

# Profile: Michael Goedhuis

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By Emma Crichton-Miller

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Michael Goedhuis, born in Holland but educated at Eton College, is an astute and committed dealer. He trained first as an economist, accumulating degrees throughout Europe, before completing his MBA at the European Institute for Business Administration (INSEAD) in Fontainebleau. He began his working life as an investment banker. In 1975, however, Goedhuis, already a keen collector of French and Italian Old Master Drawings, changed direction, taking a BA in Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art under Anthony Blunt. Bringing together his financial acumen with his passion for art has been the foundation of his success ever since. What drives Goedhuis is the impulse to pioneer – to find an untapped area of exceptional art which he can then support with informed enthusiasm and entrepreneurial energy.

At first Goedhuis worked with Lord Rothschild, helping to initiate the Oriental Department at Colnaghi, starting with the sale of Baron Edmond de Rothschild's famous collection of Persian and Mughal manuscripts and miniatures to the Shahbanu of Iran. By 1982, however, Goedhuis had set up on his own, dealing in Islamic paintings and works of art, Indian, Japanese and Chinese art. One early interest was Chinese archaeological bronzes. The Chinese discovered bronze, an alloy of tin and copper, over 4000 years ago. Today our knowledge of the first Great Bronze Age of China depends largely on the ritual vessels that symbolized power and prestige for China's earliest dynasties from the Xia, (2200 BC - 1750 BC) to the Han (206BC - 220AD). As these astonishing objects began to be excavated in the 11th and 12th centuries AD, they inspired what Goedhuis refers to as China's second great bronze age, from the Song (960-1279) to the Qing (1644-1911). For Goedhuis, this pattern of Chinese artists learning from what has come before, but then producing their own contemporary examples in order to make sense of the present, is intrinsic to the depth and resonance of their art. It also seems to Goedhuis to represent a way of thinking that permeates every area of life in China. He has said, in an interview with Bonhams, "I became interested in the whole ideological structure of the Chinese elite, an elite which has never existed in the world before and has never existed really since. People running the country who were educated, had to be cultivated." This 'literati' ideal, where knowledge of the art, literature and music of the past as well as the present is an essential requisite for every civilised person, is one element within China's historic strength, Goedhuis believes.

The 1980s and 1990s were dominated by Goedhuis's enthusiasm for the contemporary painting then emerging from China. This was technically brilliant, reflecting both Chinese and Western influences, with a subversive political edge that he found interesting. He mounted a series of groundbreaking exhibitions in the west, culminating in a significant display at Sotheby's, New York, in 2001, *China Without Borders*, which showed the work of a whole range of contemporary Chinese artists, including the dissident artists Ai Weiwei, Cai Guo-Qiang, Zeng Fanzhi and Zhang Xiaogang. Impressed by the response of Americans, in 2002 Goedhuis opened a gallery in New York: "Chinese art was very much in vogue," he recalls. On behalf of two investors, he then assembled and curated the major Chinese contemporary art collection, the Estella collection, comprising 200 works by 69 artists, which he named after Pip's great love in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. The project certainly met financial expectations. After being exhibited at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, it was sold in 2008 for \$23.5 million from an initial investment of \$3.8 million.

Since then, Goedhuis's attention has been drawn to the Chinese contemporary artists innovating in the traditional field of ink painting, whose endeavours had been overshadowed during the 1990s and 2000s. Goedhuis quotes Britta Erikson, independent scholar and founder and artistic director of Beijing-based Ink Studios, who regards the new generation of ink artists as "the most idealistic and intellectually daring" of China's artists. Goedhuis mounted an exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in 2012, "Ink: The Art of China", an important moment in a market that has since shifted from attracting a predominantly western clientele, to drawing greater interest from Chinese collectors.

Goedhuis suggests that there are only about 50 of these who are truly breaking new ground, adding: "We show the twenty-five who have most international interest." He is a great admirer of Liu Dan, the "great enterprising artist of his generation"; Wei Ligang, who deconstructs Chinese calligraphy, and Qiu Deshu, renowned for his "fissured" paintings. To create these, he applies vivid colors to xuan paper, which he then tears up, mounting the fragments on a base layer. The cracks left between the fragments, Goedhuis suggests Qiu feels, reflect the vicissitudes of life. Goedhuis comments of this market: "I don't see better value anywhere." Chinese collectors, in particular, recognise that "they are buying something that connects to their long Chinese history but which represents a new paradigm"

At Treasure House Fair, Goedhuis will also exhibit examples of Japanese bronze flower vases from the Edo and Meiji periods. These reflect a further evolution of the original bronze making techniques and aesthetics of archaic China, transmitted through later Chinese and then Japanese examples. These flower vases, imported into the west after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, had a profound impact on European taste of the time, inspiring first Art Nouveau and then Art Deco reinterpretations. As Goedhuis puts it, they show that "Art Deco has a connection to the second century BC, in China." It is these connecting threads of admiration and emulation that Goedhuis so enjoys.

