

Asian Art Museum to Remove Bust of Patron. That's Just a Start.

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SAN FRANCISCO — For 48 years, visitors to this city's Asian Art Museum have had to pass the bust of Avery Brundage, its towering patron, an industrialist and former president of the International Olympic Committee. The museum, a jeweled attraction at Civic Center Plaza, was established in 1966 to house his nearly 8,000 art pieces.

But Brundage was also dogged by accusations that he was a Nazi sympathizer and a racist — something that has not escaped critics. After the museum posted a message about Black Lives Matter, Chiraag Bhakta, a Bay Area artist and designer, taunted its officials on Instagram with a selfie in front of Brundage's bust and the added text: "Helllloo ... Anyone home?"

When the museum reopens this summer, as the city relaxes its coronavirus quarantine, the bust prominently displayed in its foyer will be tucked into storage, the museum's director and chief executive, Jay Xu, announced June 10 at a meeting of the board and commissioners. And that may be only the start.

Calls to remove the bust have gone further, to the heart of longtime discontent by some Asian-American artists, who argue that the museum presents Asian art from a mostly white perspective.

"Historically, at this institution, there's been a white gaze defining what 'Asia' means," said Scott Tsuchitani, an Asian-American artist.

In an emailed response to The New York Times Sunday, Dr. Xu, the first Chinese American to lead the museum, said, "The Brundage collection was indeed formed by a white collector and reflected a fetishization of the 'Orient' that was common among white collectors of the time." However, he added, his curators "present the collection to the public through multiple perspectives." The museum has grown to include 18,000 artworks. In the museum's numerous responses to the racial justice protests, it is addressing some of these more sensitive issues.

"We must contend with the very history of how our museum came to be," Dr. Xu wrote in a "Dear All" letter to the public on June 4. He said that Brundage "espoused racist and anti-Semitic views," and that the museum is

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struggling to respond to “a society structured around white supremacy.” In a telephone interview last week, Dr. Xu said Brundage “was a hateful person.”

Dr. Xu questioned how Brundage acquired some of his art pieces. In a later statement, the director said the museum would hold public programs to critically examine Brundage and his legacy, “as well as questions around provenance and restitution.”

Gregory Levine, a professor of Buddhist Visual Cultures at the University of California, Berkeley, who has done research on the history of looted Chinese Buddhist sculpture, said, “Opening up the restitution issue is a huge deal.”

The Asian Art Museum, the largest institution of exclusively Asian arts in the United States, attracts 300,000 visitors annually and has a \$30.8 million budget, a portion of which comes from San Francisco. It has a \$56 million endowment. If not for the coronavirus, the museum would be celebrating the opening of its \$38 million Akiko Yamazaki & Jerry Yang Pavilion, named for the co-founder of Yahoo and his wife, who has completed her third term as chairwoman of the Asian Art Museum Foundation and the Asian Art Commission.

At the June 10 meeting on Zoom, Dr. Xu said, the museum “must start by looking within ourselves” and “how our museum came to be.”

There will be much to research. Brundage, who prominently supported the America First movement that opposed the U.S. entry into World War II, insisted that the United States not boycott the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany. At the 1968 Olympics, Brundage was outraged after Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two African-American Olympic athletes, gave the black power salute at the medal ceremony. They were expelled.

During his life, Brundage was celebrated as a leader and a generous man for his art contributions to the people of San Francisco. When he died in Germany in 1975, The New York Times gave him a glowing obituary.

Although he knew of Brundage's Olympic history, Dr. Xu said it was not until 2016, when the museum was preparing for its 50th anniversary, that he and his team “developed a fuller awareness of Brundage's racist and anti-Semitic views and actions.”

Dr. Xu said that eventually the Brundage bust would be put in “a discreet space” where the public can learn about Brundage and “where the core of our collection came from.” He said the museum had planned to remove the bust for a number of years, but that “Black Lives Matter gives us the impetus.” It may not have been the only one.

Dr. Xu did not acknowledge Mr. Bhakta's post about Brundage's dark history on the museum's Instagram page next to its commitment to fight racism. But the director said, “We are keenly aware and attuned to public responses.”

