

TAIWAN MUSEUM TRAIL: GO!

臺灣博物館散步 GO

30 recommended trails that will signpost the way to a true understanding of Taiwan's history and culture

Should you start with the Presidential Office Building and then move on to the North Gate of the old Taipei city walls? Or are you better off beginning at the Southern Branch of National Palace Museum before you make your way to the National Museum of History? Su Ming-Ju draws on her many years of experience in the world of art and culture administration to join the dots between Taiwan's museums, parks, and significant buildings, highlighting underappreciated cultural gems and providing a deeper insight into the tourist hotspots.

These thirty walking trails are divided into four chronological categories, beginning with the museums that were founded during the first half of the twentieth century when Taiwan was under Japanese rule. The second part of the book focuses on the sites which were built to promote Chinese culture during the fifties and sixties, before part three turns to the natural world, featuring the Museum of Marine Biology and the Museum of Prehistory. Finally, we look at some of the smaller, more specialized museums of recent times, covering subjects ranging from hot springs and literature to fine arts and forestry.

With maps and photos to illustrate these key locations, *Taiwan Museum Trail: Go!* is the perfect tour guide, regardless of whether you're making a trip to Taiwan or visiting in your imagination.

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3. The National Palace Museum: A world-class museum

A tale of two palace museums

The National Palace Museum is one of the top five museums in the world, ranked alongside the Louvre in France, the British Museum in the United Kingdom, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the US and the State Hermitage Museum in Russia. The collection of over 600,000 objects, some of which date from the Song dynasty, represents the finest examples of Chinese art over the centuries.

When we say the Palace Museum, we are talking about the magnificent national treasure of a museum based in the Taipei suburb of Shuangxi, called the National Palace Museum to avoid confusion. The treasure trove of Chinese antiquities ranges from a painted scroll called “Travelers Among Mountains and Streams,” to the Jadeite Cabbage and the Meat-shaped Stone. There is also a Palace Museum in Beijing, located in the Forbidden City and concentrating history, architecture and art in one place. For 24 of the over 80 years of history of the Palace Museum, the museum only had one location. It split in 1949, and the two Palace Museums on either side of the Taiwan Strait both became bastions of Chinese art and culture.

Japanese journalist Nojima Tsuyoshi is astonished by the coexistence of the two museums, saying “The Palace Museum is not only an incredible museum, but two places with exactly the same name. They exist in the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan and it would not be surprising if one of them were to file a lawsuit for trademark infringement. And yet the ‘two Palace Museums’ manage to coexist – neither side has negated the legitimacy of the other or shouted that only one of the museums is authentic. Both sides use the same name and show the same types of art and artifacts, and both continue to attract visitors from all over the world as they are important tourist destinations that store ‘national’ collections.”

At the end of the Qing dynasty, former emperor Puyi was exiled and the opportunity to found the Palace Museum presented itself. On October 10, 1925, a beautifully carved stone with the words Palace Museum was mounted onto the Gate of Divine Might, the northern gate of the Forbidden City. From that day forward, the Forbidden City was transformed from an imperial palace to a historical site that was open to the public. Due to the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, the collection was moved from Beijing to Nanjing, then Shanghai, Sichuan and finally to Taiwan in 1948. At first, it was temporarily housed in Wufeng in Taichung county, where a warehouse and exhibition space was built. In 1965, the collection moved to its current location in Taipei.

Actually, the objective of the National Palace Museum was not to inspire and educate visitors, like most other museums. It was specifically built to keep the valuable art and artifacts safe. In other words, the National Palace Museum is more like a warehouse than a museum, because in the past it did not pay attention to meeting the needs of visitors with exhibits that were aesthetically pleasing.

The National Palace Museum in Taipei

In 1925, the Palace Museum was formally founded on the site of the Qing Court in Beijing (present day Beijing). As a result of political instability in Mainland China, a vast number of precious art and artifacts were transferred to Taiwan. The circuitous path of the collection from Beijing to Taipei is in itself a legendary chapter in human history. The Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China began while the rest of the world was dealing with the Cold War, leading to the loss of many important Chinese art and artifacts, but items that were sent to Taiwan were spared. Fortunately Taiwan put a considerable quantity of national funds towards protecting the art and artifacts. Not only did this help preserve brilliant assets that promote cultural diversity in the world, but it represented a significant contribution to history.

The National Palace Museum, erected in 1965 in Taipei's Shilin district, may look like a traditional Chinese building with its gabled roof, green roof tiles, cornices, and interlocking brackets, but it is actually a completely modern building. While it has some differences to the wooden imperial palace of the Palace Museum in Beijing, the National Palace Museum has become a multipurpose facility that exhibits objects, conducts education and research, invites visitors from around the world and even hosts artistic performances.

