

EXHIBITS

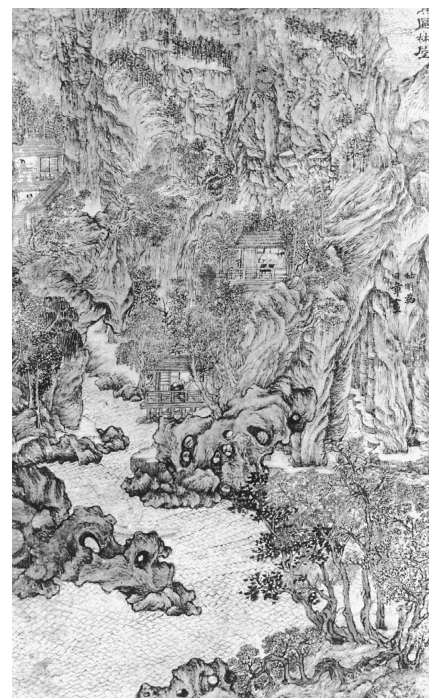
# Treasures from China Relate Five-Thousand Year History

Chinese culture has been in continuous, uninterrupted existence for more than five thousand years, making it unique: the oldest civilization in the world. In these five thousand years, the rise and fall of dynasties was closely linked

to the history of China's culture, to the different philosophical currents that emerged, and to technological achievements, inventions, and discoveries—among them, for example, the glorious invention of paper. In these five thousand

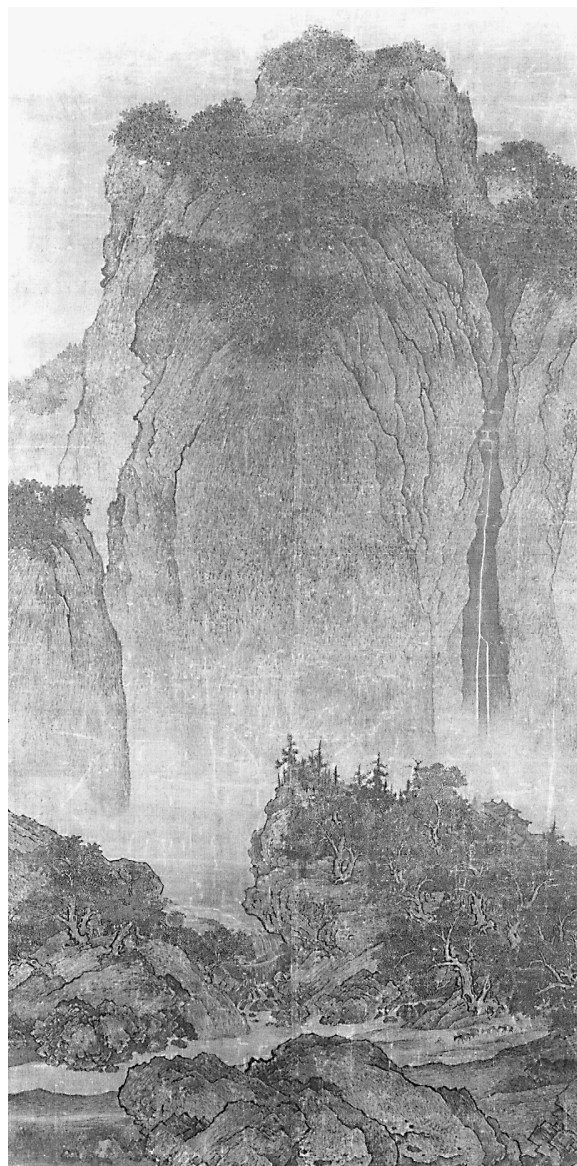
years, there were conflicts between Confucianism, Legalism, Taoism, and Buddhism, and great periods of cultural renaissance, such as that of the Twelfth-century A.D. Confucian Renaissance under the Sung Dynasty. This enormous history, which would require many years of study to begin to comprehend, could be at least appreciated though the exhibit "Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei," which completed a year-long U.S. tour in April at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., after appearing in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.

