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## Paul F. Walter (1935-2017): Personal Memories

by Pratapaditya Pal

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1

I once read a book by Sir Erwin Panofsky which asserted that all artists were born under Saturn; today I would say that so are all curators and collectors of art. Paul Walter, however, must have been an exception; as a collector he was so passionate, avaricious, curious, eclectic, impulsive, gregarious and generous that I always felt he must have been born under all the planets and shared bits of all the zodiacal signs. He was a big man, with a big appetite and a big heart, like Mr. John Wayne of Hollywood fame.

Paul and I initially met in the summer of 1964 in New York when I first came to this country as a visiting fellow of the JDR 3rd Fund. We met at the Doris Wiener Gallery by chance and remained friends until his death early



Fig. 1

this year. He was born a couple of months before me in the same year and now he has predeceased me after a friendship that lasted a little over half a century (fig.1).

Every year since that initial meeting we would greet each other on our respective birthdays through the telephone and remind ourselves that the Dalai Lama was also our contemporary (in fact Paul and the great monk were born in the same month). As we aged, we would joke who among the three would be the first to leave this earth. Well, he beat me to it, which is a great personal loss, but hopefully, His Holiness will see many more autumns than I do. In all these years--53 to be exact--Paul was the only one among my numerous Western friends who had visited my family's country house in the suburbs of Calcutta (now Kolkata) and met my family, as I often went to

his country pad and met his extended family. With few other Western friends have I had such a long familiar relationship, both professional and personal.

He was also one of few friends with whom I traveled abroad (in 1974) to India, including Kashmir where we stayed in adjacent houseboats, and Afghanistan. Characteristically, he was eager to participate in the annual autumnal festival of Durga Puja at our house (fig. 2) and to attend a special ceremony at Jaipur in Rajasthan on the last day of the festival. That ceremony on the 10th day (*Dusserah*) of the puja consists of *astrapuja* or the worship of weapons in the palace courtyard when the maharaja sits enthroned in full regalia and accepts tributes (bags of money) from all the chiefs and grandees of his kingdom. Although by then officially there were no "princedoms," the maharajas continued to observe the traditional ceremonies with all the ancient pomp and glory. I was not aware of this annual spectacle and only because of Paul was able to witness it.





Fig. 2

Earlier in our home while some fifty of us sat on the ground and took our midday meal off banana leaves, Paul was provided with a table and chair, and a ceramic plate and cutlery. With his usual savoir-faire and aplomb, Paul ate with relish and no awkwardness as if to the manner born. This is how the British Sahibs used to be entertained when they attended festivals at the mansions of the rich and famous natives in the days of the Raj. Paul loved it for, as all who knew him are aware, (and as I will discuss shortly), Paul was a passionate collector of Victoriana as well as the art of the Maharajas. It was serendipitous that he was treated like a pucca sahib in our home but he was thrilled. Alas, in those days before the selfie, regrettably, we did not have a cameraman with us.



Fig. 3

It was also on that trip that we went to see the Buddhist monuments of Sanchi which he had never seen before (fig. 3). Normally the trip to the great stupas and nearby Besnagar (an important archaeological site) from Bhopal was not a difficult journey by car but I was interested in visiting some other ruins, which proved to be more arduous than we thought. We drove off early in the morning for even in October the heat in the region was challenging, expecting to return to our hotel for lunch. However, as is often the case in India even the driver-cum-guide was vague about the precise location and so it happened that the last three miles were not navigable by car and we had to walk literally through a mini jungle. Paul proved to be a good sport and

we set off on a footpath used mostly by woodcutters and reached my Hindu temple ruins. By the time my reconnaissance was over, it was past high noon and we had to trudge back to the car. Those were before the days of bottled water and we were both thirsty and hungry. To my delight I found that most of the trees were fruit bearing, the wild custard apple (*sitaphal* = chiramaya) being the most abundant. As it is one of my favorite fruits. I plucked some, peeled the thick skins and satisfied both my thirst and hunger with the succulent flesh but Paul like a true American demurred.

