

Crowning GLORY

IMAGES: COURTESY OF LIANG YI MUSEUM

*Hong Kong's Liang Yi Museum is currently presenting *Crowning Glory: The Beauty of Ladies' Ornaments from Asia and Europe*, a landmark exhibition exploring the role that women's clothing and accessories played in the social construction of gender and identity from the late imperial era in China and Japan to the early modern period. The aim of the exhibit is to provide an insightful view into the traditional and modern concept of female beauty in the East, and its dilution and evolution upon the introduction of Western notions, morals and ideas.*



A travelling box (tebako) containing toiletries with writing utensils Japan, Edo period
Maki-e lacquer on wood



Washbasin stand with towel rack, China, 18th Century, Huanghuali, Liang Yi Museum Collection



Lady's jacket, China, mid-19th Century
©On loan from The Chris Hall Textile Collection

Hollywood Road in Hong Kong is a well-known destination for antique-hunters, especially antique Chinese furniture. In the 1980s and 1990s, this was the spot for anyone looking to buy a Ming dynasty southern official's chair, or a mid-Qing kang table made of the finest zitan. It is fitting then, that Liang Yi Museum – a private museum that houses one of the world's finest collections of Chinese classical antiques - opened on 181 Hollywood Road in 2014.

The four-storey museum is home to one of the world's largest and best curated collections of Chinese antique furniture, made of the treasured materials huanghuali and zitan, from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Started in the 1980s with many of the earlier pieces purchased on Hollywood Road itself, three decades later, the collection has grown to over 400 pieces., some of which have been exhibited in other major museums, including the National Museum of History in Taiwan and the Palace Museum in Beijing.

Like Hong Kong itself, Liang Yi Museum is a blend of East and West. For those interested in Chinese antiques, the furniture collection will enthrall. However, for those curious about European history, the Liang Yi Museum also houses the world's premier collection of bejewelled clutches, compacts and powder boxes. Made in the finest design houses such as Cartier, Boucheron and Van Cleef & Arpels, these nécessaires and minaudières, glittering with precious stones and showing exquisitely detailed craftsmanship, were once a staple of every lady's evening wear. With over 800 examples from the late 1880s through to the 1960s, this dazzling collection provides an elegant peek into a bygone era.

In addition to classical Chinese furniture and European vanities, the museum's diverse collections also include European silver and Japanese works of art. The Liang Yi Museum is singular among Hong Kong institutions in its continuing commitment to collecting and presenting its permanent collections to new audiences. In addition to permanent galleries devoted to furniture, the museum presents an

array of exhibitions, publications, and public education programmes dedicated to illustrating the connections that have always influenced art and culture – and that relevance on our lives in a global community.

Building on the success of its March 2019 exhibition *Chrysanthemum and Dragon: The Art of Ornamentation in Japan and China in the 17th – 19th Century*, which marked the debut of Liang Yi Museum's recently acquired Japanese collection, *Crowning Glory: The Beauty of Ladies' Ornaments from Asia and Europe* will further reveal more of the Museum's Japanese collection and its continuous research into the design, craftsmanship and heritage of Asian art. While the former exhibition focused largely on scholars and the literati, who were mostly men, this show takes a closer look at the other half of society: women.

This compelling exhibition features over 250 pieces, including objects of everyday use - from traditional Chinese furniture associated with the boudoir; Japanese hair ornaments and silver pieces; to textiles from both cultures.

Clothing and accessories have been a mirror of aesthetic and cultural progression for nearly all of human history. They provide an exceptional field for studying how people interpret a specific form of culture for their own purposes and everyday self-presentation. As both Chinese and Japanese society are deeply rooted in Confucian beliefs, for centuries the rights of women from the two countries have been limited to being subordinates, or at best, satellites to men. Low literacy rates, minimal property rights, and a small voice in public affairs made women the ornaments of the family and were so accordingly accessorised.

Geographical location, climate, culture, history and customs are some of the usual factors that shape each society's perception of beauty. The narrative of the exhibition therefore unfolds with the first section, which provides a visual reference to traditional beauty standards in China and Japan, with paintings and illustrations, including woodblock prints from the renowned series 'Mirror of Historical Eras' (*Jidai Kagami*) by Yōshū Chikanobu (1838–1912).

The heart of the exhibition features a display of selected artefacts including wooden objects, textiles and hair ornaments, used and worn by traditional Chinese and Japanese women from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Under the patriarchal structure of a Chinese family, a woman was confined to the domestic sphere; and hence she would have spent most of her time in her private chamber. A bed was the most important part of a woman's dowry, and was one of the very few objects that would remain in her possession regardless of divorce or widowhood. It was also the symbol of her status within the family.

Similarly, Japanese garments and ornaments - even hairstyles - reflect a wearer's cultural identity and social status. During certain periods, the choice of a hairstyle could be used to distinguish between a courtesan, an actress, or an aristocrat. The choice of hair ornaments, like kimonos, was also season-sensitive. With distinctive seasons in Japan, Japanese craftsmen utilised the visual vocabulary of each season as decorative inspiration.

Cultural exchanges of ideas are never one-sided: The West was also influenced by the exotic cultures of the East. Traders and missionaries based in the 'Paris of the East' (Shanghai), as well as other designated port cities of China, introduced Chinese fashion back to their home countries. The final section of *Crowning Glory* features a selection of European vanities from the Museum's permanent collection, with a particular focus on objects influenced by Chinoiserie and Japonism from the 1920s to 1930s.

To ground the exhibition through real-life examples and social context, there are also four dedicated galleries where visitors can immerse themselves in the lives of four Chinese women - Wu Jiangxian, Yuan Dashe, Guan Daosheng and Mo Shuying - all of whom made significant contributions to literature, art or politics from the Sui Dynasty (569 - 618) to the modern day.

The gripping exhibition hence not only showcases the distinctive craftsmanship and creative expression of the two countries, but also presents an invaluable record of the progress of human history, inviting visitors to join the global conversation on the changing social consciousness on women's evolving identity and social status.

An illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition and includes a foreword by the director of Liang Yi Museum; essays by the curator and other scholars addressing the historical, cultural, sociological and aesthetic dimensions of selected works. Free monthly talks featuring a line-up of distinguished speakers have also been organised to complement the exhibition. More details can be found on Liang Yi Museum's website, as well as Facebook, Instagram and Wechat.

Crowning Glory: The Beauty of Ladies' Ornaments from Asia and Europe runs until February 27 2020

Opening Times: Tuesday to Saturday, 10:00 am to 6:00 pm (by appointment only)

Location: 181 - 199 Hollywood Rd, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong



A Victorian silver-mounted lady's travelling dressing table set, England
 Maker: Thomas Whitehouse, 1862
 Glass and silver
 Liang Yi Museum collection