

Five Notable Figures in the Early Period of Chinese Painting Studies
(Paper by James Cahill for Jason Kuo's CAA 1991 session "Four
Decades of Research on Chinese Painting in the West")

(SLIDE: 1946 conference at Princeton on "Far Eastern Culture and Society": group photograph.) Reconsidering the achievements of major pioneers in Chinese painting studies in the West confirms what we would in any case assume, and what we all know from experience: that a richly pluralistic art history, made up of diverse contributions from people with different backgrounds and strengths, is in the end more productive for the field than any unanimity of approach we might imagine as an ideal. In this belief I want to consider five of these pioneers, all people who were in some sense my teachers, trying to assess their particular contributions. Not included in my brief consideration are others who might be of comparable importance but with whom I did not study directly: Ludwig Bachhofer, George Rowley, Alexander Soper, others. Nor do I include, since he is not properly an academic teacher, Wang Chi-ch'ien, although he was a strong and beneficial influence on me at formative stages in my career. The five I will speak about are Archibald Wenley, Osvald Siren, Laurence Sickman, Shujiro Shimada, and Max Loehr. Of these five, only Shimada is still alive and active.

(SLIDE.) Archibald Wenley, director of the Freer Gallery for many years, will seem to some an unexpected choice to head my list. His publication record in the field of Chinese painting is slim, and he is seldom cited today, except in reference to particular paintings. His strengths were in integrity--nothing he did was facile--and in a deep sense of public service, which he imparted to the Freer and its curators.

Wenley, born in Ann Arbor in 1898, studied at the University of Michigan and then at the New York Public Library. When he was introduced to the Freer's first director John Ellerton Lodge, he was looking for a job as a librarian. Lodge reportedly asked him whether he was interested in Chinese art, to which Wenley answered that he

couldn't know if he was interested since he knew nothing at all about the subject. That, Lodge replied, was the best qualification he could have, and took him on immediately as a trainee for curatorship at the Freer. Lodge's action can be understood when we realize that it was still a time when most sinologue scholars believed that any area of Chinese studies was potentially accessible to them through their mastery of the language and research materials; they were inclined to mistrust, even to scorn, disciplinary approaches. (This polarization of the field was reflected in the well-known 1947 article "Sinology or Art History? Notes on Method in the Study of Chinese Art" by the Freer's third director John Pope.) Wenley was accordingly sent to China for two years of language and other sinological studies, 1923-25; this was followed by three years in Paris, where he worked with Paul Pelliot, and two years in Kyoto. When Wenley joined the Freer staff in 1931 he was, in the words of John Pope's posthumous tribute, "the first museum man thus solidly trained in the languages, literature, and history of China and Japan to embark on a career in Far Eastern art."

(SLIDE.) Wenley was appointed director of the Freer in 1943, and worked to make it more effective as a "center for research in Oriental art," as Freer's will had specified. He built up a great library, started the series of publications called Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers, and was co-author of the 1946 catalog of the Freer's Chinese bronzes. Apart from this and a few published articles, Wenley's work is preserved in numerous folder-sheets in the Freer files, careful studies of objects, heavy on documentation, virtually unconcerned with style, although he had a good eye for quality. He was, as John Pope put it, "a man of strict conservatism and absolute integrity." He gave the Freer a feeling of stability; he and the curatorial staff (including, from 1958, myself) all ate lunch together every day, then made a tour of the galleries together, during which Arch Wenley would tell the same jokes, at which we would all laugh. As these comments will suggest, I did not appreciate him then so much as I do now.

