

# Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



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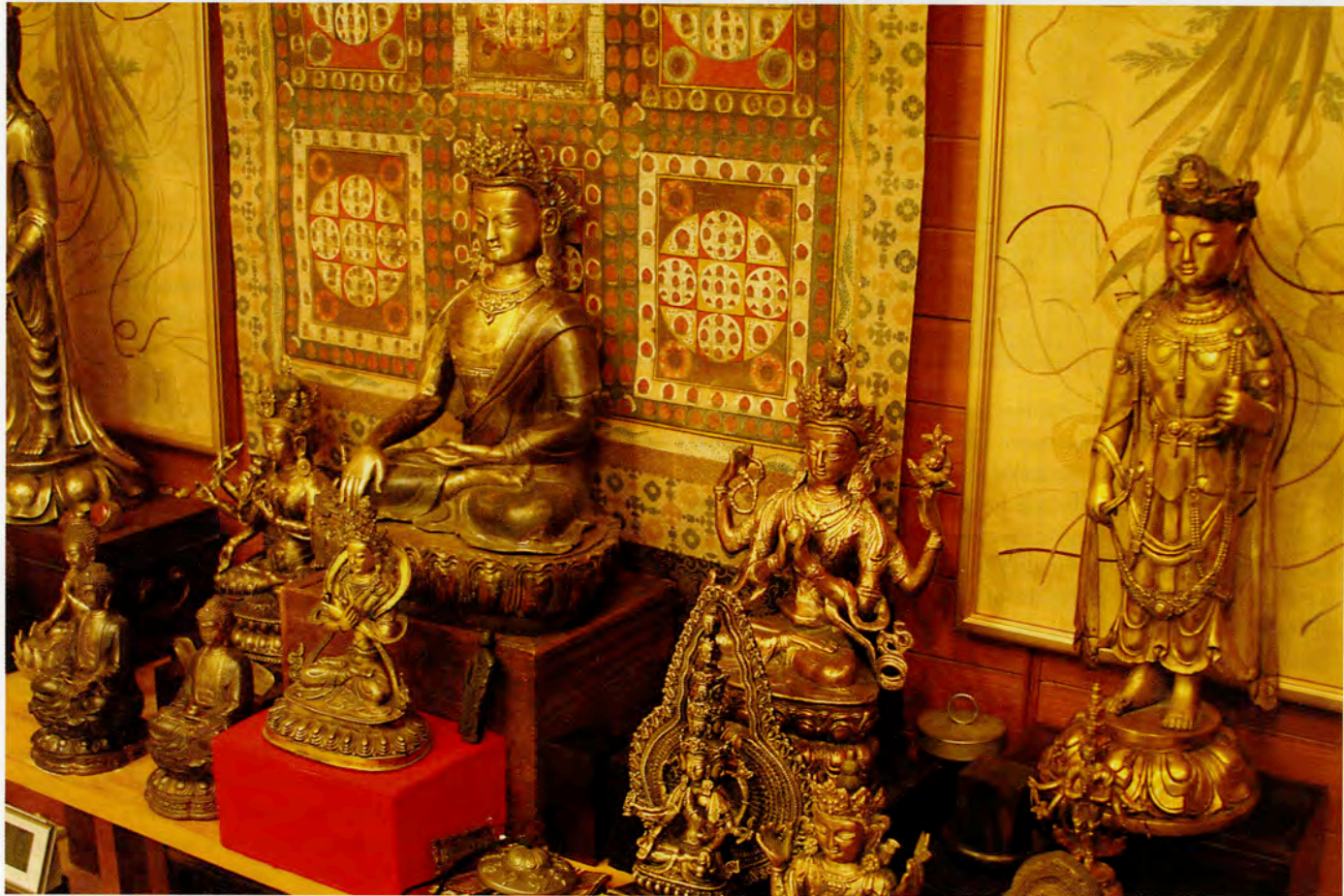
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## ASIA WEEK IN NEW YORK

# Keeper of the Flame

IN JAPAN, A VETERAN COLLECTOR PRESERVES ANCIENT ARTWORKS AND AN AESTHETE'S SENSIBILITY. BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



KYOTO, AN ELEGANT city in the south-central Kansai region of the Japanese archipelago's main island, has long been a bastion of traditional culture and a showcase for artistic expressions of all kinds, from the soul-stirring ancient Buddhist sculptures on view at the Kyoto National Museum to the graceful movements of *maiko*, a glimpse of whose shimmering silks a visitor may catch as these apprentice *geisha* make their way through the side streets of the Gion district.

During World War II, the U.S. armed forces spared Kyoto from their aerial-bombardment campaigns, which destroyed Tokyo. So it is that the former imperial capital, which is filled with temples, shrines, gardens, and important museums, can still proudly play its role as the keeper of refined and alluring traditions and countless art and architectural masterpieces. Here, in a nondescript, multi-story building in the city center, the veteran art collector Yasuyoshi Morimoto resides with his cat, Arthur, a longtime female friend and housekeeper—and a treasure trove of classic East Asian artworks, which he has gathered over many decades. For Morimoto,

it is a home filled with reminders of a life marked by many memorable discoveries and close encounters with some of the most creative people of his time.

Now in his mid-70s, Morimoto was in his 20s, studying Spanish at a foreign-languages college in nearby Osaka, when he met David Kidd, an American who was teaching English literature there. “He drove an old Cadillac—in postwar Japan!” Morimoto recalls. “I was proud to take the wheel whenever David asked me to drive him to meetings of a group of Buddhist scholars in Kyoto.”

