

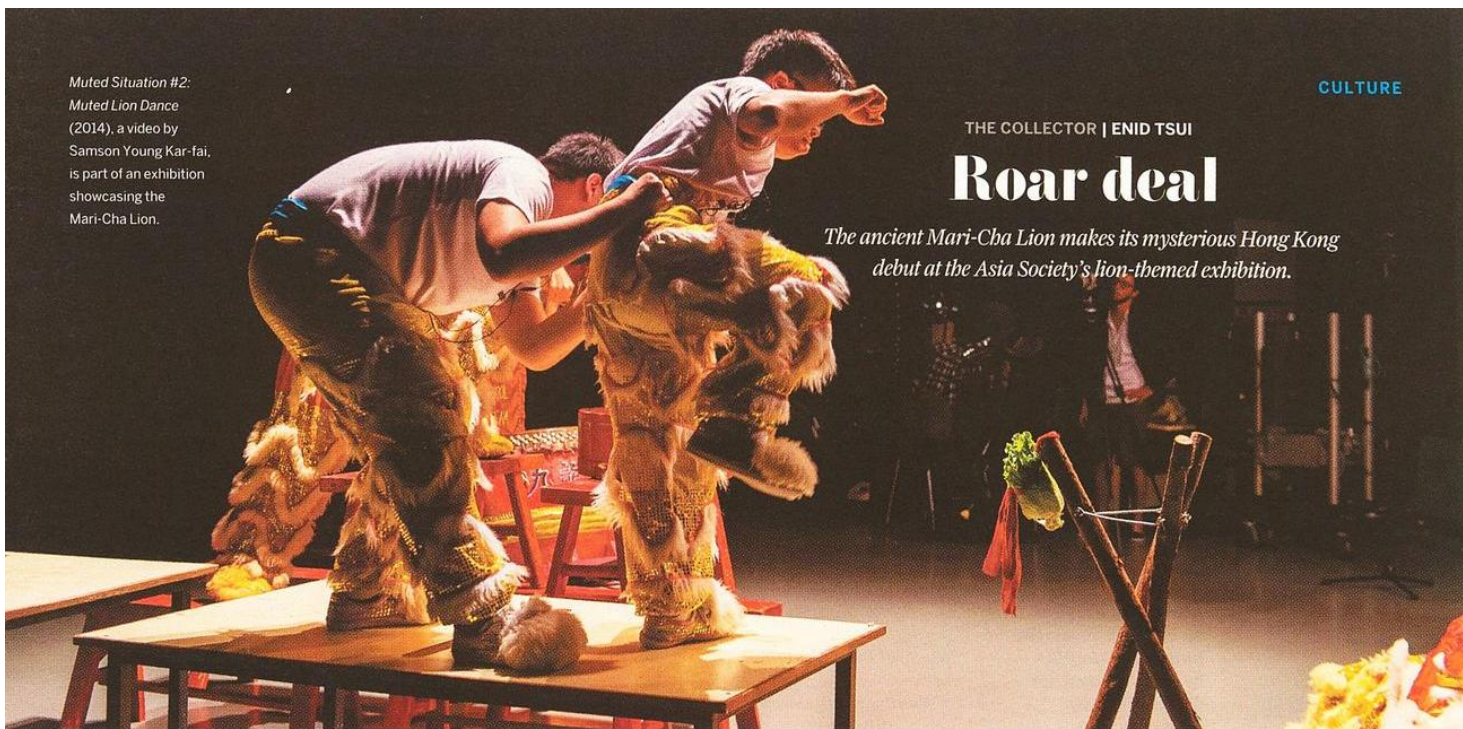
Muted Situation #2:
Muted Lion Dance
(2014), a video by
Samson Young Kar-fai,
is part of an exhibition
showcasing the
Mari-Cha Lion.

CULTURE

THE COLLECTOR | ENID TSUI

Roar deal

The ancient Mari-Cha Lion makes its mysterious Hong Kong debut at the Asia Society's lion-themed exhibition.



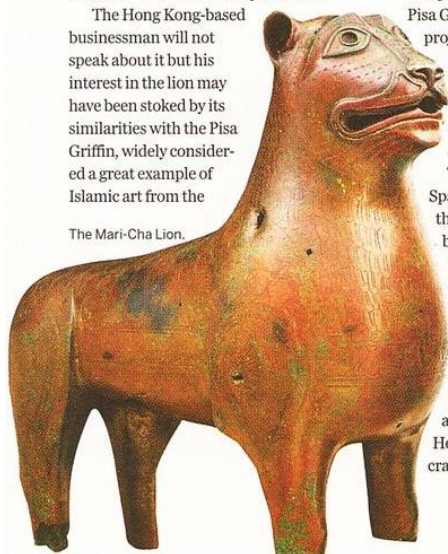
THANKS TO THE newly installed resident of the White House, people around the globe have been scratching their heads over the term “alternative facts”. Happily, competing visions of reality at an Asia Society exhibition do not pose the same metaphysical conundrum, but merely highlight the thrilling possibilities of imagining ancient history through a work of art.