Wenley believed strongly that the Freer, as a public institution and part of the Smithsonian with its motto "For the Increase and Diffusion of Knowledge Among Men," had a deep responsibility to serve both the scholarly community and the general public. He would spend hours of research in answering letters from people who wanted information on objects they owned, or translations of inscriptions on them. The Freer's storage room was more accessible to visiting scholars, or even interested laymen, than any other museum storage I have known. Most importantly, copies of whatever materials the Freer might possess or acquire--photographs, slides, printed materials--were unhesitatingly made available at cost to everyone who could use them, and information freely shared. This was at a time when the common practice among scholars, whether Western or Asian, was a possessive hoarding of research materials. The belief in scholarly openness was Wenley's own, perhaps derived from his library training--his predecessor John Ellerton Lodge had come from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where a different view on accessibility has traditionally obtained. Some of the openness and cooperative spirit, even a sense of community, within our field we owe to Wenley's model, and the Freer's; it has advanced our studies just as the older practice of exclusivity and possessiveness has retarded them, and still does wherever it survives. We live in a world, or at least a country, in which the idea of altruism grows ever weaker, that of "enlightened self-interest" ever stronger. When we hear of someone working on an artist or a problem for which we have in our keeping materials not generally available, let us remember Archibald Wenley.

(SLIDE.) Osvald Siren is more difficult to characterize in purely positive terms; he lacked Wenley's generosity, and did not willingly further the research or careers of others. He aimed at being the Berenson of Chinese painting, without ever quite developing a comparable connoisseur's eye. But Siren was a tireless gatherer, organizer, and publisher of information, translations, photographs, building for our studies a store of available material on which we all have drawn.

Siren was born in Finland in 1879, and became Curator at the National Museum in Stockholm in 1901, and also Professor of the History of Fine Arts at Stockholm University from 1908--the first art history professor in Sweden. His original specialty was Italian painting, but trips to the United States in 1916-17 exposed him to Far Eastern art in collections here, and he began working in this new region of art history, perhaps the first true art historian in the West to do so. His mentor Berenson encouraged him in this direction. (Berenson himself was in this period an enthusiast for Chinese art and a small-scale collector of it; later he was to dismiss it, with most of the rest of non-European art, as insufficient in tactile values, ideated sensations, and life-enhancing content.) Years of travels in Japan and China filled out Siren's knowledge and allowed him to amass a huge store of photographs, books, and information, and also to build collections of Chinese sculpture and paintings, both for his museum and for himself. His publications on Chinese sculpture, Chinese gardens, Chinese architecture, early Chinese art, etc. are well known and still highly regarded, but we are concerned here only with Siren as a pioneer Chinese painting specialist.

(SLIDE: Siren in his garden in China.) For painting, his publications were monumental without being penetrating or ultimately enlightening. He had a distressing way of saying more or less the same things about most of the paintings and artists he wanted to praise: I have always suspected that his Theosophist religious belief underlay his apparent conviction that anything, if raised to a high enough spiritual plane, meant the same as everything else. He seems never to have mastered Chinese in more than a rudimentary way. Working with him in Stockholm on his seven-volume Chinese Painting in the spring of 1956 and trying to explain to him why a certain translation needed revision, I felt the frustration of someone trying to explain a chess problem to another who does not play chess. The translations in his books, done by everyone from the great sinologues of Europe to his Chinese houseboy, varied widely in quality and reliability, and the texts he

cited tended to be the standard ones, used more or less uncritically. I recall visiting Jan Fontein in Amsterdam after my three-month stay in Stockholm and talking with him about the feelings of us younger scholars in the field toward Siren: he was, I suggested, like someone who goes through the blackberry patch picking all the berries that are easy to get at, leaving it for others who come later to scratch their hands going after the ones that are harder to reach.

(SLIDE: Siren and Shimada at the Kurokawa Institute in Ashiya, 1954.) Siren, unlike Wenley and others I will speak of, was not a well-loved figure. One eminent Chinese art specialist in Sweden, during my stay there, told me he had made his way in the field in spite of Siren, not because of him, and that the same was generally true of others there. The tribute to Siren on the occasion of the presentation of the first Freer Medal in 1956 was brief and cool; on his 80th birthday celebration in 1960, letters attesting to his achievements came from scholars around the world, but they were not warm; and on his death in 1968, the question of who would write an encomium for him was, so far as I know, never resolved--I, for one, declined. However, I dedicated the session on Chinese painting at the Brundage symposium in San Francisco in the autumn of that year to Siren, and invited his son Erland, an architect practicing in San Francisco, to attend. On the morning of that session, Erland unexpectedly asked to speak. Those who were present, including most of the major Asian art specialists of the time, are unlikely to have forgotten that movingly bitter tribute, in which Siren was presented as someone who had become a great scholar at the cost of diminishing his personal life and the lives of his family. "It was not easy," Erland said, "to be the son of Osvald Siren." I still have a tape of that talk, which should be part of the history of our field, a cautionary footnote to records of scholarly achievement.

