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POWER & GLORY: COURT ARTS OF CHINA'S MING DYNASTY

June 27– September 21, 2008

A rare collaboration between three of China's most prominent museums brings the first exhibition of Ming dynasty court arts to the United States.

San Francisco, CA, May 19, 2008: For centuries, Ming porcelain vases have been regarded as the epitome of priceless beauty. The Asian Art Museum's special exhibition, *Power & Glory: Court Arts of China's Ming Dynasty* demonstrates why not just vases but Ming art of many types has earned such acclaim. On view from June 27– September 21, 2008, this major groundbreaking exhibition explores the grandeur and opulence of one of the most important dynasties in Chinese history. *Power & Glory* also marks the Asian Art Museum's first collaboration with three of China's most prestigious institutions — The Palace Museum (Forbidden City) in Beijing, the Nanjing Municipal Museum, and the Shanghai Museum. Some of the most precious artworks from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) from these museums, along with some of the finest items from this period owned by the Asian Art Museum, make up *Power & Glory*, the first exhibition in the U. S. to focus on the full range of Ming court arts. Many of the more than 240 artworks — porcelain, paintings, textiles, lacquer, jade, jewelry, architectural elements, and more — will be on public view for the first time. The exhibition provides a rare opportunity to experience the breadth and depth of Ming achievement, through an unequalled collection of works from the Chinese dynasty most renowned for its refined aesthetic and standards of perfection. The exhibition will travel to the Indianapolis Museum of Art (October 26– January 11, 2009) and the St. Louis Museum of Art (February 22–May 17, 2009).

This exhibition was organized and curated by Li He, Associate Curator of Chinese Art, and Michael Knight, Senior Curator of Chinese Art and Deputy Director of Strategic Programs and Partnerships. “The Ming dynasty was much more than the fine porcelain vases that the world continues to covet centuries later. Li and I, together with our counterparts in China, worked hard to



Portrait of Prince Zhu Youyuan in ceremonial uniform, anon. Ming artist, approximately 1521-1524, reign of the Jiajing emperor (1522-1566). Hanging scroll, colors on silk. *Palace Museum Beijing.*

assemble this unprecedented exhibition that explores the full range of Ming court arts. It is our hope that museum visitors of all ages will learn more through this exhibition about the artistic and cultural traditions of one of China's most celebrated dynasties," said Knight.

Ms. Ruan Weiping, Associate Research Fellow at the Palace Museum, said, "Some of the paintings and the majority of textiles included in this exhibition will be on display for the first time ever; prior to this, they were kept in our storerooms and never seen by the public. It goes without saying that these objects are priceless and of great importance."

This exhibition is made possible by the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, a Hong Kong based philanthropic organization with a mission to foster and support Chinese arts and culture, in particular cross-cultural understanding between China and the world.

Caroline Pfohl-Ho, President of the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, said, "2008 is the year of China, and the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation takes great pleasure in continuing its collaboration with world-renowned museums in staging timely exhibitions that present Chinese arts and culture to international audiences. This exhibition features over 240 artifacts from three major museums in China, bringing to life not only the artistic achievement of the Ming dynasty, but also dialogues between museums in China and the U.S. The Foundation believes that empathy and mutual understanding are key to social harmony, and can be cultivated through appreciation of the arts. The Foundation also shares a belief of Avery Brundage, founding father of the Asian Art Museum and President of the International Olympics Committee from 1952 to 1972. This belief is that understanding and tolerance can be fostered among the disparate cultures of the world through the arts and through athletics. The Forbidden City constitutes a priceless testimony to Chinese civilization. Audiences may find that the robust cultural and economic strength of the Ming dynasty draws analogies with today's China."

The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

Ming – which means "bright" in Chinese – was an appropriate name for a dynasty whose 276 years of rule were marked by stability, economic strength, and a dramatic flourishing of the arts. The first capital of the Ming dynasty was in Nanjing. The third Ming emperor (the Yongle emperor, reigned 1403-24) transferred the capital to Beijing, and under the Ming dynasty the Forbidden City in Beijing became an international landmark. By the end of the dynasty, Beijing supported a population of more than one million people. The Forbidden City along with the outlying region that supported it made Beijing "a service and supply center that was undoubtedly the largest of its kind in the world at that time" according to the late Chinese historian Ray Huang.

