

John Alexander Pope

1906–1982

Asian Ceramics Scholar and Museum Director



John Alexander Pope was born in Detroit, Michigan. Before completing his undergraduate degree at Yale University, Pope voluntarily joined an American Red Cross Commission that reported on famine conditions in China's Yellow River Valley in 1929. Years later he recounted driving a truck for the commission through the northern provinces of Honan, Shensi, Shansi, and Suiyuan, the cradle of Chinese civilization. This experience proved to be a decisive event in his life, as it shaped his interest in the history, civilization, and arts of China.

After serving as a Chinese language interpreter for the US Marine Corps and as a translator for the Army Map Service during World War II, Pope became the assistant director of the Freer Gallery of Art in 1946. He was named the museum's third director in 1962, after the death of Archibald Gibson Wenley (1898–1962). Pope retired as director in 1971, becoming the Gallery's director emeritus and research curator of Far Eastern ceramics.

On a trip to Istanbul in 1950, Pope examined the Chinese celadon and blue-and-white porcelains amassed by Ottoman sultans and kept at the Topkapı Sarayı Museum. The insights he gained not only are noted in his 1952 scholarly volume *Fourteenth-century blue-and-white: A group of Chinese porcelains in the Topkapu Sarayi Müzesi, Istanbul*, but they also provided core material for his PhD dissertation at Harvard University (1955). *Chinese Porcelains from the Ardebil Shrine*, Pope's 1956 study of blue-and-white porcelain from the fourteenth century through the Ming dynasty, based on objects from northwestern Iran, is now considered a standard work on the subject.

Pope received the Royal Order of the Northern Star from the king of Sweden for his research and work on the royal collection of Chinese art. In 1971 he was the first recipient of a medal from the Oriental Ceramics Society in recognition of his distinguished contribution to the study of Asian art. During the final years of his life, Pope worked on a manuscript about Japanese porcelain, kiln sites, and textual sources in Japan.

Literature

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“Notes for an Autobiographical Sketch” (1967), now in the Archives of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

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Thomas Lawton and Linda Merrill, *Freer: A Legacy of Art* (Washington, DC, 1993).

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