

A window to the world

Foreign museums are keen to showcase their artifacts in an economically resurgent China

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During the first weekend after the History of the World in 100 Objects exhibition opened in Beijing last March, the temperature inside the crowded hall was temporarily out of control.

"We had monitors placed inside the exhibition hall as well as every glass case for exhibits, so we were constantly in touch with what was happening on the ground," said Yan Zhi of the National Museum of China, where the British Museum exhibition was on display until May.

"When audiences, each of whom could be compared with a mini-heater, started flooding in on Saturday morning, we experienced a little bit of an emergency."

Later everything was put right, but if you listen to Yan, the incident was a telltale sign of the enthusiasm that could be amassed by culturally minded Chinese museum-goers.

"You felt the heat, quite literally. And it is just a typical example of an increasing number of imported exhibitions that have proven big with the Chinese audiences over the past few years."

However, some issues do exist that need to be solved before such long-distance cultural exchanges can take place, Yan said.

"Take the 100 Objects exhibition, for example. Before coming to the Chinese mainland, where it was on display first at the National Museum and then at the Shanghai Museum, the show had visited Australia, Japan, the United Arab Emirates and Taiwan. That journey, over years, with each stop blessed with its own unique and drastically different climate, had caused immense stress on the protection of the exhibits. Consequently, some had to make a homebound trip en route for maintenance and were replaced by others."

Another two items that were previously featured in the exhibition but failed to come to Beijing were a piece of brocaded fabric taken by the Hungarian-British Marc Aurel Stein from Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes in northwestern China, and a carved jade disc the British Museum believes dates to the reign of the Qing Dynasty emperor Qianlong, from the 18th century.

"Both cases involve sensitive issues," Yan said. "Some Chinese experts believe that the jade disk might originally have come from the Yuanmingyuan, or the Old Summer Palace, the sumptuous royal garden-cum-residence burnt to the ground by the Anglo-French Army during the Second Opium War, in 1860."

"The problem with the fabric is that although Stein is a world-famous archaeologist and explorer,



Treasures from Afghanistan's National Museum in Kabul on show at Beijing's Palace Museum last year.

JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY



From left: British Museum's History of the World in 100 Objects exhibition at Beijing's National Museum last year; Shadow-play figurines from Java, Indonesia, at the 100 Objects exhibition. PHOTOS BY HONG EN / FOR CHINA DAILY

what he did — taking many relics, books and manuscripts away from the Dunhuang caves — still makes him a highly controversial figure in China today."

The 100 Objects exhibition, born out of a popular joint program of BBC Radio and the British Museum, was envisioned as a commercial show, Yan said.

"I believe that other museums (apart from the Chinese ones) have paid handsomely for it. We didn't because the showing at the two Chinese museums went ahead at the initiation of the Chinese and British governments, when the two countries commemorated the 45th anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic relations in 2017."

Although intergovernmental collaboration still accounts for a sizable proportion of imported exhibitions, especially the high-profile ones, there are exceptions. Between August 2016 and January 2017 the exhibition Pharaohs and Kings —

the Stories of Ancient Egypt and China's Han Dynasty, was held at the Nanjing Museum, in East China's Jiangsu province.

Visitors paid 30 yuan (\$4.70) each for a show that juxtaposes treasures belonging to two of the world's most ancient civilizations and dating back to roughly the same era.

Wang Zhen of the Suzhou Museum in Suzhou, 200 kilometers from Nanjing, said the Nanjing Museum reaped enough in ticket sales to cover the huge expense, including paying for exhibits from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

"The exhibition has set an example for other Chinese museums so used to having shows funded by the government. You can also choose to have one that is engaging enough and turn in a profit."

Another exception is the exhibition Afghanistan: Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul, an exhibition that cost a small fortune for its host, the Palace Museum in Beijing,

to organize when it went on display last year.

"The museum paid for all the exhibits, transport and installation, and the staff from the Afghanistan side who were here throughout the show, from March to June," said Ma Shengnan of the Palace Museum.

Last year the treasures also visited the Dunhuang Grotto Museum.

The Afghanistan exhibition is neither the first nor the last to arrive at the Palace Museum, whose before life as the royal residence for Chinese emperors during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911) has given it a halo unattainable for almost all other Chinese museums.

"Last year we had an exhibition about Qing emperors at the Grimaldi Forum in Monaco and are expecting one from them showcasing their own royal heritage," said Ma, who is closely involved in the project.

Ni Yi, of Zhejiang Provincial Museum, in Hangzhou, East China's Zhejiang province, said there is an

increasing tendency among museum curators to forge ties that tap into the common history of China and other countries.

"This approach often enables us a perspective and a narrative that would be impossible otherwise," she said, referring to an exhibition she co-curated with counterparts from the Jeju National Museum in South Korea.

Inspired by a Korean who traveled for more than four months in China in the 15th century, the exhibition, on display at the Zhejiang Museum early last year, pulled together antiques from the two countries that drew vivid comparison between two historically related cultures.

Qian Wei of Art Exhibitions China, a governmental organization responsible for introducing to the country some high-profile foreign exhibitions over the past years, said incoming shows now constitute a trend.

"It must be admitted that with the world financial crisis still going on, many cash-strapped foreign museums are eyeing China. We are approached by both foreign museums and independent curators. This is in sharp contrast with what happened in the 1980s, 1990s and even 2000s, when Western museums were spending big to bring to their audience a condensed version of Chinese history," Qian said.

"In 2006, Art Exhibitions China brought a foreign exhibition to China for the first time, one about Indian culture. Last year, we were involved in about 20 exhibitions. Twenty percent of them were incoming ones. In 2016, China held 36 exhibitions on cultural relics abroad, while hosting the same number of such shows from overseas.

"One way for Chinese museums to share expenses and save money is to team up with one another for foreign shows that travel to several cities."

Yan, of the National Museum, said the 100 Objects exhibition in fact featured a 101st exhibit.

"By requesting that every participating museum add one more item of their own, the curator wanted to allow the show, which traces the trajectory of human development, an open ending. The choice of our museum was a pen used to sign China into the World Trade Organization in 2001, and the one by the Shanghai Museum was a two-dimensional code, composed by the micro images of all exhibits. Visitors could swipe their mobiles against the code to view detailed information about the show," Yan said.

"And both were winking at what the National Museum of Australia in Canberra chose to show when the exhibition was there: A wireless transmitter, an Australian invention and the first one in human history. Together, they sent out a clear message: The globe is going global."