

Mactaggart Art Collection brings oriental court to U of A

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Deputy News Editor

Tucked away behind a rather inconspicuous door in the south side of the of the Telus Building, the temporary home of the University of Alberta Museums' Mactaggart Art Collection waits for visitors to take in its first exhibition—one that was three centuries in the making.

The premiere collection, titled *Dressed to Rule: 18th Century Court Attire*, was made possible by a donation of 734 Chinese paintings, textiles, and costumes by Cécile and Sandy Mactaggart, two private art collectors after whom the new museum is named.

"I wanted to make an exhibition that could only be made here at the University of Alberta," explained John Vollmer, an expert in the field of Asian textiles, costumes, and art, and guest curator of the exhibition. "It's one of the things that's sort of the first time out—we wanted to make a splash."

The exhibit is made up of a large collection of court garments and textiles

dating from the Qing dynasty, 1644–1911. Many of the pieces are incredibly intricate and delicate yet have been very well preserved since being purchased by the Mactaggarts from private art markets since the 1960s.

While the textiles of the collection alone would make for an interesting exhibit, Vollmer explained that it's the series of paintings used to catalogue the many costumes that set the U of A's holdings apart.

"In many ways the University of Alberta is now on par with the Metropolitan Museum and even the [...] Palace Museum in Beijing. [But] neither the Metropolitan Museum nor the Palace Collection Museum in Beijing could make this exhibition; they don't have these paintings."

Vollmer explained that the paintings were commissioned in the 1740s as a review of the Manchu court wardrobe by the young Qianlong Emperor Prince Bao. The emperor appointed a commission to undertake the review, which aimed at legitimizing the Manchu rule and to show that the young emperor had his empire under control.

The result was an estimated 6000 illustrations of garments, many of which were turned into more permanent woodcarvings and actual costumes.

Most the garments on display were used by the Qing dynasty court for diplomatic endeavours, but they also elicit the lavishness of Chinese culture at the time. As Vollmer explained, even the hidden layers of the costumes were elaborately decorated.

"It signals a kind of extravagance that very few cultures have," he said. "It makes no sense in our culture to do this; if you're going to wear a topcoat, you don't need to have a fancy shirt."

Vollmer added that he feels the collection will help both researchers and those coming to the exhibit to understand just how complex past Chinese cultural traditions were.

"In many ways, the garments that are here tell an economic history of traditional China—of organizing industry to produce goods in large enough quantities and then to encourage others to buy them."

Still, he believes that there's also a



COURT IS IN SESSION Historic Chinese dress is on display at the Telus Centre. RYAN HEISE

fundamental attraction to a collection such as this.

"It's full of things that the people love: they love the colour; they love the decoration; they love the significance

of it," Vollmer explained.

"It's a collection that's very personal. It's of beautiful quality, in great condition, and it's things that are visually stunning."

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