

ASIAN ART

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NEW LISTINGS FOR WORLD MONUMENTS FUND

The World Monuments Fund (WMF) is celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2025 and has recently announced its annual additions to the World Monuments Watch list. The latest list comprises 25 sites, featuring a wide variety of cultural heritage sites facing major challenges in Asia, including the Buddhist grottoes of Maijishan and Yungang in China, Bhuj historic water systems and Musi historic river buildings in India, the Noto Peninsula heritage sites in Japan, and the Eredene Zuu Buddhist monastery in Mongolia.

The two Buddhist grotto sites, Maijishan and Yungang, face conservation challenges as they have welcomed unprecedented numbers of visitors in recent years. By placing these sites on the Watch list, WMF seeks to collaborate with local teams at both sites to develop sustainable visitor management practices. The grottoes of Maijishan, located in the mountains of Gansu Province, date to the 4th and 5th centuries and are carved into a sheer cliff. They were first built in the Later Qin period (384-417) and were

continuously adapted throughout China's history from the West Qin, Northern Wei, West Wei, Northern Zhou, Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Maijishan's 194 caves also contain over 7,200 sculptures and murals.

The site's narrow, cantilevered walkways are under strain from the one million annual visitors, including as many as 13,000 per day during the peak season. Challenging climatic conditions and limited resources further complicate the grottoes' preservation.

Buddhist grottoes, carved into rugged cliffs and rock faces, are among the most distinctive architectural and artistic legacies of ancient Buddhist China. Cave temple complexes, some housing hundreds of hand-excavated prayer halls and niches, served as centres for education and cultural exchange, enhancing and promoting Buddhist teachings throughout early China. The Maijishan and Yungang grottoes are among the most celebrated of this group and are increasingly threatened by the pressures of mass tourism.



Aerial view of Maijishan grottoes, carved into the rock in Tianshu, Gansu Province, which were first built during the Later Qin period, courtesy of World Monuments Fund

In Datong city, Shanxi Province, the Yungang grottoes were created during the Northern Wei dynasty (386-535) in the 5th and 6th centuries and were inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2001. Considered among the earliest rock-cut Buddhist cave temples in China, the site comprises 252 caves and niches and 51,000 statues within a carved area of

some 18,000 square metres. The Yungang grottoes are considered to represent the highest achievement of Buddhist cave art in China. The five caves, created by the celebrated monk Tan Yao from the Northern Wei dynasty, are considered classical masterpieces showing unity in layout and design. The Northern Wei dynasty was an enthusiastic supporter of

Buddhism, and these grottoes were built under Imperial patronage. While influenced by Buddhist cave art from South and Central Asia, the interpretation of Buddhist cave art at Yungang grottoes has a distinctive Chinese character with local aesthetics.

WMF's latest sites are representative of those already placed on the list from the 29 countries that span five continents. This year's list also includes a true celestial surprise – the Moon. In 1969, when the Apollo 11 mission landed in the Sea of Tranquility, the landing site (known as Tranquility Base), preserves artefacts related to the event, including the landing module, scientific instruments, and Neil Armstrong's iconic boot print. In 2023, an interdisciplinary group of archaeologists, heritage managers, aerospace scientists, and researchers formed the International Scientific Committee on Aerospace Heritage (ISCoAH), which operates under the International Council of Monuments and Sites, to promote the preservation of the tangible and intangible aerospace heritage.



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NEWS IN BRIEF

BAIFANG SCHELL CHINA BOOKS PRIZE, NEW YORK

The digital magazine *China Books Review*, published by Asia Society's Center on US-China Relations and *The Wire China*, has announced the Baifang Schell China Books Prize, a prestigious new annual award that will celebrate exceptional book-length works on or from China and the greater Sinophone world, published in English. The prize is named in honour of Liu Baifang Schell, who passed away in 2021 after spending her life working to advance US-China relations.

