

ASIAN ART JAPAN

Below: Malcolm Fairley has specialised in Japanese works of art for 30 years. Starting as a sales clerk at Sotheby's in 1971, working first alongside Christopher Payne in the furniture department and later as a trainee in the 'oriental department', he became head of the new Japanese department of Sotheby's Belgravia in 1979. He chose to specialise in Meiji works of art at a time when important collections were being assembled including the Professor Nasser D Khalili collection of Meiji arts and crafts that Fairley would co-catalogue, together with the late Dr Oliver Impey of the Ashmolean Museum, after he joined Barry Davies Oriental Art in 1992. Fairley opened his first gallery on London's Duke Street, St. James's in 1997. He now trades from nearby Bury Street.



Left: this suzuribako (writing box), worked to the cover with a flowering cherry tree beneath the setting sun and to the interior with two figures, one holding a horse on a shoreline in high wind, is dated to c.1800.

It is priced at £7500 by Malcolm Fairley who comments: "Japanese lacquer is staggeringly beautiful – it is miles better than anything anyone else made – but there are very few collectors. The lacquer market is very flat."

Right: "Fabergé wouldn't have been employed by the best Japanese enamel makers," says Malcolm Fairley. "Put pieces of Fabergé enamel under a magnifying glass and it isn't very good. A really good piece of Japanese enamel just gets better and better."

This cloisonné enamel vase c.1900 worked in fine silver wire with a profusion of flowers and shrubs beneath a maple tree, is signed with the lozenge seal of the celebrated workshop of Hayashi Kodenji (1831-1915). It is priced at £24,000.

The vase is unblemished – a vital consideration in a market where, Fairley observes, perfection is everything. "With enamels there is no grey area. They are either perfect or they're not. You can't repair it. They can't be refired."



In search of beguiling perfection

ROLAND ARKELL MEETS MEIJI ARTS AND CRAFTS SPECIALIST MALCOLM FAIRLEY

MALCOLM FAIRLEY, LONDON SPECIALIST DEALER IN WORKS OF ART FROM THE MEIJI (1868-1912) PERIOD, IS LIKE A CHILD IN A SWEET SHOP.

A delivery has just arrived from a buying trip to Kyoto and, box by immaculately-wrapped box, he is busily reacquainting himself with purchases made several weeks previously.

It is more than 30 years since he first chose to specialise in Japanese art from this period – the 50 years during which Japan transformed itself from isolated feudal nation to industrial power – and the buzz is still there. "I have been longing to see them," he confesses.

It is the nuanced nature of art dealing in Japan that Fairley had seen some of these pieces for just a matter of seconds before committing to buy them.

"You don't get a lot of time. Over a glass of tea the dealer will bring out a box and place it on the table. If you're lucky they will take out the contents and remove the wrapping.

"The object is there in front of you and you had better make a decision within the next 30 seconds because otherwise it is wrapped and back in the box. Even after making a purchase I'm often left thinking 'just how good was that?'"

Courtesy buys are part of relationship building. "Sometimes you have to buy three things you don't want because the really good thing won't come out until you do. Then it arrives and you say 'Oh my goodness. Now I understand the system.'"

Although he professes not to speak a word of Japanese, Fairley has made regular visits to Kyoto and Tokyo since the early 1990s.

Travelling East is imperative at a time when the supply of good material to auction

伦敦古董商Malcolm Fairley在经营日本艺术品方面有超过三十年的经验。 1971年他以销售员的身份在苏富比工作， 1979年在新成立的日本艺术品部门担任总监。

当市场开始重新认识这些被遗忘的大师级工匠的卓越设计和杰出工艺时，他选择专门研究明治时代的艺术品。在九十年代他协助Nasser D Khalili教授编辑了超过1200件收藏的图录，并在之后持续研究相关主题。

虽然他声称不会一句日语，Fairley先生自从九十年代初就经常访问名古屋和东京。在纽约、伦敦和巴黎这些传统销售中心的拍卖物品来源减少时期，去东方大量购买囤积存货是非常重要的

