

# Where Dragons Dwell: 'Power and Beauty in China's Last Dynasty'

*Liu Yang*

The topic of the upcoming exhibition of Chinese Qing dynasty (1644–1911) artworks at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia), 'Power and Beauty in China's Last Dynasty', is standard fare for an art museum: the exhibition showcases a rich array of artefacts created at the pinnacle of the Qing empire, with a focus on objects and costumes made for the court. The experience of the exhibition, however, is unique and unprecedented. Since summer 2017, the

Mia team has partnered with the renowned theatre director and visual artist Robert Wilson to create an immersive experience designed to viscerally evoke the realm of the Qing emperor and nobility.

The exhibition progresses through a series of galleries that lead visitors from the performative, external world of the court to the intimate, interior world of the emperor and aristocracy (Fig. 1). Each room examines a layer of imperial life, from



Fig. 1 Plan of the installation

bureaucratic hierarchy and order to the ruler's fearsome authority, from the splendour of the religious art he used to enhance his status to the sumptuous yet melancholy inner quarters. Through theatrical elements such as special lighting, sound and progression, and the surprising juxtaposition of works, the exhibition empowers visitors to feel as though they are part of this exquisite, intoxicating and sometimes otherworldly world.

While in conventional installations spectators would first encounter the didactics of the exhibition, in 'Power and Beauty' they will walk into a space of darkness. The first gallery (1) is a soundproof room, and the only thing visitors will be able to hear is the sound of falling chopsticks. On display will be a single, black object that is only faintly lit.

The creation of such an intermediary space between the outside world and the exhibition is significant. While in the West darkness can evoke evil and depression, in ancient Chinese philosophy, and in Daoism in particular, it is congruent with its primordial meaning of obscurity. Darkness is the contrary force to brightness; they are complementary and interdependent, and give rise to each other. They are physical manifestations of the duality symbolized by yin and yang. A dark room at the beginning of the exhibition provides the visitor with a moment to meditate and purify him/herself. The solitary object with a simple shape in this room helps create a sense of emptiness in the visitor—a state of mind characterized by simplicity and quietude. It is a psychological stance associated with a lack of worldly desire.

The visitor will then be astounded by the brightness and fullness of the next room (2), a massive display of over two hundred works in various media, symbolizing material culture and art in full bloom. As well as Qing dynasty works, other objects from throughout Chinese history will be on view here too, reflecting the minority Qing ruler's efforts to reconcile himself with Han Chinese culture. The Qing empire at its apogee, and the 18th century in particular, witnessed a level of artistic virtuosity and technical brilliance that remains unique within Chinese art history. Stable imperial power and unprecedented prosperity created a perfect environment for the decorative arts to flourish. Court patronage contributed to the demand for finely crafted objects, and thus industrial centres specializing in production were established both inside and outside the Forbidden City. The enormous

assembly of artefacts in this gallery demonstrates the sophisticated technology and unparalleled prosperity of Qing decorative arts, characterized by formal variety, unique design and exquisite finishing. A joyful song from Puccini's opera *Turandot*, which is set in China, serves as the soundscape, further strengthening the festival-like atmosphere.

One of the highlights in this gallery is a carved lacquer box (Fig. 2). Both the cover and the box itself are decorated with nine five-clawed dragons cavorting in clouds in pursuit of flaming pearls. The number nine was considered auspicious, and nine dragons were used throughout the Qing dynasty as an imperial emblem. This box is carved in the *tikai* technique, which involves carving to various depths to expose layers in different colours. The base is incised and gilded with the six-character reign mark of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95). During the transitional period between the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties, from around 1610 to 1738, little



Fig. 2 Nine-dragon box  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–95)  
Red, green and brown carved lacquer (*tikai*),  
height 21 cm, diameter 28.6 cm  
(2001.68.14a,b)



Fig. 3 Five-piece garniture  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Yongzheng period (1723–35)  
Bronze, height (from left) 60.4 cm, 67 cm, 60 cm  
(99.121.1.1–5)

to no official carved lacquerware was sponsored by the court. This changed in 1739 when an official lacquer workshop was established in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, and from then on a great many imperial pieces were produced. As demonstrated by this piece, the official carved lacquers of the Qianlong reign are often distinguished by a high level of craftsmanship and a fussiness of design.

