

Restoring an Intimate Splendor

WMF AND BEIJING'S PALACE MUSEUM EMBARK ON A TEN-YEAR PLAN TO CONSERVE THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY QIANLONG GARDEN IN THE FORBIDDEN CITY



For the past four years, the Palace Museum in Beijing and the World Monuments Fund (WMF) have partnered in the restoration of the Forbidden City's Lodge of Retirement (see *Qianlong's Private World*, ICON, Winter 2003/2004). The two-story lodge has the most exquisite interior of the elaborate eighteenth-century Qianlong Garden, a two-acre private retreat nestled in the northeast corner of the Forbidden City. Built for Emperor Qianlong between 1771 and 1776, the garden has remained virtually unchanged since its initial construction, thanks in no small measure to Qianlong's decree that the site not be altered by future generations, the eighteenth-century equivalent of a landmarks preservation law. In more recent years, lack of funds and the formidable conservation challenges posed by the garden's interiors have meant that the site has been left untouched, even as much of the Forbidden City has undergone restoration.

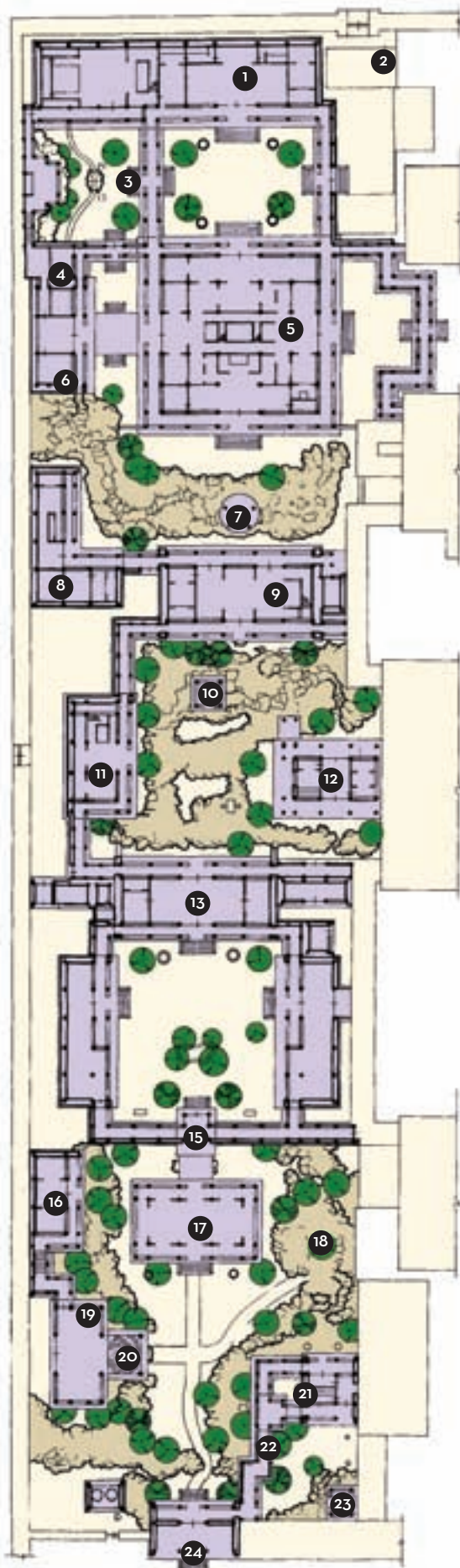
Now the Palace Museum and WMF are launching an ambitious program aimed at restoring the entire Qianlong Garden, including all its pavilions, interiors, and spectacular rockeries. The project, slated to last ten years and cost up to \$18 million, is perhaps the most comprehensive program in the history of WMF and the largest project ever carried out by the Palace Museum dealing with historic interiors.

Though largely unknown to the public and off the beaten tourist track, the garden deserves this unprecedented level of commitment. Even in a site as architecturally rich as the Forbidden City, the Qianlong Garden stands out as unique. The garden's four courtyards and 24 buildings are a remarkable contrast to the huge monumental spaces just outside. "When you go back to the Qianlong Garden, the scale of it immediately strikes you," says Henry Tzu Ng, Executive Vice President of WMF. "Some of the spaces are almost as intimate as a Cape Cod house. You can picture the emperor being by himself—some of the walkways and rooms are big enough for just one person."

