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William at his studio in Wong Chuk Hang

WILLIAM LIM

Collector with a “curios” mind

Walking into William Lim’s studio and exhibition space in Wong Chuk Hang, your eyes are drawn in a dozen different directions. Huge paintings loom over shelves of well-worn books. In between them, a conceptual art piece pretends to be a wall fixture while an old statuette of Mickey Mouse, paint chips flaking off, stands in pride of place. It’s one of the best collections of contemporary Hong Kong art in the world but junkyard treasures and antiques, along with his own designs, fill up what’s left of the space.

“It started when I was living in Boston,” explains William, who is an architect, artist, designer and Founder & Managing Director of CL3 Architects. “I guess I felt a bit homesick because I started buying little Chinese antiques to remind me of home. At least I thought they were antiques at the time, but I found out later they’re pretty much worthless!”

Even so, these pieces instilled an early appreciation for Chinese art. “Even when I was a student, I would go to the Chinese Arts and Crafts store to buy little items. Back then, it wasn’t easy to travel to China, so it really held a sort of mystery for me.” This interest in China, and Asia in general, is a thread that runs through both his collection and his approach to design.

He points to a vase, with odd square handles, sitting unobtrusively on his shelves. “This is prehistoric, it’s pre-Han Dynasty, but I think of it as a water pitcher. Yet to make a water pitcher in that form is so sculptural, it actually has a lot in common with contemporary sculpture.”

This interest in form and function is a recurring pattern when he talks about his collection. “I’ve never been that interested in historical fact. For me, it’s more an emotional response – it’s the social aspect that is intriguing.”

Three *arhats*, or Buddhist saints, hide around a corner. “These fascinate me because they show how people lived at a certain time, what they believed in. They are usually part of a collection of 18 and probably belonged to some wealthy family in the late Qing or early Ming. I just wonder how they would relate to these pieces.”

A relentless love for hunting curios or knick-knacks has led him to some of his most distinctive pieces. A 10-foot birdcage – one of the centrepieces of his solo show, *William Lim/Fundamental: 40 Years of Design Inspiration from the East*, at ArtisTree in 2015 – was discovered on a street-side. An alcove in the corner

of his studio contains a huge hand-painted lantern decorated with paper cutouts. "I found it in one of those junk stores on Peel Street. It was just lying in a corner and I suppose it must have been brought down from China. I love these festive elements, the way people believe in prosperity and auspiciousness. I always think of this lantern as being like a faded opera singer who has found a new home."

In recent years, contemporary Hong Kong and Chinese art has become the main focus of his collection. "I was travelling a lot to China about six or seven years ago, and there wasn't a lot for me to do in my free time, so I started going to a lot of galleries. In the back of my mind, I was looking for an investment but what struck me along the way is that, unlike antiques, you can meet and get to know the artists."

Wilson Shieh was one of the first artists whose work William collected. "At the time, he was really the only successful full-time artist in Hong Kong, and he's easy to appreciate. He has this meticulous Chinese quality but expresses himself using contemporary themes."

From Shieh's figurative pieces, he moved on to the more conceptual works of Tozer Pak, whose *New York Public Library Projects* used books from New York City Library. "He folded down the corner of page 22 in thousands of books at the library



and photocopied them to create a very subtle artwork right in the heart of New York. I liked it because at the time, no Hong Kong artist could show in New York but with his project, Pak created his own site-specific installation."

"I think when you build up a successful collection, the sum is greater than the parts, and that's when the stranger pieces can start to creep in."

William's collection has grown in size – the space now only accommodates one-tenth of his artworks – and he admits that he has changed as a collector through this process. "At first I focused on how collectible a work would be by itself but now I think when you build up a successful collection, the sum is greater than the parts, and that's when the stranger pieces can start to creep in."