

A GOLDEN AGE  
of CHINA  
QIANLONG EMPEROR, 1736–1795

盛世乾隆



Chinese Portrait of Emperor Qianlong in ceremonial robe 清人画弘历朝服像轴 (detail) Qing dynasty, Qianlong period 1736–1795 / coloured ink on silk / 242.2 x 179.0 cm (image) The Palace Museum, Beijing

27 MARCH –  
21 JUNE 2015

NOTES FOR TEACHERS

## EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

This exhibition of more than 124 works from the Palace Museum, Beijing, shows the opulence and splendour of China's imperial collection during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor. The Palace Museum has inherited 1.1 million works of art from the imperial collection and now holds 1.8 million national treasures. *A Golden Age of China: Qianlong Emperor (1736–1795)* highlights some of these works, and reveals the mystery and secrets of imperial life in the Forbidden City. It tells the fascinating story of the Qianlong Emperor.

### The Qianlong Emperor

Qianlong one of China's greatest and most fortunate emperors. He became Emperor at the age of twenty-five, ruled for sixty years from 1736 to 1795 and lived to the age of eighty-nine. During his rule, China was the wealthiest and most populous nation in the world. The Emperor was a poet, painter and calligrapher, and also a great art connoisseur and collector. He greatly expanded the imperial art collection he inherited from the previous dynasties, and combined his passion for collecting with his role as preserver and restorer of the Chinese cultural heritage. The Qianlong Emperor's vision was to create a new golden age modelled on the ideals of ancient China.

### Exhibition themes

The following notes include key images and contextual information related to the five themes in the exhibition:

- Manchu Emperor
- Forbidden City: The Palace Museum
- Son of Heaven
- Imperial art under the Emperor's patronage
- Imperial art of religion
- Chinese scholar, art connoisseur and collector

## MANCHU EMPEROR



### Giuseppe CASTIGLIONE

Italian 1688–1766, worked in China 1714–66

#### Qianlong Emperor in ceremonial armour on horseback

##### 清人画弘历戎装骑马像轴

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period 1739

coloured inks on silk

The Palace Museum, Beijing

Gu8761

The twenty-nine-year-old Qianlong Emperor is here portrayed in full glory, dressed in his ceremonial military garb of bright yellow satin embroidered with golden thread, riding his horse in procession to the grand review of troops in 1739. This monumental portrait attributed to Giuseppe Castiglione (Chinese name Lang Shining), an Italian Jesuit working in the imperial court of the Qianlong Emperor, is in the European tradition of equestrian portraits of monarchs and nobles. While the realism and sumptuous colours resemble a European oil painting, it is executed in ink and colour on silk in the Chinese tradition.

In 1644 Manchu horsemen crossed the Great Wall of China and ruled under the name of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Tradition has it they were invited to suppress a peasant uprising by a Chinese general, who opened the gate to the strategic 'mountain-sea pass' in the Great Wall. Once entered, the Manchus ruled China for the next 268 years, and their leaders proclaimed themselves as Emperors of China.

The Manchus were originally known as the Jurchens, who were descendants of semi-nomadic tribes living in the forest of present-day north-east China. Nurhaci (1559–1626) united the Jurchen tribes and founded the Later Jin dynasty. His son and successor Huang Taiji (1592–1643) renamed his people Manchu in 1635 and changed the name of Later Jin to Great Qing 清 (meaning pure, clear) dynasty and adopted the title of emperor.

The invaders realised that in order to retain power and preserve their identity they would have to maintain their martial spirit and superiority in archery and horsemanship, as well as their Manchu language and dress. As supreme commanders, the early Qing emperors personally led military expeditions and fought in battles, and in times of peace organised hunting activities as a form of military exercise. They also held grand ceremonies to review their troops.

