

AMA

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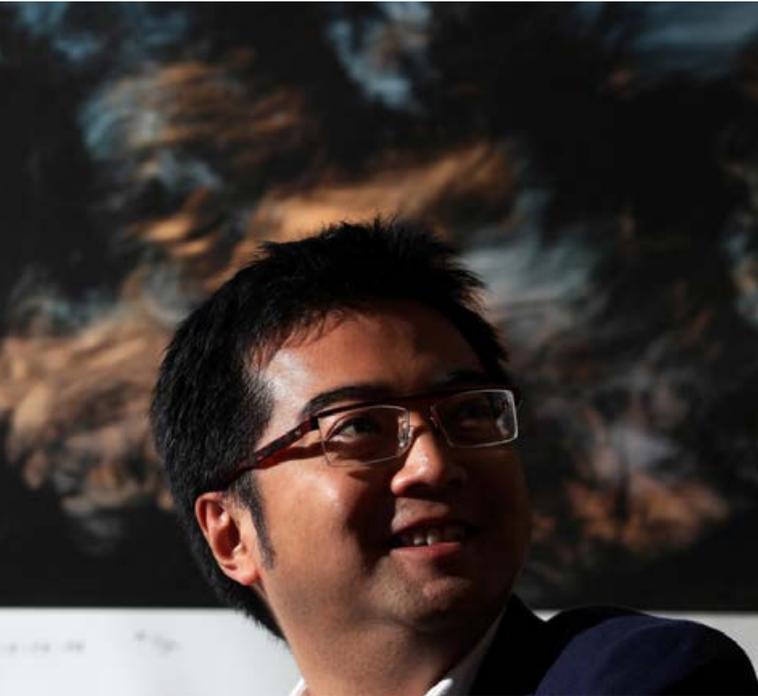


NEWSLETTER

320

3 October 2019

FINE ART ASIA
2019



Andy Hei. ARR

Robert H. Ellingsworth. Known for his expertise in paintings and furniture from the Ming Dynasty, Ellingsworth was extraordinarily well connected in the American art world. He was known for selling scores of important works to such institutions as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. And his professional clients even included the likes of John D. Rockefeller III and the famous author and philanthropist Roberta Brooke Astor.

Yet, it was not Ellingsworth's knowledge of Ming objects that Andy Hei was interested in – it was his knowledge of the international art fair ecosystem. He had been watching from Hong Kong for years as prestigious new fairs popped up in Switzerland, London, the United States, and elsewhere. Everywhere, it seemed, enterprising dealers were re-shaping the way art and antiques could be traded. During Hei's first year working for Ellingsworth, he had the chance to work with him in his booth at an international art fair. There, he was able to see how the event came together firsthand. He continued assisting Ellingsworth at numerous other fairs over the next ten years and was gradually able to learn everything he needed to know in order to convince his father that he was the pioneer who could transform the Hong Kong art world.

In 1999, Hei moved back to Hong Kong. Putting his knowledge and experience to work, he established his own firm, called Andy Hei Ltd., which was located on Hollywood Road. Always known in the past as a destination for people who wanted to scour the old antiques shop, today

Hollywood Road is regarded as an upscale destination where high-end wares can be found. Andy Hei Ltd. was part of that transformation.

Amazingly, the same year that Andy Hei founded his own dealership, he found himself participating in that same art and antiques fair that he had assisted Ellingsworth with 10 years earlier: this time with a dealership of his own.

Of course, the Western art market was very robust at that time, so Andy was able to make a great number of connections both with buyers, museum patrons, and other dealers. It still took him several years of laying the groundwork, but finally, in 2006, Andy Hei was able to leverage all of those connections in order to establish AAIF and organise the first edition of what would eventually become Fine Art Asia.

When it opened, the first edition of Fine Art Asia was the first major international art and antiques fair of any kind to be held in Hong Kong for more than a decade. It was nothing like its predecessors. The modern atmosphere of the fair, along with the excellent quality of the work on sale, immediately set a new standard for Asian art fairs.

Starting from just dozens of booths and a few thousand visitors that first year, by 2017 Fine Art Asia had grown to attract more than 23,000 visitors, who were treated to booths displaying more than 8,000 objects worth a combined total of more than HK\$3.5b (\$448 million US).

Yet, it is not only the financial success of Fine Art Asia and Ink Asia that make Andy Hei and the rest of the AAIF team proud. They are perhaps most grateful for today's symbiotic art and antique ecosystem that Hong Kong enjoys, and which they helped create. Thanks to AAIF's pioneering efforts, Hong Kong has transformed into one of the premier places in the world to view all types of art and antiques.

In fact, in addition to Fine Art Asia and Ink Asia, many other fairs have begun to thrive. The Hong Kong International Photo Festival will celebrate its tenth anniversary in 2020. The Affordable Art Fair Hong Kong will return for its eighth edition in May of 2020. The Asia Contemporary Art Show, a twice annual fair, will hold its 15th edition in autumn 2019. Meanwhile, Art Central Hong Kong 2019, which offers a full week of curated exhibitions, installations, panel discussions, experimental film and performance, will return for its sixth edition in 2020. This is without even mentioning the region's most famous fair – Art Basel Hong Kong – which has grown immensely since its inaugural edition in 2008.

Another measure of the legacy that Andy Hei and AAIF have created is the number of international auction houses that have started to plan their fall auctions to coincide with Fine Art Asia and Ink Asia. This October, during the same week as the AAIF fairs, Sotheby's, Christie's and China Guardian Hong Kong will each hold auctions in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. Sotheby's will hold 12 auctions, offering bidders the chance to score everything from Chinese art and antiques to international modern and contemporary art, and even fine jewelry, furniture and wine. Sotheby's will also be holding several selling exhibitions in the convention center the same week.

Perhaps back when he first started this journey towards the unknown, Andy Hei could not have imagined a time when Hong Kong would be the centre of the international art world. Yet, over the years he has been on the front line of that transformation. He has seen trends change from Chinese dealers and collectors getting rid of Chinese art and antiques, to seeing them buy them back again. Today, as the Hong Kong market continues to evolve and as markets open and close across the globe, AAIF is firmly at the top of what has become a crowded and dynamic field. What the future will bring is unclear. But one thing is certain: Andy Hei and AAIF will be on the vanguard of whatever is next for Hong Kong.

Phillip Barcio