



TENTH

PRESENTATION

OF THE

CHARLES

LANG FREER

MEDAL

OCTOBER 1, 1998



Smithsonian  
Freer Gallery of Art

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CHARLES LANG  
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FREER GALLERY OF ART  
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

## **PROGRAM**

### **PAST RECIPIENTS OF THE FREER MEDAL**

Osvald Sirén (1956)

Ernst Kühnel (1960)

Yashiro Yukio (1965)

Tanaka Ichimatsu (1973)

Laurence Sickman (1973)

Roman Ghirshman (1974)

Max Loehr (1983)

Stella Kramrisch (1985)

Alexander C. Soper III (1989)

### **OPENING REMARKS**

Milo Cleveland Beach  
Director, Freer Gallery of Art and  
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery,  
Smithsonian Institution

### **THE CAREER OF SHERMAN E. LEE**

Thomas Lawton  
Senior Research Scholar,  
Freer Gallery of Art and  
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery,  
Smithsonian Institution

### **PRESENTATION OF THE CHARLES LANG FREER MEDAL**

I. Michael Heyman  
Secretary,  
Smithsonian Institution

### **RECEPTION**

## OPENING REMARKS

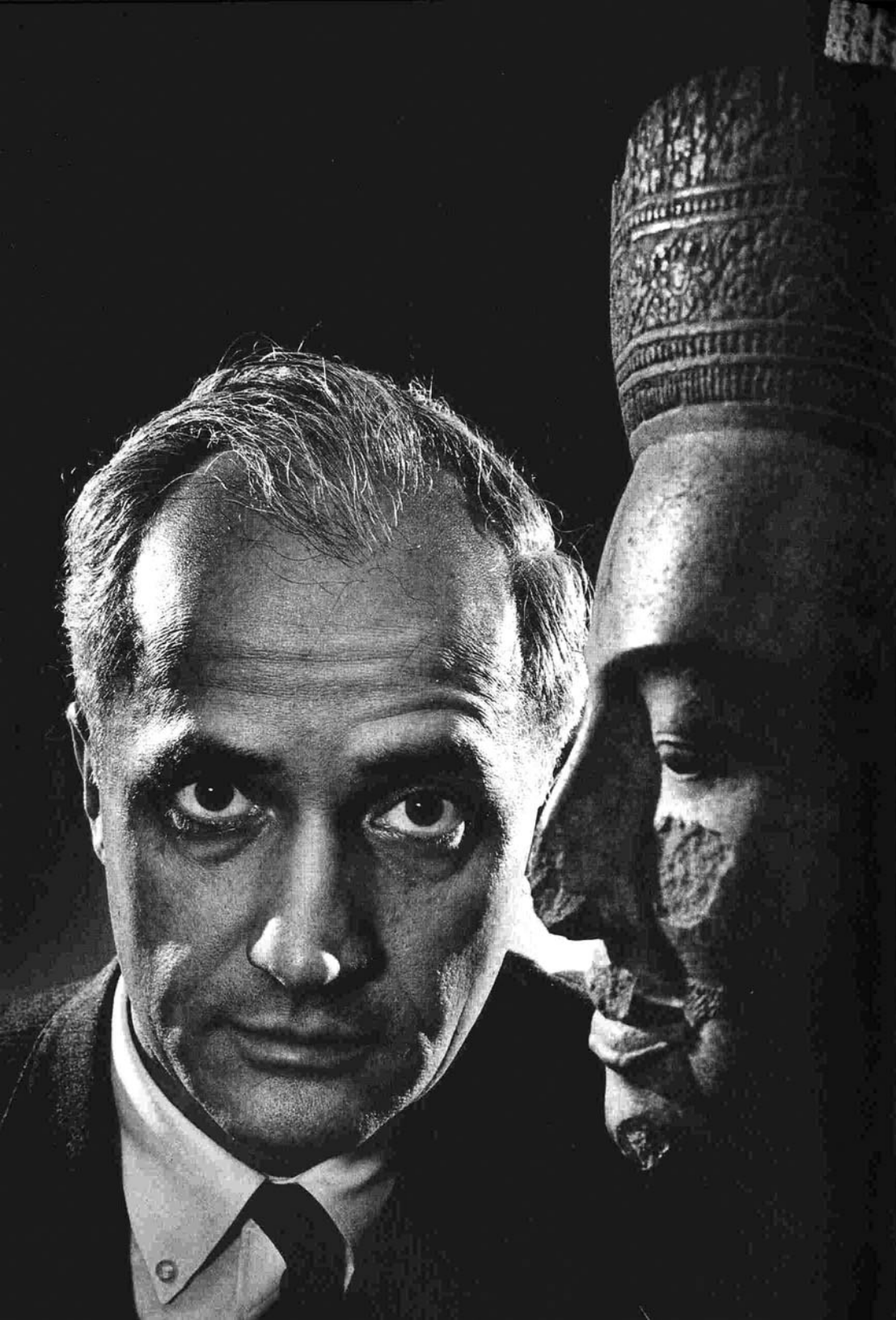
### MILO CLEVELAND BEACH

Since the initiation of the award in 1956, presentations of the Charles Lang Freer Medal have been among the most distinguished events at the Freer Gallery of Art. Today we celebrate the tenth occasion on which the Freer Medal has been granted, the tenth in forty-four years. Clearly this is no routinely scheduled event. It is intended to honor a scholar of truly extraordinary distinction.

More than any of the previous Freer medalists, Sherman E. Lee has enriched the studies of a wide range of artistic traditions in Asian countries: Buddhist art, Chinese painting, and the arts of Japan, India, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayan kingdoms, among others. The impact of his extensive publications has been augmented and broadened by frequent, often groundbreaking exhibitions and by the dazzling series of acquisitions he has made for various museums. It was as an undergraduate in 1960 visiting his exhibition *Rajput Painting* at the Asia House Galleries in New York—the first exhibition of Indian painting ever held in this country—that I myself decided on that topic for undergraduate and graduate study, and a professional career. I also remember (vividly, but still with terror) visits to the Cleveland Museum of Art as a student, when I was generously given access to any of the objects in the collection—courtesy of Sherman Lee—but then expected to return the favor with informed opinions about probable dates and attributions. I learned more from those few, brief sessions, however, than in many graduate seminars.

