

## TREASURES FROM THE WORLD'S GREAT LIBRARIES EXHIBITION

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It is no exaggeration to say that *Treasures from the World's Great Libraries* was the most successful exhibition ever put on by the National Library of Australia. One hundred and fifteen thousand people visited it between 7 December 2001 and 24 February 2002. Many Canberra residents and library staff expected an easing off in numbers after the school holidays but in fact queues grew longer, with some people waiting all night to gain entrance. In the latter stages the exhibition was kept open almost 24 hours each day.

The library presented *Treasures* as a gift to the nation, in celebration of its own 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary and Australia's Centenary of Federation. Featuring over 130 items from 38 great libraries around the world, it traced the story of civilization and celebrated the role of libraries as collectors of the recorded memory of humanity. Popular items included the manuscript of Mozart's Requiem, Keats' last letter and the Gutenberg Bible.

Asian treasures featured prominently in the exhibition. For example a most striking image from the Album of Beijing Opera Characters from the Shengping Bureau, 1844 lent by the National Library of China was used widely in advertising on banners, the exhibition catalogue, the website and elsewhere.

There were Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Malaysian, Singaporean, Thai, Burmese and Indian treasures. Major donor libraries included the National Library of China, the National Diet Library, the National Library of Indonesia, the National Library of Malaysia, the National Library Board of Singapore, the National Library of India and the Indian Museum. From outside the region itself the Chester Beatty Library in Ireland which has strong Asian and Islamic collections lent exquisite Japanese, Burmese, Thai and Arabic items.

It is impossible to do justice to the Asian treasures in a short article such as this. However a few examples may give some idea of the range of the exhibition.

Treasures lent by the National Library of China varied from inscribed oracle bones three thousand years old to eighteenth century maps and illuminated texts. Along with Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets and a fragment from an Egyptian Book of the Dead, the inscribed oracle bones which were used as divination tools by the kings of the Shang Dynasty (1766-1066 BC) were among the oldest forms of writing exhibited.

Other early Chinese writings included a fragment of stone tablet engraved with the Confucian classics from 175-183 AD, and imperial advice informing the recipient of details of promotion consisting of ink on bamboo strips, and also dating from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD).

Buddhist works included a 47 cm high statue of the Goddess of Mercy from 587 AD. The text around its base reads "Zhang Chaoming, a follower of Buddha, respectfully made a statue of the Goddess of Mercy in the name of the Emperor, my parents, all the young and old in my family and every living creature." There was also a beautifully illuminated Sutra for Reciting the True Names of the Noble Manjusri, in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese scripts, probably from the eighteenth century.

Chinese maps included a five metre long painted scroll depicting the western side of the island of Taiwan from around 1787; Coastal Map of the Seven Maritime Provinces from 1798 and Map of the Imperial Residence on the West Lake also from 1798. All three were works of arts as well as of cartography.

The Japanese treasures lent by the National Diet Library were among the most striking and colourful in the whole exhibition. Twelve Months from 1854 is by the famous artist Utagawa Toyokuni III (1786-1864). This set of woodblock prints depicts daily life in Edo (Tokyo) during each of the twelve months of the year. The beautifully illustrated seventeenth century manuscript Military Treatise on Two Samurai Generals by Kosaka Masanobu concerns fighting tactics and the ideal warrior attitude in warfare.

The *Tale of Genji* written in the eleventh century by the female courtier Murasaki Shikibu is considered to be one of the masterpieces of Japanese and indeed world literature. In addition to a 1654 edition from the National Diet Library, an exquisite seventeenth century album illustrating six chapters of the book was lent by the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. The texts are on elegant decorative paper, while the paintings are richly-coloured and detailed.

A rare Korean book belonging to the National Library of Australia was included in *Treasures*. This was *Samgang Haengsilto* [The Three Principles of Basic Human Relationships] which is believed to date from 1490. This illustrated Confucian work in Chinese and hangul scripts is part of the McLaren-Human Collection of books dating from the fifteenth to the early twentieth centuries, primarily relating to Korean history and literature. They had belonged to Mrs Jessie McLaren an Australian missionary in Korea, whose daughter Mrs Rachel Human donated the collection to the National Library in 1984.

Southeast Asian treasures included a Burmese folded manuscript book of court amusements; a Thai divination manual; rare Malay and Singaporean manuscripts and early publications; and several manuscripts from Java, Bali, Sumatra and Sulawesi in Indonesia.

India lent several rare manuscripts ranging from a sixth century Buddhist text to poems by Tagore and a letter from Mahatma Gandhi.

A number of eminent Asian librarians visited the National Library during *Treasures*. Couriers who brought items for their libraries included Ms Shi Baiyan of the National Library of China; Mr Naoki Fujimoto of the National Diet Library and Mr Gardjito of the National Library of Indonesia. The

official opening on 6 December was attended by Dr Chen Li, Deputy Director of the National Library of China; Miss Kimiko Harada, International Section, National Diet Library, Mr Dady Rachmananta, Director, National Library of Indonesia; and Ms Zawiyah Baba, National Librarian of Malaysia, all of whom also donated items to the NLA. Couriers collecting materials at the end of the exhibition included Ms Zheng Xianlan of the National Library of China; Mr Akito Nakazawa of the National Diet Library and Mr Paul Permadi, Deputy Director, National Library of Indonesia.

Lunchtime talks were held for the public in conjunction with *Treasures*. Three Australian National University scholars gave lively and well-attended presentations on Asian items. Dr Ken Gardiner spoke on the Chinese oracle bones; Dr Ben Penny on Islamic and Buddhist exhibits and Dr Ian Proudfoot on some of the books and manuscripts from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

As one member of the public wrote in the Visitor's Book about *Treasures* "Proof, if any were needed, of the integral role institutions such as libraries and museums play in preserving the soul of humanity as it is expressed in word, thought, art and music."

Although *Treasures* ended in February it lives on in the published exhibition catalogue, the website at [www.nla.gov.au/worldtreasures/](http://www.nla.gov.au/worldtreasures/) and most of all in the memories of those who experienced it.

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