

National Palace Museum

Visitor Trails : The Emperor's Treasure Chests

Length: 30 minutes

For Adults / School Groups

- These objects are on the Multimedia Guide. [Adults Multimedia Guide](#)
- Please note that certain galleries may be closed for renovation or objects may be off display. [Latest Exhibition Changes](#)

Exhibition Area I (Main Building) 1F



01



Cloisonné box with lotus decoration, Jingtai reign (AD1450-1456), Ming dynasty (AD1368-1644)

Gallery: 106

Exhibition name: [A Garland of Treasures: Masterpieces of Precious Crafts in the Museum Collection](#)

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Introduction:

This lotus cloisonné box is composed of filigree work on a copper body. The flat lid is decorated with lotus blossoms and pods. The sides of both the box and lid are curved after the shape of lotus petals. The edges of the petals stand out and the tips curl outwards, and there is great variation in the representations and in the lines of every petal, stem, and blossom. The box feels very heavy in the hand and exhibits intricate craftsmanship, with perfectly rendered filigree work on which the traces of gilt plating are still clearly discernible. The vibrant enamels used to fill the compartments between the filigree include yellows, indigo blues, light blues, vibrant reds, and fluorescent whites. The inside and base are gilt, and the bottom of the inside of the box has a row of Chinese characters in standard script reading, "Made during the Jingtai Reign of the Great Ming." According to the early Ming dynasty aficionado Cao Zhao, cloisonné would not suit the man of letters, and was more suited to the woman's chambers. Regardless of Cao Zhao's ridicule, cloisonné became extremely popular in the Ming dynasty, and it subsequently became known as "Jingtai Blue" ware. The reason for this was most likely the fact that the cloisonné made in the imperial workshops during the Jingtai reign enjoyed the most fame. In the late Ming dynasty, collectors held these Jingtai pieces in the highest regard, believing them to represent the apex of Ming art, together with Chenghua ceramics, Xuande bronzes, and Yongle lacquer ware. It is very difficult to distinguish which of the extant Jingtai pieces are genuine, but this censer box is a rare example of a piece that conforms to the style of the period.

02



Cloisonné censer in the form of a wild duck, Early 16th century, Ming dynasty (AD1368-1644)

Gallery: 106

Exhibition name: [A Garland of Treasures: Masterpieces of Precious Crafts in the Museum Collection](#)

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Introduction:

Enamelwork is a decorative craft whereby the surface of a metal body is adorned with a vitreous glaze and then subjected to firing. One of the earliest enamelwork techniques to be developed was cloisonné, which involved the creation of compartments (known as "cloisons") using thin copper wires on the surface of the metal body, filling the cloisons with colored glazes, and then firing repeatedly, after which the surface was polished and gilded with gold. This technique spread to China from the west during the Yuan dynasty, and was extensively developed during the Ming dynasty, reaching an artistic height in the Jingtai reign (1450-1456). Because of this, cloisonné works are often referred to as "Jingtai Blue" ware.

This Ming dynasty censer is believed to date from the early 16th century, and is in the form of a wild duck with head held high. The style and design are quite aesthetically pleasing. Primarily made of copper, the lid and body of the vessel fit seamlessly at the abdomen of the duck, while the incense smoke passes through the neck and out of the bill. Besides the bill and the webbed feet, the duck is otherwise cloisonné with glazes of different colors and additional embellishments to depict feathers, and the stand is also cloisonné with an intertwined chrysanthemum pattern. The gold-gilt base was likely added later, and the central “Jia” character carved in intaglio on the underside of the base is an artifact appraisal marking of the Qianlong reign. Animal-form enamelware emerged during the middle to late Ming dynasty, and contributed to the enrichment of enamelware forms and styles of the time.

03



Painted enamel vase with dragons and peony decoration, Yongzheng reign (AD1723-1735), Qing dynasty (AD1644-1911)

Gallery: 106

Exhibition name: [A Garland of Treasures: Masterpieces of Precious Crafts in the Museum Collection](#)

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Introduction:

During the Yongzheng reign, under the close observation of the court, painted enamelware, which had originally come from the West, entered a stage of full-scale development. Not only were the bodies of vessels such as porcelains, bronzes, glasses, or painted enamels done with opulent colors, the decoration was also extremely refined. The peony blossoms on the surface of this painted enamelware vase with dragons are a traditional Chinese auspicious pattern, and the k'uei-dragons inlaid onto either side of the shoulder and the ring of floral motifs at the top are exquisitely rendered. It perhaps shows, after the absorption of Western techniques, the reinterpretation of traditional craftsmanship.