As China's last native-ruled dynasty, the Ming dynasty is revered as a pinnacle of cultural achievement. Imperially supervised workshops and kilns followed strict guidelines for the creation of goods for royal consumption. Under these rigorous guidelines set forth by the court-based Bureau of

Design, Ming porcelains and other artworks such as lacquer, metalwork, and textiles became world renowned for their quality. *Power & Glory* provides a rare opportunity to experience first-hand the majestic perfection of Ming dynasty artistic endeavors.

Exhibition Overview

Power & Glory is divided into seven themes related to different aspects of Ming court life: government and ranks; entertainment and hobbies; daily life; architecture and court environments; technology and innovation; religion and beliefs; and education and tradition.

The exhibition opens in the Lee Gallery where museum visitors discover the intricate costume system that distinguished the **Government and Ranks** of the Ming ruling elite. In 1393 the Hongwu emperor issued guidelines that explicitly outlined what government officials could wear, and how they should wear it. For example, a 1405 edict regulating crown accessories stated that dragons, phoenix, clouds, and flowers were appropriate adornments. The prescribed materials for making these accessories were gold, feathers, jade, and gems. Among the many ornaments on view in the exhibition is a brightly colored crown ornament consisting of a heart-shaped amber pendant flanked by two three-clawed gold dragons. The dragons grip the amber with tongs at the heads, rear legs, and overlapped tails. Around the dragons float whirling clouds that are inlaid with a ruby at the top and another at the bottom. Representing the symbolic color of the Ming dynasty, the red heart implies loyalty to the dynasty. This amber piece will be on view for the first time in the United States.

Another artwork on view in the Government and Ranks section is bright yellow silk material embroidered with dragons which was intended to be a robe. The particular yellow hue was solely reserved for the use of the emperor. While conducting research for the exhibition, Associate Curator Li He discovered the robe in its original box in storage at the Palace Museum in Beijing. The robe – dating to the 1600s – had never been sewn together and is in absolute pristine condition. Its inclusion in *Power & Glory* marks its U.S. debut.

Power & Glory continues in the Hambrecht Gallery with a section on the **Entertainment and Pastimes** of the Ming dynasty court. Artworks include musical instruments, other accessories for amusements, and paintings depicting various pastimes of those in the court. A highlight is a painting by Zhu Zhanji, the fifth Ming Emperor (reigned 1425-1435), with the reign title Xuande, entitled *Rats after bittermelons and fruits*. This handscroll dates to the early fifteenth century and depicts variations on a rat nibbling at many-seeded fruits and casting longing eyes on ripe bittermelons. The rat is traditionally associated with qualities of intelligence and fertility (*Power & Glory* is presented at the museum in the Year of the Rat, according to the Chinese lunar calendar). Many-seeded fruits also are symbolic of fertility. Together, the images manifest the Chinese popular saying: *May you have sons and grandsons for ten thousand generations*. Through the painting the Xuande emperor addressed his

wish for everlasting dynastic succession. The poses of the rats and the attention to minute details and surface textures of the body demonstrate the emperor's talent.

The section entitled **Daily Life** introduces the fashions of the day. Personal adornments and decorative elements for the home are featured. An amber cup on display is of particular interest. This is the largest piece of amber discovered in Ming dynasty tombs to date. The base of the cup is in the shape of a lotus leaf, with a carved fisherman serving as its handle.

The Osher Gallery houses the remaining four of the seven exhibition themes: architecture and court environments; technology and innovation; religion and beliefs; and education and tradition. The center of the gallery is devoted to architectural elements excavated from the first capital of the Ming dynasty in Nanjing. Artworks discovered from burial tombs of high-ranking government families on the outskirts of Nanjing are also included. Some of the **Architecture and Court Environments** are from the Baoensi temple which was built by the Yongle emperor as a gesture of respect to his mother and father. The temple took nineteen years, over the reigns of three emperors, to complete. The finished temple complex housed a nine-storied octagonal pagoda in the center that was surrounded by seventy-two arch gateways. Each of the two pillars of a gateway was decorated with three symmetrical friezes made from earthenware finished with a colorful glaze. On the bottom was a flying elephant—the vehicle for the mythic Law Protector, Samantabhadra, in the middle was a lion—the vehicle for the deity Wenshu, and on the top section of the pillar was a flying ram who was the deities' companion. All of these motifs are set against floral backgrounds. Two segments of one of these pillars are on view in the exhibition: one of the flying elephant and one of the lion.

