

## PRESS RELEASE

### Minneapolis Institute of Art and Theater Artist Robert Wilson Collaborate To Create Immersive Experience Highlighting China's Last Dynasty

Opening February 3, Exhibition Will Reveal the Drama and Rituals of Court Life

**Minneapolis, January 8, 2018**—The Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) is collaborating with celebrated theatre director and visual artist Robert Wilson to organize a first-of-its-kind exhibition highlighting the drama, rituals, and opulence of the Qing Empire, the last imperial dynasty of China. The exhibition will present objects from Mia's renowned collection of Chinese art, including rare court costumes, jades, lacquers, bronzes, gold ornaments, paintings, and sculpture, displayed in an immersive, experiential environment conceived of by Wilson. "Power and Beauty in China's Last Dynasty: Concept and Design by Robert Wilson," presented by Sit Investment Associates, is curated by Liu Yang, Mia's Curator of Chinese Art, and will be on view February 3 through May 27, 2018.

"The staging and storytelling involved in this exhibition speak to Mia's belief in art's ability to inspire wonder and fuel curiosity," said Matthew Welch, Mia's Deputy Director and Chief Curator. "Through the use of the theatrical elements of lighting, sound, and progression, we examine the layers of imperial life—from the external presentation of the court to the internal, private life of the emperor. We want visitors to feel as though they are part of this closed, ritualized, and sometimes even dangerous world."

During the Qing (pronounced "ching") court's reign (1644–1912), the arts flourished—rivaling that of Europe's great kingdoms. This backdrop of opulence served to affirm imperial power and prestige, and acted as stagecraft to enhance the emperor's leading role as the "son of heaven."

Costumes worn at court are given particular attention in the exhibition, including the display of exquisite robes heavily embroidered or woven with symbolic designs such as roiling waves and faceted rocks that evoke the earth's oceans and mountains, or stylized clouds that suggest the heavens. Dragons, a longstanding symbol of imperial authority and might, often cavort in the clouds, suggesting the emperor's rule of heaven and earth. These symbols are also repeated on other objects throughout the exhibition and help reinforce the sense of the imperial family's rule as mandated from heaven.

"Mia has one of the world's great collections of Chinese art outside of China," said Liu Yang, Mia's curator of Chinese Art and head of China, South, and Southeast Asian Art. "Our collection of Qing dynasty textiles is one of the most comprehensive in the West, and we have many other important objects associated with the Qing emperors and their courts. It is personally very exciting for me to be able to highlight these objects in an unexpected and fresh manner by working with Robert Wilson."

#### Exhibition Experience

The exhibition will progress through a series of ten galleries that lead visitors from the performative, external world of the imperial court to the intimate, interior world of the emperor. The sequence of galleries explores different aspects of imperial life, from the almost bureaucratic devotion to hierarchy and the emperor's omnipotent control of the court to the politically expedient splendor of religious devotional objects.

Each gallery will also feature an original soundscape created by Wilson, in collaboration with sound designer Rodrigo Gava, and dramatic lighting by designer A.J. Weissbard.

To set the stage, visitors will enter a small, darkened gallery with a single illuminated object and a subtle soundscape, encouraging them to settle their minds and leave behind the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they enter the world of the emperor. In juxtaposition, the second gallery will embrace the extreme of opposites. Brightly lit and displaying approximately 200 objects including: carved lacquer boxes, bronze altar pieces, jades, gold ornaments, gilt bronzes, porcelains, and furniture—the gallery will emphasize the range of artistic creation throughout China's long history and the force of this tradition on the Qing emperors.

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An adjacent gallery seeks to recreate the sense of authority and awe inspired by meeting the emperor in his throne room. In this room with gold-leafed walls that evoke the opulence of the Hall of Supreme Harmony (Taihe dian) in the Forbidden City in Beijing, an imperial throne from the Qianlong period (1736-95) will be raised on a dais with stairs on three sides, four large pillars surrounding it, and a large dragon painted on the wall behind it. The soundscape will emphasize the fearsomeness of the emperor's power by relying on percussion instruments performing ceremonial music, punctuated by intermittent screams.

Another gallery will focus on the court life of noblewomen. This room will highlight the artistry developing in gold and silver production in the Qing period and the development of sophisticated technology for clothing manufacture, which created a remarkable material culture of garments and adornments. The aluminum-foil wallpaper of the gallery is designed to suggest a lavish and extravagant lifestyle, yet with a poignant soundscape that undercuts the display. A sad, bitter melody will be played on the *erhu* (a two-stringed instrument), but unexpectedly interrupted from time to time by the sound of female giggling—a symbolic reference to the destiny and experience of Chinese women in the imperial court.

