

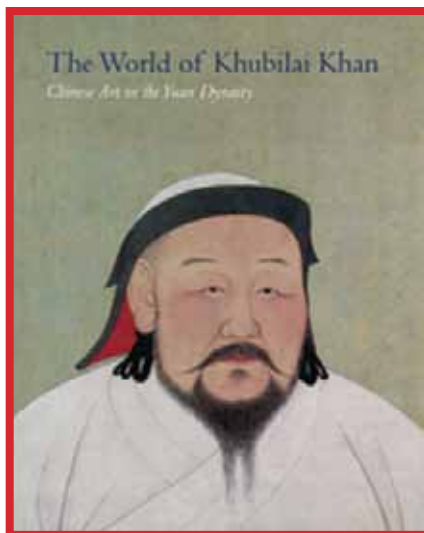
Asia at the Met

By Gretchen Liu

No trip to New York City seems complete without a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art – whether to admire the magnificent Old Masters at the top of the famous grand staircase, spend a day exploring the vast permanent collections or attend the latest ‘must-see’ show. Visitors with an Asian focus will benefit from a pre-trip look at the freshly updated website (www.metmuseum.org). In recent months the Met has hosted not only two major Chinese exhibitions but also several more intimate shows that might be overlooked in a whirlwind visit. Here is a brief look at some of the Met’s recent Asian activities.

The stunning *The World of Khubilai Khan: Chinese Art in the Yuan Dynasty* displayed some 300 objects – most of them hard-won loans from China – in thematic sections devoted to daily life, painting and calligraphy, religious art and the decorative arts. The array highlighted the new art forms and styles generated as a result of the unification of China under the Yuan and the massive influx of craftsmen from all over the vast Mongol Empire. Thus the treasures were wildly eclectic – from an exquisite porcelain pillow in the form of a tiny theatre complete with actors, to 2,000-year-old slippers from the ancient Silk Road city of Gaochang and the much-reproduced painted portrait of Chabi, Khubilai’s favourite consort. In between there were textile fragments, Hindu-style sculptures, Islamic calligraphy, superb Chinese paintings, porcelains, a Christian cross or two and a scroll depicting Jesus as a Manichean prophet sitting on a Buddhist lotus throne.

The Emperor’s Private Paradise: Treasures from the Imperial City offered a rare glimpse into a hidden corner of the Forbidden City. Also a loan exhibition, it presented some 90 paintings, architectural elements, and decorative and religious works. These were all created for the sumptuous private



The World of Khubilai Khan: Chinese Art in the Yuan Dynasty



The Emperor’s Private Paradise: Treasures from the Imperial City

retreat built in 1771 as the retirement residence of the extravagant Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–1795). He presided over the Qing Dynasty at the zenith of its power and wealth. The emperor did not retire there and the space remained a virtual time capsule, relatively untouched since imperial times. The ‘Qianlong Garden’ is now being restored in a collaboration between the Palace Museum and the World Monuments Fund. Freshly conserved

objects from there – thrones, cabinets, screens, religious sculptures, paintings – compose most of the exhibition.

Two smaller exhibitions further illuminated the Qing period, drawing largely upon the Met’s own extensive collections. *Extravagant Displays: Chinese Art in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* explored the vibrancy, innovation and taste for extravagant imagery that characterised Chinese art of the period. Many of the objects showed the mastery with which Qing artists manipulated materials such as lacquer, ivory, bamboo, metals and enamels. *Commemorating His Majesty* featured imperially commissioned paintings and calligraphies from the Qianlong era, reflecting the emperor’s extraordinary efforts to perpetuate his legacy by commissioning works of art that commemorated his achievements and enhanced his image as an ideal ‘sage-king’.

Somewhat off-the-beaten-path was *Rugs and Ritual in Tibetan Buddhism*, a display of 30 works dedicated to the enactment of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism focusing on Tibetan tantric rugs as the seats of power employed by practitioners of esoteric Buddhism. It was not for the faint-hearted: there were depictions of exposed brains in skull cups and flayed human skins, which are an extreme expression of the Buddhist pursuit of bodily detachment. Here the Met had also borrowed rarely seen ritual objects from private collections.

Further details of these exhibitions, as well as current and upcoming Asia-related exhibitions and publications, can be found on the Met website.

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