

[Articles by Dr. Pratapaditya Pal](#)

Asianart.com offers pdf versions of some articles for the convenience of our visitors and readers. These files should be printed for personal use only. Note that when you view the pdf on your computer in Adobe reader, the links to main image pages will be active: if clicked, the linked page will open in your browser if you are online. This article can be viewed online at: <http://asianart.com/articles/ellsworth>

With great pleasure Asianart.com announces that Dr. Pratapaditya Pal has agreed to write occasional articles for Asianart.com. This is the first of these articles. By clicking on the [articles by Dr. Pratapaditya Pal](#) link above, the reader will be able to view an index of all the articles published to date on Asianart.com by Dr. Pal.

The Last of the Mohicans Remembering Robert Ellsworth (1929–2014)

by [Pratapaditya Pal](#)

September 17, 2014

text © Pratapaditya Pal

1.



Fig. 1

Born in 1929, the year of The Great Crash, Robert H. Ellsworth died recently in New York – by his own description ‘the token pauper of 960.’ In case the reader is unaware, 960 is the number of the building on Fifth Avenue, where he occupied a 20-room apartment: it is supposed to be the third most desirable address in New York, only a block or two from The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Not bad for a child brought up in the depression era.

When I first met Robert (‘Bobby’ to most) back in the mid sixties, he had less opulent lodgings and shared the business with James Goldie, who was the opposite of his flamboyant partner: soft-spoken, almost a gentleman out of the Edwardian era. They made a complementary pair and each

was an engaging personality in their own distinctive ways.

It was at about the same time that I also met the now almost forgotten Christian Humann, who was of about the same age as Bobby. The three were good friends, but like James, Christian was less voluble and blustery than Bobby. Christian was born a European aristocrat (a French count by birth), American by education and by profession an investment banker on Wall Street. It was a fascinating experience when occasionally the four of us dined together: Bobby was always the life of the party.

Even then, when we were all young (I was still a bachelor and the youngest) Bobby drank like a fish and smoked like a well-kept chimney. Those were the days when smoking was still permitted anywhere and everywhere. Unlike the rest of us, Bobby never abandoned his indulgences in either alcohol or tobacco, and I remember wondering in the late 80s if Bobby would ever see the new millennium. Typically, he proved us all wrong.



Fig. 2

For a decade from the late 70s, Bobby and I served on the IRS art review committee in Washington D.C. (other members of the panel were the venerable Sherman Lee, Henry Trubner, and Thomas Lawton). Even though Sherman was the undeclared chairman of the sessions, Bobby was always the most conspicuous presence with his memory, wit, cigarette and his commanding baritone voice. Alcohol was of course verboten as we were discussing the fate of numerous fat cat donors of art to museums and it would have been disastrous if it leaked out that we were seriously questioning the value of taxpayer's donations in an alcoholic stupor. It's the only time I saw Bobby sit through two-hour stretches at a time, without moistening his lips every ten minutes or so with sips of bourbon, as women do theirs with lipstick.

In fact, after smoking was disallowed in the polluted air above the United States Bobby would fly to L.A. by taking an international flight (which still permitted customers to puff away) from New York to Mexico City and then to Los Angeles, which too was an international flight. When smoking was prohibited on those flights as well, Bobby stopped visiting the West coast. He was Churchillian in his indulgence to these two minor human vices and both lived to ripe old ages.

2.

As I write this tribute to a man who I characterize as the 'Last of the Mohicans' in the field of Asian art, I have before me an article published in 1994 in *The Independent* (U.K.) and the recent obituary in *The New York Times* [1]. In both Bobby has been lauded primarily for his life in Chinese art. In what is a lively and witty article, *The Independent* characterized him as "An Orientalist in Manhattan' and the world's richest dealer in Chinese art, while *The Times* obituary is a more somber panegyric about Bobby in his many different roles as a versatile collector and a distinguished scholar of Chinese art, as a preeminent dealmaker, as an astute market manipulator, as a friend of the rich and famous, as a generous donor, and as a dedicated patron of the MET (with which he seemed to have had a love-hate relationship).

