

The Making of ‘Eternal Offerings’: A Collaboration

Matthew Welch

The Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) possesses one of the great collections of archaic Chinese bronzes in the United States. While additions have been made in recent years, the core of the collection was bequeathed to the museum in 1950 by Alfred Fiske Pillsbury (1869–1950) (Fig. 1). Ranging in date from the Shang (1600–1046 BCE) through the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties, the collection was the result of a relationship between Pillsbury and international art dealer C. T. Loo (1880–1957), who, in the 1930s and 40s, located excellent examples of nearly every vessel type. The growth of the collection was chronicled in a series of loans to the museum during that time. As the market began to cool, and Pillsbury’s health began to decline, he hired Swedish sinologist Bernhard Karlgren (1889–1978), then director of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities (Östasiatiska Museet) in Stockholm, to write a scholarly catalogue of the collection. Unfortunately, Pillsbury passed away just months before Karlgren’s book was published.

Alfred F. Pillsbury was the son of John Sargent Pillsbury and nephew of Charles Alfred Pillsbury, two men responsible for the founding of C. A. Pillsbury and Company in 1872. The Pillsbury Company operated mills on the banks of the northern Mississippi for the processing of grain into flour,

which was then shipped downstream to the southern states or transported by train east to New England or west to Seattle. Even by the 1880s, the newer and technologically more advanced mills of Minneapolis

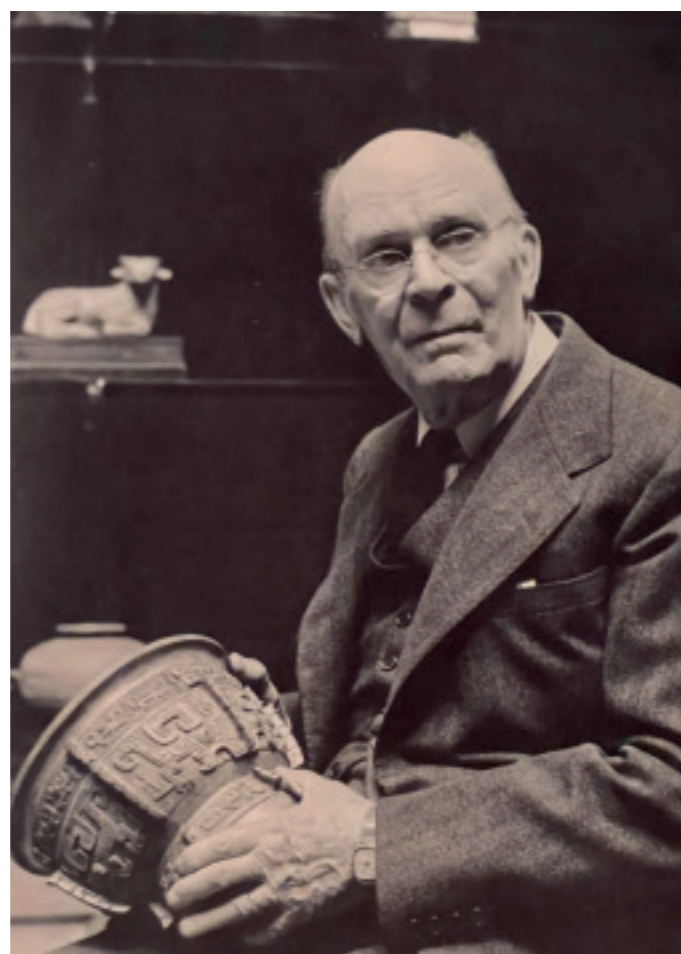


Fig. 1 Alfred F. Pillsbury (1869–1950)
Photo © Minneapolis Institute of Art

had rendered historic mills of the Delaware Valley obsolete, thus making Minneapolis the preeminent producer of flour and earning it the appellation of ‘Mill City’.

The success of the company meant that Alfred Pillsbury grew up in relative luxury. He owned the first high-wheel bicycle in the city, as well as one of the first automobiles—powered by steam. He worked at the company intermittently while in high school, and then full-time after graduating from the University of Minnesota’s School of Law in 1892.

That Pillsbury managed to become an important collector of Asian art is surprising given his responsibilities as a businessman. In 1910, for example, a city directory indicated that he was serving as vice president of Pillsbury Flour Mills Company, president of St Anthony Falls Waterpower Company, and president of Union Terminal [Grain] Elevator Company. And from 1925 until 1946 he served as the Minneapolis Parks Commissioner.

