pieces in this American home, where, as of today, eight U.S. presidents have been entertained, directly added to "the appropriateness of the location."

Cowan was with China's advance team, which included Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the United States, when they scouted Sunnylands ahead of the official visit. Sunnylands Center's temporary exhibition of 35 pieces of the Annenbergs' superb cloisonné collection — comprised of decorative, utilitarian and ritual objects of colorful enamel on metal dating from the late 16th century was a fortunate coincidence to the visit. "I think it meant a lot to them to see it," said Cowan.

But it wasn't the exhibition alone that welcomed the advance group in May, and subsequently President Xi and his wife Peng Liyuan this weekend. Rather, as center director Janice Lyle explained, it also was the contents of the house, demonstrating "the Annenbergs' interest in and receptivity to Chinese art, which was combined with their interior designer William Haines' passion for it."

The symbolic effect overall was to communicate a deep appreciation of — and respect for — the aesthetic accomplishments of China.

Moreover, the fact that this sentiment was held by a highly influential couple from a young nation toward a far older one now on the ascendancy would not have been lost on the visitors.

An ancient culture

Examples of China's artistic expression first appeared as far back as 8,000-10,000 years ago. Then, from 221 BC through the early 20th century, China was governed by a continuous succession of ruling dynasties. Each demanded ever-increasing artistry to properly convey their imperial splendor.

Taken collectively, the works of the anonymous artisans whose skilled hands fashioned such regal

pieces across the millennia represent the longest unbroken artistic tradition in the history of the world.

Objects speak. Not just literally like our iPhones and in-car navigation systems, but rather they silently communicate the contemporary values of the society for which they were made. A sleekly beautiful Silicon Valley-designed tablet instantly connects us to the world from anywhere serving our American society's high valuation on being continuously available as well as our hunger for instant information and entertainment. Likewise, the antique Chinese pieces whisper of the good life in another place and time.

The cloisonné

A late 16th- to early 17th-century cloisonné incense burner today a cherished part of the Sunnylands collection as a bravura example of this complex enameling technique was exquisitely crafted to suit the Ming dynasty ideal.

Like our highly sought-after tablets, the incense burner was then both a desirable and functional piece. It served the Chinese official or scholar who owned it by enhancing his ambiance through fragrance, additionally delivering pleasure in each viewing of its intricate finish.

Underscoring the Chinese reverence for this distinctive art form, tall graceful pairs of cloisonné cranes on long gilded legs immediately flank the imperial thrones in the Forbidden City and also at the Summer Palace in Beijing.

Ornamented with exquisite swirling dragons amid clouds as well as scrolling lotus flowers and leaves rendered in vibrant colors and gilded metal, the Annenbergs' incense burner was acquired in London during Walter Annenberg's service from 1969 to 1974 as the ambassador to the Court of St James.

Just as it pleased the ambassador, the incense burner would have been just the thing to delight the cultivated Chinese aristocrat who sat contemplating his garden while robed in silken embroidery nearly half a millennium earlier.

Ceramic treasures

Other pieces tell stories, as well.

"The Annenbergs focused most of their Chinese collecting efforts on the Qianlong era of the Qing dynasty (1735-1796) with one or two notable exceptions," said Anne M. Rowe, the retreat's director of collections and exhibitions.

"In the Royal Sitting Room at Sunnylands are examples of Tang dynasty ceramic funerary sculpture, all intended as burial objects.

The ancient Chinese of that time (618-907 AD) firmly believed in an afterlife, and so they commissioned such objects, often glazed to add color, to accompany them into their afterlife."

While the glazed figures, Rowe continues, are literal interpretations of the deceased individual, or other people, objects and animals from their life, the unglazed, painted figures displayed elsewhere in the house's Royal Sitting Room depict supernatural figures specifically intended to protect the tomb and the remains of the deceased.

Additionally, the dining room is presided over by a two-foot-tall, shimmering white porcelain piece atop a tall wood plinth.