Two-thirds of the nearly 450 rare objects in the exhibition, many classified as national treasures, have never before been shown in the U.S. On only three previous occasions have masterpieces from the National Palace Museum travelled to the West: to London in 1935-1936, to the United States in 1961-1962, and again in 1991-1992, where they were included in the National Gallery's famous "Circa 1492" exhibition commemorating the dis-



Wang Meng, "Forest Chamber Grotto at Chü-ch'ü" (after 1365).

National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China



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Fan K'uan (c.980-1050), "Travelling Amid Streams and Mountains."

covery of the Americas.

Organized chronologically, the objects in the show presented the great artistic traditions of Chinese civilization over millennia, from the Neolithic period through the Eighteenth century A.D. Beginning with a room dedicated to the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, the exhibition progressed into the later dynasties, the T'ang (A.D. 618-907), Sung (960-1279), Yüan (1272-1368), Ming (1368-1644), and Ch'ing (1644-1911). This organization, which allowed the viewer to compare the advances (or, in some cases, declines) not only of the levels of technological achievement (e.g., in the production of porcelain and the development of the glazes, or in the pictorial techniques used to represent space), but also of world outlook, depending upon which philosophical current was favored by the ruling imperial strata. Such a change leaps out, for example, when comparing paintings from the Imperial Painting Academy created under the Sung Dynasty, with ones produced during the subsequent Yüan, after the Mongols invaded and occupied China, and the Confucian Renaissance was destroyed by the expansion of Taoist influence.

### Government Promotion of the Arts

During the Sung Dynasty, painting was organized under the auspices of a centralized Imperial Painting Academy, and painters were recruited by the new government from all parts of the Empire to serve the needs of the imperial court. Over time, the traditions represented by this group of artists became what is known today as the Sung academic manner, “the culmination of centuries of achievement in mastering a naturalistic, closely descriptive and convincing portrayal of the physical world,” in the words of Maxwell K. Hearn, author of the catalogue *The Splendors of Imperial China*.

Under the Emperor Hui-tsung (1101-1125), himself an accomplished painter and calligrapher, the arts were developed to the point where they became the example for all succeeding academies. Aside from landscape painting, Hui-tsung’s academicians specialized in religious figures, historical narratives, genre painting, flowers, birds, and animals, all keenly observed and meticulously rendered.

Many of the paintings from this period remind a Western viewer of drawings and watercolors on the same subjects by later, great Western masters, such as Albrecht Dürer and Leonardo da Vinci. One of the most beautiful examples is the hanging scroll “Winter Play” [SEE front cover, this issue], attributed to Su Han-ch’en (c.1130-60’s), a preeminent painter of children at the

Southern Sung court. This painting is part of a set of hanging scrolls that probably showed children in each of the four seasons. The portrayal of a young girl and her slightly younger playmate, is a strong indication that children of both sexes were prized in the imperial world. The children are depicted at play, battling a “pretend-dragon” kitten, using, as their weapon, a banner adorned with a peacock feather.

The Imperial Painting Academy was closed during the reign of the first Yüan emperor, Khubilai Khan (1215-1294), the grandson of Genghis Khan. Pictorial representation became introspective, and realistic representation as a product of the observation of nature practically disappeared. The sense of aerial (atmospheric) perspective achieved by the Sung painters, where the “white” spaces are not empty, but full of space, was lost. Compare, for example, such examples of Sung artistry as “Travelling Amid Streams and Mountains” of Fan K’uan (c.980-1050), with the Yüan artist Wang Meng’s (c.1308-1385) “Forest Chamber Grotto at Chü-ch’ü,” where the painter “abandons all suggestion of spatial recession, and confronts the viewer with a densely textured wall of rock and water . . . creating a vision of an enclosed and sequestered environment that lies outside of the real world.”