A couple of days later we found ourselves in a Dak Bunglow at the famous Buddhist site of Amaravati in what was then Andhra Pradesh (now the capital of the new state Telengana). Before driving to see the archaeological site and the museum, the caretaker (generally also the cook) promised us to serve chicken curry and rice (the inevitable and predictable fare at Indian rest-houses since colonial days) for dinner. Upon our return, washed and ravenous, we noticed a large table in the dining room with a bunch of raucous guests speaking Telegu, the language of the region. When our dinner arrived there was no chicken curry but only a vegetarian meal of typically fiery Andara cuisine. I, of course, went ballistic when the caretaker pointed to the boisterous guests, who, as high government officers used the law of eminent domain to usurp our chicken, which is not unusual in Dak Bunglows; Paul, as usual, kept his cool and saved the day.

It was also on that visit to the state that we went to the capital Hyderabad to meet Jagdish Mittal and Colonel Raj Tandon, both well-known collectors of Indian painting. All those who are familiar with these two names will realize what an exciting experience that was. Not only did we feast our eyes with bundle after bundle of Indian pictures and drawings of extraordinary diversity and beauty but it was also an immersion in an ocean of form and color that left us breathless. An additional bonus on that first visit to the ancient capital of the Nizam was

seeing the well known monument called Char Minar in the city which, though architecturally not the Taj Mahal made me nostalgic for the home grown brand of eponymous cigarettes I smoked in my impoverished undergraduate days. (Fig. 4) We also visited the nearby romantic ruins of the old fort of Golconda, the home of a famous Deccani school of painting but better known the world over once as the source of some famous diamonds.



2

Most adventurous and memorable was our foray into Afghanistan,

Fig. 4

flying in from New Delhi. It was safe then and one of the few brief phases of peace in the volatile history of that hapless land which has been ruined in succession by two white nations, neither of whom had any reasonable business to be there: while it shared a border with Soviet Russia, the Americans might as well have belonged to the moon.

I forget now whose idea it was to go to Afghanistan but I suspect it was Paul's since he made the arrangements through his travel agents. I had of course heard and read about the country and its aggressive citizens who, I learnt as a child, all carry guns and shoot first and ask questions later. Subsequently, it had captured my historical imagination because of its close association with Alexander, the world conqueror of the 4th century BCE and, being sort of at the crossroads of Asia, Afghanistan was the staging ground for all land based invasions into India from long before the arrival of the Macedonian. It was through Afghanistan that countless Indian Buddhist monks travelled, via the Silk Road, to spread the message of the Buddha and Indian culture to China and beyond.

So for me it was thrilling to see art treasures of the Kabul Museum in the flesh that I had seen only in books in indifferent reproductions: the exciting Begram hoard that included the wonderful carved ivories from the Kushan period and of course the Bamiyan Buddhas. The journey to and from Kabul to Bamiyan in a Russian made car was an incredible experience: for stretches there were no paved roads and driving across shallow streams was not uncommon. Those Russian sedans were stodgy but sturdy and I will never forget the tension and thrill of that incredible journey with our Afghan driver.

At Bamiyan both Paul and I were surprised that our hotels did not consist of a structure but of individual tents known as yurts pitched in the open on the plateau. It was dusk when we arrived and were shown to our yurts



Fig. 5

but soon after the sun disappeared and we had to walk about 50 yards to the large tent that was the dining room, we had to wear our winter coats (which we had been advised to bring). I remember both of us commiserating the next morning at breakfast about how cold it was at night and how over a pile of blankets, we both had piled our overcoats to stay warm.

We spent the next day visiting the caves with the colossal Buddhas which were indeed among the most thrilling experiences of our lives, not necessarily for their aesthetic merit, but to witness the audacity of man and his brilliant technological skills--not to mention spiritual

ardor--that produced such marvels from live rock (Fig. 5). One almost wondered, as one looked at the faces of the locals, how their ancestors could have created these skyscraper-like figures with their primitive tools. In fact, a couple of decades later at the turn of the millennium, as Afghanistan became a quagmire and a nightmare, and "Taliban" became a household word, thanks to the technological progress of humankind, sitting in distant America we could watch in horror (and in the moment), the wanton destruction of the Buddhas by the descendants of the men who had created them. Paul and I often ruminated about that remote pilgrimage and our good fortune: To visit Sanchi and Bamiyan within a week or so was truly a rare art historical experience.

