

The Asian Art Society in the Netherlands: A Centennial Celebration

Jan van Campen, Wang Ching-ling and Rosalien van der Poel

THE ASIAN Art Society in the Netherlands (VVAK) was founded on June 29th, 1918 by a handful of men, who were keen to stimulate interest in art from Asia and to bring together art lovers in that field.¹ Ten years later, the organisation decided to start its own museum, which opened in 1932. Now—100 years after its foundation—the objects assembled by the Asian Art Society form the mainstay of the Rijksmuseum's Asian art collection, and its members form a large group of dedicated enthusiasts.

Looking back over the century of the Society's history, we can conclude that it has been extremely eventful, particularly in the early years. So, how did the Society come about and how was its collection of Asian art assembled so discreetly? The answer is twofold: the collection was a product of its time and the result of the efforts of several highly talented and bold individuals. First, let us look at the period of the Society's inception. By 1918, Asian art was far from unknown in the West, and was already being collected in other parts of the world; indeed, serious studies were being made of these collections. Boston was at the forefront of this movement and, closer to home, a major collection of Chinese and Japanese art had been assembled in Berlin that became the basis for the *Ostasiatische Kunstabteilung* (East Asian Art Department). Parisians had fallen under the spell of Asian art in a different way: there was a flourishing of Japonism and appreciation for the aesthetics, refined craftsmanship and technical skill of Japanese artisans. Given these developments it is perhaps surprising that the Netherlands, with its important historical ties with Asia and centuries of presence in Indonesia and Japan, lagged behind. Whereas in neighbouring countries serious collecting and research expeditions to Asia in the early 20th century inspired interest and enthusiasm, in the Netherlands, the response was lukewarm, almost certainly because porcelain, chintz and lacquerware from Asia had been abundantly available in the country since the 17th century. Most people were unaware, however, that these objects comprised only a limited selection of luxury goods, which had been made specially to suit European tastes.

By 1918, however, the time had evidently come for the Netherlands to make up for lost time, and Asian art was again in vogue. Asian objects, which were becoming increasingly familiar as they arrived in greater numbers from overseas, were often collected alongside contemporary Western art, and bought by dealers who sold both modern paintings and Asian artworks. From the organisation's very earliest days, the central figures in the Asian Art Society also combined an interest in Asian and contemporary art. Herman Visser (1890-1965) had studied engineering in Munich and Zurich **(1)**. He was young, brilliant and internationally oriented. He loved contemporary Western art, but was also intrigued by the art of Asia, as was the wealthy Gert-Jan Verburgt (1871-1926), the owner and manager of an insurance company **(2)**. Visser became the Society's secretary in 1918, and later also its curator. Verburgt became vice-chairman, and they invited his friend, Herman Karel Westendorp (1868-1941), to be chairman **(3)**. Westendorp was a banker, but he increasingly focused on his cultural interests: he was the supervisor of the *Rijksacademie van beeldende kunsten* (State Academy of Fine Arts) and a trustee of a society devoted to assembling a public collection of contemporary art. Parisian Japonism captivated him through his friendship with Raymond Koechlin (1860-1931), one of the most important collectors and leading figures in Parisian cultural life at the time. It is evident where the aesthetic view of art and emphasis on aesthetic qualities—enduring characteristics of the Society's approach—had its origins.

During this period, an expensive and contemporary interior, that combined both modern and Asian art, became the accepted model of "good taste". There were enough people able to afford it, and membership of the Society matched their interests. The old ties with Asia might not have

given the Netherlands a lead in the development of a renewed appreciation of Asian art, but money that had been accumulated in the Dutch East Indies certainly contributed to the flourishing popularity of the fashion. Many wealthy businessmen supported the Society and helped it to realise its aims.