The scale of the garden may be intimate, but it is no less impressive than the rest of the

THE PAVILION OF EXTENDED DELIGHT





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| 1. LODGE OF RETIREMENT | 13. HALL OF FULFILLMENT OF ORIGINAL WISHES |
| 2. GATE OF TRUTH AND COMPLIANCE | 14. EXHIBITION AND TOURIST SERVICES |
| 3. ROOM OF BAMBOO FRAGRANCE | 15. FLORAL PENDANT GATE |
| 4. CHAMBER HEART PARTITION | 16. HALL OF GLORIOUS DAWN |
| 5. BUILDING OF WISH AND REALITY | 17. PAVILION OF ANCIENT FLOWERS |
| 6. PAVILION OF JADE PURITY | 18. TERRACE OF COLLECTING MORNING DEW |
| 7. PAVILION OF THE GREEN-JADE CONCH SHELL | 19. PAVILION OF CEREMONY OF PURIFICATION |
| 8. BUILDING OF CLOUD LIGHT | 20. CUP FLOATING STREAM |
| 9. PAVILION OF APPRECIATING LUSH SCENERY | 21. PAVILION OF PRACTICING INNER RESTRAINT |
| 10. PAVILION OF LOFTY BEAUTY | 22. SQUARE PAVILION |
| 11. PAVILION OF EXTENDED DELIGHT | 23. PAVILION OF PICKING FRAGRANCES |
| 12. PAVILION OF THE THREE FRIENDS | 24. GATE OF SPREADING HAPPINESS |

Forbidden City. As the ruler of the world's wealthiest empire at the time, Emperor Qianlong made certain that his artisans used the highest quality materials as they created some of the most elegant spaces at a time widely considered to be the pinnacle of Chinese interior design. Many of the most important elements were made in the southern provinces in the rich Han style, including exotic wood screens with inlays of jade, porcelain, camel bone, and ebony thread. Preceding emperors of the Qing Dynasty emphasized simple interiors in keeping with their nomadic Manchu heritage, but Qianlong embraced the more lavish Han traditions that found their highest expression in southern China. The search for modern-day craftspeople capable of working in this tradition has led to the provinces south of Shanghai (see *In Search of Lost Arts*, ICON, Spring, 2005).

Exquisite attention to detail is also on display in the architectural features of the garden: in both the layout of the buildings and gardens among the four courtyards, and especially the widespread and unusual use of rockery gardens. The third courtyard boasts a particularly fine example of the intricately planned rock gardens. "There are these mountains of rockeries and caves there where you could get lost," says Ng. "When you walk in them it's hard to imagine that you're still in the Forbidden City, that you're still in Beijing. You could be on a mountainside in southern China."

Restoration efforts at the Qianlong Garden are being shaped by a masterplan developed by WMF consultant Liu Chang of Tsinghua University and Wang Shiwei, Deputy Director and Senior Engineer of the Historical Architecture Department of the Palace Museum. Their comprehensive review of the garden begun in 2004 was the first thorough documentation of the site, and together with a Geographical Information System (GIS) survey of the garden, will guide the effort, which is





ABOVE: A VIEW OF THE FOURTH COURTYARD FROM THE LODGE OF RETIREMENT. OPPOSITE PAGE: DELICATELY PAINTED PORCELAIN MEDALLIONS ADORN THE WALLS OF THE PAVILION OF EXTENDED DELIGHT.

divided into four phases, with each phase focusing on one courtyard. Restoration of the architectural and physical integrity of the garden, its buildings, interiors, garden rockeries, and plantings, will go hand in hand with an effort to modernize its infrastructure. And while most of the buildings are sound, some of the sumptuous interiors will require a good deal of work. Time is of the essence, however, as some of the most elaborate features, including bamboo marquetry, white jade cartouches, and double-sided embroidered silk, continue to disintegrate.

