

the Stranger

VOL. 22, NO. 27 • MARCH 6, 2013

Chinese Treasures Shipped Out of Tacoma

A Museum, a Family, a Horrific History, and a Fight Right Now

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A MANCHU NOBLEWOMAN'S EMBROIDERED SILK ROBE *Mary Young, Connie's mother, in the early 1980s, wearing one of the objects she donated to Tacoma Art Museum. The man is Jon Kowalek, then-director of the museum.*

Connie Young Yu had no more than \$11,000 to buy back her late mother's favorite red robe. The robe came up early in the sale, rising like a flame at the front of a room at Bonhams auction house in San Francisco last December. Embroidered with sprays of peonies, patterned butterflies, and gold medallions, the robe dates back to the Qing dynasty, in the 19th century. Bidding started, and Connie jumped in, but buyers whizzed past Bonhams's low estimate of \$8,000, then past Connie's budget. A Chinese businessman bid \$15,000. Sold. Just like that, the robe was gone, a half-century after Connie's parents rescued it and sent it to the Tacoma Art Museum to be enshrined as a symbol of reconciliation in the city where the mayor once called Chinese people a "curse" and a "filthy horde."

Losing the robe was the last straw. The

Young family—Connie, her brother Al, and her sister Janey—announced a lawsuit against TAM on February 28. The museum had sent the robe to auction along with 131 other robes and jades donated by the Youngs in the 1970s and '80s.

The strands of that single robe stretch from the waning days of imperial China through the American civil rights movements, ending in that San Francisco auction room with the triumph of 21st-century Chinese wealth. The characters are vivid: Al broke the Asian color barrier in race-car driving. Connie is the granddaughter of a widow with bound feet who got locked up under the federal Chinese Exclusion Act. She's also the mother of an Oscar winner and a historian who writes books about the Chinatowns where her great-grandfather once raised money to fund the fighters who tore down the Qing dynasty, scattering im-

perial cast-offs like the red robe all over the globe for Connie's parents to later find.

The size and scope of the *story*—even more than the objects themselves—is what TAM underestimated when it set out to sell the Young collection. TAM either didn't know the story's value or didn't carefully consider how to handle its specialness. While the Young material did extremely well at the December auction, yielding \$229,466, and is expected to do well again when more of it goes on the block at Bonhams on March 12, that amount of money is not spectacular on the art market—and the one thing both sides agree on is that this isn't about the money anyway. TAM spent two years deciding that building “the premier collection of Northwest art” is the smartest thing it can do with limited resources. The Youngs' unrestricted gift of jades and robes had not even been on display since 1996. It is fair game to be “deaccessioned.” The museum did its due diligence, weighing options and contacting heirs—a courtesy, not a requirement, since an unrestricted gift is, legally, exactly that. The museum and family members had three face-to-face meetings and pleasant e-mail exchanges. Only after the auction did Connie and Al raise hell.

TAM director Stephanie Stebich says she was taken by surprise. Legally, it's hard to imagine that the family has a leg to stand on in its quest to stop the next auction and force TAM to transfer what's left of the collection to the Wing Luke or some other Northwest institution. TAM did not violate industry standards. This is an art museum, not a history museum, Stebich pointed out. TAM assessed the aesthetic value of the objects, found them expendable, and decided to sell.

Connie Wolf, director of Stanford University's Cantor Arts Center, to which the Youngs gave the other half of their collection, says, “A museum is not in the business of keeping [a work] just because it's worth money.” Amen to that. It's also true that privileged donors often mistake public institutions for their own private storehouses.

But do art museums have room to value

factors beyond aesthetics? And are the Youngs really that kind of privileged donors?

This was not your typical local-scions-bequeathing-art situation. Connie's parents never lived in Tacoma. They chose Tacoma, at the suggestion of a friend who happened to be affiliated with TAM, because it was the site of the single worst act of anti-Chinese persecution in American history. It was the place where their pride could defeat a legacy.

That legacy was “the Tacoma Method.” That's the name other towns gave it afterward, towns that also dreamed of kicking out their entire Chinese populations on a single rainy night, 600 people marched at gunpoint onto outbound trains. It happened in Tacoma on November 3, 1885.

In 1977, when TAM first exhibited the Youngs' objects, Connie wrote her father: “When [Al and I] were milling among the many distinguished citizens of the North-

west at the exhibit, we exchanged comments on the irony of it all, descendants of the discriminatory communities

who forced out the Chinese crowding in to see the collection of Imperial robes donated by descendants of long-suffering Chinese pioneers... From a historical overview, the exhibit was a triumph, a sort of sweet victory.”

So when you're shipping a bunch of Chinese treasures out of Tacoma, you undervalue factors beyond aesthetics at your own peril.

TAM prides itself on standing up for historically abused communities—see the case of the LGBTQ exhibition *Hide/Seek* last year. Tacoma was its only West Coast venue. Again, amen. The Young collection, though, is a case of an art museum proceeding legitimately in the art world but stumbling in the wider world where cultural sensitivity matters. Stebich denies telling Connie and Al that the collection was not museum quality, but a screen grab of the museum's own website from late last year describes the material as “not of museum quality” and “mostly tourist keepsakes and mementos.”

Stebich says TAM will use some of the

Tacoma kicked out its entire Chinese population on a single rainy night in 1885.

money from the Young sales to fund purchases by contemporary artists telling the Chinese American story. Labels on the new pieces would mention the Youngs. But Connie and Al say that has only been proposed recently, and they no longer trust TAM.

Too little, too late is why there were 52 signatories, including prominent community leaders, on a February 26 letter that called for a public meeting at the Asia Pacific Cultural Center in Tacoma. Kathryn Van Wagenen, a signatory who was president of TAM when it moved into its high-profile new home in 2003, says she'd simply like the museum to try to be "gracious," whether they're legally bound or not.

Stebich, meanwhile, is giving statements that will almost certainly make things worse. She told the *News Tribune* in Tacoma, "We are selling these items to build a collection that helps tell the story about the Chinese in the Northwest through art. Help me understand how Chinese imperial robes do that." But it's easy to imagine how keeping a least a few of the objects donated by this remarkable family would indeed help "tell the story about the Chinese in the Northwest through art"—while honoring the reconciliation gesture.

Stebich said the planned Asia Pacific Cultural Center meeting "was scheduled not in consultation with my schedule, so I have to decline the meeting." She said TAM's board president didn't plan to attend, either. The next auction is set for March 12. The same Chinese collector who bought the red robe has told Connie he's coming back for more. ■