EMPERORS’ TREASURES
Chinese Art from the National Palace Museum, Taipei

THIRTY 150 works of art on display cover the years 960-1911 and comprise approximately one-third of hanging paintings, handscrolls, calligraphy, album leaves and portraits on silk and paper; one-third of porcelains; and one-third of jade, lacquer, glass, bronzes and court hair/hair ornaments.

The history of the original imperial collection is sad, rife with thefts and much by out-and-out theft. With the death of the Empress Dowager Ci Xi in 1909, her grand-nephew, the inept Aisin-Gioro Pu Yi, became emperor. The murkiness inside the Forbidden City no longer had a monarch to fear and plundering of the warehouses within the Forbidden City in which imperial treasures were stored began, to the degree that several eunuchs opened up antique shops in Peking with these stolen goods. The thefts continued from 1909 until 1923 and there is no way to calculate the massive numbers of items vanished from the imperial collection. It was in 1923, however, that Pu Yi suspected a massive discovery and ordered an inventory taken. Almost immediately some of the treasures were set afar from the eunuchs to hide the thefts. Again it is not known the vast number of works of art that were destroyed by the flames, nor it is known how much was stolen by the workmen controlling that part of the nation after Pu Yi was expelled from the Forbidden City in 1927.

With the ensuing civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, the governing Kuomintang decided to move as much as possible of the imperial collection to Taipei and pieces from the Taipei part of the old collection are what is on view here.

Even among all of these imperial treasures, certain ones stand out. Of the portrait scrolls the most interesting is one of Kublai Khan at the emperor Shunzhi, the first of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). Dressed in white with a low white head cap, this man is wonderfully depicted as a muscular, no-nonsense embodiment of power.

At a much later date and in a different tone is a painting, White Felines by Lang Shining (Guiseppi Castiglione, 1688-1756). He was an Italian Jesuit who was an imperial court painter under three emperors of the Qing Dynasty, Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong.

The list goes on with paintings and calligraphy with works by the Emperor Huizong (1082-1135), Zhu Xiu (1130-1200), Wang Meng (1308-1385), Ma Yuan (circa 1160-1225), Zhou Meng (1254-1322), Xiaoyu Shu (1257-1302), Emperor Xiaoye (1398-1435), Li Zai (died 1431), and the Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799).

Of the ceramics, the remnant of all is a Northern Song (960-1126) Ru ware mallet-shaped bottle vase. Only about 30 to 40 Ru pieces are known to exist and as proof of their rarity was a small (11.5 cm) lobed brush washer that was auctioned by Sotheby’s Hong Kong on 4 April, 2012, for US$267,000.

The Yuan and Ming ceramics are a display of the various colors, shapes and styles popular at the imperial court and the 17th and 18th century porcelains are a progression from the restrained Han Chinese taste that Kangxi and Yongzheng emulated at the horror suanxi taste of Qianlong, who seems to have believed that nothing succeeds like excess. Despite the modern Chinese obsession with buying Qianlong porcelains at any price, the fact remains – in my opinion at least – that these porcelains are proof positive of the victory of technical precision over good taste.

The exhibition goes on to include jade in various styles, hair and hair ornaments, fanatical bronze vessels and various works of art that appealed to the various emperors and their shifting tastes. Obviously, no matter which way one looks, this unique exhibition stands at every turn.

Martin Barnes Lorber
A catalogue accompanies the exhibition.