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LANDMARK EXHIBITION OF CHINESE ART
COMES TO ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO JUNE 29

Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei

An unsurpassed survey of Chinese art treasures from one of the greatest collections in the world opens at The Art Institute of Chicago June 29 for viewing in the Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Building through August 25, 1996. *Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei* presents nearly 375 exceptional works in all traditional media spanning nearly five millennia—from the Neolithic period through the 18th century—most never before seen in the West. The exhibition offers a rare opportunity to experience the full breadth and exceptional refinement of Chinese art, including a number of the finest examples of painting and calligraphy, as well as numerous magnificent jades, bronzes, ceramics, lacquerware pieces, textiles, and other decorative arts.

Splendors of Imperial China has been organized by the National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and is drawn entirely from the National Palace Museum, which possesses one of the world's richest and most renowned collections of Chinese art. On only two other occasions have exhibitions from the National Palace Museum been seen in the West—in London (1935-36) and in the United States (1961-62).

The exhibition comes to Chicago following its premiere at the Metropolitan (March 19-May 19, 1996), where it has been an acclaimed critical and popular success. Showings follow at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (October 14-December 8, 1996) and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (January 27-April 6, 1997). The Chicago presentation of the exhibition has been made possible by a generous bequest from the Estate of William Bronson Mitchell and Grayce Slovet Mitchell.

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The works of art in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, are classified as national treasures. Passed down from dynasty to dynasty since the Northern Sung period (960-1127)—when the core of the collection was amassed—they represent 1,000 years of both the collection and production of works of art for the imperial courts of China. The greater part of the collection entered the palace during the reign of the Ch'ien-lung emperor (reigned 1736-95). Many of the objects, especially those in jade and bronze, are intimately connected with state rituals, while others are symbols of sovereign power—the jade seal of the emperor, for example, is the equivalent of the crown of a European king.

The possession of ancient writing and pictures, libraries, and historical documents conferred legitimacy on the ruling dynasty and reflected a deep faith in cultural tradition—a belief that only those with a clear understanding of the past can have a vision of the future. The history of Chinese art mirrors this belief. Despite the changing tastes and trends of successive periods, the creative imagination of every generation is firmly rooted in a study of the past.

After the collapse of the Ch'ing dynasty in 1911 and the eventual expulsion of the last emperor from the Forbidden City in 1924, the Palace Museum opened in 1925. With the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the imminent danger of an assault on northern China, the government took measures to safeguard the treasures in the Palace Museum. A large group of the finest objects was carefully placed into wooden crates and shipped south, beginning a 30-year odyssey that took the art over thousands of miles by train, boat, truck, and even hand-towed barge, usually under the most adverse wartime conditions. Often the treasures were spirited away just hours ahead of invading armies. At the war's end, the nearly 20,000 crates, which had been divided into several shipments to avoid detection, were reunited in Nanking for a brief period before Chiang Kai-shek moved a selection of them containing more than 600,000 pieces to Taiwan in 1949. It was another 16 years—during which time the collection was stored first in sugar warehouses and then in specially constructed tunnels—

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before the National Palace Museum, Taipei, opened in 1965 and the public was again able to see this legacy of Chinese civilization.

Splendors of Imperial China is organized chronologically, with paintings and objects displayed together in the galleries. The exhibition reveals the refinement and reinterpretation of classic forms and themes that evolved over the centuries, as subsequent imperial patrons established their own legitimacy by absorbing and espousing the culture and art forms of previous rulers. Four major themes are traced throughout the exhibition to reflect this continuity: "A Cyclical View of History," "The Confucian Discourse on Art," "The Social Function of Art," and "Possessing the Past." A small number of works (three paintings and one calligraphy) will be on exhibit for only the first 40 days because of their sensitivity to light.

