Peabody Essex Museum (PEM)
Curator of Chinese and East Asian Art

As part of a dramatic expansion, the Peabody Essex Museum seeks a curatorial leader with deep experience in Chinese Art, and a track record developing exciting exhibitions illuminating the richness of East Asian art, culture, and history

The Peabody Essex Museum has embarked on a dramatic paradigm-shifting transformation and expansion---its second in twenty years and a clear indicator of its ambition and promise as a museum that values creativity, innovation, change, and the unexpected.

The museum’s internationally distinctive strengths in East Asian, South Asian, and Asian Export art and culture, already central to this mission, will play an even greater role in this next, highly aspirational chapter. PEM is building a new curatorial team to generate fresh interpretation and appreciation of Asia’s diverse historic and contemporary artistic expressions, especially in the context of an increasingly interconnected and global dialogue. To this end, the museum seeks an innovative curator with experience specifically in Chinese art and a strong commitment to PEM’s adventuresome interpretation and programming.

BACKGROUND

Founded in 1799 in Salem, Massachusetts, 15 miles from Boston, the Peabody Essex Museum is the oldest continuously operating museum in the United States. Currently the 16th (soon to be the 9th) largest art museum in North America, PEM is also one of the nation’s fastest growing art museums.

PEM has achieved a singular record of growth over the last decades. In 2003, PEM completed one of the most striking museum transformations in American history, including growth of the operating budget from $3M to more than $18M, and addition of over 250,000 square feet of new and renovated gallery and public spaces. In 2011, the museum announced the public phase of a comprehensive advancement campaign for $650M, to be completed in 2017. The campaign, for which approximately $570M has been raised or pledged to date, includes a $350M addition to an already healthy endowment; $200M for a new 175,000 square-foot expansion; and $100M to support new collection installations and interpretation, as well as extensive infrastructure improvements that will benefit visitors, exhibitions and programming.

In the coming years, gallery space will increase by almost 60% from 102,000 to 160,000 square feet, and will move PEM from the Top 25 to the Top 10 museums in North America in terms of gallery space. In addition to the increased landscape for new collection-inspired installations, the museum expects to double the scale of its changing exhibition program, which currently offers 5-7 major shows annually as well as an array of smaller exhibitions.

The museum’s many collection areas are among the finest of their kind, showcasing American, Asian and Asian Export, African, Contemporary, Maritime, Native American, and Oceanic art, as well as Architecture, Fashion and Textiles, and Photography. The museum presents a vibrant schedule of changing exhibitions, many organized and circulated nationally and internationally developed by internal teams and guest curators, and others organized by leading museums in North America, Europe, and Asia. Some 250,000 people annually visit the museum, which employs 270 staff and engages over 120 docents in support of PEM’s educational mission. By 2017, the current $22M annual operating budget is projected to increase to $35M.
CURATORIAL PROFILE
The Peabody Essex Museum has the highest visitor satisfaction ratings among 75 major
museums in the United States, and PEM’s curatorial program is a key reason for this success.

PEM’s curatorial approach emphasizes innovation, crisp execution, and close partnership across
departments and with external, leading-edge thinkers in a range of fields. This provides
significant opportunities for curators to leverage team resources with reference to current
trends and new developments in various fields.

CHINESE and EAST ASIAN COLLECTION
The Peabody Essex Museum’s East Asian collection is comprised of Chinese, Japanese, and
Korean art, including Asian export works from these cultures, and is richly complemented by
the museum’s library, maritime, 19th-century photography, and textiles and costume
holdings. The Phillips Library’s ships’ logs, diaries, cargo lists, commercial papers, firsthand
accounts, and rare books and maps help to document America’s early relationships with Asia.
The library’s Herbert Offen Research Collection emphasizes Chinese architecture, furniture,
and gardens. The museum’s photography collection includes unrivalled holdings in 19th-
century photographs of East Asia, many of them unique or exceedingly rare.

CHINESE ART
PEM’s collection is among the top five Chinese art collections in North America, with unique
strengths in 18th, 19th, and 20th-century art and material culture.

Areas of emphasis include: religious objects, among them paintings, woodblock prints, and
sculptures; textiles, especially embroidered apparel, screens, hangings, bed coverings,
patchwork, and ritual objects from 1644 to the 1990s and comprising 40% of the overall
collection; decorative, daily use and celebratory objects such as porcelain and woodblock
prints; imperial portraits, porcelain, and sculpture; painting and calligraphy from 1700 to the
present, including examples of contemporary art representing traditional and non-traditional
art forms; and art works that manifest influences from American and European cultures.
Many of these areas are absent at most other museums.

Of unique importance is Yin Yu Tang, the 200-year old, Qing dynasty merchant’s house from
Anhui Province. The house manifests links with other cultures and collection areas, and
presents cultural elements from around 1800 to the late 20th century. The house is
absolutely unique in the museum world; no other museum in the United States or Europe has
a similar historic structure. Additionally, the house, its objects, and its history provide a
superb primary source for research on many topics.

JAPANESE ART
The collection is one of the largest and oldest in the nation, originating with the museum’s
founding in 1799. The collection therefore has some of the earliest works brought from Japan
to this country—more than fifty years before Commodore Matthew Perry ended Japan’s self-
imposed exile—and includes a great number of works that cannot be found in Japan today.

