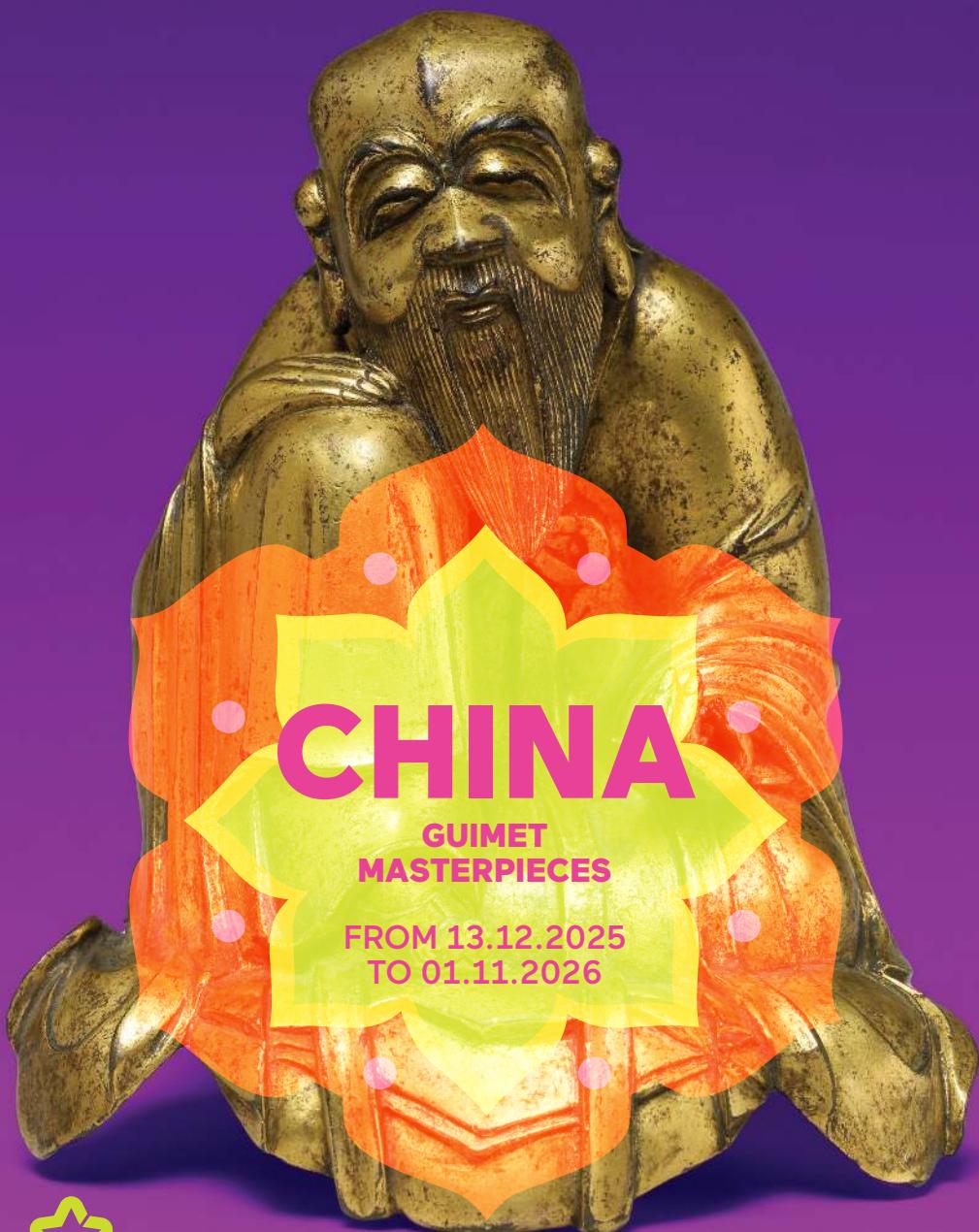


GUIMET+MONTPELLIER
MUSÉE FABRE - Hôtel de Cabrières-Sabatier d'Espeyran



CHINA

GUIMET
MASTERPIECES

FROM 13.12.2025
TO 01.11.2026



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A FOUR-YEAR JOURNEY THROUGH ASIA

The Guimet Museum has designed an original way to discover the treasures of its collections in different cities in France. Over the next four years, you can discover the art and culture of China, Japan, India and the Himalayas in each participating city.