Over the last 40 years, the National Palace Museum has continued to expand, from a simple single hall to a building with multiple wings and an extension on the left side. The National Palace Museum has undergone four periods of extension and is now part of a larger complex of buildings. In the past few years it has cooperated with famous brands and developed merchandise. The museum has made a point of transitioning from old to new and it is gradually becoming younger and hipper.

The Palace Museum includes the exhibition building and the rare books and archive documents building. Most exhibitions and activities take place in the exhibition building. The first, second, and third floors of the exhibition building are dedicated to exhibition space. The first floor shows bronze relics and oracle bones from the Shang dynasty. It also explains the relationship between Chinese culture and other cultures of the world. The second floor shows pottery, porcelain, and calligraphic works and paintings. There is also a description of the history of the Palace Museum itself and the journey that many items took from Beijing to Taipei. Finally, the third floor includes jade pieces, shelves of curios and rare books and archive documents.

The fourth floor was originally a relaxing tearoom. Sanxitang used to offer Chinese style snacks and a wide variety of tea, giving guests a special opportunity to enjoy Chinese culture through their taste buds. Unfortunately, the tearoom was closed in August 2015. The name Sanxitang was the name of the western room in the imperial court. In the Qing dynasty, it served as the Qianlong Emperor's study. The word "Sanxi" in the name refers to three rare treasures by famous calligraphers of ancient China: "Sunny After Snow" by Wang Xizhi, "Mid-Autumn" by his son, Wang Xianzhi, and "Distant" by his nephew, Wang Xun. "Sunny After Snow" is displayed at the National Palace Museum and the other two works are displayed at the Palace Museum. The museum recently renovated the building to add an underground level, where an audiovisual room and an expanded center for promoting arts education for children are located.

A treasure trove in the National Palace Museum

A highlight of the National Palace Museum is “Hua Qi Xun Ren Tie” (Fragrance of Blossoms). The scroll is one of the oldest surviving calligraphic works in the world and was painted by Huang Tingjian in the Song dynasty. Printed images of the scroll were used for the museum’s “Old is New” advertising campaign. In the first part of the advertisement, the viewers see a steaming cup of tea and a woman standing amidst hundreds of gently falling flower petals. Then viewers are taken inside the work space of local musician and electronic music producer, Lim Giong. The room is sparse and feels ancient, which contrasts with the high-tech speakers and other equipment that Lim uses. Next we here Lim’s voice: “I am moved when I look at these artifacts...comparing an understanding of modern media and an understanding for ancient verse...we see that ancient art and art created by advanced technology are actually the same.” Next the viewers see a peaceful scene of ancient China and calming water mingled with shots of fragrant tea. A light and repetitive electronic beat is mixed with the voice of Lim chanting an ancient poem in Minnan dialect. Over a dozen televisions with their cases removed are arranged artistically on the floor, each one displaying a crisp image of “Hua Qi Xun Ren Tie.” Finally, the core concept of the National Palace Museum is displayed: Old is New. The film uses creative techniques to reinterpret Chinese classics, so that they can once again enrich our lives. The viewers are attracted by the culture and modernity expressed through the visual language of the video.

This advertisement was the Gold Winner of the Promotional and Marketing Muse award in 2006, an award presented by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). The award judges said, “This stunningly beautiful advertisement featured film-quality cinematography and a dynamic soundtrack featuring contemporary and traditional compositions. The dramatic imagery and music seamlessly presented the National Palace Museum’s notion that the ‘Old is New.’ This dazzling piece of filmmaking drew us in quickly and kept our attention; by the end, we were excited to see more of what the National Palace Museum had to offer.”

The National Palace Museum has been committed to the integration of advanced technology with the arts over the past few years, and this commitment serves to strengthen the power of art. The Palace Museum has taken a leading role in combining technology with the arts, making it possible to work more closely with modern society. In the 21st century, integration is vital. Art and technology need to blend together, otherwise a museums’ competitive edge will be lost. Making “Old is New” the main feature of the campaign; planning with a digital museum in mind; inviting Hou Hsio-Hsien to film a documentary about the museum called “A new life is stored in history”; producing the movie of “The Passage”, inspired by the “Han Shi Tie” scroll; and collaborating with Italian design brand Alessi to make products: all of these projects represent a specific example of the museum’s message. The museum also cooperated with the Taiwan Design Center to promote the design of cultural products. The museum hopes to move beyond the printed derivatives of objects shown in the museum and promote young and fashionable ideas so that ancient artifacts can become more accessible. Ultimately, the museum hopes to move closer to present-day Taiwanese society, and move away from the idea that these things are unattainable or only available to scholars and nobility.

