Press Release

The University of Chicago’s Smart Museum of Art presents Performing Images: Opera in Chinese Visual Culture, a first-of-its-kind exhibition that examines the power that opera held over China’s visual and material culture during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

On view from February 13 to June 15, 2014, the exhibition brings together approximately eighty remarkable objects in a wide variety of media from major public collections—including a previously unidentified album of exquisitely painted opera figures from the nineteenth century, two rhinoceros horn cups with detailed carvings of opera scenes, extremely well preserved woodblock New Year prints (nianhua), and a very rare and intricately carved wood and ivory Chinese lute (pipa). Together with a scholarly catalogue, the exhibition reveals how Chinese visual and performing traditions were aesthetically, ritually, and commercially intertwined.

“Performing Images offers an extraordinary perspective on a remarkable tradition,” said Anthony Hirschel, Dana Feitler Director of the Smart Museum of Art. “It represents one of the important ways that the Smart fuels collaborative, interdisciplinary discovery at the University of Chicago while sharing this intellectual energy with the broader public.”

Performing Images is curated by Judith T. Zeitlin, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor in East Asian Languages and Civilizations and Theater and Performance Studies at the University of Chicago, and Yuhang Li, Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, in consultation with Richard A. Born, Smart Museum Senior Curator. The exhibition is a key component of Envisioning China, a festival of art, film, music, conversation, and performance at the University of Chicago. The exhibition and festival open with a public reception at the Smart on Thursday, February 13 from 5:30 to 7:30 pm.
Exhibition overview

For a checklist or high-resolution images of works in the exhibition, please contact C.J. Lind at cjlin@s.uchicago.edu or 773.702.0176.

During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties (1644–1911), opera lay at the heart of Chinese social and ritual life and constituted a common culture that was enjoyed by all manner of people from the village to the court. Opera’s place in Chinese society gave rise to the widespread manufacture and circulation of objects portraying operatic characters and stories. A broad selection of this material has been assembled for Performing Images, including examples of scroll paintings, illustrated books and popular prints, painted fans, ceramics, textiles, musical instruments, carved bibelots and figurines, architectural ornaments, snuff bottles, miniature dioramas, playing cards, and photography.

“Performing Image focuses on the representation of opera in the greatest possible variety of visual and material forms rather than on real artifacts used in performance,” said co-curator Judith Zeitlin. “Our hope is that the exhibition goes beyond the mere display of operatic artifacts to give audiences insight into the role that operatic imagery played in multiple facets of everyday life and recurring celebrations.”

The exhibition is divided into five sections: A Multiplicity of Forms reveals how opera enjoyed widespread popularity throughout imperial China and showcases the variety of forms and media found in the exhibition; Stage and Spectacle highlights the grandeur of performance through depictions of the opera stage, musical instruments, and costumes; Picturing the Play shows how operatic stories were illustrated in woodblock prints and on decorative objects; Romance of the Western Chamber (Xixiang ji) focuses on one of China’s most popular plays, which was a favorite subject in Chinese visual cultural as well;
and finally, **Character, Role, Actor** examines how depictions of the costumes, gestures, and face paint were used to represent specific dramatic characters and role-types. The nearly eighty works on view in *Performing Images* date primarily to the Ming and Qing dynasties. Nearly half of the works have never been displayed publicly before.

The objects are assembled from collections at the American Museum of Natural History; Asian Art Museum; Brooklyn Museum; Butler Family Collection, England; The Field Museum; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Philadelphia Museum of Art; The Joseph Regenstein Library, The University of Chicago; Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon; and C. V. Starr East Asian Library, University of California, Berkeley.

### Related exhibition

In a gallery adjacent to *Performing Images*, the Smart Museum presents the concurrent exhibition *Inspired by the Opera: Contemporary Chinese Photography and Video* (February 13–June 15, 2014). This concise exhibition reveals the continued relevance of opera, both within contemporary Chinese society and within the experimental work of individual artists. It includes photography and videos by Liu Zheng, Chen Qiulin, Liu Wei, and Cui Xiuwen. Together, the works help illuminate the relationship between contemporary art and China’s cultural heritage.