Kidd, who died in 1996 at the age of 69, was born in Kentucky and grew up in Detroit. In 1946 he headed to China's capital, then known in the West as Peking, as a college exchange student. There, he taught English and watched China's tired, fractured ruling system collapse as Mao Zedong's revolutionary communist forces defeated the Nationalists and in 1949 established the People's Republic of China.

Kidd married the daughter of a former high-ranking judge, which made him the odd, rare, foreign member of an aristo-

cratic family and provided him with a unique vantage point from which to observe the pain and pathos, for China's privileged elite, of the demise of their way of life. Kidd's stories about these experiences were published in *The New Yorker* and in a book, *All the Emperor's Horses* (1960). Later that collection was reissued as *Peking Story: The Last Days of Old China*. Kidd had to return to the United States after the Communists took control of China. A few years later, divorced and hoping to make his way back there, he went to Japan, where he remained until his death. A mainly self-taught and well-informed connoisseur of classical Chinese and other East Asian art forms, Kidd became an indefatigable collector.

In Japan, Kidd and Morimoto became friends and life partners, sharing a home and a passion for Asian art. "What little money we had, we poured into collecting," says Morimoto, an engaging elf of a man who erupts from time to time with anecdotes or comments about art. "In the 1960s and 1970s Japan was still rebuilding after the war," he recalls in fluent English. "Families that had old artworks were willing to sell them, and many good pieces emerged. We bought Chinese and Japanese works—porcelains, screens, a chest of drawers, a ship captain's chest, you name it. I liked big things. I could haul full-size screens in the Cadillac!"

For many years, Kidd and Morimoto lived near Kobe in a large traditional Japanese house built in the 1600s, which had once been part of a castle compound. Then they moved to Kyoto, taking their collection with them. Its treasures included Japanese wooden and bronze Buddha statues, Chinese and Japanese jade pieces, and assorted *bodhisattva* figures (in Buddhism, enlightened beings) from various parts of Asia. High on a multi-tiered display shelf in Morimoto's bedroom stands a 16th-century four-armed Tara *bodhisattva* from Tibet. "It's for good health and protection," the collector notes with satisfaction.

Kidd and Morimoto became steeped in the study of Asian art history and Buddhism, an



Opposite: A 17th-century Japanese copy of a Tang Dynasty mandala tanka, laid out in grid form, provides a background for Buddhist sculptures in bronze or gilded bronze. This page, from top: the collector Yasuyoshi Morimoto at home in Kyoto; rolled-up calligraphic works and other antiquities packed in their respective custom-made boxes and stored on open shelves.





From top: Morimoto's collection of sculptures in wood, bronze or gilded bronze includes numerous Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Southeast Asian interpretations of classic Buddhist figures; a sitting room features a variety of small and large jade objects.



understanding of which provided valuable clues to understanding the iconography of the sculpture and images related to this ancient philosophical-religious system. They bought and sold works from Japan, China, Korea and Southeast Asia. Morimoto worked as a consultant for Tiffany & Co., finding Japan-based artisans to

execute some of designer Elsa Peretti's creations using traditional porcelain-crafting techniques. In the world of Asian art collecting, Kidd and Morimoto became the go-to experts for a range of inquisitive, discreet clients, like the rock star David Bowie. "We met Bowie through his Japanese makeup artist," Morimoto recalls. "He liked to come to Japan to present concerts, and we became good friends with him and his wife, the fashion model Iman." Photos in the collector's home show Kidd, Morimoto, Bowie and his companions dining together in *tatami*-matted rooms. "We used to drive Bowie, disguised, around Kyoto—in the Cadillac," Morimoto recalls with a chuckle.

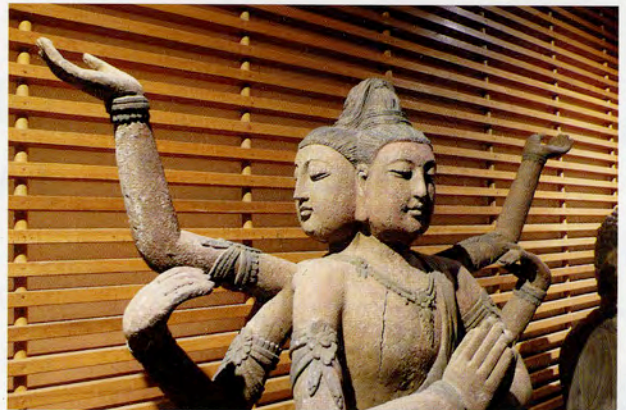
The longtime collector still sells works from his holdings but today is busy updating his cataloging system. (At press time, he had just relocated to a city in north-central Japan and stored



much of his collection at a Buddhist temple.) Looking ahead, Morimoto says with a sense of abiding passion for the tangible art forms that have long inspired him, “I feel a sense of peril. Now that everything is the Internet and electronic devices, does anyone still appreciate what is real, made by human hands and filled with soul?” He pointed



to a 17th-century Japanese copy of a Tang Dynasty mandala tanka, a group of devotional images laid out in a grid. “I could never stare at a screen,” he said, “but I could stare at this beautiful piece for hours.” Like the city that became his longtime home, Morimoto has become a custodian of great works of art—and the keeper of an aesthetic sensibility he feels strongly must also be kept alive. ▲



From top: Hanging in front of a centuries-old, multi-panel Japanese screen, whose surface is covered with gold leaf, a Buddhist painting of an enlightened seeker surrounded by attendant deities; ancient Chinese and East Asian bronze objects on display in a sitting room.