From the outset, the Society was a highly dynamic organisation: in 1919, it held an exhibition on East Asian art, with an accompanying catalogue and portfolio containing high-quality reproductions, and another in 1922 on the sculpture of the East Indies (South and Southeast Asia). The Society's third exhibition, in 1925, was devoted to Chinese art, a significant event on an international scale, with works on loan from both the Netherlands and abroad. Due to its excellent contacts, the Society was also able to draw on the knowledge of experts from all over the world.

Just how seriously the Society was being taken after such a short time is evident from its participation in the debate in the 1920s on the future of Dutch museums. The possibility was being considered of establishing a new museum devoted only to art of the greatest consequence, housing the most important European and non-European works from public collections. The Society contributed to the discussion of the Asian section. Ultimately, the cost proved to be too high and the plan was scrapped—but the idea of a permanent museum had been raised and the Society was not about to abandon its ambitions. On its tenth anniversary, the chairman announced plans for the society to open its own museum of Asian art. Like the previously proposal, the museum would concentrate on the best works of art that the Society could acquire. An acquisition fund, established in the same year, supplied the necessary financial resources. The Society benefited from the wealth and commitment of its members: “a generation which, as an economic and cultural elite, was also accustomed to taking financial responsibility for the societies and organisations which it administered”.²

The Society did not wish to limit its sources to European dealers, and so Visser and Westendorp travelled to Asia in search of acquisitions. They acquired important sculptures in Indonesia and Indochina, but the majority of their finds were in Japan, where, with the assistance of Inada Hogitaro, they bought both Japanese and Chinese works.

This successful expedition and thorough preparation in Amsterdam enabled the Society to open the Museum of Asian Art in 1932 in several galleries in the Stedelijk Museum, now Amsterdam's museum of modern art. The opening was attended by many leading figures in the cultural sector as a whole, and representatives of Dutch and foreign museums in particular. The curator and the Society's trustees were well aware that it was not realistic to try and provide a complete history of the different developments in Asian art, as noble as that ambition might have been: the subject matter, the size of the region and the periods were simply too vast. The aim had, therefore, been to collect pieces of the best possible quality to represent Asia's most important artistic centres and trends: “Pearls in a chaos of lacunas”, as a later curator described it.³

The Asian Art Society continued with the same dynamism. After the Second World War, the Society went in search of more spacious accommodation to house its growing collection. That space was found in the Rijksmuseum, where the collection went on display on the ground floor of the South Wing. The Museum van Aziatische Kunst initially remained an independent organisation within the Rijksmuseum, but eventually this proved unfeasible, and in 1972, the Society gave its collection to the Rijksmuseum on permanent loan. The Society continued its collecting activities, and the Rijksmuseum is itself expanding the collection, in line with the Society's original aims. During the museum's recent major renovation (it reopened in 2013), a new pavilion was built to display the Asian collection to its best advantage (4).⁴

Anniversary acquisitions

The Society has never stopped adding to its collection and anniversaries have always been, and continue to be, opportune occasions to do so. In some cases, members have donated works, while in others the trustees have taken the opportunity to raise funds to make acquisitions. The works acquired during the Society's anniversary years give a good picture of the diversity of its collection.



AK-MAK-232-A/B

To mark the society's 10th anniversary in 1928, the chairman donated two 9th century statuettes of Nandishvara and Mahakala, guards at the entrance to a Shiva temple (5).⁵ The pairing expresses a clear contrast between the refined and elegant Nandishvara and the coarse and vulgar Mahakala. Both aspects of Shiva were held in high esteem, however, and together they embody essential, counterbalancing aspects of Shiva's nature. Visser discovered the statues in the possession of a Dutch private collector in Paris in 1927. Westendorp bought them that year and donated them to the Society a year later. They were the first Javanese Hindu statues of high quality in the Society's collection. Important acquisitions in this field were to follow during the collecting expedition of 1930.



AK-MAK-71

Ten years later, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary, an early Chinese sculpture was added to the collection.⁶ C.T. Loo, the well-known dealer, donated this Bodhisattva Maitreya, originating from the Longmen Grottoes in Henan province (6). The Society had close ties with Loo: it purchased thirteen works from him, mostly Chinese, but also, in 1935, a 12th century Indian bronze sculpture of the dancing Shiva,⁷ one of the gems of the collection.