Pillsbury’s penchant for civic involvement began as early as 1911 when he became a trustee of the Society of Fine Art (later to become the Minneapolis Institute of Art). He began serving as treasurer in 1917, a position he held until he was elected president of the society in 1935. He served in that capacity until 1948, when he became chairman of the board, a position held until his death in 1950.

A trip to Asia following WWI undoubtedly sparked Pillsbury’s interest in Chinese art. He may also have been influenced by Augustus L. Searle (1863–1955), a rival in the grain elevator and milling business in Minneapolis who was busy collecting Chinese decorative arts of the 18th century, including jades, rhinoceros horn cups, snuff bottles, goldwork, and lacquer (the Searle collection now also resides at Mia). In fact, Pillsbury’s earliest purchases were Chinese monochrome porcelains as well as tomb figurines and Islamic ceramics. In the 1930s, however, he set his sights on archaic works of art. Over the course of the next twenty years, Pillsbury collected some 143 bronzes and 185 jades.

More recent key additions of scale were added by former curator Robert Jacobsen (1944–2021) with the help of museum trustee Bruce B. Dayton (1918–2015) and served to strengthen the collection. (It was, in fact, Alfred Pillsbury who invited Dayton to become a museum trustee in 1942, when Dayton was only 23 years old). While a gallery devoted specifically to the archaic Chinese bronzes had been opened in 1998, very little scholarly work on the bronzes had been



Fig. 2 Liu Yang
Photo © Minneapolis Institute of Art

conducted since Karlgren’s publication in 1950. Thus, when Liu Yang—scholar of Chinese art history and archaeology and already familiar with collection—joined the staff at Mia in 2011, a ‘bronze project’ became a frequent topic of conversation between us. In 2015, grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, the Blakemore Foundation, and the Bei Shan Tang Foundation launched the project in earnest. Top scholars in the field, including the two most renowned bronze specialists from China, Li Xueqin (1933–2019) and Zhu Fenghan, as well as two of the scholars who had been responsible for the production of the three-volume set of books on the Sackler collection of Chinese bronzes, Robert Bagley and Jenny So, were enlisted to research and write essays for the catalogue. At the same time, Mia invited Chinese artisans Wang Xiaozhong and Hu Zhihua for residences at Mia in April of 2015, during which they produced hundreds of ink rubbings and line drawings of the bronzes. And working with conservators at the Midwest Art Conservation Center, Liu requested X-rays and CT scans of a group of thirty bronzes to better understand the structure of these vessels, the casting techniques used in making them, and any previous repairs or



Fig. 3 Tim Yip

restorations. In February 2020, with the support of the Chinese Heritage Foundation in Minneapolis, Liu also invited Su Rongyu, a top specialist on ancient Chinese bronze casting technology from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, to visit the collection and share his insights. The new catalogue of Mia's bronze collection is expected to be published in the fall of 2023.

The exhibition 'Eternal Offerings: Chinese Bronzes from the Minneapolis Institute of Art', first assembled as a touring exhibition, garnered considerable interest from potential venues across the States. Ultimately it was shown at the Ringling Museum of Art (9 June – 10 September 2017) and at the Asian Society Texas Center (29 February – 29 November 2020).

As the time approached for the presentation of the exhibition at Mia (4 March – 21 May 2023), the idea of inviting renowned art director and film designer Tim Yip (Fig. 3) to design the show emerged from a chance conversation between Liu Yang and Pearl Lam Bergad, executive director of the Chinese Heritage Foundation. Yip had served as the set designer for *Dream of the Red Chamber*, an opera commissioned by the foundation that premiered in San Francisco in 2016. In fact, Liu was keen to approach Yip, having successfully partnered with the celebrated artist, director, and stage designer Robert Wilson in 2018 to create the exhibition 'Power and Beauty in China's Last Dynasty'. Critical reception to that exhibition had been overwhelmingly positive while also stimulating conversations across the museum field about installation design, stagecraft, and the visitor experience.

