

Article

The Auction Status of East Asian Artworks in Modern America

Yingling Ma ^{1,*}¹ Korea University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

* Correspondence: Yingling Ma, Korea University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

Abstract: This paper examines the evolution of auction activities related to East Asian artworks in the United States from the mid-to-late 1930s, with a particular focus on the transformation of auction catalogs from simple listings to systematic classifications. By analyzing auction catalogs from 1890 to 1940, this study explores the market dynamics and status of Chinese ceramics—particularly Song dynasty ceramics—Japanese ukiyo-e, and Korean Goryeo celadon. Notably, the increased recognition of Goryeo celadon in the American market, influenced by Japanese procurement activities in 1909, reflects shifts in market demand and collecting trends. This article argues that the development of auction catalogs not only responded to collectors' preferences but also played a crucial role in shaping American perceptions of East Asian artworks. Furthermore, antique dealers were instrumental in this process, serving as intermediaries between collectors and the evolving market landscape.

Keywords: East Asian artworks; American auctions; collecting trends; cultural perception; late 19th to early 20th century

1. Introduction

In the late 18th century, American curiosity about East Asia grew across multiple fields. Exhibitions at world fairs, international expositions, museums, and art galleries, along with images, illustrations, photographs, and crafts featured in newspapers and magazines, provided the public with a wealth of visual materials on East Asian culture and art.

As this trend developed, the collection of East Asian artworks gained popularity. Antique dealers facilitated the trade of ceramics, bronzes, gold and silverware, crafts, furniture, and textiles through auctions [1]. Japanese merchants actively participated in supplying East Asian artworks to the American market. While Chinese artworks had long held a prominent position in collections, the presence of Korean artifacts also gradually increased. Auction catalogs from that time provide valuable insights into variations in artwork transactions across regions and the categories that attracted American collectors.

This paper focuses on the period from 1890 to 1940, during which American engagement with East Asian artworks intensified. Through an in-depth study of auction catalogs from this era, the paper aims to examine the types of artworks sold by antique dealers and the ways in which these catalogs documented and categorized them. Additionally, by analyzing detailed descriptions of artifacts within the catalogs, this study seeks to assess the extent of American collectors' understanding of East Asian art. Furthermore, it explores shifts in collector preferences as the primary categories of artifacts for sale evolved, along with regional distinctions in the types of artworks that entered the American market. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how Western audiences engaged with and appreciated East Asian art.

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2. The Auction Status of East Asian Art in the United States

2.1. *The Origins of American Interest in East Asian Art in Modern Times*

East Asian objects were first prominently introduced to a Western audience at the 1851 Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London. During this event, Japanese items were displayed alongside other East Asian artifacts in a section organized by the British East India Company, providing Western viewers with an opportunity to engage with artistic and cultural elements from the region. Subsequently, following the signing of the Convention of Kanagawa, Japan established formal trade and diplomatic relations with Western nations in 1854 and participated in its first international exposition at the 1862 International Exhibition in London. This marked the beginning of Japan's proactive efforts to present its cultural, artistic, and craft achievements on the global stage [2].

The British Minister to Japan, Rutherford Alcock (1809–1897), played a key role in facilitating Japan's presence at international exhibitions by showcasing his personal collection at the London International Exhibition. In 1876, at the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia, held to commemorate the 100th anniversary of American independence, Japan exhibited a significant number of artifacts, second only to those from the United Kingdom. The Philadelphia Exposition provided many Western audiences with their first direct exposure to Japanese art, laying the foundation for its increasing recognition and appreciation in the Western world [3].

At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Japan achieved a historic milestone by becoming the first Asian nation to showcase fine art in the exposition's "Art Gallery," a distinction that was not realized at the previous Philadelphia Exposition. The Art Gallery primarily featured intricate crafts, with a strong emphasis on flower-and-bird paintings and figure paintings. This exhibition generated significant interest in Japanese crafts, leading American department stores and auctioneers to introduce more Japanese artworks into the market [4]. In summary, the enthusiasm for collecting East Asian art in the 19th century, which was largely shaped by international expositions, was initially driven by American interest in Japanese art rather than Chinese art.