A set of imperial bronze altar pieces provides a glimpse of the paraphernalia used in rituals (Fig. 3). Known as *wugong* ('five offerings'), the standard ritual bronzes cast for the altar comprise five vessels: a censer, two candlesticks and a pair of vases. Ritual bronze vessels like these, made for the imperial palaces and temples, were governed by state regulations. When in use, they would be formally arranged in a line across the altar table, with the censer forming the centrepiece and flanked by the candlesticks, and the vases at the ends. The archaic decoration here, including *taotie* animal

masks and blade-like patterns with stylized cicadas against a spiral ground, is a revival of a Song dynasty (960–1279) style, which was itself an interpretation of ancient Shang (c. 1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (c. 1046–256 BCE) ritual bronzes. Each vessel in this large and important set bears the six-character reign mark of the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723–35) on the base, and the additional characters *jing zhi* ('made with reverence') on the mouth rim.

The next room (3) features a display of eight imperial robes mounted on stands. These are placed on a low rectangular platform in the centre, which seems to float. The robes are presented parallel to each other in a strict sequence, a symbol of imperial order and hierarchy. In imperial China, including the Qing dynasty, there was an incontrovertible order from the heavens to the emperor, to the court, to the people. Recognizing and maintaining this structure was considered





Fig. 4 Emperor's ceremonial twelve-symbol semi-formal robe (*jifu*)  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–95), mid- to late 18th century  
Silk tapestry (*kesi*), 134 x 194 cm  
(42.8.11)

fundamental to the welfare and stability of the state and society. It began by discerning rank, as reflected in the colours, materials and designs of the clothing for those associated with the dragon throne.

The Qing court developed extraordinarily luxurious, technically accomplished and graded systems of dress. Distinctions amongst the nobility, including title, official rank and social status, were clearly defined by the prescribed garment and accessories. The two basic categories of official dress—semi-formal (*jifu*; Fig. 4) and formal (*chaofu*; Fig. 5)—provided some of the clearest distinctions.

Yellow, as one of the five colours derived from the Five Elements Theory and representing earth, surpassed all other colours when it became the official emblem of the emperor.

Such symbolism of colour, motif and design is vividly demonstrated by an emperor's ceremonial twelve-symbol *jifu* made in silk tapestry (*kesi*) during the mid- to late 18th century (see Fig. 4). Overall, the robe represents the celestial landscape: a diagram of the Chinese universe. The decoration depicts a scene of nine dragons (a ninth hides under the front fold of the skirt) flying amidst mountains, oceans and

swirling clouds. The clouds represent the heavens, while the dragons stand for imperial authority. Sun, moon, mountain and constellation emblems are positioned symmetrically around the neckband. The other eight imperial symbols—dragon, axe, cups, flame, bat, grain, pheasant and waterweed—

are arranged on the front and back. Only the top members of the royal family—emperor, empress, empress dowager and crown prince—could wear twelve-symbol robes. A bright yellow dragon robe like this one could be worn only by the emperor himself.



Fig. 5 Imperial portrait of a prince wearing a formal robe (*chaofu*)  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–95)  
Ink, colour and gold on silk,  
297.2 x 190.5 cm  
(83.30)



The formal court attire also includes items worn with the robe, such as a hat, collar, surcoat, belt and necklace. The 18th century portrait of a prince in this room perfectly illustrates full *chaofu* attire and its solemn aspect (see Fig. 5). Painted on an exceptionally large scale and in great detail using the finest mineral pigments and expensive silk, the prince is clad in the symbolic dragon robe and formally seated on a red lacquer throne in front of a nine-dragon screen. Virtually every element in this painting represents the prince's position within the imperial hierarchy of the court.

