

Heavenly Horses



THE EXHIBITION

Heavenly Horses invites you to experience how these animals connected empires, influenced art, and reflected the shifting tides of Chinese civilization.

From practical warhorses to symbols of resilience, this exhibition reveals the power of a single creature to shape history and inspire artistic expression across cultures and centuries.

This exhibition explores the remarkable influence of horses in Chinese society from the Han dynasty through the Yuan dynasty, spanning nearly a millennium. Known as "Heavenly Horses," these revered animals were more than just valuable imports; they symbolized strength, prestige, and the reach of China's power.

Each room in the exhibition unveils a chapter of this evolving story, highlighting how the role of horses transitioned from military assets in the Han, to symbols of prosperity and artistic inspiration in the Tang, to emblems of cross-cultural exchange under the steppe-influenced Yuan dynasty.

Through a curated selection of ancient sculptures, murals, scrolls, and reliefs, visitors journey through time to witness the horse's transformation from functional companion to cultural icon. Highlights include the iconic bronze chariot from the tomb of the Terracotta Warriors, the Taizong horse reliefs, and the exquisite scroll paintings of Ren Renfa, celebrated as the finest equine art of the Yuan dynasty.

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FEATURED IN THE EXHIBITION



BRONZE CHARIOT

Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor (秦始皇帝陵博物院), Xi'an, Shannxi, China

The bronze chariot from the tomb of the Terracotta Warriors is a half-life-size model crafted from bronze, inlaid with gold and silver. Drawn by four lifelike bronze horses, it features intricate details, including a canopy symbolizing imperial authority.

This masterpiece from the Qin dynasty reflects both advanced craftsmanship and Emperor Qin Shi Huang's desire for power in the afterlife, symbolizing his eternal journey with military strength and prestige.

THE BRONZE RUNNING HORSE OF GANSU

Height 34.5 cms

Gansu Provincial Museum, Lanzhou, China

The Bronze Running Horse of Gansu, also called the Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow, is a Han dynasty masterpiece and one of China's national treasures, forbidden to leave the country. Found in Wuwei, Gansu Province, this dynamic bronze sculpture captures a horse mid-gallop, its hoof delicately balanced on a bird. It symbolizes the speed and strength of the "Heavenly Horses" and showcases remarkable artistry and technical skill.



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TOMB MURAL

Tomb Dingjiazha M5, Jiuquan, Gansu, China.

This detail from a mural, dating from 386–441 CE, portrays a “heavenly horse” prancing among swirling clouds, embodying the mythical qualities of the revered tianma. The flames and flowing lines around the horse evoke speed, power, and a sense of divine energy, capturing its status as a celestial being. This striking artwork reflects the belief that these horses bridged the earthly and heavenly realms, symbolizing protection and favour from the gods.

SIX STEEDS OF THE ZHAO MAUSOLEUM

Stele Forest Museum Beilin, Xi'an, China

Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA



This mural series depicts Emperor Taizong's beloved warhorses, commemorating their role in his military victories. Created with remarkable detail, each panel captures the strength and loyalty of these prized animals. The reliefs' journey from China to their current location abroad raises complex questions about cultural heritage and ownership. These artworks reflect the Tang dynasty's reverence for horses as symbols of imperial power, loyalty, and the emperor's authority.



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SOUTHWEST VESTIBULE

Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey.

The mosaic over the Southwest Vestibule of Hagia Sophia (c. 1000 CE) depicts Christ Pantocrator flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist in a Deesis composition. Below, Emperor Constantine I presents a model of Constantinople, and Emperor Justinian I offers a model of Hagia Sophia. Set against a gold background, the mosaic showcases Byzantine artistry, highlighting divine and imperial authority with intricate detailing and vibrant colours.



TWO HORSES

Ren Refna (任仁發) 1254–1327

Original dimensions scroll 28.8 x 143.7 cm

Palace Museum, Beijing, China

Ren Renfa's *Two Horses* is a response to Gong Kai's *Noble Horse*, where a half-starved horse symbolized the decline of the Song dynasty under Yuan rule. Gong Kai's work, critical of officials who remained in service, might have been seen as a subtle critique of Renfa himself.

In *Two Horses*, Renfa contrasts a well-fed horse—representing corrupt, self-serving bureaucrats—with a thin, weary horse, symbolizing dedicated officials like himself. Unlike Kai's unbridled horse, both of Renfa's horses are bridled, indicating that they are bound to serve.

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