



THE LODGE OF RETIREMENT

Qianlong's Private World

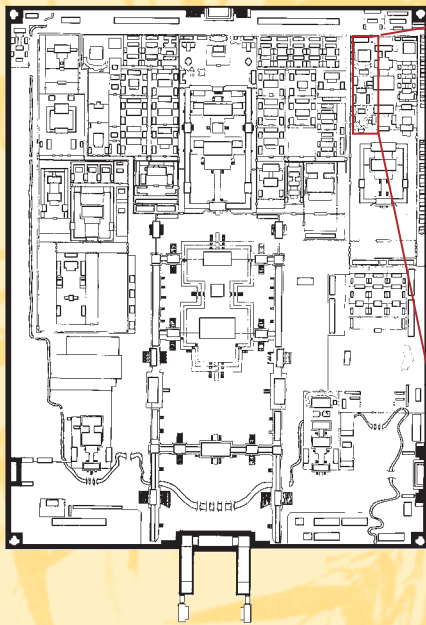
**ALL BUT FORGOTTEN,
AN EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY IMPERIAL
JEWELBOX IN THE
FORBIDDEN CITY
IS FINDING
NEW LIFE THROUGH
RESTORATION**

by HENRY TZU NG

Aside from the Great Wall, the Forbidden City in Beijing is no doubt China's most famous landmark. From the thousands of tourists who visit the ancient city each day, it is hard to imagine that the imperial precinct was completely off-limits to the general public until 1925, relatively recently considering the city's 500-year history. Even after its gates were opened to the public following the reign of Pu Yi, the country's last emperor, the Forbidden City remained largely unknown to the outside world as a result of China's political isolation. It shouldn't be surprising then that vast areas of the site, which covers some three-quarters of a square kilometer, remain hidden from view, with more than 1,000 buildings—many untouched since imperial times—awaiting discovery.

Such was the case with Qianlong's Lodge of Retirement, an eighteenth-century jewelbox tucked away in the northeast quadrant of the Forbidden City. Today, the lodge is the subject of a multimillion-dollar conservation initiative, undertaken by WMF in partnership with the Palace Museum, Beijing.

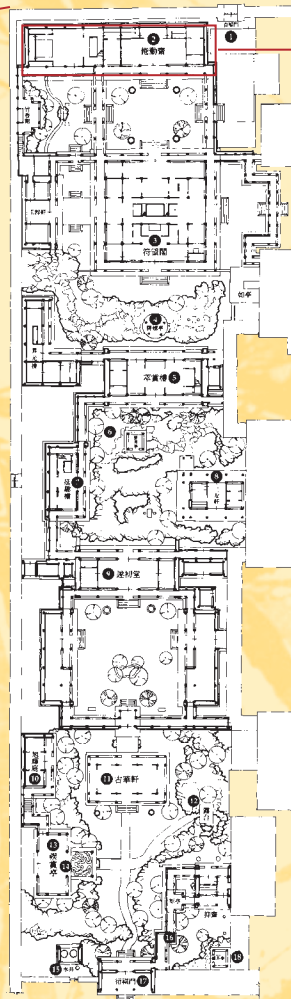
Commissioned by Qianlong in 1771, the two-story lodge was built for the Qing Dynasty emperor's anticipated retirement in 1796. Qianlong vowed that "if the Heavens blessed him to be on the throne for 60 years," he would retire out of respect so as not to oust his beloved grandfather Kang'xi, China's longest-reigning emperor.



FORBIDDEN CITY

The Lodge of Retirement, or *Juan'qin'zhai* ("being tired of diligent life when aged"), and its associated gardens and pavilions are located in the Qianlong District, a microcosm of the Forbidden City itself, being laid out along a central north-south axis with spaces dedicated to ritual, living, and leisure. Within the lodge, walls and screens are adorned with fine bamboo marquetry and white jade cartouches; trompe l'oeil paintings grace walls and ceilings; and imperial sitting areas are upholstered in embroidered silk. The murals, which exhibit a clear Western influence and use of perspective that is unique in the Forbidden City and in China, are largely the work of Wang Youxue, a student of the Italian painter and Jesuit missionary Guiseppe Castiglione, who carried out commissions for the Qing court. It has been suggested that some of the figures in the murals such as the cranes actually may have been part of an earlier work painted by Castiglione himself.

Interior partitions are mainly made of precious woods as *Pterocarpus indicus* (red sandalwood) and *Dalbergia hainanensis* (Huanghuali wood)



QIANLONG GARDEN

LODGE OF RETIREMENT

imported from Hainan Island. Jade and double-embroidery details are an integral part of the elaborate screens and panels that frame the lodge's main reception hall and the emperor's private leisure quarters. They are responsible for making the interior appear to glow like a silk lantern at night.