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about the
Kurokawa*

Nevertheless, Siren merits our respect for laying, in his extensive publications, a kind of foundation for our studies. A foundation is something that you stand on, and build on, but it is there when needed, and work like Siren's serves an important

function at one stage in the evolution of a field of study. We might wish he had done it better, but no one else was willing or able then to do it at all, on such a scale.

(SLIDE:1973 "Archaeologists" delegation to China.) Laurence Sickman, by contrast, was immensely supportive of young scholars, and as generous a man as I have known. More than any other Western specialist of his generation, he absorbed Chinese attitudes and tastes during his years in China, and made these accessible to the rest of us. He understood the special values of Ming-Ch'ing painting at a time when these were only dimly perceived by most other Occidental scholars, and, in his writings and his collecting for his museum, he played a central role in setting the direction our recent studies have taken.

(SLIDE: Sickman as young man.) Born in 1906 in Denver, Colorado, he studied from 1926 at Harvard, at that time the only university in the country offering courses in Chinese and Japanese art. They were taught by Langdon Warner--or, as it happened, at the time Sickman arrived, by Warner's sabbatical replacement Paul Pelliot. As Sickman said in his acceptance speech for the Freer Medal, "the study of Chinese art at Harvard in the late 20s had about it a distinct Japanese aura." With Warner as his mentor, and Okakura and Tomita as imposing figures across the river, he could easily have been absorbed into the Japanese- and Buddhist-oriented studies of that time, in which, as he wrote, "the art of [Chinese] painting seemed to end rather abruptly with the 14th century." Fortunately for us, he was too sinicized to be quite persuaded, as others at the time were, by this Japanese version of Chinese art. Sickman was in Peking from 1930 to 1935, on a Harvard-Yenching fellowship, and during that period, in 1933, was appointed (on the recommendation of Langdon Warner) as an advisor to the newly-opened Nelson Gallery of Art, the present Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum in Kansas City.

(SLIDE: Sickman in Beijing.) The outcome of this we all know: a collection of Chinese art unsurpassed, scarcely equalled, for all-over

level of quality, containing many of the masterworks we use constantly in writing and teaching. In a lecture given at the Nelson Gallery some years ago, with Sickman in the audience, I offered the opinion--and will repeat it now--that the collection of Chinese paintings he assembled there represents the greatest achievement in collecting in our field, at least among Western holdings. It is more surprising that, according to his own testimony, the paintings were "with a few notable exceptions assembled from Japanese and American sources." I remember once looking with him at the newly-published catalog of Chinese paintings in the Liaoning Museum, in which some of the early handscrolls taken from the palace by P'u-yi were published for the first time; on seeing the first in the catalog, ascribed to Li Ch'eng, Larry groaned and told of how he and Langdon Warner (representing the Fogg Museum) had once arranged to purchase a group of these so-called "lost paintings," including the one ascribed to Li Ch'eng, from P'u-yi for their museums. The sale was aborted when Warner, out of New-England fastidiousness, refused to pay the expected sum to the go-between, and the paintings stayed in China.

(SLIDE: Sickman as we knew him.) Tom Lawton, in his eulogy at the memorial service for Sickman, told of visiting the Nelson Gallery as a graduate student to see Chinese paintings, and finding that he was being shown them by the director himself. Others of us had the same experience, and remember with pleasure hours spent in the storage room there as Larry pulled paintings from the cabinets and we unrolled them and talked about them. Larry had learned from the Chinese a free-and-easy attitude about handling and showing Chinese paintings--the very opposite of Japanese practice, which can turn a painting viewing into a ritual nearly as taxing as their tea ceremony. I remember also, while I was working at the Freer, writing him for photographs of a Sung Hsü handscroll in the Contag collection, then stored at the Nelson Gallery, for use in a study I was doing. Instead, I received the scroll itself in the mail some days later, wrapped in brown paper, to be kept as long as I needed it. The same happened later with a Hua Yen album belonging to Harold

Acton. Perhaps that degree of generosity is unwise in today's risky world; but like Wenley's, it can be a model of scholarly openness and helpfulness.

