

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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SPLENDORS OF IMPERIAL CHINA:

TREASURES FROM THE NATIONAL PALACE MUSEUM, TAIPEI

AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, JANUARY 19, 1997

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei -- one of the world's greatest and most renowned collections of Chinese art -- is on view at the National Gallery of Art, January 19 through April 6, 1997. The National Gallery exhibition is one of the two largest shows on the United States tour (which also included New York, Chicago, and San Francisco) and features several works of art unique to the Washington venue. Only three times before have masterpieces from the National Palace Museum traveled to the West, first to London in 1935-1936 and then to the United States in 1961-1962, and 1991-1992. In this exhibition, approximately two-thirds of the nearly 450 rare objects have not been seen in the U. S. before its current tour here.

The exhibition has been organized by the National Palace Museum, Taipei, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The exhibition is supported in part by The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., The Starr Foundation, the National Endowment

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for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Transportation assistance has been provided by China Airlines.

The exhibition includes works classified as national treasures that represent the great artistic traditions of Chinese civilization over several millennia, from the Neolithic period through the eighteenth century. Included are outstanding examples of painting and calligraphy, jades, bronzes, ceramics, lacquerware, silk tapestries, and other decorative arts.

"The National Gallery of Art has had a special relationship for more than a quarter of a century with the National Palace Museum, Taipei, that has made possible two previous exhibitions of rare Chinese art treasures and this new, outstanding show of hundreds of magnificent masterpieces," Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery, said. In 1961-1962 the National Gallery and four other museums featured Chinese Art Treasures and in 1991-1992 the Gallery presented Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration, which included objects from the National Palace Museum.

Splendors of Imperial China is organized chronologically, with paintings and objects displayed together in the galleries. During non-public hours from February 25 to March 24, fifty paintings and calligraphy will be removed and replaced with forty-nine comparable works. Seventeen objects will have their

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images changed, for example, scrolls will be rolled and album leaves turned to reveal new sections.

The exhibition highlights the refinement and reinterpretation of diverse art forms and themes that evolved in China over the centuries. In addition to antiquities prized and collected by Chinese emperors, the exhibition shows numerous works of art commissioned by them, such as porcelains for palace use and other objects for decorative purposes and personal adornment. The earliest works in the exhibition are Neolithic ritual jades and the spectacular ancient bronze vessels from the Shang (c. 1300-c. 1100 B.C.) and Chou (c. 1100-256 B.C.) dynasties.

Unique to the National Gallery's exhibition are five masterworks of painting and calligraphy on silk and paper from the T'ang (618-907) and Sung (960-1279) dynasties. Draft Manuscript of a Memorial to His Nephew Chi-ming by Yen Chen-ch'ing (709-785) is the only surviving work in cursive script by this admired master. Poems Written at Huang-chou on the Cold-Food Festival is the most famous and beautiful scroll by the great humanist statesman, poet, and calligrapher Su Shih (1037-1101). Layered Peaks and Dense Forests is a rare example of a monumental landscape from an anonymous southern master (mid-eleventh to mid-twelfth centuries), while Bamboo by Wen T'ung (1018-1079) is one of the earliest examples of a subject that is favored even to this day by the Chinese. The unusual narrative

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scroll Breaking the Balustrade (anonymous) is one of the finest figure paintings from the twelfth century still in existence.

Yet another work, The Imperial Procession to the Ming Mausoleums by an anonymous seventeenth-century artist, is a remarkable example of complex and colorful painting from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). This eighty-five-foot long silk handscroll, shown in sections, depicts the grandeur of a court retinue of more than one thousand figures and seven hundred horses in ceremonial regalia.

The exhibition also features masterpieces by the creators and leaders of the literati (scholar-artists) tradition of calligraphy, which evolved into the most highly esteemed of the visual arts, and paintings from the Sung through the early Ch'ing periods (eleventh-eighteenth centuries).

