New York, NY, July 2008 – Masterpieces of Chinese painting and calligraphy from the imperial collection of China’s last emperor, Puyi, will be on view at China Institute Gallery from September 25 – December 14, 2008. The 26 objects in The Last Emperor’s Collection: Masterpieces of Painting and Calligraphy from the Liaoning Provincial Museum, from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) through the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), include handscrolls and hanging scrolls, as well as reproductions of imperial catalogues of the works. On loan from the Liaoning Provincial Museum, the objects represent some of the most treasured painting and calligraphy from their periods in China. A fully-illustrated bilingual catalogue will accompany the exhibition. A companion exhibition entitled Strangers in a Strange Land: Chinese Art From the Imperial Palaces will be on view at the Princeton University Art Museum from September 27 to December 14, 2008.
The last emperor of China, Puyi (1906-1967), was chosen to ascend the throne when he was 2-years-old. A prisoner of power behind the walls of the Forbidden City in Beijing, he abdicated in 1911, but remained in the Forbidden City until 1924 – an extraordinary story which was immortalized by Bernardo Bertolucci’s award-winning 1987 film The Last Emperor. From September through December in 1922, the emperor’s brother helped to smuggle more than 1,300 masterworks from the imperial collection which were gradually dispersed throughout northern China. Since 1949, the Liaoning Provincial Museum has worked to reassemble much of the collection.

“The history of imperial collecting in China is a unique phenomenon,” notes Willow Weilan Hai Chang, director of China Institute Gallery and co-curator and project director of The Last Emperor’s Collection: Masterpieces of Painting and Calligraphy from the Liaoning Provincial Museum. “Throughout history, many emperors – either as a result of their own personal passion or their awareness that art could be a means to legitimize their authority – diligently collected painting and calligraphy, which, like a magnet, bonded art and culture to Chinese identity.”

**Exhibition Highlights**

Among the many treasures in The Last Emperor’s Collection: Masterpieces of Painting and Calligraphy from the Liaoning Provincial Museum is a 25-foot Ming dynasty handscroll by 16th century artist Qiu Ying entitled Qingming Festival on the River. The festival, inspiring some of the most famous subject matter in Chinese painting since the Song dynasty (960-1279), is held each year around April 5 to honor deceased relatives and has also become a celebration of springtime. The scroll on view depicts the festival in the southern city of Suzhou, which was prosperous during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

A number of the objects in the exhibition were actually done by the emperors themselves who were accomplished in painting and calligraphy. The stunning handscroll, Ten-Thousand-Year-Old Pine Tree, 1431, by Zhu Zhanji (Emperor Xuanzong, 1399-1436), was a gift to the emperor’s mother for her birthday. It honored her by depicting an evergreen tree, a symbol of longevity in Chinese culture.

The famous Calligraphy in Imitation of “The Thousand Words” by Huai Su, 1770, by Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799), celebrates a long legacy. “The Thousand Words,” based on a famous work by Wang Xizhi (303-361 or 321-379), was composed by Zhou Xingci (c. 6th century) during the Six Dynasties as a primer for children. Formed in a four-word-per-sentence poem format with rhythms that were easy to read aloud and remember, the content interweaves Chinese philosophical life experiences with legend, history and morality. Later, the work became the
model for many calligraphers who replicated the seminal text. The piece on view is based on the work done by Huai Su (725-785), a Tang dynasty calligrapher known for his eccentric cursive style.

The Last Emperor's Collection: Masterpieces of Painting and Calligraphy from the Liaoning Provincial Museum will travel to the Taft Museum of Art in Cincinnati, Ohio, from May 29 – August 2, 2009.

Additional Information

China Institute Gallery is located at 125 East 65th Street (between Park and Lexington Avenues). Admission is $7 ($4 for students and seniors). 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 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 with 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, exhibiting the finest Chinese works of art, including painting, calligraphy, ceramics, bronzes, decorative art, folk art, architecture, photography and textiles from all periods. 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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