In the early 20th century, following the political transformations in China, a substantial number of Chinese artworks entered the global art market through various channels, attracting the attention of collectors. These artworks, known for their artistic refinement and cultural significance, gradually shifted market interest from Japanese to Chinese art, sparking a new wave of enthusiasm among American collectors. However, unlike Japan's active participation in expositions, China was less engaged in these events. Since the 1851 London Crystal Palace Exhibition, Chinese exhibits were often arranged by foreign officials or private individuals rather than by direct governmental participation. Particularly after the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 in the United States, diplomatic relations between the two countries faced challenges, which in turn influenced cultural exchanges. As a result, China's official presence in international expositions remained limited, reflecting the broader political and diplomatic landscape of the time.

Using the Chicago World's Fair as an example, China's exhibits were displayed only in the "Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building," showcasing a diverse array of items including grains, painted porcelain ware, enamel, decorative art objects, ivory, embroidery, and textiles. However, the export Chinese porcelain, due to its intricate decoration and densely arranged presentation, contrasted with the minimalist and well-structured Japanese exhibits, which were generally more favorably received by the audience. Furthermore, the overall quality of the Chinese artwork displayed in the exhibition hall was perceived as inconsistent. As a result, some observers at the fair viewed China as being more rooted in its traditional artistic and cultural expressions, while Japan projected an image of engagement with modern design principles and international aesthetics. China was often seen as prioritizing its cultural heritage, whereas Japan was perceived as actively in-

tegrating Western influences. This impression influenced how Chinese culture was interpreted and evaluated in the international arena, leading to its artistic contributions being less prominently recognized.

At the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, the Chinese government adopted a more proactive approach to its participation. Previously, Chinese students and merchants had expressed concerns that past exhibitions did not adequately represent the nation's image. In response, the Chinese government placed significant importance on the event and, for the first time, sent a special delegation led by Prince Pu Lun, supported by 750,000 taels of silver, with the aim of reshaping the country's presentation on the world stage. However, the exhibition faced challenges, primarily due to the categorization of artworks, which did not align with prevailing international standards. The regional classification of exhibits resulted in a display that appeared less cohesive, potentially making it difficult for visitors to fully appreciate the cultural and artistic significance of the works. At the time, exhibitor Blackmer described the Chinese exhibition as "the most uninteresting," while global attention was largely drawn to Japan [5]. This contrast reflects the differing international perceptions of Japan and China during this period, with Japan gaining increasing recognition on the world stage, while China's presentation faced limitations in achieving similar visibility.

2.2. *A Study on the Auction of East Asian Artworks in Modern America*

With the hosting of world expos, the collection of Eastern artworks gradually became popular in the United States, leading to the rapid emergence of antique dealers and galleries specializing in Eastern art across the country. Taking the Philadelphia Exposition as an example, a large amount of Japanese art remained in the United States after the exposition ended. A year later, on November 13, 1877, Japan entrusted an auction company to hold a three-day auction at Clinton Hall in downtown New York City to dispose of the leftover artworks. It is speculated that prior to this, they had already sold some pieces individually, and the auction was intended to clear out the remaining inventory [6]. Despite the lively scene and numerous bidders attracted to the auction, the headline in *The New York Times* reported, "Auction of Japanese Art and Artifacts — Sale of the Japanese Government Exhibits Featured in the Centennial Exposition Begins." Although there were numerous bidders, many pieces were ultimately sold at modest prices, as indicated by the phrase "many bidders, but sluggish closing prices." Thus, the initial interest in Eastern art that arose in Europe gradually made its way to the United States. By the end of the 19th century, auctions of Eastern art became quite active in the United States. Among the antique dealers dealing in Eastern art in America at that time, Yamanaka & Co. and the American Art Association were considered among the most prominent [7].

Yamanaka & Co. skillfully leveraged its unique advantage as a "Japanese dealer dealing in East Asian objects." At that time, there were relatively few exporters of high-quality East Asian art from Japan, so American collectors often had to seek assistance from European art dealers. Yamanaka & Co. was founded by Yamanaka Sadajirō (1866-1936). In 1895, he opened the first branch on West 27th Street in New York. Subsequently, Yamanaka & Co. continuously expanded its business, opening a branch in Boston in 1899, followed by branches in Chicago, and then in London and Shanghai in 1900. Notably, the relocation of the New York branch garnered attention and coverage from *The New York Sun*. The newspaper not only reported on the news but also included an advertisement for Yamanaka's new gallery, which further enhanced Yamanaka & Co.'s reputation and influence in the area [8].