In addition to the rigid display of dragon robes in this room, the grey carpet and the sound of wood blocks striking underline the rigid and severe imperial bureaucratic system. Straw thatch mounted on the walls, on the other hand, serves as a foil to the delicacy and exquisiteness of the silk.

The next gallery (4) forms the core of the exhibition. Within a space of equal size to the previous rooms, only one object, a tiny bronze human figure from the 5th to 4th century BCE, is on view (Fig. 6). Cast in fine detail, the figure stands formally posed with arms held out and fingers curled to form a socket, which would have held the shank of an object. The skirt, sleeves, shoulders and lapels of the costume have been inlaid with gold line decoration and cast with border motifs.

To place a single human figure from China's Bronze Age alone in a room is meaningful, and is suggestive of the ancient Chinese philosophy of governance, in which primacy is given to the people. Starting from the Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE), Chinese rulers of successive dynasties believed that their absolute authority, their right to rule, was divinely granted—it was a cosmological right known as the Mandate of Heaven. However, Heaven granted or withdrew this Mandate according to whether the welfare of the people was being properly served. When an emperor was cruel and oppressive, it was said that he had lost the Mandate and would be toppled.

The idea of the Mandate of Heaven was reinforced by Confucianism—a philosophy, a humanistic religion and a method of governance developed from the teachings of The Great Sage, Confucius (c. 551–c. 479 BCE). Confucianism emerged as the official ideology during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), and dominated Chinese thought and permeated and shaped Chinese society and government ever after.



Fig. 6 Standing figure  
Warring States period  
(475–221 BCE),  
5th–4th century BCE  
Bronze with  
gold inlay,  
13.3 x 5.1 x 6.4 cm  
(2003.140.3)

It was also the dominant and officially sanctioned ideology during the Qing dynasty. Confucianism is often characterized as a human-centred philosophy, where the ideal ruler governs by providing a shining example of refined benevolence. It is the people's responsibility to replace a regime that does not serve the people. As Xunzi (c. 313–c. 238 BCE), the great exponent of Confucius's teachings in classical times, remarked: 'The ruler is the boat and the people are the water. It is the water that holds up the boat and the water that capsizes it.'

Alone in the centre of a room with emerald green walls and a soundscape of the pure and innocent voice of a child singing, the bronze figure from around the time of Confucius faces the formidable imperial authority represented in the adjacent room to the east (5). Encircled by walls covered with gold leaf, an imperial throne is placed on a raised platform with stairs on three sides and surrounded by four large pillars (also covered with gold foil) (Fig. 7).

The hierarchical system of administration in imperial China, established by the First Emperor (r. 221–210 BCE) in 221 BCE, was a pyramid-like structure with the emperor at the pinnacle. The emperor's throne in the Hall of Supreme Harmony (Taihe dian), the most majestic building in the Forbidden City, embodies this structure. Placed on

a raised platform, the throne is surrounded by four colossal pillars and adorned with dragons. Regarded as the centre of the world, it sits at the heart of the Forbidden City. The throne hall itself is raised some 8 metres above the surrounding square, conveying the sense that the emperor could survey his entire kingdom from his throne. The series of gates and passages that officials had to pass through before reaching the emperor was intended to inspire awe, as were the front-facing dragons with bared fangs and brandished claws that are ubiquitous in the hall.

In this 'gold' room, a giant, front-facing dragon's head is painted on the wall behind the throne, the

body and tail meandering around the other three walls. Dragons are also seen on the imperial throne, which dates from the reign of the Qianlong emperor. Here, they are painted in gold lacquer across the entire expanse of the seat. The cabriole legs, aprons and openwork back and side panels are all carved in relief with scrolls—a suggestion of the celestial landscape—and lacquered in green, red and gold.