It is a figure of the Buddhist goddess of mercy, Guanyin, riding the wave of enlightenment. The delicate piece's survival since its creation around 1800 indicates that it has been prized for its artistry, symbolism and grace by each subsequent owner.

Furnishings and decorative accessories

Beyond the objects from China, "many of Sunnylands' midcentury furnishings designed specifically for the house by William Haines express a decided Chinese manner," notes Rowe. Chinese altar-like console tables with ox-bow stretchers abound. Sofa tables are inlaid with Chinese hard-stone reliefs on lacquered panels flanked by black-lacquered fretwork panels.

Additionally, Rowe points out that nearly every table-top ornament in the house is Chinese. Delicate Chinese export porcelain plates, made from the 16th to the 18th centuries for trade with eager European and later North American markets, are found in both the public spaces and also in the master bedroom.

Further, notes Rowe, the Annenbergs acquired a fair amount of decorative jade and hard-stone pieces with Chinese origins.

"They collected both kinds of jade: the more common variety known as nephrite and the rarer, more revered, jadeite," she says. "In these collecting journeys they obtained a significant jadeite sculpture that is quite important for its size and detail."

Resplendent in repose on a handsome William Haines sideboard in the living room, 'Walter' as he was and is known, is a massive 138-pound water buffalo with his tail kicked up on a hind hoof.

He is a regal beast in a relaxed, confident pose depicting living movement across the length of his carved, 20-inch muscled body.

"It is said that the technique of shaping such a massive stone during the Qianlong era of the Qing dynasty (1735-1796) would have taken the artist somewhere between 14 and 24 years basically one's lifetime of work."

Appropriate to his status as a treasure, 'Walter' was flown to Sunnylands in 1977, reports Rowe, "in not one, but two first-class seats, and has held court in the living room ever since."

Chinoiserie

Further reflecting China's historic stylistic influence, Sunnylands' collection of Chinese arts also includes some exceptional examples of chinoiserie Europe's 18th-century stylistic response to the Chinese aesthetic particularly in the estate's Inwood Room.

Created on the site of a former indoor swimming pool at Sunnylands some four decades after the house's completion, the Inwood Room is filled with fine English Georgian-period antiques brought from the Annenbergs' former home in Philadelphia. Also designed by Haines, the eastern residence was furnished in late 18th-century George III style, an era when chinoiserie was all the rage.

The room's mirrors are ornamented with birds and pagodas, and the furnishings feature Chinese motifs, especially fretwork, in wood and also spectacularly rendered on silk upholstery in a high-relief quilting called trapunto.

In harmony with the Georgian furnishings, an 18th-century Chinese, red and polychrome coromandel-lacquer, 10-panel screen is a prominent feature of the space.

Asian-American Steuben

One other dimension to Sunnylands' exceptional holdings of Chinese-origin or Chinese-inspired objects is a collection that represents an earlier American diplomatic outreach, one never attempted previously nor duplicated since. Sunnylands holds the only complete set in the world of the 36-piece Steuben Glass series, "Asian Artists in Crystal."

The collection was a project in 1954 of the U.S. Foreign Operations Administration, whose mission was "the cooperative development of economic and military strength among the nations of the free world."

The object was to create a collection of pieces made in America of fine Steuben glass that would be adorned with designs from artists in 16 nations of Asia and the Middle East. It was meant to demonstrate that Americans could not be characterized as only being "materialistic and militaristic," but rather, according to then-director Harold Stassen, were truly interested in "the cultural attainments and artistic interests of the people of Asia."

The result is a brilliant expression of midcentury-American style captured in the Steuben-designed forms, but one that takes a global turn with exotic engraved motifs, including three derived from today's Taiwan.

Nearly 60 years later, the collection is housed in velvet-lined cases in the hallway leading to the estate's dining room, offering guests a subtle reminder of both the fragility and beauty of well-intended diplomatic initiatives.