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The Met Is Selling Off 300 Works of Chinese Art From a Single Collection in a Sale That Could Fetch Nearly \$4 Million

Proceeds from the sale will be put toward expanding the museum's Asian art holdings.

Taylor Dafoe, August 20, 2019



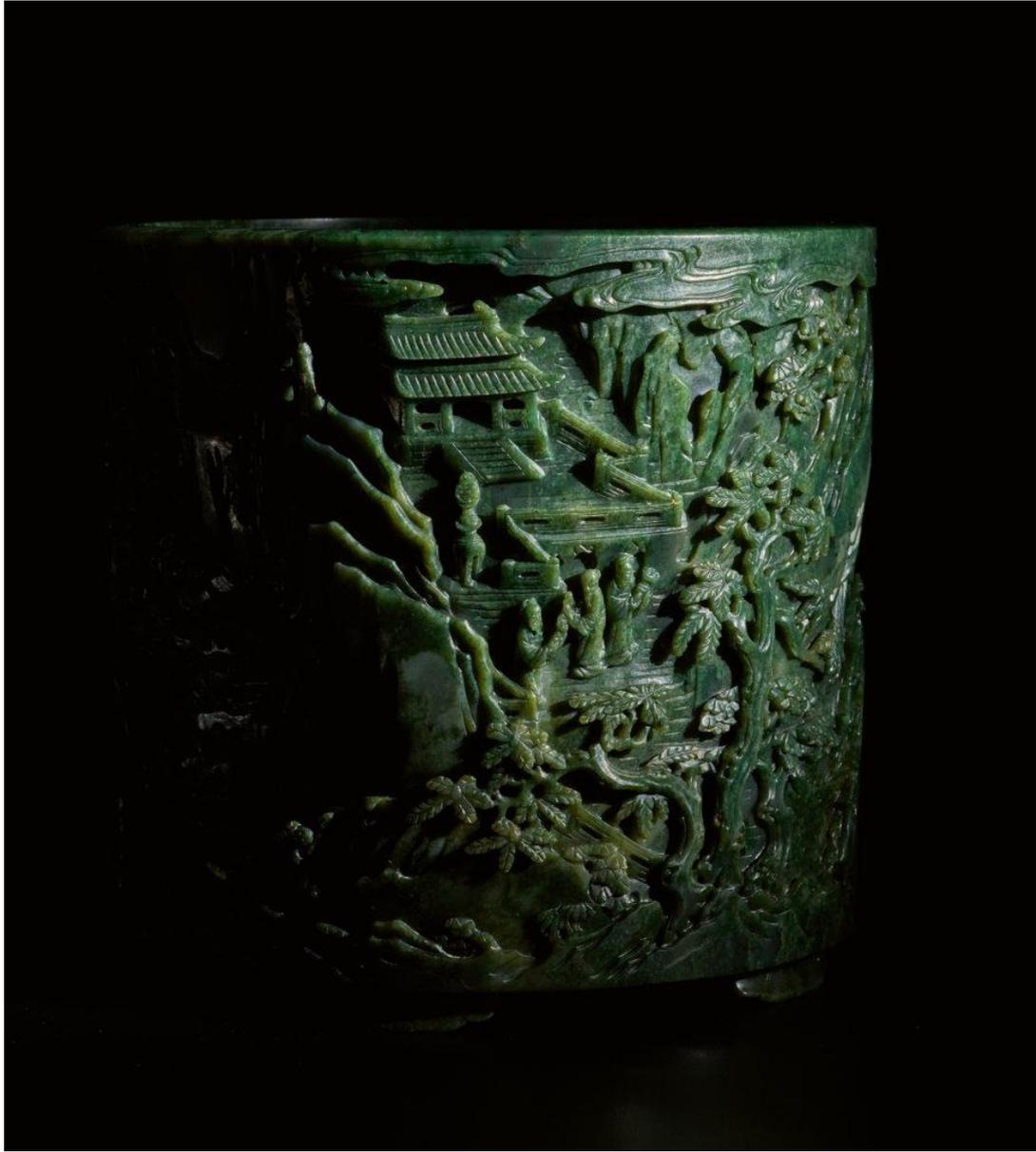
The Irvings in the Florence and Herbert Irving Galleries for Chinese Decorative Arts, 1997. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Next month, the Metropolitan Museum of Art will partner with Sotheby's to deaccession more than 300 pieces of Chinese art from the museum's collection.

The artworks, ranging from rare jade artifacts to ancient hand-carved sculptures, were part of a major 1,275-object gift to the museum by the late philanthropists Florence and Herbert Irving. All proceeds from the sale will go back to the Irving Acquisition Fund, allowing the Met to further diversify its collection of Asian art.

Should it go well, the institution will have a sizeable chunk of change to work with: Sotheby's estimates the full collection to be worth between \$2.6 and \$3.8 million. (The collection does not carry a guarantee.)

"Florence and Herbert Irving were visionary and passionate collectors whose devotion and generosity have dramatically transformed the museum's holdings," Maxwell K. Hearn, the Met's chairman of Asian Art said in a statement. "We are deeply grateful that their gifts will enable us to continue to enhance the Met's collection."



A carved, spinach-green jade 'immortals' brushpot from the Irving Gift. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

Most of the works will be included in Sotheby's Asian Art sale on Saturday, September 14. But roughly 120 items will hit the block in another auction on Tuesday, September 10, dedicated only to the Irvings' collection. Highlighting that auction is a hand-carved jade brushpot from the Qing Dynasty of the Qianlong period (1735–1795), which depicts "immortals" surrounded by symbolic elements. It is estimated to go for upwards \$700,000.

Other Qing Dynasty objects of note include a celadon and russet jade "Quail and Millet" boulder sculpture (estimated to sell for \$150,000–250,000), a spinach-green jade "dragon" basin (\$100,000–150,000), and a jadeite landscape table screen (\$80,000–120,000).

"Our sales are representative of the Irvings' exceptional taste in Chinese art, which features a strong emphasis on organic materials and works hewn from nature, as well as extraordinary Chinese jades produced during the reign of the Qianlong emperor," Angela McAteer, head of Sotheby's Chinese art department in New York, said in a statement.



A rare celadon and russet jade ‘quail and millet’ boulder from the Irving Gift. Courtesy of Sotheby’s. Herbert Irving was a co-founder of the Sysco Corporation, one of the largest—and most profitable—food-distribution companies in the world. He died in 2016 at the age of 98. Florence died at the same age in July 2018.

The couple, who owned a 5th Avenue apartment overlooking the Met, had a long and fruitful relationship with the museum. In 1991, the duo lent work to a standalone exhibition titled “East Asian Lacquer from the Collection of Florence and Herbert Irving.”

The museum named a series of galleries after the couple in 1994 (the Florence and Herbert Irving Galleries for South and Southeast Asian Art) and added a few more three years later (the Florence and Herbert Irving Galleries for Chinese Decorative Arts). In 2004, the Met dedicated its entire Asian art wing to the Irvings.

The Irvings donated more than 1,300 works of Asian art to the Met in 2015, a collection that spanned five millennia, multiple countries, and virtually every major artistic medium. Recognizing that the gift might create redundancies in the museum’s existing collection, the couple stipulated that the museum could sell the works as long as proceeds supported future acquisitions.