

**PRESS RELEASE**  
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# MING GOLD

**THE SPLENDOURS AND BEAUTIES OF IMPERIAL CHINA**  
**(14<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

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西安曲江艺术博物馆  
XIAN QUJIANG MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS



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**MUSÉE GUIMET**

18 September 2024 – 13 January 2025

Guimet – French National Museum of Asian Arts  
Press preview Tuesday, 17 September at 4.30pm

**This autumn, the Guimet museum transports visitors into the opulent world of the Ming imperial court and invites them to discover the refinement and protocols of the art of women's jewellery. This exhibition offers a rare glimpse of the delicacy and splendour of some of China's greatest gold masterpieces, unique and intricate objects which could be found both in the Forbidden City and the palaces of the wealthy elite.**



**Dragon-head hairpins**, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), gold filigree set with pearls, Xi'an, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, XYB0080/1-2 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)

Thanks to pieces on loan from the Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts (Xi'an, China) and their exceptional collection of vases and ornaments, the Guimet museum is presenting an exhibition of gold objects and jewellery created during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). This stunning collection reflects the splendour and unparalleled refinement of gold craftsmanship and the art of jewellery during a golden era of Chinese civilisation.

Gold has been considered a symbol of wealth and social status since High Antiquity, much like bronze, jade and silk. However, unlike silver, which became the main monetary metal during the Ming era, gold was only used to make or embellish luxury objects such as dinner services and jewellery.



**Phoenix hairpin**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold filigree set with rubies and sapphires, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0089 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)

The Ming dynasty was the last dynasty ruled by the Han people around the same era as the Italian Renaissance. The Ming overthrew the Mongol-led Yuan and restored Chinese traditions and Confucian law. Today, it is famous for its monuments (notably the Forbidden City and the Great Wall of China) and its arts, particularly porcelain (the remarkable *blue and white* wares), natural wood furniture, ink paintings and literature.

The Ming dynasty also saw significant maritime explorations which brought immense wealth to the empire: gold, silver, spices, gems and exotic animals. But the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century marked an important milestone: European navigators were searching for new trade routes to the Far East and opened up sea routes that linked Europe to Asia and the Americas. As a result, commerce became international, and China's trade grew intensely, turning this once agrarian empire into a merchant country. Towns in the south benefitted from this commerce and a new class of wealthy merchants emerged. Gradually, the desire for material goods reached every layer of society. In a context of urban development, luxury products such as crafted or embroidered silk, goldware and jewellery became particularly popular symbols of social status and wealth and were no longer reserved for aristocracy.



**Water jug with a dragon and lion playing with a ball**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), Wanli rule (1573-1620), dated 1601, gold, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0086/1-2 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)

When the Ming emperors came into power, one of the first measures they took was to reinstate the customs and clothing of the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties, which were considered the paragons of Chinese tradition. This decision by the new rulers reflected their desire to establish more appropriate attire and one that starkly contrasted with that of the Mongol. Gold, jade and silver accessories and jewellery (hairpins and ornaments, belt buckles and loops, scarf pendants, earrings, rings and bracelets) became an essential part of elite attire. Just like clothing, they indicated the status and class of the wearer. In fact, they were even subject to a specific law which stipulated how they may be worn depending on one's status. The law aimed to restrict the use of precious materials while reserving certain motifs (which served as insignia) for members of the imperial family and a few senior figures. Officially, the dragon, pheasant and phoenix were exclusively for the emperor and a few members of his close family.



**Hairpin with coiled dragon**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold filigree set with rubies, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0051 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)



**Pair of bracelets**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0047/1-2 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)



**Pair of bracelets**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold set with rubies, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0077/1-2 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)

At the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and particularly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (period to which most of these pieces have been attributed), the production of gold objects flourished. Some of the most remarkable pieces were decorated with gemstones: rubies, spinels, blue, yellow or green sapphires, or other rare materials such as white or pale-green jade, fresh-water pearls and kingfisher feathers. As a result, the production of these symbols of wealth and social success reached unparalleled levels. In a context of economic growth and waning imperial authority, the wealthy elite continually imitated aristocratic fashions and practices.