AK-MAK-141

Herman Karel Westendorp, the Society's chairman and veteran of the early decades, died in 1941. His widow maintained close ties with the Society, however, and to mark its 30th anniversary, she donated this Japanese writing box,⁸ decorated with a design of *hagi* (bush clover) leaves, a reference to Autumn (7). Inlaid in mother-of-pearl over the design is a poem, also on the subject of Autumn. Westendorp bought the box in 1929 from the widow of Ernst Grosse (1862-1927), a friend and fellow collector from Berlin, who was closely involved in the foundation of the Ostasiatische Kunstabteilung.



AK-MAK-314

In 1953, in celebration of its 35th anniversary, the Society bought a priest's bell (**8**), a superb specimen of Indonesian bronze casting.⁹ Each detail, such as the modelling of the four faces of the cosmic Buddhas, is cast with the utmost precision. The bell had belonged to the famous collection of Hugo Loudon (1860-1941), who had inherited it from his uncle, Alexander.



AK-MAK-1188

The emphasis of the Society's collection lay on East Asian art. This was equally true of most other museums and collections in Europe and the United States, and the collecting world in general. From this perspective, it is interesting that to mark its 50th anniversary, in 1968, the Society chose to add to its collection of Indian sculpture with a figure of the Bodhisattva Maitreya from Gandhara (**9**). The art of the ancient kingdom of Gandhara, situated on the Silk Road, accreted elements from several regions of Asia and Europe. By this time, the Society's collection was housed in the Rijksmuseum, and this figurine made it possible to study connections with the European traditions represented in the Rijksmuseum's collection.



AK-MAK-1183

As well as the Gandhara Maitreya, the Society also acquired a Japanese lacquerware reading stand in 1968 as a gift from its chairman, O.J.Tj.N. Domela Nieuwenhuis (**10**).¹⁰ The top features an evocative landscape, while the base and the back are decorated with peony scrolls, applied with meticulous precision.



AK-MAK-1224

Five years later, money was raised for another important purchase.¹¹ Visser had by this time retired, but the acquisition was entirely in line with his approach and the Society's collecting history. Chinese carved lacquerware was so highly appreciated in Japan from the 15th century onwards that nearly every specimen ended up in Japanese collections. This piece must then have been carried on the waves of Japonism to Paris, where the Society purchased it in 1973 (**11**). It is one of the few objects signed "Zhang Cheng zao" (made by Zhang Cheng). Hailing from Jiaxing, Zhejiang province, Zhang Cheng is one of the very few 14th century masters of lacquerware who is known from contemporaneous sources. Although it is known that signatures were sometimes added later, and it is impossible to exclude the possibility that this occurred in this instance, the dish certainly dates from the 14th century, as evidenced by both the quality of the carving and its problematic condition: there is a tendency for the lacquer gradually to come loose on such early specimens.



AK-MAK-1298

The art of the Himalayas was an area in which the Society's collection needed expanding, and the 60th anniversary was chosen as the occasion to do so. In 1978, the Society bought a richly gilded bronze Nepalese figurine of Padmapani (**12**) from J. Polak, the Amsterdam art dealer.¹² The Bodhisattva in characteristic pose—the weight on the right leg—looks down on us benevolently, the right hand in the gesture of giving, the left hand originally holding a lotus, which is now missing. The jewellery is partly made of semi-precious stones, and the exceptional quality of the casting can be seen in the folds of the sash.



