

EMILY J. SANO

IUC '64

A Bay Area art critic once insisted to Emily Sano that the collection at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco be housed in an Asian building. Sano -- who was the director charged with moving the Museum to a new location -- asked for the definition of an "Asian building." The critic asserted that this meant "low and horizontal." Recalling the moment, Sano says, "I thought that was just the silliest thing I'd ever heard."

A gift for candid appraisal notwithstanding, Sano's broad knowledge of Asian art, combined with the belief in the power of fine art to better a community and society as a whole, gave Sano the confidence to undertake the herculean task of moving the museum from its original home at the M.H. de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park to its current Civic Center location. Sano faced significant challenges during the ten-year endeavor. However, today she is universally hailed as the only person who could have pulled off the mission so successfully. Sano herself felt an immediate connection to the project, thinking at the time, "I was put on Earth to do this job." She now considers it her legacy.

Sano's lifelong dedication to Asian art began, interestingly enough, at the IUC. An undergrad from Indiana University majoring in Asian Studies, she was enrolled in the program in 1963-64. At the Center she developed friendships with graduate students in art history who introduced her to the world of antiques, acquisitions, and museums. She also became interested in Japanese ceramics, which drove her to visit old kilns. She characterizes her language studies at IUC as having practical importance, becoming fluent enough in Japanese to "communicate what needs to be communicated and read what I need to know about." However, she credits the program most for exposing her to Japanese art.



The experience eventually blossomed into her ultimate passion for Buddhist sculpture, which culminated at Columbia University with a dissertation on the twenty-eight Attendants displayed at the famous Sanjusangendo temple in Kyoto. After taking her Ph.D., Sano embarked on a career of presenting Asian art to the public, starting with curatorial and deputy director posts at the Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas and the Dallas Museum of Art. Earning a reputation for having both a connoisseur's eye and a scholar's intellect, Sano caught the attention of a trustee of the Asian Art Museum who was originally from Dallas, who

suggested to her that she consider a move to San Francisco.

Cited for her contribution to promoting Japanese art and culture -- particularly during her tenure as director of the Asian Art Museum -- and for her leadership in strengthening Japan-U.S. cultural exchange, Sano was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun by the Japanese government in 2008. The honor was something she had never anticipated, but it is a testament to Sano's tenacity and drive, which moved her forward on a journey that began as the daughter of a cotton sharecropper in Arkansas and led her through the highest ranks of what some would consider the rarified world of art.

Today, Sano insists that studying art history "helps you understand the world." And though she laments that the current economic downturn has undermined museum budgets across the country, in addition to causing American interest and attention to shift from Japan to China and India, she believes it also underscores the value of programs like IUC which provide a high level of training in the Japanese language and keep the bonds between the two countries alive.