

An old hand at the helm

The National Palace Museum turns 83 under a new director who has grand ambitions to make the venerable institution appeal to a wider public

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National Palace Museum Director Chou Kung-shin.
PHOTO COURTESY OF NPM

Chou Kung-shin (周功鑫), who took over from Lin Mun-lee (林曼麗) as director of the National Palace Museum in May this year, is hardly a newcomer to the institution, having begun her career at the museum back in 1972. Her long association with the museum and familiarity with the institution has allowed Chou to pursue many innovations commenced under her predecessors, as well as make some bold initiatives of her own.

New and old meet in the events being held to celebrate the museum's 83rd anniversary with two important exhibitions that show off the museum's collection in traditionally scholarly style, and musical concerts, a relatively new innovation, aimed at drawing a wider and more diverse crowd.

Chou, who received her doctorate in art history and archaeology at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, served as secretary to two of the museum's directors and headed its Exhibition Department for 16 years, during which time she organized numerous international exhibitions, including groundbreaking shows such as Monet and other Impressionists: Collections from Musée Marmottan Monet Paris (1993), Western Landscape in Paintings from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries (from the collection of Musée du Louvre in 1995) and The World of Picasso (from the collection of the Musée de Picasso in 1998).

In 1999, Chou left the National Palace Museum to join Fu Jen Catholic University (輔仁大學), where she subsequently became the founding director of its Graduate Institute of Museum Studies (博物館學研究所). She returned to the museum with a brief to develop it from being simply a great repository of ancient art into an institution that more effectively

serves the local community and to raise the level of cultural appreciation among all levels of society.

In the past, the museum's mandate was simply to preserve a priceless collection of art — everything else was secondary. Chou said that the scope of the museum's activities has gradually been broadened, first to include education, and now as an increasingly engaged member of the wider cultural scene.

"Now museum's have moved to a new level, a broader aspect, as part of a cultural industry. We have to look for ways to make the collection more valuable, so that more people can get inspiration from it. The functions of the museum have broadened," Chou said. "The National Palace Museum has to follow this trend and that is the main reason I have returned."

Chou's main challenge is finding a balance between her efforts to expand the appeal of the museum while retaining its core expertise in historical research and the technical branches of conservation and restoration. After all, it is the latter that has made the museum the internationally respected institution it is today.

Major projects include the opening of a center to promote "cultural industry creation" and train young designers. This will be built on a 5.4-hectare site opposite the museum and includes, Chou said, a range of recreational facilities such as restaurants, tea houses, classical Chinese gardens and so on.

"We want this complex to be a demonstration of the idea of cultural creation. When people visit, they will be able to see the traditional over here (the main museum), and the modern over there," Chou said.

More ambitious still are the projects surrounding the yet-to-open southern branch of the

National Palace Museum. "Because the branch is located in Chiayi, we must find ways of attracting international tourists to this location with some special characteristics. We are considering creating a theme park based on the story of the Monkey King. We'll invite people like Ang Lee (李安) and other film producers and directors to join this project," Chou said.

The idea of using the Monkey King story — also known as *Journey to the West* — is that it links Chinese culture with the rest of the world through the medium of Buddhism. The money for this project would come from private sector investment. "Basically this will be done on a BOT (build-operate-transfer) model. Many people are interested, so the budget is no problem," said Chou, adding that work on this project should begin in three or four years.

The recent completion of a new restaurant, Silks Palace (故宮晶華), managed by the Grand Formosa Regent group, has already added to the appeal of the museum as a destination and is helping to create a synergy between arts and fine dining. The museum has extended its opening hours on Saturdays to 8:30pm, when it sometimes holds concerts. The final concerts in the current series, performed by the National Chinese Orchestra (台灣國家國樂團), will take place at 6pm on Saturday and 4:30pm on Sunday at the National Palace Museum auditorium (admission is free).

At 83, the National Palace Museum is looking younger than ever. It's all a brave new world, and success or failure will depend on whether Chou is able to find the right balance between maintaining the museum's international reputation and making it a commercially successful cultural playground.

Calligraphy exhibition returns to the beginning

One of two major exhibitions that coincide with the National Palace Museum's 83rd anniversary, Masterpieces of Chin and Tang Dynasty Calligraphy (晉唐書法名蹟) is the kind of tour de force that marks the institution as one of the great museums in the world. The

whole exhibition includes just 17 items, but these include many of the texts that formed the foundation of calligraphy for the millennium that followed. According to He Yan-chuan (何炎全), an assistant curator of the exhibition, the calligraphic texts shown in this exhibition represent a very considerable portion of all the extant original calligraphic texts from this early period, and never have so many of these texts been displayed together at one time at the museum.

The Jin Dynasty (separated into Eastern and Western Jin) ruled in China from 265 to 420 and the Tang ruled from 618 to 907. They were both periods of enormous cultural efflorescence, when many aspects of what we now accept as Chinese culture were established. The scrolls on display are some of the oldest, though among the colorful ceramics, the priceless jades, and the imposing bronzes, this exhibition might seem to have little to recommend it to the non-expert viewer. In darkened rooms specially lit to protect the delicate exhibits — under museum regulations they cannot be shown again for at least two years after this 40-day stint in the limelight — the pages of text are dark with age. With a number of notable exceptions, the calligraphy itself does not look that spectacular — indeed, if you've been wondering around the museum for a while, it might look all too familiar.