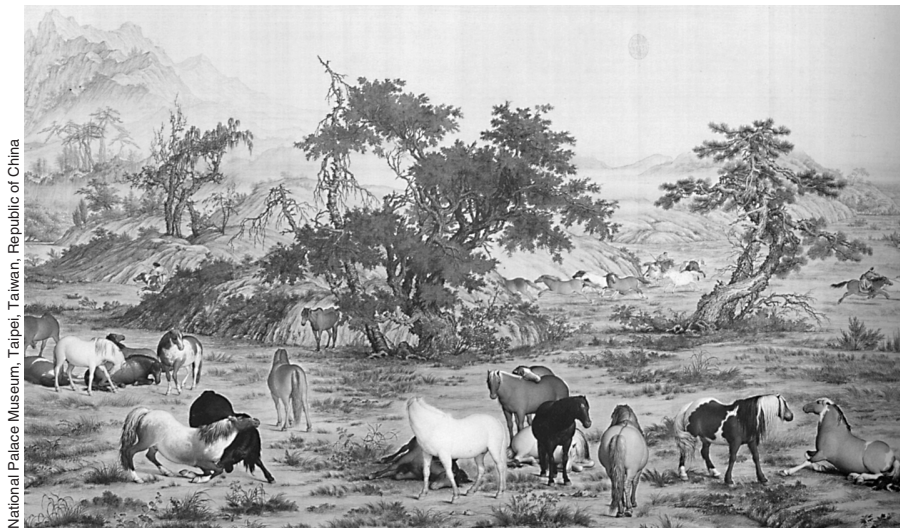
### East and West Unified

A substantial portion of the treasures of the National Museum derive from the

imperial collections of the Ch’ing Dynasty (1644-1911).

It was during the Ch’ing Dynasty, established when the Manchus overthrew the Ming in 1644, that the Jesuit missionaries, whose first arrival in China had been Matteo Ricci in 1581, fully established themselves at the imperial court. The relations between the Jesuits and the first emperors of the Ch’ing Dynasty were such, that Jesuits shared responsibility for the education of the prince, along with his classical Confucian tutors. This prince would later become the famous emperor K’ang Hsi, under whom the collaboration between East and West achieved its highest level, a collaboration organized, on its European side, by the great German philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz. The science of Europe’s Golden Renaissance, coupled with China’s tradition of the Twelfth-century Confucian Renaissance of the philosopher Chu Hsi, engendered an era of extraordinary scientific and technological advance. Under K’ang Hsi, official art workshops were reestablished in the capital and in regional centers. The Imperial Kiln Complex in Ching-te-chuen was rebuilt, and became a renewed center of porcelain production.

One of the exhibit’s finest examples of East-West collaboration, is the silk handscroll “One Hundred Horses,” finished in 1728, which gave birth to a new style by merging the best pictorial techniques of Europe and China. It was painted by Giuseppe Castiglione, a Jesuit missionary, who arrived in China at the age of twenty-seven. After several years of work at a glazing workshop, Castiglione took the Chinese name of Lang Shih-ning. Upon seeing “One Hundred Horses” for the first time, the Emperor Ch’ien-lung named Castiglione principal court painter. Both this handscroll, and another one by Castiglione entitled “Assembled Blessings,” are made in the traditional technique of Chinese painting in ink and mineral colors on silk, and the themes are also traditionally Chinese, but both have a three-dimensional quality accomplished by the subtle use of the Western technique of chiaroscuro, and Renaissance-developed perspective.



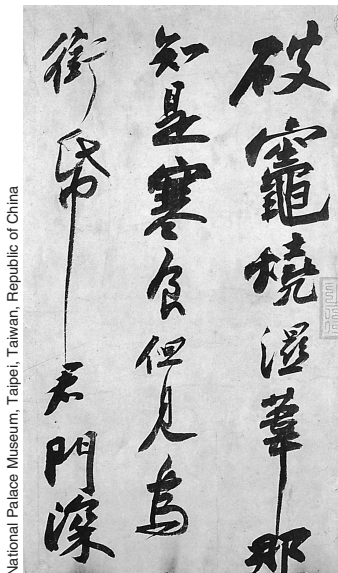
Lang Shih-ning (Giuseppe Castiglione), “One Hundred Horses” (detail) (1728).

