

CULTURAL HERITAGE



An elaborate ornament on display at the Chinese Traditional Culture Museum in Beijing. CHEN XIAOGEN / FOR CHINA DAILY



The Chinese Traditional Culture Museum in Beijing hosts an exhibition to showcase the country's rich, diverse fashion legacy last year. Exhibits include a variety of costumes and accessories. CHEN XIAOGEN / FOR CHINA DAILY



A proportionally restored artifact of Mogao Caves at an exhibition in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. LONG WEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

An avid calligrapher, Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) left a great deal of his work in the palaces of the Forbidden City. In 1772, he ordered the construction of Fo Ri Lou, a two-story structure housing Buddhist statues.

He wrote a couplet for the building, the first line of which reads, "Birds that frequently listen to sutra chanting here will eventually become intelligent", a metaphor for the way in which arts and culture cultivate the heart and mind.

Qianlong was also known for his collection of art. Once exclusively the preserve of royals, objects from his treasure trove are now on show to the public at his former residence, today's Palace Museum, as well as at other museums in China and abroad.

These days, people are increasingly less willing to spend a long time on one thing, and so museums are being forced to reimagine their role and approach to competing for attention in this era of digital life and social networking.

International Museum Day (which falls on Sunday) has taken "the Future of Museums in Rapidly Changing Communities" as its theme this year. It seeks to chart a collective path to empower museums to thrive in the face of rapid change, by exploring how they can protect intangible heritage, harness youthful energy and adapt to new technological frontiers.

The International Council of Museums has held International Museum Day every year since 1977 to encourage people to re-envision the future of museums, especially now that they are at the forefront of change.

In the traditional sense, museums are places where objects are stored and exhibited as a means of public education, but according to Zhao Feng, a member of the Executive Board of the ICOM and head of the School of Art and Archaeology of Zhejiang University, that role has become more diverse, with museums repositioning themselves to exert an influence on the future and development of society.

He says that a major concern for those working at museums is to make good and proper use of digital technology, particularly artificial intelligence.

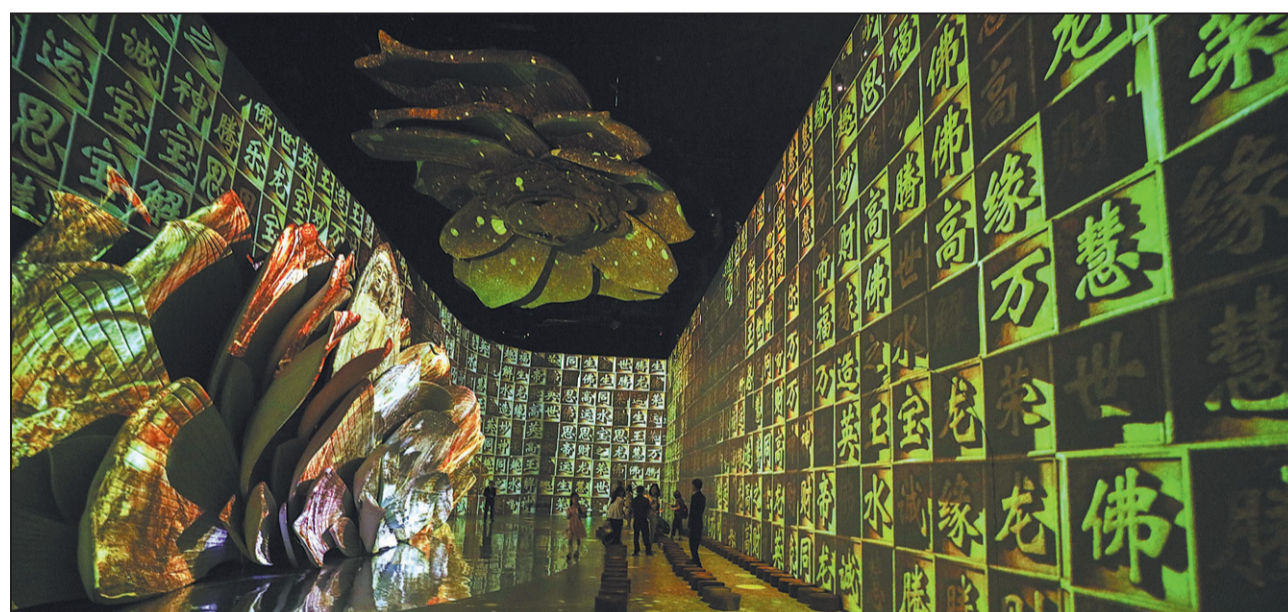
A vivid example can be seen at Beijing's National Museum of China where *The Digital World of the Rhino-shaped Vessel*, a long-term exhibition based around a single artifact — a bronze *zun* vessel dating to the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 24) — offers a rich historical and cultural presentation augmented by videos, interactive installations, high-resolution images and 3D sculptures to display the details of the vessel's embedded gold and silver work (*cuojinyin*) and other aesthetic features.