3

The first exhibition in which Paul and I cooperated was in 1972, two years after I joined the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). His old college Oberlin (Ohio) where his alumnus friend, the eminent art historian Richard Spear, was the director of the Allen Memorial Art Museum at the college, had decided to do an exhibition of a selection from Paul's collection of Indian art, which he had been acquiring then for less than a decade. Apparently he had begun collecting art while an undergraduate at college. The exhibition would be at the Allen Memorial Art Museum with the entire issue of the museum Bulletin devoted to the catalogue. I was invited not only to write it but also to give the annual and prestigious Baldwin lecture on art history. We had a wonderful time at the Oberlin campus for a week, meeting Richard and his artist wife Athena Tacha and other faculty and students, both art historians and artists. Richard and Athena, doubtless motivated by their friend Paul, also are collectors of Indian sculpture though Richard's own field is European painting while Athena is a well-known sculptor. The only fly in the ointment of that otherwise delightful trip to Oberlin College in 1972 was a telephone call from Los Angeles, in fact from the museum director Kenneth Donahue, informing me of the Northridge earthquake. However, he assured me not to worry as only one Indian sculpture had fallen from its

pedestal, the damage was under control and I need not rush back. Thank heavens for small blessings!

Paul gave the museum of his alma mater a large group of paintings and drawings that he had acquired by then, but one of the most important gifts was a sculpture of Shiva or Kumara in grey schist from Rajasthan (fig. 6) Carved in the late 6th century (regarded as the late Gupta period), it is a wonderfully modeled and elegant youthful male figure, who accompanied a group of Mother Goddesses, now in several American museums including LACMA, and the Met in New York. Unusually carved almost in the round, these lively figures are especially attractive for their natural grace. In fact, it was this major gift that not only demonstrated Paul's art historical eye and inherent generosity to museums, but had also occasioned the exhibition and the lecture.



Thus was launched a long period of cooperation between us that contributed to our mutual pleasure in hunting and collecting, discourse and learning. Paul was as voracious an acquisitor as he was generous in sharing his collection by lending, initiating exhibitions and augmenting various museum collections. His residences were chock-a-block full of art in every nook and cranny over every table and within every cupboard and closet. Neither age nor custom could limit his appetite and of all the collectors I have met in my life he was the most eclectic and a true globetrotter. There was always method in his madness (at Oberlin he had studied art history) and so as soon as he thought he had enough material in a given area he would suggest an exhibition.

The next exhibition we organized opened at LACMA in June 1976, and then it traveled until the end of 1978 to a dozen museums both large and small. Both Paul and I believed in the virtue of small, economical and manageable (rather than blockbuster) exhibitions of uncommon themes that could travel to as many institutions as possible without risking the safety of the objects. Even in the 70s, Indian art was relatively unknown and most small and university museums lacked both the opportunity or financial prowess to organize such exhibitions. In fact it was largely Paul's generosity, combined with Richard's enthusiasm, that led to the formation of a substantial and significant assemblage in Indian art at Oberlin.

This first thematic exhibition that also traveled was one of Indian drawings of the Mughal and Rajput schools which had never been done since Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) first drew the world's attention to them by publishing two volumes in the 1910s [1]. Being savvy about Western art, which he had studied as an undergraduate at Oberlin College, Paul was much more conscious about the importance of drawings than I was early in my career, although I remember one of my gurus at Cambridge University, Sir Ernst Gombrich,

impressing upon me the lesson that the drawing was the mother of the painting.