The earliest works on view are perforated discs (*pi*) of jade from the late Neolithic period (3rd/2nd millennium B.C.) and spectacular ancient bronze vessels from the Shang (c. 1600-c.1100 B.C.) and Chou (c. 1100-256 B.C.) dynasties. Among the calligraphy shown in Chicago is a key work by Mi Fu, a leading calligrapher / poet of the Sung dynasty (10th-13th century), *Poems Written on Szechuan Silk*, dated 1088. A remarkable example of Sung figure and landscape painting can be seen in the famous seven-foot-tall hanging scroll *Listening to the Wind in the Pines* by Ma Lin (c. 1180-after 1256); and an astounding 85-foot-long (a section of which will be shown) anonymous Ming dynasty (14th-17th century) silk handscroll, *The Imperial Procession to the Ming Mausoleums*, depicts a court retinue of 1,000 figures and 75 horses in ceremonial regalia. The exhibition also includes masterpieces by the creators and reformers of the literati (scholar-artist) tradition of calligraphy and painting from the Sung through early Ch'ing periods (11th-18th century).

Another highlight of the paintings is a group of life-size imperial portraits dating from the Sung through Ming dynasties that have never been seen outside China, including the imposing *Portrait of Sung T'ai-Tsu* (anonymous, second half of 10th century) and the awe-

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inspiring yellow-robed and jewel-belted *Yung-lo Emperor* (anonymous, 15th century). Also included is a smaller portrait by an anonymous Nepalese court artist of the storied *Khubilai Khan as the First Yüan Emperor, Shih-Tsu* (13th century), arrayed in Mongol garb. The exhibition also features a number of other paintings in smaller formats, such as highly portable multi-leaf painting albums by Ming and Ch'ing artists. Among these is an album of 16 ink-on-paper studies by Shen Chou—*Drawings from Life* (dated 1494)—whose startlingly fresh images of a crab, a chicken, or a cat are achieved with just a few swift but sure brush strokes.

The exhibition includes a selection of the finest known examples of imperial ceramics from the Sung through Ch'ing periods, among them three extraordinarily rare pieces of *Ju* ware (12th century) that combine a lyrically beautiful celadon glaze with vessel forms of the most astonishing simplicity and refinement. Later porcelains include elegant Ming blue-and-white bowls and vases with designs that range from scenes of children at play to auspicious floral motifs and magnificent dragons.

Among the cloisonné and painted enamels on view are an elaborately patterned incense burner (15th century), delicate snuff bottles of copper and glass (17th/18th century), and a monumental Tibetan-style ewer (18th century). Implements for the writing table—such as brush holders, inkstones, inkcakes, and wrist rests—reveal both their scholarly importance and the wit and ingenuity with which they were crafted. Exotic and unusual materials such as rhinoceros horn, ivory, rare woods, and richly colored jades have been transformed into objects of both utility and fantasy, such as a cup of translucent jade carved as a lotus leaf (12th/15th century) and a rhinoceros horn cup carved as a tree raft. The exhibition also offers a sumptuous array of lacquerwares, including painted, carved, and inlaid lacquer boxes, trays, vases, and screens.

The exquisite treasure boxes of the Ch'ien-lung emperor are among the most wondrous surprises in the exhibition. Designed to house small-scale antiquities that often replicate in

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miniature the imperial art collections, the boxes are themselves works of art, resplendent with skillful carving and inlays of ancient jade and gold. Containing as many as 40 pieces—including replicas of the emperor's favorites—these ingeniously crafted boxes, with their many secret compartments and precious, diminutive cargo, are fascinating microcosms of imperial taste.

Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei has been organized by Philippe de Montebello, director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in collaboration with Chin Hsiao-yi, director of the National Palace Museum, and the senior curators of the National Palace Museum. Curatorial responsibilities for the exhibition rest with Wen C. Fong, consultative chairman, Douglas Dillon Curatorship of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy; James C.Y. Watt, Brooke Russell Astor Senior Curator; and Maxwell K. Hearn, Curator, the Department of Asian Art of the Metropolitan Museum.

The exhibition is accompanied by two publications. *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, made possible in part by The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., and the Chian Ching-Kuo Foundation (\$85.00, clothbound; published by the Metropolitan Museum and distributed by Harry N. Abrams), by Wen C. Fong and James C.Y. Watt, with contributions by Chan Lin-sheng, James Cahill, Wai-kam Ho, Maxwell K. Hearn, and Richard M. Barnhart, is 664 pages, with 600 illustrations, including 436 color plates. *Splendors of Imperial China* (\$35.00, clothbound; \$29.95, paperback; published by the Metropolitan Museum with the clothbound edition distributed Rizzoli International Publications) by Maxwell K. Hearn, illustrates 107 works from the exhibition and is 144 pages with 119 color illustrations.

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