The Carl Whiting Bishop Photographic Archive in the Freer Gallery of Art: A Resource for the Study of Chinese Architecture, Archaeology, Geology, Topography, Flora, Fauna, Customs, and Culture

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The Freer Gallery of Art was conceived by its founder, Charles Lang Freer, as a museum and a research institution. Freer described the purpose of the Gallery as "the encouragement of the study of the civilization of the Far East." Since opening to the public in 1923, the Gallery has maintained the founder's mandate. Research tools available to scholars and the general public include the collections, a reference library and the archives. Among other materials in the archives is an important collection of photographs by Carl Whiting Bishop (1881-1942) taken while he was in China during the 1920s and 1930s.

Bishop was born in Tokyo, Japan, on July 12, 1881, of missionary parents. Until he was sixteen he lived in Tokyo and attended the English School from 1888-1897. In 1898 he came to the United States and finished his pre-collegiate education at Northwestern Academy, Evanston, Illinois. He then attended DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, from 1901-1904; Hampden-Sydney College in Hampden-Sydney, Virginia, from 1905-1906; and Business College in Poughkeepsie, New York, from 1906-1907. Bishop developed his interest in anthropology and archaeology during 1907-1912 when he traveled in the southwestern United States and Central America. In 1912 he returned to DePauw University to receive his A.B. degree and in 1913 was awarded a Master of Arts degree by the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. Also in 1913, his career in archaeology began as a member of the Peabody Museum Expedition to Central America. From 1914-1918 he was Associate Curator of Oriental Art at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and as a member of that staff made his first trip to China from 1915-1917.

In 1918 Bishop enlisted in the United States Navy and became the assistant naval attache in China until 1920 with the rank of lieutenant, junior grade. He served as a professor of archaeology at Columbia University from October 1921 to April 1922, whereupon he became an Associate Curator at the Freer Gallery from 1922 until his death on June 16, 1942. Bishop was appointed by John E. Lodge, director of the Freer Gallery, specifically to undertake archaeological research and excavation in China. Nine of the twenty years that Bishop was associated with the Freer were spent in China. The first expedition lasted from February 20, 1923, until August 6, 1927. The second trip to China lasted from November 16, 1929, until April 11, 1934. The photographs that form the archive were taken during these two trips.

When Bishop returned to Washington in 1934, he continued to work for the Freer Gallery as an Associate in Archaeology until his death in 1942. He was buried with military honors in Arlington National Cemetery.

Bishop published in the field of Chinese archaeology and was considered an excellent field archaeologist. Evidence of Bishop's concern for all aspects of China can be seen in his photographs. He was one of the few who attempted scientific excavation in China during the 1920s and 1930s when the country was experiencing a political and cultural upheaval. Only since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 has archaeological excavation been conducted generally under scientifically controlled conditions.

The results of Bishop's work in China include his report of archaeological research in northern and central China during the period of 1923-1934, approximately 4,000 black-and-white photographs, field reports and concurrent correspondence between Bishop and the Freer Gallery. The subjects of the photographs include architecture, archaeology, geology, topography, flora and fauna, objects, and the customs and culture of the people Bishop saw in China. Bishop also returned from China with 758 objects of pottery, bronze, jade, stone sculpture, tiles, iron and gold. These objects are from known sites and are therefore valuable for dating comparable objects.

To understand the history of Bishop's trips is to appreciate the value of this archive and particularly the photographic collection. The photographs are significant because of the variety of subject matter and the time in which they were taken. During the 1920s and 1930s China underwent a tremendous and all-encompassing social and political upheaval. Few Westerners were privy to the scenes that Bishop was able to photograph. For the historian or student of China in this time period, the Bishop Archive gives a perspective of this traumatic era.

As mentioned, Bishop was appointed to undertake archaeological work in China. Because this field research was to be done hand-in-hand with Chinese scientists, Bishop made arrangements with the Historical Museum in Peking, a branch of the Ministry of Education, to be an adviser in the field of archaeology to the Chinese government. He also arranged for the Smithsonian Institution to be the sole excavator and exporter of objects in China by a foreign country. The result of this agreement between the governments of the United States and China was to be a mutually beneficial cultural exchange between museums rather than between governments. All archaeological finds would be shared in return for the cooperation.

Unfortunately, in the spring of 1923 shortly after Bishop's arrival in China, he encountered insurmountable difficulties that would prevail throughout his stay in China. Bishop fought an uphill battle to persuade the Chinese authorities to permit archaeological exploration. However, despite his continuous and sincere efforts to conduct archaeological excavations and despite the above mentioned agreements, his frequent requests for permission to dig proved futile because of the constantly changing conditions in China at the time. Frequently, when Bishop did obtain permission to dig somewhere, he was prevented from doing so by the civil and social turmoil occurring throughout China. On several occasions he and his party worked under gunfire, and more than once, their headquarters in Peking were besieged or subjected to air raids.
Bishop's letters to Lodge not only reveal the frustrations of the situation but also describe war conditions, details of wartime travel difficulties, torture incidents, kidnappings of foreigners for ransom, "coups d'etat," and refugees flocking into Peking to escape looting and pillaging by mutinous unpaid soldiers.