Guimet+ invites you to contemplate these remarkable works while learning about Asian cultures by showing how each culture uniquely expresses four universal themes: prestige, beauty, the sacred and transgression.

These unique works are brought to life by multi-sensory, digital and immersive installations, offering an experience that piques the curiosity and invites visitors on a journey of poetic contemplation.

Prepare to be surprised!

Below, details of:
Prince on horseback, Indian World, India, 19th century, silver, MA 6313, Paris, Guimet Museum © GrandPalaisRmn (MNAAG, Paris) / Michel Urtado
Laozi figure (Lao Tseu) sitting, China, Ming or Qing dynasty, 17th or 18th century, gilt bronze, EO 1544, Paris, Guimet Museum © GrandPalaisRmn (MNAAG, Paris) / Thierry Ollivier
White Tara, Himalayan World, Tibet, 18th century or later, gilt copper alloy, MA 12495, Paris, Guimet Museum © GrandPalaisRmn (MNAAG, Paris) / Thierry Ollivier
Netsuke, Japan, Edo period (1603-1868), ivory, MG18840, Paris, Guimet Museum © GrandPalaisRmn (MNAAG, Paris) / Thierry Ollivier

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CHINA



China is an immense country with an ancient culture and its inventions have changed the world.

To showcase its emblems of power, ancient representations of beauty, sacred figures and rebels, we have brought together a collection of exceptional objects in bronze, jade and porcelain. These unique objects are an invitation to contemplate different ways to exist, different sensibilities, ways to express happiness or to find one's place in society.

Delve into a world of dragons, poet emperors, immortals and heroic outlaws. These are the ambassadors of a cultural history whose objects bear witness to unequalled technical perfection.



Opposite: **Bodhisattva standing, holding a fan and lotus bud**
North-east China, East Wei dynasty
(534-550), stone, traces of polychrome, acquisition, 1911, EO 2061, Paris, Guimet Museum © GrandPalaisRmn (MNAAG, Paris) / Thierry Ollivier

Ritual vessel for serving alcohol (gu)
Anyang (Henan province), Shang dynasty, Anyang era, 13th-11th century BCE, bronze, bequest of Alphonse Kahn, 1948, MA 439, Guimet Museum © GrandPalaisRmn (MNAAG, Paris) / Jean-Michel Routhier

PRESTIGE

Earning admiration or respect from others is an aspiration that exists in all cultures. Whether it's through social status, material wealth, knowledge or connections with the sacred, how one gains prestige depends on a multitude of criteria that evolve over time. By understanding these values and their hierarchy we can better appreciate the dynamics of an entire civilisation.

In Ancient China, the emperor earned his prestigious status through his sacred bond with the forces in the universe, his military and political strength, his wealth and his focus on knowledge. Everyone in this vast land was placed under his authority. The emperor's prestige was threatened, envied, disregarded, and sometimes lost, giving way to the establishment of a new social balance.

The selection of artworks from the Guimet Museum are predominantly focused on objects from the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), particularly during the reign of Emperor Qianlong who dominated a vast empire during the 18th century. He was a patron of the arts, a great antiques collector and a prolific writer.

BRONZE VESSELS

Bronze is a metal alloy that requires considerable resources to produce and work. From around 1600 BCE, the production of ritual objects for ancestor worship became one of the principal expressions of Chinese art for more than a millennium. Later, these ritual vessels used to heat and present offerings would be gradually made in other materials. Nevertheless, emperors would keep or collect these bronze objects to show the importance of Antiquity to the different imperial dynasties.

