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Celadon porcelain figurines from the Three Kingdoms period (A.D. 222-280) in "Art in a Time of Chaos: Masterworks From Six Dynasties China, 3rd-6th Centuries," at the China Institute Gallery. This is the gallery's inaugural exhibition at its new and intimate home in Lower Manhattan, on Washington Street.

Chinese History, Writ in Stunning Stone

What a shock to wake up one morning and find armed men, who spoke no language you knew and looked like no people you'd ever seen, roaming the streets of your city. And more shocking still to learn that your protectors — your leaders, your army — had fled in the night. This scene repeated itself many times in China beginning in the third century A.D.,

HOLLAND COTTER

ART REVIEW

when the Han dynasty collapsed and non-Chinese nomads swept down from the north and breached the Great Wall.

They brought fear with them, but other things, too: knowledge, beliefs, and cultural curiosity, which turned into respect, or something like it. That respect worked two ways. Gradually, the invaders came to look, and sound, and be Chinese. And the Chinese began to have an expanded, sharper sense of themselves.

Exchange is the dynamic that animates "Art in a Time of Chaos: Masterworks From Six Dynasties China, 3rd-6th Centuries," the inaugural exhibition at China Institute Gallery's new home in Lower Manhattan, on Washington Street. The show is, and let me just say up front, I don't know how China Institute Gallery, now 50 years old, does what it does.

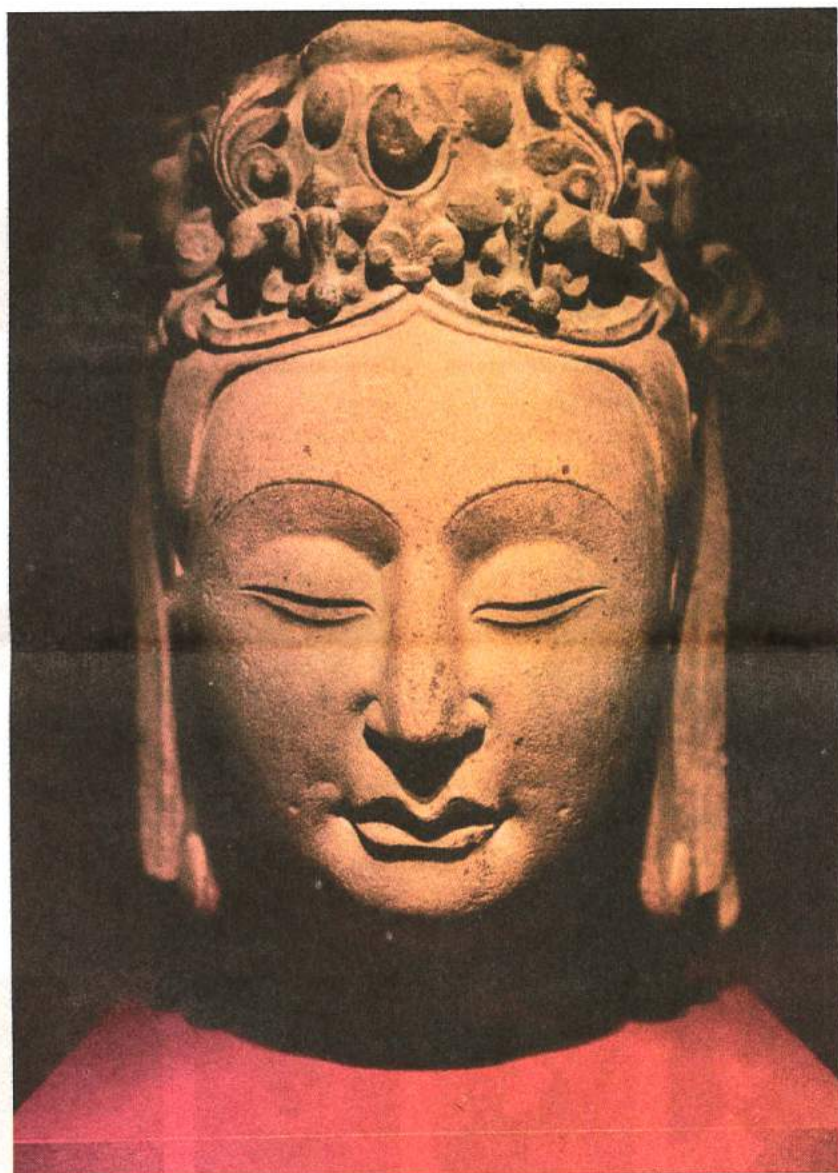
Season after season, it brings extraordinary treasures to New York, many directly from China, loans that even big-budget museums might have trouble nailing. With this material it creates exhibitions that advance scholarship (some of the catalogues are instant classics) but also give unalloyed pleasure, partly because the scale is always right. The galleries in the institute's old Manhattan premises on East 65th Street were two tiny rooms. The new ones are larger, but still ideal. You spend your time and energy on looking, not on walking.

Yet within a compact space, the show covers a vast swath of history. After Han rule ended, political discord reigned. China was effectively split in half, with the north ruled by foreigners, the south by Chinese. Each half further splintered into successions of rival kingdoms fighting among themselves. The centerlessness lasted for nearly four centuries.