Qinglong reigned at a time when China was one of the richest and largest nations in the world, and, like today, engaged with the West in trade, politics, aesthetics, and ideas. His status as a great emperor rests on his scholarship and patronage of the arts, which included the publication of *The Four Treasuries*, an extraordinary compilation of classics, history, philosophy, and belles lettres collected by more than 300 scholars, and hand copied by some 15,000 scribes. His connoisseurship also extended to building programs within Forbidden City, where he employed the best artists and craftsmen to build new palaces and temples. It is no surprise then that the Qing interiors of the Lodge of Retirement represent the epitome of Chinese interiors of their day. Yet for all their opulence, they were clearly meant for private use.

In contrast to the grand ceremonial spaces that mark the main axial way through the Forbidden City—built to accommodate the emperor and his entourage of court officials—the lodge and gardens of the Qianlong District are of singular scale designed for one man, never mind an emperor, whose flowing robes surely would have brushed against walls and pathways.

Abandoned for nearly a century, the lodge had deteriorated considerably over the years. In particular, the beautifully rendered silk paintings,

IN SEARCH OF LOST ARTS

Before we began our work on Qianlong's Lodge of Retirement, we realized the conservation facilities at the Palace Museum, accustomed to handling scrolls, fans, and portable works of art, were far too small to accommodate the large murals that would have to be removed from the lodge for cleaning and repair. Moreover, the windows were



not airtight, allowing dust to settle on ancient surfaces; inadequate ventilation posed a range of risks to conservators and works of art alike. With a grant from the Freeman Foundation, WMF and the Palace Museum were able to build a new, onsite conservation studio equipped with large, flexible workspaces, proper lighting and ventilation systems, and specially constructed multilayered wall surfaces, upon which mural panels could be attached and worked on.

Among the greatest conservation challenges we have faced in the restoration of the lodge has been the recovery of artisanal skills such as fine bamboo marquetry (1), double embroidery (3), and *zhu'huang*, or inner bamboo carving (4), which have not been practiced in China for decades, if not for centuries, and the



wallpaper, and other fragile finishes have suffered from high humidity and lack of heating during winter months. But beneath the layers of dust and crumbling finishwork is a veritable time capsule, a window on the life and taste of one of China's most illustrious emperors (see page 24).

That the lodge and gardens have survived at all is the result of an edict issued by Qianlong himself, who declared that this area of the Forbidden City was to be preserved in future years as part of a palace for "super sovereigns." Were it not for the edict this complex likely would have been altered by subsequent emperors as was the custom throughout the imperial period. The lodge—like the Forbidden City itself—survived the ravages of the Cultural Revolution because of the protection afforded by Chou En-lai. For much of the twentieth century, the lack of available financial resources protected the site from alteration. Thus, patronage and poverty have secured this site for history. If all goes according to plan, a restored and interpreted Lodge of Retirement will open to the public for the first time in its 225-year history, just in time for the 2008 Olympics. ■

Conservation of the Lodge of Retirement is being made possible through the generosity of The Brown Foundation, The Freeman Foundation, Mr. & Mrs. Peter Kimmelman, and The Tiffany & Co. Foundation.



ABANDONED FOR NEARLY A CENTURY, THE LODGE OF RETIREMENT, TOP, HAD DETERIORATED OVER THE YEARS. INTERIOR DETAILS HAVE SUFFERED FROM HIGH HUMIDITY AND PLUMMETING WINTER TEMPERATURES. A NEW CONSERVATION LABORATORY, ABOVE, WAS BUILT TO ACCOMMODATE THE LARGE MURAL PANELS, WHICH HAD TO BE DETACHED FOR CONSERVATION, LEFT.

replacement of materials such as jade used in the numerous medallions (2) and rare woods that are no longer readily available.

The front and reverse sides of double embroidery panels that make up the room dividers are identical with no visible knots. In soft light, the panels, made of *Ping Mian Shuan Kong Sha* (horizontal thread and square-holed silk), look like luminous lanterns.

Restoration of the embroidery screens includes repairs to the surrounding wood inlay frames that house the embroidery. The art of inner bamboo carving is among the rarest techniques found in the lodge. The process involves cutting and peeling the bamboo, boiling it, and then drying it in the sun.



Flattened sheets are then attached to an ornament and carved. The resulting texture is smooth as ivory, yet the distinct pattern of the bamboo is retained. The intricacy of their manufacture and the sheer number of them in the lodge attest the emperor's wealth and connoisseurship. Jade used in the numerous medallions and plaques came from the Qiemo area of Xinjiang Province. After hundreds of years of mining, however, there are limited jade resources of the same type left in that region of northwest China. While nothing today can compare to the consistent quality in color and texture of the originals, suitable new sources of jade have been located in Beijing and Suzhou. Restoration of the jade and embroidery is being underwritten by The Tiffany & Co. Foundation.