The project will begin with work on the fourth courtyard, where the Lodge of Retirement is situated, and will last from 2007 to 2010. The courtyard was designed in the style of the Jianfu Garden, Qianlong's favorite in the Forbidden City, and one which he commissioned early in his reign. In the center of the courtyard is the pyramidal-roofed *Fu'wang'ge*, the Building of Wish and Reality, the single largest structure in the Qianlong Garden. The three-story building has spacious and elaborate interiors, but it is quite derelict, and the budget for restoring it accounts for about 20 percent of the entire project.

The restoration of the third courtyard, the second phase of the project, will begin once work on the fourth is finished, and is scheduled to last until 2013. Its compact rockeries are the most remarkable in the Qianlong Garden, and are overlooked by *Songxiu Ting*, the Pavilion of Lofty Beauty, which sits atop a hill that overlooks the entire courtyard and is linked to other buildings by caves, stone steps, and verandas. *San'you'xuan*, the Pavilion of Three Friends, is particularly elegant, and is outfitted

with screens and furniture adorned with pine, bamboo, and plum blossom motifs, all metaphors for the virtues of friendship.

The second and first courtyards will be restored during the third and final phases of the project, which will last between 2014 and 2016. The second courtyard was designed in a plain, residential style, decorated by small rockery works. The main hall of the courtyard, *Suichutang*, the Hall of Fulfilment of Original Wishes, represents Qianlong's well-known pledge to retire after a 60-year reign to honor his much-beloved grandfather Kang'xi, China's longest-reigning monarch.

The garden's elaborate first courtyard is entered by a gate where a rockery work ingeniously screens the interior. A small winding path leads to the main pavilion, *Gu'huaxuan*, the Pavilion of Ancient Flowers, named after a 300+-year-old Chinese catalpa tree around which the courtyard was designed. To the southwest, facing the courtyard's rockeries, is *Xishangting*, the Pavilion of the Floating Cup, which features a mini canal where wine cups once floated on flowing water. The canal also bore the poems the emperor's guests wrote, such as that as recorded in the famous ancient calligrapher Wang Zizhi's masterpiece *Lan'ting'xu*, or *Prelude for the poem Pavilion of Cymbidium*.

All four phases of the project will bring experts from abroad to the garden to help in the restoration, and perhaps just as important, to provide training and technical assistance. Visiting conservators, architects, and craftsmen will help turn the Qianlong

A WALL-SIZE MURAL IN THE PAVILION OF JADE PURITY DEPICTS FAMILY LIFE IN THE ROYAL COURT





LEFT: THE PAVILION OF LOFTY BEAUTY VIEWED FROM THE THIRD COURTYARD; A DAY BED AND OTHER ANTIQUES GATHER DUST IN UNRESTORED PAVILIONS, ABOVE; INTRICATE CARVING AND SILKWORK IN THE PAVILION OF THREE FRIENDS

Garden into a teaching laboratory for conservation planning, and site interpretation in other areas of the Forbidden City, and perhaps eventually other sites in China. It is hoped the educational and interpretive potential of the project will have just as deep and long-lasting an impact as the actual restoration itself.

By 2016, the masterplan envisions the entire Qianlong Garden accessible to the public for the first time and presented as a single site through which visitors will be able to explore the vast majority of the buildings and gardens. New educational and interpretive centers will give both Chinese and international visitors a chance to learn more about a key period in China's architectural and imperial history. The site's intimate scale will pose a particular challenge to public interpretation of the site, since it can only accommodate a few visitors at a time. Going from the vast scale of the rest of the Forbidden City to the intimacy of the Qianlong Garden, visitors will have a chance to experience a profoundly personal encounter with one of China's architectural marvels.

"The third courtyard is full of these tall rock mountains," says Ng. "And if you're going through, you can't help but linger. You could be in a rush, but you always pause and stop on these rockeries. You can envision the emperor standing there enjoying the view. People embrace that moment. It's very striking and it's extremely calming." Once restoration of the garden is complete, visitors to the Forbidden City will have a chance to experience the same sense of inner calm that Emperor Qianlong sought here more than two centuries ago. ■

