

[ART JOURNAL]

Devils in the detail

Song Dynasty tapestry reached an apex of craftsmanship that the casual observer could easily miss

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



■ Chu Ko-jou's *Wagtail and Polygonum*.
PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL PALACE MUSEUM

■ Shen Tzu-fan's *Birds and Blossoms*.
PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL PALACE MUSEUM

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Weaving a Tapestry of Splendors — Bird and Flower Tapestry of the Song Dynasty
WHEN: Until June 25. Open daily from 9am to 5pm, closes at 8:30pm on Saturdays
WHERE: National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院), Main Exhibition Building (正館展覽大樓), exhibition rooms 208, 216 (208, 216室), 221 Zhishan Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市至善路二段221號)
ADMISSION: NT\$160

The Song Dynasty, which ruled China from 960 to 1279, was one of the pinnacles of Chinese art, when the robust ostentation of the preceding Tang Dynasty gave way to an almost manic appreciation of subtlety and nuance. In many ways, the art of tapestry as presented in this exhibition at the National Palace Museum is typical of the period — and casual observers could easily miss its almost insane level of technical complexity.

Walking past the works that make up Weaving a Tapestry of Splendors, a visitor might be excused for thinking that this is yet another display of Chinese painting — one that is attractive and accomplished, but among the other riches on display hardly startling.

The magnified sections of works, which have been enlarged between five to 60 times the original size, reveal how truly exceptional they are through showing the intricacy of the weave, which is only visible to the naked eye under close observation.

Tung Wen-e (童文娥) of the museum's Department of Painting and Calligraphy, who is curating the show, said that the tapestries can first be appreciated as painting, then at a closer level, admired for their craftsmanship.

The provision of explanatory English notes in the display cases is helpful in providing insight

into the artistry of the works.

Tung said the tapestry was so labor intensive that production virtually ceased after a period of efflorescence during the Song Dynasty. "A single panel might take as much as a year to create," Tung said, "and because the thread is not continuous, it is delicate and easily damaged."

All the exhibition's examples were taken from the imperial collection and are now preserved as framed leaves or scrolls to be appreciated as visual art, rather than serving any utilitarian purpose. Tung said their creators often worked from paintings, with threads dyed in a huge range of subtly different shades to achieve an effect that is almost as delicate as brushwork.

Tung said that she had focused exclusively on flowers and birds for this exhibition to highlight the incredible delicacy that Song Dynasty tapestry had achieved.

Unlike weaving or embroidery, tapestry creates a product in which the image can be seen and appreciated from front and back. It also allowed for very intricate shading and delicate lines, both of which are particularly evident in this exhibit.

Tapestry is not one of the major Chinese art forms, and unlike calligraphy or painting, is not often put on display. Moreover, the very early dates of these works, and their excellent condition, make this exhibition of particular interest.



Private sales are up as art auctions fall from favor

As the recession takes its toll, many collectors have changed strategies, ditched auctions and turned to private sales to avoid revealing their straitened circumstance to family and friends

BY CAROL VOGEL
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

During good times, an auction is the obvious choice for any collector wanting to sell a work of art. But as the recession takes its toll, many collectors have changed strategies and retreated to the more hidden — and potentially less lucrative — world of private sales.

For many sellers, the driving factor is fear. Fear that their friends will discover they need money. Fear that if a Picasso or Warhol, Monet or Modigliani doesn't sell at auction, it will be considered yesterday's goods. If they don't have to, fewer collectors are putting their holdings up for auction at Sotheby's and Christie's, where prices and profits have plummeted. But executives at both houses say business in their private-sale departments has more than doubled in recent months.

Even institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan are avoiding auctions. This season it has decided to sell two early classic 1960s paintings by Wayne Thiebaud through Haunch of Venison, a gallery owned by Christie's. In 2005, when the market was nearing its peak, it sold a variety of works at auction at Christie's for strong prices.

"There's an element of uncertainty with an auction that in this climate makes it more prudent to sell privately," said Ann Temkin, chief curator in the department of painting and sculpture at MoMA. (The Thiebauds were donated to the Modern with the express purpose of selling them to raise cash for future acquisitions.)

"The game has definitely shifted," said Christopher Eykyn, a former head of Impressionist and modern art at Christie's who is now a dealer in New York. "A lot of collectors don't want to be seen selling, so the private route is suddenly more attractive."

Just six months ago Sotheby's Impressionist



Though Julian Schnabel will auction Picasso's *Femme au Chapeau*, other collectors have used private transactions to sell artwork.
PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

and modern art sale brought US\$223.8 million; its May 5 sale is expected to fetch only US\$81.5 million. Christie's Impressionist and modern art auction in November totaled US\$146.7 million; its May 6 sale is estimated at only US\$94.9 million.