LUXURY AND SYMBOLS

Emperors would surround themselves with exceptional objects to demonstrate their power and wealth. Luxury porcelain would bear their personal symbol, enamelled vases would recall the prestige of Antiquity, jade objects would attest to their integrity. One symbol of good fortune, the *ruyi* (a kind of

sceptre) was used as a talisman or ceremonial object. In the 18th century, Qianlong commissioned the production of many of these sceptres. They were offered as diplomatic gifts to ambassadors and aristocrats during official celebrations.

ONE-HUNDRED BLOOMING FLOWERS

The pair of "hundred flowers" vases presented were made at the royal manufacture. They illustrate the emperor's desire to promote skilled excellence and to surround himself with exceptional objects. Their motif illustrates stunning observational skills and technical prowess and the diversity of coloured enamels on the porcelain is truly remarkable. Flowers are a powerful element of symbolic language, glorifying the abundance and vitality of nature. Here, they represent a wish for prosperity, respect and honour.



DRAGON AND PHOENIX

The dragon and phoenix are very ancient Chinese symbols. Very early on, dragons were associated with the powers of Heaven, water and prosperity in Chinese mythology. The phoenix, also symbolizing prosperity, expresses the complementarity between masculine and feminine. Over time, these symbols started to be shown together: the five-clawed dragon became the emperor's personal symbol, while the phoenix represented the empress. On this vase, the size and expressive force of the two symbols evoke the power of the imperial couple.

Hundred-flowers vase with dragon and phoenix motif
Jingdezhen kilns (Jiangxi province),
Qing dynasty (1644-1911), 18th century,
porcelain, décor "contrasted colours" (doucai),
Ernest Grandpied collection, entry before
1912, G 4354, Paris, Guimet Museum
© MNAAG, Paris, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn
/ Martine Beck-Coppola

THE SACRED

All cultures express absolute or inaccessible realities beyond the confines of mortal life. They command respect, are sometimes described as the source and essence of everything that exists and are celebrated by offerings and prayers.

Symbols and images acknowledge their presence and power and are central to rituals. They accompany individuals through the most important times in their lives and attest to convictions that we often call “wisdom”, “religion” or “path”.

Three major paths of fulfilment coexisted in China at the beginning of the common era: Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. While the ideologies of these three teachings are very different, they also influenced each other and were even combined in one “harmonious” teaching by some. Generally, these three philosophies do not exclude one another; they each address different moments of the life of an individual or community.

BODHISATTVA

Originating in India, Buddhism progressively grew and evolved in China. It retained the codes of Indian art but adopted original styles and nuances. Chinese art represents many different figures worshipped by its followers: Buddha, but also bodhisattvas. Just like the former, bodhisattvas are the epitome of compassion and wisdom, they guide those who call upon them in their prayers.

RITUAL TABLET

Extremely rare and difficult to sculpt and polish, jade quickly became considered the most precious stone in China. As early as 4th millennium BCE, jade was used to make important ritual objects. While we still don't know what their main purpose was, these tablets continue to be celebrated for their power and symbolism.

Jade was first considered a symbol of immortality and the power of the earth and sky (here mountains and stars), later it was associated with purity and moral virtues.

LAOZI AND THE IMMORTALS

Laozi is considered as the founding father of Taoism. He taught that the Tao (the source of all existence) is also a path to salvation, and by embracing the natural flow of the universe one can find inner freedom. Contemplative life in temples as well as medicinal and alchemist practices are believed to prolong the life of Taoists. Their mythology is full of immortals: exemplary eternal beings who ride the clouds.



Sculpture of a mountain temple

South China (?), Qing dynasty (1644-1911),
sculpted bamboo, acquisition, later
19th century, MG 1337, Paris, Guimet Museum
© GrandPalaisRmn (MNAAG, Paris)
/ Thierry Ollivier

BEAUTY

Beauty stirs the senses, desire and pleasure. It blinds and delights. It is both a sign of vitality and seduction and has been at the heart of human preoccupation since time immemorial. Creativity and behaviour is extremely diverse when it comes to conforming to beauty standards, which vary greatly from one culture to another.