As I wrote in the Acknowledgements of the catalogue:

Since Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the re-discoverer of Rajput paintings, wrote the above in 1912, scant attention has been paid to Indian drawings, although Indian paintings have become increasingly popular in the West. Undoubtedly the primary appeal of Indian paintings is their passionately warm and vivacious colors which tend to obscure the underlying draftsmanship. But once we can learn to look beyond color surfaces, it becomes immediately apparent that much of the "sensuous charm" of the painting emanates from the drawing itself. And if the line best expresses a spiritual intent, as Worringer once suggested, then Indian drawing certainly proves it to be equally expressive of sensuous grace. [2]



Fig. 7

In this centennial year of Coomaraswamy's arrival in Boston in 1917, which marked the formal beginning of institutional collecting of Indian, Himalayan and S.E. Asian art in America, it is particularly gratifying to recall that we took the lead in drawing the art historical world's attention to this neglected area of Indian art [3]. Coomaraswamy would certainly have been pleased and I illustrate here the spectacular colored rendering of Maharaja Pratap Singh of Jaipur by the famous Sahib Ram (fig. 7). Once in the Coomaraswamy Collection, it is now in the Cleveland Museum of Art and a mate to a better-known work of the artist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Most of the drawings and sketches in our show were assembled astutely by the San Francisco dealer of graphic material, Ray Lewis, who brought his collection to LACMA's attention. I got in touch with Paul and without any hesitation he agreed to acquire the group. A fine colored drawing of Maharo Ram Singh of Kotah from the exhibition, given later to the museum by Paul's sister

Marilyn Walter Grounds, who also is a generous donor, is a representative example (fig. 8).

The next joint venture came two years later with the cooperation of The Gallery Association of New York State and the Pierpont Morgan Library with which Paul had a long association and which too is one of the beneficiaries of his largess. The Library's director at the time was the formidable Dr. Charles Ryskamp who was a close friend of Paul. Like the previous exhibition this one too traveled to six other museums after debuting at the Library and ending up at LACMA in June 1980. In the Acknowledgements to the catalogue, Paul generously thanked all the dealers who had helped him to form the collection but particularly Doris Weiner for "originally sparking" his interest in the material. The title of the show was *The Classical Tradition in Rajput Painting from the Paul F. Walter Collection* [4]. The history of these paintings too, it should be recalled,

began with Coomaraswamy who first brought them to the world's attention in the second decade of the 20th century.

The thesis I presented in the catalogue is that though rendered between the 16th and 17th centuries Rajput pictures marked the culmination of the long history of Indian painting whose earliest examples are still preserved in the Buddhist cave temples of the first century BCE at Ajanta. This was nothing new but had been forcefully and more elegantly asserted by Eric Schroeder, a friend and intellectual sparring partner of Coomaraswamy, in the festschrift presented to the savant in 1947. Titled "The Troubled Image," in it Schroeder cogently argued how both Mughal and Rajput pictures were two different expressions of the same painting tradition that had a long history in the country



Fig. 8

[5]. Despite Coomaraswamy's early efforts Rajput paintings did not catch the imagination of collectors in America until the second half of the 20th century and Paul was at the forefront along with Stuart Cary Welch and Edwin Binney 3rd; now all three titans are gone.



Fig. 9

In the catalogue (p. vii) Paul with characteristic generosity acknowledged my role as that of "chief architect of the exhibition," and remarked on the pleasure I gave him with my "friendship, wisdom and good humor." It is now my turn to thank him for the opportunity the exhibition provided for my own learning process about Rajput painting, as well as contemporary American art. It was through him that I met several contemporary artists including Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997) and Joel Shapiro. Joel is as well a collector of Indian sculpture, which, as he told me, influenced him upon encountering it in situ for the first time when he visited India as a Peace Core volunteer in his youth.

While we were in India Paul had a set of Indian costume tailored and when I first saw him wearing it, I thought if he only used a turban, he could easily have been mistaken for a Rajput

maharaja. In fact, Billy Sullivan's portrait of Paul wearing that outfit and seated on a red velvet plush chair in the recent (fig. 9) Christie's sale compares favorably with a portrait also in the same sale (fig. 10) of Raja Udai Singh of Jhabua. Surely Paul's is the more imposing figure, perhaps he was indeed an American avatar of an Indian maharaja.

