

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/age-of-empires-chinese-art-of-the-qin-and-han-dynasties-221-b-c-a-d-220-review-treasures-of-nation-building-1491735606>

ART REVIEW

'Age of Empires: Chinese Art of the Qin and Han Dynasties (221 B.C.-A.D. 220)' Review: Treasures of Nation-Building

Objects relating military might, administrative apparatuses and artistic advances tell the story of two Chinese dynasties.



Kneeling Archer (detail), Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.) PHOTO: QIN SHIHUANGDI MAUSOLEUM SITE MUSEUM, LINTONG

By *Lee Lawrence*

April 9, 2017 7:00 a.m. ET

New York

Two thousand-year-old terra-cotta horses, mustachioed officers, and kneeling archers in suits of armor may be a familiar stand-in for ancient China, yet the sight of them continues to amaze. In "Age of Empires: Chinese Art of the Qin and Han Dynasties (221 B.C.-A.D. 220)," the stately demeanor of six close-to-life-size figures sets the tone for an exhibition whose principal aim is to impress on visitors how the Qin (221-206 B.C.) and the Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) cumulatively shaped China. While borders shrank and expanded over the millennia that followed, the template Qin and Han rulers developed during their four centuries in power persisted: a unified—though hardly uniform—state with centralized governance and a shared identity.

This is the second major exhibition this year to capitalize on the seemingly endless excavations of burial complexes over the past 50 years. The first, "Tomb Treasures: New Discoveries From China's Han Dynasty" at San Francisco's Asian Art Museum, delved into the private lives and beliefs of Han royalty. "Age of Empires" broadens the timeline

**Age of Empires: Chinese Art of the Qin and Han Dynasties
(221 B.C.-A.D. 220)**

*The Met Fifth Avenue
Through July 16*

to include the Qin, brings together 160-plus works from 32 Chinese museums and archaeological institutions—an impressive feat even for the Met—and

focuses on the dynasties' nation-building.



Strongman, Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.) PHOTO: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Reinforcing this theme, the layout's spaciousness and sightlines express solemnity and grandeur. Each dynasty's story begins with military might—note the shift in emphasis from infantry to cavalry—followed by aspects of their administrative apparatuses and an exploration of their art and the kaleidoscopic influences that helped shape it. A headless Qin statue of a man, for example, is arresting for its naturalism—the belly bulges, back and arm muscles tense as the hands grasp a pole, suggesting he portrays the strongman of an acrobat troupe. Unusual for this period, it probably embodies a

response to Hellenistic sculptures created after Alexander the Great conquered parts of Central Asia. At the other extreme, the silver and gold decorations on a pair of Han crossbow holders outline such highly stylized clouds and animals they could be art-deco motifs.

Even though the tools of administration on display are not always visually exciting, they are too important to overlook. The Qin standardized weights, measures and—most important—writing. Since Chinese characters represent the meaning, not the sound, of words, people who did not share a spoken language could now communicate in writing. And, under the Han, the water clock on display enabled a bureaucrat to record date and time on every piece of correspondence, while a staff topped by a bird-shaped finial marked its owner as over 70, visibly reinforcing the emperor's insistence on Confucian values, which prescribed respect and privileges for the elderly.

Almost as a counterweight, the final section celebrates the dynamics of pluralism. A hanging lamp, for example, melds influences from India and the Mediterranean, while a lively market scene on the lid of a bronze container exemplifies traditions maintained by the Dian, a people whose territory was annexed under the Qin.

Recent archaeological digs have both spawned a spate of shows—a third one, "Dreams of the Kings: A Jade Suit for Eternity," opens at the China Institute in New York on May 25—and enriched scholars' understanding of this period. As the Met's must-read catalog points out, we now know that maritime trade brought technologies, not just goods. The gold granulation on several ornaments are part of a transmission process that



Pair of finials in the shape of mythical beasts, Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.) PHOTO: XI'AN MUSEUM

archaeologists have traced back to northern Pakistan. Similarly, chemical analyses show that some glass previously thought to have been imported was in fact locally made—

see a bowl from the early Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 9) as well as the glass inlays in a pair of Qin gilt-bronze finials. The bowl is as simple as the finials are elaborate, their winged and beaked four-legged creatures pointing to yet another foreign connection: Western griffins.



Coffin handle, Western Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 9) PHOTO: HEBEI PROVINCIAL MUSEUM, SHIJIAZHUANG

We now also know that imperial workshops developed a system of quality control over this 400-year period. It shows. Whether in the

decorated vessels devoted to the storing and pouring of wine, the lacquerware and colorful silks, the statuettes of animals both domestic and foreign, or the figures of dancers and musicians, the mastery is stunning. Even death is made beautiful, from painted reliefs on a tomb door to a gilded and silvered coffin handle sporting an animal face flanked by sinuous mythical creatures. And, of course, the deceased's last apparel, a body suit made of jade tiles fastened with gold thread and silk ribbon.

The Chinese had long equated the hardness of jade with immortality, and the similarity to the warriors' armor befits the belief that it would keep the body intact. It didn't. What did survive, as this show clearly demonstrates, is the notion of the Central or Middle Kingdom—as China first came to be called under the Han—and caches of treasures archaeologists are still unearthing.

—Ms. Lawrence writes about Asian and Islamic art for the Journal.