

Ming China Exhibition: Fifty Years that Changed China

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Report by Jean Roberts

The Exhibition is running at the British Museum from 18th September to 5th January 2015 and has taken 5 years to plan and put together. Luk Yu-ping was a Project Curator but now works at the V & A Museum.

There are 5 sections to the Exhibition, Courts, Arts of War, Arts of Peace, Beliefs and Trade and Diplomacy, showing some objects we would expect to see, such as blue and white porcelain, lacquer furniture, cloisonné pots and Chinese scroll paintings, but there are also unexpected items from all around the known world, such as gold objects, silver, precious gems, paintings from other far eastern countries and an ancient copy of the Koran.

The Ming Dynasty stretched from 1368 to 1644 and was founded by Yuanzhang, the Yongle Emperor who reigned from 1368 – 98. When he died there was a power struggle, leading to Civil War, but in 1403 there was a second founding and the capital was moved from Nanjing to Beijing, bringing the Emperor and the Court Officials together.

China had a large State Fleet, which travelled the known world to Africa and Europe trading goods, such as the precious blue and white porcelain, never seen before. This soon became an important part of house interiors and was very sort after, becoming the first global brand and a contact point between China and Europe.

Until recently the main archaeology in China has been directed to earlier periods, but the Emperors sent out their sons to found and control Regional Courts and here they were buried in elaborate tombs, some of which have been excavated and have revealed thousands of objects. One of the tombs revealed a complex crown, a robe, paintings and a game board and counters of GO, which we can see. Another one, the burial tomb of a Prince and his wife, contained 5,000 artefacts, including a gold Ewer, jade objects, gems and a blue and white porcelain dish on a silver stand, with a gold top.

International engagement with the wider world was achieved through warfare, trade, culture and exchanges.

The last object in the Exhibition is a painting by Andrea Mantegna

(1431 -1506), of The Adoration of the Magi, showing a small blue and white, Chinese porcelain dish, many years before the first Europeans reached China.