

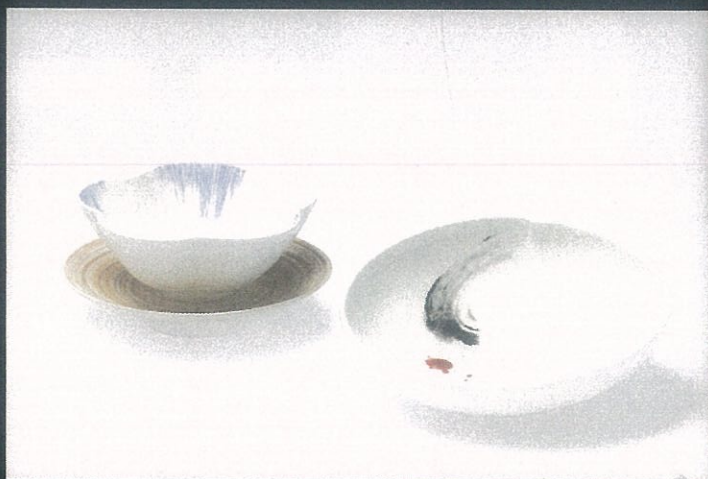


A CONVERSATION WITH KAI-YIN LO

Recognized globally for her signature jewellery, known as a cultural historian, this iconic arts, design and culture advocate is leading the way in establishing Hong Kong as a centre for collectors.

Text Cammy Yiu

Photos Courtesy of Kai-Yin Lo



Foliated bowl with stand & Calligraphy dish

Kai-Yin's signature arrangement with disparate yet coordinating jades (Sung, Ming and later), Western Han gilt bronze and carved jade piece, Ming wax amber disc

I was awestruck by her generosity with her time and knowledge. When I requested an interview with the doyenne of jewellery design – a living icon – I did not expect an immediate reply. I got one. A true professional, Kai-Yin Lo made time to meet with me. Unexpectedly and surprisingly, she proposed that we meet in her home to chat about her upcoming exhibition at Fine Art Asia 2013.

During our conversation, I understood why a meeting in her home was the ideal setting. Often she hurried about amongst her huge collection of art, antiques, books and curios to retrieve a significant reference, a book, an art piece or an exquisite strand of jewellery, to make and reinforce her point. Her “reference” materials were abundant.

Enthusiastic and joyfully giddy, as Kai-Yin Lo showed me her amazing collection, she also talked about her passions, her observations about the state of art and culture in Hong Kong and about collecting. Interesting and interested in all things visually exciting and pleasing, Kai-Yin Lo is wholly inspiring.

The following is part of my conversation with Kai-Yin Lo.

Cammy: Kai Yin, how long have you been associated with the Fine Art Asia Fair?

Kai-Yin: I have been exhibiting at the fair from the beginning and every year since. I believe in the fair, and a few years ago I was active in helping Andy Hei [the founder of Fine Art Asia] liaise with and find the right exhibitors to attend. There are so many collectors, I believed, that we must put on a good and substantial show. Now the fair has gained momentum and status as the finest and only show of its kind here. As Hong Kong has become an arts and antique centre, it really is the Maastricht [the world’s largest art and antique fair in the Netherlands] in this area.

In the early ‘90s there were only a few art galleries here, and a few art fairs were held, but nothing really took hold. Now there are hundreds of art galleries and a steady offering of arts and antique auctions and contemporary art fairs many times per year. The time seems to be ripe for art fairs and the dawn of a cultural awakening. Have you seen a change in the last few decades with regard to the acceptance of arts and culture by the general public in Hong Kong?

Yes – markedly. Firstly, connoisseurship and collecting is an age-old pastime and an innate enjoyment in our culture. And secondly, the art market has grown. At the moment, there is a prevalence of interest in fine arts. Art has become a medium for investment, and even young people, those who don’t have a lot of money, find whatever way they can to start collecting. There is also an escalation in the prices in different categories of art.

It used to be that art was collected only by the rich and the elite. Now collecting has become more commonplace. What has created this change?

I think, partly because there are more categories for collecting. Also, the general concept of collecting has changed. The driver is interest. It can also be a mark of distinction for oneself. By seeking the understanding and knowledge to collect, one may acquire the expertise.

We have observed from our readership that there is a younger market for arts and culture. However this group is not very knowledgeable about art or art collecting. What would you recommend to a young person, say someone in their 20s or 30s, who is interested in art and in collecting?