Mr. Bhakta, who works under the pseudonym *Pardon My Hindi, has had his own contentious relationship with the Asian Art Museum. In 2014, while he was preparing an installation about the commercialization of yoga, called “#WhitePeopleDoingYoga,” for a show, he said museum officials told him that the reference to white people “could be offensive or puzzling” to museumgoers. The museum preferred “PeopleDoingYoga.” A museum spokesman, Zac Rose, confirmed that the museum asked the artist to remove the title. Mr. Bhakta refused and the museum kept the name. But the museum gift shop, which had printed his “WhitePeopleDoingYoga” on merchandise, decided not to sell them.

On Sunday, in a written response, Dr. Xu said of the dispute, “We need to learn to listen better to our artists.” He said he was proud that Mr. Bhakta had provided “an opportunity to convey more provocative perspectives.”

Mr. Tsuchitani, the artist, objected to the racial impact of the culture of the museum. He said that over many years, the museum has exhibited “a pattern of repeatedly exoticizing, hypersexualizing, playing dress up with Asian cultures.”

In 2004, Mr. Tsuchitani parodied the museum's “Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile” exhibition using postcard photos of himself dressed as a geisha, which he surreptitiously placed in the museum's rack cards.

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He pointed to the title of a 2015 exhibition at the museum, "Seduction: Japan's Floating World." Its promotional literature invited people to "dive into this hotbed of hedonism." At the opening party, guests came in what he called "yellow face" — made up to look Asian — and were entertained by belly dancers and burlesque performers.

Dr. Xu said the term "Seduction" was apt, that it was meant to expose the ways in which works of art (especially seductive images of women) "were used to feed a market for Edo-period brothels, where women often served under brutal conditions." As for the entertainment, "it was meant to be inclusive of San Franciscans and their tastes and performing styles," Mr. Rose, the museum spokesman, said.

"What does it take to decolonize an art museum when it has a history of pandering to the popular, lowest common denominator stereotypes of geishas, yoga and maharajahs?" asked Dr. Levine, the Berkeley professor. He questioned how the museum conceptualizes blockbuster exhibitions, and whether artists and community leaders are part of the initial conversations. "That's the horizontal redistribution of power that can get at structural racism," he said.

Jeff Kelley, the museum's consulting curator for contemporary art from 1998 to 2008, said, "In this time of toppling statues, it's not surprising that artists and activists claim that the Asian Art Museum has been a preserve of wealthy industrialists who see 'Asia' as a misty colonial realm." He added that the current debate helps move the museum "away from its Orientalist roots."

The museum's recent original exhibitions include the popular "Lost at Sea: Art Recovered From Shipwrecks," Philippine art — which Brundage never collected, art and electronic literature by Korean and American artists, as well as traditional arts from the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

Mark Johnson, an art professor at San Francisco State University, who has curated shows at the Asian Art Museum, said that while historically the museum was focused on a white perspective of Asian culture, it has made "incredible strides, diversifying its staff, board and curators," adding that the curators are largely nonwhite.

The museum's staff is 50 percent white, 27 percent Asian, 12 percent Latino and 7 percent black. (Some people identified as two or more races.) The board is about half Asian and Asian-American, and 73 percent of its curators are Asian and Asian mixed race. "We certainly recognize that there is always room for improvement," Dr. Xu said.

Dr. Xu, responding to the Berkeley professor's comment, said that in developing exhibitions, the museum does bring together scholars, community leaders and artists. "We've been working on decolonizing and creating a horizontal redistribution of power that can get at structural racism for years," he said.

Mr. Tsuchitani and others praised the museum for appointing Abby Chen as head of contemporary art and senior associate curator in 2019, saying she comes from the Asian-American art community, but adding that the institution "still has a long ways to go," he said.

But the museum is adapting to the changing climate.

This week it will offer an online reading of a theater piece about an African-American drag queen in San Francisco who in 1966 threw coffee in a police officer's face, after he attempted an unwarranted arrest. That led to a riot, an early gay response to police harassment.

PHOTOS: Above, the bust of Avery Brundage at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. Right, Brundage, at home in 1953 with Chinese art, was known to harbor racist and anti-Semitic views. Below, the exterior of the museum. Moving the bust to a less prominent spot is part of the institution's effort to address a host of sensitive issues. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHIRAAG BHAKTA; WALTER SANDERS/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION, VIA GETTY IMAGES; AARON WOJACK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (C5)

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