This is the barest-bones version of a very tangled history, one to which even a large show couldn't do full justice. This one doesn't try. Instead, it views the period known as the Six Dynasties — or, in China, as the Northern and Southern Dynasties — through some of its distinctive cultural achievements, which included refinements in celadon porcelain, the growth of Buddhism, and advances in calligraphy and painting. And it draws its illustrative material from three of China's major regional art institutions: the Shanxi Museum in the north, and the Nanjing Museum and Nanjing Municipal Museum in the south.

With its elusive colored glazes — jade-green, kingfisher-blue, smoky-sunset-yellow — celadon was thought to have near-magical properties. Production of it exploded during the Six Dynasties, particularly in the south, answering the need for everyday tableware, collectibles, luxury items and grave goods.

A little asparagus-colored water container in the shape of a toad would have been equally suited to home or tomb. A splendid wine jar embossed all over with lotus petals must have been the prized possession of some Buddhist-minded owner. The Buddha himself appears on a chunky pot called a



Left, the sandstone head of a bodhisattva from around A.D. 550. Right, a bronze Buddha from the Southern dynasties period.

"soul urn." Such vessels were made to accompany the dead in the afterlife, and this one is capped by a sculptural tableau. The Buddha sits in a minipavilion, amid flocks of sprites and birds, looking out with a smile as if to say: "No worries. Come join the fun."

Buddhism probably arrived from India during the Han dynasty, but was embraced with panicked intensity in the disordered and disorienting era that followed. Brought overland by Indian monks traveling the Silk Road, it entered China from the north, where it took monumental visual form in the giant cave sculptures of Shanxi province. Unsurprisingly, some of the show's most beautiful images come from the museum there: the sandstone figure of a bodhisattva wrapped in a breeze-ruffled cloak, and the carved foot-high head of a dream-fluid spiritual being lost in a dream of peace.

Buddhist art had a troubled run in

China. It never entirely escaped suspicion as an alien import. Calligraphy, by contrast, was embraced as Chinese to the core, and found its most famous exemplar, Wang Xizhi (A.D. 303-361), in the Six Dynasties period. In the fourth century, he and his family were among the many upper-class northerners who relocated south to Nanjing. There he devoted himself to Buddhist and Daoist studies, which in his case entailed some serious partying. And one party made him immortal.

One bright day in 353, he and 41 of his scholarly friends gathered at a picnic spot, the Orchid Pavilion. To drink wine and compose poetry. The plan was to collect the poems in an album, and at some point in the hard-drinking day, Wang Xizhi decided to provide a preface for it. He called for ink and a brush and, in fluent script, wrote an account of the feelings the gathering inspired in him.

The result was a kind of lyric lamentation on the transient beauties of emotion, friendship and nature, and a call to turn attention toward those things, and away from the demands of professional ambition and civic life. The message sounded a note of political resistance in a Chinese culture shaped by Confucian ethics. Wang Xizhi's validation of individualism and vulnerability, implied by the polygraphic movement of the brush in his hand, had deep resonance in an insecure time.

The resonance lasted. "Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion" became the most widely emulated work of calligraphy in Chinese history, the model for a new standard of expressive writing. Although Wang Xizhi's original manuscript was lost long ago, the touch of his brush was preserved and replicated countless times in copies traced on silk or paper, or carved into stone tablets. Any link to his spirit, at

whatever degree of separation, is valued, and the show has one in a different calligraphic text: the carved stone epitaph of the great calligrapher's young cousin Wang Xingzhi (A.D. 310-340), unearthed in 1965 in the family burial ground near Nanjing.

The expressive connection between calligraphy and painting was always close, though Six Dynasties painting, like writing, survives mostly in second-hand form. And the exhibition — organized by Willow Weilan Hai of the China Institute; Annelle L. Juliano, an art historian at Rutgers University; Gong Liang, director of the Nanjing Museum; Bai Ning, former director of the Nanjing Municipal Museum; and Shi Jinming, director of the Shanxi Museum — concludes with a few examples.

One is a dim image of cosmological creatures sketched on a scrap of tomb fresco. Another is a figurative tableau, originally created in raised linear relief on a set of clay bricks, and preserved now as a pair of painting-size ink rubbings. Titled "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove," the overall image recalls the Orchid Pavilion affair, but has fewer participants, with each — whether writer, musician, or celebrity lush — carefully personalized.

Like Wang Xizhi's friends, they were historical figures and Daoist rebels, though, according to legend, more far out, more willing to say no to power and put themselves in danger. The most outrageous of the seven, the drunkard Liu Ling, hired a man to follow him everywhere with a shovel and gave him standing instructions: If I suddenly drop dead, bury me on the spot.

I like to imagine this sage as the one who was shocked by nothing; as the one who threatened foreigners as, by definition, friends; and the one who regarded great walls as delusional, built to be breached, and would say so out loud to whoever. I bet he did.



Glazed porcelain soul urns from a range of periods. These vessels were made to accompany the dead in the afterlife.

"Art in a Time of Chaos: Masterworks From Six Dynasties China, 3rd-6th Centuries" continues through March 19 at the China Institute Gallery, 100 Washington Street, Manhattan; 212-744-8181, chinainstitute.org.