Together, the galleries vividly bring to life an intimate and dramatic sense of the imperial court during China's last dynasty.

"Mia could not be more delighted to work with Robert Wilson on the creation of this exhibition," said Kaywin Feldman, Mia's Nivin and Duncan MacMillan Director and President. "His unique approach to exhibition design and his willingness to push the boundaries make him an ideal collaborator. His style often involves dramatic contrasts—brightness and darkness, fullness and emptiness—which bring a new perspective to these historic objects."

### **Support**

Presenting Sponsor: Sit Investment Associates

Lead Sponsor: Nivin and Duncan MacMillan Foundation

Major Sponsor: Delta Air Lines Inc.

Generous support provided by Gale Family Endowment

### **About Robert Wilson**

Born in Waco, Texas, Wilson is among the world's foremost theater and visual artists. His works for the stage unconventionally integrate a wide variety of artistic media, including dance, movement, lighting, sculpture, music, and text. His images are aesthetically striking and emotionally charged, and his productions have earned the acclaim of audiences and critics worldwide. After being educated at the University of Texas and Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, Wilson founded the New York-based performance collective "The Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds" in the mid-1960s, and developed his first signature works, including *Deafman Glance* (1970) and *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974-75). With Philip Glass he wrote the seminal opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976). Wilson's artistic collaborators include many writers and musicians, such as Heiner Müller, Tom Waits, Susan Sontag, Laurie Anderson, William Burroughs, Lou Reed, and Jessye Norman. He has also left his imprint on masterworks such as Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Brecht/Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Goethe's *Faust*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Jean de la Fontaine's *Fables*, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, and Verdi's *La Traviata*. Wilson's drawings, paintings, and sculptures have been presented around the world in hundreds of solo and group showings, and his works are held in private collections and museums throughout the world. Wilson has been honored with numerous awards for excellence, including a Pulitzer Prize nomination, two Premio Ubu awards, the Golden Lion of the Venice Biennale, and an Olivier Award. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as the German Academy of the Arts, and holds eight Honorary Doctorate degrees. France pronounced him Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters (2003) and Officer of the Legion of Honor (2014); and Germany awarded him the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit (2014). Wilson is the founder and Artistic Director of The Watermill Center, a laboratory for the arts in Water Mill, New York.

### **About Liu Yang**

After completing his PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in 1997, Liu Yang served as the Senior Curator of Chinese art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. There he mounted an impressive number of major exhibitions, including shows on Chinese painting and calligraphy, Buddhist sculpture, jades, bronzes, Daoist art and modern prints. Since joining

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Mia in 2011, Liu has curated exhibitions on the contemporary ink painter Liu Dan as well as on ancient terracotta warriors and treasures associated with China's first emperor, Qin Shihuang.

### **About the Asian Art Collection at Mia**

Mia's collection of Asian art comprises some 16,800 objects ranging from ancient pottery and bronzes to works by contemporary artists, with nearly every Asian culture represented. Areas of particular depth include the arts of China, Japan, and Korea.

Specific subsets and highlights of these collections rival the holdings of museums across the globe. The museum's holdings of ancient textile, lacquer wares and hardwood furniture comprise one of the largest and best collections in the West. For its stylistic diversity and condition, Mia's collection of ancient Chinese bronze is typically considered one of the nation's top collections of its kind. Important examples include a famous vessel in the form of an owl, superb silver inlaid works, and many other outstanding vessels from the Shang and Zhou dynasties (c. 17th–3rd century BCE). Mia's Japanese collection has outstanding concentrations of Buddhist sculpture, woodblock prints, paintings, lacquer, works of bamboo, and ceramics, and is particularly rich in works from the Edo period (1610–1868).

The museum's commitment to Asian art is also evident in the sheer volume of space devoted to its display. At present, Asian art occupies an impressive 20 percent (32,200 sq. ft.) of the total display space (161,000 sq. ft.) for art at Mia. The permanent display space for Japanese art is the largest in the Western world, with 15 galleries spanning more than 10,000 square feet.

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## **About The Minneapolis Institute Of Art**

Home to more than 89,000 works of art representing 5,000 years of world history, the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) inspires wonder, spurs creativity, and nourishes the imagination. With extraordinary exhibitions and one of the finest wide-ranging art collections in the country—Rembrandt to van Gogh, Monet to Matisse, Asian to African—Mia links the past to the present, enables global conversations, and offers an exceptional setting for inspiration.

General admission to Mia is always free. Some special exhibitions have a nominal admission fee.

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## **Museum Hours**

Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday	10am–5pm
Thursday, Friday	10am–9pm
Sunday	11am–5pm
Monday	Closed

For more information, call + 1 612 870 3000 or visit [artsmia.org](http://artsmia.org)

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