During this period, Japan actively promoted the sale of East Asian artworks in the American market, widely distributing them through antique dealers and auctions. From the 1910s to the 1920s, auctions of East Asian artworks were extremely active, and the market flourished. However, in the late 1920s, the Chinese government implemented policies that prohibited the export of cultural artifacts, making it more difficult to transport

items for auction to the United States. This had a profound impact on sales [9]. Subsequently, World War II broke out, leading to a decrease in the number of American antique shops. During the 1930s, auctions of East Asian artworks sharply declined, and the market fell into a depression. This highlighted the significant impact of political factors and war on the art market and the cultural industry.

3. Changes in the Demand for East Asian Art

When organizing auctions, the hosts would produce catalogs containing detailed information about the artworks. This article focuses on auction catalogs from the New York area in the United States. By examining these catalogs, the study explores the sales status and changing trends of various artifacts at the time. The analysis also looks at the features of the content and terminology used in the catalogs over different time periods to reveal the dynamics of the art market during that era.

3.1. The Evolution of Auction Catalog Structures

The auction of East Asian artworks continued from the late 1880s to the 1940s. During the 1910s and 1920s, the number of auctions increased significantly, and the market flourished. However, starting from the mid-1930s, auction activities gradually decreased. As the types of artifacts changed, the format of auction catalogs continuously evolved to meet the demands of collectors, which is evident from the changes in the structure of these catalogs. This article explores the overall trends in the sale of artifacts and the changes in auction catalog formats and descriptions of artifacts by studying the auction catalogs of Yamanaka & Company's New York branch recorded in Yuri Yamanishi's work "Yamanaka & Company: The Art Dealer Selling Oriental Treasures to Europe and America", as well as the relevant content on East Asian artifacts in "American Art Auction Catalogs 1785-1942"

Table 1. Catalogs of East Asian Art Auctions Held in the United States from 1890 to 1940.

	Title of Catalog	Publishing Institution	Publication Date
1	Brinkley, F., Description of "the Brinkley Collection" of Antique Japanese, Chinese and Korean Porcelain, Pottery and Faience.	New York : Edward Greey Gallery	1885
2	Charlotte Adams, BRINKLEY COLLECTION – ART GALLERY OF EDWARD GREY	NEW YORK TWENTY EAST SEVENTEENTH STREET M DCCC LXXXVI,	1886
3	Edward Greey, Catalogue of a collection of paintings by European and American artists, and of Chinese, Cochinese, Korean and Japanese ceramics, &c., the property of by Thomas E. Waggaman	Thomas E. Waggaman	1888
4	Catalogue of antique curios and representative works of art direct from China, Japan and Corea	American Art Association	1895
5	Catalogue of Rare lacquers, paintings, prints, porcelains	Yamanaka & Company: American Art Galleries	1896
6	The Art Collection of Mr. Tozo Takayanagi	HENRY A. HARTMAN	1908
7	Extraordinary antique Chinese and Japanese art objects and a remarkable collection of antique Chinese rugs	New York: Yamanaka & Company	1908

8	Illustrated catalogue of a remarkable collection of a early Chinese pottery	New York: Yamanaka & Company	1912
9	Illustrated Catalogue of the Denny Collection of Chinese, Korean and Japanese antiquities	SAMUL T. FREEMAN & CO	1916
10	Japanese color prints, Ancient Ohi (brocades), netsukes and Korean pottery and porcelain	THE WALPOLE GALLERIES	1917
11	The Hirakawa Collection: UKIYO-YE	American Art Galleries	1917
12	Exceedingly important collection of artistic Oriental objects and decorative art	American Art Galleries	1921
13	The notable Yamanaka Collection of Artistic Oriental Objects And Decoration Art	Yamanaka & Company: American Art Association	1921
14	Chinese, Korean, Persian and Indian ceramics, bronzes and fabrics	American Art Association	1925
15	Chinese and Korean potteries & porcelains: Collection of the late Desmond FitzGerald	American Art Association	1927
16	Chinese, Japanese and Korean works of art, soapstone carvings, porcelain and pottery, a few pieces of Siamese bronze, lamps, Cloisonne enamel	THE WALPOLE GALLERIES	1927
17	Oriental art; Chinese & Korean art objects of age and excellence	American Art Association	1928
18	Objects of art, mainly Chinese and Japanese, including Korean and European	J. C. MORGENTHAU & CO	1934

