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Exhibit Review: *Empress Dowager Cixi: Selections from the Summer Palace*

By Hannah Norton

The *Empress Dowager Cixi: Selections from the Summer Palace* exhibit, hosted at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California between November 12, 2017 and March 11, 2018, marked the first time that the Empress Dowager Cixi has been the subject of an exhibit beyond the borders of China. Held in association with the Summer Palace Museum in Beijing, the exhibit was guest curated by Ying-chen Ping, an art history professor from American University. Featuring art and pieces from Cixi’s own personal collection, this exhibit offers a glimpse into her life spent at her favorite residence, the Summer Palace. After being destroyed during the Second Opium War in 1860, the Summer Palace was refurbished in preparation for Cixi’s sixtieth birthday celebrations in 1894. After its restoration, the Empress Dowager made the Summer Palace her main residence, from which she oversaw governance of the empire. From the time of her ascendancy to Empress Dowager in 1861, until her death in 1908, Cixi served as the de-facto ruler of China. Cixi’s reign presided over the dramatic final decades of the Manchu Qing dynasty, which had ruled China since 1644, and was already under pressure from internal dissent and foreign opposition before Cixi’s rise to power. Instead of dwelling on the decline and fall of the Qing dynasty, this exhibit seeks to demonstrate how Cixi utilized art and material wealth to legitimize her rule and establish herself as a cultured woman.

Upon entering the room, the intricate throne set, prominently placed at the center of the exhibit, immediately draws the visitor’s attention. This reception throne set, featuring multiple pieces of furniture, provides a glimpse of where and how Cixi ruled. This set includes two large standing fans made of feathers, multiple animal figures signifying status, small tables topped by incense burners, a standing screen, long desk, and a semi-transparent image of Cixi hanging above the throne, completing the illusion of how the Empress Dowager held audience. Surrounding the throne set on both sides are examples of outfits worn by Manchu noble women and young imperial women during Cixi’s regency. Along the back wall, the exhibit features a selection of pieces worn by women and Pekingese dogs in the
imperial palace with a selection of Cixi’s own beauty products, including a makeup brush, comb, and nail guard. To the right, the room features pieces from Cixi’s collection of Western products and selections from her birthday celebrations. Included in this display are a number of clocks from the Empress Dowager’s personal collection. Like her nephew, the Guangxu Emperor who reigned from 1875 through 1908 mostly under her control, Cixi was fascinated by the technologies of the Western world, leading to her collection of clocks and mechanical birds.¹ In the corner of the room is the Empress Dowager Cixi’s 1901 Duryea Surrey car, one of the main pieces of the exhibit. Gifted to her as a sixty-sixth birthday present by General Yuan Shikai, the car further underscores Cixi’s keen interest in Western technology. A looped video describes some of the rumors and tales that the car inspired, such as the story of a car accident caused by a eunuch driving drunk ending in the death of a few pedestrians; and that Cixi insisted on the back part of the car having a raised platform to prevent her from being at the same level as her driver. The inclusion of the car in the exhibit marks the first time that it has returned to the United States since the car was purchased in 1901. In the back corner hangs a portrait of the Empress Dowager Cixi painted by Dai Ze after the original by Hubert Vos. To the left of the throne set, there are more artifacts, furniture, and pieces featuring the Chinese character shòu (寿), the symbol of longevity. Tucked into the corner, behind protective glass lay a series of four paintings credited to the Empress Dowager Cixi. These paintings, which featured her official seal, flowers, and a poem, were often given as gifts to important officials.²

Music plays throughout the room, helping to set the ambience and keep the viewer engaged with the exhibit. Information about Cixi, the artifacts, and the Summer Palace are painted on the walls of the room. These also include quotes, such as one from Isaac T. Headland, who wrote that “Cixi was the concubine of an emperor, the maker of an emperor, the dethroner of an emperor, and the ruler of China for nearly half a century, in a

land where woman has no standing or power."3 Interspersed with these fascinating anecdotes are large prints of the Empress Dowager, such as one of eunuchs carrying Cixi in a sedan chair. The exhibit is tied together by a number of common themes presented in the artwork, such as the symbol of longevity, bats, and dragons.

The exhibit looks at her relation to art and power without passing judgement on her character or the rumors about her private life. The museum avoids taking sides in the debate about her early life, the extent of her political power, or the rumors about her alleged sexual promiscuity and murderous plots. Even today, the legacy of the Empress Dowager Cixi remains fraught with controversy. The exhibit also offered a seven-part lecture series on the Empress Dowager Cixi, China under her rule, and Cixi’s relation to art. The lecturers included Jung Chang, the author of Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China, one of the most recent and controversial histories of Cixi. This book and some of the prints featured in the exhibit are included in the gift shop along with other histories of the Empress Dowager, such as the blatantly false history by J.O.P. Bland and Edmund Backhouse.

The Empress Dowager Cixi began her career as a lowly concubine of the Xianfeng Emperor, yet despite her humble origin, she rose to become one of the most powerful political figures of the late Qing dynasty. As regent, Cixi ruled over China for nearly half a century in the name of her son the Tongzhi Emperor, and later her adopted son the Guangxu Emperor. Although the museum could have worked harder to fight back against the inaccurate and false histories of Cixi by not selling a history based on forged documents and baseless rumors in their gift shop, the exhibit offers a glimpse into the daily life, residence, and love of art of the last female leader of China. The exhibit accurately displays Cixi’s utilization of art and material wealth as a means to give her rule legitimacy and present herself as a cultured woman. Though much about Cixi’s life remains shrouded in mystery, this exhibit provides a close-up view of a major Chinese political figure for the first time outside of China.

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3 Isaac T. Headland was a missionary in China during the early 1900s. His wife worked as a physician in the Imperial Palace for many of the ladies-in-waiting. This quote comes from his book Isaac Taylor Headland, Court Life in China: The Capital, its Officials and People (New York: F.H. Revell, 1909, 109.)
Bibliography


Author Bio

Hannah Norton is an undergraduate student at California State University, San Bernardino preparing to graduate with her Bachelor of Arts in History in June 2018. Her academic interests focus primarily on Modern Latin American history, with an emphasis on genocide, foreign relations, and gender issues. Upon graduation, she plans to pursue a Master of Arts in History, with an emphasis on Modern Latin American and World History. Hannah plans to eventually receive a doctorate in history and teach history at a community college level.