

**Tragic love story, inspiring art and music for over 1,000 years,  
is focus of new Worcester Art Museum exhibition**

*Dangerous Liaisons Revisited* opens on January 20

Worcester, MA—November 16, 2017—The tragic love story of the historic Chinese emperor Ming Huang (reigned 712-756) and his consort Yang Guifei has inspired artists, musicians, and writers across Asia for centuries. It is now the focus of a new exhibition, [\*Dangerous Liaisons Revisited\*](#), opening at the Worcester Art Museum on January 20, 2018. Centered on the Museum's 14th- to 17th-century Ming period handscroll painting, *Ming Huang and Yang Guifei Listening to Music*, the exhibition explores the story's enduring appeal through 25 works ranging from the 7th to the 21st century, including tomb sculptures, ink paintings, prints, historical musical instruments, and contemporary works. The exhibition remains on view until April 22, 2018.

The prosperous Tang dynasty (618-907) is known as the golden age of Chinese art and culture, especially during the reign of the great music patron Ming Huang in the 8th century. Music played an important role at court by shaping behavior and social roles—from ritual music intended to cultivate morals and virtues for harmonious rule, to vernacular music of entertainment, which came to represent the sensuality and decadence of Tang court life.

The fateful liaison between Ming Huang and Yang Guifei began when she entered the imperial court at the age of 17 as the consort of the emperor's son. Later, she annulled the marriage and became a nun in order to remarry as the emperor's consort. When they wed, Yang Guifei was 27 years old and Ming Huang, who had already ruled for more than 30 years, was 61. His legendary reign ended in national crisis when—after a series of catastrophes—his affections for Yang Guifei were blamed for his negligence of duties, and his generals rebelled. As the emperor and Yang Guifei fled the capital, his remaining followers also mutinied by killing Yang Guifei.

“Love and tragedy are the defining characteristics of the story that has endured and inspired across cultures and centuries,” said Vivian Li, assistant curator of Asian Art at the Worcester Art Museum and curator of the exhibition. “That contemporary artists are as engaged with the tale of the emperor and his consort as their forbears testifies to the strong human resonance of this particular story. Generations of artists have interpreted this tragic love story, from paintings to plays.”

While the Tang dynasty never regained its former splendor, the ill-fated love between the emperor and the renowned beauty was immortalized in the widely-circulated poem of 806, “The Song of Everlasting Sorrow,” by the famous Tang poet Bai Juyi. This work has inspired numerous poets, writers, and artists in China—and later in Japan as the story traveled—from the 9th century to the present day.

*Dangerous Liaisons Revisited* explores three main themes: the shifting representation and meaning of the famous love story of Ming Huang and Yang Guifei in later Chinese and

Japanese art and culture; the role of music at the Chinese imperial court and as a metaphor for human desires; and the significance of the golden age of the Tang dynasty for later generations of artists, from the anonymous Ming period artist of the Worcester Art Museum's handscroll painting to contemporary artists.

In *Ming Huang and Yang Guifei Listening to Music*, the love between the emperor and his consort is expressed as they listen to an all-female orchestra at court. In addition to this painting and other works from the Museum's collection, the exhibition features another rare Ming period handscroll depicting an all-female orchestra at the Chinese Tang court from the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as historical Chinese musical instruments from the [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#). A *pipa* (lute), loaned by the [Boston Symphony Orchestra](#), was acquired by the BSO on their first historic tour to China in 1979.

The ongoing relevance of the Tang dynasty's cosmopolitanism and extravagance is highlighted by two contemporary works, Wang Qingsong's photographic piece *Night Revels of Lao Li* (2000) and Peng Wei's six-panel ink painting *Coming Full Circle* (2015). *Night Revels of Lao Li* parodies a famous Tang period handscroll painting of a court official's degenerate night life. Wang's monumental photographic work evokes the wealth and luxury of the Tang period to comment on the commercialism and decadence of contemporary Chinese art and culture.

Peng Wei's *Coming Full Circle* draws on the popular landscape subject of Ming Huang's escape to remote west China with Yang Guifei after he abdicated the throne to rebel forces. However, in her painted landscape, Peng also includes excerpts from the historical correspondence among early 20th-century literary luminaries Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetayeva, and Rainer Maria Rilke in the summer of 1926. The juxtaposition of the classic Tang period green and blue landscape imagery representing Ming Huang's and Yang Guifei's escape along with the letters' text describing the plight and despair of Pasternak alienated in Stalinist Russia, Tsvetayeva living in poverty and alone in France, and Rilke suffering from leukemia in Switzerland creates new layers of meaning for both narratives that, like the other works in *Dangerous Liaisons Revisited*, transcends time and space.

#### **Master Series Third Thursday Program:**

On Thursday, March 15 at 6 p.m., composer Shirish Korde and cellist Jan Müller-Szerwas will present a reinterpretation of ancient music at the Chinese Tang Court. The performance will include the premiere of a new solo work for cello by Korde, professor of music at the College of the Holy Cross, inspired by ancient Chinese melodies originally composed for the qin, a traditional Chinese instrument. A reception in the Museum's Renaissance Court, with cash bar and live music, will follow the lecture. The program is free with Museum admission.

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### **About the Worcester Art Museum**

Founded in 1896, the Worcester Art Museum's encyclopedic 37,500 piece collection covers 51 centuries of art. Highlights include the Medieval Chapter House, Renaissance Court, and Worcester Hunt Mosaic, as well as the recently integrated John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection of arms and armor. The Museum is internationally known for its collection of European and American art. It was the first in America to acquire paintings by Monet and Gauguin and one of the first to collect photography. As the first U.S. museum to focus on collaborating with local schools, it has been at the forefront of engaging audiences and giving them a meaningful and personal experience.

The Worcester Art Museum, located at 55 Salisbury Street in Worcester, MA, is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; and every third Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Admission is \$16 for adults, \$6 for children 4-17, \$14 for seniors 65+, and \$14 for college students with ID. (New hours and admission, effective September 1, 2017) Members and children under four are free. Parking is free. For more information, visit [worcesterart.org](http://worcesterart.org).

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