



Bringing the Emperor's Treasures to Chicago: *Splendors of China's Forbidden City*

by Robin Groesbeck

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On a brisk morning in January 2004, a team of Field Museum exhibit professionals, clad in bulky layers of polar fleece, examined exquisite imperial artifacts in the dim light of the *Wenbua Dian*, or Hall of Literary Glory, in Beijing, China. Aspiring bureaucrats once sweated over civil service exams here some 250 years ago, but the times and inhabitants have changed dramatically.

Formerly the Forbidden City—exclusive home to China's supreme rulers—this 178-acre walled complex, housing more than one million objects, is now the Palace Museum. And today, the Beijing Eight, as we have anointed ourselves, has begun examining and packing the objects that will travel to Chicago for the exhibit *Splendors of China's Forbidden City: The Glorious Reign of Emperor Qianlong*. Organized by The Field Museum, in collaboration with The Palace Museum, Beijing, it's the largest exhibit ever to leave the Forbidden City.

Electrical heating and lights are not allowed in many of the Palace Museum's halls in order to protect the ornate, ancient wooden buildings from the ever-present threat of fire. In our honor, Ding Meng, the Palace Museum's project manager for this phase of the exhibit, had a few bulbs temporarily installed, and we took a moment to applaud him for this enhancement before diving into work.

For several days, we worked alongside colleagues from the Palace Museum, the Chinese Bureau of Cultural Relics, and our packing and shipping agent, Huaxie International Fine Art Freight Services. Altogether, nearly 30 people minutely examined over 400 stunning, imperial-quality artifacts, including teapots, vases, writing instruments, armor, garments and weaponry. We unrolled vividly preserved scrolls, 39 to 75 feet long, and examined elaborate Tibetan Buddhist stupas that come apart into 40 pieces. And we photographed, videotaped, annotated and assembled detailed condition reports that would accompany each piece on its roundtrip journey from the Palace Museum to The Field Museum, to The Dallas Museum of Art, and finally back home to Beijing.

Plans for the exhibit had been hatched in 2000 when co-curators Chuimei Ho and Bennet Bronson, and Vice President of Exhibitions and Education Sophia Siskel, traveled to China to tour pearl farms and museums to request loans for an earlier exhibit about pearls. During long hours in airplanes and vans, they discussed the idea of approaching the Palace Museum about an exhibit based solely on objects from its rich collections. Ho was particularly interested in focusing on the Qing dynasty emperor known as Qianlong. A connoisseur who collected over one million objects during his lifetime, his sixty-year reign was a dynamic period of prosperity and expansion in China. Officials at the Palace Museum responded favorably to the idea, and over the next year and a half Siskel successfully led the Field's contract negotiation efforts. The agreement was signed in 2002.

Ho and Bronson dove into the project and selected over five hundred objects, many of which had never been on display, even at the Forbidden City. Palace Museum curators expressed surprise, for example, when asked to loan the emperor's funerary tablet, which was found in a storage area above the southern gate, hidden from public view. Ho and Bronson proved to be excellent negotiators, and



the object list eventually featured an unheard-of 22 artifacts ranked “class one,” a designation applied by the Chinese to denote objects of the highest cultural value. Never before had permission been granted for so many “class one” treasures to leave the walls of the Palace Museum for a single exhibit.

After the initial object selection, we engaged in a painful winnowing process. During an object inspection visit in March 2003 (which unfortunately coincided with the first news reports about the SARS outbreak) our team of conservator Betsy Allaire, registrar Angie Morrow, chief mount maker Pam Gaible, project manager Francesca Madden and myself carefully measured, took photographs, compiled information for the indemnity application, and assessed the condition of about 90% of the objects. Back at the Field, we conferred with the curators, chief conservator Ruth Norton, legal counsel Daniel Eck, developer Matt Matcuk, and Siskel regarding the condition of specific



Conservator Betsy Allaire and Chinese colleagues inspect a fine carved brush holder. Photo: Robin Groesbeck

objects, packing and mounting issues, insurance, indemnity requirements, shipping methods and expenses, and how each object fit into the storyline. This led to honing the object list down to about 420 pieces.

Our next step was a meeting with our fine art shipper to discuss the best approach to packing and crating. We decided to have Huaxie build a new set of crates and make custom Ethafoam cavities for each piece. This would mean shipping specialized materials to China. We also brainstormed methods for moving the particularly difficult objects, including a 1.5 ton jade boulder and its solid bronze base. The boulder, delicately carved on all sides, would be carefully hoisted using straps, and placed in an open-sided wooden armature.

In December 2004, Morrow and Madden flew back to Beijing and met with the Palace Museum project team and our shipping agent to organize the logistics for packing and condition reporting. In order to save time, each object would be packed in its inner pack and crate, and staged next to condition reporting tables in the *Wenbua Dian*. Our team, assisted by staff from the Palace Museum, the Bureau of Cultural Relics and Huaxie would unpack, photograph (or in the case of long scrolls and cylindrical stupas, video tape), condition-report and repack each piece. We also decided to bring a freelance videographer, John Hillman, to wrangle several cases of photographic equipment, assist with backing up the images each night, and serve as an additional photographer.

These preparations paid off. Madden explained, “As soon as we arrived (for condition reporting in January) I realized my fears had been groundless. The Palace Museum staff and the Hall of Literary Glory were totally organized and ready for us to begin.” Workstations had been set up, and new yellow packing crates were stored nearby.

