

Excellent Design, Exquisite Exhibits

JSMA Chinese and Japanese galleries reopen.

The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the UO is starting its fall season with a bang — and a decidedly Asian focus.

Oct. 8 will be a quadruple opening event. Together with two new temporary exhibitions (“Inside the Floating World” and “Ukiyo-e Outside In”), the museum is re-opening its Chinese and Japanese galleries with exquisitely designed inaugural installations.

Soreng Gallery for Chinese Art

Originally, the museum was built to house the Murray Warner Collection of Oriental Art. Since it first opened in 1932, the “throne room” has been devoted to works from late Imperial China (Qing Dynasty, 1644-1911), one of the JSMA greatest collection strengths. The new installation remains faithful to the original focus and intent, but its excellent design enhances our experience and understanding of the artifacts.

The exhibit space itself is greatly improved. Removing one of the two thrones that stood at opposite ends and moving the other to the west wall changed the room orientation and balanced its dimensions. Extensive use of deep red on the coved ceiling perceptually lowers the ceiling, making the room warmer and more intimate without compromising spaciousness. The woodwork contributes its own reddish accents. The ceiling’s red and gold scheme also functions thematically. The auspicious color red is widely used in China for decoration, and only the emperor wore yellow, the royal symbol of the Qings.

Special attention to the vertical dimension of the layout links floor and ceiling. The throne is backed by high silk panels. Along the center of the room, tall glass cases display garments, suspended from the ceiling by steel cables.

Much credit goes to Kurt Neugebauer, JSMA exhibition designer, who worked in close partnership with Charles Lachman, JSMA curator of Asian art and UO art history professor. “Originally, all the objects were encased in glass and pushed back against the wall,” Lachman said. “Kurt wanted to eliminate the use of traditional cases as much as possible and decided to use platforms instead. These set the objects back a little from the viewers, but without creating a barrier. On the other hand, his use of glass to show off garments allows you to get closer and see them from both sides.”

To house the rich array of decorative objects in jade, glass, bronze, and ceramic, Neugebauer came up with the idea and basic design of the treasure wall, which Creswell furniture-maker Erik Shumate created out of golden chestnut (or chinquapin, a native ever-



53 Stations of the Tokaido: Okabe Hiroshige (1797 - 1858)
Edo period (1615 - 1868), 19th century, Woodblock print

green) that grew on his property. A state-of-the-art, user-friendly touch-screen console by Eugene media company InterVision provides information about the treasure wall artifacts. (It is worth noting that all outsourced works were undertaken by local firms, including Presentation Design Group, Gibson Steel and Multicraft Plastics among others.)

Providing a unifying rhythm to the whole gallery, the various installations, including the treasure wall itself, follow one of the traditional Chinese landscape patterns, based on a guest-host relationship metaphor, with a host peak flanked by two lower guest mountains.

“Our policy,” Lachman said, “is to evoke a sense of how these objects would have been experienced without duplicating a specific setting.” The arrangement of ritual bronze funerary garniture (a tripod incense burner flanked by candle holders and vases atop an altar table), is thus meant to evoke how such individual pieces would traditionally relate to each other in China.

Lachman’s thematic approach focuses on the visual projection of status and authority in imperial China. The

throne installation and the emperor’s symbolic representation in the dragon figure are emblems of his absolute

power, while the architecture of the Forbidden City manifests imperial authority in its cosmogonic layout. Ritual objects and iconography, including an unusually large model pagoda, remind us of the Son of Heaven’s role as spiritual authority in all three religions: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

Art fulfilled extensive ceremonial and decorative requirements in the imperial community. The Qing emperors were keen art collectors, and the treasure wall bears testimony to their patronage. “The emperor had an active role in the arts and created taste,” Lachman said. “He had a say in the ceramics workshops at court, indicating what kind of shape or motif was to be created. This is a testimony of his taste and subtle understanding of the beautiful objects he collected.”

Finally, richly decorated court robes, uniforms, accessories and badges display the complex semiotics of the strict imperial social hierarchy. The JSMA collection of Chinese costumes is considered one of the most significant in North America.

The Preble/Murphy Wing for Japanese Art

While the Chinese room is about imperial splendor, the Japanese gallery focuses on Art and Everyday Life in Japan. Here, the aesthetic is spare, the color scheme cool and restful. The coved ceiling is now indigo blue, echoing the blue of woodblock prints and fabric dye. Walls are celadon, evoking the green of tea and tea-ware. Honey-colored woodwork recalls the unvarnished wood of Japanese interiors.

