



# The Rübel Asiatic Library

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# The Rübel Asiatic Library

*John M. Rosenfield*



Yenshaw Chao, 1984. Reproduction. FAL Administrative Files.

A TIMID NEOPHYTE FROM THE MIDWEST, I CAME TO HARVARD IN THE summer of 1954 as a doctoral candidate in the history of Asian art. My advisor was Professor Benjamin Rowland Jr., whose office in the basement of the old Fogg Art Museum was crowded with books and scroll paintings. Opposite was a storeroom housing the renowned Grenville Winthrop collection of Chinese ritual bronzes, archaic jades, and Buddhist sculpture (Ben also served as curator). An adjacent space was devoted to the library of the Rübel Asiatic Research Bureau (in battered war-surplus racks). In the same room were the desks of the assistant curator and department secretary, cubicles for graduate students (all four of us), a sink with a teakettle, and the occasional Danish pastry. This was a nurturing environment for fledgling scholars of Asian art—the close proximity of a learned professor, great works of art, a fine research library, and a bubbling teakettle.

The library had been set up in the late 1920s by the charismatic Langdon Warner, Harvard's first teacher of Asian art history. The Boston businessman C. Adrian Rübel, a great admirer of Warner, provided financial aid, saying that he wanted to counteract the appalling lack of interest in our country in the peoples of Asia. Mrs. Emma Norris, a

loyal volunteer, cataloged the books and served as den mother to the students, inviting us to tea in her Memorial Drive apartment in order to inculcate etiquette and gentility. Each year, without fail, Mr. Rübel contributed money to buy books, and the collection grew steadily. Scholars from all over the East Coast were attracted to its rare holdings and hospitable cups of tea.

Over the years we met the widow of the famous Ananda Coomaraswamy editing her late husband's articles. Ernest G. Stillman, a distinguished medical research scholar and avid Japanophile, donated rare Japanese imprints. George Manuel Fenollosa created a book endowment in honor of his uncle Ernest Fenollosa (Harvard Class of 1874), pioneer historian of Asian art. Generous aid was offered by Susan Bush, scholar of Chinese art theory, and by Sylvan Barnet and William Burto, learned local collectors.

Adrian Rübel created an endowment fund for the library in 1958. Two years later Max Loehr began his tenure as the newly established Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Professor of Oriental Art. Emma Norris was nearing the end of her working days, so Max asked the Harvard College Library to take responsibility for the books. From Widener Library came an administrator equipped with sharp eyes and a tape measure, and he concluded that the Rübel Library was too small and the catalog too amateurish to warrant membership in the Harvard College Library system. "We consider it a personal collection," he said, "like the books on your desk."

The only way forward was to create a professional catalog, so the ever-generous Adrian Rübel enabled us to hire (part-time) a trained librarian, Mrs. Yenshew Chao, who had just moved with her husband from California. Mrs. Chao labored heroically to straighten out the catalog. Funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities enabled us to extend her service, and in the 1970s, with a grant from the Japan Expo Commemorative Fund, we acquired some of the great multi-volume art history compendia that were then pouring from presses in Japan—and are now virtually unobtainable.

In the early 1980s, the Rübel Library moved from the Fogg's dark basement onto the sunny top floor of the new Arthur M. Sackler Art Museum, across Broadway. The Fine Arts Library assumed responsibility for the collection, and the cozy proximity of professor, art collection, research library, and teakettle came to an end. (Pastries, because they attracted bugs, were not approved.)

Before long, however, the Rübel Asian art books and staff were totally integrated into the Fine Arts Library. The collection has continued to grow, but at present the volumes are shelved together in a dark basement corner of the stacks in Littauer Hall. Harvard's many libraries are all standing on the threshold of enormous changes, but even so, the rubric "Rubel (Fine Arts)" preceding book numbers in the Harvard Library online catalog remain an enduring trace of C. Adrian Rübel—the shy, quiet, self-effacing, dignified, and generous man who, almost ninety years ago, helped found what has become an incomparable resource for the study of Asian art.

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