The next section, entitled **Technology and Innovation**, features, among other artifacts, remnants of the famed shipyards used to build the massive wooden nine-masted ships – the largest the world had seen at the time – sailed by Admiral Zheng He during his Ming government sponsored expeditions dating from 1405–1433. More than 28,000 sailors and marines were on the first voyage. The voyages sailed along the Indian Ocean basin and as far as Africa. Porcelains and textiles are also included in the Technology and Innovation section of the exhibition. They illustrate the mass-production techniques developed during the Ming dynasty. An early form of gun that used gunpowder is also on display. The gun was made in a foundry in Fengyang, the hometown of the first Ming emperor.

Vessels, sutra covers, and other religious and ceremonial artworks comprise the **Religion and Beliefs** section of *Power & Glory*. The rulers of the Ming dynasty believed that emperors were bestowed the divine right to rule by Heaven. This right to rule was inherited from their ancestors, but could be withdrawn at any time and bestowed upon another if Heaven so deemed. Emperors spent a vast amount of time and state resources ensuring that the mandate was not withdrawn. Communication with Heaven was through the ancestors and through a plethora of rites and rituals.

In addition to ancestor worship, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism were supported throughout the Ming dynasty, depending on the personal leanings of each emperor. During the reign of the Yongle emperor, intricately woven textiles, imperial porcelains, superb sets of sutras with lacquered covers, and fabulous images of gilt bronze were made in the imperial workshops as gifts to the high Buddhist lamas of Tibet. A dramatic thangka (a form of Buddhist painting or embroidery) included in the exhibition was created at the imperial textile workshops by order of the Yongle emperor. Imposing at approximately 11 feet by 7 feet, this intricately embroidered textile is in pristine condition. It depicts the god Raktayamari and his consort in sexual embrace, representing the union of compassion and wisdom. This textile will only be on view at the Asian Art Museum. As the thangka is from a private collection, the exhibition provides an exclusive opportunity to view this incredibly rare and stunning artwork.

Education and Tradition is the seventh and final theme of *Power & Glory*. More than half of the artworks in this section are paintings. They illustrate the various stylistic influences on painters active at the Ming court. In an effort to align the dynasty with prestigious eras and episodes from the past, Ming dynasty court painters often followed the traditions of the imperial academy of the Song dynasty (960-1279). A painting in the exhibition entitled *Expansive rivers twining around clear peaks* by Li Zai (d. 1431) is an example. The artistic treatments of branches and textural strokes show the influence of Song dynasty traditions, yet vigorous ink washes demonstrate a departure typical of the early Ming. Three groups of figures from different social classes appear in this painting, each differentiated by the activities they undertake. In the foreground, fishermen in boats entertain each other by offering drink and playing the Chinese flute. Behind a hill in a pavilion over the water, an educated man reads books. Before a mountain house in the center, a host greets a guest who is followed by a boy servant carrying a zither instrument.

During its long and prosperous rule, the Ming dynasty court actively supported the flourishing of the arts. It contributed much to the cultural heritage of China. *Power & Glory* provides a rare opportunity to view artistic achievements which are part of its lasting legacy.

About the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation

With deep roots in Chinese culture, the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation was founded in 2005 with a mission to foster and support Chinese arts and culture, in particular cross-cultural understanding between China and the world. Underlying the Foundation's philosophy is a strong belief in the importance of educating the whole person and cultivating mutual understanding among people, thus benefiting the growth of the individual as well as society. The Foundation believes that participation in the arts enriches lives, liberates potential and encourages creative thinking. It also helps people approach issues in life, society and the world with greater ingenuity.