In Ancient China, an individual's beauty was firstly associated with their health, but also with their ethics. In an aim to maintain social order, there were often strict codes regarding behaviour, clothing, accessories and makeup and these were a constant focus of attention. However, none of these elements escaped change.

There was one rule which lastingly marked the representation of beauty in Ancient China: the body would never appear nude. Neglected clothes and unkempt hair were also never socially acceptable.

BEAUTY CANONS

The beauty canons of Ancient China are represented in poetry, paintings as well as many figurines and funeral objects. During the 7th and 8th centuries, court ladies were influenced by the perfumes and colours of foreign lands with which China was in contact. While brightly coloured makeup and sophisticated hairstyles were extremely fashionable, high-ranking women matched their hairstyling skills to create "double", "docile", "worried" and even "enchanted" hair buns.

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL...

"If your eyes lose sight of the mirror, it is impossible to trim your beard and eyebrows. If the body loses focus, it will no longer be possible to know what is correct." As in many cultures, in China, the relationship with one's image provokes questions that go beyond appearance. This passage from a classic philosophical work illustrates how familiarity with the mirror invites you to focus on your appearance, but it also to reflect on ethics and social behaviour.

WILLOWS IN BLOOM

Slender young women who are "as supple as a weeping willow" are lightly dressed in fine clothing. Their elegance and modesty illustrate a beauty ideal that appeared in China in the 15th century. The ideal woman, "a partner in excellence", had a perfect face, a subtly perfumed body, and flawless behaviour and moral conduct. In China, the weeping willow, a symbol of spring and burgeoning love, also suggested the nostalgia of fleeting love, and the bitter-sweet feelings of fading beauty.



Court lady (funeral substitute)

North China kilns, Tang dynasty (618-907),
7th-8th century, terracotta, "three colour"
glaze (sancai), bequest of Jacques Polain,
1993, MA 6126, Paris, Guimet Museum
© MNAAG, Paris, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn
/ Roger Asselberghs

TRANSGRESSION

When it comes to humour, toying with the conventions of language and politeness is always a source of entertainment.

When it comes to justice, breaking the rules of an oppressive power can be considered an act of courage.

Intoxication, a trance-like state and love can sometimes lead an individual to surpass themselves, and in some circumstances, inspire poetry or mystical awakenings.

In Ancient China, rules were deliberately broken. While the derogative of authority would always be to remind deviants of the law, audacity, outrageous behaviour, cunning and concealment were often celebrated by literature, theatre, and by certain strategic or religious acts. Popular and classic novels, tales and poems illustrate that disobedience has existed in all classes of society and through all eras. Transgression is ambivalent, it threatens social order but, in many cases, it also ensures its stability and cyclic regeneration.

ECCENTRIC SAGES

The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove voluntarily broke away from imperial power and renounced their social responsibilities to become examples of liberated men. They drank excessive alcohol, wrote poetry, practiced calligraphy and music in the bamboo grove and became famous for their eccentric behaviour and disregard for the politics of the court. This screen was reproduced on the back of a poem written by Emperor Qianlong, showing his critical admiration for this circle of scholars.

BUDAI

Depicted as sitting on the ground, laughing and generally unkempt, Budai is always represented carrying a bag, giving him the name Budai, literally meaning "cloth bag".

Contrary to the solemnity of the many Buddhist figures, this historical monk is known for his jolly nature and humorous personality. He is one of the most popular eccentric figures in the Chinese pantheon

and has become a symbol of abundance and fortune. Today, people still rub his stomach in the hope of becoming rich.

"FOCUS ON YOUR PATH RATHER THAN THE HEAVENS!"

