

# A controversial emperor gets his due

*The National Palace Museum's exhibition on the Yongzheng Emperor is a masterful scholarly achievement, albeit one that seems to regard the average admission-paying viewer as something of an afterthought*

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STAFF REPORTER



The National Palace Museum's Harmony and Integrity — Yongzheng Emperor exhibition is long on detail but short on explanation.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATIONAL PALACE MUSEUM

## EXHIBITION NOTES:

**WHAT:** Harmony and Integrity — The Yongzheng Emperor and His Times  
**WHERE:** Halls 105, 107, 202, 208 and 212 of the National Palace Museum, 221, Zhishan Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市至善路二段221號)  
**WHEN:** Until Jan. 10, 2010. The museum is open daily from 9am to 5pm, closes at 8:30pm on Saturdays  
**ADMISSION:** NT\$160, NT\$80 for students with ID  
**ON THE NET:** www.npm.gov.tw/exh98/yongzheng (Chinese only); www.npm.gov.tw/en/visiting/exhibit/exhibit\_08.htm?docno=587 (basic introduction in English)



**H**armony and Integrity — The Yongzheng Emperor and His Times (雍正—清世宗文物大展), which opened last week at the National Palace Museum (故宮博物院), has received particular attention as the first plank in an extensive cooperation agreement between the museum and the Palace Museum (故宮博物院) in Beijing.

Thirty-seven items are on loan from Beijing, along with a couple of contributions each from the Shanghai Museum (上海博物館), Academia Sinica (中央研究院) and the private collection of UC Pharmaceuticals (五洲製藥股份有限公司), making this the most comprehensive exhibition ever on the life and times of the Yongzheng Emperor (雍正), a shadowy but crucial figure in the consolidation of the Manchu Qing Dynasty's domination over China. (The rest of the 246 pieces on display come from the National Palace Museum's permanent collection.)

Putting aside the gratifying achievement of inter-museum cooperation, which will also include a host of scholarly exchanges, the exhibition itself is not much of a departure for the museum. While some of the items are splendid to look at, the nature of the exhibition is still very much research driven, with an unduly high proportion of objects that might excite scholars but are unlikely to wow the general public at first glance. This may be partly remedied by the audio tours, thematic tours, educational activities and training tours for elementary and high school teachers.

Yongzheng, who reigned for just 13 years (1722 to 1735), came to the throne after a bitter succession struggle in which he proved utterly ruthless toward anyone who got in his way, including many of his siblings. Despite the peace and prosperity that he brought to his realm through efficient administration, building on the foundations of his father the Kangxi Emperor (康熙), this legacy of brutality and the suspicion of an illegitimate

succession have tainted his name. The fact that his reign was sandwiched between two of the Qing Dynasty's most able and long-reigning emperors — his father was on the throne for 61 years and his son Qianlong (乾隆) for 60 years — further places him in the shadows. This exhibition is intended to go some way toward clearing his name, presenting him as an individual and revealing the artistic flourishing over which he presided. It achieves this enormous task with considerable success, though given its huge scope, it is easy for visitors to lose the thread.

One of the key items in the show is *The Kangxi Emperor's Last Will and Testament* (康熙遺詔), one of a small number of items on loan from the Collection of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, which supports Yongzheng's legitimate claim to the throne. The relevant text is highlighted in the display case. While doubtless of inestimable value as a piece of historical evidence in a complex scholarly debate, for the casual visitor, there is insufficient context to excite much interest.

The many-layered facade of imperial court life makes getting to know someone like the Yongzheng Emperor enormously difficult, something that is highlighted above all else by the two larger-than-life formal portraits of him, one sitting, one standing, both showing in painstaking detail the intricate imperial garb and impassive features of the emperor. Other works such as a massive 468.7cm-long scroll of the Yongzheng Emperor making offerings at the altar of the god of agriculture chronicle the infinitely complex court ceremonial practices of which Yongzheng was the center.

In vivid contrast to this highly formal material, there are a number of letters and other official documents on which the emperor has added his own pithy comments in vermilion ink, revealing a sharp, opinionated bureaucrat with a deep concern for those working under him. There are

moments when his words sound remarkably contemporary, and this, above all, brings him vibrantly alive.

This official face is contrasted with pictures of and items taken from everyday court life. *Beauties: Appreciating Antiquities* (美人圖:鑒古) from the Palace Museum, Beijing, is a treasure trove of detail concerning the decorative features of the court's inner apartments, from the costumes of the imperial consorts to the furnishings and decorative knickknacks that were favored at the time. There are a couple of works by the Jesuit missionary Giuseppe Castiglione, who was resident at the imperial court around this time, most notably of horses, and other works by court painters that reflect the adoption of Western techniques, an indication of Yongzheng's broad-ranging artistic tastes, and hint at the looming storm of European involvement in Asia.