The soundscape in this room also helps to cement the fearsome imperial power. It consists of ceremonial music performed on an assemblage of percussion instruments, interrupted by an intermittent scream.



Fig. 7 Imperial throne  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–95)  
Softwood with polychrome lacquer, 125.1 x 168.8 x 106.1 cm  
(93.32a-d)

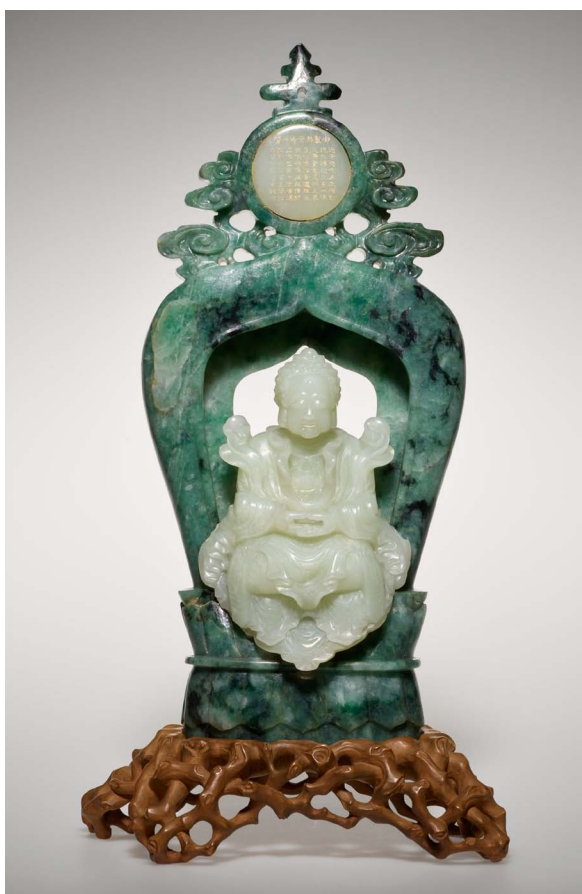


Fig. 8 Amitabha  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–95)  
Jade, height 33.3 cm  
(92.103.14)

Two adjacent rooms flanking the throne are dedicated to religious arts. On one side (6), five Buddhist statues are elevated on high pedestals, obliging viewers to look up to see them. The walls and floor of this room are plated with brushed stainless steel, and the soundscape is the chant of a Buddhist sutra. The whole arrangement evokes feelings of devotion and religious awe.

First imported into China from India during the 1st century CE, Buddhism was a major catalyst for the creation of monumental sculpture, paintings, temple architecture and printing. However, religion and politics were intertwined, and rulers often engaged in religious devotion and patronage of the religious arts in order to reinforce their reign. Imperial patronage not only of Mahayana but also of esoteric Buddhism and their corresponding arts during the Qing resulted

in the production of vast quantities of religious works in both or a synthesis of styles.

Among the court-commissioned Buddhist figures in Mia's collection is the enthroned Buddha Amitabha in Figure 8. The statue was more likely made for a domestic altar belonging to a member of the Qing royal family than for a temple, and displays the unusual use of jade in contrasting colours. The Buddha, carved in white jade, is shown in *dhyana mudra* and seated on a stylized lotus pedestal, while the surround, in green jade, is an open nimbus in the form of a Tibetan-style stupa. The inset medallion in white jade bears a gilded imperial inscription in praise of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light.

On the other side of the throne room (7), five Daoist paintings positioned in the same fashion as the Buddhist statues simultaneously evoke a sense of adoration towards religion and imperial authority. This room has the soundscape of Daoist text-reading, and the walls and the floor are decorated with mud.

