

## Lifeworks

## Immortal jade

To Confucius, jade was like a fine gentleman “esteemed by all under the sun.” Indeed, as an exhibition recently on view at the Art Gallery of Hamilton attests, jade has been valued in China even more than gold and silver in the Western world. *Jade, The Ultimate Treasure of Ancient China*, presents some 120 jade artifacts: decorative, intricate work such as *Sash Pendant with Dragonfly Carvings* from the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), a detailed cup and saucer carved during the early Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), and a shaman-like figure estimated to be from the Neolithic period (2600–200 BCE). The show is also a trove of historical detail. The visitor learns, for example, that jade craft in China attained its greatest glory and

technical perfection during the reign of the Chinese Emperor Qian Long (1736–95 CE). A formidable patron of the arts, Qian Long went so far as to make jade his private property, declaring trade in jade illegal and punishable by death.

This exhibition revolves around a precious stone few of us know much about. Jade is not one stone but two: nephrite and jadeite. In their pure and most highly prized form, both varieties are white. The presence of other minerals such as iron and chromium gives jade its many hues, including the shade we call “jade green.” Nephrite, considered the “true jade,” is very resistant to fracture. Jadeite is more easily broken and produces a brilliant gleaming surface when polished. Both the miner-

alogic qualities of jade and its significance in Chinese culture explain the longevity and mystique of the ancient artifacts in this exhibition.

*Jade* as an exhibition is sensational, not only because of the age of the artifacts it contains, but because of the boundaries it straddles. Curated by Barry Till, curator of Asian Art at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, *Jade* is organized by the Canadian Foundation for the Preservation of Chinese Cultural and Historical Treasures (chaired by Nelly Ng, a Toronto physician) and the China Cultural Relics Coordination Centre. *Jade* successfully introduces aspects of Chinese history to an audience that, generally, has little exposure to this heritage. *Jade* is also the poster exhibition for the federal government’s Canada Travelling Exhibition Indemnification program, the new jewel in the crown of the Department of Heritage.

Most of all, *Jade* crosses the boundaries between museum and gallery, artifact and art, craftsmanship and intellectual pursuit. Because of its social and anthropologic nature, *Jade* is an exhibition one might first expect to see at the Royal Ontario Museum or the Canadian Museum of Civilization (where it will be from May 8 to Sept. 2, 2002).

Courtesy China Cultural Relics Coordination Centre



**The Jade Suit of Princess Douwan**, Western Han Dynasty, 206 BCE – 25 CE

Yet its touring schedule primarily involves art gallery stops (the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Sept. 6 to Jan. 6, 2002; the Edmonton Art Gallery, Jan. 25 to Mar. 24, 2002; and the National Gallery of Canada, Oct. 4 to Jan. 5, 2003). True, the exhibition contains artifacts — items representative of culture and tradition — but artifacts that are so painstakingly rendered that they cause us to question the distinction between art and craft. If we narrow the criteria to the media now traditional in Western art, we narrow the gallery doors to the exclusion of ancient arts that evolved separately from European influences.

Whether or not this exhibition overstepped the art gallery's reach, one

thing is for certain: *Jade* is a beautiful exhibition with sexy marketing potential. It's exotic, mystical and has box-office draw without controversy. *Jade* even has its own equivalent of King Tut's gold burial mask: *The Jade Suit of Princess Douwan* (second century BCE). Discovered by chance in 1968 in a mountain tomb, the suit is in perfect condition. It is composed of over 2100 pieces of jade sewn together with 700 grams of gold wire. Experts believe it took craftsmen 10 years to complete.

As a stone, jade was believed to have protective and preservative qualities, warding off evil spirits and decay. The discovery of the tomb that contained both the princess and her husband, Prince Lui Sheng, considered one of

the greatest archeological finds of the 20th century, confirmed academic speculation about ancient Chinese burial practices. Princess Douwan's suit looks like a green and gold mosaic suit of armour. Like the rest of this exhibition's pieces, the burial suit is accompanied by its own provocative anecdote: clearly, the jade did not protect this body from decomposition, but the porous rock does have absorptive capabilities. The accompanying taped narration speculates that the princess' DNA might be found intermixed with the fibrous rock that encased her for 2000 years. Maybe Douwan is immortal after all.

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