

# Art and Legitimacy: The Heavenly and Earthly Treasures of the Qianlong Emperor

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By Marian Ang | Sep 27, 2023

Explore three spectacular highlights from *Heaven and Earth: The Collection of an Aesthete Part 1* coming to Sotheby's Hong Kong this autumn.

As the ruler of a vast empire, asserting the legitimacy of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) established by his Manchu ancestors, and that of his own reign in particular, was of vital importance for the Qianlong Emperor. Descended from an ethnic minority who came from beyond the northern Chinese border, the Qianlong Emperor understood the imperative to demonstrate his deep understanding of China's history and culture, aligning his Manchu roots with native Chinese cultural and spiritual ideals. His quest for political legitimacy was supported by a carefully cultivated image as an enlightened, almighty leader who mediated between Heaven and Earth, and enhanced by his patronage of the arts – in particular the exquisite Imperial treasures commissioned to signal the different facets of his status. Building upon the cultural accomplishments of his grandfather the Kangxi Emperor, and his father, the Yongzheng emperor, the Qianlong Emperor recruited the most talented artists and craftsmen to his court and pushed them to new creative heights. We take a closer look at three highlights coming to Sotheby's Hong Kong this autumn.



**The Ruler of Heaven and Earth**



An imperial massive Khotan-green jade *bi* disc with original bronze 'dragon' stand, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period | Estimate Upon Request.

Jade *bi* discs fascinated the Qianlong Emperor, who was an avid collector. The famous ritual text *Zhou Li* (Rites of Zhou), collected and compiled over the third to second centuries BC, states that of the jade implements used for ritual ceremonies to Heaven, Earth and the four directions, the *bi* disc was reserved for offering rituals to Heaven. The Qianlong period heralded a series of innovations, in particular the crafting of large-scale jade *bi* works of art. Adorned with pale green veining flowing across its impeccably smooth surface, this spectacular jade *bi* boasts a diameter of 40.5 cm and thickness of five cm, with its aperture measuring 13 cm.

'Jade is capable of providing shade and shelter for good crops, preventing water shortages and droughts, making it a treasure.'

– Guoyu (Discourses of the States)

This ancient symbol of Heaven is supported by the powerful image of the dragon, the greatest signifier of imperial birthright since Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of unified China, styled himself the “Emperor of the Dragon Throne” and “master of the waters”. The writhing bodies of two ferocious five-clawed dragons cast from bronze emerge from frothing waves, piercing through the graceful clouds to support the massive dark green jade *bi* disc with their horns and claws. A celestial mountain cradles the *bi* at its base. For the imperial “heavenly sons of the real dragon”, which every emperor called themselves, it became vital to preserve the exclusivity of the five-clawed dragon motif as a signifier of the emperor himself, with unauthorised depictions punishable by death during the Qianlong Emperor’s reign.

Standing 54 cm tall at its highest point, this spectacular creation would have once stood outside an important hall within the Forbidden City, carefully positioned on its central axis. The only other jade disc of this size, cut and polished from the same stone and mounted in the same style of bronze stand, still

stands today facing the *Yangxindian* (Hall of Mental Cultivation) where the Emperor spent much of his time at the court, carrying a potent message of imperial authority over the heavenly and earthly realms.



## The Imperial Aesthete

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As the ruler of the world's largest and wealthiest nation at the time, the Qianlong Emperor's generous patronage of the arts and lavish commissions were vital and necessary expressions of his superlative connoisseurship and peerless aesthetic tastes.

The Qianlong Garden located in the *Ningshougong* (Palace of Tranquil Longevity) complex of the Forbidden City was first built in the 28th year of the Kangxi reign (1689), and subsequently renovated by the Qianlong Emperor between the 37th and 41st year (1772-76) of his reign. Intended as the Qianlong Emperor's retirement retreat, the lavish and exquisite furnishings of the Qianlong Gardens' three major buildings *Fuwangge* (the Wish-fulfilling Pavilion), *Juanqinzhai* (the Lodge for Retired Life), and *Yucuixuan* (Gallery of Jade Purity) represent the apex of the era's craftsmanship. The emperor oversaw every detail of the renovation, sparing no expense on the finest materials and craftsmen.



A rare and impressive imperial jade and hardstone-inlaid lacquered wood 'birds and wisteria' panel, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period | Estimate: 5,000,000 - 8,000,000 HKD

Details of trailing wisteria stems, an auspicious symbol of longevity and prosperity, grace furnishings such as the present work. Two paradise flycatchers perched on wisteria branches are enclosed by a grained *jichimu* wood frame that resembles elegant woody vines, whilst the hundred-treasure inlay technique was deployed to create intricate and precious white jade bodies, lapis lazuli crests, red carnelian beaks and claws, and mother of pearl eyes. The organic simplicity of this hanging screen sets off the natural beauty of the gardens, combining courtly style with literati sentiments. Among the most impressive of the Qing court hanging screens, this work closely resembles a pair preserved in the *Yucuixuan* to this day.



## The Enlightened One

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With its wild yet natural grace, the warm honey-brown meditation chair fashioned from gnarled, swirling roots and branches conjures up the impression of a sitter enveloped and supported by Nature herself. Root wood was highly prized by the literati and beloved by the emperors of the Qing dynasty. Admiring the “primitive simplicity” of the root wood ‘Liuyun’ raft-shaped couch he encountered by the Slender West Lake in Yangzhou (now housed in the Palace Museum in Beijing), the Qianlong Emperor composed the poem *Enjoying the Garden* to praise its organic beauty:

‘Accidentally encounter added pleasure, in a realm of water and bamboo. I can take it to Pengze Lake, and it is celebrated in Yangzhou from now on. It looks like rugged rocks, as the corridor winding. Leaning on the wood couch Liuyun, I joyfully meet the calligrapher Yiguang.’

– the Qianlong Emperor



An extremely rare imperial rootwood meditation chair, Qing dynasty, Yongzheng - Qianlong period | Estimate: 1,500,000 - 2,500,000 HKD

The chairs themselves only allowed their owners to sit bolt upright, and they appeared frequently in Buddhist and Taoist paintings, particularly those of Zen monks and Arhats, who had reached a stage of enlightened perfection through study and meditation. It chimed with the literati dream of immersion in the beauty of mountains and rivers, and self-cultivation through communing with nature. This idealist longing for the purity of nature dated as far back as the Han, Wei and Jin dynasties, influenced by the precepts of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. For the Qianlong Emperor, it was a means of cultivating a personal image that placed himself within the realm of the virtuous and enlightened.

Contemporary records document the production of numerous items of root wood furniture by the esteemed Imperial Workshop – not only of chairs, but also beds, thrones, tables and incense stands, many of them taking a year or so to complete. Taking a very personal interest in these works, the Qianlong Emperor specifically named the skilled craftsman he wished to undertake any particular repairs. The finished works were prominently displayed in imperial gardens, including the Garden of Harmonious Interests in the Summer Palace, and the Siyong Study of the Old Summer Palace, the perfect symbol of the emperor's mastery over the natural world and his ability to create a harmonious environment for his earthly kingdom.



## About the Author

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