Daoism flourished during the Qing dynasty alongside Buddhism. Its roots can be traced to the sage Laozi (c. 571–c. 471 BCE), who wrote the classic text *Daodejing (The Way and Its Power)*. During the 2nd century CE, Daoism emerged as an organized religion that focused on the quest for the magical elixir of immortality. It soon acquired a cultic orientation, with a supreme god known as Tianzun, a canon of scriptures, temples, priests and a ritual practice modelled on traditional Chinese popular cults. Thereafter it had a tremendous impact on people's daily lives, extending to representations in Chinese art and culture, and Daoist references have enriched artistic depictions of figures, animals, plants and fruit. The ideas of hermitage and individualism also influenced representations of mountains, which became sacred places for solitary practice. Like Buddhist art, Daoist art was used by rulers as a powerful means to cultivate legitimacy for their rule.

Another room (8) adjacent to the display of the single bronze figure will feature artefacts associated with noblewomen, conjuring the life of the inner quarters. The Qing period saw unparalleled production of gold and silver jewellery and the development of sophisticated technology for clothing manufacture, creating a remarkable material culture of garments and adornments for noblewomen. Among the most striking are the women's formal and informal robes associated with the court, the latter lavishly ornamented with auspicious imagery

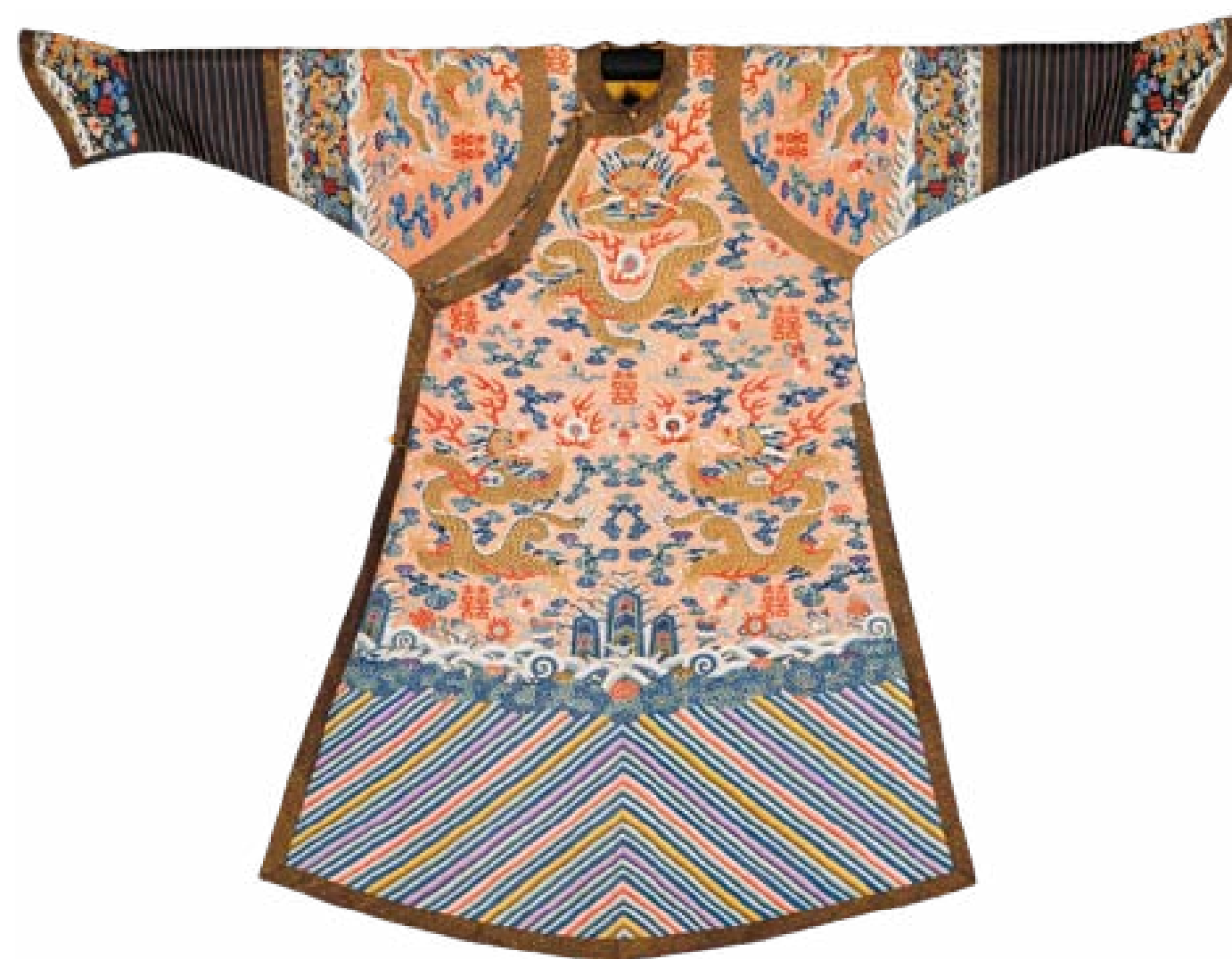


Fig. 9 Empress's formal robe (*chaofu*)  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Daoguang period (1821–50)  
Silk tapestry (*kesi*), 140 x 185 cm  
(42.8.72)

and naturalistic floral motifs, most often executed with exceptional embroidery.

A highlight of the exhibition is the Empress's robe in Figure 9. The cut of its inset sleeve panels and distinct border arrangement are characteristic of an empress's formal court robe (*chaofu*). On the body and upper sleeves is a celestial landscape, which includes nine dragons in gold, multicoloured clouds, mountains, waves and the *lishui*, or standing

water, bordering the hem. Scattered in this celestial landscape are the 'eight treasures'—the pearl, double lozenge, stone chime, pair of rhinoceros horns, double coins, ingot, coral and *ruyi* sceptre. The inclusion of the double-happiness characters on the ground, neckband and cuffs indicates that the robe was intended for use in a wedding ceremony.