Since its inauguration, the Foundation has taken an active role in supporting numerous arts and cultural programs internationally. In 2007, it supported *Britain Meets the World: 1714–1830*, an international partnership between the British Museum and the Palace Museum in Beijing. In early 2008, the Foundation partnered with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York to present *Cai Guo Qiang: I Want to Believe*, realizing the museum's first-ever solo retrospective of a contemporary Chinese artist. The exhibition will travel to Beijing to coincide with the Beijing Olympics in summer 2008, then to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in early 2009. By joining hands with renowned Chinese writer Pai Hsien-yung, the Foundation is active in the revival and promotion of Kun Opera, an art form classified by UNESCO as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Touring performances of the Kun Opera classic *Peony Pavilion* has been on going throughout China and are planned for overseas in the coming years. In the promotion of Buddhist philosophy and the arts, the Foundation collaborates with the Honolulu Academy of Arts in a multi-year project that aims to preserve, document and present the living Vajrayana Buddhist culture of Bhutan. The exhibition, *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*, will begin in early 2008 and tour until 2009, embracing such destinations as the Rubin Museum in New York and the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco (February 20–May 10, 2009). The project will provide conservation training for Bhutanese monks, create a video archive for Cham ritual dance, and develop a database on Bhutanese arts in museum collections worldwide. The Foundation hopes to inspire other efforts to preserve and revitalize traditional arts and culture.

Exhibition Organization

This exhibition was organized by the Asian Art Museum in collaboration with the Palace Museum, the Nanjing Municipal Museum, and the Shanghai Museum. *Power & Glory* was developed by a grant from the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation. The museum is grateful for additional support provided by the Henry Luce Foundation, the Starr Foundation, the Bei Shan Tang Foundation, Sotheby's MasterCard, and United Airlines. Additional funding is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Media sponsors: CBS Outdoor, KQED Public Broadcasting, NBC11, San Francisco Magazine, KTSF 26, Sing Tao Daily, AsianWeek, World Journal, and Where Magazine. Official hotel: Hilton San Francisco Financial District. The exhibition will travel to the Indianapolis Museum of Art (October 26–January 11, 2009) and St. Louis Art Museum (February 22–May 17, 2009).

Exhibition Tours

Groups of 10 or more enjoy discounted admission to the museum, and can reserve private tours of the exhibition with the museum's knowledgeable docents for a fee. *Power & Glory* private tours are available in English, Cantonese and Mandarin. Tours are available July 1 through September 21, 2008, with the exception of the first Sunday of each month. Reservations must be made at least one month in advance: (415) 581-3624, or groupvisits@asianart.org.

Publication:

Power & Glory: Court Arts of China's Ming Dynasty, published by the Asian Art Museum, and edited by He Li and Michael Knight includes essays about Ming dynasty art as well as detailed entries for each of the objects in the exhibition. The fully illustrated catalog is available at the Asian Art Museum store (\$39.95 softcover, \$59.95 hardcover). 415-581-3600 or shop@asianart.org.

Media Preview

A media preview for *Power & Glory: Court Arts of China's Ming Dynasty* will be held on June 25, 2008. Doors open at 9:30 am, remarks begin at 10:15 am. For more information and to RSVP, please email pr@asianart.org or call (415) 581-3713.

About the Asian Art Museum

The Asian Art Museum is a public institution whose mission is to lead a diverse global audience in discovering the unique material, aesthetic, and intellectual achievements of Asian art and culture. Holding more than 17,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history, the museum is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. Once located in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, the museum now resides at its new, expanded facility at Civic Center Plaza. An architectural gem featuring a dynamic blend of beaux arts and modern design elements, the museum's new home is the result of a dramatic transformation of San Francisco's former main library building by renowned architect Gae Aulenti (designer of Paris's Musée d'Orsay) into a showcase for the museum's acclaimed collection and exhibitions.

- **Information:** (415) 581-3500 or www.asianart.org.
- **Location:** 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102.
- **Hours:** The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, with extended hours until 9:00 pm every Thursday.
- **Admission:** \$12 for adults, \$8 for seniors, \$7 for youth 13–17, and free for children under 12. Thursday evenings after 5 pm admission is just \$5 for all visitors except those under 12 and members, who are always free. **Target First Free Sundays:** The museum offers FREE admission to all on the **first Sunday** of every month, courtesy of Target.
- **Access:** The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access, please call (415) 581-3598; TDD: (415) 861-2035.