“Go to the Museum to find surprises; go to the Museum to find dreams; go to the Museum to find imagination; go to the museum to find popular trends.” As mentioned in the advertisement, the National Palace Museum has over 654,000 exquisite pieces of art and artifacts. It has more than enough in its

collection to help visitors find something to spark their creativity. Today, the museum is a vast treasury that is developing art and creativity tourism in Taiwan.

Included in this warehouse are Ru ware dishes, lotus bowls, a flawless narcissus bowl, “Travelers Among Mountains and Streams” by Fan Kuan, “Early Spring” by Guo Xi, “Wind in the Pines Among a Myriad Valleys” by Li Tang, “Plum and Birds” and “Shi Tie” by Emperor Huizong of Song, and “Han Shi Tie” by Su Shi. If the art and artifacts in the National Palace Collection can be considered to have an unlimited level of beauty, then how will they change and grow in Taiwan as a part of the cultural heritage of humanity? Put another way, what role will the National Palace Museum play in representing the national culture of Taiwan? Taiwan should attach importance to promoting art, creativity and tourism by using the treasures of the cultural industry to reconsider the National Palace Museum.

Significant antiquities of the National Palace Museum

Jadeite Cabbage

The Jadeite Cabbage is made from a piece of jadeite that is half green and half white. According to popular opinion, the material used for the sculpture is not high quality, because it has cracks and cloudy patches. If the jadeite were used to make an annulus, a bracelet or a vessel, these features would surely be considered flaws. But the skilled artisan broke free of rigid expectations and sculpted the jadeite into a Chinese cabbage that looks so fresh it almost seems edible. The green parts turned into cabbage leaves and the white part represented the stalk. The cracks transformed into tracks of water droplets and the cloudy patches transformed into luscious leaves. There are also two insects on the cabbage, making the artwork seem even more lifelike.

The Jadeite Cabbage is the most famous and most impressive object in the National Palace Museum Collection. It is also a tourist favorite. The Three Treasures of the museum, as they are known by tourists, are the Jadeite Cabbage, the Meat-shaped Stone and the Mao Gong Ding. Though the specialists working at the museum may have different ideas about which of the artefacts are the most significant, they can understand why the Jadeite Cabbage is so popular with visitors. According to the story, the Jadeite Cabbage was a dowry gift from the Guangxu Emperor to Consort Chin after she entered the Qing Court. The green and white colors signified purity.

Celadon glaze and Ru ware

Only seventy pieces of Ru ware exist in the world and twenty-one of those pieces are in the National Palace Museum. The highlight of the Ru ware is a famous narcissus bowl which is thought to be the only Ru ware in the world without a crackle in the glaze. It is extremely rare to find Ru ware in such good condition. Ru ware is also called “celadon glaze” because its pale bluish-white color looks like the color of a blue sky just after a rain.

Siku Quanshu

Siku Quanshu (The Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature) was first compiled during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor of the Qing dynasty. The book represents one of the largest book collections ever compiled in the world. The collection was first started in 1773 and took approximately ten years to complete. The collection includes classics, history, philosophy and literature and the color of each book

cover is different. The book features nearly all of the significant works from many schools of Chinese thought and comprised seven manuscript copies. The “Wenyuan Chamber” edition, stored at the National Palace Museum, is used as a basis for all reproductions. The book collection was originally stored in the Forbidden City in Beijing but in 1949 it was moved from Nanjing to the National Palace Museum on one of multiple shipments made by a ship called the *Hai Hu Hao*. The other copies are stored around China.

“Lanting Xu”

“Lanting Xu” (Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion) is one of the most important works written by calligrapher Wang Xizhi. At the age of forty, Wang Xizhi served as governor of Kuaiji prefecture (present-day Shaoxing, Zhejiang province). He invited forty-one literati to come to Lanting for a *qushui* feast, where they drank wine and composed poems by a stream and organized a feast. At the feast, the participants all took turns composing poetry, which was later turned into an anthology. Wang Xizhi wrote the preface to the anthology, which is why “Lanting Xu” exists. However, the original preface did not survive because Emperor Taizong of Tang ordered that the work be buried with him after his death. The replica in the National Palace Museum was made from a rubbing of a tablet discovered in Dingwu, Hebei province, after going missing for many years.