In every area of his own interests, Dr. Lee has both given and demanded from others the kind of informed opinions that result from knowledge, experience, and careful thought. This is as true of judgments of quality in objects, or the ways by which one most meaningfully presents works of art to the general public, as it is of scholarly, art-historical matters. Dr. Lee has also provided a model for museum directorship—one currently under siege—in demonstrating how to balance advanced scholarship with the ability to portray significant ideas to a beginning audience through verbal and visual means, as well as curatorial interests and responsibilities with the administrative demands made on a museum director.

Often provocatively, and always with humor, Sherman Lee has inspired and presided over the growth of interest in Asian art in this country for more than half a century. I would like now to ask Thomas Lawton—former director of the Freer Gallery of Art and founding director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery—to speak in more detail of Dr. Lee's career.



## THE CAREER OF SHERMAN E. LEE

THOMAS LAWTON

Asian art has always presented a special challenge to Western scholars. The vast periods of time, the disparate cultures, and the many languages involved are perhaps the most daunting aspects of that challenge. Writing more than three decades ago, one Western scholar described the situation in frontier terminology:

One of the pleasures of working in [this] field comes from its agreeable sense of openness. No one can expect to re-experience [Ernest] Fenollosa's exultation. . . . The true pioneer days are past; but neither is one hemmed in by the togetherness of the West, the gridiron streets of Classical Archaeology, the endless quarter-acre subdivisions of the Renaissance and Baroque. For this sense of being able to breathe more freely and see farther, one has naturally to pay. Nothing is so carefully mapped, not all the cross-road signs are there or are accurate when they can be found, the roads are bumpier. The facilities that come with settled occupation are lacking; everything takes longer to do, and is impossible to do with a metropolitan finish. There are bound to be mistakes, occasionally large ones. We are none of us capable of matching the breath-taking, urbanized perfection of [H.W.] Janson's performances with the great monuments of our own artistic world; nor are we likely to come much closer, so long as we enjoy discovery more than the prospect of settling down for good.<sup>1</sup>

The prospect of settling down for good has never appealed to Sherman E. Lee, the 1998 recipient of the Freer Medal. Throughout his career Dr. Lee has enjoyed discovery, and his encyclopedic knowledge of Asian art reflects a lifetime of dedicated research.