## FORBIDDEN CITY: THE PALACE MUSEUM



### Envoys from vassal states and foreign countries presenting tribute to the Emperor 清人万国来朝图轴

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period 1736–95

coloured inks on silk

The Palace Museum, Beijing

Gu6271

The Forbidden City is here presented in bird's-eye view and linear perspective, showing the influence of Western painting techniques. Buildings are reduced or enlarged in scale according to their importance. The tribute bearers are portrayed outside the Forbidden City. This magnificent painting shows the political strength of the Qing dynasty and the opulence of the imperial court.

The Forbidden City, or the 'Purple Forbidden City' (*Zi jin cheng* 紫禁城), was named after the *Ziwei* or Pole Star, believed by the Chinese to be the centre of the cosmos and the home of the Emperor of Heaven. The Purple Forbidden City was the earthly equivalent of the Heavenly Palace. As the residence of the Son of Heaven, no one outside the imperial court was permitted inside the Forbidden City.

The complex was built on the ruins of the imperial palace of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) in the early fifteenth century, when Yongle, the third Ming emperor, relocated the capital from Nanjing (meaning 'southern capital') to Beijing ('northern capital'). Construction took place between 1406 and 1421 and involved a conscripted workforce of ten thousand craftsmen and one million labourers. With some 9000 rooms, the Forbidden City occupies an area of more than 720,000 square metres, and served as the residence of twenty-four emperors of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. In 1925, with the establishment of the Palace Museum within the Forbidden City, this palace for one (the Emperor) became a palace for all.

## SON OF HEAVEN



**Giuseppe CASTIGLIONE**

Italian 1688–1766, worked in China 1714–66

**Portrait of Qianlong Emperor in ceremonial court robe**

清人画弘历朝服像轴

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period 1736

coloured inks on silk

The Palace Museum, Beijing

Gu6464

This formal portrait was painted for the young Emperor's inauguration in 1736, when he was twenty-five years old. He is portrayed as the Son of Heaven, a mediator between Heaven and Earth, seated in a golden dragon throne and dressed in full ceremonial robe and accessories. The ceremonial robe is of bright imperial yellow, a colour reserved for the Emperor, and decorated with dragons, symbols of the Emperor. The painting shows the European influence of portraiture and realism, as well as illusionism in the linear perspective of the carpet. Its subject, symbolism and the medium of ink and colour on silk, however, are traditionally Chinese.

## SON OF HEAVEN

In imperial China the emperor was called the Son of Heaven (*Tianzi* 天子) and was often referred to as the True Dragon (*Zhen Long* 真龍). The 'Son of Heaven' title was first used in the Zhou dynasty (eleventh – third century BC), when the Zhou rulers, who worshipped Heaven as the Supreme Being, named themselves Sons of Heaven. They claimed that they were given the 'Mandate of Heaven' (*Tianming* 天命), or authority to rule, on moral grounds. As unifier of China in 221 BC, the King of Qin proclaimed himself First Emperor (*Shi Huangdi* 始皇帝), adopting the title of emperor (*huangdi* 皇帝) that had previously been used for deities and the legendary sage-emperors of the golden past.

Although the imperial throne was won by military force, the Manchus realised they could not rule China on horseback: as a minority ethnic group, they needed to adopt Chinese ways to rule 150 million Han Chinese. The Manchu Emperor proclaimed himself the 'Son of Heaven', Ruler of the Universe. The Manchus inherited the intricate and hierarchical political structure of the previous Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and linked themselves to the illustrious rulers of the past dynasties of China, becoming part of this great lineage.

The Qianlong Emperor was Prince Hongli (1711–1799) of the Manchu clan of Aisin Gioro, fourth son of the Yongzheng Emperor (reign 1722–35). He was a favourite of his father and grandfather, Kangxi Emperor (reign 1662–1722), who recognised Hongli's abilities in both martial and scholarly accomplishments from a young age. Hongli was selected to become the Qianlong Emperor in 1736 on the basis of merit. Qianlong 乾隆 (Lasting Eminence) is the name of his reign (1736–95): 'Qian' 乾 meaning Heaven and 'long' 隆 meaning eminence.