The reason is that these texts, especially the three works by Wang Xizhi (王羲之, 303-361),

became, during the Tang Dynasty, templates for good calligraphy. The works by Wang are not originals, but copies made in the 11th century of 4th-century originals that are now lost. They are the closest thing that now exists to the writing of a man regarded as the godfather of Chinese calligraphy. Microscopic inspection shows a work such as the *Yuan Huan* (遠宦帖) to have been reproduced by the careful tracing of outlines. "It makes this work just one step away from the original," He said.

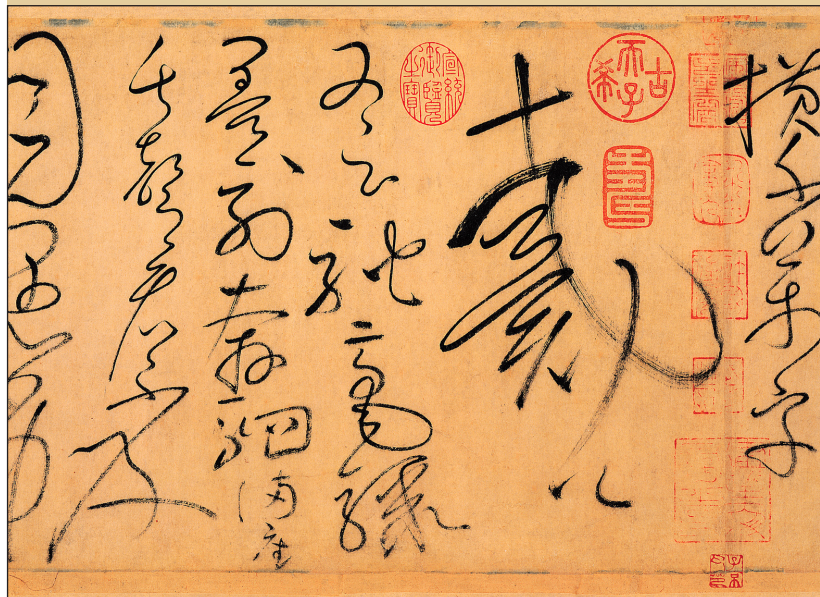
An introduction at the beginning of the exhibition and longer-than-usual explanatory cards placed with the exhibits provide some context, but without a general knowledge of the cultural background in which someone like Wang is known to every high school student, the true importance of what is on display is hard to appreciate. The other artists on display also hold seminal positions in the pantheon of Chinese calligraphy. There is the *Autobiography* (自敘帖, 777) by Huai Shu (懷素), which formed the template for the wild cursive style, the *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew* (祭姪文稿, 758) by Yan Zhenqing (顏真卿), which established a more rustic style in contrast to Wang's elegance, and *Inquiring After Friends in the Twelve Months* (十二月朋友相聞書), an instructional template in the art of polite letter writing by an anonymous Tang Dynasty calligrapher.

There is something endlessly fascinating about being in the presence of the very ancient, especially

when there is such a clear connection with the present world. Wang's calligraphy, after all, formed the basis of every child's education in calligraphy until at least the beginning of the last century. As fascinating as this exhibition is, it also highlights the academically driven nature of many of the museum's "special" exhibitions. The fun is in the details, and while some effort has been made to make these works accessible (a fairly detailed English-language introduction to some of the works is available at the museum's Web site at www.npm.gov.tw/exh97/chintang/eng_info.html), much that makes this exhibition so important is likely to remain just beyond the grasp of a general audience.

EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Masterpieces of Chin and Tang Dynasty Calligraphy (晉唐書法名蹟)
WHERE: National Palace Museum, Galleries 202, 204, 206, 208
UNTIL: 9am to 5pm (open until 8:30pm on Saturday). Until Nov. 20
TICKETS: NT\$160 (admission free Saturdays 5pm to 8:30pm)



Yuan Huan by Wang Xizhi, whose style of writing continued to be influential until the last century.
PHOTO: COURTESY OF NPM

