Professor Michael Sullivan and His Paintings

DAVID A. ROSS
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Professor Michael Sullivan (1916–2013) bequeathed to Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum a collection of twentieth-century paintings that the museum lauds as “the single greatest private collection of contemporary Chinese art in the West” (Telegraph 2013). This essay remembers Professor Sullivan, his wife Khoan (d. 2003), and the collection that they parented over a period of almost seventy years.

Between 1996 and 2000, I was a constant presence in the home of Professor Michael Sullivan (1916–2013), then in his early eighties and the preeminent historian of Chinese art in the Western world. Having left Stanford for literally greener pastures, he was an emeritus fellow of St. Catherine’s College, Oxford, while my future wife, Li-ling Hsiao, was the latest in a line of devoted quasi-familial graduate-student assistants. We often cooked for him and his lovely wife Khoan (d. 2003), turning our dormitory bedrooms into ad hoc dining rooms with bed sheets for table cloths. He in turn cooked for us, alternating between a risotto that I taught him and a stir-fried beef dish at once gluey and boozy due to his heavy-handed way with the sherry-cornstarch marinade. He often took us to a Chinese buffet near the Oxford train station, and we occasionally visited pubs and villages in the surrounding Cotswolds. The conversation dwelt on Chinese art, Western art, and culture generally, with John Ruskin’s name cropping up more frequently than it did normally in late-twentieth-century conversation. Then as now under the spell of Yeats and the high-modernists, I was prone to cultural pessimism. Born in 1916 to an English mother and Canadian father, Michael took a shrewd but sunnier view of things. This undaunted outlook—this faith that the sun will not only rise in the morning but shine a little more brightly given exertion and good will—awed me in its faint whiff of inherited Victorianism. Michael told stories of minor giants he had known: Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), who had flirted with Khoan in the hills of Italy; Arthur Waley (1889–1966), whose funeral went almost entirely unattended. Michael was immune to academic gossip—the usual conversation by polite razor-blade—except
when it concerned a young person who needed a stipend or a job and whom he sensed an opportunity to help.

Michael died on September 28, 2013, aged 96. He was a lovely fellow, soft-spoken, modest, earnest, curious, knowledgeable, fond and forgiving of his fellow men, passionately devoted to the cause of Chinese art, noblest of husbands. I had been reading about people like Virginia Woolf’s nephew Julian Bell (1908–37), a Spanish Civil War casualty, and I saw Michael as a romantic figure of the 1930s, emblematic in his erudite amateurism, in his sense that life is to be lived at once graciously, generously, and adventurously, in his alloy of public school mien and twentieth-century consciousness.¹ He served as a Red Cross ambulance driver in China during the 1940s.² He moved at the fringes of what was left of the old Bloomsbury culture. He traveled constantly to Asia and knew many of the Titans of twentieth-century Chinese art personally. He was not an adventurer by nature, but he took accidental adventure, like everything else, with good humor and aplomb.

Notwithstanding a world reputation as a scholar and almost twenty years at Stanford (1966–1984), Michael was not an academic at heart. He was not at odds with the university, merely blind to its pretensions as a pontifical city-state. He took it at face value, as a warren of rooms available for the purposes of teaching, at best socially pleasant and professionally handy, at worst incidental. Had he been transplanted from Stanford or Oxford to a mountain grotto of the kind that Huang Binhong 黃賓虹 (1865–1955) liked to depict, neither his regimen nor

¹ As far as his “public school mien” goes, Michael was educated at Rugby and Cambridge (1936–39), where he studied architecture. With what seems gratuitous mordancy, The Guardian observes that “the family set about educating him as a model Englishman, with only partial success” (Danchev and Vainker 2013). After he and Khoan returned from China in 1946, Michael pursued Chinese studies, first at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and then at Harvard, completing his Ph.D. in 1952 (Danchev and Vainker 2013).

