

# COLLECTING FOR LIFE: BOOK REVIEW OF *SILKS FOR THRONES AND ALTARS* AND *CELESTIAL ART*

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***Silks for Thrones and Altars: Chinese Costumes and Textiles*, collected by Myrna and Samuel Myers, introduction and text by John E. Vollmer (Myrna Myers, 2003)**

***Celestial Art: Paper Offerings and Textiles from China*, collected by Leo Haks, main text by Coen Peppinkhuizen (Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon: Ghent, Belgium, 1997)**

Beyond the sheer beauty and range of the Chinese textiles and costumes—and paper offerings, in the case of Haks—what has really fascinated me about these two books is the stories behind the collections and the somewhat diverse collecting styles they represent.

Myrna and Samuel Myers' collection of Far Eastern costumes and costume fragments forms the core of *Silks for Thrones and Altars*. In the Preface, they describe their moment of conversion: Back in 1974, strolling at the Maastricht Fair, they were smitten by the rich colors and designs of the Tibetan silks shown by Moke Mokoloff. "Chinese textiles," writes Myrna, "soon became a special if eccentric feature of our gallery."

Though short, the Preface offers a succinct portrait of the Myers' (and Myrna in particular) as the kind of connoisseur-collectors who make a serious effort in becoming learned in their areas of collecting. This effort often means sustained involvement with collectors' societies, study centers, as well as museums. Myrna's own "apprenticeship," as she describes it, involves all of these. Hers is a venerable example of an active collector's life—of how a beloved collection could endow the collector with a life of learning and activities beyond the joy of

building the collection and contemplating its beauty.

One strong influence on Myrna was Krishna Riboud, the Paris-based textile scholar and collector and founder of AEDTA, an Asian textile study center. Through Riboud, she had her "initiation into the circle of textile enthusiasts." Myrna's description of her friend is itself a lively portrait of a connoisseur-collector—"a regal presence evoking her future projects in an incense-fragrant atmosphere in which everything seemed possible."

The main text for *Silks for Thrones and Altars* is by John E. Vollmer, author of *In the Presence of the Dragon Throne*. Myrna met him at a conference of the Hong Kong Textile Society in 1995. Vollmer's contribution is significant. The nearly eighty objects, majority of which have never been published, are illuminated with a wealth of information and historical knowledge that Vollmer provides. And just as in his book on dragon robes, he gives diagrams of how the garments are constructed—an invaluable feature.

The book is divided into three sections, which aren't really related except for the common theme of textiles. The first, "Silks for Court and Palace," includes court robes, rank badges, and cushion covers (a spectacular one with fine lotus embroidery once belonged to Barbara Hutton). Contrasting with this section's imperial splendor is the more solemn beauty of the last. There we see vestments, hangings, thankas, and patchwork mandalas, all textiles for temples and altars. Some of these, made of materials as costly as those used for court robes, were commissioned by the

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emperor as gifts for the Buddhist church in China and Tibet.

The part of the collection that fascinates me most—the Chuba—appears in the book's middle section, "Silks in Trade and Diplomacy," really the odd one out. Chubas are man's robes worn by Tibetan officials and aristocrats who interacted with the Qing court. What's fascinating about these slightly "off-looking" robes is the way the Chinese silks, some coming from used garments, were cut up, the patterns freely rearranged to construct the Tibetan robes. As Vollmer comments, "The original Chinese patterns were radically rearranged in Tibet, losing much of their coherence, but gaining in boldness and visual impact as a result of their often surprising juxtapositions."

In a way this quotation serves as an apt metaphor for the book itself. By definition, a collection rearranges objects, out of their original contexts. Vollmer, with his historical knowledge, has provided the objects with as much of their original contexts as possible, and a certain degree of curatorial coherence. But the real coherence comes, after all, from the Myers themselves. The book is a rich record of a life-long pursuit of collecting and learning, of visiting fairs and attending museums, of talking to people similarly enamored. All this was time-consuming for sure, but time very well spent.

Leaving the hushed halls of the Myers' *Thrones and Altars* we arrive at a somewhat different realm in *Celestial Art*. The book is a visual record—and a stunningly beautiful one—of the unusual collection Leo Haks put together in Singapore between 1975 and 1982. Haks' journey as a collector—a fascinating story that he tells in a vivid "candid ac-

count"—diverged dramatically from that of a connoisseur; in fact, his account begins with his disenchantment with the society of ceramics collectors he was part of. This is the story of a maverick-collector who charted his own path. Or, to put it in another way, he chanced upon an unmarked path and followed it to where it led him. Whereas the connoisseur visits antique shops, fairs, galleries, and museums, Haks spent most of his time hanging out in the paper shops where he made his acquisitions—nearly all of which had no "collector's value" when he bought them. And what an adventure! (And how many books will feature a photo of the bare-chested collector?)

The paper shops in a Chinese community specialize in ceremonial objects. Those made of paper, usually replicas of things associated with well-being in this life such as money, clothes, buildings, furniture, even cars, are made to be burned as offerings to gods and departed ancestors. Beyond paper goods, the shops also rent out textiles and hangings for decoration during ceremonies and festivals.