Qianlong was the sixth Manchu emperor and the fourth emperor of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). After reigning for sixty years, not wanting to outshine his grandfather who ruled as emperor for sixty-one years, he abdicated in 1795 in favour of his fifteenth son, who became the Jiaqing Emperor (reign 1796–1820). After he abdicated, Qianlong lived to the age of eighty-nine, making him the longest living emperor in the history of China. During his reign, China became the wealthiest and most populous nation in the world. Chinese silk, porcelain, lacquer and tea was in great demand in many parts of the world at this time, and great wealth was gained through trade with other nations.

To ensure succession to the throne, the Qing emperors adopted the Ming system of polygamy, and the Emperor had many wives. The empress was the principal wife and performed official duties, but there were other imperial consorts beneath her. The Manchu imperial family tradition required that an empress came from a renowned Manchu family. Court ladies were classified into eight basic ranks, with the empress occupying the first and highest rank. Qianlong had more than forty consorts and fathered seventeen sons and ten daughters.

While the Outer Court formed the ceremonial area of the Forbidden City, the Inner Court served as the private residence of the Emperor and his family. The rear palaces of the Inner Court are the most enclosed and secluded areas of the Forbidden City. Except for the imperial guards, the Emperor was the only man allowed inside the Forbidden City after dark. The Emperor and his wives' personal attendants were low-status palace women and eunuchs recruited mainly from desperately poor Han Chinese families in northern China. Manchus were not allowed to become eunuchs. Eunuchs served in the imperial court as early as the Qin (221 – 207 BC) and Han (206 BC – 220 AD) dynasties.

## IMPERIAL ART UNDER THE EMPEROR'S PATRONAGE



### Giuseppe CASTIGLIONE

Italian 1688–1766, worked in China 1714–66

### Pine, hawk, and lingzhi fungus 郎世宁高献英芝图轴

Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period 1724

coloured inks on silk

The Palace Museum, Beijing

Gu5357

Dating from 1724, the second year of the Qianlong's father, Yongzheng Emperor's reign, this painting was commissioned to mark the Emperor's birthday. In China, the rare white hawk is considered an auspicious sign sent from Heaven to signal the sovereign's virtue and confirm his right to rule. The pine tree is a symbol of wisdom and longevity. Growing at the foot of a pine tree and sprouting from its trunk, the *lingzhi*, known as the fungus of immortality, is a symbol of longevity. Although the painting's symbolism is Chinese, its execution is Western in terms of its spatial depth, lighting and volume.

Qianlong Emperor played an important role in his court academy of art, and in his imperial workshops in the Forbidden City, Suzhou, Yangzhou and Guangzhou (Canton). Every work had to gain his approval before it was produced. The works here show Qianlong's fondness for jade and his exotic taste for European decorative arts and painting with enamel; including snuff bottles, European clocks and Chinoiserie (decorative arts based on the European imagination of China). The arts commissioned by the Emperor demonstrate the opulence and wealth of his imperial court at the time.

One of the key figures in establishing the new aesthetic at the Qing court was the Italian Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), whose illusionistic approach to painting revolutionised the art of the court academy. Born in Milan, Castiglione arrived in Beijing in 1715 as a young missionary of twenty-seven and remained in Beijing until his death in 1766. He painted for three emperors: Kangxi (reign 1662–1722), Yongzheng (reign 1722–35) and Qianlong (reign 1736–95). Known by his Chinese name 'Lang Shining', Castiglione introduced many Western techniques to Chinese court artists.

