



How to start collecting Asian art – Heiner Wemhöner's tips

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Want to collect contemporary art from Asia but don't know where to begin? Renowned collector Heiner Wemhöner tells *Art Radar* how he got started.

Art lovers often want to make the leap from looking to collecting, but it takes confidence to do so. *Art Radar* spoke to longtime collector Heiner Wemhöner to find out how he got started buying contemporary Asian art, and to hear his tips for would-be collectors and dealers.



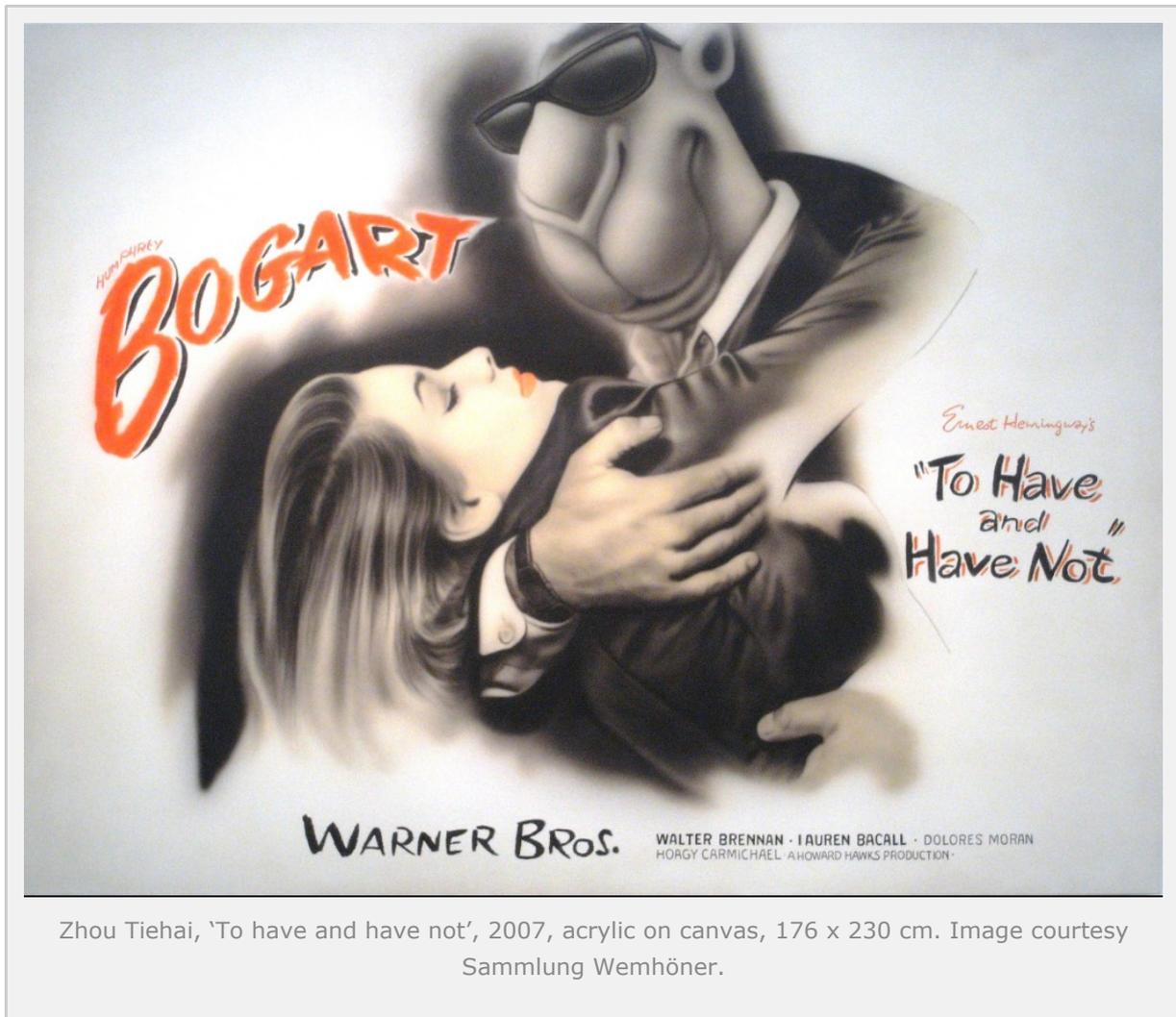
Wang Yin, Untitled, 2007, oil and acrylic canvas, 150 x 400 cm. Image courtesy Sammlung Wemhöner.

