

Tientsin Rotarian – Dr. George Crofts  
pivotal figure in the acquisition of Chinese antiquities for Western museums  
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Dr. George Crofts, *HonLLD (Ontario)*, (1872–1925) was a prominent Irish fur trader and art collector who became a pivotal figure in the acquisition of Chinese antiquities for Western museums, most notably the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), Canada.

He established Geo Crofts & Company in Tientsin (*Tianjin*) (天津), Ch'ing Empire (大清國) (China), in 1896 (光緒二十二年). While primarily a successful trader in furs and hair, his business evolved to include the export of Chinese antiquities.

Though often referred to in the context of archaeology, Crofts was primarily a collector and supplier rather than a trained archaeologist. He acted as a critical intermediary, purchasing artifacts---often from local dealers and tomb excavations---for export to the West during the early 20th century.

Crofts became the ROM's chief agent in China after a chance meeting with the Museum's first director, Charles Trick Currelly. Between 1918 and 1925, he was responsible for sending thousands of significant artifacts to Toronto, Canada, including Buddhist sculptures, ceramics, and even the massive "Ming Tomb" (the tomb of General Zu Dashou 祖大壽).

After the Rotary Club of Tientsin (天津扶輪社) was formally chartered on 10 May 1923, Crofts joined the Club as an Active Member holding the Classification "Archaeologist". In the Club, Crofts was affectionately called "Punch" as his nickname. Regrettably, his Rotary life was very brief that he passed away in 1925.



Born into an Irish family in England, George Crofts started his successful trading company in Tientsin in 1896, when he also started what would become his habit of collecting Chinese antiquities for export. Early in 1918, on his way to the China from London, Crofts made a stop in Toronto. He stayed at the King Edward Hotel, where he discovered the promotional postcard Currelly had made. Crofts recognized the ROM's Luohan (羅漢) sculpture as one that he had once owned. With only a few hours before he had to catch his train to continue his long journey, he went to the museum to see the piece and any others in the ROM's collection. It just happened that Currelly was in the gallery with the president of the University of Manitoba when Crofts introduced himself. But because Currelly was engaged with the university president, the two men merely exchanged a simple greeting.

Later that day, Currelly called all the major hotels, locating Crofts just as he was about to check out. The two men had a very brief meeting in Crofts's hotel room, where Crofts showed Currelly a few photos of his current possessions. These objects were, in Currelly's own words, "the finest collection of Tang objects I had ever seen." When Currelly realized that the price Crofts was asking for the pieces in the photographs was only one-fifth what it would cost the ROM if they were to purchase similar objects in London, he said to Crofts: "Let me have the photographs. I'm not allowed to run into debt for the museum, but I'll tear the money out of Toronto in ten-cent pieces before we let such a chance slip."

After this brief meeting, Crofts had to catch the train to California, U.S.A. On 23 January 1918, in a letter from San Francisco, Crofts wrote: "May I place on record the fact that your Lohan figure was originally made in China. Your wonderful collection of porcelains passed through my hands to Messrs. Franck & Co. London, likewise your velvets, embroideries, screens, and almost the whole of your exhibits from London came from myself. I feel therefore, I can take interest in your Museum and that it should be possible to arrange business in the near future." Barbara Stephen, a curator of the ROM Far East Department, noted that Crofts was likely unhappy with London art markets and ready to do business directly with this emerging museum in Canada.

Thereafter the friendship between Currelly and Crofts resulted in Chinese antiquities flooding into Toronto at a level beyond Currelly's anticipation. As a direct result, Currelly was forced to run the museum into debt from time to time. He never hesitated to approach people such as Sir Edmund Walker and Mrs. Warren for financial support, receiving enthusiastic responses from them most of the time.

In his Tientsin warehouse, Crofts always carefully arranged to photograph the artifacts before packing and shipping them out of China. In 1921, four years before his death, he entrusted to the museum all his company's photographs relating to his Chinese art transactions. Today, in ROM's archive, they have twenty-one precious original George Crofts Albums, now all becoming accessioned objects, which contain 962 photographs of artifact assemblages ranging from a single large object to a group of three dozen or more.

Documents such as these, which clearly record the original conditions and assembled groups, are very rare. Most of these objects are now in ROM's collection, but some can be found in other major museums around the world.

In 1922 Currelly and Walker arranged for Crofts to receive a doctorate degree, Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, from the University of Toronto. This was done to praise Crofts for his contributions to the Toronto museum because it was deemed "the highest honour that there is, now that knighthoods are done away with." The gift---along with the establishment of the George Crofts Collection, which provides a credit line for every object acquired through him---shows the respect bestowed upon Crofts by the cultural dignitaries of Toronto.