04



Gilt flint case with coral-and-turquoise inlay (with carved lacquer box and Qianlong reign mark), Qing dynasty (AD1644-1911)

Gallery: 106

Exhibition name: [A Garland of Treasures: Masterpieces of Precious Crafts in the Museum Collection](#)

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Introduction:

This gold gilt rectangular box-shaped case has thin iron plates inlaid at bottom. Upon releasing the coral knob at the top, the case can be opened to reveal a long, narrow interior container made of thin gold plate, in which the flint and tinder were stored. Sparks for fire were produced by striking the flint against the inlaid iron plates,

and such flint cases were a common accessory worn about the waist by Qing dynasty men, with a role akin to that of the modern-day lighter. For the Manchu imperial family and nobility, who had their origins in the steppes of Manchuria and continued to preserve a martial tradition of horsemanship, archery, and hunting, the wearing of a flint case or pouch-shaped fire bag or flint pouch not only had practical purposes, but also served as a reminder of their ancestry, traditional customs, and origins. Besides metal, flint cases could also be sewn from embroidered fabric, or carved from ivory or rhinoceros horn. The surface of this case is decorated with flowing cloud and scattered flower patterns interspersed with tiny round gold beads, produced by hammering, cloisonné, and soldering techniques; while the edges of the surface are chased with a braided rope pattern. The top and bottom edges of the case lid are marked by ruyi head patterns inset with beads, with delicate flowing lines resembling silken embroidery. Red coral and green turquoise have been inlaid at the center of the floral patterns adorning the surface of the case lid. This flint case displays superb craftsmanship, and was further paired with a coiled dragon pattern silk wrapper and a carved lacquer box in the shape of a pomegranate bearing the seal of the Emperor Qianlong, all three of which were stored in a treasure box at the Hall of Mental Cultivation in the Qing Imperial Palace, and were therefore most likely special treasures reserved for the emperor's personal use.

05



Planter with a coral carving of the planetary deity Kuixing, Qing dynasty (AD1644-1911)

Gallery: 106

Exhibition name: [A Garland of Treasures: Masterpieces of Precious Crafts in the Museum Collection](#)

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Introduction:

Take a close look at this planter: you won't find an actual plant inside, but instead, you'll see a special kind of sculpture. This was in fact an auspicious planter display that was very popular in the Qing dynasty court. Here, the figure is the Planetary Deity Kuei-xing delicately carved from a piece of red coral and holding a representation of the Big Dipper. Legend has it that the Kuei-xing was a highly educated scholar, but his ugly appearance always prevented him from passing the civil service examinations. In a fit of anger and resentment, he threw himself into the waters but was saved by a fish dragon. Thereafter, he was transformed into the celestial head of the Big Dipper and was put in charge of determining the outcome of examinations, and career advancement. He thus became one of the commonly worshipped deities.

The figure seen here is completely in vermilion red, with budding horns, bushy eyebrows, protruding eyes, and fangs, for a fierce and animated look. The deity is accompanied by accessories such as fluttering sashes, and holds a representation of the Big Dipper and a branch of plum blossoms. He is standing on the head of a fish dragon with a dragon's head and fish's body carved from green jadeite, and soaring among surging waves. The two objects held by the deity serve as symbols for coming in first place in the civil service examinations. One of his legs is also kicking back towards the main star of the Big Dipper. Known as the "dipper kick," it is a metaphor for being the best among those on the list of successful examination candidates.

The Deity Kuei-xing not only represents prospect of success in the civil service examinations but is also surrounded here by various auspicious symbols. The sides of the jade planter, for example, are adorned with images of multi-colored bats surrounding a longevity character, symbolizing prosperity and long life as well as good fortune at one's doorstep. The fungus on the garden rock in the planter is an auspicious imagery of immortality, while the branch of plum blossoms in the deity's hand also serves as a harbinger of spring, blooming before all the others. This sculpture features lively carving and skillful inlay techniques combining gold, silver with semi-precious gems and convey auspicious connotations, all that makes this piece of display exquisitely beautiful.