Heiner Wemhöner started collecting in the late 1990s and his collection now comprises artworks by world renowned artists, ranging from painting and photography to sculpture. His relationship with contemporary art was strengthened with the planning and realisation of the **MARTa Herford** museum (Germany), opened in 2005 in a Frank O. Gehry designed building.

Wemhöner supports the cultural life of his hometown, Herford, as Chair of the Friends of MARTa and Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Wemhöner Foundation, established in 2000. Since 2006, the Foundation has

invited internationally renowned artists through its Fünf Tore/ Fünf Orte project to create works for the medieval city gates in Herford. The first of such artists to realise an artwork was American **Dennis Oppenheim**. The Foundation also holds a biannual award, the MARTa Herford Prize.

In 2011, Wemhöner published *FOCUS ASIA*, the first volume in a series of publications on the Wemhöner collection, written by China expert Ulrike Münter and examining East-West correspondences in the artworks, placing them within the context of art history.



Zhou Tiehai, 'To have and have not', 2007, acrylic on canvas, 176 x 230 cm. Image courtesy Sammlung Wemhöner.

You started collecting art in the 1990s. Who and what inspired you to begin?

It was at the end of the 1980s that I bought my first colourful oil paintings in Florence, Italy. A friend living in the region had taken me to some galleries.

Can you tell me more about the Wemhöner Foundation? Why did the foundation shift its focus onto contemporary art?

The Wemhöner Foundation was founded to mark the 75th anniversary of the company in 2000; it started its work by supporting the training and advanced training of young engineers. Since 2010, the foundation has also funded the museum MARTa in Herford, my hometown. This is why every two years, the MARTa prize of the Wemhöner Stiftung is awarded, with the latest award ceremony having taken place just a few days ago.

Your family company has a base in China. Was it this that drew you to Asian art?

When I started looking for a location in the metropolitan area of Shanghai for my company in 2004, I came across **Lorenz Heibling's ShanghART Gallery** – a lucky strike for me. Through Lorenz I met a lot of artists. And I have a keen personal interest in the magnificent Chinese culture going back several thousands of years. This culture, after all, is often referred to in the work of young artists. I take great

pleasure in constantly learning something new. And I love to read books about China.



Yang Fudong, 'No snow on the broken brigd', 2006, C-print laminated on aluminium, edition 1/10, 120 x 180 cm. Image courtesy Sammlung Wemhöner.

Can you tell me about your collection – who and what do you focus on and why?

Currently the collection includes about 600 works, lots of them photographic. It was in China that I first got in touch with photography. **Yang Fudong** is one of my favourites: he is so wonderfully poetic. But of course, there are also paintings and drawings in the collection. And on top of that, I have created a large sculpture garden. **Li Hui**, a Beijing artist, is currently working on a sculpture – a large outdoor sculpture – for our company in Changzhou.

What was the first piece of contemporary Asian art you bought and why were you drawn to it?

I bought the first two works from **Schoeni Art Gallery** in Hong Kong, two sculptures by **Yue Minjun**. The strong expressiveness of the work – "romanticism and realism" – touched me deeply. There is such a sense of new beginnings about it, exactly the mood I was in at that time.

How has your collection evolved over the years?

Photography became more and more important, and something happened that I never would have imagined a few years ago: the collection can now also count video works and video installations among its assets.



Yue Minjun, 'Romanticism & Realism Series #1', 2003, acrylic on fibreglass, 95 x 78 x 30 cm.
Image courtesy Sammlung Wemhöner.

What changes in Asian contemporary art have you witnessed in your collecting career?