To understand how much the study of Asian art has changed during the past century, we should remember that in 1900 there was only one curator of Asian art in an American museum. When Sherman Lee was born in Seattle in 1918, the number of curators of Asian art in the United States had doubled; one of them had studied Asian art in Europe, the other had undergone no formal museum training at all. In 1918 the Freer Gallery of Art was still under construction, and when Charles Lang Freer died the following year, he had not yet selected a curator. That crucial decision had to wait until 1920.

At the time Sherman Lee decided to pursue a doctoral degree in art history, the excellent museum in Cleveland was a major factor in his choice of the Case Western Reserve University. It was a momentous decision: Dr. Lee's relationship with the Cleveland Museum of Art has continued for sixty years.

As part of his doctoral program, Sherman Lee spent the summer of 1938 studying Chinese art with James Marshall Plumer at the University of Michigan. Professor Plumer had devised his own method of encouraging students to increase their sensitivity toward art objects. Rather than have his students make judgments based solely on a visual examination, he insisted that they identify different Chinese wares by handling pieces and feeling the shapes and glazes while the ceramics were covered with a blanket. Although that training might have been unorthodox, it stressed the importance of using all of one's sensibilities when evaluating an art object.

Equally valuable was Professor Plumer's suggestion that while Sherman Lee was preparing his dissertation he might consider working as a volunteer intern at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Howard C. Hollis was curator of Asian art in Cleveland at the time, and the two men collaborated on an exhibition of Chinese ceramics that opened at the museum in the spring of 1941.

After Sherman Lee received his doctorate in 1941, he joined the staff of the Detroit Institute of Arts as curator of Far Eastern art. His first museum publication, written fifty-seven years ago, was a short article on two Chinese ceramics, a Han dynasty lead-glazed censer and a Song dynasty Ding ware bowl, in the institute's collection.

In 1944, Dr. Lee enlisted in the United States Navy, and following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, he took part in the operation that landed American occupation troops at Sasebo on the island of Kyūshū. His experience with Asian ceramics as a graduate student and as a museum curator prompted him to visit the Arita kilns. Dr. Lee also managed a quick trip to China. In spite of unsettled conditions in Peking, some of the Liulichang shops were open for business, and Dr. Lee was remarkably successful in his first direct contacts with Chinese art dealers. A twelfth-century Song dynasty ceramic pillow that he acquired in Peking in 1945 is now in the Seattle Art Museum.<sup>2</sup>

Howard Hollis, Dr. Lee's mentor in Cleveland, had been selected to head the Arts and Monuments Division in Japan in the summer of 1946, and he invited his former intern to be his assistant. When Hollis returned to the United States the following year, Dr. Lee assumed his duties. Established by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan, the Arts and Monuments Division had a mandate to inspect and inventory all Japanese art in that country, to determine what works had been destroyed, to assist the Japanese in the protection and preservation of their cultural property, and to encourage the display of Japanese works of art.<sup>3</sup>

In his official capacity with the Arts and Monuments Division, Dr. Lee had a unique opportunity to examine Japanese cultural monuments that had been rarely seen, even by the Japanese. Perhaps the most famous collection of art treasures in Japan is stored in the Shōsōin at Nara. Prior to the Second World War only a few people had been invited to view a small portion of the Shōsōin collection each October, but the treasures had never been displayed publicly. Quite unexpectedly, Dr. Lee gained access to the Shōsōin in 1947 as a result of negotiations between the Japanese and the Chinese Nationalist governments. An unanticipated development from those negotiations was the decision by

Japanese officials to hold the first public exhibition of Shōsōin treasures at the Nara National Museum in September 1947. The practice of displaying a selection of the Shōsōin collection annually continues to this day.

Dr. Lee returned to the United States in June 1948 to become associate director and curator of Asian art at the Seattle Art Museum, located in the city where he was born. Richard Fuller, the museum's director, agreed to Dr. Lee's proposal that he spend \$5,000 to acquire Asian antiquities in Japan before formally taking up his duties. With that modest budget, Dr. Lee was able to assemble a group of Chinese and Japanese objects for the Seattle Art Museum; the outstanding quality of those objects ensures that they will always remain among the masterpieces in the collection.