The minimalist blue and gold geometry of one casing houses a black, blue and gold suit of armor shining like the exoskeleton of an oversized coleoptera (beetle). Nearby, a bare sword-blade arcs over a chest originally designed for a scholar’s implements. Simplicity of form balances intricacy of construction and lacquered detail — so many drawers in so many sizes, and surely a few hidden ones?

On the far wall, a busy street scene printed from one of Mrs. Warner’s lantern slides provides a lacquered and gilded palanquin with a pertinent backdrop but unfortunate camouflage. The palanquin’s elegant shape and elaborate motifs deserve a plain background.

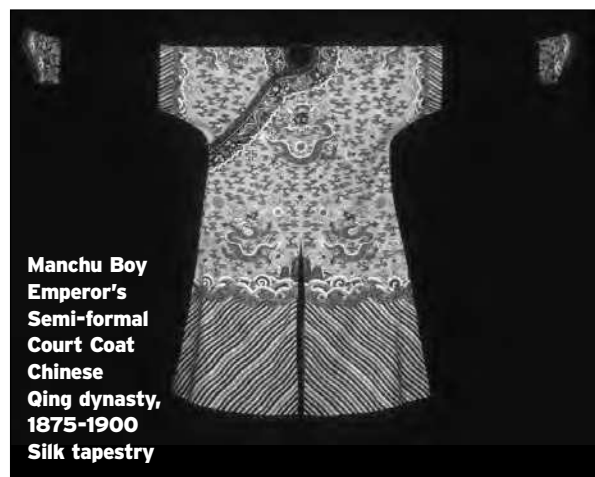
As does the transom openwork carving above the entry to the netsuke alcove. In terms of theme, motifs (longevity, tea ceremony) and color, the three indigo futon covers on the wall do fit but breach the rule of restraint. Their lines interfere with the partitions’ planes. Clutter threatens.

Not so in the well-proportioned display of coats, jackets, and humble tea ceremony objects. If symmetry is central to Chinese artifacts, asymmetry is crucial to Japanese aesthetics, testifying to a radically different relationship between human and object. The Chinese vase of carved jade functions as a sign. It represents an idea of order and an ideal of power. It bears the name of its owner, not its maker. The imperfect bowl of the Japanese tea ceremony possesses intrinsic value. It is loved for itself, for its very individuality — hence the importance of its slight imperfection. The Japanese artifact bears the name of its maker and is itself named: South-Facing, tea scoop.

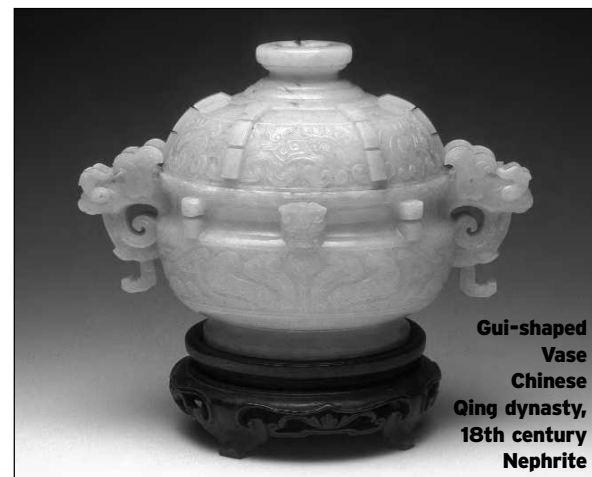
Other lovely displays in this inaugural exhibit include lacquerware sprinkled with gold (maki-e); modern ceramics by Kanjiro Kawai, one of the major forces in the mingei (folk art) revival in the early 20th century; folding-screens depicting craftsmen at work; and recreation scenes; plus a netsuke (carved toggles) case.

Despite the attraction of the new, don’t forget “The Art of Death in China” and “True Views: Traditions of Korean Painting” in this same Asian wing. They bear seeing again. **EW**

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Manchu Boy Emperor's Semi-formal Court Coat
Chinese
Qing dynasty,
1875-1900
Silk tapestry



Gui-shaped Vase
Chinese
Qing dynasty,
18th century
Nephrite