



National Palace Museum photos

A painting of Kublai Khan is in the Asian Art Museum's showcase of works associated with four dynasties and eight rulers.

ART REVIEW

Rewarding 'Treasures'

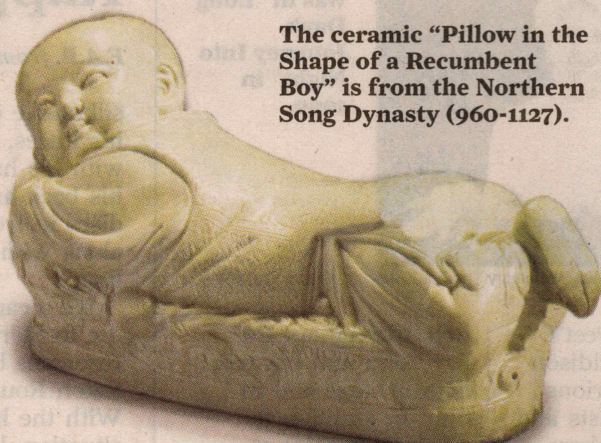
Context is key to absorbing Asian museum's royal array of works

By Charles Desmarais

It is the 50th anniversary of one of the Bay Area's most important visual arts organizations, but one that doesn't always get its due. The Asian Art Museum's collection is among the largest of its kind in the U.S. (if not the world) and, by the measure of most international experts, very fine. But the museum's significance is not well enough understood or properly celebrated at home.

How, then, should the museum celebrate its long presence in the city in a way that will extend its local and regional relevance? The museum chose an excit-

Art continues on E2



The ceramic "Pillow in the Shape of a Recumbent Boy" is from the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127).

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



National Palace Museum

‘Treasures’ rewarding for educated audience

Art from page E1

ing-sounding theme: “Emperors’ Treasures: Chinese Art From the National Palace Museum, Taipei.” Encompassing more than 150 objects associated with four dynasties and eight rulers — seven emperors and an empress — the show presents extraordinary works of art, more than half of which are making their first appearance in the U.S.

It is a richly rewarding experience, with many memorable moments. But it is also an exasperating one, too often offering material that is, ultimately, accessible to few but the most deeply knowledgeable and committed.

Captivating paintings

Most alluring to me are the paintings. There are three-dimensional objects that embody perfection itself in color, form and subtlety — several of which, by themselves, could occupy the three hours I devoted to the exhibition. Yet porcelain or lacquerware, to take two abundant examples, are nearly lost arts that are, frankly, hard for the nonexpert to evaluate among today’s flood of mechan-

Emperors’ Treasures: Chinese Art From the National Palace Museum, Taipei: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays; until 9 p.m. Thursdays. Through Sept. 18. \$10-\$15, free for ages 12 and younger. Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., S.F. (415) 581-3500. www.asianart.org

ical reproductions; painting is a medium in which virtuosity is more readily understood.

The showstopper is a 4-foot-long scroll from 1668, “White Clouds and Green Mountains” by the artist Wu Li. Wu describes his motivation for making the painting in an inscription on the work — his loneliness walking through wind and rain on a long journey, and his pleasure as the sky cleared after eight days of storm.

One has the sense that he has infused all that into the picture, not only in its details drawn in ink but also in broad metaphorical swaths of emerald and white: the rambling, winding trail; the sweeping views; the contrasts of cold and warmth, wet and dry. It might at first be mistaken for an Abstract Expressionist canvas, full of angst and drama, until the eye is drawn deeply into the gullies

and valleys, and into the details that finally reveal a lone figure on a stepped path.

A century later, a Milanese Jesuit missionary, Giuseppe Castiglione, who was eventually embraced by a succession of three emperors and took the name Lang Shining, painted the grand (6-by-3-foot) “White Falcon,” an emblematic image of a raptor drawn with almost shocking clarity, set in an idealized mountain landscape.

Patience pays off

One of the first works one encounters in the exhibition is “Walking on a Path in Spring” (1195-1224), a deceptively simple design that shows a white-robed scholar, stroking his beard, poised on a bluff at the edge of a vast open space. A willow branch loops overhead; a small bird sings, another flits across the sky.

