

Orvar Karlbeck

1879–1967

Engineer, Dealer, and Collector of Chinese Art



Orvar Karlbeck trained as an engineer at the Royal College of Engineering in his native Stockholm, Sweden, and graduated in 1904. He first journeyed to China in 1906 as an engineer for a concrete manufacturing company. Two years later he joined the Tientsin-Pukow Railway Company, which was responsible for building the line between Beijing and Shanghai. Karlbeck's initial encounter with

ancient Chinese artifacts occurred when tombs were uncovered during excavations for the railway. He built his first collection from these accidental finds and from purchases he made from Chinese dealers. Karlbeck remained with the Tientsin-Pukow Railway Company until 1927, when political instability in China forced him to return to Sweden.

A few months later, in September 1928, Karlbeck was back in China serving as a collector for the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm. That successful expedition was financed by the museum's China Committee, which was chaired by Crown Prince Gustav Adolf of Sweden (1882–1973) and was under the directorship of Johan Gunnar Andersson (1874–1960). He led three more collecting expeditions between 1930 and 1934 on behalf of the Karlbeck Syndicate, an international consortium of seventeen museums and collectors that included George Eumorfopoulos, Oscar Raphael, Charles and Brenda Seligman, Louis Clarke, the Berlin State Museum, the Museum for Asiatic Art in Amsterdam, the British Museum in London, and the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm.

Karlbeck wrote two accounts of his activities in China: *Tsin Pu Tie Lu* (1938) and *Treasure Seeker in China* (1957). In these accounts and in the archives of the Karlbeck Syndicate it is clear that Karlbeck was aware of the attempts by the Chinese Nationalist government in Nanjing to stop the trafficking of artifacts suspected of being looted from ancient tombs. Karlbeck himself may have been acquiring illegally excavated objects. The international market for antiquities, which was fed by a network of Chinese dealers, and the instability surrounding the civil war in China contributed to a collecting free-for-all that lasted until the outbreak of World War II.

Literature

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