AK-MAK-1464

In 1993, the Society celebrated its 75th anniversary. Drawing on its own financial resources, and with support from funds from its members, the Society bought a pair of Japanese screens in the Unkoko style developed by Unkoko Togan (1547-1616),¹³ which is characterised by paintings with a plain background of gold leaf (**13**). The subject is early Spring, as indicated by the fresh green of the willow coming into leaf, the camellias, and the blossoming cherry, still with snow on the branches. The screen is undated, as was usual until the end of the 17th century in works for noble patrons. A pair of magnificent screens like this would have been well suited to the reception hall of a distinguished Japanese family—but only, of course, in the brief period of early Spring.



AK-MAK-1733

The Society broke with its own conventions for the 2013 anniversary acquisition, and chose an object that emphasises the relationship between Asia and the Netherlands (**14**). This charger, decorated with the Amsterdam coat of arms, belongs to the well-known "province plate" genre,

featuring the coats of arms of Dutch and Belgian cities.¹⁴ These are examples of Chinese export porcelain, part of the international trade in luxury goods. This specimen is interesting, however, because the arched portal framing the coat of arms is probably drawn from the frontispiece of one of the many European books that missionaries took to China in the 16th and 17th centuries. From the detailing, it would seem that the porcelain painter probably worked from a Chinese woodcut based on just such an engraved frontispiece.



AK-MAK-1736

On the same occasion, Jaap Polak, a committed member of the Society, donated an extremely rare Indian bronze figurine (15). Going by the hairstyle and attributes, the figure is Karuppannasamy, the “black god”, one of India’s many local gods and deified heroes.¹⁵ Karuppannasamy is worshipped in rural Tamil Nadu. Unlike the pan-Indian gods (such as Shiva and Vishnu) he is not a vegetarian, and non-vegetarian gods are seen as fierce and capricious, so they are not usually venerated in the home. Bronze statues of Karuppannasamy are also unusual because bronze was generally too expensive for his devotees. These factors make the figurine particularly rare and intriguing.

The Society’s centenary’s acquisition

The Society’s centenary called for a spectacular acquisition: a monumental Chinese painting by Ye Shuangshi (16), who came from Siming (Ningbo) in China’s Zhejiang province, a region famous from the 11th century onwards for its specialisms in both the flower-and-bird and the Buddhist painting traditions. The artist was a nephew of Lü Ji (circa 1439-before 1505), the leading master of flower-and-bird subjects at the imperial painting academy (*huayuan*) during the Chenghua (1465-1487) and Hongzhi (1488-1505) eras. He was the best-known Ming (1368-1644) painter of these subjects and his work was regarded in his own lifetime as representing the very highest standard achieved by the Ming painting academy. Lü Ji’s paintings testify to a strong preference for the well-established convention of meticulous line work and colour washes.

Very little is known about Ye Shuangshi’s life. Reportedly, he served as a court painter during the Hongzhi period (1488-1505) and mastered his uncle’s painting style, which is characterised by pleasing subject matter depicted with bright colours in a naturalistic manner, the whole arranged in a well-balanced composition of great charm and decorative appeal. Besides flower-and-bird paintings, Ye Shuangshi was famous for his landscapes, and his rendering of water was particularly skilful.

Silver Pheasants under Spring Blossoms possibly depicts a scene in the imperial garden and shows a pair of silver pheasants and three light-vented bulbuls flitting between rocks and spring flowers: magnolia, crab-apple blossoms, peonies, roses, orchid and *lingzhi* mushrooms. The complex composition of the painting is based on diagonal movement from the viewer’s lower left to the mid-right border and then to the upper left corner, while the pictorial movement is balanced along the vertical and horizontal axes. The exquisite balance of movement and rest (birds in motion contrasting with static rocks and flowers), of curved and angular forms (the rock and tree branches),

of filled and empty areas, are clearly the result of meticulous calculation and design on the part of the artist.

All the objects depicted in the painting convey a symbolic meaning. The pheasant is sometimes used in place of the phoenix, which is equally a common emblem of beauty and good fortune. The pheasant is commonly associated with the scholar-official, and representations of it were used to indicate rank on the mandarin squares sewn onto the surcoat worn by these elite figures in the Ming and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. The pheasant is seen as a symbol for the five virtues (*wude*) associated with the scholar: its gleaming plumage and feather crests stand for literary success; its claws for material spirit; its pugnacious character for bravery and courage; its inclination to share food for benevolence; and its habit of announcing daybreak for reliability.