I shall however concentrate on his life as a dealer in South and Southeast Asian art, which is what brought us together in the first place. It should be mentioned that in those days of the mid sixties the principal categories of Asian art recognized in the art world were known as Chinese, Japanese, and Indian. Southeast Asian art as a category did not become preeminent or popular until after America's military adventurism in that part of the world and the Himalayas received attention only among mountain climbers. The Dalai Lama had not yet become popular with the Hollywood crowd and Nepal was yet to be swamped with young American pacifists in the form of hippies as the Vietnam War raged.



Fig. 3

It should also be pointed out in those days when Bobby was beginning his career; scholars of Asian art were more catholic and versatile than they are now. Scholars such as Alexander Soper, Max Loehr, Larry Sickman, Richard Ettinghausen, Benjamin Rowland, and even Sherman Lee were curious and knowledgeable way beyond their own fields of specialization. One might say that they were all rounders, and cast more in the Coomaraswamy mould, than the narrow art historians of today. I even remember long conversations with the formidable Meyer Shapiro who was a medievalist, but a great admirer of Coomaraswamy and well informed about Asian art. The youngest of that generation of scholars who also has now passed away was John Rosenfield, whose first publication on Kushan Art remains a classic even though he became a renowned Japanese art historian. The celebrated Indian dealer Nasli Heeramaneck,

who would have been 114 years old today had he lived, was also of that mindset and roamed all over Asia and cast as wide a net as did Ellsworth. Nasli died in 1971 and curiously I never heard him mention Bobby and vice-versa, but as I will presently discuss, mysterious are the ways of Providence.

In *The Independent* article Ellsworth himself ascribed his phenomenal success as a dealer to having stored away one in every three items he bought. So did Heeramaneck, who as early as 1966 produced the greatest show of Indian and Himalayan art that America had ever seen—all from the nooks and crannies of his townhouse on E. 83rd Street. That exhibition today forms the core of the LACMA Indian Collection. Moreover, two other Heeramaneck Collections—that of the ancient art of Asian nomadic cultures and Persia as well as of Islamic art—are also now in LACMA [2]. Additionally, two other substantial assemblages of Indian and Himalayan art are in the Virginia Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Ottawa [3]. Even more fascinating is the story of how yet another spectacular collection from the Heeramaneck attic and basement ultimately ended up with Ellsworth. But before I narrate

that tale I must first recount Bobby's first coup in the field of Indian art in the mid 60s.

3.

It was serendipity that brought the Belmont Collection of Indian art, mostly Chola bronzes, to Bobby's door just as the Heeramanek exhibition was about to hit the road; Ellsworth seized the moment. J.R. Belmont was Swiss and lived in India (just after World War II) as representative of Swiss Air. While there, he formed a collection of Chola bronzes with which he returned to Switzerland a few years after independence without any difficulty. A decade later he was compelled to liquidate the collection to raise funds to rescue his nephew from financial difficulties. He knew the canny collector Sammy Eilenberg of New York (another legend in our field whose story remains untold) whom he approached and Sammy put him in touch with Ellsworth. This is where Christian Humann came in as the financier behind the deal.

From what I could gather, Christian agreed to lend the funds to Ellsworth on condition that he would have the first pick from the Belmont Collection. In the event, however, the most important piece in the Belmont Collection ended up in the John D. Rockefeller 3rd collection. It is the unique sculpture of Kaliyadamana (Krishna quelling the serpent Kaliya) that has no equal in India in the medium of bronze [4]. From the two versions I have heard about this story from Christian and Bobby, it was a misunderstanding. Bobby insisted that he always made it clear to Christian that he would sell that particular bronze to Rockefeller, while Christian assumed it would be his. I never heard Sammy's version of the unfortunate incident, for at the time I did not know his involvement.



Fig. 4

I say unfortunate because it ended the friendship between Ellsworth and Humann. Christian made his choice of the Belmont objects and never did the twain meet again. So the statement in The New York Times obituary that the '1600 paintings and objects [a most inadequate description of the vast Pan Asian collection of Christian Humann] from India, Southeast Asia, and China had been acquired over a quarter-century with Mr. Ellsworth's counsel' is patently incorrect.

As long as I knew Christian since at least 1967 until his premature death in the early 80s, he refused to meet Bobby or speak about him. I remember chastising him about this from time to time, especially when I would visit Bobby and become excited over an object that Christian should buy; I thought he was the ultimate loser, but Christian would not be persuaded.

