Processing the National Palace Museum, Taipei Collection

1. Discover Context
When the collection arrived at the Department of Image Collections (PLI), we only knew it came from the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) and featured art held in Taiwan.

What do these photos document?
The Chinese imperial art collection, amassed by emperors over centuries, was crated and hidden to protect the country's treasures from the Japanese invasion and Civil War in the 1930s-40s. In advance of their retreat to Taiwan in 1949, the Nationalists evacuated many crates and thus established two Palace Museums: one in Beijing and one in Taipei.

In 1963-64, a multi-institution collaboration created and distributed the Palace Museum Archive (PMA), a photographic record of the exemplary holdings in the National Palace Museum, Taipei (NPMT) for remote study. Sets of these photographs, provided at cost by the University of Michigan (UM), were ubiquitous at institutions exhibiting or teaching Chinese art until reproduction technology changed.

What is the NPMT Collection in PLI?
Renowned for Asian art collection and scholarship, CMA was a collaborator with NPMT and UM as early as 1963, as suggested by archival documents.

In 2006, PLI acquired the CMA Photographic Library Collection. This gift vastly increased PLI's Asian holdings, including a nearly-complete set of PMA photographs now called the NPMT Collection.

- Approximately 18’ 13” linear feet
- Black and white photos from the mid-1960s
- 9” x 11” board mounts with typewritten CMA labels

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2. Digital Access
PLI's catalog did not include most artists featured in the collection. I wanted artists to be easily searchable by today's art historians, so I included three writing systems. 524 artists documented.

Get Data from CMA Label
Artist name in Wade-Giles, dynasty, personal dates

Typo, outdated scholarship

Code into Catalog

MARCC21 and local guidelines to create authority and summary records in Voyager.

Tidy after transfer to Alma

Affixing accession numbers. Photo by KS Ostrach.

CMA label and corrections. Photo by KS Ostrach.

Why no digitization?
- NPMT maintains image copyright
- Some image available for download @ Open Data platform
- UM maintains the master files
- Permission required; images digitally available @ Visual Resources Collections

3. Physical Access
Photographs arrived organized by dynasty; alphabetically by artist surname in Wade-Giles (no longer widely used); and indiscriminately within artist sections. A new system was devised prior to rehousing and indexing.

What or who is missing from our collections?

Broader Questions to Interrogate Collections & Process

What or who is missing from our collections?

Look beyond the content of the image; what value does it have as an object itself?

Where digitization is not possible or usable, how can we make analog items accessible and usable on site?

4. Preservation
Photographs arrived with no inventory, packed tightly in flip-top boxes. Many boards are warped or damaged on the edges.

New Housing Goals
- Adhere accession number to every board
- Custom fit boxes and folders to protect boards and save space
- Folders and labels for each artist
- Clamshell boxes for safe, easy browsing
- Index for easy access

Final Tasks
Finishing this project has been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Remaining tasks:
- Complete rehousing of painting and calligraphy photographs in red boxes
- Arrange, assign accession numbers to, and rehouse bronzes, ceramics, and other objects

Future Opportunity
Many NPMT artists are not found in LCNAF or ULAN, or their records need improvement. PLI’s data can be reconciled with ULAN’s through the Getty Vocabularies OpenRefine Reconciliation (https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/obtain/openrefine.html). Corrections could be made to PLI’s data or suggested to the Getty as updates to ULAN.

3,096 boards of painting and calligraphy photos housed in 74 boxes.

- Yue Shu, Librarian, Freer | Sackler Library
- Rosanne Hui, Vice President, Han Mo Xuan Co. Ltd., Hong Kong
- Dr. Roberta Bickford, Professor Emerita, Brown University