欧洲人、美国人和部分日本人仍然是这个领域的最忠实的买家。但是，对于第二次参加今年典艺文博(10月4-7日)的Fairley先生来说，他正在寻找一个新的客户群。

去年的活动验证了一个具有价值的实情调查任务。 “去年我们是唯一一家只展出日本艺术品的展台。不用说，中国买家肯定在想为什么这些东西会在这里，但是他们理解这些艺术品的价值。”

亚洲艺术市场的狂热爱好者们也意识到目前中国和日本艺术品价格上有著巨大分歧。正如Fairley先生所说的，“日本艺术品是辆小汽车的零头的价格，而不像中国艺术品那样是间整家汽车制造厂的价格。”

如图所示他的三件藏品，包括一件由桂光春制作的混合金属材质的小王子骑竹马逗狗的置物，一件1800年左右的髹漆硯箱和一件1900年左右由著名的林小伝治工作室出品的七宝烧嵌银瓶。

in the traditional selling centres of New York, London and Paris has dwindled but he also finds the personal ways of doing business an antidote to the faceless online transaction or conspicuous consumption of 21st century western commerce.

Remarkably, most auctions in Japan remain private events, conducted by invitation only in a culture where collectors still value the anonymity and advice achieved when buying through a specialist dealer.

Fairley has championed Meiji arts and crafts since the 1970s when the market – that in the post-War era had placed

late 19th century Japanese art on the rubbish tip of Victorian artistic endeavour – was beginning to rediscover the design excellence and technical brilliance of master craftsmen whose wares had once been fêted at exhibitions home and abroad.

Books on the subject were limited – "there was a lack of information not just about individual artists but about whole schools of artists," he recalls – but Fairley was among those who began to make sense of the enormous quantity of wide-ranging material from this period.

continued on page 22

ASIAN ART
JAPAN



Above: this unusual mixed-metal okimono by Katsura Mitsuharu, of a boy on a hobbyhorse looking down at his pet chin dog is thought to depict an Imperial prince. It is priced at £24,000 from Malcolm Fairley.

The Imperial family were great benefactors of the Japanese metalworking industry that looked to apply historic skills to new markets following the end of the samurai and the declining demand for sword fittings.

“Out of 1.3 billion people, there has to be one who wants Japanese things”

continued from page 21

Most of it was relatively poor quality. Some of it better and highly decorative. A small percentage was executed with the very tightest quality control by the finest metalworkers, ivory carvers, lacquer artists and pottery painters that graced the 19th and 20th centuries.

Fairley continues to work on a hierarchy of these artists and their workshops whose best pieces he sums up thus: “Meiji art is all about perfection. They chose first the simplest design and then the most complicated way of making it.”

Many of the great collections of Meiji art now reside in the West – including the 1200-piece Khalili collection that Fairley helped to build and catalogue in the 1990s.

There are still influential Japanese collectors too (it's easy to overstate the decline of what remains the world's third largest economy) but the vagaries of collecting fashion and global economics dictate that today's market is unpredictable at best.

While a handful of dedicated buyers drive demand for the very best pieces – and decades of accumulated specialist knowledge can occasionally be rewarded with spectacular finds at auction – the traditional collecting base has narrowed.

Today, prices for 17th century kakiemon and imari can often be in the hundreds rather than thousands, significantly less than the sums paid for turn-of-the-century Satsuma.

Sotheby's, the auction house where Fairley and others learned their craft, ended their interest in the Japanese market in 2007.

It is in search of a new customer base that Fairley will exhibit at *The Fine Art Asia Fair* in Hong Kong for the second time this year on October 4-7.

Last year's event, held against a backdrop of pro-democracy protests, proved a valuable fact-finding mission. “We were the only people exhibiting purely Japanese objects. Needless to say the Chinese buyers were wondering what on earth these things were but they understood their quality.”

Aficionados of the Asian art market are also increasingly aware of the huge gulf that now exists between the prices for Chinese and Japanese art or, as Fairley puts it, “these items are the price of a small car but not the price of the whole factory as Chinese art can be.”

Doubtless it will take time before curiosity translates into sales but Fairley is confident that these items of contemplation, beguiling in their artistic creativity and technical virtuosity, will ultimately appeal to Japan's near neighbours.

“Out of 1.3 billion people there has got to be one who wants Japanese things,” he quips.