(SLIDE) Shujiro Shimada exemplifies supremely the great Japanese tradition of sinological and Chinese art studies: meticulous attention to objects, rigorous but subtle uses of texts, awesome erudition in Chinese history and literature, avoidance of facile formulations. In particular, his recognition of lesser currents in Chinese painting along with the grand sweep--in part forced on the Japanese by the special nature of their holdings--has been an essential corrective to the Chinese and Western "great masters" approach. Shimada's acceptance of foreign students during his periods in Japan, and his years of teaching at Princeton, justify his inclusion here in a session on Chinese painting studies in the West.

When I went to study with Shimada as a Fulbright student in 1954, he was a curator at the Kyoto National Museum, but teaching at Kyoto University, a course that consisted of a careful reading of Kuo Jo-hsü's T'u-hua chien-wen-chih, with Soper's recently-published translation as a guide. Shimada was characteristically cool and distant with me at first, but after a time undertook to introduce me to the great Japanese collectors of that time, taking me, sometimes with others, to the homes of Sumitomo Kan'ichi, Takashima Kikujirô, Hashimoto Sueyoshi, the novelist Kawabata Yasunari, and others. It was an exciting year.

A self-imposed constraint on Japanese specialists of Shimada's generation was their reluctance to write about any works they had not studied first-hand; and since opportunities for foreign travel were rare then, this meant in effect that they concentrated on Chinese paintings in Japanese collections. For us foreign specialists and for the field as a whole, however, the effect of that concentration was positive, since Japanese holdings in early Chinese painting, besides being generally of high quality, supplement in important ways what has been preserved in China. Paintings in mainland

collections represent chiefly the tastes of Ming-Ch'ing collectors; what lay outside their limited range of taste had a poor chance of being preserved, and large, important areas of Chinese painting, as we all know, have been virtually wiped out there. Some of these are recoverable only through the historical accident of transmission to Japan. So the kind of Japanese scholarship that Shimada represents on the highest level, by concentrating on those areas, has been instrumental in filling in extensive, otherwise-lost terrain that surrounds the islands of "high-taste" appreciated by the Chinese. To have studied with Shimada thus provided an invaluable supplement and corrective to what we learned from Chinese writings and Chinese scholars.

Shimada taught at Princeton for a year, 1958-59, and then, after some years in Japan, returned to join the faculty there in 1965, teaching until his retirement in 1975. Ostensibly holding an appointment as a specialist in Japanese art, in practice he taught the early history of both Japanese and Chinese painting, and the relations between them, especially in the medium of ink monochrome painting. Now living in announced retirement near Kyoto, in fact he remains active in writing and, as President of the Society for International Exchange of Art-historical Studies, in overseeing a series of annual symposia, in one of which I participated last June. Watching him then, I thought about how astonishingly little this man has changed in the three-and-a-half decades I have known him, and wondered whether that might be how ancient worthies got themselves reputations as immortals. At the beginning of this year he received a richly-merited recognition when he was presented with the Asahi-shô, an award for his contribution to scholarship worldwide.

(SLIDE) Max Loehr I have written about at some length for another, happily non-posthumous occasion, and can speak of more briefly here. In his readings of paintings, heavily stylistic but going often beyond style into penetrating analyses of their representational and expressive content, he set another model for us.

While he did not believe in the kind of contextual studies we are now attempting, his work serves as a necessary foundation for those, helping to define the issues we still argue.

There are various ways to define Max Loehr's contribution to Chinese painting studies. One is to say that more than anyone else of his generation (excepting perhaps Alexander Soper) he overcame the "sinology vs. art history" problem by bringing both sinological and art-historical expertise to bear on the subject in an exemplary way. Or, one can emphasize the art-historical aspect of his work and say that he brought Chinese art history into the domain of general art history: if Larry Sickman introduced Chinese attitudes toward art to the West, Max Loehr can be said to have introduced Western (especially German) art-historical method to China, or at least to Chinese art history. A multiplicity of objects that had hitherto preserved their Asian mystique, a certain exotic incoherence, sorted themselves in Max Loehr's mind and lectures and writings into intelligible art-historical patterns. Even lowly spearheads and daggers became objects of style within coherent systems. Yuan painting separated itself from Sung painting--not as separate but equal (that had to wait for another generation) but at least as separate, not just "Sung only not as good" as it had been in writings by Loehr's predecessors, including his own teacher Bachhofer.

