

Stálá expozice umění Asie a starověkého Středomoří
ze sbírek Národní galerie v Praze a Národního muzea
Permanent exhibition of the Art of Asia
and the Ancient Mediterranean from the Collections
of the National Gallery in Prague and the National Museum

Opened Feb. 4, 2011

Hours: 10am-6pm Tuesdays-Sundays,

Admission: 150 basic fee/ 80 seniors/students / 200 for families

Address: Kinsky Palace, Staroměstské náměstí 12, Praha 1, 110 15, Czech Republic

Art of the Old World—or a Paradise Lost?

by Tony Ozuna, the Prague Post staff art writer



The previous seat of the Collection of Oriental Art of the National Gallery in Prague - Zbraslav Chateau



The present seat of the Collection of Oriental Art of the National Gallery in Prague - Kinsky Palace

On the 215th anniversary of the founding of the National Gallery in Prague (Feb. 4), a new Prague National Gallery exhibition opened in the stately Kinský Palace, on Old Town Square. This exhibit, The Art of the Old World combines ancient art from the foundations of the West (Ancient Mediterranean) and the East (Asia) using collections from the National Museum, Charles University, and most significantly the National Gallery's vast collection of Oriental Art.

When the National Gallery in Prague had its Oriental Art collection in its previous home in the Zbraslav Chateau (between 1972-2009), it had ample room for its outstanding collection of 13,900 pieces. Since relocating the entire collection to Kinsky Palace, during the past year, the National Gallery is now only able to display 665 pieces, or half of what was on regular display at Zbraslav. And due to the new conditions, only the best pieces are now on display from the major sections of its collection.

The exhibit The Art of the Old World begins at the top of the stairs, on the second floor, with its collection from the Ancient Mediterranean, then continues back down on the first, but lured in by a pair of beautifully ferocious 19th century Japanese guardian lions (a male and female), most visitors are entering the exhibit on the first floor, leading into an impressive room of ancient Chinese Art.



This room is actually the only one with “ancient art” of Asia from the NG’s collection. There are fine pieces of bronze and jade artifacts from the Bronze Age through the time of the first emperor of China into the era of the Han Dynasty. Tomb sculptures and ceramics (small clay figures buried with the dead) are the highlights here with the most realistic pieces from the first half of the 2nd Century, BC (1).

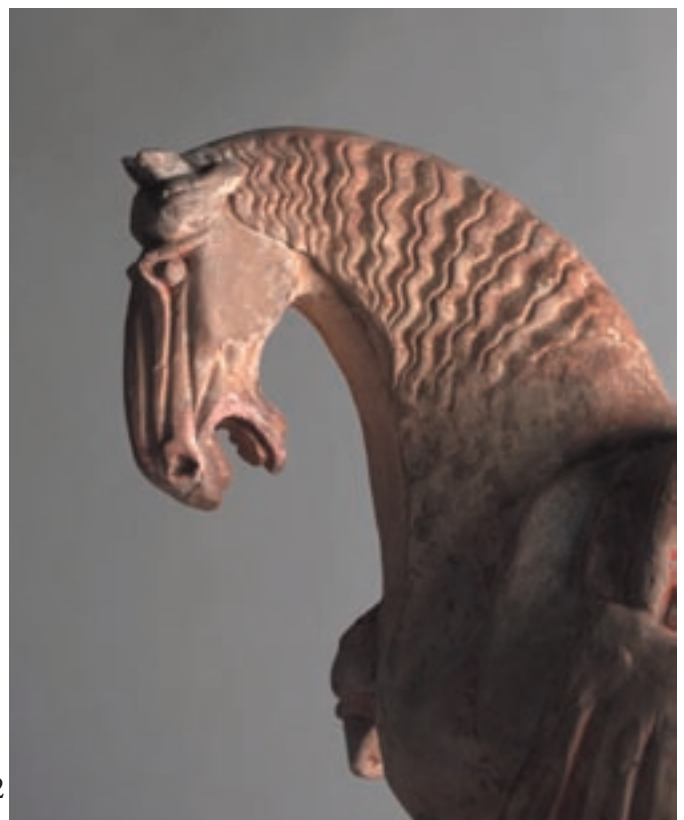
1 The next room has more early Chinese art from the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and its burial figurines or mingqi (spirit utensils) are standouts. These more elaborate guardian figures differ from the previous room mainly due to their fine glazed surfaces and stripes of three colors (ocre, terracotta and green).



