

Abel William Bahr

1877–1959

Collector and Dealer in Chinese Art



A. W. (Billy) Bahr was born to Jürgen Bahr (1838–1903), a German civil servant in Shanghai, and Marie Ling Wan Yin (1839–1913). After receiving an education at St. Francis Xavier’s School in Shanghai, Bahr began his career as a clerk with a wholesale and retail coal merchant. He eventually established the Central Trading Company with a group of friends in 1898. Following his marriage to Helen Marion Southey (1873–1954) in 1900, he joined the firm of Hopkins, Dunn and Company.

Bahr’s interest in Chinese art seems to have begun around 1905, when he began collecting porcelain from the Kangxi period (1662–1722). In 1908 he promoted the first exhibition of Chinese art in Shanghai, which was organized under the auspices of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. He moved to England in 1910 and continued to make trips to China.

In 1927 Bahr’s collection of early jades was exhibited at the Field Museum in Chicago, with curator Berthold Laufer writing the privately printed catalogue. The Field Museum acquired the jades the following year. A catalogue of Bahr’s Chinese painting collection was written by Osvald Siren and published in 1938. Most of his paintings were purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1947. Many public museums and galleries in North America and Great Britain acquired ex-Bahr material, either through purchase or gift, including the Montreal Museum of Art, the Royal Ontario Museum, the British Museum, and the Freer Gallery of Art.

In 1946 Bahr and his family moved to Montreal, Quebec, where he remained for five years. He joined his daughter Edna Bahr (1907–1986) in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in 1951 and died there on March 2, 1959. Following Bahr’s death, Edna donated pieces to various institutions in her father’s memory.

Literature

A. W. Bahr, *Old Chinese Porcelain and Works of Art in China: Being Description and Illustration of Articles Selected from an Exhibition Held in Shanghai, November 1908* (London, 1911).

Catalogue of an Exhibition of Early Chinese Paintings, Porcelains, Pottery and Bronzes from the Collection of A. W. Bahr (London, 1911).

Antique Chinese porcelains, pottery, jades, screens, paintings on glass, rugs, carpets and many other objects of art and antiquity, American Art Association, January 17–19 (New York, 1916).

Chinese antiquities and art treasures, American Art Association, January 9–11 (New York, 1922).

Antique Chinese potteries, porcelains, jades and objects of art, Anderson Galleries, April 7–8 (New York, 1926).

Archaic Chinese Jades Collected in China by A. W. Bahr, now in the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago (Chicago, 1927).

Osvald Siren, *Early Chinese Paintings from the A. W. Bahr Collection* (London, 1938).

“Abel W. Bahr Dies in his 82nd Year,” obituary, *Ridgefield Press* (March 5, 1959).

Nick Pearce, “Shanghai 1908: A. W. Bahr and China’s First Art Exhibition,” *West 86th* 18, no. 1 (2011), pp. 4–25.

A. W. Bahr Papers, 1919–1957. http://www.asia.si.edu/archives/finding_aids/bahr.htm

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