I don't know exactly when the two met, but presumably it was sometime in the late 50s. Thus, for about a decade until 1967, Bobby may well have been Christian's principal source, especially for Southeast Asian objects but also for some Indian and Chinese material, most of which was stored in the Denver Art Museum as both were friendly with Mary Lanius, the Asian art curator (who I first met in Calcutta in the early 60s) and Emma C. Bunker, who was associated with the museum and a close friend of both. In January 1970 I moved to Los Angeles (LACMA) and thereafter most of Christian's purchases in Europe, U.K. and the U.S. would be sent to LACMA.

It was in 1973 that Alice Heeramanek approached me to say that she needed to sell a large collection of Indian and Himalayan art and could I find a buyer. I called Christian first and asked if he would be interested and so on my next visit to New York, along with Claus Virch (who was then managing an art fund for Christian and some of his investors) visited Alice and a deal was struck for \$1.6 million for a large collection of hundreds of objects including stone and metal sculptures, Indian paintings –both Mughal and Rajput– Indian and Nepali illuminated Buddhist manuscripts (over one hundred pages and the largest cache in private hands) and also a group of over a hundred thankas from both Nepal and Tibet, which included the remnants of the great Tucci collection. In fact of the 1600 artworks that Ellsworth later acquired from the Pan Asian Collection, at least a third was originally collected by the Heeramaneks.

This haul was shipped out to LACMA lock, stock and barrel, and remained there until his death. It was from this collection and the Indian sculptures on display and in storage in Denver that I made a selection and organized 'The Sensuous Immortals' exhibition that opened in 1977 at LACMA, probably the most important exhibition of Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian art ever organized to date in the world [5].



Fig. 5

Humann was reluctant to exhibit the collection in his own name and so we concocted the expression 'Pan-Asian' as it included a significant number of objects from several sovereign countries of Asia except of course Tibet, which had become part of China.

Significantly, in expressing his gratitude in the Collector's preface, Christian thanked a large number of dealers in Europe and New York, which included R.H. Ellsworth among the latter [6]. In thanking me, he wrote that 'In the past decade he has guided the evolution of the collection with skill, tact and devotion,' so the evidence does not support The New York Times obituary claim about Mr. Ellsworth's counsel for over a quarter-century.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

When Humann suddenly died a few years later I was approached, this time by his brother Edgar and the estate, to see if I would be willing to leave LACMA and, for a guaranteed annual payment of \$100,000 (my salary at the museum was half that amount) and a commission of 5 percent on every sale, to sell the collection over the span of the next five years. The money was tempting but I thought better of it, as I was enjoying my job at the museum and did not want to lose the many other advantages of being a county employee. So I demurred and told them that I would find them a buyer.

Knowing how complete the collection was I thought at least the objects in The Sensuous Immortals should be placed in a museum. Within weeks of Humann's death both the Cleveland Museum of Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art had submitted their wish lists to the estate and so I knew those institutions would not be interested in the entire collection. Besides, Cleveland had a policy of never buying collections, though recently they appear to have changed that policy and acquired a private collection for more than the asking price of The Sensuous Immortals. So I approached Dr. Dillon Ripley, who was then the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute and urged him to buy the collection to add to the Freer, which had only modest collection of South and Southeast Asian sculpture. Together with their already impressive collection of Indian paintings it would make them a major repository of art from that part of the world.



Fig. 8

The offer was declined though a few years later they bought a major collection of Indian and Persian paintings for a larger amount of money.

So the smart and irrepressible Robert Ellsworth made his move and the deal was done, as the estate needed funds to pay taxes to Uncle Sam. I admired Bobby's chutzpah, but knowing what I did of their relationship the irony of the purchase was not lost on me.

4.

None of this wheeling and dealing ever had any effect on Bobby's and my personal relationship. Since 1970 after joining LACMA whenever I came to New York (which was usually three times a year) we would invariably meet for a drink or two or three at his place late in the afternoon exchanging gossip, listening to his relentless yarns about collectors and celebrities, about his relationships with the two stars in his life – Alice Boney and Claudette Colbert – and viewing his new acquisitions, which was always a delight because often there was a dramatic tale behind each, as I will narrate presently.