The forms of expression have changed, for example by shifting from Cynical Realism and colourful hues to more subtle forms. And they have become more political, too.

You have published *FOCUS ASIA*, the first book in a series presenting your collection. Can you tell me about the series and why you chose to display your work in this way?

After having collected art for several years, I felt the desire to catalogue the works to put them in order

and keep better track of the collection's evolution. In this light, it was only consistent to publish *FOCUS ASIA* as the first book, given also that the collection really has a strong focus on Asian and Chinese art. I think that there are about 35 Chinese artists in the collection at the moment.

Will there be an exhibition accompanying the book? Do you have any wider plans to loan out or exhibit your collection?

We have just presented a part of the collection to the public for the first time, and the opening ceremony was held last Saturday in the OSRAM Höfe in Berlin. A catalogue of the exhibition is also available. I would be very happy to hold an exhibition of the collection in the city of Changzhou, where our Chinese company is located. But contemporary art has not yet appeared on the radar of politicians there. We're working on it.



Yu Ji, 'Fang and her Doll', 2007, digital C-print, 120 x 150 cm. Image courtesy Sammlung Wemhöner.

Every year there are more and more fairs and biennales. Do you attend them and are they useful for you as a collector, or do you source acquisitions by other means?

Yes, the number of fairs is exploding now. This is certainly a sign that interest in contemporary art is growing. On the other hand, it is impossible for a collector to visit all these fairs. In the past, a biennale always meant something special. Now, in my view, it is losing much of its significance due to this inflationary trend. Less would be more.

There are many people who love art and long to own a work but cannot make the leap to collect, doubting their own intuition and taste. What is your advice to them?

Follow your gut feeling. Follow what you love – what touches you, what stirs your emotions. Don't ask for the price first. Ask the cost of something only when you like it. And then ask yourself if you can, or would like to, be able to afford it just at that moment.

What advice would you give to a dealer who is starting out about how to develop a relationship with a collector like you? Why?

For me, the best gallerist would be the one telling me "Listen, I would not buy this if I were you, because this is one of the weaker works of the artist." A gallerist providing just honest advice. But this is how trust is built. I would also expect the gallerist to give me timely hints and suggestions helping me to be the first to have a look at some particular works.



Chi Peng, 'Wu Kong', 2012, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm. Image courtesy Sammlung Wemhöner.

What are the biggest mistakes that novice dealers make with established collectors? Why?

Selling you something they are not convinced of, only to get rid of a shelf-warmer. The relationship between a gallerist and a collector is a very delicate one and should primarily be built on trust.

Do you have any rules of thumb about the career stages of an artist? For example, is it best to collect art which has appeared at auction, artists who have had their first solo show or something else?

You should buy an artist's work if you like it, if you feel fascinated by it. Buying big names and spending lots of money is something anybody can do! And at times, you have to be ready to even buy something you might not like so much five years later; in other words, to make concessions. Buying something because you feel emotional about it is no mistake, after all. But you will move on. And this is a positive thing.

You have been active in the art world a long time, what are the biggest irritations or challenges?

The incredibly high prices that are presently achieved at international auctions, such as **Sotheby's** or

Christie's. Where is this going to end?



Chen Xiaoyun, 'Revolution's Romanticism', 2007, Inkjet print, edition 3 / 8, 144 x 180 cm.
Image courtesy Sammlung Wemhöner.

What information sources do you use to follow the art world?

I read a lot. Books, art magazines, newspapers, and I visit galleries and also museum exhibitions. And I meet the artists.

You must have seen many shows over the years. What makes an interesting show and what makes a bad one?

I still clearly remember the exhibition "Sensation" in the museum Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin 1999. For the first time ever, **Saatchi** showed British avant-garde, with artists like **Damien Hirst** and Tracey Emin. This was indeed a shock for me, I simply was not ready for it yet. The exhibition was a highly moving experience I will always keep in my mind.



Shi Xinning, 'Cigarette', 2008, oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Image courtesy Sammlung Wemhöner.



Wei Guangqing, 'In Inscription No 1', 2008, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 146 cm. Image courtesy Sammlung Wemhöner.

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