The peonies symbolise fortune or wealth and rank (*fugui*), together with Magnolia (*yulan*) and crab-apple blossoms (*haitang*). Homonyms of these words form an auspicious message (*yutang fugui*) meaning “wealth and rank in the jade hall”; in combination with roses, also known as the eternal spring flower (*changchunhua*), they imply “eternal Spring with good fortune” (*fugui changchun*). The rock, *lingzhi* mushrooms and light-vented bulbs all symbolise long life. Overall the whole painting conveys a highly auspicious message of everlasting prosperity.

The size of this painting is also exceptional: it is almost three metres in height, excluding the mounting. This monumental scale suggests it was produced for display in a grand hall as a hanging scroll or perhaps as a standing screen, but it has not been possible to determine whether it was produced for imperial or private use. There is no doubt, however, that its design and execution combine to maximise the compelling and pleasing visual effect.

Paintings by Ye Shuangshi are exceedingly rare: the only other known example of his work is *Pine Tree, Plum Blossoms and Cranes*, which is now in the Guangdong Provincial Museum. It bears the artist’s signature, “Shuangshi”, and the seal, “Siming Ye Shuangshi yin”. Although both works are in the same style, *Silver Pheasants under Spring Blossoms* is clearly the superior work since in the case of *Pine Tree, Plum Blossoms and Cranes*, the painting work is somewhat stiff, the composition has less dramatic impact and the scale is less imposing.

The co-acquisition of *Silver Pheasants under Spring Blossoms* by the Society and the Rijksmuseum marks a new chapter in co-operation between the two institutions, and the century-long history of the Society. This auspicious work is surely the best possible gift to the Society on its 100th birthday!

Jan van Campen is Curator of Asian Export Art at the Rijksmuseum. He specialises in Chinese export porcelain and the collection history of Asian objects in Europe.

Ching-ling Wang is Curator of Chinese Art at the Rijksmuseum. He specialises in Chinese literati painting, Ming and Qing court art and questions concerning visual, material, cultural and artistic exchanges between China and Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Rosalien van der Poel is a Board Member of the Asian Art Society in the Netherlands.

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- 1 Herman Visser, oil on canvas by Johanna Elisabeth (Betsy) Westendorp-Osieck, circa 1930, private collection
 - 2 Gert Jan Verburgt, drawing in black chalk by Johanna Elisabeth (Betsy) Westendorp-Osieck, 1925, 36 x 23.9 cm, Rijksmuseum, on loan from the VVAK, inv. no. RP-T-BR-130
 - 3 Herman Karel Westendorp and Johanna Elisabeth (Betsy) Westendorp-Osieck, Merkelbach photographic studio, Amsterdam, circa 1917-1920
 - 4 Asian Art Pavilion, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
 - 5 Nandishvara and Mahakala, Indonesia, 9th century, volcanic stone, height 76.5 cm and 75 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-232-A/B
 - 6 Maitreya, China, 500-550, limestone, height 46 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-71
 - 7 Writing box, Japan, 18th century, lacquer on wood and mother-of-pearl, 27.7 x 25.7 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-141
 - 8 Hand bell, Indonesia, 9th century, bronze, height 18.5 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-314, purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt
 - 9 Maitreya, Pakistan, 3rd century, slate, polychrome and gilding, height 52 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-1188, purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt
 - 10 Reading stand, Japan, 18th century, lacquer on wood, gold leaf, height 57 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-1183
 - 11 Dish, China, Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), lacquer on wood, diameter 32.5 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-1224.
 - 12 Padmapani, Nepal, 14th-15th century, gilt bronze, semi-precious stones, height 29.2 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-1298, purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt
 - 13 Pair of screens, Japan, 1630-1660, ink and colour on gilded paper, each height 180 cm, width 370 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-1464-A/B, purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt and the Rijksmuseum Stichting
 - 14 Dish, China, circa 1720, porcelain, diameter 54 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-1733, purchased with funding from Stichting 400 Jaar Amsterdam VOC
 - 15 Karuppannasamy, India, Tamil Nadu, 17th century, bronze, height 16.8 cm, inv. no. AK-MAK-1736
 - 16 Ye Shuangshi, *Silver Pheasants under Spring Blossoms*, late 15th–early 16th century, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 291.3 x 144.9 cm

