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From left: *Robust and Vigorous Landscape* by Wang Yuanqi; *Shadows of Paulownia Trees in the Autumn Evening* by Wang Hui; *After the Spirit of the Four Yuan Masters* by Wang Jian; and *Autumn Mountains and White Clouds* by Wang Shimin. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

## A creative circle of four

Beijing show celebrates the works of key Qing Dynasty artists who share the same aesthetic style

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It may seem like a coincidence, but Chinese painting circles during the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) were dominated by four artists sharing the same surname.

Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Hui and Wang Yuanqi, who are colloquially referred to by Chinese historians as the “Four Wangs”, shared similar artistic styles and enjoyed status in the art world at that time.

They also were associated with each other through educational or familial connections.

A recent exhibition at the Hall of Literary Glory in the Palace Museum in Beijing looked back at their achievements by displaying around 110 pieces of their highlighted works.

*The Four Wangs' Paintings of the Early Qing Period Collected by the Palace Museum* ran until Oct 30.

As the former imperial palace, the Forbidden City is famed for its grandiose and ostentatious aura, but the red columns in the Hall of Literary Glory were painted a lighter color more conducive to a gallery setting, while a pavilion was also set up in the exhibition hall to recreate the simple yet elegant atmosphere preferred by the literati.

“Sitting there and watching the Four Wangs’ paintings, it feels like being in a water town in southern China (where the artists came from),” Tian Yimin, curator of the exhibition, said.

“They venerated the literati styles of southern China and stressed the imitation of ancient and classical styles and techniques,” she said.

Many paintings by earlier artistic icons



A visitor at the recent exhibition in the Palace Museum in Beijing. The display featured around 110 artworks by the “Four Wangs” of the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

were also included in the exhibition, including works by Huang Gongwang and Ni Zan from the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) as well as Dong Qichang from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) — which served as inspiration for the later four artists. Several works by their predecessors were juxtaposed with works by the Four Wangs for comparison.

Each of the four artists has their own stand-out characteristics.

Wang Shimin (1592-1680) is known for his own rigorous technique and elegant style. The exhibit *Autumn Mountains and White Clouds* is his best-known work. Wang Jian (1609-1677) traced certain artistic styles back to the 10th

century and excelled in both monochrome and polychrome ink works as well as color paintings.

Wang Hui (1632-1717) combined elements from works by masters from both southern and northern China and infused his paintings with detailed observations of nature, as exemplified in his work *Shadows of Paulownia Trees in the Autumn Evening*.

And Wang Yuanqi (1642-1715), who was also the grandson of Wang Shimin, was a master of textural shading and famed for his vigorous brushwork and ruminant compositions, which is probably best highlighted in his painting *Robust and Vigorous Landscape*.

Unlike many literati painters in ancient China, who lived their lives as virtual hermits and shunned politics, the Four Wangs’ destiny was quite different.

The curator explains that one of the reasons why they were so revered in the Qing Dynasty was because of the huge sway they held in the imperial palace. For instance, Wang Hui’s painting *Southern Inspection Tour (Nanxun Tu)* featured a grand procession of the Kangxi emperor.

Some of their students were later hired as court painters, and were favored by the emperors, who labeled their works as “orthodox”.

Nevertheless, this connection with the imperial court once made some critics doubt the real artistic value of work of the Four Wangs. In the late Qing Dynasty, prices of their works rocketed in antique markets, which were ridiculed by people at that time.

“All these rights and wrongs have passed,” Tian said. “What’s important for us is to take aesthetic enjoyment from their individual legacies.”

The Palace Museum now houses more than 800 works by these artists, the largest number of any museum in the world.

Nearly 700 were included in a 10-volume panoramic album of works by the artists, which was published on Sept 1 to offer a more detailed reference work for scholars. Some 277 pieces — including *Southern Inspection Tour* — have never been publicly published before.

“An exhibition is also an opportunity to promote related academic research,” Shan Jixiang, director of the Palace Museum, said. “It can also raise public awareness about traditional fine art.”