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ARTS / LEISURE

James Lally and the Booming Chinese Market

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NEW YORK — When the president of the most powerful auction house in the United States steps down to open his own art gallery after devoting 15 years of his professional life to the company, it means that something big is happening in his field.

All the indications are that Chinese art, particularly its early forms from Shang bronzes to Ming porcelain, is on the eve of yet another boom. The career of James J. Lally, who resigned as president of Sotheby's North America on Dec. 31, 1985, to set up a gallery at 42 East 57th Street simply called J.J. Lally & Co. Oriental Art, neatly coincides with the developments that have led to the present price explosion on the Chinese market.

Little in his university background predestined Lally to become a leading market expert in Chinese art. Neither his undergraduate studies in English literature at Harvard nor the combined degree in economics and diplomatic history he took at Columbia pointed to commerce or art, let alone China. Early exposure to the outstanding collection of Chinese art in the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, his hometown, was the initial factor that awoke what was to become a lifetime passion. While in Europe to see more Chinese art, Lally was offered a job at Sotheby's. Hired for his competence in finance and economics, he somehow managed to have a yearlong stint in the Chinese art department in London under James Kiddell, of whom he still speaks in reverential tones.

In May 1973, while Chinese art was riding a crest thanks to Japanese buying and the awakening of Hong Kong, there came an opening in New York. Sotheby's expert in Chinese art was leaving for Europe. Lally joined the department and, on Nov. 20, 1973 held the first sale for which he had written up all the entries. It was a landmark in American auctions of Chinese art. For the first time, footnotes and cross-referencing in scholarly style

loomed large in contrast to the past, when objects were broadly characterized in terms of medium, size, and period. A white porcelain bowl of otherwise banal appearance was shown to be connected with the Liao kingdom on the basis of an incised mark in a well-documented discussion that brought in the discoveries of the Swedish scholar Jan Wirgin.

The other major innovation was Lally's approach to the market. He

scouted for objects instead of waiting for them to fall in his lap. While walking about Georgetown, his eye was caught by a jade vase in the window of a shop of antiques of every description. He walked in, inquired about the price, which was \$15,000, and said he could get three times as much in his forthcoming auction. In that Nov. 20 sale, the superb Kangxi covered vase set a world record at five times the dealer's price. By the end of the year, Lally was director of the Chinese art department.

Julian Thompson, director of the Chinese department in London, was then setting up Sotheby's Hong Kong. The November experimental sale had been a thumping success. Lally, who had been to Hong Kong and met the dealers and collectors, sensed a fantastic opportunity. He asked to join. After a trial period, he became a director of Sotheby's Hong Kong in 1974 and, from then until his resignation from Sotheby's, ran the operation with Thompson. The rich Chinese business community was gradually drawn into the auction game and this had a worldwide impact on the prices for later imperial porcelain in the Chinese taste.

When A. Alfred Taubman bought Sotheby's in 1982, a new era opened for Lally, who soon became president of Sotheby's America. Two years later he resigned. He had found himself bogged down in administrative chores and cut off from what he cared most about — objects and collectors. Like other experts, he did not like the new atmosphere — "I had no wish to be another sort of apparatchik," Lally wryly notes. The challenge of working in an auc-



Large archaic bronze bell of the Zhou dynasty.

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tion house as an expert, which is in being confronted with hundreds of objects and learning daily, no longer worked. There comes a time when you sift more and more to learn less and less.

Above all, Lally felt that time was ripe for a new gallery in Chinese art. The two giants in early Chinese objects are now slowly withdrawing from the New York scene. J.T. Tai, who sold most of the great archaic bronzes to be seen in American collections, has been winding up his operation for the last five years. Another major dealer, Alan Hartman, recently closed his gallery, Rare Art Inc., on Madison Avenue, to operate from home.

Their semi-retreat takes place at the moment when New York is emerging as a major trading center for Chinese art after a prolonged eclipse. When Lally first stepped into Sotheby's Chinese department, yearly sales for the season (1972-1973) stood at \$1.7 million. In his last full season (1984-1985), they had jumped to \$17.5 million — an increase of \$5 million from the previous season.

Several factors account for the New York renaissance. It took a generation to erase the consequences of the law banning any imports from Communist China.

A second factor, Lally says, is the impetus given by the special consultant for Far Eastern art in the Metropolitan Museum, Professor Wen Fong of Princeton University. In New York, where interest in art often follows trends set by an institution or a personality with a high profile, the impact on collectors was perceptible.

A third factor that Lally, with his reserve bordering on shyness,

would not dream of discussing, is Lally himself. I have accompanied him on visits to collectors, equally reserved and determined to shield their privacy, who, when handling objects in his company, thawed as he does too. He has undoubtedly stimulated some old collectors and inspired new ones. Moreover, he is the man who established a two-way traffic between New York and Hong Kong, attracting collectors and dealers from the Far East to New York and persuading New Yorkers to go to Hong Kong.

The location that Lally chose, the way in which he built up his stock, and the procedures for his opening exhibition all reflect his experience as an auction house man, as well as his personal tastes in art, and even the professionals he most admires. It is probably no accident if the premises he chose on 57th Street call to mind the London gallery of Giuseppe Eskenazi at 166 Picadilly. Both are above street level, allowing privacy. In both, the display, discreetly modern, is unassuming and leaves the objects to speak for themselves.

To launch his gallery, Lally decided to hold an exhibition and proceeded much as he used to in the Sotheby days. He cast his net far and wide, traveling from New York to Hong Kong and Europe, and produced a catalogue that deceptively looks like some of his last catalogues at Sotheby's, down to the dark blue background for a creamy sculpture on the cover. With a difference: the pieces are Lally's own choice, not that of a mixed bunch of vendors. They amount to what to any auctioneer would consider a dream sale.

Lally enjoys the rare advantage



James Lally and Tang dynasty lion.

of combining the object lover's instant perception and the scholar's awareness of historical significance. His selection went all the way from neolithic pottery from the Gansu to enameled glass brush pots made under Qianlong (1736-1795). It is characterized by a mix of blockbusters (the most beautiful bronze bell of the Zhou period, of the seventh-sixth centuries B.C., I have seen on the market as part of a chime, of which another may be seen in the Arthur Sackler Museum at the Smithsonian) and of marvelous rarities not worth a great deal because they are so unobtrusive. His admirable bronze incense burner of the early Han period, with an openwork spiraling dragon on the lid, has no known parallel.

Lally had sent out 100 catalogues and 400 invitations to the private viewing on Dec. 2, stipulating that the sale would start at 6 P.M. By Dec. 1 at 10 P.M., four people were queuing on 57th Street in a snowfall. When Lally arrived at 8 A.M.

on Dec. 2, two more had joined them. By noon, Lally had to improvise. Buyers would be allowed in according to arrival order established by ticket numbers. Each buyer would be limited to five items only. On the first night, 25 of the 47 items had been sold.

At the end of the exhibition on Dec. 17, only 10 remained unsold, with sales exceeding \$1 million. Buyers included two New York collectors, a Japanese agent dispatched by a Tokyo syndicate, a London dealer representing a European collector, and five U.S. museums. The stone figure of a Bodhisattva that retains much of its original polychromy and can be dated to the first half of the seventh century now stands in the Cleveland Museum of Art. Lally passed his inaugural exhibition test with flying colors. A new power has arisen in the international arena of Chinese art. And New York has scored once again.