

International opening

The Feuerle Collection, Berlin

A new gallery showcases this collection of international contemporary art and imperial Chinese design, but does Berlin need another art space? *Oliver Krugg* talks to its director, Désiré Feuerle, about how this one is different



Above: an elm side table with everted ends from the early Qing dynasty, 17th century



Left: a stone head of Avalokiteshvara in the Bayan style, 12th-13th century

The Feuerle Collection is housed in a second world war era telecommunications bunker in Berlin, which is appropriate given the gallery's aim: to provoke dialogue between art and design from different cultures and periods. As a collector, Désiré Feuerle, the director of the gallery, has championed cross-cultural, multi-era comparisons between contemporary western and ancient Asian art.

Feuerle's collection juxtaposes 7th- to 13th-century Cambodian Khmer sculpture, imperial Chinese furniture spanning the Han and Qing dynasties (200 BC-18th century) with contemporary work by the likes of Cristina Iglesias, Anish Kapoor and Zeng Fanzhi.

The building has been redeveloped by architect John Pawson and offers an unusually sensual experience: there's a meditative interior lake, a room for traditional Chinese incense ceremonies and one of the world's most advanced lighting systems.

What made you take the step from collecting to creating a museum?

I was always collecting works of art and never knew what to do with them. In the end, it was the collection that forced me to think bigger. Friends of mine kept asking to see works and I had to say they were in storage. I also wanted to give each work the physical space it deserved.

How did you decide on a place to show the collection?

We started looking nine years

ago. It was not easy to find something suitable, but the minute I saw this bunker I knew that it was special. I wondered if I needed such a big space, but then realised I would be able to install things the way they ought to be, with air between them.

Why Berlin?

It's a rough city, it's a young city. At first glance, the museum doesn't seem to fit in, but in the end that is precisely why it does. Everything in Berlin is slightly unexpected and so is my collection. This town makes you look at art differently.

What will visitors see?

Everything in the collection is unique. But there are certain pieces I am particularly happy to be able to show. There is a sitting platform from the Han dynasty that is one of the earliest pieces of Chinese furniture. Underneath the

platform the four seas are carved in stone, alongside astrological cross lines, symbolising that the person sitting on it controls the world, the sky and the universe.

Then there is the tiny Khmer head that visitors encounter first as they enter. This little piece has such presence; it can carry the whole room because it is of such extraordinary quality.

The museum is about valuing quality. Nothing matters more in art than its quality, not the price or the fame. As a reminder of that the museum opens with this tiny head.

Why did you decide to pair ancient works with contemporary ones?

I became interested in this juxtaposition around 30 years ago. It is fascinating to see how works can be thousands of years apart and still evoke the same profound feelings and thoughts in the viewer.



Above: a polished stone statue of Harihara from the pre-Angkor period, 7th-8th century

The first room is dark. Why?

Light is important to me. Visitors enter into darkness, which cleanses their visual palate. Then comes music, which refocuses them. I tried out many pieces, but Music for Piano 20 by John Cage felt right. Only then is light reintroduced. Every artwork has a special angle that brings out its essence. This is what good light can do – our lighting system is among the most advanced in the world.

Why is there a lake inside the building?

One of the rooms is more than 2,000 sq m and I thought it would look amazing filled with water. It is good for the soul to look at art and water.

Will artists create site-specific works?

Yes, Cristina Iglesias has already made a piece. We spoke about the eroticism of Chinese furniture and she said she

Project data

Cost Undisclosed
Main funder Désiré Feuerle
Architect John Pawson; Realarchitektur
Site supervision Wolfgang Meier-Kühn, AGP* Architekten
Structural engineer Ingenieurbüro Rüdiger Jockwer GmbH
Art handling and exhibition logistics Museumstechnik
Lighting Erco
Admission €18



Désiré Feuerle is the director of the Feuerle Collection, Berlin

would create a work in response to that.

Why do you have an incense room in the gallery?

Being invited to an incense ceremony in China is an honour, and the event is a wonderful sensory experience. You enter a world of incredibly refined smells. We thought it wasn't possible to bring this to the museum because it's such a complicated process – you don't burn incense, you have to heat up wood to bring the oil out.

So I brought in the producer of an electronic tasting device and a high-end furniture maker, and the architect thought we could make it work. It took us a year to find the finest African black wood; it's made in a minimalist Chinese manner. Visitors can book an incense ceremony as part of their visit.

Oliver Krugg is a freelance writer. thefeuerlecollection.org