They have to have a lot of exposure to art. The expressions can be so divergent in so many different media. When I started with collecting, I knew



Kai-Yin Lo



Necklaces with painted glass beads and agate beads

Necklace with ivory knot, turquoise disc and carved jade

A Conversation with Kai-Yin Lo

nothing about it. With a small beginning, I began to understand, and started to train myself. I am a historian and I go back to the basics. I am grateful to have the knowledge of the development of different aspects in society and culture. It is very important to know this.

You have the benefit of your immense knowledge of history and of arts and culture to help guide you when you are collecting. For those who don't have your background, how does one get started?

For example, I collect limited editions of something that commemorates an event or an artist. I learn about something that has distinction in a certain area. This could be a rare postcard. Thirty years ago, I bought postcards of the Leonardo drawings from the British Museum. I remember these and I still have them, and they give me great pleasure.

Should novice collectors concern themselves with the investment value of art?

It is an inevitable consideration. Buy names that are known for their excellence, that are recognized and are affordable. Know what you are buying.

It seems you will have a lot to display at the fair. Yes, including a new collection of ceramics. These are limited edition productions – not easily produced. I am trying to do a new production in Jingdezhen, where ceramics in Southern China began. After making hundreds of phone calls, we will finally get the samples tomorrow.

Ceramics from my contemporary collection are inspired by the white ceramics of the Song era, which I collect. I designed these new pieces, inspired by the fluted shapes and elegance of the ceramics of this era. The Song designs were influenced by China's interchange with the Middle East, which resulted in a lot of wonderful happenings. My modern interpretations have design elements that incorporate touches of East and West, old and new. These touches, such as the red dot, are inspired Joan Miro and other details by Cy Twombly.



Necklace with Xijiang white jade pebbles with amber accent. 18 Century amber drop



Hand braided cord necklace with carved bone and an amber drop

You obviously do a lot of collecting. What did you look for when you were just starting, and what do you look for now when you collect? When I was young, I dabbled in decorating. I had an artistic bent in me. When I went to the UK to go to university, I studied European history and collected some old master's drawings. I didn't know that much, but I wish I'd gone into it more.

When I came back here, I decided to know more about my history, so I went to Cat Street and bought bits and pieces of jade. No one knew much about these pieces then. Some were good. Others not so good. Instead of leaving these pieces to lie separately, I decided to put them together to wear them. That's how I began to form a direction of design. From then on, I continued to look for jade, semi-precious old stones, amber included, for materials. I always mix old with the new. I will be exhibiting some of these.

I used to collect Chinese furniture, but because of the wood, it has become expensive. I now



Different mother of pearl flower pins set with semi-precious stones and pearls. 18K gold and silver vermeil



The early 1930's Alvar Aalto Paimio armchair.



Nendo Cabbage Chair

collect vintage, contemporary and modern furniture. I have always been interested in modern masters and designers. In 2008, I had the opportunity to buy two important chairs, because of the downturn in the economy, for a fraction of the price of Chinese chairs. These chairs are designed by a master. The Curly Birch Chair is by Alvar Aalto, stamped and numbered. The Paimio Chair, 1932, also by Aalto, is made with wood which for the first time was bent as one piece. I admire Aalto very much, because he has a lot of affinity with Japan and with nature.

During a recent trip to Denmark, I bought this Grand Prix chair made around 1963 by the great Arne Jacobsen. It is inspired by medieval chairs. I have some contemporary designs, such as this chair by Thomas Heatherwick – who at the moment can do no wrong. This is a new one, the Cabbage Chair, by Nendo who is one of the most successful designers in the world at the moment. These chairs I can still buy direct from the modern masters.

It sounds like you take the opportunity when things are affordable to get into collecting the affordable. Is this correct?

Yes, that's right. When I first started buying Huanghuali furniture, it was affordable. Now it is impossible. The wood is so rare.

Will you be selling some of your collection of chairs at the fair?

I will sell some. I do have quite a few of these Arne Jacobsen chairs. 🇺🇸



"Balance with imbalance" - a necklace with white and green jade, carved amber, and amethyst



Two versions in an easy-to-wear lingzhi design edition. Clear crystal strewn with diamonds, green tsavorite and pink sapphires. Other pendant in dark crystal.

Buy names that are known for their excellence, that are recognized and are affordable. Know what you are buying