Ceramics designed to shock and awe

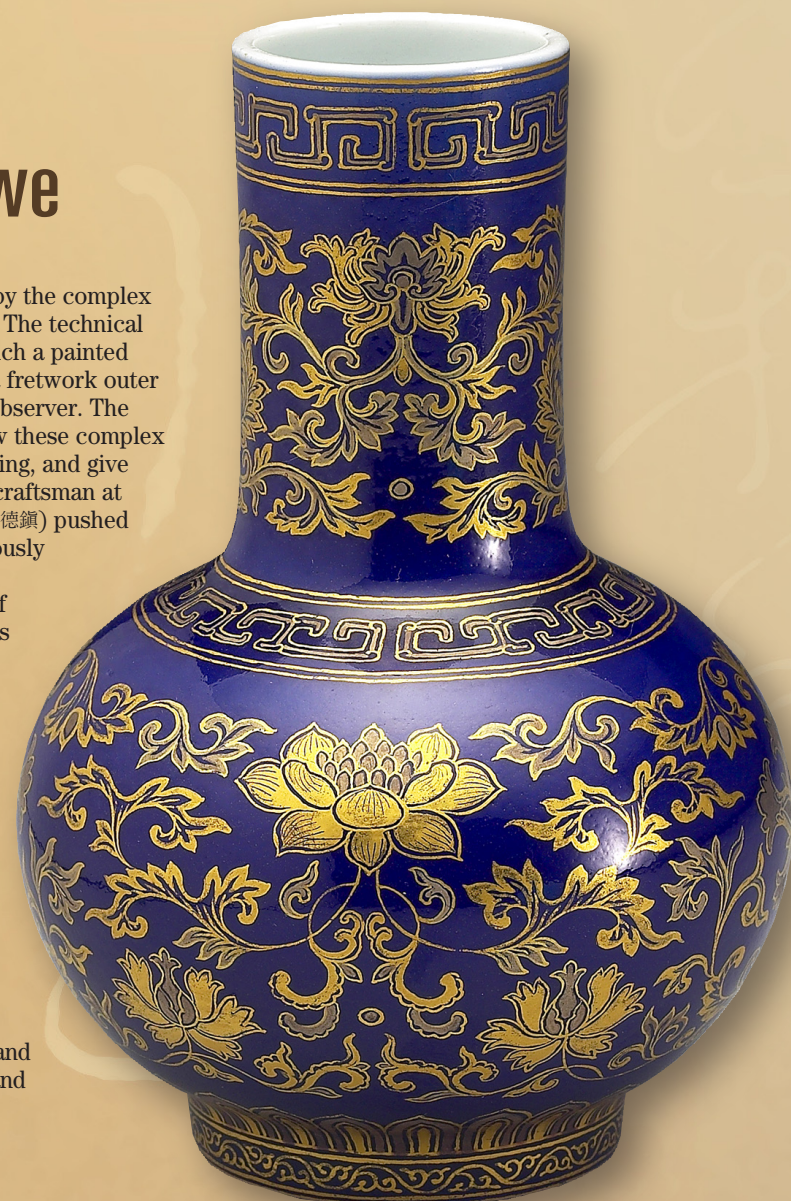
The second of the National Palace Museum's special exhibitions opening this week is the Stunning Decorative Porcelains from the Chienlung Reign (華麗彩瓷: 乾隆洋彩特展), which as you might expect from ceramics devised especially for the admiration of one of the Qing Dynasty's (1644-1911) most powerful and artistically sophisticated emperors, absolutely overwhelms with its artistry and ornateness. Compared to the Masterpieces of Chin and Tang Dynasty Calligraphy, this is a much larger exhibition (over 100 pieces), and with its breakdown displays of the complex methods by which these ceramics were assembled and painted, much more accessible.

The ceramics presented in this exhibition, most of which were made between 1741 and 1744, represent two styles of vase painting that were developed in the mid 18th century. One aspect of the exhibition deals with the subtle differences that distinguish the *fa-lang-tsai* (琺瑯彩) style and the *yang-tsai* (洋彩) style. Unless you intend to spend serious time in Gallery 306, this aspect of the exhibition is probably best left to the specialists. Both styles favor intricate brocade decorative designs applied through multiple layers of glazes, the *yang-tsai*, at its simplest, being distinguished by the use of some Western painting techniques, such as the use of shading to create a fuller and more three-dimensional image.

The intricacy of the enamel work can be

matched in a number of instances by the complex structure of a number of the vases. The technical complexity of creating vases in which a painted inner vase is able to rotate within a fretwork outer vase is evident even to the casual observer. The displays and diagrams showing how these complex works were assembled are fascinating, and give a clear indication of how hard the craftsman at the imperial kilns of Jingdezhen (景德鎮) pushed themselves to impress their notoriously discriminating emperor.

While the incredible ornateness of these works may not be to everyone's taste, they are indisputably "stunning," as the title of the exhibition suggests. The only criticism is that given the intricacy of the enamel work, it is difficult to make out some of the detail looking at the objects behind glass. Many of the items were clearly intended to be handled lovingly by connoisseurs and to be admired in a manner more intimate than is possible in a museum gallery. Blown up displays of design elements do help viewers appreciate some of the workmanship, but time and again you simply want to reach out and hold some of the pieces close up.



Far right: Mullet-shaped vase in enamel on a cobalt blue ground, 1742.
Right: Square vase in enamel on a yellow ground with Western floral decor that was made during the reign of Emperor Qianlong.
PHOTOS: COURTESY OF NPM



EXHIBITION NOTES:

WHAT: Stunning Decorative Porcelains from the Chienlung Reign (華麗彩瓷: 乾隆洋彩特展)
WHERE: National Palace Museum, Gallery 306
UNTIL: 9am to 5pm (open until 8:30pm on Saturday) Until Aug. 15, 2009
TICKETS: NT\$160 (admission free Saturdays 5pm to 8:30pm)