By studying the 1895 collection catalog of Matsuo Kinsuke and the 1896 auction catalog of Yamanaka & Company, it is evident that early artworks were not categorized by type, but rather simply listed, indicating that the content was concise [10]. In contrast, the 1908 catalog from Yamanaka & Company was meticulously organized, clearly categorized by significance, type, and period, and used terms such as "rare" "important" and "extraordinary" to highlight key items. The catalog also included period information for the artifacts and added illustrations to help clients familiarize themselves with the types of artifacts in advance. This trend was particularly evident among large antique dealers or galleries that had held numerous auctions. However, for catalogs issued in the 1910s to 1920s with fewer than 100 pages and fewer artifacts for sale, the descriptions remained relatively brief, not reaching the level of more complex arrangements.

3.2. Overview of the Sale of Cultural Relics in China, Japan, and South Korea

3.2.1. China

Compared to Japanese or Korean artworks, Chinese artworks had a larger volume of transactions. Taking the 1908 catalog of Yamanaka & Company as an example, Chinese ceramics comprised a significant portion, with blue and white porcelain and Song dynasty ceramics being particularly prominent. The catalog used evaluations such as "Interesting" and "very fine" to attract buyers. Descriptions like "sea-green tint" were used to accurately depict the color of celadon and provide detailed information about the period of production and the reigning emperor, offering comprehensive historical context. The primary items sold were from the Kangxi, Yongzheng(1722-1735), and Qianlong periods(1736-1796), with the majority from the Kangxi era. In the category of ceramic artifacts, items were more frequently labeled as "Pottery" rather than "Porcelain," with a particularly rich

selection from the Song dynasty. This phenomenon is not limited to ceramics; it is also evident in various types of crafts such as jade, lacquerware, and furniture.

The Yamanaka S. Company auction catalog from January 1912 indicates that the sale primarily involved ceramics from the Ming, Yuan, Song, Tang, and Han dynasties. The preface of the catalog states that the Yamanaka Company focused on antiques from the latter part of the 17th century. The catalog listed items in detail, such as Ming dynasty blue and white porcelain, Dehua kilns' white porcelain, Ding Kiln wares, and Ming dynasty celadon, reflecting subdivisions by period and type. Items from the Ming and Song dynasties were more abundant, possibly reflecting the collecting trends of that time. Specific period information was specially marked in the catalog to help buyers understand the era in which the artifacts were crafted. This indicates that collectors at the time already possessed a certain level of appreciation for Chinese ceramics. The 1921 catalog differs from other catalogs previously reviewed in that it has a dedicated section for paintings. Similar to the previously introduced Chinese ceramics, Chinese paintings were also categorized for sale according to dynasties such as Song and Yuan. The main artworks on display were Buddhist paintings and figure paintings, with a small number of flower-and-bird paintings also offered.

3.2.2. Japan

In early catalogs, Japanese artworks were common, but their quantity decreased after the 20th century. The 1888 catalog shows that Japanese ceramics were mainly from the Hizen and Yamashiro regions. The 1895 catalog recorded ceramics like "Seto, Tamba, and Junken Yaki." In the 1908 catalog, items like "Imari, Raku Ware, Kyoto Pottery, Shigaraki, Satsuma, Hagi, and Seto Ware" were frequently seen. The 1921 catalog marked the origin of ceramics and collected items from the era of Emperor Shōmu, the Kamakura period, and the era of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, but without specifying precise dates. The 1896 catalog organized Japanese prints and landscapes by author, including in the "hanging scrolls" format. The 1928 catalog mainly sold ukiyo-e prints, such as works by Katsushika Hokusai and Kitagawa Utamaro. Japanese paintings were mostly modern works, in contrast to the preference for antique Chinese paintings. Creators and origins were noted in the catalog; these paintings, due to their unique style and modern context, were more favored by American collectors.