06



Pair of "Bovet" pocket watches with pearls and painted enamel , 19th century

Gallery: 106

Exhibition name: [A Garland of Treasures: Masterpieces of Precious Crafts in the Museum Collection](#)

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Introduction:

Ever since they were brought to China during the Ming and Qing eras, western clocks and watches were held in high esteem and much beloved by the imperial court, government officials, and merchant class, and they eventually became an important medium for cultural interaction between China and the west during the modern era. Pocket watches, with their intricate design and wearable nature, became not only a convenient instrument for telling the time, but also a status symbol and precious collectable. These two pocket watches, decorated with painted enamel and inset with pearls, are paired watches with symmetrical imagery. Atop the round watch face, a U-shaped ring inlaid with pearls is attached, thus enabling the watch to be attached to a string or ribbon and worn. The watch face is made of white enamel, with two sets of Roman numerals and three hands. On the inner side of the watch case, a circular crown marking can be found, within which the Chinese characters "Bo Wei" spell out the Chinese translation for "Bovet", the Swiss family of luxury watchmakers. Renowned for their exquisite enamel watches destined for the Oriental market, the Bovet company was one of the earliest European watchmakers to establish a presence in the Chinese market, setting up a company in Guangzhou during the first half of the 19th century. The enamel imagery of this pair of pocket watches centers on three adorable cupids, one of which holds aloft in both hands a floral basket overflowing with fruit, while a sash weaves around his body and drapes from the sky, while the other two sit nestled against each other. The cupids are surrounded by red and white roses in full bloom, as well as other vividly depicted flowers of many forms and hues. Wash techniques are employed to give an air of soft beauty to the clouds and sky in the background, and the rich light and dark contrasts lend a three-dimensional effect to the hair and skin of the cupids, as well as the surrounding flowers and leaves. The facial features of the cupids are somewhat different from the deep-set eyes and high noses of western babies, suggesting that this pair of pocket watches differs from the traditional European flower and figure enamel imagery and techniques, and was probably designed and manufactured exclusively for the Chinese market of the late Qing era.



Ivory balls of nested concentric layers with human figures in openwork relief. Second half of the 19th century.

Gallery: 106

Exhibition name: [A Garland of Treasures: Masterpieces of Precious Crafts in the Museum Collection](#)

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Introduction:

This set of movable openwork ivory balls nested in concentric layers comprise four main parts: a dragon fish hook, two ladies-in-waiting carved in the round, a set of hollow nested concentric balls, and a pendant depicting the Heavenly Twins of Conjugal Felicity. In between, varying lengths of linked chain connect the respective parts, and an additional small round ball is connected by screw threads between the nested ivory balls and the two ladies-in-waiting. At least 17 nested concentric balls have been counted, with fluid movement allowed between each layer. On their outer side, mountain and water landscapes, pavilions, and figures have been carved in high relief, while the inner side is decorated with openwork image patterns. Based on the carving technique and style, this openwork set of nested ivory balls was likely made by Guangdong ivory carvers dating from after the mid-Qing era. During the Qing dynasty, the linked chains, animated openwork, floss weaving, and nested concentric ivory balls of the Southern School of ivory carving were so wondrous that they were referred to in the Beijing Imperial Workshop as “the work of celestial beings”.



Silver raft cup of "Zhang Qian Riding a Raft" with the mark of Zhu Bishan, Yuan to Ming dynasty (AD1271-1644)

Gallery: 106

Exhibition name: [A Garland of Treasures: Masterpieces of Precious Crafts in the Museum Collection](#)

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Introduction:

This silver raft cup takes its theme from the story of Zhang Qian of the Han dynasty, who was said to have rode a raft to trace the source of the Yellow River, and eventually travelled to the Milky Way, where he met the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl. This raft cup takes the form of a single natural hollowed log, in which Zhang Qian sits, gazing at the heavens. With headdress fluttering and robes open, Zhang Qian smiles into the breeze as he holds a rectangular stone in his right hand, upon which is engraved the two characters, “zhi ji” (loom weight), in seal script. The overall design is elegant and reserved, characterized by flowing, well-crafted lines and vivid features that are indicative of a masterpiece of silverwork. Based on the seal script engravings, “bi shan zi” and “Manufactured in the Yiyou year of the Zhizheng reign” (circa 1345) on the underside of the raft cup, this artifact may have been made by the famous Yuan dynasty silversmith Zhu Bishan of Jiaying, or by some other silversmith that was skilled in the chiseling style of silverwork perfected by Master Zhu. The Qing dynasty Neifu (Imperial Household) housed three silver raft cups made in the style of Master Zhu in its

collections, each with unique designs and craftsmanship. Another silver raft cup concurrently on display is a replica made by the Neifu in the 31st year of the Qianlong reign (circa 1766) of a work by Zhu Bishan, the original of which is now housed in The Palace Museum in Beijing. The replica reflects the continuation and development of chiseled silverwork during the Qing dynasty.