Facing unsanitary and hazardous conditions as well as the failure of his mission in China, Bishop became disillusioned. In his journal, he wrote, "We had already long since learned that under conditions as they existed in China at that time, official permits alone were apt to have a negative rather than positive value. They by no means assured us of liberty to proceed with an enterprise unmolested; but without them we were certain to be hindered, blackmailed, or even stopped altogether." (Feb. 1925, p. 218, footnote 199)

Dejected and embittered by his inability to carry out any important archaeological work, Bishop left China in 1927 only to return in 1929 hoping for improved conditions. What he found, however, was increased opposition to any foreign digging or enterprises. During Bishop's two-year absence from China, the Chinese Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities had been established and was strongly opposed to any excavation by foreigners.

After more reconnaissance missions and very little digging in the early 1930s, the Freer Gallery of Art program of expeditions to China was abandoned in 1934. Lodge felt that what little results came from the expedition were not worth the $30,000-a-year budget.

During the period 1923-1934 Bishop did see a marked increase in the amount of interest in archaeological study compared with what he found when he first arrived in China. Libraries increased in number along with the attempt to preserve rather than disregard ancient objects. A number of Chinese archaeological organizations were established, such as the Institute of Scientific Research and the Geological Survey. As a result of the increased interest in archaeology, Bishop was able to exhibit some of his finds in the Peking Historical Museum and to contribute to some scientific journals in Peking.

Political conditions in China during Bishop's active period there regrettably prevented the possibility of his taking actual part in any extensive excavations, although two minor ones were completed. Despite the fact that Bishop was absent from the site, the excavations at An-yang, Honan Province, were partially due to his strong influence. In fact, the work done there in 1929 was a joint project between the Freer Gallery and the Chinese National Research Council. Dr. Chi Li, one of the principal archaeologists on that dig, was trained by Bishop.

The Bishop photographs are assembled into eleven three-ring binders which are located in the Freer Library (open to the public Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.) A twelfth volume contains a numerical and subject index to the photographs, some background information on Bishop in China and his mission while in China and a list of the objects Bishop acquired for the Freer Gallery. Each photographic volume is arranged by the number of the negative. The Bishop photographic negative number system was designed by Bishop and fashioned after the Dewey Decimal System. Therefore, although the eleven volumes of photographs are arranged by negative number, they in fact appear organized by subject matter.

The photographic quality of the prints in the eleven volumes is not good. Printed before Bishop's death in 1942, the photographs appear faded. They have been placed on buffered paper in the binders to counter the damaging effects of the
original printing process. Negatives of most of the photographs exist and are stored in the Freer Gallery. A user of the Bishop Archive may consult the eleven volumes of photographs using the index volume to find particular subjects, locations, etc. The photographs may not be borrowed, but copies may be ordered by negative number through the Museum Shop. The copyright for the photographs is held by the Freer Gallery of Art.

While the majority of the 758 objects acquired by Bishop in China are in the Freer's study collection due to their fragmentary nature, more than one dozen valuable objects were accessioned into the Gallery's permanent collection. A list of these objects is contained in the index volume. By comparing the list of objects and their source with photographs of known sites, the art historian can use the photographs as important source material.

The photographs can also be used to illustrate texts on a variety of subjects including architecture, caves, ceremonies, customs, geography, burial mounds, palaces, rivers and views of famous places, among many other subjects.

Although the photographs which illustrate the unrest, the poverty, the discord, the effects of the political upheaval and the social complexities of the era are the principal part of the archive, Bishop's field notes and other papers are also important. They describe the on-going difficulties Bishop experienced and futile efforts he made. Despite the fact that Bishop's official mission to China was never accomplished, his photographic documentation paints an explicit picture of China in the 1920s and 1930s. It is thus a significant and valuable research tool for the scholar of China.

Bishop's extensive field reports, although bound into a two-volume journal, were never published by the Freer Gallery because they lacked substantial information on actual excavations. The majority of the field reports contained descriptions of the fruitless negotiations with Chinese officials and scientists to obtain permission for archaeological excavation and descriptions of reconnaissance of potential excavation sites. The more valuable parts of the reports were published in technical journals, with a summary in the Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections series.

In summary the Bishop Archive, which is basically unpublished, presents a wealth of images for historians studying a variety of subjects about China during the twentieth century. It has an index which is also unpublished, but available in the Library of the Freer Gallery of Art. For use of the Bishop Archive, contact:

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Material in the Freer Gallery of Art Library
Relevant to the Bishop Archive

Bishop, Carl Whiting. Archaeological Expedition to China. (In Explorations and Fieldwork of the Smithsonian Institution in 1927, 1927, p. 109-118, illus.)


Bishop, Carl Whiting. Excavation of a West Han Dynasty Site at Yen-tzu Ko-ta, Wan Ch’uan Hsien, Southwestern Shansi. Kelly & Walsh, Shanghai, 1932.

VIEW OF PEKING, 1917. The photograph from the Archive shows a stone bridge which spans the moat at the southeast corner of the Tartar City. One of the gate towers leading into the Forbidden City and sections of the old city wall can be seen in the background.