



MAK

Applied Arts | Contemporary Art

Press Release

## The Emperor's New Colors. 19th-Century Chinese Art from the MAK Collection

Press Preview	Tuesday, 12 April 2011, 10:30 a.m.
Opening	Tuesday, 12 April 2011, 8:00 p.m.
Exhibition venues	MAK Study Collection Textiles and MAK Permanent Collection Asia MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna
Exhibition Term	13 April – 18 September 2011
Opening Hours	Tue MAK NITE® 10 a.m.–12 midnight Wed–Sun 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Mon closed

The exhibition “The Emperor’s New Colors. 19th-Century Chinese Art from the MAK Collection,” to open on 12 April 2011, demonstrates the history and diversity of China’s courtly art production during this period using objects from the MAK Collection Textiles and Carpets and the Asia section of the MAK Permanent Collection. For this showing, the usual division of holdings according to materials will be superseded by a more integrative mode of presentation.

The 19th century began with China a leading world power, but by century’s end it had become a dysfunctional state which was dependent upon the powers of Europe. This was due to both foreign and domestic developments: even as early as the late-18th century, it had become clear that the gigantic Chinese Empire was growing ever more difficult to administrate, but serious deterioration began to show only in the 19th century. Despite the country’s being weakened by internal unrest and wars with the rising colonial powers of Europe, the power of China’s imperial house continued to be celebrated with extravagant creations—in seeming oblivion to the political problems affecting its dominion. Chinese traditional motifs continued to resonate in such works of art and craftsmanship, developing historicist-type variations. At the same time, newly invented chemical pigments made possible flamboyantly colored compositions that were highly coveted.

Magnificent imperial robes continued to place the Chinese Emperor firmly at the center of the cosmos. The Emperor possessed exclusive ceremonial rights to the color yellow and the five-clawed dragon. One of the highlights of this exhibition is an unfinished, richly embroidered robe done in imperial yellow. Alongside other dragon robes and accessories, this presentation will also include examples of civil servants’ clothing that reflect the Chinese Empire’s complex, tightly organized bureaucracy.

Although exports—above all to European markets—stagnated during this period, porcelain and luxury articles from the imperial manufactories show how the tradition of superlative craftsmanship was upheld. The imperial porcelain manufactory in Jingdezhen supplied the court with costly ceramics which frequently harkened back to 18th-century designs. Towards the end of the 19th century, a campaign was mounted to recapture export markets that had been lost. Large ensembles of “sample vases”—this exhibition features two such groups—were produced to demonstrate the high standard of Chinese porcelain. The description customary at the time, reading “Vases from the imperial porcelain manufactory in Jingdezhen, demonstrating the colors used in gifts of porcelain presented on the occasion of the Emperor’s marriage in 1889,” documents the urgency of efforts to strengthen the country’s export industry.

The British maritime trade monopoly during the first half of the century led to the growth of the export industry in and around the “treaty port” of Canton (Guangzhou). An increasing number of works employed ivory, with consideration being given to the European market in terms of styles and actual uses. An ivory box shown in the exhibition represents a rare example of such craftsmanship. The opulent carvings portray everyday scenes from Chinese commercial life and surround, at center, the coat of arms of State Chancellor Prince Klemens Wenzel von Metternich—who received the box as a gift from Emperor Francis I in 1813.

Likewise on exhibit is a chess set thought to have been ordered in Canton by Archduke Franz Ferdinand while on his world tour (1892–1893). The late 19th century saw numerous high-quality chess sets produced in this region for export. Typically Chinese is the convention of coloring the “black” figures red—an originally English variant. The piece representing the white king, who symbolizes the Chinese Emperor, is somewhat larger than that of the red king, who appears as an imaginatively dressed foreign ruler. The foldable gameboard also contains a backgammon set.

Finally, this exhibition will include photographs taken in Hong Kong by Austrian photographer Wilhelm Burger in 1869. These show China as seen by Europeans during the 19th century.

All press material on this exhibition is available for download at <http://mak.at/press>

This exhibition’s press preview and opening will take place in combination with those of “The Second Skin. Objects for Packing and Presenting,” an exhibition in the Metal section of the MAK Study Collection.



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Press Data Sheet

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Curator	Barbara Karl, MAK Curator Textiles and Carpets Johannes Wieninger, MAK curator, Asia
MAK Expert-guided Tour	Thursday, 14 April 2011, 5 p.m., with Johannes Wieninger, MAK Curator Asia Thursday, 21 April 2011, 5 p.m., with Barbara Karl, MAK Curator Textiles and Carpets
MAK Admission	€ 9.90 with MAK guide / € 7.90 / reduced € 5.50 Free admission on Saturdays®
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Vienna, 21 March 2011