The exhibition touches on many aspects of life during Yongzheng's reign, and presents a lovely panorama, although it can feel somewhat unfocused at times as it reaches for inclusiveness at the expense of clarity. The historical notes in English posted on the walls can be maddeningly vague, and individual explanatory labels are rather too minimal to be helpful in explaining the significance of specific objects on display. There is, nevertheless, plenty there for those with the time and interest to pull it all together — it would just have been nice if the curators could have been a bit more helpful.



## Soul-searching in China as art prices plummet

*The market for contemporary Chinese art has been hit hard by the financial crisis, though more traditional categories of Chinese paintings and antiques have fared better*

BY JAMES POMFRET  
HONG KONG, REUTERS

The fallow plots of farmland on the edge of the artists' village of Songzhuang (宋莊) are a symbol of Chinese contemporary art's recent boom and bust cycle.

When prices for Chinese art soared, there were grand plans to build more galleries and studios in this artists' hamlet near Beijing. Yet today, after art prices plunged by some 60 percent in the past year, the expansion plans have floundered.

After a white-hot stint, the financial crisis has battered China's art landscape, shrinking investment in grand schemes like Songzhuang, shuttering galleries in Beijing's pioneering 798 arts district and deflating bloated egos, valuations and excesses.

"The Chinese contemporary market was over-swollen before. I felt it wasn't very healthy," said Nan Xi (南溪), a former Chinese army officer turned artist whose works, huge pointillist ink-brush canvasses which he displays in his spacious Songzhuang villa, fetched around half a million yuan (roughly US\$70,000) at the peak of the market.

In the good days, ferocious bidding in auction rooms at the market's peak in 2007 and last year caused prices to spiral skyward with buyers and speculators treating contemporary artwork almost like stocks or tradeable commodities.

What resulted was a glut of average art at inflated prices and a growing community of millionaire artists, some more drawn by the opportunities to make vast amounts of cash than any artistic vision.

"The financial crisis has been a good lesson for us; to better know what the market is, and art's relationship to it. Having too much money is not good for an artist's development," said Nan.

China's leading auction house, Beijing Poly International

Auction, which is famous for its repatriation of looted bronze animal heads from the West, has seen business in Chinese contemporary art plunge over 50 percent in the past year.

"A lot of buyers have been pushed out, including the speculators. The collectors who are left are now able to pay more reasonable money for reasonable things," said Li Da (李達), Poly's general manager.

He gives the example of a large Zhang Xiaogang (張曉剛) bloodline painting which fetched US\$2.5 million in May and says that painting would have sold for more than twice that amount if it had been auctioned in 2007.

Melancholy canvasses by Zhang, one of China's A-list artists which includes the likes of Liu Xiaodong (劉小東), Zeng Fanzhi (曾凡志), Fang Lijun (方立均) and Yue Minjun (岳敏君), sold at up to US\$6 million a piece at the market peak.

Those valuations have, like many others, since fallen some 66 percent according to an index on Chinese art Web site Artron.net.

Since 2007, the overall market for Chinese contemporary art has shrunk over 54 percent according to Artron. Sotheby's and Christie's, which both pared back their sales of Chinese contemporary art in Hong Kong, have struggled to consign outstanding works, with sellers still wary of fragile sentiment.

At Sotheby's autumn sales, bidding was mixed for contemporary art with Zhang Xiaogang's *Comrade* one of few pieces testing the US\$1 million dollar mark.

Without an across-the-board recovery in China's economy and a return to the days of huge wealth creation, Li said she doesn't see a comeback in Chinese contemporary art prices

anytime soon.

Auctioneers and dealers say collectors have become more selective since the crash, spurring lesser works while seeking value in younger artists beyond China in Asia and in the West.

"Through this consolidation, there will be better discernment of good artists and good works and their inherent value" said Li of the Poly Group. "The true connoisseurs of Chinese contemporary art, the collectors are left ... and they will be able to pay reasonable money for reasonable things."

Misung Shim, the head of Seoul Auction, which sold a large work of British artist Damien Hirst in Hong Kong this month for US\$2.2 million, an auction record for the artist in Asia, sees growing opportunities beyond China's art scene.

"We are trying to open the Western art market in Hong Kong rather than the Chinese paintings market," she said.

Over the past three decades, Chinese contemporary art has written out of the wilderness of Chairman Mao Zedong's (毛澤東) Cultural Revolution purges and upheavals like the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, later piggy-backing on China's economic and political rise, to catch the eye of the global art community.

