

The last secrets if the forbidden city heads to the us

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This article is concerned with the current state of the famous Forbidden City, a huge enclosure, once home to the mighty Chinese emperors, which lies at the heart of modern Beijing. The author provides a brief description of the Forbidden City as a whole. Its name derives from the fact that, when the emperors ruled, it was off limits to all except those who has been specifically summoned to the imperial presence. This law was strictly enforced, and those who attempted to contravene it and breach the City's high red walls and surrounding moat, could expect no less punishment than death. After the Chinese Revolution of 1911, however, by which the Empire became a republic, the Forbidden City no longer served as the seat of power, and in 1925, it first opened its doors as a museum.

While it is one of the most important and frequented tourist destinations in China today, the author has been given a tour of the site which takes in some areas of the complex which remain out of bounds, including some that are in a state of neglect. The compound's vast size, encompassing as it does some 179 acres and including 980 separate buildings, makes maintenance a real and ongoing problem for the museum's directors, and means that the whole areas cannot be opened to the public at any one time.

The author finds, for example, the Qianlong Gardens, with vastly overgrown bamboo and wolfberry plants. These unchecked corners are just a stone's throw from the main reception halls and state apartments which host thousands of visitors daily. They were built for a long-ruling Qianlong emperor in the 18th century. Little has been done to the interiors of the structures in this quarter in the course of the past century, but now work has

at last begun to restore them. The funding and organisation for this project have been made available by collaboration between the Palace museum and the World Monuments Fund. As part of the agreement for restoration, some 90 objects from the Qianlong gardens will, from mid-September, be put on display as part of a Forbidden City exhibition touring several museums in the United States.

These artefacts include a lacquered screen covered in images of the Buddha's learned disciples, and visual aids to meditation. Many of the objects have never been on public display before, and so this is widely anticipated as a major exhibition. While there have been some complaints from within China that it would have been more appropriate for the exhibition to be held within China itself to begin with, officials from the Palace museum conceive of the touring exhibition as a useful means of raising international awareness of the Forbidden City and its treasures. This is not the first such exhibition of important Chinese artefacts to visit American museums in recent years. The Peabody Essex, the first venue for the new tour, has previously played host to a late Qing dynasty house which was dismantled in Anhui province, China, and rebuilt on the grounds of the museum.

While the new foreign tour progresses, so does restoration work on the structures within the Qianlong gardens. Work on the first building to be tackled - the Studio of Exhaustion from Diligent Service - has recently been completed.