The exhibition has been made possible thanks to the museum's efforts to build a digital database of its collection, especially objects of importance and rarity like the rhino-shaped *zun* vessel.

"Since 2019, we have acquired the images of some 720,000 artifacts in the collection, and constructed 3D models of about 7,500 objects. ... Since the exhibition opening (in May 2023), it had received more than 2 million visits by the end of last year, including from people working at other museums in China and abroad," says

With foot in past, museums eye future

Experts reimagine role of institution as innovators to keep up with rapidly advancing technology, **Lin Qi** reports.



Top and above right: The National Museum of China in Beijing offers immersive experience for visitors in an exhibition about grottoes and a long-term exhibition on the rhino-shaped *zun* vessel. **Above left:** Relics and digitally reproduced images of the Longmen Grottoes are on display at Luoyang Museum in Henan province.

PHOTOS BY JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY; CHEN XIAOGEN AND HUANG ZHENGWEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

Ding Pengbo, deputy director of the National Museum of China.

She says that digitalization has also deepened cooperation between the museum and other institutions in terms of promoting exchange and learning among civilizations.

Last year, the museum held *Notre-Dame de Paris, the Augmented Exhibition*, a digital show that took visitors on a virtual dive into the history of the cathedral's architecture through the use of a specially developed tablet, and *Caravaggio's World of Art*, which included a 12-minute virtual reality tour that explored the meteoric rise and tragically short life of renowned Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610).

For Gehane Nabil, director of the GEM Learning Center at the Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza, technology plays a vital and encouraging role in engaging the younger generation, so that they come to view museums as centers of lifelong learning, not only of art and culture, but also of a variety of experiences.

"At GEM, we believe technology is not a goal, but a means that helps deepen and enhance the visitor experience," she said at the third UNESCO High-Level Forum for Museums, held between April 23 and 25 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province.

The forum was attended by experts in museum management and heritage protection from more than 60 countries and regions.

In her speech, Nabil referenced a Hackathon which has been held twice at GEM as a case for inviting college students to think of museums with the aid of AI.

She says the competition is designed to encourage innovations in problem-solving using advanced technology, and that dozens of university teams from all over Egypt participated to develop solutions, such as ways of improving GEM's photo booth service, at the Hackathon in December.

"College and university students are not regular museum visitors. They have a stereotype that museums are all about artifacts and boring stories," Nabil says.

"So we want to engage them, to talk to them in their own language."

During the competition, students spent a 24-hour period at the museum, developing their ideas on computers. They were dedicated to their tasks and came away feeling that they had contributed to museum management, Nabil says.

Silvia Singer Sochet, director of The Interactive Museum of Economics in Mexico, who also attended the forum, says: "People coming to museums are of different generations in need of different forms of learning. We've designed games for different groups, so that they can have fun while learning, and be connected to other people at the museum."