While plunging prices of avant-garde art worldwide represents a big potential upside, major art investors such as Philip Hoffman of the Fine Art Fund in London are putting their money more in conservative, safer bets, with recent Asian sales in New York and Hong Kong showing strong demand and prices for traditional categories of Chinese art, including classic ink brush paintings, imperial scholars' objects, and Ming and Qing dynasty ceramics.



Above: A visitor to the Hong Kong International Art Fair views a sculpture titled *Nude No. 2* by Chinese artist Mu Boyan, in May.

Below: A Sotheby's staff member walks past a sculpture by Xiang Jing titled *Your Body* at the auction house's preview in Hong Kong earlier this month.

PHOTOS: REUTERS



"We've allocated more to porcelain and ancient art, but we've allocated very little to Chinese contemporary," Hoffman said.

"I've been amazed to see how the recession has not been affecting the very best [traditional] Chinese art."

At its peak, the Chinese contemporary art market was seen by some to be highly manipulated and speculative.

Auction houses were accused of collusion with artists to inflate prices, critics and curators blamed for hyping up artists' reputations for hard cash, and artists churned out works straight for auction, production-

style with an army of assistants, rather than going through the traditional primary market of art galleries first.

"In a Chinese context, the phenomenon of auctions in the art market is a very new thing," said Ingrid Dudek, a contemporary Chinese art specialist with Christie's.

"A lot of the results were driven by private collectors, indicating not necessarily speculation, but of enormous demand ... maybe that did make the correction hurt a little bit more too because you didn't have a dealer network that was there."

Now though, galleries and dealers seem to be making a comeback, with artists seeing the worth of being patiently backed and promoted to ensure reputations and valuations are less vulnerable to market volatilities.

"Some other galleries think going to auction is a test of the market value [of an artist] so they can make faster money. But we try to do the opposite," said Federico Keller of Hong Kong's Connoisseur Contemporary gallery, which specializes in Asian and younger Chinese artists.

## EXHIBITIONS



Lunc Lin, *Seating for Good*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GALERIE GRAND SECLE

Taipei Art Award winners Lunc Lin (林昆穎) and Chen Chih-chien (陳志建) team up with a series of installations in **The Flowing Feast** (流水席). The show, which examines the motifs of time and the environment, features their most recent video, photography and light installation pieces.

■ Galerie Grand Secle (新苑藝術), 17, Alley 51, Ln 12, Bade Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市八德路三段12巷51弄17號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2578-5630  
■ Until Nov. 8

### The Story of Shanghai

presents a series of oil paintings, watercolors and ink paintings by 50 artists reflecting the momentous changes that have taken place in Shanghai since the 1930s. The works on display were borrowed from the Shanghai Art Museum.

■ Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號). Open daily from 9:30am to 5:30pm, closes at 8:30pm on Saturdays. Tel: (02) 2595-7656  
■ Until Nov. 8

### Yang Chih-fu (楊智富)

presents a new series of oil on canvas expressionist works in a solo exhibit at Impressions Gallery.

■ Impressions Art Gallery (印象畫廊), 40, Renai Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市仁愛路四段40號). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 10:30am to 7pm and Saturdays and Sundays from 11am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2705-9966  
■ Until Oct. 25

**Open Your Mind** is a group exhibition by five young German

artists, including Matthias Galvez, Amely Spotzl and Bernd Zollner, who work in paint, installation, photography and mixed media.

■ Aki Gallery (也禮), 141 Minzu W Rd, Taipei City (台北市民族西路141號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 12pm to 6:30pm. Tel: (02) 2599-1171  
■ Until Nov. 1

### Anima (魔幻)

is an animation festival that brings together 56 works by artists from Taiwan, France and the US. The animation production techniques range from traditional media such as hand-drawn puppets to the latest in digital 3D computer animation.

■ Digital Arts Center (台北數位藝術中心), 180 Fuhua Rd, Taipei City (台北市福華路180號). Open Fridays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 7736-0708. On the Net: www.dac.tw  
■ Until Oct. 25

### Functionality is the underlying concept of **Creative Living: Selected Exhibition of New Ceramic Works** (創意生活·陶瓷新品評鑑展).

The group exhibit of contemporary ceramics features 57 works organized according to five themes: household, ornamental, industrial, sanitary and architectural.

■ Yingge Ceramics Museum (鶯歌陶瓷博物館), 200 Wenhua Rd, Yingge Township, Taipei County (台北縣鶯歌鎮文化路200號). Open Tuesdays to Fridays from 9:30am to 5pm, closes at 6pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Tel: (02) 8677-2727  
■ Begins Saturday, until Dec. 13