This new annual award will celebrate exceptional book-length works on or from China and the greater Sinophone world, published in English. Winners will be awarded in two categories, each accompanied by a \$10,000 cash prize: Outstanding Nonfiction Book on China and Outstanding Translated Chinese Literature – shared between the author and translator(s). The awards seek to recognise and promote excellence in books that deepen understanding of the complexities of China and the greater Sinophone world through original reporting, incisive analysis, compelling narrative, and literary merit. The inaugural awards ceremony will take place at Asia Society's New York headquarters later in 2025, considering books published in 2024.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

The Metropolitan Museum of Art today unveiled two monumental works of calligraphy by Taiwanese artist Tong Yang-Tze (born 1942, Shanghai, based in Taipei) for the Museum's Great Hall Commission. The works are installed on the two eastern walls of the Great Hall that frame the Museum entrance. Dialogue marks the artist's first major project in the United States as well as the third project in a series of

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ETERNAL OFFERINGS

Chinese Ritual Bronzes from the Minneapolis Institute of Art

Bronze casting in China, which began over 4,000 years ago, stands as one of the greatest achievements in early metalcraft. During the Shang (1600-1046 BC) and Zhou (1046-256 BC) dynasties, the period known as the Bronze Age, ritual bronze vessels played a central role in ancestor worship, a cornerstone of Chinese spiritual and social life. Although China was not the first country to enter the Bronze Age, its bronzes from this period are an important part of world history because of their variety and intricacy, the ritual context in which they developed, and the sheer number that have been unearthed over China's vast territory. The people of Bronze Age China believed in the hierarchy of beings, from the heavens to the king to the royal



Recumbent water buffalo, late Western Zhou dynasty, 9th century BC, bronze, 11.43 x 20.64 cm, bequest of Alfred F Pillsbury

courts to the people. They created their art to maintain this order on earth and in the afterlife. They made a wide range of bronze vessels to acknowledge the powers invested in those of high rank in ceremonies and sacrifices.

Each vessel type served a specific purpose in ritual ceremonies and was adorned with intricate designs that

symbolised power, spirituality, and cosmic harmony. Many were inscribed to honour ancestors and rulers or to commemorate significant events, blending artistic mastery with historical record. These vessels, crafted using advanced casting techniques, were not only functional but also remarkable testaments to technological and cultural sophistication.

This exhibition, drawn from the extensive collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, explores the diverse forms, functions, and symbolic meanings of ancient Chinese bronzes, providing a window into the spiritual and artistic essence of early Chinese civilisation.

• From 6 March to 13 July, China Institute, New York, chinainstitute.org

CYCLES OF CLAY

The Ceramic Narratives of Sunkoo Yuh

This exhibition explores the creativity of Sunkoo Yuh, an artist who navigates the intersections of cultural heritage and contemporary expression. Yuh's ceramic sculptures combine bold colours, evocative imagery, and intricate figures layered vertically to evoke histories and community connection. Themes of Buddhist cycles, Confucian ideals, and sociopolitical commentary permeate his works, which includes monumental pieces like Long Beach Summer and Athens Winter. Through experimental glazing and unpredictable firing techniques, Yuh captures the tension between order and chaos to create visually compelling sculptures that explore life's beauty, fragility, and complexity.

• From 7 March to 24 May, Charles B Wang Center, New York, stonybrook.edu.
• Lecture: Glazed Realities A Journey in Clay, 7 March at 4pm



Can You Hear Me (2007) by Sunkoo Yuh, glazed porcelain, 27 x 22 x 17 inches, Charles B Wang Center

LEE BUL

Long Tail Halo

Until recently, The Met's major commission was the one taking place on its rooftop. Since 2019, the museum has taken advantage of the niches on its front facade, each year inviting an artist to present works that interact with the space. Selected for this edition, Korean artist Lee Bul (b 1964) presents four sculptures where the artist pursues her investigation of the human figure in this technological age. Her earlier cyborgs have now led to a human form made of shattered pieces; a contemporary version of Milo's Venus seen through the artist's lens. Her sculptures irrevocably lead to the question of what caused such a drastic transformation. Between sculptures of fragmented parts and others resembling a human shape made of crystal pieces, one wonders whether this is what lies ahead or whether this is how Lee Bul presently views this all-too-often chaotic world. As a



Long Tail Halo by Lee Bul

multi-disciplinary artist, Lee Bul has frequently opened new avenues when it comes to man's evolution. She continues that path, presenting no definite conclusion, but skilfully playing with form and

material to make us doubt our capacity to determine the course of our existence, and thus, our becoming.

Olivia Sand

• Until 27 May, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org

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