

## Treasures Galore

*An exhibition of Chinese archeological relics in Hong Kong – a handover gift from the Motherland – is both a visual and intellectual delight*

Yenni Kwok in Hong Kong



To see the best relics of China, lovers of Chinese antiquity usually have to visit dozens of museums scattered across the country. A glimpse of the Ming dynasty's exquisite underglaze blue ceramics, for instance, would require a trip to the National Museum of Chinese History in Beijing. To see Emperor Qin Shihuang's terracotta warriors – those magnificent sculptures of archers and horsemen – would require a trip into neighboring Shaanxi province.

But not any more – at least not for the next month. Sinophiles can now visit the Hong Kong Museum of Art, where 163 prized Chinese artifacts are on display. Called "National Treasures: Gems of China's Cultural Relics," the exhibition is in celebration of Hong Kong's reunification with the Motherland. This is the first time that three-fourths of China's so-called "Class One" relics, selected from 30 Chinese museums and cultural

institutes, have ever been exhibited outside the mainland. Though Chinese artifacts have graced foreign museums in the past, no more than 5% of the prized Class One collection had ever left the country.

The 10-week show, which ends on March 1, surpasses any exhibition ever organized on the mainland itself. The four exhibits of Chinese relics held in the mainland so far – in Beijing and Shanghai alternately – have been confined to artifacts excavated only over the past two decades or so. By contrast, "National Treasures" is an extravaganza that offers objects of art from the Neolithic period to the Qing dynasty.

The show is divided into seven sections, starting with the prehistoric period and ending with the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. To navigate through the eras, the museum offers an optional audio guide, available in Cantonese, Mandarin and English. Though an excellent source of historical, cultural and intellectual information, the taped recordings cover only 20 of the displayed artifacts. Visitors unversed in Chinese may find themselves handicapped because there are no translations provided for the characters on some of the relics. Although there are televised lecture videos available, they are only in Mandarin or Cantonese.

Still, an average of 1,000 people from every conceivable ethnic group flock to the exhibition daily. Over 60,000 visitors were recorded in the first month alone, and their numbers are bound to swell as the show nears its closing date. To accommodate this rush, organizers are keeping the museum open until 9 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday.

For Hong Kongers, there is the delight of seeing some of the territory's own antique pieces: a 5,000-year-old stone ax, several Shang-era stone ornaments and Bronze Age pottery. On a recent drizzly Friday morning, a group of local students elbowed each other to get closer to the museum tour guide. Not far from them, a Western man switched on a flashlight to examine the minute human figures intricately woven into a gold hairpin from the Ming dynasty. Appreciation for the relics crosses cultural boundaries. As Yanagisawa Ichiro, a spellbound Japanese visitor, put it: "I am thrilled."

The exhibition's success is largely due to the sheer variety of categories. While most Chinese art exhibits usually display the so-called "imperial arts," which comprise objects such as Ming ceramics that cater to aristocratic or scholarly tastes, the Hong Kong museum brings together several genres

encompassing religious, folk, domestic and ethnic art themes. The materials, insured for \$200 million, range from clay, bronze and ceramic to silver, jade and gold, reflecting the uniqueness of Chinese contributions to culture and civilization.

Some of the most outstanding pieces were once used as domestic objects. Chief among them is a bronze lamp from the tumultuous Warring States period (475 B.C. to 221 B.C.), which saw large armies fight battles of annihilation. A work of brilliant originality and craftsmanship, it features a rather-comical looking, silver-headed man. He is dressed in an ornate robe, holding a snake in each hand. Connected to the reptiles are three lamp-trays at different levels, allowing for both an artistic and practical diffusion of light.

Virtually every era of Chinese history has used jade for adornment as well as ritual. On display from the Ming and Qing dynasties are a set of jade plaques mounted in gold, a water container shaped like a dragon-headed tortoise, and a dark green jade plate with an imperial poem inscribed on it. There is also a jade "pig-dragon," from which the mythical Chinese dragon as we know it today possibly evolved. To protect their dead from evil influences, the ancient Chinese placed jade above, below and at the four directions of the body during burials. By the advent of the Han era in 206 B.C., this practice had led to the use of elaborate jade burial suits for deceased royalty. The costumes were made by sewing hundreds of delicate jade plates with gold threads in an ostentatious display of pomp.

Archaeological excavations sometimes both reveal and mystify the past. Consider a greenish-blue bronze figure from the Shang dynasty (16th century B.C. to 11th century B.C.), one of the most remarkable pieces in the show. Standing over two meters tall, with a beak nose, large, pointed eyes and a square jaw, he is wearing an ornate headgear and is dressed in a flowing robe, arms raised, fingers clenched. Who does this awesome figure represent? His unmistakable aura of austerity suggests that he is of note -- a high-ranking shaman, a cult deity, perhaps a king.

The exaggerated features of several Shang bronzes, including one eagle head, are strikingly similar to native Indian totems found in North America. Could this prove the well-known theory that the ancients of Asia had crossed the Bering Straits to America? When asked for her opinion, Rose Lee Wing-chong, the museum's assistant curator for Chinese antiquities, simply shrugs

and says: "This is not our emphasis." Her only concern at the moment, it seems, is to offer the best of China's treasures to the world.

*The article was published in Asiaweek magazine ([www.asiaweek.com](http://www.asiaweek.com)), February 6, 1998*