*Inspired by Opera* is curated by Wu Hung, Smart Museum Consulting Curator, Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor of Art History, and Director of the Center for the Art of East Asia at the University of Chicago, in consultation with Stephanie Smith, Smart Museum Deputy Director and Chief Curator.

### Exhibition catalogue

The exhibition will be accompanied by the first scholarly publication of its kind in English. Through essays and illustrated object entries, it offers new interdisciplinary perspectives on Chinese visual and performing traditions. The book is edited by Judith Zeitlin and Yuhang Li with contributions by Bo Songnian, Jonathan Hay, David Johnson, Ni Yibin, Mei Mei Rado, and Wu Hung.

The catalogue will be available for purchase in the Smart Shop in February 2014. It will be distributed by the University of Chicago Press.
Envisioning China

UChicago Arts presents a diverse selection of art, film, music, conversations and performances connected to the arts and cultural history of China during a five-month festival. From the magnificent art and spectacle of Chinese opera to rarely screened silent films and world premiere performances, the festival opens a window on the rich cultural heritage of China, past and present. Performing Images, Inspired by the Opera, and related programs are key components of the festival.

Envisioning China is directed by Leigh Fagin, Assistant Director of Collaborative Programming at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts. Professor Judith Zeitlin is the faculty director of the festival.

For a full schedule of programs, visit envisioningchina.uchicago.edu.

Related programs

Unless noted, all programs are free and open to the public and take place at the Smart Museum of Art.

Thursday, February 13, 5–7:30 pm

At the Threshold

Celebrate the public opening of Performing Images and Inspired by the Opera. The evening features creative experiences organized by Matt Austin, an artist and the Smart’s interpreter in residence, as well as drinks, music, and conversation inspired by Chinese opera.

Free admission, cash bar ($4 drinks). All are welcome, but must be 21+ to drink.

Saturday, March 1, 1–4 pm

Family Day: Domino Throwdown

In 1900s Beijing, fans of the Chinese opera could collect playing cards of their favorite actors and opera characters—much like we collect baseball cards or celebrity tweets today. See an original set of Chinese opera domino cards in Performing Images, make your own playing cards, and then join in a dominoes tournament.

All materials provided. Activities are best for kids ages 4–12, accompanied by an adult.

March 7, 7 pm; April 6, 2 pm; May 3, 7 pm; May 16 7 pm

Film Series: Chinese Opera

Logan Center for the Arts, The University of Chicago, 915 E. 60th Street, Film Screening Room

Explore cinematic adaptations of the epic and often scintillating stories from historic Chinese operas. This film series mixes narrative and documentary work and includes the rarely-screened gem Romance of the Western Chamber (Xixiang ji) (dir. Hou Yao, China, 1927, 59
min, 35 mm)—a silent film that will be presented with live music from a newly commissioned score by Donald Sosin. 

Presented by the University of Chicago’s Film Studies Center, Department of Cinema and Media Studies, and Smart Museum of Art in conjunction with the Consul General of Chicago of The People’s Republic of China. Free. Seating is limited and offered on a first come-first served basis.

Friday, March 14, Noon

**Gallery Talk: Drama, Gardens, and Printing Culture**

Isabel Wong leads an insightful gallery talk through *Performing Images*, discussing the Chinese musical drama and its profound influence on Chinese society. Isabel Wong is an ethnomusicologist and Assistant Professor of Music, emerita, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Free, but space is limited. Please register in advance at smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/calendar/register.

Thursday, March 20, 5:30–7:30 pm

**Third Thursday: Bowling and Spooning**

Drop by the Smart and get creative. Using the intricately carved and finely painted objects on view in *Performing Images* as a guide, carve and decorate your own utensils and bowls with representations of the modern-day equivalent of Chinese opera stars (aka your favorite celebrities).

*All materials provided. Open to adults of all skill levels.*

April 10–11

**Symposium: Chinese Opera in Late Imperial and Early Republican Visual and Material Culture**

*Multiple locations at The University of Chicago*

Leading scholars from the fields of literature, art history, and history will explore the impact of Chinese opera on visual and material culture during the late imperial and early Republican period (roughly 17th–early 20th centuries). The keynote address “Performance and the Spectacular in Ming Painting” will be delivered by Craig Clunas (Professor of the History of Art, Oxford).