The Mari-Cha Lion, star of the lion-themed art exhibition, is an enigma.

On October 19, 1993, Robert Miller of duty free shopping fame (and a major benefactor to the Asia Society) bought the ancient bronze sculpture from an anonymous “noble European family” for £2.4 million at a London auction. It was the most anyone had ever bid for a piece of Islamic art, as the lion was thought to be, even though virtually no one had heard of the object before.

The Hong Kong-based businessman will not speak about it but his interest in the lion may have been stoked by its similarities with the Pisa Griffin, widely considered a great example of Islamic art from the

The Mari-Cha Lion.



same era and kept at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, in Pisa.

The Christie's auction catalogue says the lion and griffin could have come from the same workshop and metallurgists have proved both were made in the 11th or 12th centuries. They are both bronze, roughly the same size, engraved with similar patterns and have an Arabic inscription expressing goodwill on their chests and flanks. Naturally, the better-known griffin's backstory was used to fill in the massive gaps of knowledge regarding the lion.

The griffin's origins are not clear cut, however. Various claims have been made about it coming from Iran or Fatimid Egypt. The predominant view among experts of the Pisa Griffin Project, an international research project based at the School of Oriental and African Studies, in London, is that it was made within the Islamic Mediterranean – most probably Moorish Spain – and was captured and taken to Italy by invading Pisans. The Christie's specialists found the Spanish theory most convincing, saying the griffin and the lion resembled other beasts found in the Iberian Peninsula. That's why the lion was sold as Islamic, probably from Spain.

Richard Camber, a medieval and Byzantine art expert who has studied the lion since 1993, disagrees. Instead, the guest curator of the Asia Society exhibition puts forward a seductive, alternative theory of multiculturalism. He says the lion was made by Arabic craftsmen for the Normans, who ruled



Lion's Masks (2005-2006), by Vu Dan Tan, part of the Asia Society's lion-themed show.

southern Italy at the time. The northern Europeans had initially arrived as mercenaries to help locals oust the Byzantine rulers. Like the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, they turned against their weak employers and made themselves rulers instead.

The Normans consolidated their power in southern Italy under the Kingdom of Sicily's Roger II, a man who adopted Byzantine customs in an effort to appear legitimate. And that's where the lion comes in, Camber says. The Byzantine courts often featured thrones based on the Bible description of that of King Solomon. They were always guarded by two lion statues.

“Roger II was considered a usurper. He liked to dress up as the Byzantine emperor and we have evidence that ‘thrones of Solomon’ existed in two cities in Norman Sicily,” Camber says. It would make sense for such a Byzantophile to have adopted the Eastern empire's love of gimmickry.

The Byzantine courts were full of mechanical toys, such as silver trees with birds that “sang” and roaring beasts powered by air. A vase-like chamber inside the lion suggests it once “roared”; too. Visitors can hear it via an augmented-reality app at the gallery.

But there's no getting round the fact that the lion was engraved with Arabic. And it doesn't look that different from the lion sculptures at the Alhambra. Wouldn't it be simpler to concede that it was an Islamic lion?

No, says Camber. He has not seen anything like the Mari-Cha Lion from the Spanish Islamic courts of that time and the Alhambra lions have been dated to a much later period. As for the Arabic script, it was a world of porous borders and rulers who spoke many tongues. The Normans were fluent in Arabic, apparently, and the makers of the lion and the griffin could be itinerant craftsmen who simply travelled Europe from one job to another.

It all makes for a wonderful story. But how do we know if it's true? As Camber points out, it would be great if the “noble European family” that owned the lion for many generations would tell us what they know. Alas, they have decided to remain silent.

Formerly called the New York Lion, because Miller had lent it to the city's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the new name, shared by his fleet of racing yachts, is in tribute to Miller's wife, Marie-Chantal. ■

“Roaring Guardians: The Mari-Cha Lion with Asian Traditional and Contemporary Art” will be held at the Chantal Miller Gallery, Asia Society, 9 Justice Drive, Admiralty, Tue-Sun, 11am-6pm, until February 19.