

The Making of ‘Power and Beauty in China’s Last Dynasty’: A New Approach

Matthew Welch

The Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) is home to one of America’s greatest collections of Chinese Qing dynasty (1644–1911) textiles. The core of the collection—some 342 pieces—was acquired by the museum in 1942 from the San Francisco collector and attorney William Edward Colby (1875–1964). Colby had presciently capitalized on the availability of imperial costumes and furnishings in the antique shops of Chinatown, then flush with these ‘outmoded’ objects, which had come onto the market after the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. The museum has since added to its Qing textile holdings, and they now include more than 600 works.

In 1991, the museum’s then curator of Chinese art, Robert Jacobsen, staged an exhibition conceived to reveal the depth of its collection. Room after room of the museum’s capacious exhibition hall was filled to capacity with Chinese robes, carefully arranged by type: formal court dress (*chaofu*), semi-formal robes (*jifu*), surcoats (*bufu*) with Mandarin squares (*buzi*) and informal court robes (*changfu*), as well as examples of non-court dress, ecclesiastical robes and theatrical costumes. The sheer quantity and opulence of the material, mounted on mannequins and ‘T’ stands and displayed in layers on stair-stepped platforms, made ‘Imperial Silks from the Qing Dynasty’ an eye-popping experience.

Twenty-seven years later, the museum’s present curator of Chinese art, Liu Yang, rightly feels that it is time to highlight this aspect of the collection again, and to draw attention to Mia’s rich holdings of Qing period art in general. However, Liu wanted to take

a radically different approach. To do so, he enlisted the help of the renowned visual artist and theatre director Robert Wilson. The exhibition ‘Power and Beauty in China’s Last Dynasty’ is the result of this partnership, and will be shown at the Minneapolis Institute of Art from 4 February to 27 May 2018.



Liu Yang
(Photograph: Minneapolis Institute of Art)

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Jangan Temple, detail of *Diamond Mountains*
[*General View of Inner Geumgang*]

By Sin Hakgwon (1785–1866), mid-19th century
Six sheets mounted as a single panel,
ink and light colour on paper, 47 x 234 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Purchase, Friends of Asian Art Gifts and
Gift of Dr Mortimer D. Sackler, Theresa
Sackler and Family, 2017 (2017.185)
(Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art)
(see p. 86)

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Robert Wilson
(Image © Yiorgos Kaplanidis)

Wilson shot to fame in 1976 with his theatrical production of the opera *Einstein on the Beach*, a collaboration with composer Philip Glass, and has maintained a reputation as the world's foremost avant-garde theatre artist and producer ever since. Extremely prolific, he has worked on productions the world over and has collaborated with a host of creative luminaries, including Allen Ginsberg, Tom Waits, Lou Reed, William S. Burroughs and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Wilson has also partnered with several museums to stage exhibitions, notably 'Giorgio Armani' (Mori Art Museum and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), 'Isamu Noguchi: Sculptural Design' (Vitra Design Museum) and 'Egypt's Sunken Treasures' (Venaria Reale, Turin). In addition, he is a seasoned art collector in his own right, having created an 'archive' of objects from Oceania, Africa, Latin America and China that serve as a source of inspiration. He purchased his first Chinese piece, a Neolithic pot from the Yangshao culture (c. 5000–3000 BCE), in the early 1990s. It was, in fact, because of his activity as a collector of Chinese art that he came on to Liu Yang's radar as a potential collaborator for the exhibition at Mia.

