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From left: A visitor wanders among royal furniture from the Ming and Qing dynasties at the Nandaku Gallery of Furniture; A middle Qing Dynasty-style throne in red sandalwood; A chair made of deer antlers is among exhibits at the new gallery. PHOTOS BY FENG YONGBIN AND WANG KAIHAO / CHINA DAILY

THRONE ROOM

New gallery at Beijing's Palace Museum showcases about 400 items from Ming and Qing dynasties

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The hall feels like an Ikea store, but in a Chinese royal style.

Opened to the public in September, Nandaku Gallery of Furniture, a new exhibition space and warehouse, is a must-see venue at Beijing's Palace Museum — China's imperial palace from 1420 until the fall of the monarchy in 1911. The museum is also known as the Forbidden City.

About 400 items from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties are visible in the new section, and 30 of the most highlighted pieces have been chosen to be displayed separately under different themes. Some are put together to re-create scenes from the royal court — gardens, studies and rooms for emperors to enjoy the *guqin*, an ancient stringed instrument.

Wandering among the old furniture can feel like time travel for some visitors. One can see the patina on handrails or scenarios of the emperors' daily lives depicted in ancient paintings.

Zhao Yingying, an exhibition curator at the gallery, said emperors from the pinnacle of the Qing Dynasty — Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong — were chosen as the main themes of the display.

Rosewood, called *huanghuali* in Chinese, and red sandalwood were used to make items that showcase royal luxury, while the ornaments are made of materials like gems, gold, jade, corals, ivory and rhino horns. The technique employed in earlier times to make lacquer ware can also be seen at the new gallery.

"The furniture during Kangxi's time inherited simple styles from the Ming Dynasty," Zhao said. "Yong-



From left: The Nandaku Gallery of Furniture at the Palace Museum in Beijing has been open to visitors since Sept 19; Museum director Shan Jixiang said the new section is a space both for exhibitions and the storage of royal relics.

PHOTOS BY FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

zheng favored the literati flavor and he personally designed some of the furniture. Qianlong made a great contribution as craftsmanship reached its peak under his rule."

Zhao said furniture pieces were customized during the reign of Qianlong (1735-96), with many styles designed to suit the surrounding environment. Among the collections at the Palace Museum, furniture pieces from his reign outnumber items from any other emperor's rule. For example, a red sandalwood throne inlaid with jade is placed near the entrance of the new section.

The key exhibit has become a symbol of royal power. A chair, made of deer antlers, was one of Emperor Qianlong's most beloved items because he enjoyed hunting deer. To please the emperors, details were important for the designers of the objects. For example, aquariums for small fish are shaped like palaces or pavilions.

Inside the warehouse of the new gallery, Zhao pointed to several shelves that pack surprises — a desk inlaid with enamel cloisonne decoration and a tea table in a simple style from the reign of Emperor Xuande (1426-35) are among the oldest items of furniture in the Forbidden City.

The 156-meter-long Nandaku, or the Grand Southern Storehouse, lay in the largest warehouse in the Forbidden City at one time and can now be partially viewed by visitors. It will be made fully accessible to the public later this year. Nanxundian (Fragrant Hall in the South), which is located near Nandaku, is set to become part of the new section in 2019.

Nanxundian is among the few surviving original constructions from the Ming Dynasty in the Forbidden City. Most of the palatial complex, covering 720,000 square meters, was burned down in a war in 1644, which led to the collapse of the dynasty,

and the city was rebuilt in the Qing Dynasty.

There are about 6,200 pieces (of which 2,580 are made of red sandalwood) of Ming and Qing furniture at the Palace Museum, scattered across 80 halls.

"Their variety reflects the spirit of ancient Chinese design and traditional craftsmanship," Zhao added.

Museum director Shan Jixiang said while the museum has the world's largest collection of Ming and Qing furniture, a separate display space for such items was not available before.

"In the auction market, dozens of pieces of Ming and Qing furniture have been sold and the prices are rocketing," he said. "In contrast, the most precious ones were behind closed doors and covered in dust. It's better to let them shine again."

Shan said about 2,000 pieces of furniture will be displayed in the new gallery later. Another 2,000

pieces will remain in their original halls inside the museum. The rest will be exhibited in an upcoming northern branch museum on the outskirts of Beijing.

Making full use of rooms in the Forbidden City has been a challenge for Shan since he entered the director's office in 2012. At the time, only 52 percent of the museum area was accessible to the public. Now, that has risen to 80 percent. When Shan decided to renovate Nandaku in 2015, it was a big utility room on the verge of being abandoned.

About 1.86 million cultural relics are housed at the Palace Museum, but only about 2 percent have ever been publicly displayed.

"Many larger sized artifacts didn't have any chance of being exhibited at all," Shan said. "This combination of warehouse and exhibition hall at Nandaku is an experiment. We can save room and have items displayed at the same time."

Unlike paper-based artworks like paintings, which are sensitive to light and temperature, furniture can be permanently displayed, he said.

"When an artifact is viewed by the public, our preservation of the relics can be better supervised."

More rooms in the Forbidden City will be used as warehouse and gallery space in the coming years. As many as 240,000 pieces of wood blocks for printing books were recently found in the turrets of the palace.

"We also have 23,000 Buddhist statues, and many horse saddles, weapons, palanquins and large ritual items used in royal ceremonies," Shan said. "We will find more space to display them."

Shan expects 8 percent of the museum's collection to be publicly exhibited by 2020, to mark 600 years since the fall of the Forbidden City.