Outlaws were admired for their extraordinary strength, audacity, and their honour and loyalty to their brothers in arms. The Chinese novel Water Margin depicts excessive characters who transgress every social norm. Their wild ways stirred fascination and inspired many illustrations, adaptations, motifs on porcelain and even television series. Their ambivalent, sometimes banned tale, was also interpreted as an example of the violence needed to regenerate the empire.



Table screen of the Seven Sages
of the Bamboo Grove engraved on the back
of a poem by Emperor Qianlong

Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Qianlong reign
(1736-1795), sculpted jade, acquisition
late 19th century, MG 2401, Paris, Guimet
Museum © GrandPalaisRmn (MNAAG, Paris)
/ Thierry Ollivier

REFINEMENT

The collections of the Musée Fabre preserve the work of Colette Richarme, a painter and poet who settled in Montpellier in 1937. Her personal history is closely linked to China, the country of her birth in 1904. The objects presented here, inherited from her father – a silk merchant and collector – have been remarkably preserved. These precious mementos of a childhood spent in southern China on the banks of the Pearl River reflect the European taste of the time for traditional Chinese craftsmanship, the refinement of which continues to amaze us.

STAGE CURTAIN OF THE CHINESE OPERA

The backdrop of the Chinese opera stage consists of two curtains through which the actors enter and exit. Their decoration features sumptuous, embroidered motifs: key characters from the operatic repertoire, as well as dragons, phoenixes, flowers, and other auspicious symbols. Here, in a dominant position, we see the *dan* – a high-ranking female figure – distinguished by the elegance of her bearing and adornment. In one hand, she holds a golden pheasant feather attached to her headdress; in the other, she holds up a pocket mirror to contemplate her reflection. Below her stand two *jing*, whose stylized makeup, aggressive posture, and armor indicate their role as warriors. Finally, the scene is enhanced with a symbolic dimension through the presence of mythical creatures: the dragon above to protect the heavens, and the lion below, representing the earth.

FANS WITH HANDLES

Made of bamboo, silk, and ivory, round fans were initially used primarily by ladies of the imperial court and the aristocracy. Closely associated with the feminine figure, they suggest the ephemeral beauty, melancholy, and sometimes fragile destiny of women in ancient China. Delicate accessories, they are emblematic of literary beauties and court

ladies, representing the perfect union of utility, art, and poetry. As for the folding fan, more practical and portable, it was especially popular with men. The popularity of fans fostered the development of painting itself. The fan on the left bears a dedication, signed and stamped by the artist.

MINIATURE SHOES

In China, the beauty of a woman with extremely small feet was appreciated from the 10th century onward, notably by Emperor Li Yu. He is said to have been inspired by the grace of a concubine dancing with bound feet, known as "lotus feet." The oldest written records concerning foot binding date back to the 11th century. This practice became associated with an ideal of beauty that spread among the elite. Miniature shoes, embroidered and precious, played an important role in betrothals, and "lotus feet," a symbol of purity and elegance, were the mark of a high-ranking woman. Criticized by 19th-century reformers, foot binding was banned after 1912 but did not truly disappear until 1949.



Colette with a parasol
1908, Médiathèque centrale Émile Zola, Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole

Miniature shoes
Wood, nails, textile embroidered with polychrome silk threads and metallic threads
Régine Monod, legatee of the Colette Richarme Collection, photo Association Richarme



MUSÉE FABRE - Hôtel de Cabrières-Sabatier d'Espeyran

PRATICAL INFORMATIONS

OPENING HOURS

Musée Fabre

Tuesday to Friday:

11am to 6pm

Closed on 1 January, 1 May, 8 May
and 25 December.

Hôtel de Cabrières-Sabatier d'Espeyran -

Département des arts décoratifs

Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays:

11am to 6pm

Additional opening hours for groups
by reservation on Thursdays and Fridays
from 9:30 am to 4 pm

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HOW TO GET THERE

Tramway: lignes 1, 2 stop Comédie
and Corum, ligne 4 stop Corum

www.guimet.fr

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