“The Palace Museum and Huaxie staff packed the artifacts with great skill and care,” Madden continued. In fact, the Palace Museum had spent weeks preparing traditional custom-fit, silk-lined inner boxes, padded with cotton, for many of the pieces.

We formed three teams that each included an interpreter, curators, conservators and note-and-picture takers. We pored over each object, noting every loose thread, tiny dent or missing inlay, before trained art handlers carefully wrapped and packed it. The process moved slowly at first as each of the three teams landed on a common set of terms, developed trust, and came to agreement on the level



We assessed every object in the dim light of the ancient halls before packing them in custom made yellow crates. Photo: John Hillman



of documentation. In general our reports were more detailed than the Chinese reports, and we recorded many more images (about 4,000 photographs and 12 mini DV tapes) than was customary. Our Chinese colleagues were very patient as we documented each piece—a process that was repeated over 400 times during 11 straight days of work.

Our workspace was stunning. Built in the 1400s, the Hall of Literary Glory features an intricately painted coffered ceiling and a beautifully patterned tile floor. In the January chill we could see our breath, so we stood on pieces of foam. We took warming tea breaks in a simple room nearby that sported radiators and electrical outlets for our many battery chargers.

To help sustain this intense activity, the Palace Museum generously served us elaborate Chinese lunches in their executive dining room each day. Morrow, who subsists largely on Nutter Butters and Peeps Marshmallow Treats in the States, broadened her culinary horizons as she sampled “fish with many paws” (baby octopus), steamed lotus root and many varieties of mushrooms. “The hot lunches really got us through the day,” she said. We were treated to as many as 20 dishes each noon, very few of which were repeated during the trip. And we learned to eat sparingly because the delicious dishes just kept coming.

Our responsibilities on this trip didn't end with condition reporting. As figurehead of The Field Museum's delegation, Vice President and General Counsel Felisia Wesson attended meetings and banquets, gave toasts, presented gifts and advised the team on legal and insurance issues. But these duties played second fiddle to Wesson's main job—helping the team photograph and document the objects, day after day.



Felisia Wesson and Jill Plitnikas assess the condition of the emperor's desk.
Photo: Robin Groesbeck



Ruth Norton, chief conservator, and Zhang Guangwen, examine the emperor's saddle. Photo: Robin Groesbeck

Wesson reflected, “The trip gave me the chance to get out from behind my desk and participate in fieldwork. As a result, I feel more connected to the Museum and have a real appreciation for what goes into these exhibitions.”

Field Museum conservators Norton, Allaire and Jill Plitnikas relished the chance to closely examine an extremely wide variety of materials, including porcelain, jade, gold, silver, ivory, bronze, wood, lacquer, kingfisher feathers, cloisonné, water-based and oil paintings, calligraphy, pearls and textiles.

“I loved examining the pieces! My Chinese colleagues, Mr. Zhao and Mr. Tu, talked about the nature and history of the objects as we worked,” said Allaire. “I really appreciated learning so much more about Chinese art. At first it was slow going, but as we began to understand the condition issues that were important to each of us, the process went more smoothly. For example, my Chinese colleagues noted recent changes such as dents or scratches, while I was looking for active corrosion in metal, lifting paint in lacquer, brittle areas—weaknesses that could lead to issues down the road.”

Packing and transporting the objects required considerable teamwork and ingenious problem-solving. Moving the jade boulder from its storage location to the packing building had been a challenge. The strap system and armature worked well, but the roadway had to be repaired after the heavy piece was relocated.

After packing was completed, the crates were sealed, loaded onto trucks and taken under police escort, with sirens blaring, to the Beijing airport. Ensuring that airport personnel treated the crates gently provided the trip's most difficult moments for Morrow.



“The hardest part was the last few days when I had bronchitis and had to stand out on the open tarmac in wintry weather, or sit in a truck for hours on end, watching our crates being grouped onto pallets for air transport. Unfortunately I don’t speak Chinese, so at times it was hard to communicate with the airport crew,” she said. Morrow was accompanied by an interpreter, but it was still challenging to convey the need for gentle handling to the ground personnel—a situation that is not unusual in many parts of the world.

Later, members of the Beijing Eight accompanied each bright yellow shipment home to Chicago. Morrow, who has flown as a courier for more than 30 exhibits, took the toughest leg, which included 30 hours aboard an air freighter with stops in Anchorage and New York. She had to guarantee that every crate was loaded back onto the aircraft after each landing. In New York, airport personnel wanted to give Field Museum cargo space to another client, and Morrow refused to let the plane take off until the Field’s shipment was secured.

After each airplane arrived in Chicago, the crates were delivered to the Museum’s loading dock and transferred into the exhibit hall. Production supervisor Nel Fetherling, whose team built and installed the exhibit, remarked, “It was a relief to finally get the crates, to have our coworkers back safe and sound and to realize the quantity of artifacts was actually *finite*.”

The physical challenges and pressure we had faced faded into the background as the Beijing Eight surveyed a sea of crates, now securely ensconced in The Field Museum.

Morrow concluded, “We enjoyed a feeling of great accomplishment after doing something that seemed so daunting—seeing it all come together. And how many people get the opportunity to work in an amazing place like the Palace Museum?”



The condition reporting and packing team in the courtyard of the Hall of Literary Glory. Photo: John Hillman



Splendors of China’s Forbidden City: The Glorious Reign of Emperor Qianlong was on display May through September at The Field Museum, and will run from November 21, 2004 to May 29, 2005 at The Dallas Museum of Art. A richly illustrated companion book of the same name, written and edited by Chuimei Ho and Bennet Bronson, has been published by Merrell.

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