

Scenery of the Imperial Palace in Beijing

The Palace Museum a world-renowned cultural institution is the most extensive and representative museum of China. The Forbidden City, where the Palace Museum is situated, was the Chinese imperial palace through the Ming and Qing dynasties. Built 596 years ago, it is the largest surviving wooden palace complex on earth and was added to the World Cultural Heritage List in 1987.

Approximately 1.8 million exhibits are collected in the Palace Museum, and a good number of them were gathered from imperial collections of various dynasties. In 2014, visits to the museum exceeded 15 million. The Palace Museum has initiated proactive interaction with overseas entities, and since 1999 has joined with the Macao Museum of Art to launch a total of 17 special artefact exhibitions in Macao. These theme based exhibitions have become cultural trademarks of Macao and contribute to its exotic reputation. The Palace Museum continues its support and involvement to this very day.

Our imagination brings us back to the prosperous reign of Emperor Kangxi and Qianlong that dates back some 200-300 years. As magnificent as it is today, the Forbidden City was formerly the Emperor's permanent residence: he handled administrative affairs in the Exterior Court and lived in the Interior Court. Dukes, princes and officials were not allowed to enter the palace without an imperial order. Here, everyone was expected to behave decently, and their access to the palace was restricted. Permission to see the Emperor in person was an extraordinary privilege.

In order to proselytise Western missionaries sailed to China. Amongst them were those who excelled in fine arts and these were summoned to paint in the palace. The most prominent was an Italian artist named Giuseppe Castiglione, who produced portraits for the Emperor and recorded crucial political incidents in court and cultural activities. His paintings have become a precious visual record for current and future generations to better understand the history and culture of those days.

The palace that was safeguarded by rigid entry requirements in the past has now become the Palace Museum that Chinese and foreign tourists must visit, and visitors abound. During 2002 to 2004, French artist Charles Chauderlot entered the Forbidden City through the East Glorious Gate like Giuseppe Castiglione did in the past. Not as a Western missionary working for the Qing court, but just an ordinary Western painter. Drawn in by the grand Forbidden City, this great painter from the other side of the ocean was indulged by the ambiance amid the architecture. His depictions of the tremendous palace were chronicled with Chinese ink wash tools and the expressive techniques of Western sketches.

The Palace Museum recognised his passion and hence aided him in his art creation: the painter was allowed to visit some areas that remain restricted to the general public. Captivated by its landscape, Chauderlot strolled through many places in the Forbidden City, where he completed 81 paintings. With his subtle observations, his works demonstrate the unique charm of this Chinese palace. Chauderlot subsequently moved from Beijing to Macao and continues to illustrate the spirit of Macao architecture through his artistic expressions.

The depiction of Forbidden City landscapes were purchased by renowned Macao resident, Lam Kam Seng (Peter Lam), and were donated to the Macao Museum of Art for its permanent collection. In addition, Macao Post released a set of stamps themed, "Scenery of the Imperial Palace in Beijing" featuring Chauderlot's ink wash paintings. As such, Macao, China has provided another opportunity for the Forbidden Palace architecture to be highlighted to the rest of the world.

Author: Chan Hou Seng
Director of Macao Museum of Art