During his four years in Seattle Dr. Lee lectured on Asian art at the University of Washington. Those lectures formed the foundation for his book, *A History of Far Eastern Art*. According to one critic, Dr. Lee's *History* provides "a remarkable abundance of trustworthy information about the major arts of India, Southeast Asia, China and Japan."<sup>4</sup> In his book Dr. Lee maintains a point of view that pervades all of his publications. As he has expressed it, "My own interest is in the broad, overall analysis—trying to find larger patterns, dealing with comparisons of various and diverse things with an eye for an educated audience that has not had the time nor the patience to deal with the highly specialized studies."<sup>5</sup> Another theme that runs throughout Dr. Lee's writings is the significance of the continuous series of technical innovations that occurred in the various mediums used by early Chinese artists. Technology has provided Dr. Lee with a useful framework for his study of jades, bronzes, lacquers, textiles, and ceramics, as well as sculpture and painting.<sup>6</sup>

In 1952 Dr. Lee returned to the Cleveland Museum of Art as curator of Asian art, and it was during his more than thirty years in Cleveland that he further enhanced his international reputation. Even after he became director in 1958 Dr. Lee also held the position of chief curator of Asian art. He was responsible for making many important additions to the collections. As is apparent from his imposing bibliography, found at the end of this publication, he also has continued to publish articles, books, and catalogues in which he



Sherman E. Lee (front row, sixth from the left) in the People's Republic of China leading the Art and Archaeological Delegation of the American Council of Learned Societies in November 1973. He is shown visiting the sixth-century Liang dynasty tombs, Nanjing, with Chinese and North American colleagues. Among them are former Freer Medal recipient Laurence Sickman of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Mo. (to Dr. Lee's left), and Freer staff members William T. Chase (back row, first from the left) and Thomas Lawton (back row, third from the right).

discusses those acquisitions. He also has continued to express his views on controversial topics relating to art museums.

Dr. Lee's reputation as a connoisseur also resulted in his assuming an advisory role in the development of several private collections of Asian art. On occasion his travels with collectors took on the trappings of an imperial progress. Or, as Dr. Lee succinctly described one European motor tour, there was "a Rolls for the passengers, a Bentley for the luggage."<sup>7</sup>

Today the museum world is awash in special exhibitions of Asian art and related symposia. It may come as a surprise to many people to learn that the exhibition-symposium combination is a relatively recent phenomenon. One of the first, and to my mind one of the most successful, of these cultural joint ventures was held at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1968. Dr. Lee and his

staff organized an exhibition of Yuan dynasty objects, titled *Chinese Art under the Mongols*. As Dr. Lee points out in his preface to the catalogue, "The Yüan period was a true watershed in Chinese cultural and social history." The exhibition provided an opportunity for a comprehensive reexamination of a period that had been a convenient classification dumping ground for Chinese antiquities that did not fit neatly into the Southern Song or Ming periods.

In 1973, an Art and Archaeological delegation, under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies, visited the People's Republic of China. Dr. Lee was chairman of the delegation. For six weeks he shook hands with a steady stream of Chinese officials, offered toasts at innumerable lunches and dinners, and—perhaps most taxing of all—listened patiently to endless requests by the members of the American delegation. He did all of these things flawlessly, thereby impressing the Chinese with his unflinching courtesy and his comprehensive knowledge of the artistic monuments displayed in China's museums. Perhaps his most unexpected talent came to light when the Chinese hosts suggested, as a way of relaxation, that Dr. Lee might be willing to participate in a game of Ping-Pong. Accepting that invitation with disarming diffidence, Dr. Lee soon put the Chinese on their guard when he sent the ball ricocheting across the table. He is a superb Ping-Pong player.

Before retiring as director of the Cleveland Museum of Art in July 1983, Dr. Lee organized the exhibition *Reflections on Reality in Japanese Art*. As he stated in the catalogue, the exhibition was "about a way of looking at the world, thinking about it, and then depicting the resulting thoughts and emotions in visual images." Some of the objects in the exhibition were National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties that had never before left Japan. Only for Sherman Lee would Japanese authorities have agreed to lend so many important treasures from Japanese museums, temples, shrines, and private collections. It was a fitting gesture of respect and admiration by Japanese cultural officials.

Dr. Lee remains very active in the museum world. In 1992 he coordinated the East Asian portion of the National Gallery of Art's exhibition *Circa 1492*, commemorating the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America.

That exhibition was remarkable not only for the quality of the objects displayed, but because it was the first time the governments of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China agreed to loan objects to the same exhibition.

