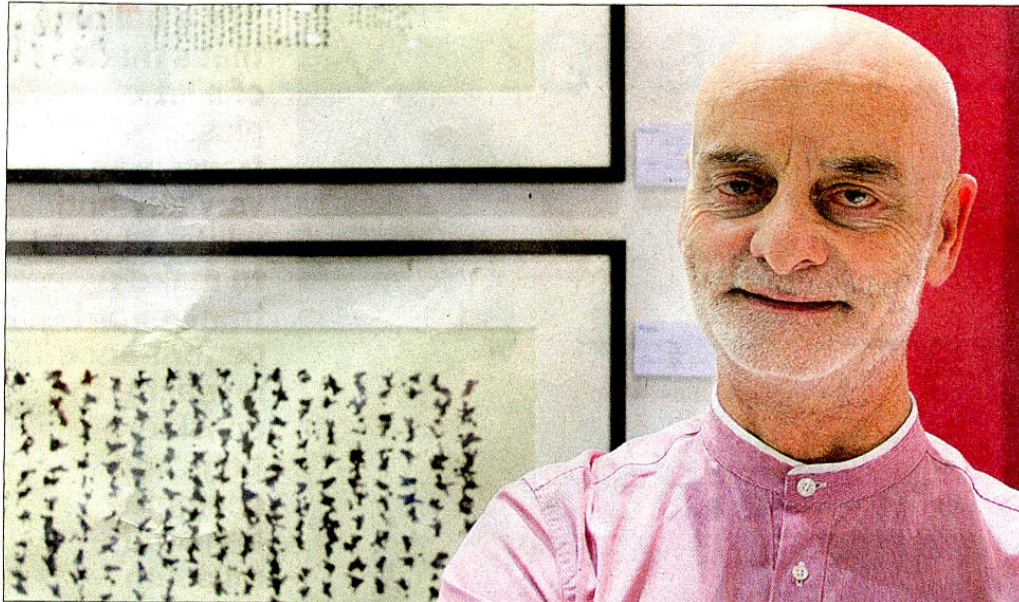


Artist Featured: Bai Yi Luo (China)

Source: The Straits Times, Life! – Saturday, October 06, 2007 Page 8 & 9



ART AND YOU:
Dr Uli Sigg (left) says that buying art is an inquiry into oneself.

ST PHOTOS: ALAN LIM

Buy art like an expert

Curiosity is more important than deep pockets when it comes to buying art, says a collector

June Cheong
ARTS REPORTER

YOU don't need a million bucks to buy art. What you need is curiosity, an aptitude for bargaining and at least a four-figure budget.

Top collector of contemporary Chinese art Dr Uli Sigg, 61, who is in Singapore for the ongoing Asian art fair ART-Singapore, says: "The first-time buyer should go to an art fair and look at everything. He should ask himself why he likes or hates something.

"Art buying is an inquiry into yourself."

The former Swiss ambassador to China began collecting art in the late 1980s, when he and his physician wife Rita were stationed there.

Besides holding positions on the international councils of museums like Tate Gallery in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he also serves as vice-chairman on the board of Swiss media enterprise Ringier Group.

And until the late 1990s, he was virtually the only serious collector of contemporary Chinese art, which has soared in value in recent years. His collection currently spans 1,600 pieces – from sculptures to paintings to installation art – and includes works from today's top names in Chinese art like Zhou Tiehai and Yue Minjun.

One of Dr Sigg's most famous pieces is the 1973 painting *Divert Water From The Milky Way*, a propagandist canvas from the Cultural Revolution years, showing workers building an aqueduct.

Some 300 pieces of his collection are constantly on tour in overseas exhibitions, while the rest are in Switzerland.

He says: "What sticks in your mind after looking at a lot of art is a good indication of what works speak to you."

Case in point: The most recent art piece he acquired was a 20m-long and 4m-high sculpture by Chinese artist Wang Jin, 45, which depicts a set of vertebrae.

"Maybe because I hurt my spine recently, I was intrigued by this work which is shaped like a spine," Dr Sigg says. "It's a very powerful work."

Asked what differentiates an art collector from an art buyer, he quips: "At some point, your apartment gets full. If you don't stop buying art right there, you become a collector."

His most expensive buy was a famous

portrait of Mao Zedong by Chinese artist Chen Yanning two years ago. It cost him a cool US\$1 million.

He says: "I can only afford to do that once. I don't want to repeat it. Contemporary Chinese art has become a lot more expensive. One has to be very selective when paying such high prices."

He advises first-time buyers to consider buying photographs as they are generally cheaper.

Another practical tip for buyers: Turn up at art fairs early to get the best picks, or go late when booths are closing and sellers might be more willing to negotiate prices.

Asked if haggling applies in a respectable art fair, he says with a wry smile: "The art dealers will hate me for saying this but the pricing of an artwork is a soft science. Prices can always be discussed."

Armed with these pointers, *Life!* took a walk through the fair with Dr Sigg on Thursday and found out what he would buy if he had \$1,500, \$5,000, \$15,000 and \$25,000 to spare and why.

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> ART-Singapore is at Suntec Singapore, Level 4, Hall 404, from today to Monday. Opening hours are 11am to 8pm except on Monday when it opens at 11am and closes at 5pm. Call 6235-4113 for tickets, which cost \$10 each.

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If you have... \$5,000

What: Summer, a photographic print by Chinese artist Bai Yiluo, which is an extensive arrangement of flies made to resemble Chinese calligraphic characters

How much: \$8,800. Okay, so the budget was busted but what's another \$3,800 for an art piece by acclaimed Luoyang-born photographer and installation artist Bai?

Where: Asian Art Options, Booth C05

Why: "I personally like his work. All his works usually deal with photography and are process-driven. This one alludes to Chinese calligraphy but in a clever, original way. It takes the viewer out of his comfort zone and teaches us to look at things anew."