The Asian Art Society in the Netherlands

The Asian Art Society in the Netherlands (VVAK) was founded in 1918.

The society's main goal is to make high-quality Asian art accessible to a wider audience, to foster interest in it and to stimulate academic research in this field.

The society exhibits its world-class collection of some 2000 objects at the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

Benefits of membership of the society

- Three issues annually of *Aziatische Kunst* magazine (in Dutch and English)
- Free admission to the Rijksmuseum on display of your membership card
- The VVAK monthly digital newsletter
- Exclusive invitations to lectures, meetings and other activities
- Access to a network of lovers of Asian art
- Invitations to centenary celebrations in 2018 with exhibitions, the international symposium *The future of collecting Asian art in Europe and America* and more

Ikigai

Ikigai is the young professionals network of the VVAK.



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Annual membership fees

Individual members	€ 80
Partner members	€ 110 (for two partners at a single address)
Young members (up to 25)	€ 25

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To become a member of the VVAK and a friend of its collection of Asian art, sign up now at vvak.nl/en/friends/

Contact



www.vvak.nl



@VVAK_nl



VVAKDutchAsianArtSociety



info@vvak.nl

¹ P. Lunsingh Scheurleer, "Asian Art in the Rijksmuseum", in *Asian Art* (Rijksmuseum collection book), Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 2014, pp. 8-23; M. Draak, "Chronicle of the Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst", in P. Lunsingh Scheurleer, ed., *Asiatic Art in the Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam, 1985, pp. 9-27; M. Fitski, "Japanese Art in the Westendorp-Osieck Collection", *Arts of Asia*, Vol. 38, no. 4, July-August 2008 issue, pp. 48-57.

² R. Steenbergen, "De Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst in het Interbellum: deftige verzamelaars, rijke donateurs en Indische fortuinen", *Aziatische Kunst*, 38/3, 2008, pp. 14.

³ Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, curator from 1975 to 2008, see *Aziatische Kunst*, 38/4, 2008.

⁴ M. Fitski and A.A. Ślęczka, "A New Pavilion for Asian Art at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam", *Arts of Asia*, Vol. 43, no. 3, May-June 2013 issue, pp. 132-139.

⁵ *Asian Art*, no. 24, pp. 86-87.

⁶ M. Fitski, "Twee bodhisattva's en een windstreekhoeder", *Aziatische Kunst*, 38/3, 2008, pp. 79-86.

⁷ AK-MAK-187, see Fitski and Ślęczka, 2013, fig. 7.

⁸ *Asian Art*, no. 87, pp. 250-251.

⁹ *Asian Art*, no. 35, pp. 108-109.

¹⁰ *Asian Art*, no. 86, pp. 228-229.

¹¹ *Asian Art*, no. 65, pp. 174-175.

¹² P. Lunsingh Scheurleer, "Avalokiteshvara, Nepal, 14de-15de eeuw", *Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, 37/3, 1989, pp. 158-159.

¹³ *Asian Art*, no. 81, pp. 218-219.

¹⁴ *Asian Art*, no. 111, pp. 284-285.

¹⁵ A.A. Ślęczka, "Temple Guardians and 'Folk Hinduism' in Tamil South India: A Bronze Image of the 'Black God' Karuppannasamy in the Rijksmuseum", *Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, 64, 2016, pp. 63-82.