² According to the obituary in The Telegraph (UK): “In 1940 [Sullivan] answered a Quaker appeal for humanitarian work in China’s war-stricken south-west territories. A confirmed pacifist, Sullivan drove aid missions for the International Red Cross in Sichuan province until, in 1942, he found refuge teaching Archaeology at the West China Union University in Chengdu. It was there, out of the range of Japanese bombers, that he was introduced to the two constants of his life: Chinese art and his wife. When Sullivan first met Wu Baohuan, known as Khoan, she was a bacteriologist working on smallpox vaccines for the city’s public health services. They married in 1943” (Telegraph 2013). In Chengdu, Michael became friendly with exiled artists like Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983), Pang Xunqin 龐薰琴 (1906–85), Wu Zuoren 吳作人 (1908–99), Ding Cong 丁聰 (b. 1916), and Guan Shanyue 關山月 (1912–2000). Amid such talent, he naturally slipped into the role of collector (Sullivan 2009, 11–12).
his sense of reality would have shifted. Here was a moral for a graduate student with his pant leg caught in the machinery of professionalization.

Michael and Khoan’s flat was as through the looking glass as anything written by Oxonians like Lewis Carroll and Philip Pullman, the ordinary giving way to the extraordinary as if by magical portal. Occupying the second floor of a building that was (if I understood things correctly) purchased for St. Catherine’s by one of Michael’s fond American patrons, it struck me, an American suburbanite used to the gleam of perpetual renovation, as very post-war, nicked here, peeling there, but spacious and pleasant. There was a battered kitchen nook notable for the astonishing detail that Michael never refrigerated his butter (or was it margarine?), a small dining room where we ate on mismatched china, a modest office walled by art books, a bedroom with a row of green-spined Penguin crime fiction on a mantle over the bed, presumably within convenient 3 a.m. reach, and an ample living room with a large-windowed view of suburban verdure to the rear.

For all its worn furniture, the living room housed one of the world’s densest domestic concentrations of museum-caliber art, vying in its way with the Gainsborough-stuffed galleries of the great country houses. Framed pieces occupied every square-foot of wall; more recently framed pieces were propped against tables, chairs, and sofa ends; scrolls were bunched vertically behind the door in vague token of an umbrella stand. The collection’s Gainsborough-equivalents include seven paintings by Qi Baishi 齊白石 (1864–1957), six by Huang Binhong, seven by Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983), three by Fu Baoshi 傅抱石 (1904–65), five by Lin Fengmian 林風眠 (1900–1991), and a magisterial black landscape by Li Keran 李可染 (1907–89). Occupying a slightly lesser tier are dozens of paintings by the likes of Zhu Qizhan 朱屺瞻 (1892–1996), Wu Zuoren 吳作人 (1908–99), Wu Guanzhong 吳冠中 (b. 1919), Zao Wou-ki 趙無極 (b. 1921), Liu Guosong 劉國松 (b. 1932), Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian 高行健 (b. 1940), etc., in both traditional ink-brush and more contemporary modes. The apartment contained only one Western piece, a little Picasso that hung over the desk in the study with all the pride of place of an insurance company calendar. This Freer-like cache might be worth—who can possibly say? The obituarists of the British press circulated an estimate of “upwards of £15 million” (Clark 2013). I would stress the qualifier upwards given that single works by the twentieth-century masters potentially sell for millions and that convincing provenance is the rarest and most powerful multiplier of value. Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum, which had long been promised the collection and finally inherited it upon Michael’s death, thought it

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3 For all information about the collection, see Sullivan 2009, passim.
valuable enough to merit its own purpose-built gallery. Whatever the financial reality, this math would have appalled Michael, who had a gentleman’s disdain for the capitalist churn of the art market and refused to entertain any discussion with even a tenuous commercial implication, no matter how bound up with larger aesthetic and cultural issues. As the offspring of New York business types who discussed the stock market as casually as baseball and the weather, I found this moratorium maddening, and I regularly blundered into breaches of it.

The moments branded upon my mind with existential fire include my wedding, my daughter’s birth, and the evening we returned from the Chinese buffet to find Michael’s door frame in splinters. The realization that the door had been pried open began in the gut and spread poisonously. We staggered inside with rubbery legs and lumps of meat for hearts. I took the lead and confirmed in a few glances that the apartment had been only superficially rifled. The burglars had forced open a roll-top desk and left the ceremonial jade sword it had contained on the floor. Apparently their shopping list did not include locked-up artifacts of vaguely ancient and gem-like aspect. The paintings were untouched. The prize of the haul was a bedside clock. Chatting with a policewoman later in the evening, I joked that if the burglars had broken into the Tower of London they would have made a clean sweep of the gift shop. She said, “You can’t imagine how dumb criminals are. Nothing tops them for laughs.” This was a close shave. Had the burglars made off with the paintings, Michael would have collapsed into a puddle of his own spilled life-blood like the parent of an abducted child. The next afternoon, the Ashmolean had Michael’s apartment outfitted with an alarm system. The belatedness of this measure occurred to me a year or two later when thieves—brainier than our hapless chronoklepts—lowered themselves through the museum’s glass roof and made off with a £3 million Cezanne.

