

The Collector: Ai Weiwei

A Chinese contemporary artist's take on his country's past

By Shai Oster

Ai Weiwei is an iconoclast.

One of China's best-known and most outspoken artists, Mr. Ai started to make his name in the mid-1990s by defacing priceless Chinese artifacts. He took millennium-old urns and painted them with the Coca-Cola logo or coated them in Day-Glo colors or smashed them. He ripped apart centuries-old furniture and turned it into objects such as a table rearing like a horse, or scuttling insect-like up a wall on three legs.

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei stands behind a sculpture made of antique stools and desks in his studio.

In fact, he's a great fan of ancient Chinese artifacts and has a keen appreciation of the craftsmanship and philosophy underpinning their design. Earlier in his career, Mr. Ai collected antique Chinese furniture, Neolithic pottery and ancient jade.

These days the 51-year-old artist is too busy to add to his collection; he still owns hundreds of pieces, most stored in a warehouse.

The son of Ai Qing, a famous poet persecuted during China's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, Ai Weiwei has become a leading intellectual in China, famous for his provocative work and words. A Falstaff-like figure with a long, wispy beard who is married to artist Lu Qing, Mr. Ai uses humor pointed like a dagger to poke fun at the Chinese government.



The name of his company Fake Design alludes to China's dubious honor as the capital of counterfeits. But he also liked it because the Chinese pronunciation sounds like an English expletive.

He was a founding member of a group of artists who called themselves "Xing Xing," or Stars. In a defiant act in 1979, the artists exhibited their work on a sidewalk in front of an art museum in Beijing. Police shut down the show on the second day. Disillusioned, Mr. Ai and other members of the group began to look for ways to leave China.

In 1981, Mr. Ai embarked on a 12-year self-imposed exile in the U.S., mostly in New York where he worked odd jobs and studied at Parsons The New School for Design. He came back to China in 1993 to tend to his dying father, and to pass the time and reconnect to his country's heritage, he began collecting antiques.

It was a heritage he knew little about, his education having been disrupted by the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. He roamed antique markets, buying and selling jade, pottery and furniture. Eventually, some pieces became the basis for his most famous works, such as "Colored Vases" (2006), a collection of ancient pottery painted in vivid colors like lime green, hot red and bright yellow. His work later grew in ambition and scale. For "Fairytale," his contribution to Documenta 12 in 2007, he brought 1,001 people from China to experience the German town where the art exhibition was held. The project also included an installation of 1,001 Chinese chairs.

Last summer, his pugnacious spirit made international headlines. Mr. Ai participated in the design for the iconic National Stadium, the Olympic venue nicknamed "the Bird's Nest" for its distinctive latticework exterior. He then repudiated the Games and refused to attend the opening to protest the lack of freedom in China.

Now, Mr. Ai is butting heads with authorities by compiling a list of students killed in the Sichuan earthquake, a year ago this month, when their schoolhouses collapsed. The government has just given an official tally of 5,335 students as dead or missing, and promised compensation for parents. But it has yet to release victims' names, or the results of investigations into the cause of the collapses. Mr. Ai's blog postings about the names have been censored in China. Volunteers gathering names have been harassed and detained by police, he says.

"As long as we are alive, we will find the truth, we'll continue," Mr. Ai vows. He's keeping detailed records of the process and hopes it could one day serve as a template for civil disobedience. Mr. Ai is aware that his challenges to authority could put him in danger. But he says he has sympathizers within the government.

So far, his team has uncovered more than 5,000 names. Next, he wants to set up an independent commission to investigate the disaster.

Why do you collect?

When I came back from New York, I had nothing to do but go to the antique market. I didn't know much about the past. In the Cultural Revolution everything old, you'd just break it. It was sort of exciting. We'd rebuild the world with Chairman Mao. We'd break the old world and build a new one.

After spending 12 years in the U.S. I was really fascinated with China's past. My brother took me to an antique market and I was so astonished to see these objects. I have a lot curiosity. I wondered, Why did they make things this way...After five or six years, I was also selling.

What do you like about furniture?

The furniture has a system. It's like architecture. It has developed a Confucian identity...Each piece is about how, when, where a man should sit. It's clearly identified where the husband, wife and child sit. Which room and location -- it's all clearly stated.

The furniture relates to the architecture in China -- no matter if it's in the imperial court or a remote village. The craftsmanship is great. They never used metal in the furniture. They were masters in joints. Every part has a name and a purpose. All of this is linked to the character of the wood. These are traits that are completely lost in contemporary furniture.

Why do you collect Neolithic pottery?

I have about 200 pieces. Most people like the blue and white Qing dynasty stuff. But in China, you can spend only one month and build a first-class collection of Neolithic pieces because the prices are relatively low, and you need a better appreciation of art to understand it.

Why do you collect jade?

I like it because it's special. A thousand -- maybe 2,000 -- pieces have passed through my hands. One day, when I'm older, I'll have time to sort through them all. My favorite piece is always the piece that fascinates me -- where I can't guess the reason someone made it. Now I have a small ax, maybe five millimeters thick, about the size of a pack of cigarettes. And it was sliced in half making two even thinner pieces. Nobody knows how they made the ax; why the hell slice it in two?

In other pieces, there are round holes. You can understand how they made those by drilling the stone. But some have square holes -- how did they make that?

What's your philosophy of collecting?

There is always something great that no one else pays attention to. At the beginning I liked stone sculpture. No one else liked it. Now it's hot. Later, I bought jade from the Liao Dynasty (907-1125). The Liao conquered parts of China after the Tang Dynasty, but nobody cared about them because they were a minority. Then it also became very hot.