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## **Contents**

## **History of the Freer Medal**

### **Opening Remarks**

Julian Raby, Dame Jillian Sackler Director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art

### **Bibliography of Dame Jessica Rawson**

# History of the Freer Medal

## From the first presentation of the Freer Medal on February 25, 1956

This medal is established in commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the founder of the Freer Gallery of Art. The late Charles Lang Freer was born on February 25th, 1856, at Kingston, New York. For many years he was a devoted and discerning collector and student of Oriental art. He believed that more is learned concerning a civilization or epoch from the art it has produced than from any other source. With this idea in mind, he presented his collection, a building to house them, and an endowment. The income was to be used "for the study of the civilization of the Far East" and "for the promotion of high ideals of beauty" by the occasional purchase of the finest examples of Oriental, Egyptian and Near Eastern fine arts. This gift was offered to the Government during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, to be given in trust to the Smithsonian Institution. The deed of gift was executed on May 5th, 1906. Ground was broken on September 23rd, 1916, and the building was completed in the spring of 1921, about 18 months after the death of the founder in New York City on September 25th, 1919.

The medal, designed by one of our leading sculptors, Paul Manship, will be presented from time to time "For distinguished contribution to the knowledge and understanding of Oriental civilizations as reflected in their arts."

Stella Kramrisch (1985)

#### **Previous Recipients**

Osvald Sirén (1956)

Ernst Kühnel (1960) Alexander Soper (1990)

Yashiro Yukio (1965) Sherman Lee (1998)

Tanaka Ichimatsu (1973) Oleg Grabar (2001)

Laurence Sickman (1973) James Cahill (2010)

Roman Ghirshman (1974) John Rosenfield (2012)

Max Loehr (1983)

# **Opening Remarks**

Julian Raby, Dame Jillian Sackler Director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art

Thank you for joining us this evening for the award of the Freer Medal for exemplary contributions to the field of Asian art and scholarship. This is only the fourteenth such medal to be awarded in sixty years, and its rarity and roster of illustrious recipients are testimony to how judiciously we try to honor—on all our behalves, we hope—colleagues who have enriched our field, our thinking, and our lives. Today's ceremony is a celebration of accomplishments and an augury for the future.

Our founder, Charles Lang Freer, believed in the transformative, even redemptive, potential of art and sought expressions of what he regarded as a universal beauty that transcends time and place. Intrigued by what he called "points of contact" between the arts of Asia and the arts of the West, Freer believed firmly that all of us have the "power to see beauty" . . . if only we open our eyes. He believed that beauty is accessible to all, regardless of knowledge, yet he saw knowledge as enriching those first, innocent experiences. So he pledged his institution to the pursuit of beauty and to learning or, as he phrased it, to the study of the peoples and cultures that produced those works of beauty.

In reopening the Freer Gallery of Art after several years of refurbishment, we are pledging ourselves to Charles Lang Freer's twin principles. One is a universal accessibility and, hopefully, wonderment. We have tried to achieve this by affirming the reductive aesthetic that was such a marked feature of the Freer Gallery when it first opened to the public in 1923. It is an aesthetic that removes the extraneous and the distracting. In its play of volume, light, simplicity, and sparseness, it is an aesthetic that attempts to enhance our visual acuity, that helps us "open our eyes" to works of transcendent beauty. The second of Freer's principles is an unwavering commitment to fostering and communicating scholarship—your findings—to a broader public. There can be no more appropriate way to instantiate this double commitment than to present the Freer Medal to a colleague who bestrides the world of museums and the world of academe.

Tonight we honor the lifelong achievements of Dame Jessica Rawson, professor of Chinese art and archaeology at the University of Oxford. Her pioneering work, her ever-rigorous sense of inquiry, her vigilant guardianship of academic standards epitomize the values the Freer Medal was designed to celebrate. Both as

curator and professor, Jessica opened our eyes to the ebb and flow of Chinese cultural influence in Asia and beyond. Firmly rooted in the scholarship of material culture, her work has shed light on the uses and significance of objects in China over the course of some ten thousand years, from the Neolithic to the twentieth century. Jessica Rawson's contributions have been immense—as a leading force in public understanding of Chinese art and archaeology, a consummate researcher, a scrupulous teacher, a dedicated mentor, and a leading figure in the broader academic direction of the University of Oxford. Let me provide you with some details.

