

## **WILLIAM H. WOLFF (1906–1991)**

### **Dealer of Asian Art**

William Hirschler Wolff (1906–1991) was an influential New York dealer of Asian antiquities for over thirty years, active from at least 1959 until his retirement in 1990. Doing business as William H. Wolff, Inc., from various gallery locations on Madison Avenue in New York City and known to many as “Willie” (or “Willy”), Wolff carried a range of “Far Eastern antiquities.” He gained a market reputation for high-quality stone and metal sculptures primarily from South Asia and Southeast Asia and for bronzes and ceramics from China, which he sold to nearly all major museums and private collectors across the United States.

In a 1984 listing of New York City’s major art dealers in *Connoisseur* magazine, The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s former director Thomas Hoving (1931–2009; director at The Met, 1967–1977) included only two dealers of “Oriental” art: William H. Wolff and Robert H. Ellsworth (1929–2014). Here, Hoving describes Wolff as “an enthusiastic and witty dealer, a man of supreme self-confidence, who has that rare ability to assess quality in both delicate and monumental pieces.”

Albeit highly subjective, these two opinions of Wolff—from a potential client and a business rival—offer a sense of the highly competitive marketplace in which Wolff did thriving business for nearly thirty years. He entered the Asian antiquities business in the late 1950s, which was a time when interest in Asian art was gradually but steadily growing in the United States. Wolff’s roster of clients included private collectors such as Avery Brundage (1887–1975), Samuel Eilenberg (1913–1998), John D. Rockefeller III (1906–1978), Arthur M. Sackler (1913–1987), and Norton Simon (1907–1993) as well as art museums including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and Musée guimet. While information about Wolff’s clients in Europe and the United States is increasingly available today as institutions begin to share acquisition histories of their collections online, it is far more difficult to know the sources from whom Wolff was buying his inventory. Research has shown that Wolff sometimes purchased objects deaccessioned by leading American museums directly from such institutions, and he also sold on consignment objects owned by private collectors. But, as he shared in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1990, his buying (like that of his contemporaries) was largely done in Asia, through biannual buying trips to India, Tibet, Nepal, Pakistan, Burma

(Myanmar), Thailand, Japan, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Wolff built networks of local dealers and middlemen who secured artworks from archaeological sites, other regional sellers, and private collectors. In a 2012 interview, Douglas Latchford (d. 2020), himself a notorious Bangkok-based art dealer, mentions that Wolff went shopping for Thai and Cambodian antiquities in Bangkok (including at the Nakhon Kasem, Bangkok's Thieves Market, during the 1950s–1960s) and that he also bought artworks in cities like Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Archival research also shows that Wolff knew dealers in Calcutta and, presumably, he had contacts in other cities in India as well.

As one may expect, Wolff did not publicly disclose the identities of his sources or details about the logistics of how artworks were brought into the United States. He did, however, admit in the 1990 *LA Times* interview that he was well aware antiquities export was illegal in many of the countries from where he acquired art and he had his own “network of scouts” in several of those places. While the authenticity of artworks handled by Wolff does not appear to have been questioned by his clients, investigations in recent years have revealed that Wolff had dealt with stolen, illegally excavated, and illegally exported antiquities on at least two known occasions. In 1976, Wolff sold a Cambodian stone sculpture of Bhima to the California private collector Norton Simon (1907–1993), which had been stolen from the Prasat Chen temple at Koh Ker. It was missing its hands and feet, the latter remaining *in situ* at the site, and in 2014, the Norton Simon Museum returned this sculpture to Cambodia. In a separate case, Wolff sold a Chola-period South Indian bronze sculpture of the Hindu saint Sambandar to the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in Canberra in 1989, a replacement image of which was documented in the French Institute of Pondicherry in 1958; the NGA returned this sculpture to India in 2021.

These incidents reflect the complicated—and problematic—market dynamics involved in collecting Asian art in the Western world, where the large amounts of money involved and the desire to possess beautiful, rare, and valuable objects raise issues of unethical conduct on the parts of various individuals and middlemen (and sometimes government officials) in source countries and in Western art dealers and their institutional or private collector clients. The debatable legacy of William H. Wolff continues today to play a prominent role in the politics of collecting Asian art, even thirty years after his death.

## **Biography**

William H. Wolff was born in Brussels, Belgium, on April 15, 1906. He studied in Mannheim, Germany, and lived there as a German national until he emigrated to the United States, arriving in New York on April 2, 1936, as a “Hebrew” from Nazi Germany. He was thirty years old. By August 1936, Wolff had moved to Chicago, and 1940 census records show he was not married at the time; his widowed mother, Renée, lived with him, and he worked as a manager in a bedding factory. He remained in Chicago until at least 1943, when he became a US citizen.

At some point after 1943, Wolff returned to Queens, New York, from Chicago and started a business dealing in animal byproducts, including animal skins and feathers, which took him to Asia on buying trips. On his travels, Wolff started to pick up artworks that attracted him; these caught the interest of his friends back home in New York, who began to ask him to buy for them as well. Such personal and casual purchasing of artworks from Asia became a serious pursuit for Wolff and, by 1959, he had established himself as an art dealer and set up a self-named gallery, William H. Wolff, Inc., on Madison Avenue.

Wolff remained in business as an art dealer in New York for thirty years, from about 1959 until his retirement in 1990. His inventory of artworks was sold at auction by Sotheby’s New York in nineteen sales between 1991 and 1995. Wolff died of a heart attack in his New York apartment on December 16, 1991. He was eighty-five. His wife, Susanne Koschinsky, had died in 1972, and he was survived by a stepson, Klaus Winter of New York City, and a sister, Marianne Weil of San Francisco.

## Literature

### Archival sources:

Samuel Eilenberg Papers, Columbia University, New York. Accessed November 2022–February 2023.

Sherman Lee Papers, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH. Accessed June 2023.

Avery Brundage Papers, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Accessed May 2023.

Published articles (a selection):

Hoving, Thomas. "The Other Art Capital: New York's Galleries Offer a Quality and Range and Depth Matched Only in London." *Connoisseur*, May 1984.

Dallos, Robert E. "Top New York Dealer of Asian Arts Closes Doors: For Decades a Source for Museums and Collectors, William Wolff Is Calling it Quits After a Huge Rent Increase." *Los Angeles Times*. December 25, 1990. Proquest Historical Newspapers, accessed October 5, 2022.

Felch, Jason. "A Blast from the Past: 'Norton Simon Bought Smuggled Idol'." *Chasing Aphrodite* (blog). April 10, 2012. <https://chasingaphrodite.com/2012/04/10/a-blast-from-the-past-norton-simon-bought-smuggled-idol/>.

Erker, Ezra Kyrill. "[After the Horrors, Cambodia Looks to Reclaim Its Heritage](#)." *Bangkok Post*. October 14, 2012.. Accessed October 3, 2022.

Mashberg, Tom, and Ralph Blumenthal. "[Christie's to Return Cambodian Statue](#)." *New York Times*. May 7, 2014.

Kumar, S. Vijay. "A Piece Of India's Heritage Is Now Stuck In Australia." *Swarajya*. February 26, 2016. Accessed July 15, 2023.

"[Australia Set To Return 14 Works Of Art Including Chola-Era Sambandar Murthi To India](#)." *Swarajya*. July 29, 2021.

Updated June 2024.