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'If it is beautiful, it will endure on every level'

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‘If it is beautiful, it will endure on every level’

The Asian Art Society in the Netherlands was founded in 1918 with the intention of generating greater interest in Asian art, bringing interested parties in contact with each other, and advancing scholarship in this field.

Rosalien van der Poel

THE SOCIETY STRIVES to achieve its goals by preserving and expanding its collection, organising exhibitions, specimen meetings and excursions, issuing publications, including the Dutch-language journal *Aziatische Kunst* and a Newsletter, and collaborating with like-minded societies in the Netherlands and abroad. The Society has 550 members, and set up the chair in *Material History of the Cultural Interactions Between Asia and Europe* at Leiden University.

From museum to pavilion

A dedicated museum of Asian art was essential to achieving the Society’s goals: a place in the Netherlands where Asian artworks could be permanently displayed. This was realised in 1932 when the Museum of Asian Art was inaugurated in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The museum was relocated to the Rijksmuseum in 1952, where the collection has been housed ever since. The collection will once again be exhibited in all its glory in a specially designed Asian Pavilion when the Rijksmuseum reopens in 2013.

The collection

Since its founding, the Society has brought together a multifaceted collection of Asian artworks. This internationally renowned collection now comprises 1730 objects, and continues to expand through the Society’s ongoing acquisition policy as well as through the gifts and bequests it receives. The Society’s collection includes of a number of highlights, high-quality representatives of the most important Asian art forms. Because of the wide scope of the collecting area and the enormous time span covered by the objects, it is almost impossible to use the objects in the collection to show the historical development of the various art forms, or to demonstrate how forms of artistic expression influenced each other time and time again. Despite this, interest in exhibiting the objects has never been a problem –as a chairman of the Board once wrote, ‘If it is beautiful, it will endure on every level’.

The collection is strong in several areas: ancient Chinese art (sculptures, bronzes, paintings and ceramics), Japanese paintings, prints and sculptures, as well as temple objects and other artworks from Indonesia. The collection also includes objects from India, Thailand, Laos, Sri Lanka, Korea and other Asian countries.

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Join the Asian Art Society in the Netherlands today

- Contribute to the preservation of the Rijksmuseum’s collection of Asian art and to the study of Asian art in the Netherlands.
- Support the acquisition of museological Asian art objects to supplement existing sub-collections in the Rijksmuseum;

Benefits of membership

- Receive the quarterly Dutch-language journal *Aziatische Kunst* and the *Newsletter*, which include information about presentations, excursions and exhibitions in the Netherlands and abroad;
- Attend lectures, meeting and excursions relating to the field of Asian art;
- Free entrance (with one guest) to the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.
- Request a sample copy of *Aziatische Kunst* at www.vvak.nl.

Become a member by donating a minimum of 60 euro per year at www.vvak.nl. For more information, contact Rosalien van der Poel, info@vvak.nl.

MAIN IMAGE:

Lohan, wood with traces of a polychrome decoration, height 109 cm, China, 13th–14th century, acquired in 2005, inv. no. AK-MAK-1727

SPOTLIGHT: AJITA, ONE OF A GROUP OF LOHAN*

The Society’s collection of Chinese sculptures includes this imposing statue of a seated *lohan*. It was originally placed on a plinth, and the elegant folds and curves of the monk’s robes hung over the edge of the front of the flat surface at a right angle. The penetrating gaze from the glass-inlaid eyes and the full lips amplify the intensity of the monk’s expression. A *lohan* has extraordinary qualities, being a monk who dedicated his life to acquiring the highest wisdom and who withdrew from worldly life and lived as hermit to achieve this.

A *lohan* possesses transcendent and supernatural powers. The sculptor of this statue succeeded in beautifully conveying the *lohan*’s great inherent power with his intense gaze and dignified posture. Within the greater group of 500 *lohan*, there is a group of sixteen ‘great’ *lohan* that are especially revered. This group is described in a *sutra* uttered by a dying *lohan* on Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in the third or fourth century. The text *Da aluohan Nandimiduoluo suo shuo fazhuji* (*Record of the Abiding Law as Spoken by the Great lohan Nandimitra*) describes sixteen of Buddha’s disciples and relates that as Buddha approached his death he entrusted these sixteen *lohan* with the task of protecting the Buddhist laws until the arrival of the future Buddha, Maitreya. The veneration of groups of *lohan* blossomed during the early Song period (960–1279), when the groups of sixteen or eighteen *lohan* statues were also selected. It seems that the *lohan* in the Society’s collection is the fifteenth *lohan*, Ajita. He is described in an early twelfth-century text as having ‘his head inclined, listening to the reading of a *sutra*, with a blissful, pure expression, as if he is in a state of consciousness called *samadhi* (a higher state of meditative concentration).’ The *lohan* in the Society’s collection is an outstanding example of thirteenth and fourteenth century Chinese Buddhist sculpture and is the only one of its kind in the Netherlands.

*With thanks to Menno Fitski, curator of East-Asian art, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. The complete description of this object was published in *Aziatische Kunst*, volume 35, no. 3, 2005.

TOP

Left: *Divine Beauty*, sandstone, height 94 cm, India, 11th century, acquired in 1934, inv. no. AK-MAK-185-00
Middle: *Dancing Shiva*, bronze, height 153 cm, India, 12th century, acquired in 1935, inv. no. AK-MAK-187-00
Right: *Guanyin* (Avalokiteshvara), wood with polychrome decoration, height 117 cm, China, 12th century, acquired in 1939, inv. no. AK-MAK 84-00

INSET BELOW

Left: Flowerpot, decorated with yellow, green and aubergine coloured *émail sur bisquit*, height 17.2 cm, diameter 22 cm, China, 17th century, acquired in 1968, inv. no. AK-MAK-572
Right: Detail from a *Plaquette*, ivory, 5 x 12 cm, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), 17th–18th century, acquired in 2009, inv. no. AK-MAK-1730