### Minimum and Maximum in Brushwork

Almost all the pieces in paper or silk, and also some of the bronzes, were accompanied by calligraphic poems, a crucial aspect of Chinese painting to be understood by the West. Confucian teachings considered writing to be the moral act of a man who fulfilled his responsibilities to society as a whole—past, present, and future—as it was embodied in the person of the emperor, in his own family, or in a specific clan. Writing was also a prerequisite for the individual to be considered one of the *literati* (*wen-ren*), since, among other things, the need to memorize the composition of thousands of calligraphic characters and their meanings, required many years of study. Lifelong dedication and practice were necessary to be able to write skillfully.

Each calligraphic character is a composition in itself, sometimes requiring as many as twenty-four brushstrokes. Aside from being part of the group of characters, each is an individual entity with intrinsic value. Chinese calligraphy has passed through many stages in its development to the present.

Five masterpieces of calligraphy and painting on silk and paper from the T'ang (618-907) and Sung (960-1279) Dynasties were displayed, including "Poems Written at Huang-chou on the Cold Food Festival," a handscroll by the



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most famous poet and calligrapher, Su Shih (1037-1101), and "Bamboo," by Wen T'ung (1018-1079), an early example of a subject that continues to be a Chinese favorite. The identity of the artistic idea in these two works, one "painting," the other "calligraphy," is evident. Many beautiful examples of calligraphy from later periods were exhibited, including ones by Shen Chou, patriarch of the *literati* in Soochow during the Ming Dynasty.

Shen Chou's sixteen ink and color works on paper, entitled "Drawings from Life" (1494), are a group of calligraphic paintings, where the essential characteristics and forms of the subject are represented with a minimum of brushstrokes, but with total freedom. When the National Gallery exhibited some of these drawings in the "Circa 1492" show in 1992, the public was able to compare them with drawings and watercolors from the Italian Renaissance. This time, an exhibition of works on paper entitled "Six Artists, Six Centuries," was also on dis-

Left: Su Shih, "Poems Written at Huang-chou on the Cold Food Festival" (detail) (1082). Below: Wen T'ung, "Bamboo" (detail) (c.1070).



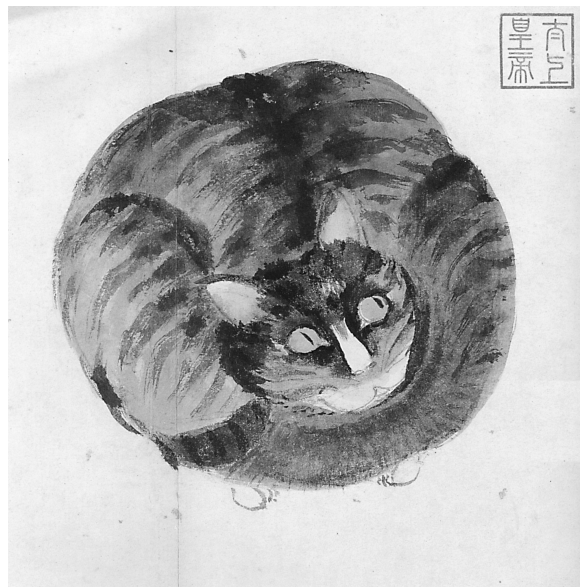
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play at the museum, so it was again possible to compare watercolors by Dürer with these extraordinary Chinese paintings.

Concerning a civilization, five thousand years of continuous existence speak for themselves. "Splendors of Imperial China," and the catalogue volumes issued to commemorate it, should generate a true sense of admiration and respect for a culture and civilization little known in the West, but from which there is a great deal to be learned.

—Ana María Mendoza

Two catalogue volumes have been published to commemorate the exhibit. The full catalogue, "Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei," by Wen C. Fong and James C.Y. Wyatt, is 648 pages long, and is priced at \$85. "Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei," by Maxwell K. Hearn, is a beautiful, shorter (144 page) report of the exhibit, priced at \$35. Both volumes are published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y. and the National Palace Museum, Taipei, and may be available in local libraries.



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Shen Chou, one of sixteen drawings from "Drawings from Life" (detail) (1494).