First, however, I want to relate my tale of the first spectacular acquisition that I made through Ellsworth for LACMA. Soon after joining the museum I realized that the weakest part of the Heeramanek collection that LACMA had acquired was Chola bronzes, generally regarded as the aristocrats of Indian art. Not only did we not have a Chola Nataraja but no significant example of a Chola bronze of any other form. One day I was lamenting the omission to Bobby as he sipped his bourbon from his silver cup and I my scotch from a glass, when he asserted that he could remedy that. This was only a few months into my new curatorship. I was surprised as I did not notice any outstanding Chola bronze around, but he said that he knew where he could get hold of some. He

asked me to return the next afternoon and he would show them.



Fig. 9

So I did so eagerly and abracadabra there on a table were standing a group of four bronzes of impressive size representing Krishna Rajamannar (The Cowherd King), his two spouses Rukmini and Satyabhama and his 'lear-jet' the Garuda bird (fig. 5). They had the usual accretions from being buried in the ground but I could visualize the forms underneath. Even though they belonged to the later Chola period, they made a stunning group. I had never seen a complete group anywhere, not even in a book (and have not seen another since, not even in the countless museums and temples I have visited on the subcontinent). Knowing how expensive Chola bronzes were already I thought to myself how in one fell swoop I could acquire four Chola bronzes representing both the male and female forms. They were not only outstanding examples of the late Chola style but together formed a

rare iconographic group and would make an eye-popping display for the lay public in a museum gallery.

With trepidation I asked the price and Bobby said, \$150,000. It was not a huge price for Chola bronzes but I hesitated, as I was not sure that so soon after purchasing the Heeramanek collection (about 350 objects for 2.5 million to be paid over 10 years! What an incredible deal!) I could get that kind of money from the trustees. After all LACMA wasn't the MET or Cleveland. Noting my hesitance, Bobby in his deep voice said, "Prata (he always left out the last 'p' and Henry Trubner always called me 'Prat'), believe me the owner needs the money but if I had the time to clean these guys up, I would ask double the amount."

I knew he was not bluffing, for he was indeed an expert restorer of bronzes who had always done his own cleaning with infinite patience and dental tools (his father was a dentist and mother an opera singer and I always wondered if she had not died early in his life whether he would not have cultivated that voice musically). So I told him to send the bronzes to Los Angeles and fortunately fairly soon I was able to find a couple of angels in Hal Wallis, the famous Hollywood producer (most notably Elvis films and Casablanca) and his wife, the actress Martha Heyer. (Fig. 9a) Wallis had just been invited to join the board of trustees and regarded the money to be his initiation fee for the privilege. The bronzes were cleaned in the museum's conservation department with spectacular result. The following year I published a monograph on the group. [7].



Fig. 9a

Indeed a little later I had the privilege to watch Bobby clean a sizable bronze Buddha from Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu. He was very proud to have spotted the bronze, which was heavily encrusted with accretions, in an auction in London, [8] eluding all the dealers including his friend the eagle-eyed Sammy Eilenberg. By the time Bobby completed cleaning the bronze it was transformed into a spectacular artwork of elegant simplicity and dignity. Robert did not hide the fact that he had paid a meager \$5,000, but now his asking price was \$125,000, a year after the auction.

I would have preferred to buy it for the museum but I had just acquired the Rajamannar group. Approaching Humann was not an option and so I brought it to the attention of the industrialist Norton Simon who had recently started to collect Indian art. However, when I told him what Bobby had paid for it a year ago and what his nonnegotiable asking price was, of course, Simon was outraged and called it highway robbery. It took me a few weeks to convince him (principally by reminding him how he himself bought companies on the cheap, turned them around and sold them for a profit).

What finally persuaded Simon was that neither Christian Humann nor John D. Rockefeller 3rd owned anything similar. [9]. Those two collectors were his touchstones.

5.

Whether Robert H. Ellsworth was the 'King of Ming' or the 'No. 1 purveyor of things Asian,' as has been claimed by Mark F. Wilson, the noted Chinese art specialist, or for that matter, the 'world's richest dealer in Chinese art' as he was characterized back in 1994 in The Independent, I can affirm, having known him for almost half a century, that he was one of the most flamboyant and smartest art dealers I have had the privilege to meet. He was complex, generous, voluble, loose-mouthed, stylish, fiercely loyal to those he loved, charming with the rich and famous (with many of whom he moved in at 960 in 1977), irreverent (he described his celebrity

residence in 1994 as ‘the best mouse trap in the world’), and, as another friend who knew him well suggested, ‘enigmatic.’