(SLIDE) In treating Chinese painting, Loehr was perhaps at his best in large patterns and in finely-nuanced details; his 1970 article on "Phases and Content" was full of the former, and his book The Great Painters of China full of both. He was less strong in the intermediate zones of schools, movements, correlations with social and economic history, where much of the most interesting work is going on now. Max Loehr had no patience with these--he saw art as preeminently the product of individual talent or genius, at its best when untouched by considerations of the real world. Here even his students have had to respectfully disengage themselves from his position, while continuing to use the stylistic and interpretative formulations he gave us.

And this, of course, is as it should be: it would be a mistake to take Loehr or the others as models to be imitated, rather than transcended, and to remain enmeshed in the style-and-documentation approach or any other. As Fan K'uan began his move toward mastery of landscape painting by learning from Li Ch'eng but then, making a memorable pronouncement, went on to learn from nature and from his mind (as Li Ch'eng had done before him), so we can acknowledge the contributions of these and other pioneers in our field, absorb what they have taught us as a foundation for our own work, go back to the paintings and the texts to see what they are saying to us now, and proceed to build on that foundation, expanding and enriching the study of Chinese painting, contributing to its diversity according to our own individual bents and abilities.

Expanded "Five Notables" for SAA, May 6, 1991

A. Identify on slide: Wenley & Warner; Siren; Rowley; Bachhofer; Rowland & Plumer; Pope & Sickman; Salmony; Wilma Fairbank; (Ch'en Meng-chia); Alan Priest. (Lots of other notables, but not art specialists.)

Soper not there (why?). Soper's "Early Ch. LS Ptg" 1941 (Art Bulletin). "Life-motion and the Sense of Space in Early Chinese Representational Art" 1948 (after 1946 conference).

Bachhofer's Short History of Ch. Art 1944.

Pope's "Sinology or Art History? Notes on Method in the Study of Chinese Art," 1947 (HJAS).

Schools & Issues:

Langdon Warner, Benjamin Rowland, James Plumer: Harvard; Coomaraswamy, also strongly inf. by Japanese (Okakura, Tomita). Okakura (Ideals of the East, 19): "Asia is One." Coomaraswamy also. Lee opens book with it; etc. Idea that "Asia" is an entity, set off from west by its spirituality, in contrast to Western materialism. Fostered by Asians themselves--Tagore, Chinese, Japanese inf. by them--as response to colonialist intrusions of west, industrial revolution, etc. Historically understandable; scarcely taken seriously today.

Pope & Sickman. Studied at Harvard, w. Warner and others; but spent time in China. Knew John & Wilma Fairbank, Arthur Wright, etc.: historians. Sinological approach.

Alan Priest: maverick, hsieh-p'ai or "heterodox school"--heterodox in more ways than one can count. Studied at Harvard, spent time in China & Japan; came back, became curator at Met. Wrote pretty good book on Ch. sculpture, around pieces he'd bought for Met; but in later years slipped into dilettantish, over-precious approach, went on for years w/o doing serious scholarship. Aschwin Lippe working under him for years: I learned from both.

Bachhofer, Salmony, later Loehr: German art-historians, attempting to apply German art-historical method, better developed than any other school or kind of art history, to study of Chinese art. Scorned by sinologists, incl. Pope, Wenley, Maenchen-Helfen (German, but politically anti-German, Marxist, unlike others.) Sinologically

trained, felt his closest ties with sinologues on campus. I took his courses 1948-49; solid, not inspiring.

