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Glimpse into Qing-era royal life

Exhibition of Manchu-style outfits, utensils and furnishings highlights the craftsmanship, rich aesthetics of the time

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A new exhibition at Beijing's Capital Museum offered visitors a glimpse into royal lifestyle during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

The more than 130 antiques on show were representative of the rich aesthetics at the time. With a combination of practicality and artistry, they reflected the development of craftsmanship during the middle Qing period.

One of the key exhibits was a yellow brocade *changfu* robe, emblazoned with dragons and clouds, which used to belong to Hong Taiji, one of the founders of the dynasty. It is the first time that the robe had been exhibited to the public.

Changfu was a type of Manchu garment, typical of the Qing era. Emperors, empresses and concubines usually dressed in *changfu* for festivals, celebrations and sacrificial rites.

The emperors also wore *changfu* to attend *jingyan*, lectures specifically held for them to study historical classics and improve their cultural literacy.

According to Tian Xinyou, the exhibition's curator, the *changfu* robe on display was in the traditional costume style of Manchu and since it was used before the dynasty moved to Beijing, its design had not yet been influenced by Han culture. The cuffs of the robe have a horseshoe-shaped design. Usually, the cuffs were turned up so that it was easier for Hong Taiji, the first emperor of the Qing Dynasty, to move and work, as one exhibit suggested. On cold days, however, the cuffs could be turned down to cover the back of his hands to keep warm.

Such a design complied with the compulsion of the Manchu to spend much of their time practicing archery and riding horses.

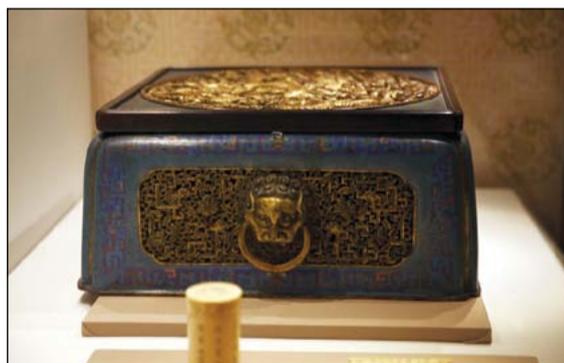
A number of portraits were on display, and that love of riding was evident in one that depicted Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799) on horseback.

There were also a number of household utensils on display, especially those used for dinner, such as a silver hotpot decorated with gold-plated patterns of the Chinese character *shou* (longevity), as well as a black lacquer plate adorned with gold-outlined patterns of two Chinese landscape paintings.

There was also a small refrigerator on show. Without electricity, the



Visitors at an exhibition featuring royal household items of the Qing Dynasty at Beijing's Capital Museum. PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY



A small refrigerator made of cloisonne enamel, wood and gold lacquer used by the Qing royals.



Famille rose porcelain kettles made during the reigns of emperors Jiaqing (left) and Daoguang (right).

royals of the Qing Dynasty used to use ice cubes to preserve food and fruits. The frame of the refrigerator on display was made of cloisonne enamel decorated with hollowed-out, gilded flower patterns on the four sides, with the handles sculpted to look like lions with rings in their mouths. The middle of its wooden cover was embossed with a gold lacquer dragon.

The utensils were designed to add to the pleasure of the food, but moreover, they played an important role in distinguishing rank and practicing etiquette.

Emperors of the Qing Dynasty used to attach great importance to

the study of Han culture. As well as calligraphy and paintings produced by both the emperors Kangxi and Qianlong, the exhibition recreated a typical Qing emperor's study and that of a royal living room, in order to provide visitors to the exhibition with a realistic example of how the royals enjoyed their surroundings.

Items, including jewelry boxes, fans and mirrors, which belonged to the concubines presented a delicate and elegant touch. Several small powder cases demonstrated the high level of craftsmanship in glass-making at the time.

All of the exhibits on display, including costumes, accessories,

utensils and furnishings, as well as works of calligraphy and art, are usually housed at the Shenyang Palace Museum in Northeast China's Liaoning province. They were moved there from Beijing in the 1950s.

The Shenyang Palace Museum, also called the Mukden Palace, was built in 1625. It was once the formal residence of Qing Dynasty founder Nurhaci and his son Hong Taiji, before the dynasty moved to Beijing in 1644.

Since then, Shenyang — named Mukden (Shengjing) at the time — had served as the alternate national capital. Between 1671 and 1829, the emperors Kangxi, Qianlong, Jiaq-

ing and Daoguang made 10 visits to Shenyang and each spent a short time living there to worship their ancestors.

Emperor Qianlong paid four visits to Shenyang, not only launching renovations and expansion of the palace, but also storing a large number of treasures there.

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, many of the treasures housed at Mukden Palace were lost. However, the number of antiques in its collection has since increased from several thousand pieces in the early 1950s to more than 100,000 pieces.

Han Zhanming, director of the Capital Museum, said the exhibits are intertwined with the history of the Mukden Palace and, to some extent, demonstrate the life, etiquette, cultural beliefs and ethnic features of the Qing era.

Tian hoped that the exhibition will raise people's awareness of the Shenyang Palace Museum.

"The architectural style of the Mukden Palace is an important part of the history and culture of the Qing Dynasty before it moved to Beijing," she added.

The exhibition, *From Shengjing: Household Items of the Qing Royal Court*, ran through Dec 2.