"Clients want it now," said Marc Porter, president of Christie's in America. "And that means cash in their pockets." Why wait months for the regularly scheduled auctions when you can have instant money, even if it

means forfeiting the possibility of sparking a bidding war at auction?

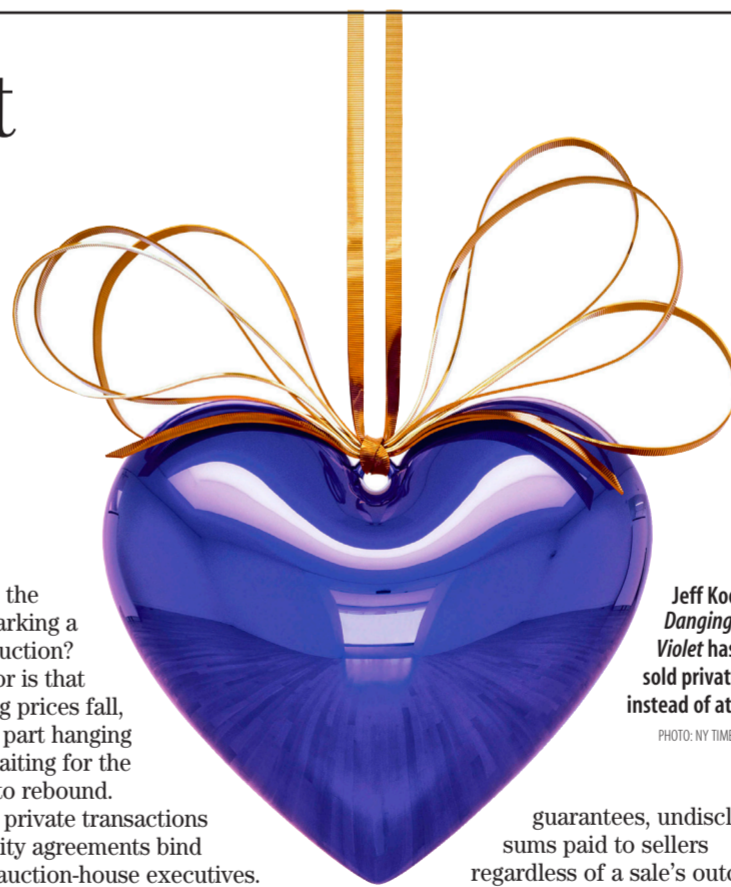
Another factor is that collectors, seeing prices fall, are for the most part hanging onto their art, waiting for the auction market to rebound.

So secret are private transactions that confidentiality agreements bind the dealers and auction-house executives. Still, the art world loves to talk, and in recent months among the expensive paintings that have quietly changed hands are a 1970s De Kooning abstract canvas sold for around US\$30 million; a Cy Twombly *Blackboard* painting for US\$12 million; one of Gerhard Richter's *Color Charts* for US\$18 million; and Jeff Koons' *Hanging Heart Violet* sculpture for US\$11 million.

There are exceptions, of course. Estates continue to go to auction because executors have a fiduciary responsibility and prices are rarely challenged after public sales.

For the auction houses, private sales are lucrative and inexpensive. Generally Sotheby's and Christie's charge 5 to 10 percent of the purchase price of an artwork, depending on its value and the agreement with the seller. (If a work goes to auction the houses charge sellers 25 percent of the first US\$50,000, 20 percent of the next US\$50,000 to US\$1 million and 12 percent of the rest.) Money earned from private transactions comes cheap, without expenses like advertising, insurance and shipping associated with auctions.

The dismal sales in New York in November, when night after night paintings by Monet and Matisse, Bacon and Warhol went unsold, meant big losses for Sotheby's and Christie's, which had a financial interest in most of this expensive art in the form of



Jeff Koons' *Dancing Heart Violet* has been sold privately instead of at auction.
PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

guarantees, undisclosed sums paid to sellers regardless of a sale's outcome.

After the fall auctions, both houses immediately began changing the way they conduct business. In addition to announcing hundreds of layoffs — with perhaps more to come — they mostly halted the practice of guarantees and stopped giving consignors a cut in the fees they charge buyers. The days of publishing luscious catalogs have ended as well.

For their part, dealers say that their phones started ringing after Sept. 15, the day Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy. "It's been pretty steady ever since," said Steven Henry, director of the Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea. He said he had been getting inquiries about selling art from people who had investments with Bernard Madoff, or who had seen the value of their stock or real estate assets collapse.

