

## Honorary Fellow A Citation



### **Professor James C. Y. Watt, BA, MA**

In 1971 the newly appointed Curator of the (then) Art Gallery of the Institute of Chinese Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong arrived at what he described as a “beautiful and empty shell”. But, as he said, he set to work “full of enthusiasm for building up an institution that was to be an important part of the University”. Today, the Art Museum of the Institute of Chinese Studies is indeed an important institution of the University, with a worldwide reputation. For that we owe much to the Founding Curator, Professor James C.Y. Watt, whose achievements we are honouring this afternoon. He started building the collection and drawing in the generous supporters and friends, such as the family of Lee Hysan, who have been so crucial to the development of the Museum. He also articulated its founding vision. Having begun his career at the Hong Kong City Museum and Art Gallery in 1964, he saw that the Museum at the Institute of Chinese Studies had a distinctive purpose. As he explained a few years ago: “A university art museum is different from a public museum. The latter serves the interest of the general population. It has an educational function and also serves recreational and social purposes. But a university museum exists primarily to support teaching and research projects at the university”.

The inaugural exhibition of the new Art Gallery in 1971 reflected the integration of tradition and modernity that has been one of the University’s founding ideals. As our first Vice-Chancellor, Dr Li Choh-Ming, said at the opening ceremony, “When we speak of Chinese culture, we must think of the saying, ‘Inherit the past and pioneer the future’.” This was the aim of the Gallery’s first Curator, now realized so splendidly in the distinguished and innovative Museum we enjoy today.

Professor Watt was educated at Oxford University and then studied for four years under Professor Jao Tsung-I at the University of Hong Kong. After he left Hong Kong in 1980, he was a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge, working with Joseph Needham, before going to the United States in 1981, where he has had a distinguished career as a curator in some of America’s great art museums. He worked in the Department of Asiatic Art of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, then joined the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where he is now Brooke Russell Astor Chairman of the Department of Asian Art.

With his rich curatorial experience and extensive scholarship in Chinese and Asian art, Professor Watt is one of the most respected authorities on a range of topics that include East Asian lacquer, Chinese jades, textiles, painting, ceramics and the archeological discoveries of present-day China. He has brought celebrated exhibitions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, including collections from the National Palace Museum in Taipei, East Asian lacquer from the Florence and Herbert Irving Collection, Chinese jades from the Collection of the Seattle Art Museum and Nomadic Art of the Eastern Eurasian Steppes from the Eugene V. Thaw and other New York collections. For all these and other exhibitions he has published informative catalogues



drawing on his extensive learning, and books on a variety of topics. They include: *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*, *Defining Yongle: Imperial Art in Early Fifteenth Century China*, *The Translation of Art: Essays on Chinese Painting and Poetry*, *Chinese Jades from Han to Ch'ing*, and *When Silk was Gold*. Some of his earliest publications, such as *A Han Tomb in Lei Cheng Uk*, focused on archaeological finds in Hong Kong, including Ming dynasty pottery at Shek Pik, Lantau Island and Sung-type pottery found elsewhere in Hong Kong.

Professor Watt's services to the Hong Kong community include serving as an overseas member of the Creative Arts, Performing Arts and Design Panel of the 1999 Research Assessment Exercise of the University Grants Committee. He also presented The Dr. K.S. Lo Memorial Lecture 2006, organized by the Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong Limited, on the topic, "Sultans, Lamas and the Yongle Emperor". In 2007 he presented the Sixth Joseph Needham Memorial Lecture sponsored by the East Asian History of Science Foundation (Hong Kong).

Professor Watt has been working in New York for the past twenty years or so, but he has never ceased making significant contributions to the Art Museum of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has served as Honorary Adviser to the Museum. At the 30th anniversary of the Art Museum in 2001, Professor Watt attended the seminar on "The Building of a Museum: The Collection and History of the Art Museum, CUHK". To commemorate the 35th anniversary in 2006, Professor Watt wrote the foreword to a new book, *Friendship and Scholarship: the First 25 Years*, jointly published by the Friends of the Art Museum and the Art Museum. He also delivered the keynote opening address in the seminar "Making and Studying Porcelain, East and West" held at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in December 2007.

Mr Chairman, it is my privilege to present to you Professor James C.Y. Watt, distinguished curator and art historian, and founding Curator of the Art Gallery of the Institute of Chinese Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, for the award of an Honorary Fellowship of the University.

*This citation is written by Professor David Parker*