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Asian Art Museum of San Francisco Unearths Stories of Life and the Afterlife in Early China



San Francisco, January 19, 2017 — Like the Roman Empire, China's Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) forged one of the most powerful, advanced civilizations of the ancient world, and its elite had it all: **unbridled luxury, technical innovations and courtly romance**. On February 17 the Asian Art Museum unveils ***Tomb Treasures: New Discoveries from China's Han Dynasty***, an original exhibition of more than 160 intriguing works **recently unearthed** from the coastal heartland of classical Chinese culture.

On view through May 28, *Tomb Treasures* showcases these **fresh archaeological finds, almost all never-before-seen** outside of China. Surviving over 2,000 years underground, such outstandingly crafted royal burial goods **reflect Han royalty's daily lives and nightly pastimes**, and confirm how the early Chinese courts sought to glorify their statures in this life and in the next one.

Building on international audiences' interest in the world-famous Terracotta Warriors — presented in the Asian Art Museum's wildly popular 2013 exhibition — *Tomb Treasures* features new discoveries from Jiangsu province, near present-day Shanghai. Through artworks and artifacts created from ceramic, lacquer, precious metal and priceless jade, *Tomb Treasures* tells a rich story of how early Chinese aristocrats deployed luxury to make their lives — and by extension their *afterlives* — as majestic and pleasure-filled as possible.

Co-curated by Jay Xu, director and CEO of the Asian Art Museum, and Fan Jeremy Zhang, the museum's senior associate curator of Chinese art, the exhibition is organized into three areas themed according to popular Han-era adages found on various artifacts:

Dancer figurine, unearthed from the Tomb of the King of Chu, Tuolan Mountain, Xuzhou, Jiangsu. Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE), 2nd century BCE. Earthenware. Xuzhou Museum.

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- **Everlasting happiness without end (長樂未央): Luxurious life and palatial entertainment.** Daily life, banquets and pastimes of the Han elites are accompanied by the music and dance of the court.
- **Eternal life without limit (長生無極): Worship of jade and search for immortality.** A tomb-like atmosphere allows visitors to explore ancient ideas about the afterlife.
- **Enduring remembrance without fail (長毋相忘): Private life and intimacy at the court.** Affairs of the heart expose secrets from the innermost chambers of men and women fascinated by pleasure.

“This exhibition underscores how connected we really are to the past, that **we share the same passions across time and culture**,” says Asian Art Museum director and exhibition co-curator Jay Xu. “These tomb treasures show how the Han people’s ambitions relate to our own pursuit of comfort and security today. The search for longevity, the craving for immortality, the yearning for a joyful life and a satisfying afterlife — **is it the sweetness of this world that inspires our hopes for the next?**”

Life and Death (and Sex and Sewers) Displayed for the First Time

Most of the artworks and objects featured in *Tomb Treasures* come from the looted mausoleums belonging to the Jiangdu Kingdom at Dayun Mountain, only excavated in 2011, and royal tombs of the Chu Kingdom at Xuzhou, first uncovered in 1995. Nearly untouched tombs of Han-era aristocrats are exceedingly uncommon and **North American audiences have rarely had the opportunity to experience such a luxuriously detailed portrait of court life.**

“Death was merely an initiation into the afterlife,” explains Xu. “These **underground palaces were furnished to provide everything the deceased would have needed to continue their grand existences** — visitors will not only appreciate the innovation of the artistry and craftsmanship on display, but the very human aspirations they represent.”

Most of the works on view have never travelled before from their home museums in central China, and highlights of the Asian Art Museum’s presentation include:



- **An extravagant jade burial suit** made up of hundreds of “fish scale” tiles and sewn with gold threads. Only a handful of these suits, thought by the Han to guard against decay, have ever been discovered.
- **An exquisitely decorated lacquer and jade coffin**, resplendent even after centuries underground and still revealing new secrets about its assembly.
- **Ingenious bronze “smokeless” lamps** that set the mood for evening revelry.

Jade suit, Unearthed from Tomb 2, Dayun Mountain, Xuyi, Jiangsu. Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE), 2nd century BCE. Jade and gold. Nanjing Museum. Photograph © Nanjing Museum.

- **Elegant bells that still ring**, which were vital to state ceremonies and ancestor-worship rituals. A replica set of chimes will be performed on by the museum's partners from San Francisco's Center for New Music every third Sunday.
- **Ceramic dancers** caught forever in a graceful pose, swaying to an unknown melody.
- **Romantic silver belt hooks** excavated from the tomb of a female consort, made of two interlocking pieces bearing the auspicious inscription "forget me not," and fitting together in perfect harmony to literally become one for all eternity.

