

# The New York Times

## Art & Design

Art Review | Asia Week



## Monkey Gods to Textiles: Far East on the East Side

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

Published: March 21, 2008

This year Asia Week in New York has stretched into Asia Fortnight. The two art fairs that usually coincide on a single weekend have spread out to fall on consecutive weekends.

The 10-year-old New York Arts of Pacific Asia Show, traditionally the scrappy downtown underdog, starts Friday at the Gramercy Park Armory, at Lexington Avenue and 26th Street. Its older, plusher uptown rival, the New York International Asian Art Fair, changed its dates at the last minute; was displaced from its usual location, the Park Avenue Armory; and transpired last weekend in smaller quarters with fewer dealers. Suddenly the private and out-of-town dealers who customarily stage short gallery exhibitions to coincide with the uptown show found their big weekend — this one — overlapping only with the downtown Pacific Asia show.

Any benefits of this extension fall to us, the onlookers. Two Asian art fairs in one weekend was always a challenge. The downtown fair is on the upswing and the gallery shows, concentrated in the Fuller Building on East 57th Street and along upper Madison Avenue in Manhattan, are more plentiful and outstanding than ever. Here are a few of this year's high points, with many more waiting to be discovered as you poke around.

### Pacific Asia Show

This fair still offers total, slightly crazed immersion in the different universes crowded under the umbrella of Asian art. But for better or worse, the souklike kaleidoscope of objects and cultures has slowed a bit. It is more orderly with fewer and more carefully selected dealers (72, down from 92 last year) arrayed in larger booths. It all feels less dense, more aerated. Even Chinalai Tribal Antiques, known for virtually barricading the front of its booth with cases piled with tiny votive objects, jewelry and folded textiles, is almost penetrable.

Some booths look truly elegant, like the eclectic orchestration of mostly Japanese art and artifacts in the merged booths of Galen Lowe and Axel Michels, or the much more modest and focused arrangement of Japanese hanging scrolls and ceramics at Bachmann Eckenstein. A standout here is a recent earthenware vase by Kato Shigetaka; covered with slashes of black glaze, it reflects an awareness of Japanese Gutai painters and their American contemporaries, the Abstract Expressionists.

At Thomas Murray a tall Indonesian stone megalith shaped like a bird's beaked profile (but with both eyes on one side, like a [Picasso](#)) communes with a 19th-century female carved wood totem intended as a house guardian from West Borneo. (Her forthright sexuality is also Picasso-like.) Both receive colorful backup from an unusual red 18th-century Konya kilim gridded with abstracted figures, a theme throughout this booth. Jan Van Beers, one of three dealers who shifted from the uptown to the downtown fair this year, has a fine selection of Chinese porcelains,

including a blue-and-white brush pot (Kangxi period, 1662-1722). Its wraparound landscape includes an outdoor tea ceremony and is notable for its intense blues and crisp angular forms.

At Nankai you can get something of a crash course in Vietnamese ceramics with several dozen vessels, mostly from the 12th to the 15th centuries. At Judith Rutherford the textiles include a bamboo vest and jacket from 19th-century China. At Joss Graham more textiles share the space with Indian paintings, including two Indian paintings of hell in which the damned, seen against a brilliant aqua background, are tormented individually in little tubs. But don't let me tell you where to go.

### **The Fuller Building**

For the last few years the concentration of dealers in the Fuller Building, at 41 East 57th Street in Manhattan, has constituted a de facto fair without the entrance fee. Pick up a list of exhibitors in the lobby and work your way downstairs from the top, starting with "Two Thousand Years of Chinese Sculpture" at J. J. Lally; it opens with two Tang court ladies, a not unfamiliar convention, but these are exquisite both in pose and in the soft colors and patterns of their hand-painted robes. For Chinese landscape painting Sydney L. Moss has outstanding examples in most of the important forms: hanging scrolls, hand scrolls, albums and fans. The landscape in a hanging scroll by Chiao Ping-Chen, a Kangxi period painter, includes a portrait of a Tibetan Buddhist monk and achieves an unusual hybrid of Chinese and Western painting conventions.