Americans are interested in the techniques of East Asian decorative arts and crafts but show less interest in Eastern painting. The British diplomat Rutherford Alcock (1809-1897) once opined that Asians lacked the ability to create "Fine Art," especially regarding the use of perspective in landscape painting. However, Japan's successful exhibitions at international expositions led Americans to view it as a country that combines advanced technology with traditional culture, thereby elevating its status in the art world. The lack of Western techniques in Japanese painting became a marker of its uniqueness, enhancing its international appeal. In contrast, Americans' appreciation for China and Korea is often limited to their long histories and traditions, with a greater inclination toward collecting antiques. Meanwhile, they show significant interest in modern Japanese artworks, a trend clearly reflected in art collecting practices.

3.2.3. South Korea

The trade of Korean artworks is similar to that of Chinese artworks, primarily centered around ceramics, with furniture, bronzes, and other items also included. According to the classification of Korean artworks collected by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts between 1892 and 1950, ceramics account for as much as 73%, forming the main part of the collection. Approximately 80% of Korean ceramics were collected before 1950. In terms of chronological distribution, about 60% of the ceramics belong to the Goryeo period, followed by 20% from the Joseon period; the Three Kingdoms period and the Unified Silla period account for 9% and 3%, respectively.

Based on the collection timeline of the museum, ceramics have been continuously collected from 1892 to 1950, whereas metalworks and paintings have been collected intermittently, primarily after 1910. Through auction catalogs, it can be confirmed that the sales of ceramics have been ongoing continuously, whereas the trade of paintings has been relatively scarce. In the United States, the Philadelphia Exposition held in 1876 became a turning point for the substantial increase in both the quality and quantity of Oriental ceramic collections, as well as a growth in interest in ceramics. Shortly after the Philadelphia Exposition, William Copeland devoted a separate chapter to "Korean Ceramics" in his work. Given the limited variety of Korean ceramics accessible to Americans during this period, it was understandable that they regarded Korean ceramics as the origin of Japanese ceramics and believed their forms and manufacturing techniques were derivatives of Chinese creations.

In addition, personal collections centered around Goryeo celadon began to gradually form, while the activities of antique shops and merchants dealing in their trade also increased. This trend indicates that Goryeo celadon gradually occupied an important position in the art market of that time. According to documents from the Residency-General in 1909, it is known that Goryeo ceramics were being looted from cemeteries in the Seoul and Kaesong areas by Japanese grave robbers and their agents, and exported to the United States through American-controlled commercial channels. These activities were quite extensive. Given this background, the increase in trade transactions is thus understandable.

In the 1917 catalog, this feature is clearly evident. Among the approximately 300 artifacts, 24 were identified as Korean, all of which were ceramics. The catalog separated "Korean Pottery" and "Korean Porcelain" into different sections, with notable differences in their descriptions. In the "Korean Pottery" section, it is noted that these ceramics were excavated from tombs, having been buried for over 800 years, and are important examples of glossy green-glazed ceramics, emphasizing their historical and archaeological value. In contrast, the "Korean Porcelain" section offers a simpler description, merely mentioning that these porcelains are antiques over 100 years old. Although the term "celadon" is not explicitly used, it can be inferred that 12th-century celadon was considered to be of greater importance than ordinary porcelain. This difference in categorization and description reflects the understanding and value judgment of Korean ceramics at the time.

4. Conclusion

The text examines the changes in the background and demand for East Asian art auctions in modern America since the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London. East Asian artworks gradually entered the market and gained attention through various fairs and auctions. Among these, ancient artifacts from China and Korea, especially ceramics, bronzes, and jade crafts, became primary trading objects. Chinese ceramics from the Tang to Qing dynasties were highly prized, particularly those from the Song, Ming, and Qing periods. Initially, Korean ceramics focused on local white porcelain and Buncheong ware, but with the increased recognition of Goryeo celadon, the market demand for these also grew. In terms of paintings, China and Korea mainly sold Buddhist and figure paintings, while Japan was primarily known for its prints.

These differences can be understood through catalog structures and artifact descriptions. Chinese and Korean ceramics often emphasized a "tomb discovery" background to highlight their antiquity value, while Chinese ceramics recorded details about their production periods. This information helps us understand the demand trends at the time and how they might have been influenced by the differing perceptions Americans had of various countries.

Moreover, East Asian antique dealers may have influenced Americans' perceptions of East Asian artifacts. Auction catalogs, adapted to the early collectors' tastes, altered their formats, and the content of these catalogs influenced Americans newly exposed to East Asian art. These catalogs' distinctions between countries in presenting East Asian

items may have affected contemporary American perceptions of the various East Asian countries.

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