

Chinese Treasures

ROBYN BUNTIN SHEDS LIGHT ON COLLECTORS' FEVER

WRITTEN BY NADINE KAM • PHOTOS COURTESY ROBYN BUNTIN



for 27 years. He's witnessed many a bubble over different market segments over time, and is at the forefront of another cultural movement as China's growing elite has begun wielding its economic might around the world. It is not all frivolous spending as many are attempting to buy back their own history from the West.

"The things they most want to acquire are the exquisite items, porcelain and jade," Buntin said. "In the last three to four years, auction house prices for fine items from China have quadrupled."

To understand this desire, one must go back to the mid-20th century, the start of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when objects reflecting the country's feudal history were destroyed to make way for a new society.

"It was 10 years long, and during that time the country systematically annihilated Buddhist and Taoist images, and cultural items

As relics of the past, you'd think early art and antiquities would be free from the current trends that drive retailers.

Not so. Just ask Robyn Buntin, who's been in the business of dealing with fine art from Asia and the Pacific

in temples and institutions," Buntin said. "Cultural private holdings, jades, porcelains and other items were confiscated and destroyed as well."

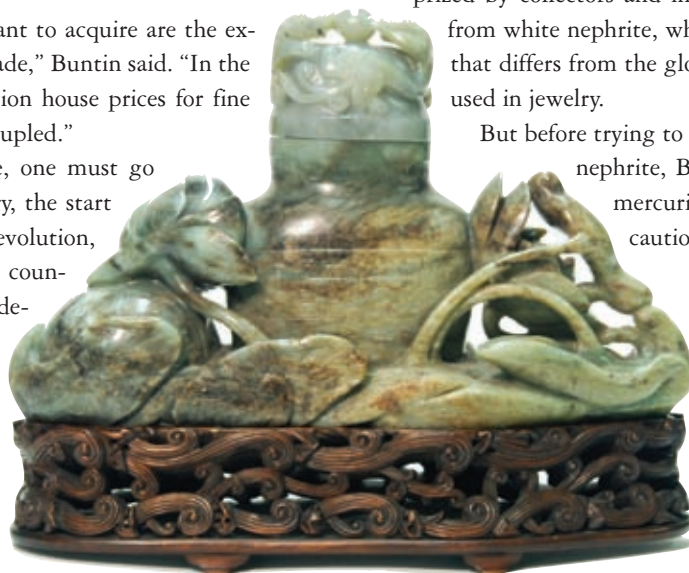
Treasures that weren't destroyed were auctioned to raise funds for the new government, with valuable artifacts and personal belongings ending up in the hands of collectors in Japan, Europe and the United States.

Buntin said the first individuals who pursued Chinese antiquities worked through dealers, but growing sophistication has given them the confidence to strike out on their own. With most novice collectors, Buntin said the first impulse is to buy anything, in the right materials, that catches the eye, but many have moved onto the second phase of collecting, selling marginal work while upgrading to finer pieces focusing on artistic merit.

Buntin, who carries many jade works, said the pieces most prized by collectors and institutions today are carved from white nephrite, which has an oily, waxy finish that differs from the glossy, shiny surface of jadeite used in jewelry.

But before trying to corner the market on white nephrite, Buntin, always aware of the mercurial whims of buyers, offers a cautionary word.

"At a certain point, sophisticates will begin to understand an older aes-



This Ming period (1368-1644) carving of a bottle in the form of a lotus is made of mottled nephrite jade. It measures 8 inches tall by 10 inches long, \$15,000.



Aka Kutani Ichirin (bud vase)
From Japan's Meiji Period
\$2,500



In addition to carrying Chinese antiquities, Robyn Buntin of Honolulu features art objects from Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia and Polynesia, such as this painting, "Bijin in a Garden," by Murata Harue on silk.
\$28,000



This 15.5-inch jadeite carving of one of the manifestations of Guan Yin dates to the 19th century Qing dynasty;
\$140,000

thetic," he said, referring to mottled nephrite prized by dynasties in the 18th century and earlier, before it became possible to mine great quantities of white jadeite. The mottled quality was worked into early carvings to give them a painterly aesthetic.

As a result of demand, Buntin said it has become difficult to find quality pieces, adding it is unfortunate that some still believe they can find deals in China, where full-color museum books have become templates for knock-off artists determined to copy ancient pieces.

Now wise to preserving their country's legacy, the Chinese government forbids artifacts made prior to 1904 from leaving the country, said Buntin, who adds, "If you want to waste large amounts of money, buy antiques in China. You're sure to be buying a very new antique." *

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