

Empresses of China's Forbidden City, 1644–1912

On view March 30–June 23, 2019, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

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The lives of empresses during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) offer a compelling tale of influence and opulence as told in this first-ever, in-depth exhibition of the subject. Their vital presence over the 260-year course of the Qing is brought to light through an unprecedented assembly of spectacular objects, from royal portraits to costumes and jewelry they used in the imperial complex known as the Forbidden City. The exhibition breaks stereotypes by showing the empresses' influence in the realms of art, religion, politics, and diplomacy. In actively recovering their position, we are reminded that history often leaves women's accomplishments untold.

Most of these artworks are from the Palace Museum, and many have never been exhibited outside of China. The exhibition is organized by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts; the Freer|Sackler; and the Palace Museum in Beijing, China.

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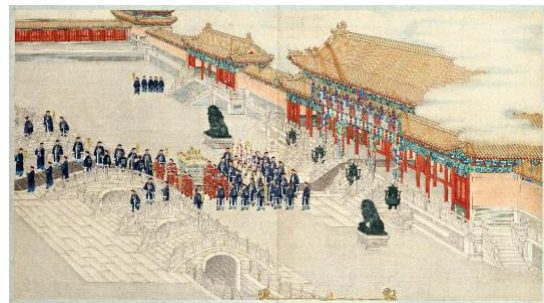
The Qianlong Emperor and Imperial Woman Hunting a Deer (detail)

Court painters, probably at the Wish-Fulfilling Studio (Ruyi guan)

Frontispiece by the Qianlong emperor (1711–1799)
China, Beijing, Qianlong period (1736–95), probably 1760–79

Handscroll; ink and color on paper

Palace Museum, Gu9205 © The Palace Museum



The Grand Imperial Wedding of the Guangxu Emperor (detail)

Qing Kuan (1848–1927) and other court painters
China, Beijing, Guangxu period (1875–1908), ca. 1889
Album leaves; ink and color on silk

Palace Museum, Gu5887-7/9-10 © The Palace Museum



Empress Dowager Chongqing at the Age of Eighty

Ignatius Sichelbarth (Ai Qimeng, 1708–1780), Yi Lantai (act. ca. 1748–86), and Wang Ruxue (act. 18th century)
China, Beijing, Qianlong period (1736–95), 1771
Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk
Palace Museum, Gu6453 © The Palace Museum



Consort of the Qianlong emperor and the future Jiaqing emperor in his boyhood

Probably Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688–1766) and other court painters
China, Beijing, Qianlong period (1736–95), probably 1760s
Painting originally mounted on a wall (tielu); ink and color on silk
Palace Museum, Gu6539 © The Palace Museum



Empress Xiaozhuang

Probably Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688–1766) and other court painters
China, Beijing, Qianlong period (1736–95), ca. 1750
Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk
Palace Museum, Gu6379 © The Palace Museum



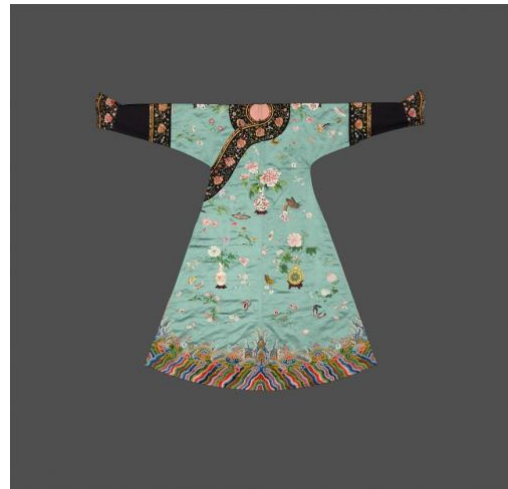
Empress Xiaoxian

Ignatius Sichelbarth (Ai Qimeng, 1708–1780) and Yi Lantai (act. ca. 1748–86) and possibly Wang Ruxue (act. 18th century)
China, Beijing, Qianlong period (1736–95), 1777, with repainting possibly in 19th century
Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk
Peabody Essex Museum, gift of Mrs. Elizabeth Sturgis Hinds, 1956, E33619



Virtuous Empresses and Empresses Dowager in Successive Dynasties

Jiao Bingzhen (ca. 1660–1726)
China, Beijing, Kangxi (1662–1722) or Yongzheng (1723–35) period, early 18th century
Album leaf; ink and color on silk
Palace Museum, Gu5632 © The Palace Museum



Festive robe

Imperial Silk Manufactory, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province (weaving and embroidery)
Imperial Workshop, Beijing (tailoring)
China, Beijing, Qianlong period (1736–95), 1736–77
Embroidery, polychrome silk threads on silk satin
Palace Museum, Gu42151 © The Palace Museum



Court hat with phoenixes

Probably Imperial Workshop, Beijing
China, Beijing, Qing dynasty, 18th or 19th century
Sable, velvet, silk floss, pearls, tiger's-eye stone, lapis lazuli, glass, birch bark and metal with gilding, and kingfisher feather
Palace Museum, Gu60084 © The Palace Museum



Ewer with mothers and sons in garden

Imperial Workshop, Beijing
China, Beijing, Qianlong period (1736–95), probably 1760s or 1770s
Cloisonné and painted enamel, copper and gold alloy with polychrome enamels and gilding, coral, turquoise, and lapis lazuli
Palace Museum, Gu11450 © The Palace Museum



Hair ornament with dragons

China, Qing dynasty, probably 19th century
 Pearls, coral, kingfisher feather, and silver with gilding
 Palace Museum, Gu10104 © The Palace Museum



Platform shoes

China, Guangxu period (1875–1908)
 Embroidery, polychrome silk threads on silk satin with silk tassels; platforms: wood core covered with cotton and glass beads
 Palace Museum, Gu61391 © The Palace Museum



Seal of an empress with box, tray, lock, key, and plaques
 Imperial workshop, Beijing
 China, Beijing, Republican period (1912–49), 1922
 Gold alloy with silk tassels
 Palace Museum, Gu167075 © The Palace Museum



Five-panel screen

Workshop, probably Guangzhou
 China, Beijing, Qianlong period (1736–95), probably 1775 or before
 Panels: cloisonné, copper alloy with polychrome enamels and gilding; frame: zitan wood and nan wood
 Palace Museum, Gu210730 © The Palace Museum



Empress Dowager Cixi

Katharine A. Carl (1865–1938)

Oil on canvas with camphor wood frame, 1903

Transfer from the Smithsonian American Art Museum,
S2011.16