

Building bridges between nations

By **PROFESSOR MARTIN ROTH**

DIRECTOR, V&A



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became Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in September 2011. Before joining the V&A, he was Director General of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, overseeing 12 museums and galleries. During this time he created an extensive network of international partners, which led to numerous exhibitions overseas. From 1996-2001 Mr Roth was a member of the senior management of the Expo 2000 in Hanover and Director of Thematic Exhibitions.

The V&A has a long history of working in and with China to share knowledge and expertise, promote cultural understanding and encourage the exchange of new ideas. The V&A now has a popular Chinese language website www.vamuseum.cn. In April 2012 the Museum was the chosen venue for the first UK-China Summit, People to People Dialogue (April 2012), led by Rt. Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport and Madame Liu Yandong, State Councillor of the People's Republic of China. This was an important moment in an ongoing dialogue and vibrant programme of cultural exchange. My own interest in and engagement with museums in China is also longstanding. As both Director of the V&A and, formerly, as Director General of Dresden Museums, I have supported an active programme of cultural exchange between China and Europe.

A highlight of this year's exhibition programme at the V&A in South Kensington is the ambitious survey of Chinese paintings from 700 to 1900, *Masterpieces of Chinese Painting* (26 October 2013-19 January 2014). The exhibition is the first major retrospective of Chinese painting in the UK since 1935. It brings together over 100 of the finest examples of Chinese painting. Visitors can view some of the earliest

surviving Chinese paintings as well as other extremely rare pieces, from the greatest international collections. Contemporary artworks created in response to the exhibition include a major installation by Xu Bing, titled 'Travelling to the Wonderland', in the John Madejski garden at the V&A.

From today's perspective, it doesn't seem extraordinary to be working in China and to engage in direct cultural exchanges. But what today appears as an everyday scenario was unthinkable fifteen years ago. China has opened up and radical changes are now taking place, so fast at times that processes can be viewed as history only a few years after they have occurred. The *Masterpieces of Chinese Painting* exhibition is one indicator of the sea-change that has taken place over the last 20 years. There is more collaboration and more exchange of expertise between Chinese and UK museums than ever before.

We are thrilled to display in the exhibition several national treasures, some of which have not previously left China. These include the 12th century painting *Auspicious Cranes* and the 17th century painting *Flowers on the River*. The V&A was able to secure these rare loans with the support of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, Art Exhibitions China (AEC) in Beijing, the Embassy of the People's Republic of



Xu Bing, 'Travelling to the Wonderland', installation at the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013

China to the UK and our colleagues in the five lending institutions, The Palace Museum Beijing, Shanghai Museum, Liaoning Provincial Museum, Dunhuang Academy and Tianjin Museum.

Masterpieces of Chinese Painting is the latest in a lively and impressive programme of exhibition exchanges with China. In 2010, the V&A showed *Imperial Chinese Robes from the Forbidden City*. This was the first time the sumptuous robes and accessories worn by the emperors and empresses of the Qing Dynasty were shown in Europe. In March 2008, to coincide with the Olympic Games held in Beijing, the V&A opened *China Design Now*, the first UK exhibition to explore contemporary design and architecture created in China. In 2005 the V&A held the first major display of contemporary Chinese photography and film in the UK in the exhibition *Between Past and Future*.

During his visit to Beijing in 2010, the British Prime Minister David Cameron announced plans for a major festival of British culture, UK Now, in China in 2012. For the festival, the V&A partnered with the British Museum and the National Museum of China to create a major exhibition, *Passion for Porcelain: Ceramics Masterpieces from the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum*. It went on display from June 2012-January 2013 at the National Museum of China. Earlier this year the V&A's *The Splendour of India's Royal Courts* was successfully shown at the Palace Museum, Beijing (25 April-31 July 2013). The V&A also showed 100 British Watercolours from its collections in the *Water into Art* exhibition held at the Shenzhen Museum (8 September-11 November 2012). The major scholarly work by V&A curator Katherine Coombs, *British Watercolours, 1750-1950*, is one of the Museum's publications recently translated into Chinese.

Individual exhibitions and publications are important milestones, but we also need to think about long-term strategies and commitments. The 19th century strategy of building an international museum through acquisition and display needs to be updated for the 21st century. Making a truly international museum is now about forming connections and promoting dialogue. It means striving to connect with international communities and work together with respect for each other's terms.

There has been an impressive and exponential growth in China's museum community in recent years and, alongside it, a welcome embrace of international knowledge-sharing and collaboration as a means of enhancing and diversifying museum programmes. The V&A enjoys excellent relationships with some of the most established museums in China, including the National Museum and the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City. In November this year I participated in an international forum of museum directors held

to mark the re-opening and expansion of Nanjing Museum. The term 'expansion' does not quite do justice to the enormous increase in display space and capacity that has taken place in Nanjing over the last four years. Like the equally spectacular expansion of the National Museum in Beijing, the dimensions of the new building are of a size that cannot be imagined in a European setting. These new buildings are a symbol of change and reconciliation, an impressive sign of national awareness and pride on the one hand and a welcome indication of openness on the other.

The V&A is in advanced discussions with China Merchants Group regarding a pioneer partnership to develop a new design museum in Shenzhen, China's 'City of Design'. This would be the first major design museum in South China. It would provide a platform to promote Chinese design to an international audience, as well as present the best international design in China.

Sharing expertise means not only co-operation between museums and museum professionals, but between museums and a variety of other institutions – universities, think-tanks, design practices and other businesses. It may also mean imaginative short-term interventions. V&A curators are contributing this year to the Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture held in Shenzhen. Their adventurous approach is to ask designers, architects, curators and others to collect objects that capture the reality of the city today. This exciting display will be rooted in the observation of contemporary reality and designed to stimulate debate. These are key principles on which we can form strong collaborative partnerships and continue to enjoy truly international exchange between China and the UK in the future.

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Masterpieces of Chinese Painting, 700-1900, V&A, 2013



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