The exhibition catalog praises the “relaxing mood” prompted by what is described as the “Ma corner.” Named for the artist Ma Yuan, who painted this work, it is a compositional device in which the subject is mostly contained in one corner, leaving empty space to take up

Art continues on E3



National Palace Museum

“White Falcon,” by a missionary who became Lang Shining.



National Palace Museum

Art from page E2

much of the picture.

“Relaxing,” of course, is in the eye of the beholder. It’s not the word I would use. Behind the figure of the scholar, the tree leans away, not languidly, but purposefully: Two roots spring up from its base, like a pair of legs with bony knees, pushing at the ground; the trunk, a torso with arched back, pulls hard on the limb above like a fisherman forcefully leveraging one of those long, deep-sea rods. Above, wispy willow tentacles reach out, the singing bird strains upward. It is an instant of extraordinary stasis — the world suspended in a peak moment of torsion, moored amid a void of space and sound.

To experience this work at the level I am describing takes little more than patient looking. The museum adds information in an object label that brings the

work to an even higher plain, translating the Chinese script, a verse that describes a “shunning human among quiet birds that caw no songs.”

And then the kicker: The calligrapher was none other than the Emperor Ningzong, who so loved this object in his collection that he was moved to inscribe, and perhaps compose, the appended poem.

Challenge to the uninitiated

All art has what we might think of as both intrinsic and associative value. Understanding the associations can radically change our perception. How do we judge a good picture commissioned by a bad person, for example? Or a mediocre object treasured by a great author or statesman? In the case of art associated with times or cultures distant from our own, we are bound to need help with the linkages.



Namu Gaji

Above: “White Clouds and Green Mountains” (1668), an evocative 4-foot-long scroll by Wu Li.

Far left: “Walking on a Path in Spring” by Ma Yuan, with calligraphy attributed to Emperor Ningzong.

Left: “Meat-Shaped Stone,” a seductive bit of craftsmanship.

At the same time, no matter how helpful it is to have such information in the back of our minds, it’s essential that we experience the object itself. No amount of words can replace what can be communicated nonverbally in a work of art.

It’s not an easy balance to strike in a museum exhibition. “Emperors’ Treasures” is accompanied by a 254-page, thoroughly illustrated catalog, extensive wall texts, equally ample object labels, videos and maps. We learn a bit about geography, history, imperial traditions, calligraphy forms and fabrication techniques. And still, without a lifetime of acculturation and an understanding of Chinese — not to mention a deep knowledge of Chinese art and history — a show such as this can be bewildering.

How can those of us without such background hope to en-

gage productively with numerous sheets of fine calligraphy (other than to noddingly appreciate the distinctions between traditional styles, helpfully described in a short video in the gallery)?

It’s no wonder that the 2½-inch-high “Meat-Shaped Stone,” widely publicized in museum advertising and a truly seductive bit of craftsmanship, is one of the most popular works at its home museum in Taipei, but what to make of a jade “Wish-Granting Wand”?

Museum’s difficult task

Better to drift among exquisite objects, responding with the eye and heart, investigating more deeply only when the art compels us to.

For the museum’s part, though the theme may have seemed accessible at first, the vast topic should probably have been dramatically trimmed

back. By showing the audience more about a single imperial family and its interaction with art, we might have ended up with even more broad knowledge, specifics be damned, about classical Chinese art and its place in the culture.

Which brings me back to the matter of recognition of the museum’s rightful place in the Bay Area. Most estimates place the Asian population at about one-third of San Francisco’s total, which would seem to ensure a built-in audience for the museum. But Asia is a very big place — the Asian continent is home to 60 percent of the people alive — encompassing myriad nationalities, languages, religions and cultural groups.

There is little reason to expect, then, that the programs and exhibitions of the Asian Art Museum would be immediately accessible to most visitors who are not scholars in the field. Beauty knows no cultural confines — there are always great visual rewards to any visit to the museum. But context is central to a contemporary understanding of works of art, and the challenge of conveying that kind of information without overwhelming the art or the audience will continue to be the museum’s task as it enters the second half of its first century.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle’s art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfbchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1