Still, Liu was sceptical that Yip would be interested given his impressive accomplishments and hectic schedule. Best known for his work on the 2000 film by Ang Lee, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*—for which he won an Academy Award for best art direction—Yip has created sets and costume designs for many celebrated directors including John Woo (*Red Cliff*, 2008), Feng Xiaogang (*The Banquet*, 2006; *Back to 1942*, 2012), Chen Guofu and Gaoshu (*The Message*, 2009), Tian Zhuangzhuang (*Springtime in Small Town*, 2002), Chen Kaige (*The Promise*, 2005), and Li Shaohong (*The Palace of Desire*, 2000; *Ripening Orange*, 2002), among others.

In addition, Yip has been equally active with dance and theatre troupes, working with distinguished directors and choreographers including Akram Khan (*Creature*, London, 2020), Carolyn Choa (*Beauty and Sadness*, Hong Kong, 2019), Yang Liping (*Rite of Spring*, Stanford, 2018), Stan Lai (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, San Francisco, 2016), Franco Dragone (*The Han Show*, Wuhan, 2014), and Robert Wilson (*The Grand Voyage*, Taipei, 2010), to name but a few.

Undaunted, Liu reached out to Yip in December 2021, through the introduction of Pearl Lam Bergad. To his amazement, Yip quickly responded, conveying his interest in the project and noting his admiration of the museum's renowned bronze collection. He also suggested a virtual meeting as soon as possible, as he was soon to depart for Moscow and the Bolshoi Theatre where he was designing the set and costumes for a production of *Lohengrin*, directed by François Girard (the same opera premiered at the Metropolitan Opera on 26 February 2023). With



Fig. 4 View of the exhibition 'Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters', Minneapolis Institute of Art (5 March – 28 May 2017)
Photo © Minneapolis Institute of Art

Fig. 5 View of the exhibition 'New Pictures: The Propeller Group, Reincarnations' at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (22 April – 10 September 2017)
Photo © Minneapolis Institute of Art



only a little more than a year to prepare for the exhibition in Minneapolis, and with Yip's schedule already burgeoning with projects, Liu needed to move quickly. Over the course of the year Liu and an implementation team at Mia that included Taiwan-born Yaumu Huang, Mia's in-house exhibition designer (formerly at the Art Institute of Chicago), met frequently with Yip and his assistant Yao Jin, and later with lighting designer A. J. Weissbard, to shape the exhibition.

In this way, 'Eternal Offerings' demonstrates Mia's abiding commitment to innovation and experimentation. Rather than an anomalous 'one-off', the exhibition can be seen in the context of a series of groundbreaking ventures at the forefront of museum practice. For example, the museum's 2016 partnership with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Art Gallery of Ontario to illuminate the creativity and source-inspiration of Guillermo

del Toro brought artworks (both high and low) from the film director's collection into the museum context—thus questioning the standard focus on 'masterpiece' (Fig. 4). In 2017, a project with The Propeller Group, an artists' collective based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, ceded curatorial authority to members of the group. Artists Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Phunam Thuc Ha, and Matt Lucero created a dense arrangement of historic figurative sculpture from the museum's collection to echo the funerary procession featured in their video *The Living Need Light, the Dead Need Music* (Fig. 5). Around the same time, Mia curator of Native American arts Jill Ahlberg Yohe, guest curator Teri Greeves (Kiowa), and curatorial research assistant Dakota Hoska (Oglala Lakhóta) organized an advisory panel of 21 Native artists and Native and non-Native scholars representing nineteen tribal nations from across North America for the exhibition 'Hearts of Our People: Native Women

Fig. 6 View of the exhibition 'Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists' at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (2 June – 18 August 2019)
Photo © Minneapolis Institute of Art