**Sceptre or ruyi (detail)**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), Wanli rule (1573-1620), dated 1601, gold filigree set with jade, rubies and sapphires, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0109 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)

Gold ornaments were even believed to reveal the radiance of a woman's face, a notion long celebrated by poets. Besides their role as an ostentatious display of wealth, these accessories also became an essential to aristocratic women's attire and were closely associated with the ideal of feminine beauty.

The choice of motif was also of decisive importance. In addition to being insignia, they were believed to bring wealth, happiness, health and longevity to the wearer. Flowers and birds were traditionally associated with the seasons and brought good fortune. The *prunus* evoked the beauty of winter, the peony abundance and spring, the lotus purity and summer, and the chrysanthemum integrity and autumn. The lantern promised an abundant harvest and was associated with Chinese New Year. The bat was the symbol for happiness, the crab for success, and the butterfly for longevity. Other elements were borrowed from religious iconography, like the staff of Buddhist pilgrims, or from the eight Taoist immortals such as the calabash bottle, symbol of abundance and a thriving progeny, or the basket of flowers, associated with fecundity.



**Decorative vase**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold filigree set with jade, rubies and sapphires, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0103/1-2 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)



**Crab motif hairpins**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold filigree set with pearls and rubies, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0097/1-2 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)



**Lantern motif hairpins**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold filigree, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0105/1-2 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)



**Calabash earrings**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold, Xi'an, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0055/1-2 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)

Members of the aristocracy would sometimes use gold and silver dinner services with dishes, plates, goblets, carafes and bowls, and occasionally chopsticks and spoons. These services were used for libations as well as for presenting and consuming delicacies and alcohol. Hosts would lay them out for banquets as a display of their wealth and social status. Among the most remarkable of these luxury objects are those with a baroque décor of dragons or flowers, with latticework in precious metal, showcasing the intricate techniques of filigree and granulation and the virtuosity of the craftsmen. Although officially reserved for the emperor and his close family, these ostentatious luxury objects became popular among the wealthy elite.





**Sacred figure ornament**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold, Xi'an, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0177 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)

Today, there are very few gold objects left from the Ming era. Given the value of the precious material, many have been melted to make more modern objects. This is why we have only a few rare examples in this exhibition, all of which have come from the exceptional collection belonging to the Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts.

The objects in this exhibition have been presented in a way that highlights the luxury and refinement of each piece, immersing visitors in the opulence of the Ming aristocracy. The exhibition not only invites people to contemplate the aesthetic quality of these objects but also offers educational and multimedia content explaining the role gold played in the Ming dynasty, and its importance to the attire of elite women at that time. Multimedia presentations for example, developed with the support of the Paris School of Jewellery Arts, help visitors understand the techniques used in goldsmithing (melting, hammering, embossing, chasing, stamping, filigree and granulation). Meanwhile, reproductions of famous paintings show how the jewellery was worn, and content designed for younger visitors (8–12-year-olds), explains the significance of motifs, their official symbolism and popular beliefs. This additional content offers a deeper understanding and insight into the palace, gardens and private residences of Chinese aristocracy at a time of significant economic change and one that shaped modern China.



**Phoenix motif ring**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), chiselled gold, Xi'an, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0036 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)



**Ornaments with *shou* character on bat motif**, Ming dynasty (1368-1644), gold filigree set with rubies and sapphires, Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts, Xi'an, XYB0043/1-3 © Peter Viem Kwok's Dong Bo Zhai Collection (Collected in Xi'an Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts)

**This exhibition is organised by the Guimet museum and the Qujiang Museum of Fine Arts (Xi'an, Shaanxi, China) as part of the Franco-Chinese Year of Cultural Tourism and the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between France and China. The objects exhibited are from the exceptional collection of Mr. Kwok.**

#### **Curation**

Hélène Gascuel, curator in charge of Chinese textiles and furniture at Guimet  
Arnaud Bertrand, curator in charge of Korean and Ancient China collections at Guimet

#### **Guided tours (adults):**

Every Sunday at 3pm, 4pm and 5pm (except 3 November, 29 December and 5 January)

Duration: 30 mins.

Free on presentation of entry ticket, no reservation required.