Following her undergraduate degree in history at the University of Cambridge, where her studies focused on Europe, Jessica Rawson launched her professional career in the late 1960s at the British Museum. As a young curator in the Oriental Antiquities Department, she was given the responsibility of managing the early Chinese material in the collection. Those were the years when the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) made China inaccessible, so Jessica dedicated herself to the collections in the British Museum, re-organizing the storage and creating the first systematic departmental records of the collections. In the evenings she worked toward her degree in Chinese language and literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies. <sup>1</sup>

Although the amount of objects available for study could not match what is available to the field today, Jessica remembers those early days of her career with great fondness, as she was granted freedom to rearrange the collections at the British Museum, and she could at a steady pace, and in constant contact with objects, learn about China and its culture.<sup>2</sup> It is remarkable how Jessica, even in these early days, opened up her material to broader avenues of inquiry: she never treated, and never treats, a subject or an object in isolation, but always searches for a bigger picture of interrelations and connections.

It is this ability to combine a minute and sensitive examination of the object with a panoptic sense of context that led Robert E. Harrist, the Jane and Leopold Swergold Professor of Chinese Art History at Columbia University, to describe the approach as "Rawsonian."<sup>3</sup>

What, then, are the Rawsonian elements that make Jessica's scholarship outstanding? In Robert Harrist's words, they are "her acute sensitivity to the sensuous material presence of objects—their colors, shapes and textures, their appeal to the sense of touch, and the sensations of weight and mass they convey" with "the capacity to envision relationships among objects and to imagine them in use during the periods when they were made," as well as "where and how objects and images were presented to the viewers." 5

In short, Jessica's approach is all-embracing. An early example of this is the 1977 exhibition *Animals in Art*, which showcased works from a wide geographic

scope, ranging from Japan to Africa and to the world of classical Greece. Andrew Burnett, former deputy director of the British Museum, recalls his first meeting with Jessica "when she organized a tea party to bring young(er) curators together when she was planning the *Animals in Art* exhibition." He says, "It was typical of the way that she thought big, across the whole collection of the museum."

Jessica utilized the experience gained from this exhibition in her early landmark project *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon* (1984–85). Her work is hailed as "one of the foundational texts for the study of Chinese visual culture and a basic guide to understanding how design concepts originating in China fused with or were transformed by ornamental systems from elsewhere," in this case, through the arrival in China of Buddhism from Central Asia. Again, the project ranged widely and led from the Mediterranean to China, with Jessica drawing on collections from across this "universal" museum. In those years, many still believed that early Chinese civilization was isolated, with limited contact with other cultures. Jessica led the way in demonstrating the connections between China and other cultures, and she continues to do so today in her current research project on "China and Inner Asia, 1000–200 BC: Interactions that Changed China," a major undertaking made possible by a five-year grant from the Leverhulme Trust.

The influence of Jessica's scholarship is well described by Jan Stuart, the Freer| Sackler's Melvin R. Seiden Curator of Chinese Art: "Jessica Rawson's prodigious learning and creative way of thinking have touched just about everybody in the fields of Chinese art and archaeology. I don't know anyone who has not been influenced by her path-breaking writings, including early work such as *Chinese Ornament: The Lotus and the Dragon*, which helped shape my thinking at the beginning of my career."<sup>8</sup>

In the 1990s, Jessica continued her prolific career by assuming a prestigious and influential academic appointment at Oxford, yet she continued her contributions to the museum field with a daunting array of projects. One of these was a monumental publication related to objects many of which are in the Smithsonian. In 1990 she published Western Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections, the second volume of a three-volume work authored by leading specialists in the field of Chinese antiquities, including Robert Bagley and Jenny So. With this publication, Jessica not only enriched our knowledge of the Sackler collection of Chinese bronzes but also transformed our understanding of the history of the Western Zhou period. This was more than a catalogue of objects; it was the first comprehensive study of the material culture of the Western Zhou. This was a topic long neglected by Western art historians, and it came at a time when the study of Chinese bronzes was dominated by the study of Shang ritual vessels. Jessica was the first "to attempt to characterize and

appreciate Western Zhou bronzes in their own right," and she "show[ed us] the Western Zhou period to have been one of pivotal, even revolutionary importance in the history of the craft." 10

Jessica approached her subject matter comprehensively, looking at the Shang legacy and the emergence of a distinct Western Zhou idiom as well as regional variations in early Western Zhou styles. Truly innovative was her theory about a change in ritual practice that led to changing demands for vessels and stylistic shifts in the latter Western Zhou. Jessica based her theory on archaeological evidence coming out of China, bringing the most recent discoveries and scholarship into the English-speaking world. Her current work on the material culture of the Western Zhou will doubtless further illuminate the field.

Another major project Jessica undertook in the 1980s and 1990s as the Keeper of the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum was the complete refurbishment and redisplay of the collections from China, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia. Named after Sir Joseph E. Hotung, the gallery was opened by the Queen in 1992. Just as Jessica has returned to the Western Zhou in her current research, so she has returned to the Joseph Hotung Gallery, working on its current redisplay, which will reopen next week on November 8.