*Presented by the University of Chicago’s Center for East Asian Studies, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, the Franke Institute for the Humanities, Logan Center for the Arts, and Smart Museum of Art. The symposium is free and open to the public.*

Saturday, May 3, 1–4 pm

**Family Day: About Face**

Join us for a springtime face-painting and mask-making festival at the Smart! Transform into a Chinese opera character from *The White Snake* or something else entirely.

*All materials provided. Activities are best for kids ages 4–12, accompanied by an adult.*
Sunday, June 1, 2 pm

**Pipa Recital: Lan Weiwei**

Enjoy a performance from virtuoso Lan Weiwei—one of the best pipa players in China and lecturer in pipa performance at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. The pipa, a plucked Chinese string instrument, was often featured in Chinese opera accompaniment. The recital will bridge ancient and modern, featuring Ming dynasty and other traditional works from the pipa repertoire as well as the debut of a newly commissioned piece by composer Chen Yao (UChicago PhD’12, Assistant Professor in composition at Illinois State University). Before the recital, Performing Images co-curator Judith Zeitlin will give a brief gallery talk about a rare, lavishly decorated Ming dynasty pipa that is on view.

*This performance is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Consul General of Chicago of The People’s Republic of China, and the Richard and Mary L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry at the University of Chicago. Free. Seating is limited and offered on a first come-first served basis.*

Saturday, June 7, 1–4 pm

**Family Day: Snake Stories and Plush Puppets**

*Oriental Institute Museum (1155 East 58th Street) and Smart Museum of Art (5550 S. Greenwood Avenue)*

Join the Smart and the Oriental Institute Museum for a family afternoon full of puppet-making and folklore-sharing! First, visit the Oriental Institute to hear the ancient folktale *A Donkey Reads* and create a take-home shadow puppet. Then, slither over to the sssssSmart for ssssstorytelling and a fun plush project. After reading the tale of *The White Snake* and exploring the art in Performing Images, make your own plush stuffed snake and sock puppets based on the characters in this Chinese legend.

*All materials provided. Activities are best for kids ages 4–12, accompanied by an adult.*

Saturday, June 7, noon

**Curator Tour: Performing Images**

Explore Performing Images and the rich visual culture of Chinese opera with exhibition co-curators Judith Zeitlin (William R. Kenan Jr. Professor in East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago) and Yuhang Li (Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison). The exhibition’s consulting curator Richard A. Born (Senior Curator, Smart Museum of Art) will introduce the program.

*Free, but space is limited. Please register in advance at smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/calendar/register.*

**About**

*Performing Images* is curated by Judith T. Zeitlin, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor in East Asian Languages and Civilizations and Theater and Performance Studies at the University of Chicago, and Yuhang Li, Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in consultation with Richard A. Born, Smart Museum Senior Curator.
The exhibition and catalogue have been made possible by the Smart Museum’s Pamela and R. Christopher Hoechn-Saric Exhibition Fund and its Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Endowment; the Office of the Provost, The University of Chicago; Mary Smart and the Smart Family Foundation; Janis Kanter and Thomas McCormick and the Kanter Family Foundation; the Walter E. Heller Foundation; and Gay-Young Cho and Christopher Chiu. Support for related programming is provided by The Franke Institute for the Humanities and the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Chicago. Additional funding for the catalogue is provided by the Confucius Institute at the University of Chicago and Furthermore—a program of the J. M. Kaplan Fund.

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**About the Smart Museum of Art**
The Smart Museum of Art is an intimate museum for bold encounters with art. Both fueling and expressing the creative energy of the University of Chicago, the Smart opens the world to boundary-breaking art and ideas through innovative special exhibitions, ever-changing programs, and distinctive collections.

**Mission**
The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago opens the world through art and ideas.

**Smart Museum of Art**
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**Hours**
Tuesday–Sunday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.  
Open Thursday evenings until 8 p.m.

Galleries closed Mondays and holidays

**Admission is always free**