Forming a symmetrical arrangement with the room containing the eight imperial robes, a



rectangular platform in the centre of this room bears this and other objects from the female quarters. Rather than in rigid order, however, here the objects are placed irregularly. Works in different media and shapes and with different functions are juxtaposed. While the aluminium-foil wallpaper suggests a voluptuous and extravagant lifestyle, the soundscape, a melody with tones of bitterness and sadness performed on an *erhu* (a two-stringed instrument) counterpointed by a woman giggling intermittently, conveys the life and destiny of Chinese women in the imperial period.

In classical Chinese literature, one often reads that flowers and women share the same attributes of refinement, delicacy and fragrance. Poets frequently lead the reader to flit between these two kinds of 'flowers'. Yet in reality, women in ancient Chinese

society did not enjoy the status, either social or political, accorded to men. They were admired as blossoms, but only permitted to flower in the shade.

In the room (9) adjacent to this one, a display of two- and three-dimensional depictions of mountainscapes represents the ruler's and scholar-officials' fascination with nature. Steeped in centuries of religion, history, literature and folklore, China's mountains are seen as divine realms and endowed with myriad sacred associations. The idea of retreating from society to a life of seclusion in the mountains appealed greatly to scholar-officials, and even to rulers. Several imperially commissioned 'jade mountains' in the show demonstrate the new outlets they found for expressing their love of mountains, as well as their inclination to associate



Fig. 10 Boulder illustrating the gathering of scholar-officials at the Orchid Pavilion  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–95), 1790  
Jade, 57.2 x 97.5 cm, weight 640 lb  
(92.103.13)



Fig. 11 The five hundred arhats (detail)  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), 18th century  
Handscroll, silk tapestry (*kesi*), 42.5 x 899 cm  
(42.8.343)

with the tranquillity of otherworldliness. They nurtured a belief that someone could be engaged in a political career while preserving a sense of seclusion internally, remaining spiritually remote and uncontaminated by public life.