Matthew Marks, another Chelsea dealer, has noticed that sellers "just aren't into gambling anymore and auctions are no longer a sure thing."

Dealers say that despite the increase in private sales, deals do not happen as briskly as they did in the days when collectors were on waiting lists for hot artists. "Everything is a negotiation," Marks said.

Still, he is grateful for business. "I'm not asking sellers any questions," Marks said. "I'm just happy the phone is ringing."



Change

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TT: What is the significance of the sub-themes?

DO: The themes are derived from some details of Poussin's work. The very first thing that the visitors will see is a curtain. On this curtain we shall have a huge-scale projection of *Les Bergers d'Arcadie* (*The Arcadian Shepherds*) by Poussin — it was not possible to get the original one because it's in the Louvre. So it's a projection on the curtain and the visitors will have, like they did in Seoul, to cross the painting to enter the world of Arcadia. Each section of the exhibition came from one detail of this particular painting. For example, [in Poussin's painting] there is a half-naked woman, so this is the introduction to voluptuary. From these details we have sections devoted to still life, and landscape and the nude and most of the iconography of the painting of the time.

TT: Does the exhibit really bring home the idea that these modernist artists were influenced by the Renaissance tradition?

DO: In spirit, of course.

TT: What are the differences between the pictorial experiments taking place during the Renaissance and the modernist experiments taking place during the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

DO: I think we've emphasized for too long that there is a big difference. I'm not sure that there is that difference. You can use different vocabulary, but in fact you are saying the same old story. And the Renaissance is not a single way of practicing painting. If you compare Poussin to Caravaggio, there is probably more difference between Poussin and Caravaggio than Poussin and Matisse, I think. It was a dramatization of history to say that modernity is the negation of the past, that it is the radical idea of innovation. Yes it could be, but it could be something different.

TT: So placing the work of Poussin together with these modernist artists goes against the grain.

DO: Yes. This is rarely a way of seeing modern art. Generally we say there is the Poussin of classicism ... and there is a break with Manet and we enter a different world. But what you see in the show is that ... Manet will be at the end and Poussin at the beginning just to explain that, after all, if we want we can imagine that history is not going in the way we were thinking. It's much more complex. This stems from ideas that we have had since the middle of the 1970s when we started thinking of a new way of reading and writing art history.

(Ottinger is an expert on modern art and has written books and essays about seminal figures such as Jean Helion, Rene Magritte, Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, to name just a few.)

TT: You've published 11 books and catalogues on modern art. Did you write anything for the *Arcadie* catalogue?

DO: Yes, there is an introduction. I have a new interpretation of Poussin and this is something I wanted to propose to my colleagues from the Louvre. The most important art historians of the time wrote major books about Poussin, such as [Erwin] Panofsky and [Harold] Rosenberg — and I propose this new idea.

TT: What has been the response to your theory?

DO: It's not very well known in France because the show has only been shown in Seoul and the catalogue was mostly sold in Korea.

TT: So the Taipei exhibit has not been seen at the Pompidou.

DO: No. No. No. No. No.

TT: Will it be seen at there?

DO: I'm not sure it would be that easy because ... (we both laugh). It's something quite experimental in a way. I don't know.

TT: The exhibit might cause controversy in France. Is that why you're doing this outside the country?

DO: Perhaps I am more free in the way I could think of what modern art is outside the place where these ideas are rooted.

TT: Has the essay that you wrote for the catalogue been seen by other critics or art historians in France?

DO: I'm not sure. I haven't publicized it. But probably I will have to give the text to Pierre Rosenberg because he was curious about that. He heard about the project — he was the former president of the Louvre — and heard about Arcadie and asked about the text. When I'm back I will give it to him. I am curious to know what he thinks about my interpretation of the works because it is not one he explains in his books.

TT: Did the Pompidou exert any control over the content of the exhibit? Is it representative of the museum?

DO: No, no, no ... When I was a teacher ... at the Ecole du Louvre I used to tell the kids, "You have to consider that there is not a single way to know what's the meaning of modern art. There are plenty of ways and if you come up with something interesting, probably you will be able to write another story about that." I used to compare — as a game, but it was also to explain — two interpretations of Barnett Newman's work by critics working at the same time and in the same country. One was by Clement Greenberg, and he says [Newman's work] is purely formal, and at the same time you have Harold Rosenberg who says it is purely mythical and religious. Who is right? You cannot reconcile these two views. Who was right at the time? For a long time we thought Clement Greenberg was right. Now we think that probably Rosenberg is right. I think it's the same thing with the most established ideas about modern art. Manet is not the man who destroyed the subject but probably introduced another kind of subject that we didn't see at the time.

This interview has been condensed and edited.