2 Such precious works fell into the hands of the National Gallery mainly through a Czech (Josef Martinek) who was a Customs Officer for the British, serving for 12 years in China, and in 1928 he returned to Prague with a stash of Chinese art, including terracotta statues of horses in dynamic poses (2).

3 The earliest pieces of Buddhist art in the Chinese collection are tiny gilt bronze Buddha statues and an effective plateau display of wooden Buddhist statues (3).

There are also ten large stone and wooden Buddhist heads dating from the 6th to 16th century (decapitated from their bodies) resting at eye level. In the same room, wall paintings from the Ming Dynasty (15th century) with their floral designs and lovely celestial maidens apsara (4) appear to be obvious influences of Mucha and the Art Nouveau movement.



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With the first five main rooms devoted to Buddhism, the rest of the Asian Art collection includes standout works from old Tibet, Japan, India, Southeast Asia, and the Islamic art. Tibet's room of wrathful and merciful Buddhist icons in the form of gilt bronze sculptures and paintings on canvas (thangka) (5) is a centerpiece.

"This is a gallery exhibit and not a museum, so there is a stress on the aesthetic quality, and not on maps with descriptions," says the director of the NG's Oriental Collection, Dr. Helena Honcoopová. There is a difference between museum exhibits for learning versus 'enjoying it'. "This section is a gallery with beautiful solitary pieces." Beyond the rooms devoted to Buddhist art, there are several rooms devoted to Chinese and Japanese decorative arts from vessels as early as the third millennium before Christ through the 16th and 17th centuries, when a new flow of works via sea-traders made their way to Europe. Asian lacquer-ware and porcelain (white and cobalt blue vessels) made for European exports are in abundance; and a grand Japanese early 17th century lacquer-ware chest from the Prague Castle collection (6) is a precious royal export piece.



5

There are also examples of Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, landscapes (mountains and water-falls), natural still lifes ("bird and flower" paintings), and figure paintings on hanging scrolls. The room of Japanese art presents also ukiyo-e from the Edo period (1615-1868), including 18th century wood-block prints of beauties and actors as well as the 19th century landscape woodcuts by the famous Japanese artists Hokusai (7) and Hiroshige. There is also a room devoted to rare Korean art (8) from a long-term loan of the National Museum of Korea in Seoul with the support of the Korea Foundation. The current exhibit ends in May with the hope to replace this Special Exhibition Hall with a new set of other rare pieces from Korea.



6

Upstairs, there are rooms from the National Museum dedicated to Egyptian, the ancient Near East Anatolian, Assyrian, Mesopotamian, and Iranian artworks, and exceptional examples of classical Greek, Hellenistic, Etrurian and Roman art. A large Studio room is open for lectures and art workshops.

This exhibit opens a new phase in the history of the National Gallery. It marks the first time ever that such works of European Classical antiquity have been on public display in the Czech Republic. But it also includes a comprehensive display of ancient art of Asia in a permanent collection in the center of Prague, which would have been unheard of in the past, and it may still be unusual for some Czechs.

The Silk Road's commercial trade first brought art from Asia to Europe in the first millennium A.D., then Asia was reached more efficiently by sea-traders from the 1500s, and thus Asia (especially China and Japan) has had not only a presence, but a special influence on developments in European art, and vice versa.



7



In one way, this permanent exhibit is a landmark for lovers of art, in general, with approximately 1,300 works spanning 5,000 years of the development of art of the Old World, and incorporating the cultures of Asia, Europe, and North Africa, but it is also a set-back for special devotees of the National Gallery's unique Oriental Art collection. For this collection of the National Gallery in Prague has lost its oasis at Zbraslav, and in the age of globalization, now seems to be fighting for a place in modern Prague.

Replica of the famous Silla Kingdom Golden crown - gift from the National Museum of Korea to NG in Prague

Glimpses from the new exhibition:

Japanese Buddhist Art

The Art of Ancient Egypt

The Art of Classical Greece

Chinese Buddhist Art

Chinese Funerary Art

Art of the Tibetan Region

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