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Tomb artifacts bring Han Dynasty to life

Exhibition at the Asian makes an ancient culture accessible

By Charles Desmarais

The idea that a society at least as sophisticated as ancient Rome existed simultaneously on the other side of the world still has the capacity to shock some people. How fortunate to have the Asian Art Museum in our midst, always ready to remind us how big the world really is, and how rich.

The latest such proof is “Tomb Treasures: New Discoveries from China’s Han Dynasty,” on view at the Asian Museum through May 28. It is an expansive look at the intimate lives of Chinese nobility in the provincial kingdoms north of present-day Shanghai, during the period 206 B.C. to A.D. 9.

The show and its accompanying major catalog are the personal project of Jay Xu, director of the museum and a specialist on early Chinese art and archaeology. He edited the book, and he co-curated the exhibition with the Asian’s senior associate curator of Chinese art, Fan Jeremy Zhang. Most of the objects

“Treasures” continues on E3



Xuzhou Museum

Top: a stand for musical chimes, one of a pair. **Above:** a dancer figurine from the tomb of the King of Chu. Both are from Jiangsu and date to the second century B.C.

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Tomb artifacts illuminate a culture

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come from excavations that took place in 1995 and 2011, and are on loan from several Chinese museums.

The line between archaeology and ancient art is a fine one. A well-crafted object, no matter how utilitarian its purpose, will often have an innate physical charm. And works accepted as the finest artistic masterpieces can be immensely important documents of human history.

Many of the objects on view are lovely versions of things we use now in our daily lives, but not spectacular: simple bowls and basins, cups, ladles and cooking pots. The wall texts, typically for an Asian Art Museum show, are long on historical and social context. Xu's scholarly background shines through everywhere. Forced to choose whether to call this an archaeology exhibition or a fine art show, I would have to go with the prior.

When a show is this good, though, to heck with such distinctions. Spend 90 attentive minutes here and you will leave with a much-enhanced knowledge not only of Chinese history, but of urges to power, wealth and immortality familiar across all of time and every land. The exhibition is splendidly designed, and those wall texts are so lively, so well written they will surprise anyone who has waded through the prose of most museum presentations.

Even objects in the show with the most humble of functions are often made with exquisite care, and their backstories can be fascinating. The last of three exhibition themes, "Enduring Remembrance without Fail," centers on homely aspects of the after-life.

Certainly, a reborn noble will need a cosmetics box and a pumice-like stone for washing, but who knew a toilet will also be required? The carved rock example unearthed from Tomb 2, Tuolan Mountain, and preserved at the Xuzhou Museum could be, in its geometric simplicity, a model for today's strictest Minimalist.

And while we are talking basic human needs, let us not bypass the two bronze dildos boldly included here. Unlike religious symbols of phallic power like, for example, the Hindu lingam, these appear to

have been fashioned for actual use. One has a convenient handle. The other, a gargantuan enhancement to any mere human, is hollow, smoothly polished and has holes in the base to be used to securely strap it to the body.

And if the preponderance of the works on view will be utilitarian in the next life, that life will also have music and art. Grave robbers might have skimmed the more precious objects over the centuries, but there are extraordinary things to appreciate, particularly in the first section of the exhibition. "Everlasting Happiness

without End" opens to a view of a grand set of bronze bells, topped with a cloudscape inhabited by dragons. It is flanked by another pair of dragons, of bronze and inlaid silver, supporting on their backs stands that would have held musical chimes.

Several earthenware figures of dancers create a sense of what the experience might have been, more than 2,000 years ago, to be in attendance at a performance. (Short, unobtrusive video and sound clips of dance and music enhance our understanding — though we would do well to