Another highlight is a group of life-size imperial portraits dating from the Sung through the Ming periods (eleventh to seventeenth centuries) that have never been seen outside China. These imperial portraits, which combine careful observation of the ruler's features merged with deliberate idealization to create an august image of the emperor as the Son of Heaven, include the imposing Portrait of Sung T'ai-tsu (anonymous, second half of tenth century) and the awe-inspiring yellow-robed and jewel-belted Yung-lo Emperor (anonymous, fifteenth century). Also included is a smaller portrait by an anonymous artist of the storied Khubilai Khan as the First Yuan Emperor, Shih-tsu

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(thirteenth century), arrayed in Mongol headdress and robes.

Among a selection of the finest known examples of imperial ceramics from the Sung through the Ch'ing periods are three extraordinarily rare pieces of Ju celadons (pronounced "ru," twelfth century) that combine a beautiful greenish-blue glaze with astonishingly simple and refined vessel forms. 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 stunning cloisonné and painted enamels on view are an elaborately patterned incense burner (fifteenth century) and delicate snuff bottles of copper and glass (seventeenth/eighteenth century). Witty and ingenious brush holders carved of jade, hardwood, or bamboo, and scholars' inkstones and wrist rests reveal the high level of craftsmanship associated with these objects. Exotic and unusual materials such as rhinoceros horn, ivory, rare woods, and richly colored jades were transformed into objects of both utility and fantasy that often play off the original form of the medium.

The uniquely Chinese art form of carved lacquerware is presented in a sumptuous array of boxes, trays, vases, and screens. Among the most wondrous surprises in the exhibition are the treasure boxes of the Ch'ing dynasty, Ch'ien-lung reign (1736-1795). Designed to house small-scale antiquities, some of which replicate in miniature the imperial art collections, the

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boxes themselves are works of art, resplendent with deft carving and inlays of ancient jade and gold. Containing as many as forty-three of an emperor's favorite works from his collection, these ingeniously crafted boxes, with their many secret compartments and precious, diminutive cargo, are fascinating microcosms of imperial taste.

The exhibition tour included The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Art Institute of Chicago; and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. The curators for the exhibition are Wen C. Fong, James C.Y. Watt, and Maxwell K. Hearn of the department of Asian art of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The special curatorial consultant for the National Gallery of Art exhibition is Marilyn Wong Gleysteen, former assistant curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and former assistant professor, department of history of art, Columbia University.

Accompanying the exhibition are two lavishly illustrated publications. Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei was written by Wen C. Fong, consultative chairman, Douglas Dillon Curatorship of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, of the department of Asian art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Edwards S. Sanford Professor of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University; and James C.Y. Watt, Brooke Russell Astor Senior Curator in the department of Asian art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The five other contributors are: Chang Lin-sheng, vice director of the National Palace Museum,

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Taipei; James Cahill, professor emeritus in the department of history of art, University of California, Berkeley; Wai-kam Ho, former Laurence Sickman Curator of Chinese Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; Maxwell K. Hearn, curator in the department of Asian art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Richard M. Barnhart, professor of the history of art, Yale University. The second companion volume, Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei was written by Maxwell K. Hearn.

Possessing the Past (\$85.00 hardback) offers a comprehensive overview of Chinese art, focusing on the cultural significance of the visual arts throughout China's history. Published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, the book functions as a catalogue for the exhibition; with 664 pages and 600 illustrations, including 436 color plates, it contains pictures of every object in the show.

Splendors of Imperial China (\$35.00 hardback; \$29.95 paperback) illustrates 107 works from the exhibition with comparisons of other selected works and discussion of their historical context. Also published by The Metropolitan Museum (hardback edition distributed by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., New York), the book is 144 pages with 119 color illustrations. These books and a wide array of items related to the exhibition are available through the Shops at the National Gallery of Art or by calling (301) 322-5900, Monday-

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Friday, 8 am-4 pm.

The exhibition is located in the National Gallery of Art's East Building, concourse galleries, at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, NW. The National Gallery of Art is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is free of charge. For general information, call (202) 737-4215, or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD), weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., at (202) 842-6176.

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