NOBLE TOMBS AT MAWANGDUI:
Art and Life in the Changsha Kingdom
Third Century BCE to First Century CE

Treasures for the Afterlife on View at China Institute Gallery from
February 12 through June 7, 2009

New York, December, 2008—More than two thousand years ago, a Chinese marquis and his family began their plans for the afterlife with three lavish tombs in Hunan Province which were excavated in the 1970s. Their extraordinary existence will come to life in NOBLE TOMBS AT MAWANGDUI: Art and Life in the Changsha Kingdom, Third Century BCE to First Century CE at China Institute Gallery from February 12 through June 7, 2009. For the first time in the U.S., nearly 70 treasures including bronze sculptures, lacquer ware, jade ornaments, seals, wood carvings and silk costumes will be on view from the Hunan Provincial Museum. A fully-illustrated bilingual catalogue will accompany the exhibition.

The excavation at Mawangdui in Hunan Province in Southeastern China is considered one of the major archaeological discoveries of the 20th century. Containing the remains and possessions of the Marquis of Dai and his wife and son, the tombs were found between 1972 and 1974 in the archaeological site of Mawangdui, which is located in a suburb of the modern city of Changsha. More than 3,000 objects from the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE to 25 CE) were found in nearly perfect condition representing the highest levels of workmanship.

“People during the Han dynasty regarded death as birth and longed for immortality,” notes Willow Hai Chang, Director, China Institute Gallery. “To prepare for the afterlife, they constructed their tombs to be eternal residences. As a result of this landmark excavation, we now have a rare window into the fascinating Han civilization through these remarkable objects of the highest artistry.”
Exhibition Highlights

Among the highlights of NOBLE TOMBS AT MAWANGDUI: Art and Life in the Changsha Kingdom, Third Century BCE to First Century CE are five charming wooden figurines of musicians which seem to form a small family band and perhaps indicate the importance of song and dance to the tomb occupant. The figures are painted in black and vermilion to depict their faces and colorful gowns.

Also indicating the importance of music to the family, the exhibition includes a seven-stringed qin, a musical instrument first played for entertainment and then as a solo instrument played by scholar-poets to “harmonize the emotions.” By the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE), qin-playing was among the “four accomplishments” of the scholar-gentleman along with painting, calligraphy and Chinese chess. In literati belief, the qin went beyond all other forms of art – musical or visual – in its mysterious power to harmonize the soul and purify the mind. The is the first Han dynasty qin ever discovered in China and the first “half box shaped” qin ever seen.

A two-tiered cosmetic box containing nine small boxes is thought to have belonged to Lady Dai. The outer surface of the box is coated with black lacquer and then affixed with patterned gold foil. The interior of the box is coated with vermilion lacquer. The top tier of the box contained a silk scarf, a belt and a silk mirror case with embroidery representing longevity. The nine small boxes in the lower tier contained items that can be found on many women’s dressing tables: cosmetics, rouge, silk powder pads, combs and a needle case.

The exhibition also offers extraordinary textiles including an example of gauze with a printed and painted design which represents the world’s earliest silk fabric combining both printing and painting discovered to date. The design depicts a plant with vines, buds, flowers and leaves, reflecting an extremely advanced level of technique. Another piece of stunning gauze is printed with a flame pattern in gold and silver representing the earliest silk fabric printed in three color block printing.

The tombs at Mawangdui contained a stunning amount of information in the form of books and tablets on health, well-being, and longevity. One tablet inscribed with Chinese characters refers to dried soybean seeds that have germinated and were used in the treatment of headache, paralysis, asthma and other health problems. Also found was a book, Prescriptions for Maintaining Health, which was written on silk and contains 32 different medical prescriptions.
including advice on sexual relations. Both the tablet and sections from the book are included in
the exhibition.

The exhibition is curated by Chen Jianming, Director, Hunan Provincial Museum, who also
edited the catalogue, and is organized by Project Director Willow Hai Chang, Director, China
Institute Gallery.

Educational Programs
A number of educational programs have been organized to support NOBLE TOMBS AT
MAWANGDUI: Art and Life in the Changsha Kingdom, Third Century BCE to First Century CE
including a curator’s lecture, a symposium, a short course and a cooking course on
Hunanese cuisine.

Additional Information
China Institute Gallery is located at 125 East 65th Street (between Park and Lexington
Avenues). Gallery hours are daily Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 10
a.m. to 5 p.m.; Tuesday and Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Admission is $7; $4 for students
and seniors; and free for children under 12. Admission is free on Tuesday and Thursday from 6
p.m. to 8 p.m. For more information, the public can call (212) 744-8181 or visit
www.chinainstitute.org.

About China Institute
China Institute advances a deeper understanding of China through programs in education,
culture, business and art in the belief that cross-cultural understanding strengthens our global
community.

Founded in 1926 by a group of American and Chinese educators, China Institute in America is
the oldest bicultural, non-profit organization in America to focus exclusively on China. The
organization promotes the appreciation of Chinese heritage, and provides the historical context
for understanding contemporary China. Programs, activities, courses and seminars are offered
on the visual and performing arts, culture, history, music, philosophy, language and literature for
the general public, children and teachers, as well as for business.

China Institute Gallery, established in 1966, is distinct among the museums of New York City. It
was the first in the United States to exclusively showcase Chinese art on a regular basis. Today,
China Institute Gallery is New York’s only non-commercial exhibition space solely dedicated to
Chinese art and is known for its innovative thematic and scholarly exhibitions, publications and
related art education programs.

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China Institute Gallery
125 East 65th Street, New York City
February 12 through June 7, 2009

Images Available for Reproduction

Lacquer Flanged Cup with Cloud Pattern and Inscriptions “Jun Xing Jiu” and “Si Sheng,” Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE). Paint, wood, 27.5 x 22.3 cm. Excavated 1972, Han Tomb I, Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Province. Hunan Provincial Museum.

Lacquer Two-Tiered Cosmetic Box Containing Nine Small Boxes, Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE). Paint, wood, and textiles, 20.8 x 35.2 cm. Excavated 1972, Han Tomb I, Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Province. Hunan Provincial Museum.


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