

# CHINESE NOW

BY JOHN EWING  
jewing@earthlink.net

Connecting the past to the present is a creative challenge for an art institution. One end of the equation is fixed in time, like the fragile objects the past embodies. By contrast, the present is in the making, open to chance, and often hidden in newness. It's fitting that the San Antonio Museum of Art's current effort to link past and present is something of a well-planned coincidence. As SAMoA prepared to host "Weaving China's Past," an exhibition of Chinese textiles, museum director George Neubert encountered the collages of local artist Henry Rayburn at Joan Grona Gallery. Among the delicate and aged materials Rayburn is known for, Neubert noticed swatches of embroidered Chinese silk.

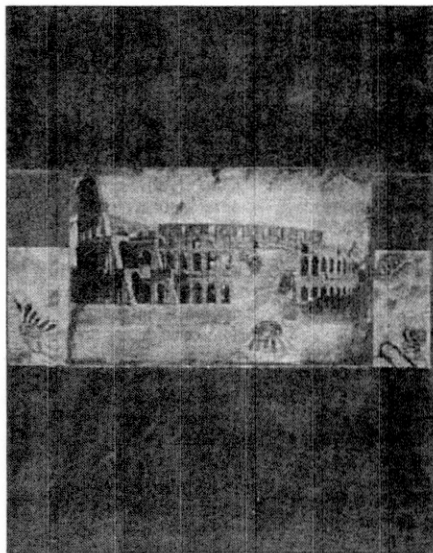
In the sort of "Eureka!" moment that generates interesting shows, Neubert (a collage artist himself) invited Rayburn to respond to "Weaving China's Past" with a suite of collages incorporating the artist's own collection of Chinese textiles. As a result, the exhibit is an elegant and subtle

counterpoint, echoing the past in unexpected ways.

Though contemporary in approach, Rayburn's collages are built on surfaces with "a history." After applying thick coats of acrylic matte medium to museum board, Rayburn rubs the rough surface with oil bar to give it a dark, weathered patina. On this rich background the artist then combines photographs, portions of post cards, and embroidered silk. The collages often reflect Rayburn's early training as an architect. In one titled *Colisee*, swatches of fabric mimic the arches of the Coliseum pictured in a photograph below.

Other collages build on similarities between pen-and-ink handwriting on turn-of-the-century postcards and the graceful, flower patterns of Chinese embroidery. The postcards themselves are a form of collage. Their postage stamps are haphazardly affixed in visually interesting — though presumably unintentional — patterns. This mystery adds to their allure. The cards' elaborate postmarks also have their counterpart in the exhibition downstairs, where

**HENRY RAYBURN**  
**WEAVING CHINA'S**  
**PAST: A**  
**CONTEMPORARY**  
**CONNECTION**  
Through April 28  
San Antonio Museum  
of Art  
200 W. Jones  
978-8100



Henry Rayburn's *Colisee (Colosseum)*, 2001, collage over mixed media

history has made the city a veritable cachepot for exotic souvenirs. Estate sales and antique shops turn up an assortment of global odds and ends that are well suited to Rayburn's artistic practice. But Rayburn takes these materials beyond mere happenstance. The collages' French titles (e.g. *Carte Postale, Soie, de Chine*) make the subtle point that the exoticism of the Orient is a Western notion, constructed in part by museums.

It may be this ability to suggest multiple frames of reference that makes collage such an enduring medium, as compelling to Modernists like John Heartfield and Joseph Cornell as to the Postmodern "cut and paste" bricoleurs of Photoshop. Clearly, Rayburn has a strong sense of how deeply familiar the average art patron has become with the language of collage. He states in the gallery text that "education has already trained the viewer to see these contemporary background surfaces as traditional and the carefully placed and trimmed fabric compositions as contemporary." Kudos to SAMoA for seeing this, too. ●

trade stamps from ceramic roof tiles are used as embroidery motifs in one textile. Rayburn's handling of materials also seems inspired by the overlapping folds and controlled, decorative fraying featured in some of the Chinese pieces. Additionally, Rayburn has used his own 19th-century fabrics to create an artist's book illustrating traditional Chinese stitchery, located in the entrance to "Weaving China's Past."

Combining old postcards and photos of Europe with Chinese fabric is itself something of a local coincidence. According to Rayburn, San Antonio's extensive military