In addition to luxuries, royals also surrounded themselves with domestic wares that surprise us with their **intimate reflection of private life and an abiding concern with grooming, hygiene, longevity and sex** during the Han dynasty.

"We have everything from a large silver basin for taking baths, to a working stone latrine with an armrest, to an elaborate ceramic urinal — we are even displaying **two hollow bronze phalluses** that could be worn and used," says exhibition co-curator Fan Zhang. "This almost modern **appreciation for the body's needs and wants** is something we think our open-minded visitors from San Francisco and around the Bay Area will especially enjoy learning about and sharing with friends!"

Programs Guide Visitors through this Life and the Next



A public **opening party on February 16, AFTERLIFE**, is fit to send any royal into the beyond and kicks off *Tomb Treasures* with music — from DJ Proof and New Orleans jazz band, MJ's Brass Boppers — along with other live performances and plenty of art-adjacent dancing. Special giveaways include bedroom goodies from local favorite Good Vibrations as well as elixirs and potions to foster enduring good health.

This evening-long, all-ages party inaugurates the museum's **popular 2017 Thursday Night Programs season**, which takes place from mid-February to late-September, 5-9 PM, with reduced admission fees.

The Thursday evening "**Tasting Menu**" series at the museum will focus in 2017 on how chefs present meals creatively, **traditional Chinese herbal medicines, and food-based healing techniques** believed to promote longevity and enhance vitality — the qualities idealized in *Tomb Treasures*.

The Asian Art Museum will also be offering "Tomb Pleasures," an underground, self-guided tour for curious visitors to learn more about the mysteries and histories of 10 surprising highlights in the *Tomb Treasures* exhibition that together provide more detail about daily court life — and nightlife! Showcasing intriguingly contemporary objects, "Tomb Pleasures" provides an intimate peek into how the Han nobility cared for their bodies and hearts.

Phallus, unearthed from Tomb 1, Dayun Mountain, Xuyi, Jiangsu. Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE), 2nd century BCE. Bronze. Nanjing Museum. Photograph © Nanjing Museum.

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Throughout the exhibition's run, the museum will also host a series of in-depth looks at contemporary death, burial and memorial practices here in San Francisco, across the United States, as well as in East Asia. Key programs include a presentation by **Columbia University's DeathLab**, which seeks to revolutionize death in dense cities via alternative, ecological means of body disposal.

Check the museum's website for more information on programs.

Exhibition Publication

A 256-page exhibition catalogue published by the Asian Art Museum accompanies *Tomb Treasures: New Discoveries from China's Han Dynasty* (\$29.95) and features essays from Jay Xu, Fan Zhang, Li Zebin, Li Yinde and Tianlong Jiao.

Exhibition Organization

Tomb Treasures: New Discoveries from China's Han Dynasty is organized by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the Nanjing Museum. Presentation is made possible with the generous support of The Bernard Osher Foundation, Diane B. Wilsey, The Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang Fund for Excellence in Exhibitions and Presentations, United, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, Warren Felson and Lucy Sun, Angela and Gwong-Yih Lee, and Fred Levin and Nancy Livingston, The Shenson Foundation, in memory of Ben and A. Jess Shenson. Media sponsors: *San Francisco magazine*, *Sing Tao Daily*, *World Journal*.

About the Asian Art Museum

The Asian Art Museum—Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture is one of San Francisco's premier arts institutions and home to a world-renowned collection of more than 18,000 Asian art treasures from throughout Asia spanning 6,000 years of history. Through rich art experiences, centered on historic and contemporary artworks, the Asian Art Museum unlocks the past for visitors, bringing it to life while serving as a catalyst for new art, new creativity and new thinking.

Information: 415.581.3500 or www.asianart.org

Location: 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102

Hours: The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 AM to 5 PM. Hours are extended on Thursdays until 9 PM through September. Closed Mondays, as well as New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

Special Exhibition Admission: FREE for museum members and children (12 & under). On weekdays, \$20 for adults and \$15 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On weekends, \$25 for adults and \$20 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On Target First Free Sundays and on Thursday evenings, 5-9 PM, admission to the exhibition is \$10.

General Admission: FREE for museum members, \$15 for adults, \$10 for seniors (65+), college students with ID, and youth (13–17). FREE for children under 12 and SFUSD students with ID. General admission is FREE to all on Target First Free Sundays (the first Sunday of every month). On Thursday evenings from Feb. 23 - Sept. 28, 2017, general admission is \$10 for adults, \$8 for students and seniors, and a \$5 surcharge may apply for special exhibitions.

Access: The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access: 415.581.3598; TDD: 415.861.2035.

Never miss a moment: @asianartmuseum #TombTreasures #TombPleasures