

Universal Heritage and Musical Instrument Collections

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Like many objects associated with an intangible art, musical instruments transcend their physical form, serving globally as cultural symbols identifying a time, place, and groups of people. They take on even greater significance as icons of rituals, as personifications of and mediators with spirits, as agents in life-cycle events, and as bearers of innovative technology. Additionally, as sound producers, instruments may provide aural symbols evoking extra-musical concepts that communicate ideas and feelings which are inexpressible any other way.

> These concepts about music and its cultural importance are given shape and form through the work of musical instrument museums and collections. So important to the human experience are these objects that they are housed not only in museums of music, but also in archeology, anthropology, art, technology, and natural history museums, in institutions specializing in a region or a musical genre, colleges and universities, in music libraries, and historic homes. Here music's material culture is preserved and interpreted in ways that illustrate a people's preferred sound/aesthetics, the status and use and playing technique of the instrument and what its sound and image signifies. In these institutions issues and ethics of conservation related to playing policies are addressed, and acoustical or mechanical investigation is carried out. Visitors, administrators, and fundraisers may hold opinions and expectations that instruments should be functional—a situation which



contributes to the inevitable replacement of original materials as these elements are worn away with repeated use—and the original maker's hand is lost. This interface between curators and conservators, and the interests of the public, musicians, administrators and fundraisers creates a dynamic unlike that of other types of objects.

> The interpretive possibilities are vast as curators choose to highlight an instrument's



An instrument might illustrate the co-existence of several philosophies, as does the back of this Chinese Pipa.

Pipa. China, Ming Dynasty
Back view showing 120 ivory plaques and detailed view of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian symbols.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Bequest of Mary Stillman Harkness, 1950. 50.145.74

musical and technological development, its diffusion process, or its role as a healing agent or as a cultural signifier. Displaying and preserving musical instruments helps draw attention to diverse musical traditions across time and space, aids visitors in making connections between disparate cultures, and helps to preserve our universal musical heritage.

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