Wilson's formal approach and distinctive style push the boundaries of exhibition design. Unfettered by traditional curatorial deference to chronological narrative or historical accuracy in creating exhibition 'settings', Wilson conceives of exhibitions in terms of their psychological impact on the visitor—as a series of unexpected experiential shifts, each markedly

different from what precedes. Darkness gives way to brightness, for example, or an installation dizzying in its abundance of objects is followed by one that is strikingly spare. Saturated colour and unexpected materials, too, play roles in casting museum objects in new contexts. For seasoned museum visitors, Wilson's approach can be disconcerting as they search in vain for the carefully crafted curatorial narratives that they typically encounter in museums. However, for all its seeming incongruity, Wilson's schema is not without an underlying strategy—albeit one that subverts rationality and appeals directly to the subconscious. Wilson has said that placing a baroque candlestick on a baroque desk does nothing to help a viewer understand the idiom. However, the jarring ambiguity of placing a telephone on a baroque desk has the effect of bringing both objects into sharper focus so that they might be more readily understood and appreciated, if on an entirely intuitive level.

For his part, Liu Yang is no novice to exhibition curation. After completing his PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in 1997, he served as curator of Chinese art



Robert Wilson studying Mia's collection of Chinese textiles



The Watermill Center, Watermill, Long Island
(Image © Lovis Ostenrik)

at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. There, he mounted an impressive number of major exhibitions, including shows on Chinese paintings and calligraphy, Buddhist sculpture, jades, bronzes, modern prints and Daoist art. Since joining Mia in 2011, he has curated exhibitions on the contemporary ink painter Liu Dan (b. 1953), ancient ritual bronzes, and treasures associated with China's first emperor, Qin Shihuang (r. 220–210 BCE). Liu's extensive curatorial experience led him to embrace the prospect of a completely different approach for a show about Qing courtly arts, and he was excited to work with Robert Wilson to evolve a unique installation in the spirit of Mia's current approach to exhibitions. 'It is refreshing to try a different strategy,' Liu notes. 'There is so much we can learn from the theatre world about installation techniques that might make our exhibitions more memorable and effective.'

In early August this year, a team from Mia journeyed to the Hamptons at the bucolic eastern end of Long Island, where Wilson hosts workshops for upcoming ventures each summer. Exhibition designer Michael Laphorn, head of exhibitions Jennifer Komar Olivarez and I made the two-hour drive with Liu from New York City to the picturesque hamlet of Watermill. In 1989, Wilson had purchased a former Western Union research facility there that included

a dilapidated complex of buildings. The idea was to create a place where young artists could develop their work and where he, too, could incubate his own projects. The first programme was held there in 1992, when The Watermill Center was officially launched by Wilson under the operation of The Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation. The reimagined complex was not fully refurbished, however, until 2006, and by then included 8.5 acres of gardens and forests that not only provide an inspirational setting but function as flexible spaces for installations or performances.

To workshop his projects each August, Wilson's team erects a series of canopies over a massive yard of raked white gravel. Beneath the canopies, temporary white walls loosely demarcate individual classroom spaces and two stages are defined by sheet vinyl for dance and performances. The highly aestheticized atmosphere of The Watermill Center's interior space, where art objects from Robert Wilson's collection are carefully placed on sight lines, is carried forward into the temporary classroom complex. Antique furniture, architectural elements and other objets d'art are fastidiously installed there under Wilson's direction. Individual projects are assigned a 'classroom', where resource materials can be taped to walls or laid out on tables. During our time at Watermill to plan 'Power and Beauty', Wilson was also working on a production of *Il Trovatore* to be

staged at the Teatro Farnese in Parma and the Teatro Comunale in Bologna, and on the choreography for *The Two Oars*, an opera by Paola Prestini based on Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, for the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb. Midway through our six-day 'process', representatives from the Max Ernst Museum in Brühl, Germany arrived to workshop an exhibition they are planning there.

All participants in the workshops are free to follow Wilson from project to project, listening in on his ideas for staging, sound, lighting and choreography. Herein lies some of the magic of Watermill. Participants form a kind of artistic commune, each deeply immersed in their own projects and discussions with Robert Wilson but also benefiting from the free flow of ideas, creativity and problem-solving that inherently arise from this unique format. Meals are served communally, further fostering a degree of intimacy and trust among participants as their projects evolve. At the same time, everyone willingly offers their assistance as needed to help others' projects along. To facilitate Wilson's visualization of the scale of Mia's present special exhibition galleries, for example, a group of artists and dancers helped the Mia team lay out the

entire floor plan, to scale, using scrap 2x4s on the gravel yard. They also served as human stand-ins for Buddhist sculptures or mounted costumes in order to help Wilson estimate the number of objects each room could accommodate.

