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Entering the Forbidden City: Milwaukee Art Museum Offers Rare Glimpse of Treasures from China

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(above) **Portrait of the Qianlong Emperor Celebrating the New Year, ink and colors on silk, (C) PALACE MUSEUM;**

(right) **Guardian Beast Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE), painted earthenware, LENT BY JAMES E. CONLEY JR., PHOTO BY JOHN R. GLEMBIN**

(opposite) **Portrait of the Qianlong Emperor, ink and colors on silk, (C) PALACE MUSEUM, Bowl, lacquer, (C) PALACE MUSEUM**



ENTERING THE FORBIDDEN CITY

MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM OFFERS RARE GLIMPSE OF TREASURES FROM CHINA

BY CURTIS L. CARTER

A rare glimpse into the Palace Museum of Beijing's Forbidden City awaits visitors of the Milwaukee Art Museum exhibition "The Emperor's Private Paradise: Treasures From the Forbidden City." Ninety works were chosen from the Palace Garden of the Qianlong emperor (1736-1795), an area long closed to the public. Among the highlights are a portrait of the emperor in ancient costume by a court painter, original calligraphy from the emperor's own hand, landscape and interior paintings, floor and table screens, and murals collected by the emperor. Also featured are wall partitions from the Palace Garden made of zitan (a rare wood from India so expensive that it was reserved exclusively for use by the emperor), jade with inset paintings and other architectural elements.

Decorative arts from the Palace Garden are represented by furniture including an imperial throne made of zitan, bamboo, jade and precious stones along with chairs and benches of root wood. Sculptures and miscellaneous objects featuring gold, porcelain, cloisonné and lacquer, as well as a set of the emperor's writing utensils made of bamboo, enrich the exhibition with their exquisite craftsmanship. Elegantly formed motifs of plum blossoms, lotus flowers and cracked ice adorn the artifacts.

The exhibition offers viewers a firsthand experience of Imperial China in the 18th century as interpreted by the finest Chinese artists and craftsmen of the times. The collection consists of items personally chosen by the emperor and installed under his supervision in the Palace Garden as he prepared for his retirement after reigning for some 60 years.

In his words, "I have conscientiously constructed the Tranquility and Longevity Palace. I will use it for my exhaustion from diligent service."

His garden consisted of a series of small buildings organized within a landscape appointed with unique architecture, artificial mountains, rock formations, ancient trees, flowers and plants. Four courtyards within the garden—containing open pavilions, covered corridors, grottoes (caves decorated with art objects) and enclosed shrines—divide the spaces.

The architecture was intended to provide the emperor with spaces for enjoying musical and theatrical performances, writing poetry, and appreciating the beauty of nature and

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other activities suitable for a retirement of contemplation and enrichment of the mind and spirit. A theater and enclosed Buddhist shrines gave the emperor access to aesthetic and spiritual nurture. Names assigned to the 20 different spaces, including the "Pavilion of Soaring Beauty" and "Supreme Chamber of Cultivating Harmony," expressed the meaning of the garden's various components.

The garden was also intended to serve as a museum to display the emperor's fine arts collection, which gathered artifacts by leading Chinese artists and craftsmen from all areas of the country. Items in the collection are made of the finest quality of jade, lapis lazuli, marble, gold, bronze, bamboo, root wood and zitan. European Jesuit artists such as Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), who served various Chinese rulers including the Qianlong emperor, influenced some of the paintings and wall decorations.

Reflecting the Emperor's Character

The collection served as a mirror of symbols to reflect the character, achievements and taste of the emperor. He was a man of remarkable talents—artistic, intellectual, military and political—who managed favorable settlements of political disputes with rival nations while attending in great detail to cultural development. He is said to have written some 40,000 poems in calligraphy. His devotion to arts and culture rivals the Florentine Medici rulers and other Western counterparts. He showed great foresight in creating a national library of Chinese manuscripts and detailed cataloging of his art collections, which remain a rich source of cultural history for China. His early receptivity to Western art is indicative of his desire for innovation and pursuit of new ideas. At the same time, he honored Buddhist and Daoist religious lessons and Confucian social values concerning family and civic wisdom.

Because of their special place in Chinese culture and history, this marks the first and likely only time that these works will travel outside of China. The Milwaukee stop is the final leg of a national tour following exhibits at New York's Metro-

politan Museum of Art and the Peabody Essex Museum in Peabody, Mass. Milwaukee audiences, together with visitors at the two earlier sites, will have viewed the exhibition ahead of the official opening of the garden in China (an official date has not been set, pending completion of the site's renovation). The exhibition is accompanied by a handsome, fully illustrated text with informative essays published by Yale University Press.

"The Emperor's Private Paradise: Treasures From the Forbidden City" will be shown June 11-Sept. 11 at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Curtis L. Carter is professor of aesthetics at Marquette University's department of philosophy. Formerly founding director and chief curator of

the Haggerty Museum of Art, he is currently international curator and honorary director of the Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art and president of the International Association for Aesthetics.

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