His love of the glamour of the Raj and Victoriana led him to amass a vast collection of 18th and 19th century objects. Made both in the U.K. and on the subcontinent they





Fig. 11

consisted of regalia and souvenirs, posters and photographs,
medals and mementos, silver and jewelry, as well as textiles and shawls. A limited
selection resulted in the 1986 exhibition *From Merchants to Emperors: British Artists*and India, 1757-1930 which was a pioneering presentation of the material in the United
States [6]. The host was once again the Pierpont Morgan Library. Although conceived
independently it was part of what was touted as the "Festival of India" sponsored by the
U.S. and Indian governments; this show traveled also to several venues in the country.
Instead of a catalogue the material was organized in the form of a book and my coauthor was Vidya Dehejia who decades later would organize an exhibition at Columbia
University of Paul's Indian silver collection [7]. For the cover of that book we used the
spectacular painting by the British artist William Simpson of a lively street scene in

Bombay (now Mumbai) (fig. 11).

Of course as an educated Indian and being born and raised in British India (I was 12 at the time of the British departure in 1947), I was serendipitously familiar with some of the material produced during the Raj, but I must say if it wasn't for Paul and his deep interest in the stuff, I may well have remained ignorant about it. By pushing me to do an exhibition with the material, he challenged me to delve into the subject and to expand my own art historical horizon. Although I have known and befriended many collectors in my long career (some of whom were really rich and famous), I can honestly admit today that much of my broad interest in art, not just of India but globally, was due largely to Paul's curiosity.

In 1986 alluding to Paul's eclectic taste in collecting Charles Ryskamp wrote in his Foreword to the *From Merchants and Emperors*: "Mr. Walter is an extraordinary collector--from the ancient to the contemporary world, a connoisseur of paintings, drawings, photographs, sculptures and furniture. India has for many years been a very special interest of his" [8]. As we now know from the latest Christie's sale, even Charles, were he around, would regard that as an understatement [9]. Like Coomaraswamy or Okakura Kakuzo (1863-1913) before him, Paul, clearly invalidated Rudyard Kipling's assertion that "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." They did meet in him.

4

Paul was intrigued always by the unusual and the unknown no matter where it was made. We have already seen him collecting Indian drawings and the diverse art of British India, especially photographs (which could be the subject of an entire monograph), jewelry and silver, but the final such innovative theme that he selected

was Indian terracotta sculptures about which I will make a few closing remarks.

Icons of Piety Images of Whimsy Asian Terracottas from the Walter-Grounds Collection with a catalogue opened at LACMA in 1987 and traveled to several other venues under the auspices of the American Federation of Arts (fig. 12) [10]. Once again the collection demonstrates again Paul's uncanny interest in neglected areas of Indian art and thereby creating a new focus and a market. I can do no better than to quote a passage from my own Preface to the catalogue to provide the scope of the collection.

The combined collections of South and Southeast Asian terracottas are the most comprehensive either in public institutions or in private hands. While most major museum collections of Asian art



Fig. 12

contain some examples of terra-cotta art from South and Southeast Asia and a few have more extensive range of Indian terra-cottas, the Walter-Grounds collection remains unique for its wide geographical distribution and diversity of forms. It is especially gratifying that this group of objects has been promised to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where the Indian collections have been enormously augmented by generous donations from several members of the Walter family in the past.[11]

Paul's interest in Indian terracotta grew I think from his love of modern and contemporary art. There is an abstract, inchoate, spontaneous and mysterious quality about folk and primitive art that simultaneously appeals to admirers of contemporary form and expression as well as the connoisseur of traditional art. I think Paul's first engagement was with some rejects of a kiln from ancient Cambodia or Thailand that he saw in a gallery which for years rested on a table in the guest toilet of his New York apartment (fig. 13). As an unknown Oxford scholar jibed in the early 20th century: "For it's not in verse and it's not in prose/ But earthenware alone/ It is that ultimately shows/ What men have thought and done." [12]







Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

I illustrate here two rare and impressive sculptures from the exhibition; they are from different cultures but were created about the same period (circa 1400). One from Nepal represents an animated and complex composition with a beautiful young woman twisting like a dancer below a leafy canopy of a mango tree. (fig. 14) Seemingly she points to the carcass of a dog with a slit belly at the bottom of the tree with her head turned away but expressing no disgust. She likely represents Manibhadra, one of the few females among a group of eccentric mystics known as Mahasiddhas (Perfected Yogic Teachers) of tantric Buddhism. By contrast, the Javanese male seated in the posture of regal ease is the serene and elegant bodhisatva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara (fig. 15). It is a rare depiction from East Java of a type of image known as Lokeshvara on Mt. Potalaka in south India. However, the iconography and style are clearly influenced by a model that became popular in Song China. The lovely Nepali lady was donated by Paul in my honor to the Art Institute of Chicago, while the bodhisatva is in LACMA.