## IMPERIAL ART OF RELIGION



**Qianlong Emperor portrayed as an incarnation of Manjushri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom (in Puning Temple, Hebei province)**  
清人画普宁寺弘历佛装像轴

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period 1736–95  
coloured inks on fabric  
The Palace Museum, Beijing  
Gu6485

This portrayal of the Qianlong Emperor as an incarnation of Manjushri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom, is based upon the religious paintings (*tangkas*) of Tibet. He wears the monastic robes and hat of the Tibetan Gelugpa (Yellow Hat order), and the lotuses above his shoulders bear a sword and the *Prajnaparamita* (*Perfection of Wisdom*) sutra, attributes of Manjushri. His right hand is raised in the gesture of religious discussion (*vitarka mudra*) and his left hand holds a wheel, symbol of the Universal Monarch. Above him are buddhas and bodhisattvas, headed by the historical Buddha Sakyamuni. The image of Rolpay Dorje, the Emperor's guru, (*teacher*) appears in a circle above the Emperor.

Shamanism was a religious practice of the Manchus and the peoples of north-east Asia. Shamanic rituals were established at the Qing court immediately after the Manchus' entry into Beijing in 1644. In his traditional role as the Son of Heaven, the Qianlong Emperor performed ancient rituals and sacrifices to Heaven and Earth and the nature spirits of the Sun and Moon, wind, thunder, water, fire and earth.

As befitting a universal monarch at the centre of the world, Qianlong lent his support to a variety of religions, such as Ancestor Worship and Confucianism, popular Daoism and Chinese Mahayana Buddhism of the Han Chinese, as well as Christianity and Islam. The Manchu emperors embraced Tibetan Buddhism – the teaching of the Buddha as followed in Tibet. They favoured Tibetan Buddhism as practised by the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) sect, the order of the Dalai Lamas.

The Qianlong Emperor believed deeply in Tibetan Buddhism, which reached its greatest popularity at the court under him. His Guru or spiritual teacher was Rolpay Dorji. As one of the four highest incarnations in Tibetan Buddhism, Rolpay Dorje was also the Emperor's spiritual adviser.



## CHINESE SCHOLAR, ART CONNOISSEUR AND COLLECTOR



### CHINESE (court artists)

#### Qianlong Emperor appraising: One or two?

##### 清人画弘历是一是二图挂屏

screen painting painted and signed by Qianlong Emperor in the summer of 1780 and with two seals of the Qianlong Emperor, also inscribed with poem by Qianlong Emperor Qing dynasty, Qianlong period 1736–95

coloured inks on silk

The Palace Museum, Beijing

Gu6492

There are four versions of this portrait of the Emperor in the imperial collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing. It is a copy of a Song (960–1279) painting now in the Palace Museum in Taipei. The Qianlong Emperor has substituted an image of himself dressed as a Chinese scholar in place of the collector in the earlier painting. The Emperor sits on a couch, and there is another image of him in a hanging scroll on the screen. The ink painting of plum blossoms on the screen was painted by the Emperor when he was seventy years old.

The inscription is a poem written by the Qianlong Emperor. The poem reads:

Is there one or are there two?  
They are neither identical nor dissimilar.  
One may be Confucian, and the other Moist,  
Why should I worry?  
Why even bother to ask myself?

Like earlier Manchu emperors, Qianlong Emperor assumed the role of a traditional Chinese scholar. It is said he was a child prodigy, and at the age of six began studying the Chinese classics with Chinese tutors at the Hanlin Academy. He was also a passionate poet and essayist. No less than 13,000 prose pieces and 40,000 poems have been attributed to him. The Emperor also learned to write Chinese calligraphy and ink painting in the scholar-amateur style between the ages of eighteen and nineteen.

Most of all, Qianlong was a dedicated collector of Chinese art. The Manchu rulers inherited the ancient palace collection of the Ming (1368–1644) and earlier dynasties. But the real renewal and expansion of the imperial collection came under the personal direction of the Qianlong Emperor. He played multiple roles of collector, connoisseur, art historian, curator, registrar and conservator. Qianlong combined his passion for collecting with his role as preserver and restorer of the Chinese cultural heritage. His models were the emperors of ancient China, as well as the highly educated Chinese scholars whom he aimed to emulate. He had the vision of creating a new golden age modelled on the ideals of the past.