

Berthold Laufer**1874–1934****Anthropologist, Sinologist, Curator, and Collector**

Berthold Laufer, one of the most accomplished sinologists of the early twentieth century, was born in Cologne, Germany, to Max Laufer and his wife, Eugenie (née Schlesinger). He was educated at the Friedrich Wilhelms Gymnasium in Cologne and attended Berlin University (1893–95) before he received his doctorate from the University of Leipzig in 1897. During his training he studied a range of Asian languages and cultures, from Persian and Sanskrit to Tibetan and Chinese. At the suggestion of anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942), Laufer accepted a position at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City in 1898, from where he joined the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1898–99) to Siberia, Alaska, and the northwest coast of Canada as an ethnographer. He led his first collecting expedition to China for the museum from 1901 to 1904.

In 1908 Laufer moved to Chicago, Illinois, and worked at the Field Museum of Natural History, where he ultimately headed the Department of Anthropology. Laufer remained at the Field for the rest of his career. He led two more expeditions to China—the Blackstone Expedition of 1908–10 and the Marshall Field Expedition of 1923—and consequently formed one of the earliest comprehensive collections of Chinese material culture in the United States. During his first expedition, Laufer acquired more than 19,000 archaeological, ethnographic, and historical objects that span the period from 6000 BCE to 1890 CE. He collected an additional 1,800 objects during the 1923 expedition. Laufer also compiled extensive field reports, took photographs during these trips, and engaged in detailed correspondence with other specialists about his movements, contacts, and purchases.

Through his position at the Field Museum, Laufer researched and published widely, and he engaged in extensive correspondence with significant collectors, dealers, and specialists in Chinese art and archaeology around the world. He wrote more than 450 publications on Chinese art, archaeology, and anthropology in English, French, and German. Laufer was one of a handful of people who shaped the study of Chinese art, archaeology, and anthropology in the West during the first half of the twentieth century. Two of his books—*Jade: A Study in Chinese Archaeology and Religion* (1912) and *Chinese Pottery of the Han Dynasty* (1909)—remain seminal works recognized for their historiographical value. The Field Museum holds all of Laufer’s correspondence, field notes, reports, and photographs from 1908 to 1934, as well as all of his publications.

Laufer was living at the Chicago Beach Hotel with his wife, Bertha (née Hampton), and his stepson when he fell from the eighth-floor fire escape and died in 1934. He had been treated for cancer shortly before this and might have taken his own life.

Literature

Selected writings by Laufer:

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