‘Emperors’ Treasures: Chinese Art From the National Palace Museum, Taipei’ Review

An exhibition that is as much about the people who collected the art as about the works themselves.

By ERIC GIBSON
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The current trend in museum exhibitions is away from displays of objects chosen primarily for their beauty or aesthetic importance and toward ones that offer an “experience,” something more than the visually stunning. The rationale is that with the majority of today’s visitors having little or no art background, an appeal to the eye or cultural and historical significance isn’t enough to pull in an audience.

Yet in an art-museum context the word “experience,” with its overtones of infotainment or Disney, can send chills up your spine. And certainly, there’s more than enough of that sort of experience at the moment. But when executed well—and it is being done superbly well right now at the Asian Art Museum—the result can be a multifaceted exhibition that enriches our understanding of the subject and renders it accessible without dumbing it down.

“Emperors’ Treasures: Chinese Art From the National Palace Museum, Taipei,” is a major loan show from one of the greatest collections of Chinese art in the world, conceived as part of the Asian Art Museum’s 50th anniversary celebration this year. Organized by Jay Xu, the museum’s director, and Li He, associate curator of Chinese art, it brings together some 150 objects owned, commissioned and in some cases created by eight emperors and an empress and covers
nearly 1000 years of Chinese history, from the Song Dynasty (960-1279), a period of cultural and intellectual renewal, through the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

The show is organized chronologically, emperor by emperor, the focus being on what they collected and created. This makes it a kind of a portrait show, one about people as much as art. At the same time it is more than that, a musing on taste, patronage, cross-cultural pollination, personality, and ego.

Though today we don’t associate the idea of creativity, or any artistic leanings, with politicians and rulers, in imperial China it was part and parcel of their identity, so one of the first objects we see is a poem in praise of a rock written by the Song Emperor Huizong (1101-25), who had earned a reputation as a calligrapher of note. His script, known as the “slender-gold style” is particularly lean and energetic, as if the emperor had made his marks quickly, using only his wrist. Unfortunately, Huizong’s love of art proved to be his undoing. Too preoccupied with a vast project involving building temples and palaces, landscaping and creating ritual and domestic objects, he eventually lost the northern part of his empire to invaders and died in exile.

By far the most interesting figure is the one we encounter near the end of the exhibition, the Qing Emperor Qianlong (1736-95), a hyperactive patron and collector whose taste was notably wide-ranging and eclectic. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the “Champlevé Ewer.” Its basic form is Persian and its body is decorated not just with Chinese motifs but painted portraits of a European mother and child, as well as western landscapes. Yet somehow it all works to create an object of unparalleled elegance and invention.

As the ewer suggests, for all its emphasis on individual emperors, there is no shortage of exquisite objects in “Emperors’ Treasures.” Among other things, the show offers a short course on the glories of Chinese ceramics. And anyone encountering Chinese portraiture for the first time in “Half-Portrait of Emperor Gaozong, Zhao Gou” (son of the hapless Emperor Huizong), is likely to come away wanting to see a great deal more of this art form, and not just because of its keen psychological insight.

To Western eyes, Chinese ruler portraits are startlingly different from their European counterparts. Rather than modeled in the round according to the tenets of Renaissance illusionism, the images are two-dimensional, composed of broad areas of flat color. Yet close inspection reveals the artist achieves many of the same ends as a Western artist, but by different means. Volume is conveyed by sharply drawn contour
lines in conjunction with—especially evident in the handling of the emperor’s black hat—the subtlest modulations of color. Pictorial space is suggested by the overlapping of forms. The effect is to create the image of a ruler at once powerfully present and remote—no doubt just the way the emperors liked to be perceived.

The emperors may have rejected illusionism in their official portraits, but they enthusiastically embraced it elsewhere. Without a doubt the most intriguing—and unusual—object is the Qing Dynasty “Meat-Shaped Stone,” a piece of jasper whose upper surface has been treated to resemble animal skin so that, along with the dark vein running horizontally across it, the stone uncannily resembles a slice of pork belly that has just been retrieved from the pot. It is an artistic response to nature utterly different from anything you would see in the West, transformative, not imitative.

After closing in San Francisco the exhibition travels to Houston. Considering that it has been 20 years since the National Palace Museum has loaned work to any U.S. museums, this is an opportunity that shouldn’t be missed.

*Mr. Gibson is the Journal’s Arts in Review editor.*