

Laurence Sickman

Museum Curator and Director
1906-1988

by David Conrads

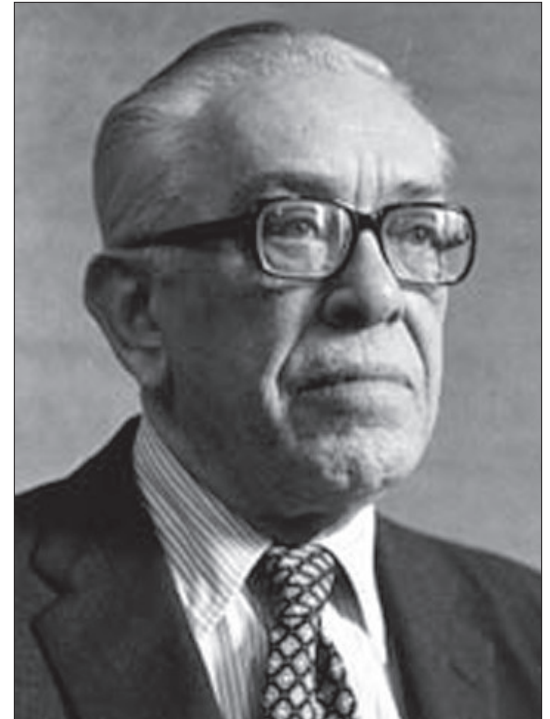
Laurence Sickman was connected with the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art for more than 40 years. His long career as a connoisseur and historian of Oriental art coincided with the development and early history of the Nelson-Atkins, and he was instrumental in building one of the most celebrated collections of Oriental art in the western world. Sickman was considered Kansas City's most internationally distinguished art scholar and at the time of his death, he was recognized as the West's leading authority on Chinese art.

Laurence Sickman was born and raised in Denver, Colorado. He traced his early interest in Asian art to a group of Japanese prints owned by his grandmother. By the age of 17, he knew he wanted to be an Oriental art curator. After two years at the University of Colorado, he transferred to Harvard University, where he graduated in 1930, only the second person to earn a Bachelor's degree in Chinese language and culture from that institution.

Sickman first became connected with the Nelson-Atkins in 1931, two years before the museum's opening. He was studying in Beijing on a Harvard-Yenching fellowship when he was engaged to buy Oriental art for the unfinished museum. In 1935 Sickman was named the Nelson's first curator of Oriental art. He became vice-director of the museum in 1947 and director in 1953, a position he held until his retirement in 1977.

Sickman served as a major in the Army Air Force combat intelligence group in the Far East from 1942-1946. He was also an advisor in the arts and monuments section of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's headquarters in Tokyo.

Sickman pursued a number of scholarly endeavors outside of his duties as a museum curator and administrator. He was the editor of the Archives of the Chinese Art Society from 1948-1966 and editor of the Archives of Asian Art from 1966-1973. He also collaborated on and contributed to many important scholarly books, most notably *The Art and Architecture of China and Chinese Calligraphy*



and Painting. In 1973 he was awarded the prestigious Charles Lang Freer Medal for his contributions to the understanding of Far Eastern art.

Sources

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