Fig. 10

Another friend, a retired curator in a prestigious museum, told me over the phone that Robert always promised him that he would split his collection, if and when he died, between his museum and the MET. But in 1994, he declaimed to the writer of The Independent article, “When I cool [a typical Bobby phrase] my holdings will be sold in a consecutive seven day sale. The last lot will be a single item, the finest piece of jade in the world – which I wear on my finger.” That too was priceless Ellsworth chutzpah!

If indeed that is what he has planned it will include at least two objects from the remainder (both once belonged to Christian Humann) a powerful brass and expressive portrait of an unknown Tibetan mystic (fig. 10), and a delicately modeled and lustrously polished sandstone Khmer female figure (fig. 11). Both were his favorites and no amount of money could persuade him to part with them. Possibly the Khmer lady was originally sold to Humann by Ellsworth, which is one reason for his attachment to her.



Fig. 11

We wait with bated breath to see the final dénouement planned by the autodidactic dealer and most colorful personality that I have ever met in the field of oriental art.

But that may not be Bobby’s last hurrah! He always threatened to write his memoirs, which he promised would be both candid (with a twinkle in his eyes) and entertaining. I wonder if that was just a bluff or the truth!

Endnotes

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/arts/design/robert-h-ellsworth-whose-life-was-devoted-to-chinese-art-dies-at-85.html>
Bruce Weber, ‘Robert H. Ellsworth is dead at 85 After a Life devoted to Chinese Art,’ The New York Times (Aug. 8, 2014), p. A17.
And
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/an-orientalist-in-manhattan-he-lives-in-a-20room-new-york-apartment-and-is-the-worlds-richest-dealer-in-chinese-art-but-how-did-robert-ellsworth-get-there-1425285.html>
An orientalist in Manhattan: He lives in a 20-room New York apartment and is the world's richest dealer in Chinese art. But how did Robert Ellsworth get there? Geraldine Norman Sunday 26 June 1994
2. For the early Asian art see Nancy Thomas, ‘Nasli M. Heeramaneck (1902–1971)’ in Pratapaditya Pal (ed.) American Collectors of Asian Art. (Bombay: Marg, 1986), pp. 73-92 and also Glen Markoe (ed.) Ancient Bronzes, Ceramics and Seals (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1981). For the Islamic art collection, see Pratapaditya Pal (ed.) Islamic Art, The Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection. (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1973).
3. For the Virginia Museum of Art Collection see Joseph M. Dye III, The Art of India (Charlottesville, The University of Virginia Press, 2001). For the National Gallery of Art Collection, see, Pratapaditya Pal, Divine Images Human Visions (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada – Bayeux Art, 1977). and Pratapaditya Pal: Images Divines perceptions humaines, (Ottawa National Gallery of Art – Bayeux Arts, 1977).
4. The scuttlebutt in Bombay (now Mumbai) was that the sculpture languished in the city’s art market in the mid- 50s but no one bought it as the asking price of \$5,000 was considered excessive. It was even offered to Mr. Rockefeller when he stopped in Bombay en route to Japan but he demurred because he did not wish to buy any antiquities in India. It was finally snapped up by Belmont.
5. Pratapaditya Pal, The Sensuous Immortals, A selection of sculptures from the Pan-Asian Collection (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1977).
6. Pratapaditya Pal, The Sensuous Immortals, A selection of sculptures from the Pan-Asian Collection (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1977), p.7

7. Pratapaditya Pal, Krishna: The Cowherd King (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1972). The Norton Simon Museum has a more modest group but without the Garuda, considerably smaller in size but of slightly earlier date. See Pratapaditya Pal, Art From the Indian Subcontinent (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with The Norton Simon Museum, 2003) pp.260-61, #186.

8. Catalogue of Primitive Art, Tibetan Tankas, Indian, Khmer, Tibetan and Thai Sculpture (Dec. 7, 1971, Sotheby's London), cat. # 68.

9. Pratapaditya Pal, Art From the Indian Subcontinent (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with The Norton Simon Museum, 2003), pp. 257-8. #183. The bronze had been first published by Alfred Salmony in Asiatische Kunst Ausstellung Köln, 1926.

text © Pratapaditya Pal

Articles by Dr. Pratapaditya Pal

asianart.com | [articles](#)