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Duanfang
1861–1911
Collector of Chinese Art

Duanfang was a government official, reformer, and a notable collector-connoisseur of Chinese antiquities during the late Qing dynasty. His Han ancestors had joined the Manchu Plain White Banner (military company) and had been government officials for several generations. Starting his career as a department secretary, Dufang rose through various government ranks and distinguished himself during the Boxer Rebellion. He served as the governor of Hubei (1901–1904) and viceroy of Liangjian (1906–1909). Although he was appointed viceroy of Zhili in 1909, he was soon dismissed from that position for perceived disrespect during the funeral of Empress Dowager Cixi. Two years later, in 1911, Duanfang was appointed superintendent of the Guangdong-Hankou-Chengdu railroads. In the fall of 1911 he led a battalion of imperial soldiers to quell a revolt in Sichuan. He was beheaded there by his own troops, who were sympathetic to the revolutionary cause.

During his time as a government official, Duanfang studied and collected Chinese antiquities, including bronzes, jades, steles, calligraphy, and paintings. He cultivated relationships not only with Chinese scholars of classic art and history but also with such foreigners as Japanese art critic Taki Seiichi and American collector John C. Ferguson, to whom he introduced the Chinese tradition of bronze connoisseurship.

In 1905 Duanfang gained broad recognition in the West when he and four other Chinese commissioners traveled to the United States and Europe to observe political, social, and cultural institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Upon his return, Duanfang was instrumental in organizing the Nanyang Exposition of 1910, China's first world's fair.

Several years after his death, Duanfang's destitute family was forced to sell his collection. Many important pieces were acquired by Western institutions, including the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Numerous artifacts in these collections are noted in *T'ao-chai chi-chin*, Duanfang's catalogue of bronzes that was published in 1908. Writer Taki Seiichi referred to *Jen-yen hsiao-hsia chi,* a 1902 catalogue of Duanfang's paintings and calligraphy that was never published; the manuscript is presumed lost. A catalogue of Duanfang's jade collection, *T'ao-chai ku-yü,* was published posthumously.

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February 29, 2016