Over the course of the six days, the exhibition rapidly took shape through intermittent visits by Wilson to Mia's temporary classroom and the ensuing conversations with Liu and the Mia team. From the curatorial side, there was a desire to maintain an educational thrust so that visitors might understand, through the presentation of the museum's objects, something of Qing imperial protocol, standards of dress, and religious ritual and ceremony, and of the cultured life of the emperor and his court. At the same time, Robert Wilson expressed how a well-choreographed installation could have a powerful impact on visitors, advocating for an alternative to exhibitions that are dense with objects and lengthy didactic labels but short on drama and atmosphere.

As might be imagined, stagecraft is of paramount importance in an experiential exhibition. In this regard, Wilson is aided by a team of professionals. Based in New York City, Stephanie Engeln serves as his associate designer, translating his ideas and



Open-air 'classroom' at The Watermill Center

rough sketches into CAD drawings and sourcing specialized materials. She has worked with Wilson since 1989 on numerous exhibitions and theatrical productions. A. J. Weissbard, who resides in Rome, is a lighting designer whose association with Robert Wilson dates from 1994. They have worked together on more than 100 unique projects in areas of theatre, opera, installations and special events. A relative newcomer to this creative cadre is Rodrigo Gava, a young sound designer, composer and multimedia artist from Brazil, who has worked on four theatrical productions for Wilson since 2013. Since the workshop at Watermill, Liu Yang and other Mia staff have been in regular communication with Wilson's team in the months leading up to the installation of the exhibition.

This approach to exhibition design and presentation is representative of Mia's appetite for innovation and experimentation. In 2016, the



Workshopping 'Power and Beauty' at The Watermill Center
From left: Jennifer Koh (violinist), Michael Laphorn, A. J. Weissbard, Liu Yang, Stephanie Engeln and Robert Wilson

museum partnered with The Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Art Gallery of Ontario to present 'Guillermo del Toro: At Home with Monsters', an exhibition that featured artworks (both high and low) from the film director's collection together with film clips, life-sized models of his creatures, and comic books—a major source of his inspiration. The idea was that the show be not so much about singular masterpieces as about the sources of del Toro's creativity. More recently, the museum invited members of The Propeller Group, an artists' collective based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, to curate a display of objects from the museum's permanent collection to be exhibited in conjunction with their video *The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music*. The video is about the fantastical aspects of funerary traditions and rituals in South Vietnam, and for their installation, artists Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Phunam Thuc Ha and Matt Lucero created a dense arrangement of figurative sculptures from across Asia evoking funerary processions.

'Power and Beauty' will push the boundaries of museum practice even further. Designed to be experiential, the exhibition will be mounted entirely without didactic panels and labels—with the exception of an introductory overview. Each room will suggest an aspect of life within the high walls of the Forbidden City, the former imperial palace in Beijing, from the splendour and heraldry of civil and military gatherings to the intoxicating atmosphere of the sovereign's private quarters, where he enjoyed the company of lavishly robed wives and concubines. The exhibition will vividly convey the dual aspects of the emperor's persona—at once the terrifying and all-powerful master of the realm and a curious and learned scholar who longed to spend his days reading ancient poetry and leading an eremitic life. Rooms will also be devoted to Buddhism and Daoism, the two religious doctrines followed by the Qing court, which reflected their belief in the mystical teachings of Tibetan lamas as well as the quiet sensitivity to nature's rhythms espoused by Daoist priests. Featuring carefully selected objects of profound power and beauty, each room will dazzle—and occasionally disorient—as visitors wander through a fantastic and alien realm, evocative not only of the Qing court, but of the fertile imagination of Robert Wilson.

Matthew Welch is deputy director and chief curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.