William Southworth, on behalf of the curators for Asian art

A PRELIMINARY RESPONSE TO 'FRAMING "ASIA"'

The results of the survey presented in this article are useful in gauging the opinions of the public. With the reopening of the Rijksmuseum, the profile and cultural background of the visitors has changed. The fact that only 2% of visitors to the Asian Pavilion had specifically come to the Rijksmuseum to see Asian art, demonstrates that we are reaching a much broader public than is normally the case for an Asian art collection. The fact that a large majority of these visitors had not noticed Asian artefacts at all in the main building also suggests that the Asian Pavilion is succeeding in raising the profile of Asian art throughout the museum as a whole.

Such increased visibility represents both a challenge and an opportunity. It is clear both from the statistics and the comments quoted in the article that many visitors have no specialist knowledge or even expectation of Asian art and it is a challenge to engage effectively with all of them. Nevertheless, the fact that they came to the Pavilion at all is hugely encouraging and represents a remarkable opportunity to gain the interest and support of a wider public.

In two respects however, it is clear that we perhaps need to think again or try to do more. The first concerns the joint presentation of historical and contemporary art. The main reason for introducing contemporary art in the Pavilion is the increasing popularity of contemporary Asian artists both in the Netherlands and abroad. It is also important to show the visitor that Asian art did not simply stop on its first appraisal by Europeans. This point should of course be clear from the numerous Asian trade items displayed in the main building, not least by the newly-acquired Amsterdam lacquer chest from Japan. However, it is also important for us to show high-quality Asian artefacts produced, up to the present day, for local markets and connoisseurs within their country of origin. In contrast, the work of many celebrated contemporary Asian artists, such as Ai Weiwei, is consciously international in both its marketing and appeal, while that of Edmund de Waal can be seen as a highly personal, aesthetic response to Japanese art, memory and craftsmanship. How, where, and in what relation to each other, these different types of contemporary art should be displayed is very difficult to determine and remains an active issue.

The second concern is in regard to provenance and the desire expressed by many visitors for more information on how and by whom the artworks were acquired. Sadly, some of the critical opinions expressed in the survey are only too commonly held and need to be countered by more detailed information. In general, the collection of the VVAK is exceptional for its integrity and the date and manner of its acquisition. This needs to be communicated more effectively if we want to adequately inform and reassure the public.

In one important respect however, we remain entirely unrepentant. One of the founding principles of the Society in 1918 was the conviction that Asian art is not just 'Asian', but also 'art'; and sometimes 'great art'. If the Asian Pavilion can succeed in convincing at least some of our new visitors to think the same, then its planning and realisation will have been very worthwhile.

Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst

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