Geoffrey Hedley (d. 1960), the British Council’s representative in China from 1944 to 1950 (Sullivan 2009, 42), assembled the core of the collection: six of the seven Qi Baishis, a Pu Xinyu 溥心畬 (1896–1964), two of the seven Zhang Daqians, four of the five Lin Fengmians, all three Fu Baoshis, an album of Fu Baoshi landscapes that includes one of the artist’s most poignant autumnal images, and a remarkable album with contributions from most of the above. Michael had known Hedley in China and later in London. Michael’s memoir of his collecting activities does not indicate that the two were close, but the young scholar evidently made an impression on the patrician diplomat-collector. In 1960, Hedley’s “exhausted heart gave out,” as Michael puts it, and he and Khoan were astounded to be reborn as the inheritors of his artistic wealth (Sullivan 2009, 17). Hedley’s decision to place his
collection in their underfunded private hands was visionary. He had found for his collection passionate keepers of a trust. Over the next five decades, Michael and Khoan documented, analyzed, and expanded the collection, eventually accumulating some four hundred paintings, woodblock prints, and sculptures.

That quasi-ambassadorial figures like Hedley make contacts and receive gifts is not surprising; that an unsolicited Huang Binhong landscape, “unmounted and folded up small,” arrived in Michael’s London mailbox during the late 1940s is far more surprising (Sullivan 2009, 88). One wonders what invisible current of love between Michael and Khoan—what gentleness and sincerity—seized the imagination of so many artists and moved them to offer their work. I suspect that Michael and Khoan so often received because they so transparently did not seek. Though they collected on a grand scale, they were not by nature collectors, that is, privatizers and egoizers who parade the work of others as their own mark of distinction. As was apparent to everybody, they were foundation-layers, dusty with trowel work. They envisioned the day when Chinese modern art would assume its place in the world pantheon, and they inspired others to envision this day as well. As the Chinese art market became a brutal scrum in the 1990s, this selflessness must have been all the more winning.

Given the inclusion of so many gifts, the collection’s quality and coherence might seem accidental, but this ignores certain controlling factors: 1) While warm and genuine, Michael’s friendships originated in his desire to meet the artists of whose talent he was most convinced; 2) Valuing Michael’s keen eye—and later the importance of his collection—these artists were careful to offer their best work. Michael may not have cherry-picked every painting in his collection, but it is no accident that these paintings were sent to Michael and no accident that they are exceedingly good.

In a position to choose, Michael chose well. He was a fine and important historian of art, but the essence of his critical enterprise was visual, his true triumph his consistently sound assessment of aesthetic merit. An anecdote suggests his faith in the eye as the indispensable organ, trumping even the reasoning mind. He had long regretted that the collection lacked a Pan Tianshou 潘天壽 (1897–1971). At last he had an opportunity to buy a piece. He sat before the painting morning to night for three days, allowing his mind to exhaust itself so that his eye might at last see. The result was a vision of the painting in its true light: technically correct, even convincing, but somehow off, wrong in ways too tenuous for analysis. He decided not to buy, and he would sigh a little sadly over the sternness of his own judgment. If Michael had a susceptibility—an unconscious preference—it was for the feminine, the
innocent, and the playful. He was not a brooder and his collection tends not to brood, Li Keran’s basaltic black mountain-scape notwithstanding. Michael was fond of Li Huasheng’s 李華生 (b. 1944) Home Village of Li Bai (1987), which hung in his living room. I connect its soft hues and rounded forms with Michael’s taste and temperament. I consider it the quintessential Michael Sullivan-owned painting.

