

Imperial Chinese Robes from the Forbidden City

7 December 2010 – 27 February 2011

Empress' informal robe with crane design, China, Guangxu reign period (1875-1908) © The Palace Museum, Beijing



For the first time in Europe, the V&A are showing the magnificent robes worn by the emperors and empresses of the Qing Dynasty, the last ruling dynasty of China. The exhibition tells the story of a vanished court life within the confines of the Forbidden City, through exquisite and intricate clothes for grand state functions as well as simple, beautiful garments that were worn daily.

This is a rare chance to see these historic garments and objects, worn for everyday life, important rituals, imperial banquets as well as travelling dress for hunting and royal visits to provinces. It is also an opportunity to study the intricacies and rich colour of the Chinese silk and the exquisite craftsmanship used in making them.

Imperial Chinese Robes features over 50 garments, alongside 20 accessories and 15 fabrics from the collection of the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City in Beijing, the former residency of the imperial Chinese dynasties and now the most visited historic site in China. Highlights include an intricately woven brown gauze robe with golden dragon roundels dating back to the Kangxi reign (1662-1722) and a wedding dress robe with red dragon and phoenix worn by Yehe Nara Jingfen, for her marriage to the Guangxu emperor in 1889. A yellow double-sided dragon robe featuring exquisite embroidery shows the vibrant colours of the fabrics and superb workmanship. Both the dragon motif in different forms and a particular bright yellow colour had been the prerogative of the emperor's garments for many

centuries. It was against the law for Chinese people to use them on their own clothes.

From 1644 to 1911, the Forbidden City was the residence and workplace of ten successive Chinese rulers. Throughout the year the emperor carried out a great variety of official tasks inside the Forbidden City, some practical, some symbolic, and some ceremonial. The clothes he wore were designed to suit the tasks he performed. The Forbidden City was the innermost part of Beijing. Split into different Halls and Palaces, the spaces dictated the activity in each part of the City. Each space therefore determined what the emperor wore.

Many of the robes were created for the emperors' wives. The empresses were entitled to a quota of silk fabric and fur, and the dowager empress received yet more. Other wives of the emperor were given imperial robes. When not performing an official duty, members of the imperial family wore informal dresses, whose styles, colours and materials were left to the personal preferences of the wearers. When Empress Dowager Cixi took control of state affairs on behalf of her six year old son after her husband had died in 1861, in itself an unorthodox event, she wore informal robes. The result was the appearance of a large quantity of female informal dresses in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, all made from the finest materials with exquisite workmanship.

Chinese dynastic rule came to an end and a republic was proclaimed in 1912. The family continued to reside in the Forbidden City until 1924, from which date the clothes and accessories of the emperors and empresses were accessioned by the Palace Museum as part of the national heritage.

Mark Jones, Director of the V&A, says: *'We are delighted to be working on this exchange of exhibitions with the Palace Museum in Beijing, and excited to be able to show these amazing and beautiful Imperial robes for the first time here at the V&A.'*

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Notes to Editors

- Imperial Chinese Robes from the Forbidden City is on display in the V&A's fashion gallery from 7 December 2010 until 27 February 2011

- Admission to the display is £5 (concessions: £3). To book visit www.vam.ac.uk (booking fee applies)
- The exhibition curator is Ming Wilson, V&A Senior Curator for Asia.
- The exhibition Travel Partner is Viking River Cruises. Drawing on a heritage of more than 175 years, Viking River Cruises provides unique holidays for travellers interested in geography, culture, history, or simple relaxation with cruises along the scenic rivers of Europe, Russia, China and Southeast Asia. Viking has received many prestigious awards voted for by both consumers and travel agents.
- This exhibition has been kindly supported by Lady Keswick and Sir David Tang
- There is a catalogue published to coincide with this exhibition. For further information about the book contact Julie Chan on 020 7942 2701 or email j.chan@vam.ac.uk
- The V&A Shop is stocking a range of products to accompany the display. For further information about these products contact Lee Kendall, Marketing and PR Manager, V&A Enterprises on 0207 942 2681 or l.kendall@vam.ac.uk

For public enquiries please call 020 7942 2000 or visit www.vam.ac.uk

For further PRESS information please contact Elinor Hughes at the V&A press office on 020 7942 2500 or email e.hughes@vam.ac.uk or press.office@vam.ac.uk

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