Chinese Art Treasures

by ALAN PRIEST Curator of Far Eastern Art

The Chinese Art Treasures that will be exhibited at the Museum from September 15 through November 1 are a selection of 231 works of art from the vast collections rescued from the wars on the mainland and taken to Formosa by the Chinese government. Various estimates have been made of the size of these collections: one of them gives 377,375 as the total, nine thousand of which are paintings and nearly eighteen thousand ceramics. The exhibition is a magnificent cross section of a collection that has a long and romantic history.

Present-day scholars have chosen as the formal beginning date of the imperial collection the reign of the emperor Hui-tsung (1082-1135), who was a great patron of painting and himself a superior painter. There are records of the paintings in his collection, some of which, though lost for a time, were later recovered and are part of the collection as it now exists. In the centuries following Hui-tsun's time there were wars and changes of government. Many scholars consider the present collection largely the work of the Ch'ien-lung Emperor (1736-1795), an important collector and something of a poet and painter.

FRONTISPICE: Green hawthorn vase. Chinese, Ch'ing dynasty, K'ang-hsi period (1662-1722). Enamel on biscuit. Height 29 1/2 inches
Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913

ON THE COVER: Detail of the vase shown opposite

The Western world, aware of Chinese ceramic art from the days of Queen Elizabeth I of England and of Chinese decorative arts from the eighteenth century, did not discover Chinese painting until the last half of the nineteenth century and only began to collect it seriously in the last quarter of that century. At that time American collectors found their Chinese paintings in Japan; quite naturally they came to admire paintings that reflected the early dynasties, T'ang, Sung, and Yüan, which the Japanese admired. Western writers of the early twentieth century almost without exception stopped their accounts with the Yüan dynasty and glanced

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only lightly over the works of the Ming and the Ch'ing dynasties. Not until after 1945 did Western scholars take up the rewarding study of later periods and of the great Chinese painters of our day.

The present exhibition is the first to give us a perspective of the history of Chinese painting, particularly landscape painting. It is the most important exhibition since the colossal one in London in 1935, which included three thousand works, and is far more selective. Hundreds of paintings by court artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were excluded by the selection committee from the present exhibition. Not until modern times did the Chinese collect sculpture or religious painting; these were reserved for tombs and myriad temples. There are three Buddhist paintings in the exhibition. The Chinese interest in bronzes was a historical one; the present exhibition includes five impressive bronzes that illustrate it. There is a brilliant selection of ceramics, with enough lacquers, enamels, and bamboo carvings to give a hint of the exquisite small things that show how deeply the artistic consciousness of the Chinese penetrated.

The exhibition emphasizes painting, especially large landscapes of great quality. Such a series has never been shown before. It is for our public a revelation. Professional scholars, teachers, dealers in Chinese art, museum curators, and collectors may discuss and bicker over attributions and that intangible thing called quality. They should—but this exhibition is not for the few (a very few really). It is for the Western world at large, a majestic sermon on Chinese landscape painting and a record of the Chinese feeling for nature and man's place in it.

American museums have been working since 1935 to bring this exhibition about, and at last, with the co-operation of the museums in Taiwan (Formosa), they have succeeded. This tremendously important showing has been made possible through the efforts of the many patrons and committees listed in the splendid catalogue of the exhibition. The catalogue, which illustrates every item, is the best presentation to date of the Chinese government collection and takes its place at once as an important reference work.

Fig. 1. Travelers among Mountains and Streams, by Fan K'uan. Sung dynasty (960-1279), early xi century. Hanging scroll in ink and colors on silk.
Fig. 2. Deer among Red Maples, by an unknown artist. Five Dynasties (906-960). Hanging scroll in ink and colors on silk.
Fig. 3. Emperor Ming-huang’s Journey to Shu, by an unknown artist. T’ang dynasty (618-906). Hanging scroll in ink and colors on silk.
Fig. 5. Whispering Pines in the Mountains, by Li T'ang. Sung dynasty, 1124. Hanging scroll in ink and colors on silk

Fig. 4. Detail of Autumn Colors on the Ch'iao and Hua Mountains, by Chao Meng-fu. Yuan dynasty, 1295. Handscroll in ink and colors on paper