

Pleasures of the Imperial Treasure

Gaining historical insight at the National Palace Museum of Taiwan

By Loh Jian Hui

The last emperor may have been evicted from the Forbidden City in 1924, but fortunately the imperial treasures were preserved.

The first Palace Museum was opened for public viewing in Beijing's Forbidden City the following year, but amid a succession of wars (the Chinese Civil War in 1927, the second Sino-Japanese War in 1931 and finally World War II), a majority of the collection was packed up and separated. By the end of 1948, the best pieces had been moved across the Taiwan Straits for safekeeping, forming the core of the National Palace Museum of Taiwan (NPM).

My dear grandmother always wore a jade bangle on her wrist and favoured jade pendants and earrings – a practice I once saw as old-fashioned. But visiting the NPM made me realise that the Chinese fascination with this precious stone dates back to the Neolithic Age. Jade then was thought to possess spiritual powers and was used to make ornaments and ritual objects. The jade objects of this time tell of the 'dark bird', which was believed to symbolise the mystery of life. One of the museum's most popular pieces is the *Jadeite Cabbage with Insects* from the Qing Dynasty. It is so popular that it's been moved to a special case for better viewing. Its craftsmen used the natural properties of the jade to create a remarkably lifelike *bok choy*. It is likely that it was a dowry gift for the Qing Emperor's consort Chin, the locust on the leaf symbolising fertility and blessings for the bride to produce many children for the emperor.

Outstanding examples of ceramics abound at the NPM. There are T'ang dynasty (c.221-960) 'greens of the south and whites of the north'. There are examples of *sancai* (tri-colour) wares used in sumptuous funeral practices and the simple, nature-inspired designs of porcelain produced during the Sung dynasty (c.960-1350). Of course there are many early classic blue and white Ming period (c.1350-1521) pieces, but I was truly amazed by *Revolving Vase in Yellow Glaze Famille Rose with Auspicious Symbols* (early Qing period, c.1662-1795), which consists of separate layers that rotate one within the other to create an effect of moving scenery.

One particularly memorable artefact is not crafted in porcelain but carved from an olive pit. The *Olive Stone Boat* includes carved figurines and must be viewed through a magnifying lens as it's just 3.4 cm in size. Another marvel is the *Set of Concentric Ivory Balls with Cloud-and-Dragon Design in Openwork Relief*, which has 17 concentric layers each rotating independently of the others. Among my personal



Jadeite Cabbage with Insects, Qing dynasty;
photo courtesy of NPM

favourites are the miniature curio boxes from the Qing dynasty court, used for storing items like perfume bottles, brushes, calligraphy, ornaments and jewellery. I can imagine that figuring out how to open the box and playing around with the compartments to search for 'treasure' was like a game in itself.

A video installation showed how some of the designs for the curio boxes could be translated into modern, space-saving, interior design ideas such as folding beds.

Despite a \$21 million, 10-year renovation to enlarge and modernise the facilities, just 60,000 pieces (rotated every three months) of the entire collection of 677,687 artefacts can be shown throughout the year. It is said that it would take 12 years to view the entire collection! I have already visited twice.

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The author in front of the National Palace Museum of Taiwan;
photo by author