Haks' collection includes these and more. The paper costumes, which he calls the core of his collection, are dazzling, all hand-painted with vivid colors, displaying the artists' considerable skills *and* taste, because the effect is balanced and not gaudy. Perhaps because of his appreciation for the paper garments, Haks also collected opera costumes. He bought the whole wardrobe of a well-known troupe after the owners retired. As he himself acknowledges, this segment of the collection doesn't seem to have an immediate connection to the rest. But opera costumes can be considered part of a collection of ceremonial objects as operas are often performed during temple festivities, even without an audience (the true audi-

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ence is supposed to be the gods).

In addition to the artistry of the objects, what makes the collection special, maybe even unique, is its historical significance. The paper offerings featured here are all “old-styled” and in that sense extinct; they were made in China between 1930 and 1960 (there are no paper cars in Haks’ collection). After 1949, the year when China turned Communist, ceremonial objects decreased in supply as religious devotion was discouraged—after the Cultural Revolution, their production stopped altogether. The quality of the paper dropped as well, and at one point, in the 1950s, paper was so scarce in China the shops in Singapore had to send paper there to be painted (presumably, the craftsmen with the skills stayed in the mainland). When Haks was putting together his collection, in the 1970s, the paper offerings used in ceremonies were made in Bangkok rather than China, were mass-manufactured by machines rather than hand-painted. The devout actually preferred the machine-printed ones as they were seen as new and thus more worthy of the gods and ancestors. Haks bought the “outmoded” offerings that the shops couldn’t sell.

Haks writes touchingly on this aspect of his collecting: “It gradually dawned on me that I had come upon fragments of an important part of traditional Chinese culture...and that what I was collecting may well be the vestiges of an ancient craft, in apparently terminal decline for political and cultural reasons. I came to feel strongly that I had a responsibility to rescue what I could. The collecting, per se, of these beautiful things became of lesser importance than their preservation.”

There is an irony in trying to preserve, to salvage,

things that are, in their intended use, ephemeral, but I’m glad someone tried.

The publication of *Celestial Art* should inspire more to become interested in this part of Chinese culture. Haks “hoped and expected too that the academic and museum worlds would come to realize their [the paper offerings’] significance.” The book itself offers some hopeful signs. Frans Haks, Leo’s brother, is the retired director of the Groninger Museum, and his enthusiasm for the collection led him to help put an exhibition together at the Kunsthal in Rotterdam—an enterprising museum quite far from the traditional terrain of Asian art, but it’s museum recognition nevertheless. And like Myrna Myers’ book, which has John E. Vollmer to provide curatorial expertise, Haks’ has Coen Peplinkhuizen, a scholar in anthropology of art, writing its main text.

Haks says he has known and discussed the collection with Peplinkhuizen for some 20 years. Yet, to this reader at least, his long and dense essay is rather baffling and doesn’t do much to shed light on the topic. With sentences such as this: “The Haks collection is a vital illumination of the forms of sacrificial paper garments, and he gives an absorbing account of their production and points of sale—their Earthly infrastructure,” the Introduction suffers from opaque rambling typical of some current academic “discourse.”

The contemporary feel of the book continues through its design. The first thing you notice about *Celestial Art* is that it is very attractive looking. Folio-sized, it is designed with chic graphics by Swip Stolk and looks like a fashion monograph. Indeed, the photo on the jacket turns out to have come from the hip magazine *Dutch*, which did a fashion

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spread with opera costumes from the collection. This very "cool" photo essay by Marcel van der Vlugt is reprinted at the end of the book.

Museum and academic recognition, while important, and hip design, while impressive, are but an extended life of a collection. In the end, what to me is truly important and impressive about *Celestial Art* is how, because of his collecting, Haks gained a life experience as enchanting and colorful as the objects themselves. He came to spend a lot of time at the three paper shops. Sometimes, in the middle of the afternoon, he would skip work and spend a couple of hours there. "I watched people coming and going, watched what they bought and didn't buy and asked why. It was wonderful, almost like a meditation." The families who ran the shops became his friends. They spent hours explaining things to him. One time they even put him to work. He saw them get married, have children, their children grow up, their elderly members pass away. He also saw the temple festivities where the paper objects were used and burned.

All this first-hand experience must have instilled in Haks a deep respect for the things he was collecting, and the understanding that "for many Chinese people there is something of a taboo on collecting this kind of ceremonial object" (thus he was very careful in handling the objects). Perhaps it does take a foreigner to preserve this dying art.

China's three major religious traditions—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—tend to eschew, in its philosophical expressions, speculating on the afterlife. In folk practices, however, the Chinese use their humanistic imagination and paint a picture of the afterlife that is almost an exact copy of life here-and-now—hence the paper

offerings: over there you'd still need things like money, clothes, even cars. The Chinese heaven (and hell) is every bit as crowded, boisterous, and filled with vivid characters as the overpopulated world they live in. This very human, very Chinese universe is what Leo Haks had a glimpse of, as well as experienced, through his collecting. *Celestial Art* is invaluable in the earthly life it presents.

Ming-Yeung Lu is a writer and translator and an ex-museum educator.

Where to find the books:

*Silk for Thrones and Altars*, please contact Myrna Myers at [mmyersgal@aol.com](mailto:mmyersgal@aol.com)

*Celestial Art*, please contact Chris Frape at [chrisf@pacific.net.hk](mailto:chrisf@pacific.net.hk)

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