

AKIKO YAMAZAKI AND JERRY YANG



Portrait of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang  
Photo by Angela DeCenzo

IRENE CHOU, Untitled, 1995, ink on paper, 152.4 x 106.7 cm. Courtesy Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang, and Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford.

Understated Visionaries

BY OLIVIA WANG

“When I first started to think about collecting, I really had no basis for judging what was good or bad,” the ever-humble Jerry Yang said when I asked him about the beginnings of his journey as a collector. Yet after getting married in 1997 and settling down together in California, he and his wife Akiko Yamazaki agreed that they would focus on “collecting works that reflect [their East-Asian] heritage.” They have since built a three-tiered collection, which comprises traditional calligraphy, overseen solely by Yang, Song-dynasty ceramics—Yamazaki’s pursuit—and their joint passion, contemporary Chinese ink paintings.

Yang’s penchant for traditional calligraphy might be surprising to some given his profession. He holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from Stanford in electrical engineering, and co-founded Yahoo—an acronym for the ironic phrase “Yet Another Hierarchical Official Oracle”—in 1994 with his friend David Filo while he was still a doctoral candidate. With the official job title “Chief Yahoo,” he was propelled to dot-com billionaire status within two years of the company’s launch.

His exposure to art, however, can be traced to his childhood in Taiwan, where he was born and raised before moving to the United States with his family at the age of ten. He practiced calligraphy as a student in Taipei, and when he made his first acquisition, in 1998, it was a piece by Ming-dynasty master calligrapher Dong Qichang. Calligraphy struck a chord, Yang said, because of his familiarity with the medium. He has since put together an impressive collection of more than 300 calligraphy works dating from the 13th to 19th centuries.

While Yang cultivated his eye for calligraphy, Yamazaki directed her attention to Song-dynasty ceramics. Yamazaki was raised in Costa Rica, where her father was a Japanese expatriate, and earned an undergraduate degree in industrial engineering from Stanford in 1990. Though she took painting and calligraphy classes at her school in Costa Rica, her passion for art and collecting ceramics was sparked only after she joined the San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum as a board member in 1997. Gradually taking on a more active role in the museum’s leadership, she was elected chair of the board in 2014. Yamazaki explained that over the years, with the advice of Hao Sheng, former curator of Chinese art at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, she has taken an increasingly critical and disciplined approach to collecting ceramics, giving considerable

thought to criteria such as provenance, beauty, condition and rarity. The couple now own 50 antique ceramic pieces.

Though Yang and Yamazaki developed different passions, their interests converge when it comes to collecting contemporary Chinese ink paintings. They made their first purchase in 2001, and have since amassed more than 100 works, focusing initially on works by artists whom they came to know personally through specialists in the worlds of calligraphy and traditional painting, such as Li Huayi, Gu Wenda and Wang Tiande. “It was more like relationship-based collecting, but obviously with good guidance from [experts such as] Michael Knight [who is also consulting curator of the couple’s collection] and Mee-Seen Loong,” Yang explained. At the time, these artists were still in the early to mid-stages of their careers; some have become leading figures in the genre—a testament to the couple’s discerning eye. Many of the paintings were acquired from the artists directly, but there are also a portion that were commissioned for special occasions. To celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary, for example, Yang and Yamazaki asked Zheng Chongbin—known for fusing Western principles of abstraction with Chinese ink traditions—to create a work. The result was a large-scale, abstract collage spanning over two meters in height, composed of overlapping and folded paper fragments painted with ink and white acrylic. Zheng is extensively represented in their collection, with roughly 12 works dating from 1995 to the present. Liu Dan is another artist whose oeuvre the couple has followed closely. They own six of Liu’s works, including his monumental 1991 painting of an open Chinese dictionary bearing traditional characters—as opposed to the simplified characters that emerged from the Maoist era—illustrating Liu’s reverence for traditional culture. To provide historical context for the contemporary ink works in their collection, the duo have also acquired paintings by pioneers of the genre who were active in Hong Kong in the 1960s and ’70s, such as Lui Shou-kwan, Lui Kuo-sung and Irene Chou.

Given the couple’s deliberate approach toward collecting, I was curious to know if they had ever made an impulse purchase. Yamazaki spoke with enthusiasm as she told me about a 17th-century *Rinpa*-style flower painting by Takashi Murakami that she unexpectedly acquired after a recent visit to the artist’s studio in

New York. “There is something just so compelling about his art,” she explained.

In the pair’s characteristically understated manner, they approach their roles as collectors with reverence. “As for the art we collect, we own it for now, but we’re ultimately passing it down to the next generation of collectors, whether it is ours or someone else,” Yang said. “The contemporary artworks we collect are a reflection of the past and present, and hopefully will be around in the future.” Yet they have no plans to establish a private museum to house their collection. “I prefer the model of lending,” explained Yamazaki, “whereby institutions can curate their exhibitions according to their audiences.” Yang continued, “There’s the goal with those who want to establish a private museum to leave their legacy in art. I don’t know if we feel that strongly about that being our legacy. But who knows, check back with us in the future!”

Beyond collecting, the pair have donated generously. In 2017, they pledged USD 25 million toward an architectural and programming revamp at the Asian Art Museum—the largest donation in the institution’s history. “We’re relatively private people, but when it comes to art and loaning our art to exhibitions, we feel it is important to use art to initiate cultural dialogue,” Yang said. “China, Japan and Korea are involved in so many facets in the world today, particularly politically, economically and geopolitically. I think having art encourage such a dialogue is very important.”

For the couple, engaging with art starts at home. Yamazaki recounted having a mini-version of Yayoi Kusama’s *Obliteration Room* (2002– )—an interactive installation where viewers are invited to cover a space with brightly colored dot-shaped stickers—constructed for their younger daughter’s eighth birthday party a few years ago. Their daughter and friends primed the installation first with white paint, so they could understand that artists have to work very hard physically, before affixing the stickers anywhere they wished. Their daughter’s fete indicates the couple’s earnest and genuine efforts to share their passion for the arts with others. With all the attention-seeking collectors that exist in the contemporary art world today, it is inspiring and refreshing to see those who approach collecting and patronage with as much respect and deliberation as Yang and Yamazaki.

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