Prolonged and true friendship in life is a rare phenomenon. Paul's and mine lasted for more than half a century and I shall miss him for the remainder of my life. If we do meet again I hope no arrogant bureaucrats deprive us of our chicken curry as they did in the earthly city of Amaravati (which strangely means "the deathless realm"); nor will we, hopefully, freeze our butts off in the hellish cold of the Bamiyan plateau!

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**errata:** We discovered two errors in the text which we have corrected on Nov. 9, 2017. The following changes were made to the original text:

"Richard Spear, was the department chair": has been corrected to

"Richard Spear, was the director of the Allen Memorial Art Museum at the college" and

"Athena Tachar". has been corrected to

"Athena Tacha"

We regret these errors.



Dr. Pratapaditya Pal

**Dr. Pratapaditya Pal** is a world-renowned Asian art scholar. He was born in Bangladesh and grew up in Kolkata. In 1967, Dr. Pal moved to the U.S. and took a curatorial position as the 'Keeper of the Indian Collection' at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, he has lived in the United States ever since. In 1970, he joined the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and worked there as the Senior Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art until he retired in 1995. He has also been Visiting Curator of Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian Art at the Art Institute of Chicago (1995–2003) and Fellow for Research at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena (1995–2005). Dr. Pal was General Editor of Marg from 1993 to 2012. He has written over 60 books on Asian art, whose titles include, *Art of the Himalayas: Treasures from Nepal and Tibet* (1992), *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain* 

Art from India (1999) and The Arts of Kashmir (2008). He has furthermore written over 200 papers on Asian art. In 2009 Dr. Pal was awarded the Padma Shri for his extraordinary contribution to the sphere of art.

- 1. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Indian Drawings* (Broad Campden, Gloucestershire: Printed for the India Society by Essex Press, 1910) and: *Indian Drawings* [Second Series, Chiefly Rajput] (London: Printed for the India Society by the Old Bourne Press, 1912.
- 2. Pratapaditya Pal and Catherine Glynn, 1976. *The Sensuous Line: Indian Drawings from the Paul F. Walter Collection*. (Los Angeles County Museum of Art); p. 1.
- 3. It should be mentioned that it was in the same year (1976) that unbeknownst to us Stuart Cary Welch also organized a show of Indian drawings at The Asia Society, New York.
- 4. Pratapaditya Pal *The Classical Tradition in Rajput Painting from the Paul F. Walter Collection* 1978 New York; The Pierpont Morgan Library / The Gallery Association of New York State. The title was suggested by Charles Ryskamp to conform to a decade earlier exhibition at the Library: "The Classical Tradition in Islamic Art."
- 5. Eric Schroeder 1947, "The Troubled Image" in *Art and Thought*, Edited by K. Bharata Iyer. (London: Luzac and Co.).
- 6. Pratapiditya Pal and Vidya Dahejia. *From Merchants to Emperors British Artists and India: 1757-1930.* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1986).
- 7. Ryskamp suggested the idea of a book rather than a catalogue. For the silver catalogue see Vidya Dahejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Rai* (Mapin Publishing 2008).
- 8. Pratapiditya Pal and Vidya Dahejia. *From Merchants to Emperors British Artists and India: 1757-1930.* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1986), p.7.
- 9. The Collection of Paul. F. Walter. New York, 26-27, September 2017. Christie's New York.
- 10. Pratapaditya Pal, *Icons of Piety Images of Whimsy: Asian Terra-cottas from the Walter-Grounds Collection* (Los Angeles County Museum 1985).
- 11. Pratapaditya Pal, *Icons of Piety Images of Whimsy: Asian Terra-cottas from the Walter-Grounds Collection* (Los Angeles County Museum 1985) p. 11.
- 12. As quoted in Pratapaditya Pal, *Icons of Piety Images of Whimsy: Asian Terra-cottas from the Walter-Grounds Collection* (Los Angeles County Museum 1985) p. 11.

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