

Imperial pride

Don't miss a rare chance to view some of China's finest works, writes Yenni Kwok



Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy by Yan Liben

Hong Kong Museum of Art curator Szeto Yuen-kit has every reason to be excited. A “very, very rare” exhibition of Chinese masterpieces has just landed in the museum's two special exhibition galleries, which he oversees, and the show is set to be a blockbuster.

The Pride of China is a two-part showcase of 32 priceless classical Chinese brushworks dating from the Jin (265-420) to the Yuan (1279-1368) dynasty. They're on loan from the Palace Museum in Beijing, and most have never before left the mainland.

Calligraphy and ink paintings are the most highly regarded forms of Chinese visual art, yet opportunities to view the best of these works are few and far between. That's because most of the existing pieces are hundreds of years old – and some were created more than 1,000 years ago. Painted on fragile silk and paper, they are locked in vaults.

”Not only visitors, but even curators and directors of the Palace Museum in Beijing rarely have a chance to see the artworks,” says Szeto, who curates *the Pride of China* exhibit.

The curator himself was surprised with the possibility to host such an

exhibition. When Szeto approached his counterparts at the Palace Museum last October, suggesting an exhibition to commemorate the handover anniversary, he expected to be lent “one to five pieces”. Yet as the talks between the two institutions continued, the number grew. In the end, they agreed on 32 paintings and calligraphy, surpassing the total number of artworks loaned to the Shanghai Museum for an exhibition in 2002.

”This is the first time the collection from the Palace Museum has travelled outside the mainland on such a big scale,” Szeto says. “It's unbelievable.”

In 1997, to celebrate the handover, the museum hosted *National Treasures: Gems of Chinas Cultural Relics*, showcasing three-quarters of mainland China's most precious archaeological relics, known as “Class One” exhibits. According to Szeto, the painting exhibition is even more exceptional.

“Compared with archaeological relics, paintings and calligraphies are more difficult to exhibit,” he says. “Made of paper and silk, they are difficult to preserve. Throughout history, only very few survived the test of time, political turmoil and wars.”

To ensure the preservation of the delicate artworks, the six-week exhibition is divided into two phases. Sixteen paintings are shown in the first phase, from July 1 until July 22; the rest will be shown from July 23 to August 11.

The exhibition reveals the fine differences within Chinese visual art. “Each dynasty has its own characteristics,” says Szeto. “The Tang dynasty is considered to be the classical period of Chinese art. Many paintings were produced for political or religious purposes, similar to the Renaissance period in Europe.”

Yan Liben (601-673), a high official within the Tang imperial court, painted Buddhist and Taoist subjects as well as receiving various imperial commissions. His exhibited painting, *Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy*, shows Yan's mastery in capturing people's expressions through limited use of colour and subtle lines.

The oldest piece in the exhibition is *Letter to Boyuan in Running Script* by calligrapher Wang Xun of the Eastern Jin dynasty (265-581). The fourth-century handscroll is the only existing calligraphic work signed by the artist. The free, unrestrained brushwork is regarded as a masterpiece of *cao shu*, or

cursive writing, that leaves legibility behind in favour of a free-flowing expression of the artist's personality.

Wang Xun (349-400) was one of three master calligraphers praised by Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty as the *san xi*, or three rarities. The other two were his uncle, Wang Xizhi (303-361), and his seventh son, Wang Xianzhi (344-386).

Wang Xizhi, the patriarch of the illustrious family, is considered a master of calligraphy. His hallowed work, *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering in Running Script*, was said to have been acquired by Emperor Tang Taizong (reigned 626-649) after his secret envoy stole the calligraphy from a Buddhist temple. The emperor loved the artwork so much he arranged to have it buried with him on his death.

That magnum opus, however, survived through the copies done by later calligraphers. The replica by the seventh-century Tang court artist Feng Chengsu, exhibited in the show, is said to be the closest to the original.

Along the River During the Qingming Festival by Zhang Zeduan (1085-1145) is the best-known work on show. To be seen in the first phase of the exhibition, the 5.3-metre long panoramic handscroll gives a detailed glimpse of architecture and life in what is believed to be the capital of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), near today's Kaifeng. A copy of the painting, attributed to Ming dynasty painter Qiu Ying, will be on display for the remainder of the exhibition.

Chinese emperors were not only generous patrons of the arts – some of them were artists in their own right. Zhao Ji, who painted *Auspicious Dragon Rock* and *Mid-Autumn Poem in Regular Script*, was the birth name of Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song (who reigned from 1100-1125), who was known more for his artistic passion rather than political zeal. (The inept ruler collected artworks, assembled the best artists at his court, painted and wrote poetry.) The poetic verses in both works were written in the elegant style of calligraphy he developed, known as "slender gold" because it twists and turns like gold filament.

Chinese imperial art is unique as masterpieces of calligraphy and painting were produced by professional artisans – many were employed by imperial courts – and also amateurs – aristocrats, literati and scholastic officials saw

an artistic pursuit as part of self-perfection or *xiu shen*, the highest calling for a Chinese gentleman. After all, as Chinese classical wisdom has it, a true gentleman should be well versed in four arts: painting, calligraphy, *weiqi* (Chinese chess) and *qin* (Chinese zither).

The amateur painters produced a tradition later known as *wen ren hua*, or literati painting. Despite the tendency of scholarly amateurs to look down upon the professional artists as mere craftsmen, the boundaries between amateur and professional artists were often blurred.

During the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties, political turbulence saw the emergence of hermit painters. One of the most celebrated was Liang Kai (1140-1210) who painted the magnificent *Riders in Snow*. A court painter who rejected the highest order award, he left the imperial painting academy and became a Chan Buddhist recluse.

The preference for reclusive life continued during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) as many scholars preferred seclusion rather than serve the Mongols. Ni Zan (1301-1374), one of the Four Masters of the Yuan dynasty, was a prosperous literati who lost his estates as a result of crippling taxation. He became a wanderer and painter, working in ink, it was said, as sparingly as if it were gold. His *Ink Bamboo* uses elegant and simple strokes to create a sense of austere calm.

Impressive age and historical values aside, Chinese brushworks have their own peculiar style that sets them apart from the western artworks. The recurring images and themes in Chinese painting and calligraphy are those of tranquility: serene landscapes, elegant plants, beautiful animals, ladies and gentlemen at leisure. In contrast to western art, depictions of death, war, violence, nudity and martyrdom are virtually absent from Chinese art.

Puppet Play of a Skeleton, by the Southern Song painter Li Song (1166-1243) is perhaps an exception. It depicts a couple of puppeteers, with the wife breastfeeding their newborn while the husband, in a form of a skeleton, manipulating a skeleton puppet. Art critics have been puzzled with such an enigmatic portrayal; some believe the painting depicts the duality of joy and grief, life and death, while others say it is an expression of the painter's discontent with his times.

"As long as there is painting and calligraphy, a lifetime of 1,000 years would

not be enough," Emperor Huizong said. We may not have a millennium, but the six weeks ahead are surely not to be missed.

The Pride of China: Masterpieces of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy of the Jin, Tang, Song and Yuan Dynasties from the Palace Museum, Hong Kong Museum of Art, TST, until Aug 11.

The reportage was published in Silkroad, the inflight magazine of DragonAir, July 2007 and the South China Morning Post daily, 1 July 2007