## Notable Collections

Crofts facilitated the acquisition of some of the ROM's most famous pieces:

### 1. The Chinese Architecture & Sculptures

- The Ming Tomb: The most spectacular item in the collection, this 17th-century tomb arrived in 1921. It belonged to the famed General Zu Dashou and is currently a centerpiece in the Gallery of Chinese Architecture. (See photo on Page 4)
- Buddhist Sculptures: Crofts secured several Lionesque tomb figures and large Buddhist saints known as Bodhisattvas that stand in the Bishop White Gallery.
- Tang Dynasty Artifacts: Includes a renowned collection of Tang horses and tomb figures. The ROM's collection of small tomb figures is considered the largest of its kind outside China.

### 2. The Himalayan Collection

Crofts assembled a significant portion of the ROM's Himalayan artifacts between 1918 and 1925. Key highlights include:

- 15th-Century Paintings: Large-scale works such as the Black Hayagriva and a Mandala of Robed Mahakala.
- Ritual Objects: An eclectic group of bronzes, sculptures, and over 100 paintings.

### 3. Decorative Arts and Imperial Goods

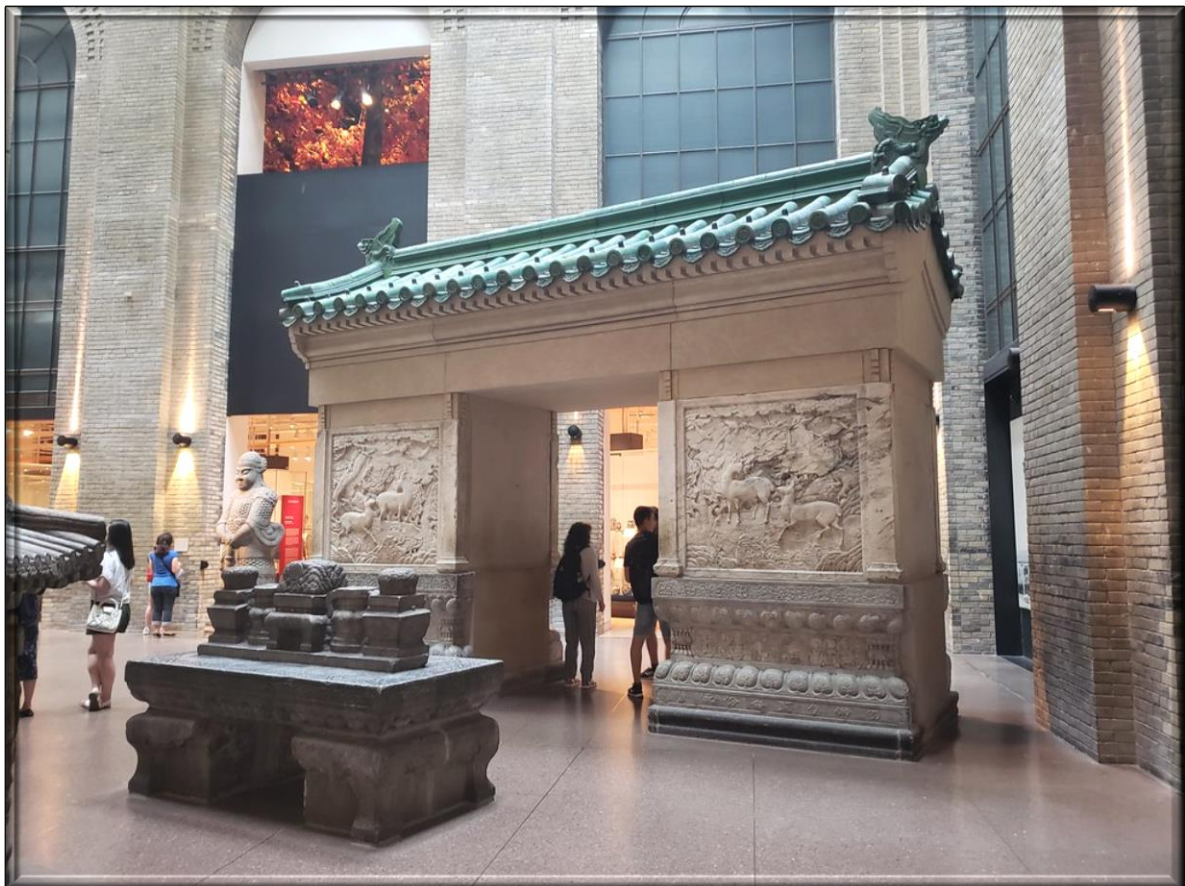
- Imperial Wardrobe: A collection of high-status textiles and clothing from the Chinese imperial court.
- Porcelains and Ceramics: Thousands of items ranging from early pottery to refined Ch'ing Dynasty pieces.
- Ivory and Crystals: Intricately carved pieces that were often secured at a fraction of their market value in London or New York.

### 4. Documentary Heritage

The Crofts Albums: A set of 21 leather-bound albums containing inventory photographs of the artifacts Crofts shipped from Tientsin. These albums, such as Album 8 and Album 19, serve as critical provenance and research records for the museum.



*Royal Ontario Museum, Canada*



*明代祖大壽將軍陵墓－皇家安大略博物館的鎮館之寶  
The Ming Tomb of General Zu Dashou -- a centrepiece collection of Royal Ontario Museum*