

A section of *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, the lone surviving painting by Wang Ximeng from the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The piece, completed when the artist was aged 18, is among dozens of works on show at a new exhibition in the Palace Museum in Beijing. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

# Return to the rivers and mountains

Seen as key to China's fine art history, an 11-meter-long masterpiece from the Song Dynasty is on show in Beijing

By WANG KAIHAO

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**A**n 18-year-old genius left his mark on the world with a work that has resonated for nine centuries.

Indisputably, *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, the only surviving work from painter Wang Ximeng of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), is one of the most important in China's fine art history.

The work, together with 85 others, is on display in Beijing in an exhibition titled *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains: Blue-green Landscape Paintings from Across Chinese History*. It opened on Sept 15 at the Palace Museum, also known as the Forbidden City, and runs until Dec 14.

"The blue and green paintings have relatively thick mineral pigments and are thus difficult to preserve," said Palace Museum researcher Wang Zhongxu, curator of the exhibition. "It is extremely rare to see a 900-year-old painting intact."

He said the 11-meter-long scroll

painting is a record of people's lives and the natural scenery of that time, mixing realism with creative imagination. There are mountains, rivers, villages, ports, temples and pavilions.

"We can also see all kinds of human activities," he said. "For example, some people are sightseeing, some are in caravans and others are living as hermits."

He described the details as a grand aura.

"Song Dynasty paintings are renowned for their delicate details," he said. "And this work is an outstanding representative. It's the pinnacle of blue and green painting, not only for its technique but also its theme."

For the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, a huge digital version of this painting was projected onto the center of the stadium.

The painter, Wang Ximeng, who was born in 1096, was part of the imperial painting academy of the Song Dynasty. He was tutored by Emperor Huizong, a fine art guru, and completed this painting at the age of 18.

As for his other achievements, the details are vague. But it is known that he died in his 20s.

The painting was acquired by the Forbidden City during the reign of Qianlong (1735-96).

The two other times the work was displayed — in 2009 and 2013 — it was not fully unrolled because of space constraints. This time, a special exhibition case has been made to display it in full, along with critics' comments.

Referring to the comments, Wang said: "A monk from the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) said that he had seen the painting hundreds of times but found something new each time he viewed it."

According to Wang, blue and green paintings were a very important genre in Chinese landscape painting in the Tang (AD 618-907) and Song dynasties. But their status was lost to ink-and-wash works after literati paintings, which emphasize more subtle and plain emotions, rose in prominence during the Yuan Dynasty.

"The change led people to nurture a stereotype that Chinese paintings

are ink and wash," Wang said. "But traditional Chinese paintings were also abundant in color."

The exhibition is a bid to promote blue and green paintings and revive the lost position of the genre, Wang said. "This will help people understand Chinese landscape painting."

The exhibition has five sections, including the origin of blue and green painting in the fourth century, its peak in the Song Dynasty, later developments and, finally, its absorption of Western techniques.

Among the displayed works is *Springtime Jaunt* by Zhan Ziqian during the Sui Dynasty (AD 581-618) — believed to be the oldest surviving blue and green painting.

*Rivers and Mountains in Autumn*, another painting from the Song era, known for its depiction of peaks, is also among the exhibits.

Shan Jixiang, the museum director, said: "The exhibition is the outcome of research in our museum. We'd like to narrow down our topics and set specific themes. So the exhibitions reflect our achievements in academic studies."

Earlier, key paintings in the Palace Museum used to be exhibited in rotation two to three times a year, but there was no specific theme. This old display method was abandoned in 2015.

Now, key paintings in the Palace Museum like *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* are stored for three to four years before being exhibited at least once.

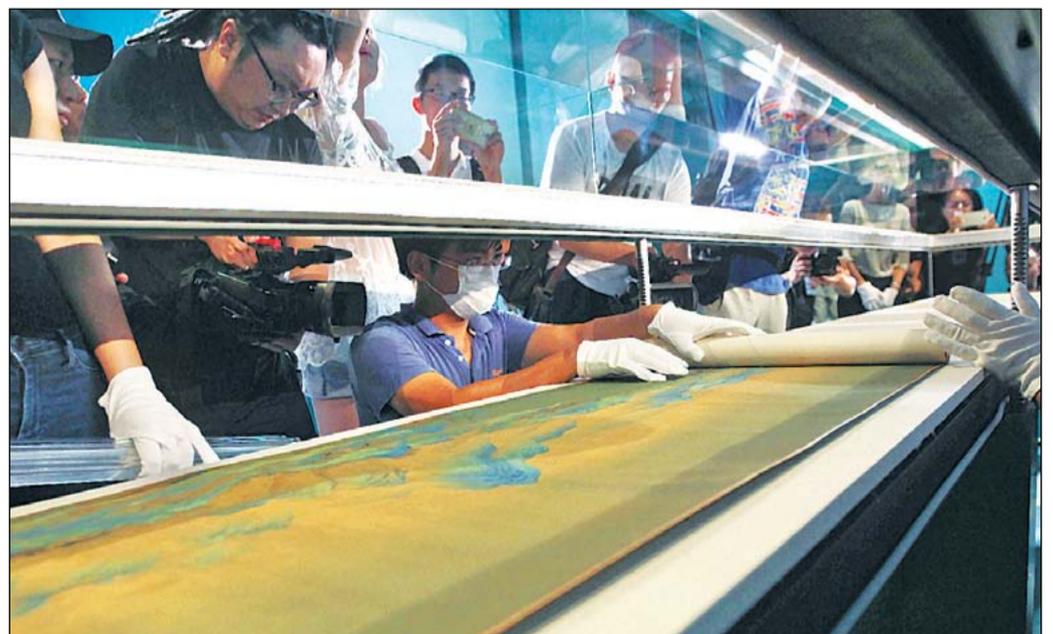
"If people want to see it again, they have to wait," Shan said.

In 2015, when *Alongside the River During the Qingming Festival* was exhibited in the Palace Museum, visitors stood in long lines to see it. The famous painting is by Song Dynasty artist Zhang Zeduan.

"Long lines are also expected this time," Shan said.

Nevertheless, as a separate exhibition space is set aside for *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* and six other works, the director said things will be better this time.

"Still, we will consider setting a quota for visitors," he said. "But the specific number will depend on the response."



Staff members from the Palace Museum prepare the masterpiece for display. PHOTOS BY ZHANG WEI / CHINA DAILY