Michael’s personal acquisitions are fascinating because so implausibly good, so indicative of his eye, so obviously the harvest of Khoan’s charm. The most remarkable aspect of the collection is that it juxtaposes the canonical and the recent with so little wavering of the aesthetic standard that Hedley had established. Of the not obviously (or not yet) canonical works, the most striking is perhaps Wang Jia’nan’s 王迦南 (b. 1955) Listening to the Sounds of the Autumn Mountains (2000). It envisions the traditional landscape as a mystic luminosity, the cloud-mirror of some ineffable sunset, recalling Wang Wei’s poem:

The mountain emptiness  
Pounds with speech  
Evening spreads far within the wood  
The moss a lucent green.

Also striking is Li Shubai’s 李虛白 (b. 1940) Landscape No. 5 (2000), which reinterprets the traditional mountain scenery as stylized geometry. The critic Jason Kuo writes that Li “maintains his connection with the contemporary world by creating a seemingly flat pictorial space and a pixilated effect reminiscent of digital media” (Kuo 36). To my mind, Li’s topography is less pixilated than crystallized, as if attempting to imagine the kind of art—or even the kind of world—that preceded perspective and anatomy. Li’s art longs to reverse the modern fall from the spirit of stone. C.C. Wang (1907–2003) painted in this manner, as for that matter did Burne-Jones. Call it Chinese pre-Raphaelitism. In Michael’s dining room hung Gao Xingjian’s Farmhouse in the Evening (1998), which seemed elegant even without the luster that would later be added by Gao’s Nobel Prize in Literature (my wife argues that he is a better painter than writer, in any case). Gao utilizes washes of black and grey to evoke—just barely—the outline of figures and landscapes. Michael’s piece is characteristic, a nocturne of fleeting melancholy and brooding suggestion, at once poetic and somehow existential, like a Lin Fengmian landscape rendered in the chromatics of a wet Parisian boulevard. Equally poised between modernity and tradition are Yang Yanping’s 楊燕屏 (b. 1934) semi-abstractions, which seem to fuse traditional landscape topoi and the alien geometries of microbiology. Leung Kui Ting’s 梁巨庭 (b. 1945) Cliff I (2000) is an apparent abstraction that resolves into a version of Li Keran’s iconic
black landscapes. The plunging mountain river seems to organize itself into a calligraphic flourish, suggesting the conflation of art, language, and nature within the great axial energy of *qi*. This is not necessarily a beautiful painting, but it is an elegant stroke of visual philosophy. By giving them the chance to hold their own beside the work of Qi Baishi, Fu Baoshi, and Li Keran, Michael did everything possible for these paintings; time’s sorting hand must do the rest.

Khoan collaborated in all Michael’s work, as Michael endlessly emphasized. She translated, corresponded, researched, and lent her own keen aesthetic sense (having inherited Khoan’s hand-tailored wardrobe, my wife is literally robed in her good taste). It is no secret that in her later years Khoan suffered mental impairment. Senile dementia was the official diagnosis. By the time we met her in 1996, she was unable to communicate coherently and seemed sporadically lost in dissociative fantasy. She would often converse animatedly with Zhong Sibin’s 鍾泗濱 (1917–83) full-length portrait of herself (1959), all her charm lavished on the beautiful guest who was her younger self. We, too, felt her charm. She darted with the alert energy of a little bird and exuded hospitality, greeting you at the door, taking your arm, and leading you to the sofa. Her beauty was not diminished but rendered more poignant by her wisps of grey hair. We realized that personality is not a function of reason but of some marrow-deep habit of identity. Although I had never heard Khoan speak an intelligible sentence, I knew not only what she had been but what she still was. The famous photo of Khoan and Zhang Daqian—her head thrown back in laughter, his smile bemused—memorializes a charm that never dissipated. We were perpetually moved by Michael’s devotion to Khoan. In all the years we knew him, he exhibited not even the mildest complaint, impatience, or weariness. These final years of caretaking were not the anti-climax of a scholarly career, but the climax of a profoundly humane life, the ultimate test of feeling for which all else had been preparation. Our dining room includes a photograph of my wife in their company, amid the artistic bounty of their apartment. This will rest in its spot for the rest of our lives. When we glance its way we remember the paintings; even more, something that eludes all paintings.

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4 The photograph was taken in 1967 at the Stanford Art Museum, during Zhang’s Northern Californian interlude. It features as both frontispiece and rear cover of Modern Chinese Art: The Khoan and Michael Sullivan Collection. See Sullivan 2009.
References