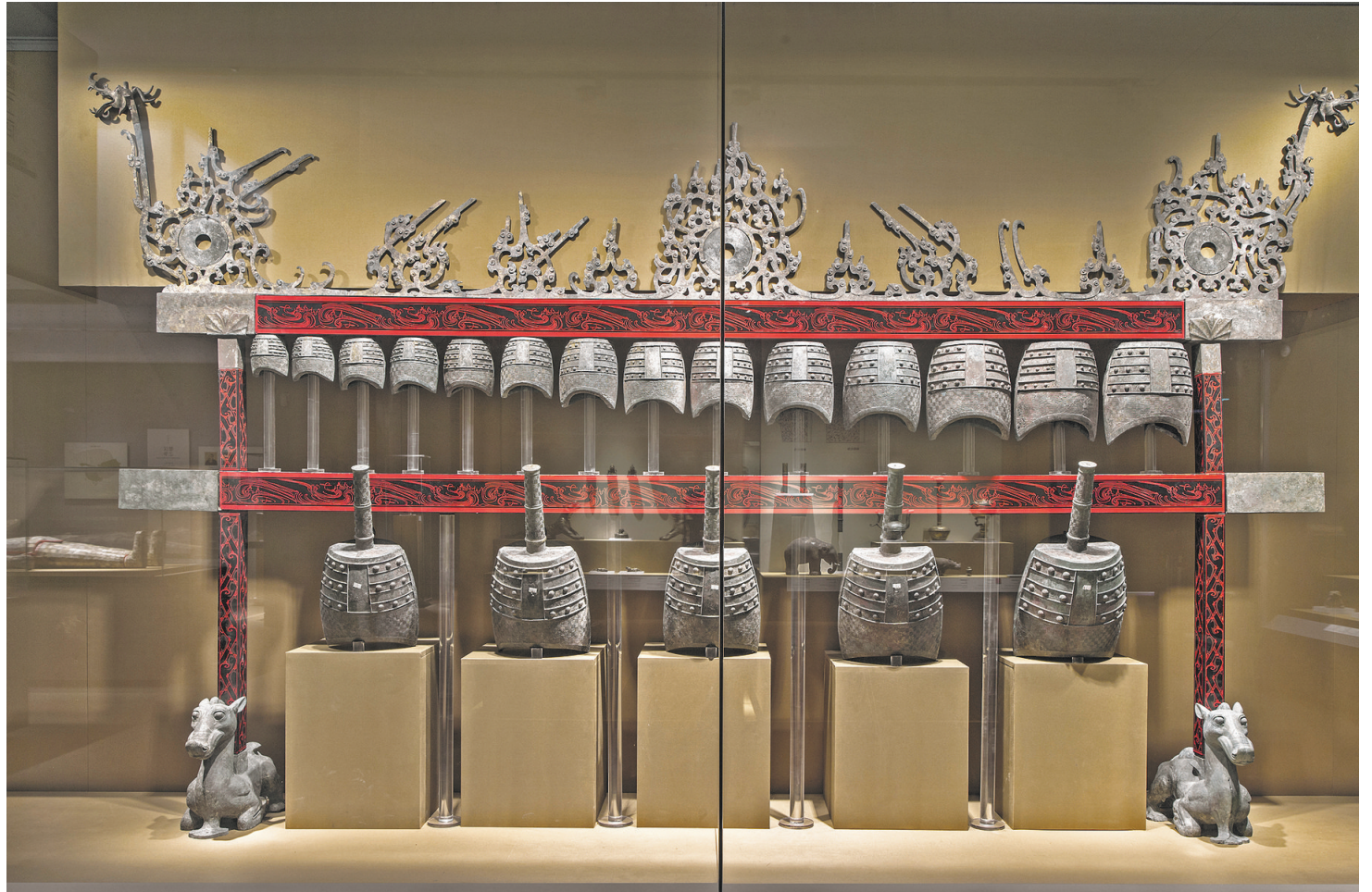
keep in mind that they are, necessarily, speculative.) One particularly expressive dancer, at the center of the room, sways and swirls impossibly, her arms enveloped in long bell sleeves that swing like fuchsia blossoms at the ends of their stems.

Elsewhere, two tiny weights meant to keep a floor mat from furling are cast in the form of tigers. Barely longer than 4½ inches, their bronze bodies, inlaid with gold stripes, slink low, ready to pounce. They are the liveliest sculptures in the exhibition, though they could be over-

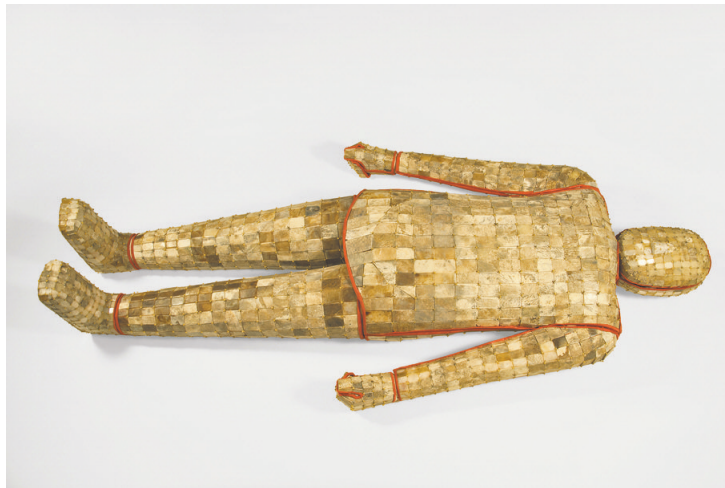
looked in their corner vitrine.

Not so easily missed is the custom-fitted, head-to-toe jade burial suit. It had a dual function. It protected, like a magical suit of armor, the queen of the Jiangdu Kingdom it enveloped. But jade was also used to prevent the escape from the body of vital essences. Its wearer, like all of us, was both protected by culture and enmeshed within it.

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



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Tomb Treasures: New Discoveries from China's Han Dynasty: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays, Thursdays until 9 p.m., through May 28. \$15-\$25. Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., S.F. (415) 581-3500. www.asianart.org

Above: Bell set, second century B.C. Far left: Lamp in the shape of a deer from Tomb 1, Dayun Mountain, Xuyi, Jiangsu (second century B.C.). Left: Jade suit from Tomb 2, Dayun Mountain, Xuyi, Jiangsu.