The range and high aesthetic quality of objects represent the collection’s strengths. The
breadth of objects dealing with Japanese material culture and daily life, especially of the 18th
and 19th centuries, is unmatched in this country, and include ceramics, lacquer, textiles, paintings, woodblock prints, and decorative arts and furnishings.

Many of America’s most important 19th- and 20th-century collectors of Japanese art, especially Edward Sylvester Morse, helped build the collection. Although the collection spans from the Jomon period (10,500-500 B.C.E.) to the present, examples from the late Edo and Meiji periods dominate and rank among the finest in the world.

**KOREAN ART**

Only a handful of American museums collect Korean art to any significant degree, and PEM’s Korean collection is among the most important because of its focus on the vernacular art and culture of the late 18th and 19th centuries, encompassing the late Choson dynasty.

The collection’s origins are historically significant, coinciding with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Korea in the late 19th century. The collection is well known in Korea because of the formative collaboration between Yu Kil-Chun, a famous late 19th-century political and social leader who studied in Massachusetts and then worked with the museum’s pioneering director Edward Sylvester Morse in 1883.

Noteworthy aspects of the collection include screens, paintings, lacquer, ceramics, and textiles, both Choson period [1392-1897] and contemporary. The strong presence of textiles, basketry, and paper-based objects made by women emphasizes their prominent role as artists and artisans in Korean culture.

**ASIAN EXPORT ART COLLECTIONS**

Asian export art encompasses works in all media made by artists in China, Japan, India, and Indonesia (among other cultures), specifically for non-local patrons and markets. PEM’s collection is the largest, most comprehensive, and diverse collection of its type in the world. Among the first objects collected by the museum’s founders were decorative arts produced in China, Japan, and India for Europeans and Americans. The collection has a particularly strong international profile for Chinese export porcelain, paintings, and silver; and early Japanese export porcelain and lacquer.

In the course of their work, curators will draw from works in the Asian Export Art collections to highlight the impact of cross-cultural exchanges on art and the impact of art on commerce and international relations.

**RESPONSIBILITIES**

The new curator will play a pivotal role in shaping and implementing the museum’s go-forward, team-based program in Asian art and its specific manifestation of Chinese and East Asian art and culture. This will be accomplished primarily through innovative exhibitions, interpretation and programming, as well as through strategic enhancement of collections and original research.

The primary responsibilities of the Curator will be to:

- Work with the Chief Curator and other members of the museum’s new Asian art team to establish the direction, goals, and priorities for Chinese and East Asian art at the Peabody Essex Museum.
• Organize special exhibitions and secure exhibitions organized by other institutions. The focus will be exhibitions that offer fresh ways of interpreting and appreciating the art of diverse East Asian cultures, with special emphasis on Chinese art. The curator is expected to develop a more interconnected view of Asian cultures, and to foster a dialogue between historical and contemporary expressions.

Organize collection-based installations of Chinese and East Asian art that integrate engaging ideas and new interpretive methods, immersive experiences, and design as part of the museum’s team-based interpretation initiative. The initial emphasis will be the new galleries devoted to Chinese art as part of the museum-wide, expansion-related installations slated to open in 2017. The curator will also serve on other appropriate interpretation teams associated with this large-scale effort and the museum’s ongoing efforts to provide leadership in the arena of museum interpretation.

• Develop a systematic plan to strengthen PEM’s collections through strategic acquisitions of historical and contemporary works, long-term loans, and through research and conservation initiatives.

• Enhance and expand the museum’s international network and partnerships with museums and governments relevant to Chinese art and culture. The emphasis will be identifying opportunities to exchange exhibition projects, loans, and expertise, and on cultivating and securing patronage for the museum overall for specific Chinese art initiatives in collaboration with the museum’s philanthropy staff.

• Develop programs and events in conjunction with exhibitions and in collaboration with the education staff that emphasize new ways to provide immersive experiences of Chinese and East Asian culture and art;

• Serve as an advocate and representative for PEM’s mission, exhibitions, publications, research, programming, and collection, assuring that the museum’s reputation for innovation and scholarship are continually advanced; sustain an international reputation and profile through publishing, lecturing, organizing or participating in symposia, membership in professional organizations, and other pertinent activities.

QUALIFICATIONS and PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The successful candidate will:

• Have substantial experience working with institutions with extensive collections of Chinese art and organizing nationally and internationally traveling exhibitions; experience with both historical and contemporary art is preferred;; an established network in China and Hong Kong is highly desirable.

• Have an advanced degree in art history or cultural studies, with a specialty in Chinese art and culture (a Masters degree is required); fluency in English and Chinese (ideally Mandarin) is highly desirable;

• Be an outcome-oriented, hard worker with a high energy level and initiative; a “doer” with a willingness to work hands-on;

• Be a mission-driven individual with a commitment to PEM’s core values and transformative goals, open to experimentation and thinking “outside the box”; predisposed to juxtaposing ideas and objects in new and unexpected ways, including
across disciplines, between different realms of creativity beyond the visual arts, and between the historical and contemporary;

- Be a good listener and strategist; comfortable receiving input from many sources, and able to analyze and formulate disparate information into sound, well-organized goals, strategies, and proposals; a partner able to flexibly collaborate with people of diverse areas of expertise, experience, cultures, and personalities; a tactful negotiator;

- An emotionally mature individual with strong self-awareness and a good sense of humor.

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