The display in this room centres on a large, pale green jade mountain commissioned by the Qianlong emperor (Fig. 10). The boulder depicts a literary gathering of scholar-officials at Lanting, the Orchid Pavilion, described in the 'Lanting jixu' ('Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion') by Wang Xizhi (303–61), considered the foremost calligrapher in all East Asia. Copied by Qianlong, the text itself is carved on the front. Wang, together with 41 other renowned scholar-officials, gathered at the Orchid Pavilion and engaged in a drinking contest: cups of wine were floated down a small, winding creek as the men sat along its banks. Whenever a cup stopped, the man closest to it was required to drink the wine and write a poem. In the end, 26 of the participants composed 37 poems between them. Qianlong's own poem is carved on the reverse.

The jade mountain is surrounded by a silk-tapestry landscape handscroll presented in a long,

low showcase (Fig. 11). This extremely fine weaving illustrates the five hundred Buddhist arhats engaged in various activities in a fantastic mountain-landscape setting. The handscroll can be divided into several pictorial segments, each reflecting a subject such as the Buddha Descending from the Western Paradise and the Proclaiming of the Dharma. This remarkable work originally belonged to the Qianlong emperor, and three of his nine imperial seals are displayed at the beginning of the scroll.

The handscroll forms a meaningful dialogue with a landscape by the cutting-edge contemporary artist Yang Yongliang (b. 1980), which is mounted over all four walls. This digitally manipulated landscape, which superimposes scenes of modern urban life on images of mountain peaks and waterfalls, encapsulates the timeless dichotomy of mundane society and otherworldliness.

Also included in this room are several other exquisitely made objects in jade and bronze, as well as musical instruments and cultural implements (such as brushes and an inkwell), representing the ruler's noble pursuits as art lover, connoisseur and poet. One of the objects is a white jade pleasure boat,





Fig. 12 Pleasure boat  
Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–95)  
Jade, length 27.9 cm  
(94.103.10a-f)

symbolizing the leisure activity of a nobleman and striking in its realism (Fig. 12). The great pleasure gardens of the Qing dynasty, such as the Summer Palace in Beijing, included extensive watercourses for the boating parties of the aristocracy. This jade boat is reminiscent of the famous marble and wood boat commissioned by the Qianlong emperor in 1755, once docked at Kunming Lake in the Summer Palace. With its theme of a gathering of nobles, flawless white stone and superb craftsmanship, the jade boat is the epitome of 18th century decorative taste. A four-character inscription carved horizontally on the front, 'Qianlong yuwan' ('For the amusement of the Qianlong emperor'), is further evidence that the boat was made in the 18th century imperial workshop.

Dark is forever balanced against light. In ancient China, the yin and yang forces considered to make up all aspects of life were traditionally depicted as the light and dark halves of a circle. Thus, the 'light' of the last room (10) of the exhibition is a complement to the visitor's experience at the beginning of his/her journey. In the yin/yang theory, light is associated with the yang force, symbolized by phenomena such as heaven, masculine power, the sun, the dragon and the ocean. The soundscape of ocean waves crashing against rocks thus further reinforces the visitor's experience, and is also reminiscent of the border

design of the imperial robes. The light-box-like walls, white floor and solitary white object in this room allow visitors to linger a while longer in the power and splendour of China's last dynasty.

As demonstrated by this description of the installation, 'Power and Beauty' is the most imaginative exhibition design to date at Mia thanks to the collaboration of Robert Wilson and the Mia team. The staging and storytelling involved speak to the museum's belief in art's ability to inspire wonder and fuel curiosity. Wilson's unique approach to exhibition design and his willingness to push the boundaries make this exhibition extraordinary. His style, involving dramatic contrasts—brightness and darkness, fullness and emptiness—brings a new perspective to these historical artworks.

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*All works illustrated in this article are in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art.*

*'Power and Beauty in China's Last Dynasty: Concept and Design by Robert Wilson', curated by Liu Yang, will be on view at the Minneapolis Institute of Art from 4 February to 27 May 2018.*