

Getty Gets In on Chinese Photo Trend



Hai Bo, "They No. 5" (2000)

Courtesy AW Asia

LOS ANGELES—In its first foray into the field of contemporary Chinese photography, the **J. Paul Getty Museum** in Los Angeles has acquired a group of nine works by trailblazing photographers [Hai Bo](#) and [Wang Qingsong](#) from the New York-based **AW Asia**, a private organization devoted to promoting Chinese contemporary art.

The transaction, which was in the range of \$100–150,000, was negotiated by AW Asia founder [Larry Warsh](#) with [Judith Keller](#), acting senior curator in the department of photographs at the Getty. It adds another dimension to the Getty's unparalleled photography collection.

The Getty's department of photographs is the only one in the museum that can pursue works created after 1900; it is also the only one whose mission extends beyond collecting Western European art, and Asia has become a special interest, Keller says, in part because of "the heritage of a huge number of people in our audience here in Los Angeles."

This latest acquisition "is the first group we have acquired through purchase," Keller adds, noting that the museum already has two late-90s works by fellow Chinese contemporary photographer [Liu Zheng](#) that "were donated to us by members of our photographers' council last year."

The Hai and Wang acquisition was put into motion by [Weston Neff](#), the recently retired Getty curator who built the museum's photo collection. "He was intrigued by Chinese photography — which only began in the early 1990s — by Hai Bo and Wang Qingsong," Warsh said in a phone interview.

Both photographers explore the relationship between China's past and present, between tradition and the realities of modern-day living. In Wang's plainly staged photographs, men, women, and children in modern dress, some digitally shrunk, mingle with more traditionally outfitted counterparts. One of the Getty's new acquisitions, *Can I cooperate with you?* (2000), features a crowd of young, casually dressed figures clustered around a bicycle-powered rickshaw and hoisting heart-shaped banners bearing logos from McDonald's and Coca-Cola.

Hai's work juxtaposes portraits of friends and relatives from the time of China's Cultural Revolution with present-day re-creations depicting the same people in the same poses, but in modern clothing. Contemporary Chinese photography has gained curatorial traction since the pioneering show at the **International Center of Photography** and the **Asia Society** in New York in 2004, "Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video From China," which included works by both photographers.

The Getty isn't the only institution to get in on the trend. Last year, New York's **Museum of Modern Art** acquired a group of 28 Chinese contemporary photographs, also from AW Asia, in the same \$100,000 range. Several other institutions, including the **Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles**, and the **Brooklyn Museum**, have also acquired works.

The Getty acquisition appears to be a good deal in that one of Qingsong's signature works, the mural-sized *Follow Me* from 2003, sold at **Christie's** London last July for £576,830/\$864,943 (est. £120–180,000). Though not part of the just-acquired brood, it reflects some of the intense interest generated by this still-emerging area of Chinese contemporary art.