Most recently Dr. Lee selected the objects for *China 5,000 Years*, the exhibition held earlier this year at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. In his preface for the catalogue Dr. Lee took a firm stand against a current school of art history when he stated, "This is an exhibition which stresses the art of an ancient culture with particular relation to innovation and creativity. It is not meant to emphasize the historical, sociological, ethnographical, or literary aspects of Chinese culture. But so compelling are the achievements of these artists and artisans that their creations illumine the civilization in which they were produced—its material options and constraints, its social obligations and expectations, its moral compulsions and freedoms, its aesthetic preferences and boundaries. These works appear before us as tangible witnesses to China's cultural history."

Dr. Lee is so eloquent in matters relating to Asian art and art museums that I conclude my remarks with a few of his ideas on several important topics. About the significance of quality in art, he has said,

Some people think they can tell good quality from bad just by looking, that the sense of quality is something built into a person. I think that is a very primitive and also very snobbish point of view. Standards of value and judgment are built up by comparisons over a long period of time, and until you have built up enough comparisons and have had enough time to get a consensus from people who are interested in art and who have taken the time to make comparisons, you really have no solid ground for evaluation."<sup>8</sup>

About the management of art organizations, he has said,

An art museum is not the same kind of institution as a corporation. I don't think many business assumptions are valid for the art museum. We must not think of it in terms of a balance sheet [even though we try to be in the black each year and usually succeed]. I think many



museums have been put in financial jeopardy and have been mismanaged by the misapplication of business principles.<sup>9</sup>

Or, on the same subject,

Many museums spend far too much money on installation of special exhibitions. As a matter of fact, I would go so far as to say that in some cases it's almost a public scandal because what they have done is let the means become more important than the ends.<sup>10</sup>

And, finally, on the role of an art museum,

The museum should be concerned primarily with art, not with being a social agency or a means of social uplift or a source of assistance to the underprivileged, however compassionate and noble those goals may be. I think that in modern culture in general and in American culture in particular the arts are an endangered species and that therefore it's very important for the museum to retain its function of insisting on the integrity of the arts, on conserving works of art and on preserving the standards under which good work can continue.<sup>11</sup>

At a time when many Asian art specialists are preoccupied with sociological, economic, or philosophical concepts, Dr. Lee remains steadfastly committed to his lifelong respect for connoisseurship. To those who might question the validity of that commitment, I would suggest that they look at the museums, collections, and the individual antiquities for which Dr. Lee has been responsible during his career. Success in any one of his endeavors would have been sufficient to merit high praise. Success in all of them is nothing less than extraordinary. Then again, Dr. Lee's career has been an extraordinary one, and it is for his extraordinary achievements that we honor him today.

## NOTES

1. Alexander C. Soper, "Review," *Artibus Asiae* 27, nos. 1–2 (1964–65): 172.
2. Mary Ann Rogers, "Sherman E. Lee," *Orientalism* 24, no. 7 (July 1993): 47, upper left.
3. Sherman E. Lee, "My Work in Japan: Arts and Monuments, 1946–1948," in *The Confusion Era: Art and Culture of Japan during the Allied Occupation, 1945–1952*, ed. Mark Sandler (Seattle: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, in association with the University of Washington Press, 1997): 91–103.
4. Soper, "Review," 172.
5. Rogers, "Sherman E. Lee," 56.
6. Sherman E. Lee, *China 5,000 Years: Innovation and Transformation in the Arts, Selected by Sherman E. Lee* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1998): 31–33.
7. Sherman E. Lee, *Catalogue of the Severance and Greta Millikin Collection* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1990): 13.
8. Pamela M. Banks and David W. Ewing, "A More Certain and Precise Perimeter: An Interview with Sherman E. Lee," *Museum News* 61, no. 5 (June 1983): 73.
9. *Ibid.*, 78.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 112.

## PRESENTATION OF THE CHARLES LANG FREER MEDAL



### I. MICHAEL HEYMAN

Dr. Lee:

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On behalf of the chancellor and the regents of the Smithsonian Institution, I hereby present to you the Freer Medal. The citation reads as follows:

For distinguished contribution to the knowledge and understanding of Oriental civilizations as reflected in their arts

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The Charles Lang Freer Medal. Established in 1956 in memory of the founder of the Freer Gallery of Art, the medal was designed by the noted American sculptor Paulanship (1885–1966), who as a young man had been deeply influenced by the collection of Chinese art he saw in Freer's home in Detroit. The obverse of the medal features a portrait of Freer, based on a photograph by Edward Steichen (1879–1973), together with a view of the north facade of the gallery.

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THOMAS LAWTON

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