In 1994 Jessica was appointed Warden of Merton College, Oxford. This was a landmark appointment as it was the first time in Merton's history since its founding in 1264 that this position had been held by a woman. Academia provided her the opportunity "to move into new research areas and teach students about the importance of studying objects—of the physical remains of tombs, of rituals, of palaces—as ways to understand China." Unsurprisingly, given how much her exhibitions and publications had done to transform the field, her teaching has had deep impact on her students. "Studying with Jessica was a life-changing experience for me. I learned from her how far one could go with genuine passion and curiosity for knowledge. . . . She allowed me to explore my potential as well as the many possibilities offered at Oxford," says Hsueh-man Shen, professor at New York University.

Another former student, Jianjun Mei, director of the Institute of Historical Metallurgy and Materials, University of Science and Technology in Beijing, describes Jessica's impact on his work. "What Jessica has taught me over the years goes far beyond her insights into Chinese archaeology and art history, especially her longstanding interest in the early cultural interactions between China and the Eurasian steppe. As a university teacher with dozens of students now, I realize that her kindness, patience and generosity towards young students served as a model for me. To have had Jessica as my teacher was a big stroke of luck." 13

Jessica's appointment in Oxford did not mark a break between a career as curator and a career as academic, for in her curatorial phase she published,

if one can say it, like an academic, and in academe she continued to curate exhibitions in London and elsewhere.

In 1995, in the British Museum exhibition *Chinese Jade from the Neolithic to the Qing* and its accompanying catalogue, Jessica demonstrated a masterful understanding of Chinese jades to complement her expertise on Chinese bronzes and ornament. *Treasures of Ancient China: Bronze and Jades from Shanghai* combined these two areas of expertise, but the breadth of her scholarship was evident in the remarkable *China: Three Emperors, 1662–1795.* Jessica also made major contributions to exhibitions of the Qin dynasty Terracotta Warriors, held at the British Museum in 2006 and 2007 and at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities at Stockholm in 2010.

Jessica's career has been marked by honors and recognition from her peers and government. I will name only a few here among the many honorifics and degrees awarded to her internationally. In 1990 she was appointed a Fellow of the British Academy; in 2002 she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her services to Oriental studies; and in 2012 she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences as a Foreign Honorary Member.

Over the course of a career spanning a half century, Jessica, in her many roles as a curator, scholar, and teacher, has not only experienced the transformation that took place in the West's relations with China and its culture, but she also helped shape Western understanding of China's extraordinary cultural achievements. As access to China and its archaeology began to improve in the 1980s, Jessica formed strong relations with colleagues in China and expanded her scholarship with the latest evidence emerging from Chinese excavations. At every stage of her career Jessica has revisited her previous work and drawn fresh conclusions from the growing information. She combines analysis with synthesis to create an alchemy of insight.

Jessica has shown us all that it is possible to combine scrupulous scholarly standards with sensitivity to objects, unceasing inquiry, broad vision, and commitment to public understanding. Let us all celebrate this, and for us at the Freer|Sackler, let it be a model for our endeavors, a propitious augury for the future of our museums. Jessica, thank you.

- <sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Knight, "Reflections in Scholarship: An Interview with Professor Dame Jessica Rawson," *Orientations* 44, no. 1 (2013), p. 38.
- 2 Ibid
- <sup>3</sup> Robert E. Harrist, Jr., "Reading Jessica Rawson," *Orientations* 44, no. 1 (2013), p. 34.
- 4 Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Knight, "Reflections," p. 38.
- <sup>7</sup> Harrist, "Reading," p. 35.
- 8 Knight, "Reflections," p. 39.
- <sup>9</sup> Lothar Von Falkenhausen, "Issues in Western Zhou Studies: A Review Article," *Early China* 18 (1993), pp. 139–226.
- <sup>10</sup> Colin MacKenzie, book review, "Western Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections. Volume 2 of Ancient Chinese Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections. Vol. 2A: Introduction; Vol. 2B: Catalogue by Jessica Rawson," *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991), pp. 153–54.
- <sup>11</sup> Knight, "Reflections," p. 41.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 42.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

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Front and back interior, details: *The Palaces and Gate Towers of Penglai* by Zhu Dan; China, Qing dynasty, 1683; hanging scroll; ink, color, and gold on silk; Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1909.397. Center back: Ritual wine container (*fang hu*); China, Western Zhou dynasty, 11th century BCE; bronze; Gift of Arthur M. Sackler, S1987.13. Right back: Dame Jessica Rawson, 2014. Photo by John Cairns.