Zhao says that the museum is a unique type of classroom, compared to those at schools. It provides lifelong learning, anytime and anywhere. It offers online resources and on-site learning, real experiences that are irreplaceable. "It's a treasure trove of human knowledge."

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New venue sets sights on Neolithic Yangtze settlement

By **WANG KAIHAO**
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The iconic late archaeologist Yan Wenming (1932-2024) once dubbed ancient people living near the Yangtze River as "vanguards on the path toward civilization" who, more than five millennia ago, left abundant legacies etched into China's long history.

Exquisite jades, of course, shine like oracles passing on the stories of their splendor. Dating back 5,200 to 5,800 years, the Lingjiatan site in Hanshan county, Ma'anshan, Anhui province, a late Neolithic settlement in the lower reaches of the Yangtze, plays a pivotal role in researching early-stage Chinese civilization.

Since its discovery in 1985, archaeological research and preservation efforts at the Lingjiatan site have made substantial progress.

The unearthed relics have now found a new home where they can be admired by the public. The Lingjiatan Site Museum opened on Friday at the archaeological ruins after being under construction for two years.

The newly opened museum covers an exhibition area of approximately 4,000 square meters and showcases nearly 1,100 artifacts, such as pottery, jade objects, stone tools and bone artifacts.

"This marks the first-ever comprehensive showcase of Lingjiatan relics, notable not only for the large number but also for their diversity," says Wu Weihong, an archaeology professor at the University of Science and Technology of China and the museum's main exhibition curator.

Among the highlighted relics on display are a double-sided circular jade dragon, a jade eagle adorned with octagonal patterns, vivid jade figures, ritualistic jade turtles, tablets and pig statues, newly excavated dragon-headed jade artifacts, and the largest-known prehistoric Chinese stone axe whose variety was known as *yue*.

More than 100 artifacts are on display for the first time, offering visitors a firsthand experience of the Lingjiatan site's profound historical significance in tracing origins, formation and the early development of Chinese civilization.

Wu notes that a highlight of the exhibition is the integrated display of the set of artifacts unearthed from tomb 07M23 ("royal tomb"), with more than 300 objects found in the resting place of a probable chief priest.

"The display incorporates dynamic presentations with in-depth ritual research to vividly re-create the burial customs of that period," he says.

"By combining findings through systematic research, the exhibition offers a holistic, immersive reconstruction of ancient social life, unveiling the authentic realities of prehistoric human history."

Wu worked as the lead archaeologist during excavations at the Lingjiatan site, but now focuses on his work at the university. However, he says research on the site in recent years has been fruitful.

Two layers of moats used as a defensive system were discovered. Archaeologists also excavated the ruins of a massive public building covering over 3,000 square meters and a site used for burning sacrifices, which are key indicators of the Lingjiatan people's lives.

Wu explains: "From a cultural development perspective, the middle to late phases of Lingjiatan culture marked a pivotal era characterized by social complexity, establishing sophisticated ceremonial systems and pioneering jade craftsmanship."

"Its relatively intricate social structure remained incomplete. For example, we haven't seen rigid hierarchical social classes through studying the tombs."

"But it undeniably positioned Lingjiatan as a vanguard of civilization in its time."

The museum aims to serve as a crucial platform for showcasing archaeological research outcomes and elevating the construction standards of the Lingjiatan National Archaeological Park, says Zhang Ling, deputy director of the archaeology department at the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

"Lingjiatan is a crucial site for showcasing the cultural roots along the Yangtze River," Zhang says.

"Our ancestors created it, and it has persisted through the ages. To this day, Lingjiatan maintains its idyllic pastoral scenery,



A double-sided circular jade dragon. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

crisscrossing paths amid undulating waves of rice fields."

She adds that the development of rural tourism and programs for educational research trips will be planned now that the museum is open.

"The site is a vital gateway for inheriting and promoting the rich, traditional Chinese culture," she says.

"It will teach the public how agrarian cultures have evolved and prospered along the Yangtze since the Lingjiatan era, and serve as a reference for maintaining harmony between humans and nature."