If Japanese art is your thing, Carole Davenport is concentrating on ceramics and Mika, as usual, makes its tiny space feel almost voluminous with a few choice objects. Next door Francesca Galloway's exhibition of Indian court painting is an almost relentless succession of treasures, starting with a painting of the Hindu monkey god Hanuman visible at three points (near, far and farther) as he flies across a heaving gray ocean.

Nancy Wiener, who is showing in the Fuller Building for the first time, and Carlton Rochell, who is headquartered there, have impressive exhibitions of Asian sculpture. Mr. Rochell features a large and robust 12th- to 13th-century Ganesha from South India, carved in textured granite that has grown luminous from centuries of loving touches, and an austere 12th-century Jain saint seated in a cross-legged yogic pose; its chipped extremities seem consistent with its angularity and its nearly black stone. Ms. Wiener counters with an immense Buddha, in a similar pose, but more gently rounded and carved from glowing red sandstone.



Rossi & Rossi is concentrating on wonderfully ghoulish Tantric carpets from 19th-century Tibet and China. Used in exorcism ceremonies, they depict flayed elephants, tigers and demons, sometimes surrounded by bones and body parts. Next door Schneible Fine Art has several enchanting Tang dynasty animals in carved and painted wood, including a sneering camel detailed in fine black lines worthy of Saul Steinberg. But the real star here is a Neolithic stone carving, about 15 inches high, and dating from 6000-5000 B.C. It shows a male deity and his female partner standing side by side in a kind of clinch. While vague of form, they are kinetically distinct and familiar. They seem to step forward with a touch of Fred-and-Ginger Hollywood glamour, but also evoke Adam and Eve on their way out of Eden.

### **Madison Avenue**

Of the several outstanding shows on or just off Madison Avenue, two of the best feature Japanese art. Koichi Yanagi Oriental Fine Arts (17 East 71st Street) has "Faces From Medieval Japan," a selection of rare Kishin masks from the 14th to 17th centuries — demons and monkeys used in ritual dances and usually retired to temples — and an early Noh (or even pre-Noh mask) of an old man. But also on display is a stunning 16th-century mandala that, unlike the more abstract Himalayan versions, depicts an actual shrine, the path among its buildings being the road to enlightenment. The subject here is the Nachi shrine with its famous waterfall, surrounded by flotillas of curly, low-lying clouds and profusely needled pine trees.

At Sebastian Izzard (17 East 76th Street) “Early Images From the Floating World: Japanese Paintings, Prints and Illustrated Books, 1660-1720” focuses on early guides, how-to sex manuals (for brides and courtesans alike) and erotic prints pertaining to the red-light districts of Edo-period Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. Color wood-block printing had not yet been invented, so all the color in these prints is applied by hand and is out of this world. It is most heavenly in the rare and abundant boldly composed prints of Sugimura Jihei, a generally overlooked master of the genre.

At E. & J. Frankel (1040 Madison Avenue, at 79th Street) pillars of the New York Asian art world, a marvelous exhibition of works from the Julia and Vance Hall collection of Korean art gives pride of place to ceramics from the Silla, Koryo and Choson dynasties, ranging from the 7th to early 19th centuries. It richly illustrates Korea’s importance as an active, transformative conduit between China and Japan. Pieces like two tall, narrow-necked subtly asymmetric vases show how the Koreans relaxed Chinese forms, setting the stage for an appreciation of irregularity that the Japanese would cultivate into a love of accident.

The northern-most stop is a display of superb Asian sculpture assembled by John Eskenazi, a London dealer camped out in spacious quarters on 24 East 80th Street. Attractions include a fabulously fluid fifth- to-sixth-century terracotta Gupta roundel of Vishnu carried through the air by Garuda (while this bird spirit was still a man); a Nepalese strut from around the 15th century that is carved from wood and stacked with goddesses; and a Gandharan Bodhisattva head whose ornate headdress predicts some of [Caravaggio](#)’s. It is a fitting conclusion to the cornucopia of Asia art, here for the seeing, this weekend.

New York Arts of Pacific Asia Show, Gramercy Park Armory, Lexington Avenue at 26th Street, Friday through Monday, (310) 455-2886, [asianart.com](http://asianart.com). Hours: Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m.-7:30 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.; Monday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Last admittance Monday at 4:30 p.m.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/21/arts/design/21trib.html?sq=Asia%20Week%202008&st=cse&scp=3&pagewanted=all>