Rowley really an art-historian, trained in Italian art studies, couldn't read Chinese, had his limitations; but highly intelligent, willing to take on large problems. 1947: Principles of Chinese Painting. Marred by his lack of first-hand familiarity with Chinese texts, and by a-historical approach; but valuable in its time. He produced at least two major pupils: Alexander Soper, Wen Fong. Also, his controversy w. Soper crucial to dev. of field (hope that mine with Dick Barnhart will be seen as similarly stimulating and fruitful, whatever posterity may decide about who was right.)

Siren I will speak of later. Somewhat outside these issues; as if occupying some higher plane.

Now, very briefly, so you will understand my relat. to these people, a quick outline of my own movements in this period. In 1946-48, was in army, in occupation in Japan & Korea. Returned in 1948 to UCB, graduated 1950 in Oriental Languages; took courses in Ch. & other Asian art with Maenchen-Helfen. 1950-51 at Freer, learning from Wenley and Pope; in 51-53 at U. of Michigan, learning from Loehr and Plumer (and meeting others); 1953-4 at Met, on fellowship, learning from Priest, Lippe, C.C.Wang; 1954-56 in Japan, learning chiefly with Shimada (Siren came for visit, also Chang Ta-ch'ien); then for several months in winter-spring of 1956 in Europe, mostly in Stockholm working with Siren; 1956-65 back at Freer, with Wenley & Pope etc. Wenley died 1962. 1965 on: here.

B. Sickman & Dubosc vs. Priest.

1949: Wildenstein exhib. of Ming-Ch'ing paintings.

1950: Dubosc's article "A New Approach to Ch. Ptg." pub. in Oriental Art. Direct attack on Priest, and on his support of purchase of Bahr collection: mostly fakes, names of early artists attached. Priest pushed through sale anyway (1954?) Huge sum for time...

Sherman Lee.

B. 1918; 1948-52: Arts & Monuments division of GHQ, Japan. Chance to see lots of great Japanese and Chinese art. 1948-52: Seattle, Assoc. Dir. of Seattle ART Museum, teaching at U.Wash; 1952-58

Curator at Cleveland Museum of Art, 1958-1983; Director. 1983 on:
Adjunct Prof. of Art, U. of N. Carolina in Chapel Hill.

1964: History of Far Eastern Art (now in 4th ed., still best we have.)
Impressive for breadth of his knowledge and "eye" for Asian art;
hard to match. Made mistakes, but because he went out on limbs,
bought things others afraid of. Had experience with both Japanese
and French of believing and acquiring objects that native scholars
didn't accept, paid no attention to; later accused of "smuggling out"
ptgs that should have stayed in country. even a warrant for his
arrest, issued by French govt. in 1984, for his purchase of Poussin
ptg; had been doubted by experts, including Anthony Blunt; Louvre
passed up opportunities to acquire it; but once it had entered
Cleveland Museum and was recognized as genuine, big outcry. Can't
go back to Paris; says he doesn't want to anyway.

C. More on Shimada.

Shimada always an outsider in Japanese scholarly circles; belonged
to great tradition of sinological studies in Kyoto, but didn't get
position at Jimbun Kagaku Kenkyujo that would have been proper for
him (same with Kohara later); never cooperated much with others.
Wrote slowly, didn't meet deadlines. Upon return from Princeton,
expected to get job at Kobe U.; but thru academic politics, failed to.
Jobless in Japan, in bad way (wife died suddenly); Wen Fong rescued
him with offer from Princeton. Long, important career there. Then
back to Japan; finally being accepted by Japanese scholarship; has
been head of Society for Exchange of Art-historical Studies. Has
finally published work postponed for years (Sung-chai mei-p'u);
others underway; one hopes he will finish them.

C.C.Wang. Studied w. him, informally, from 1953; together in 1959
looking thru Palace Mus. collection, also 1962-63 in Taichung &
Taipei, during great photographing project. Still living in N.Y.,
travels a lot, gets better and better as painter. Represents great
tradition of Ch. connoisseurship; people who have spent time looking
at ptgs with him have learned a lot from him. (Story of Hsieh Shih-
ch'en ptg.)

Chang Ta-ch'ien. (Exhib. planned at Sackler Gal. in D.C. for ; also book
on him by Carl Nagin, in press? and film by him and Carma Hinton.
Worth watching for.