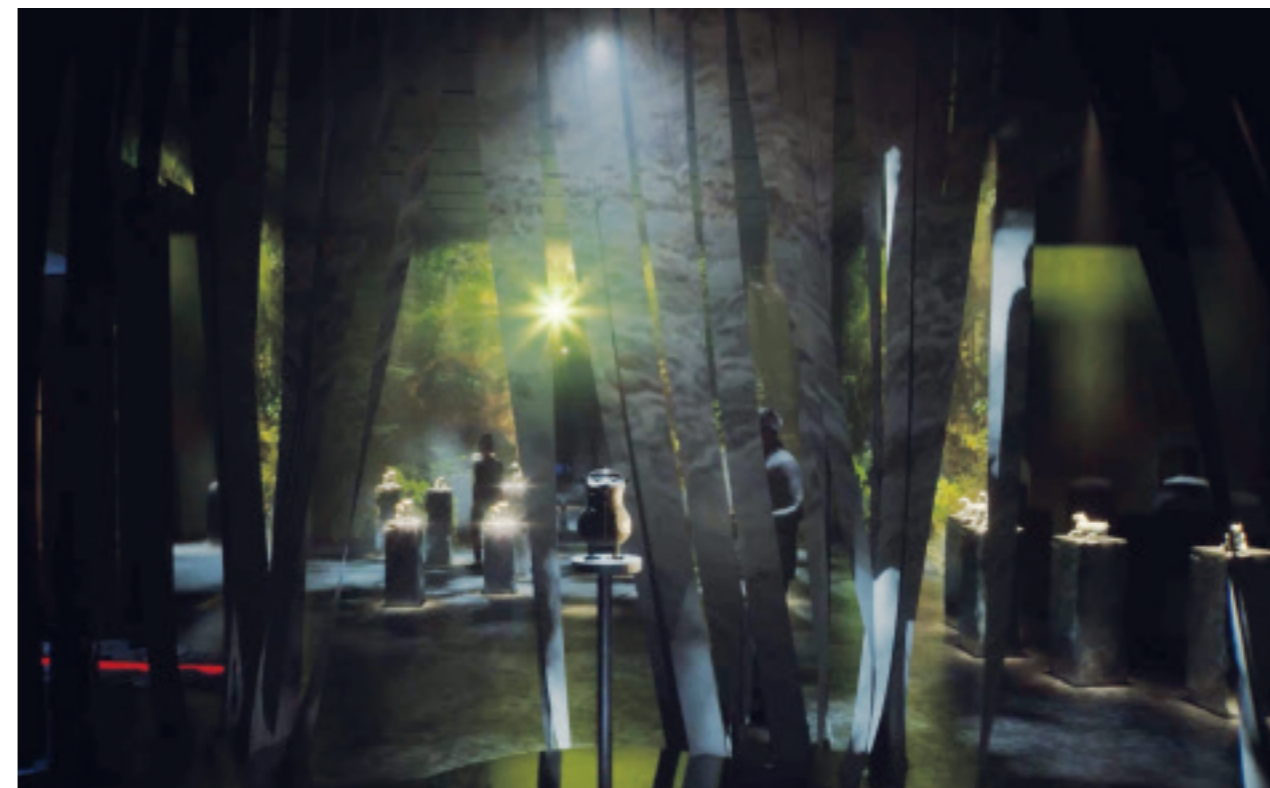


Fig. 7 Digital visualization of an installation for 'Eternal Offerings'
Photo © Tim Yip Studios

Artists' (2019). This process not only brought the lived-experience and perspectives of Native people to bear on the project but also recognized the diversity of voices within the Native community itself (Fig. 6).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given his background in film and theatre, Yip's approach emphasizes experience over pedagogy. The installation, filling seven galleries and over 1,000 square metres, is devoid of didactic panels and labels (although visitors will be offered an explanatory brochure). Instead, the installation is meant to be a series of evocations to transport visitors into abstracted environments intended to conjure the contexts in which the bronzes were originally used and the mindset of the Chinese who produced them (Fig. 7). Through cinematic projections, pictorial wall murals, and atmospheric gallery lighting, visitors are meant to feel the mystery of the forest and the creatures that inhabit it; to understand, for example, the stylized animals and zoomorphic patterns embellishing the surfaces of ancient bronzes. Other installations emphasize the ritual use of bronze objects within the context of a formal religious setting or burial

altar. And one room focuses on the role of bronzes in expressing the concept of *li*, or propriety through ritual and sacrifice.

The partnership of Yip and Liu, with support from Yip's design team in Hong Kong and designer Yaumu Huang at Mia, also addressed Yip's concern about China's historic representation and interpretation via Western concepts and paradigms. Certainly, the emphasis on taxonomy and periodization that have frequently characterized exhibitions of ancient Chinese art in American and European museums has been laid aside in 'Eternal Offerings' in favour of something far more evocative, encouraging visitors to journey through space and time to feel the import and meaning of these stately objects and to embrace their mysterious beauty and power on a less intellectual, more intuitive level. In so doing, it well represents Yip's aesthetic notion of 'New Orientalism'—a contemporary way of interpreting ancient Chinese culture as means to inspire the future.

Matthew Welch, PhD, is Deputy Director and Chief Curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.