

# POWER AND GLORY

## COURT ARTS OF CHINA'S

# MING DYNASTY

### *The Ming Empire (1368–1644)*



The Empire of the Great Ming was founded in 1368 by Zhu Yuanzhang, who enthroned himself as the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–1398) after nearly a century of oppressive rule under the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). The first Ming capital was established in Nanjing, a great city on the banks of the Yangzi River that served as a royal capital in ancient times.

In 1420, during the reign of the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–1424), the imperial capital was moved north to Beijing. The court remained there for the duration of the dynasty, while Nanjing served as an auxiliary capital in the south. During the Yongle reign, the Ming sent its naval fleet on voyages as far as the eastern coast of Africa. After this brief period of exploration ended, the empire became increasingly inward-looking, but the court continued to commission great works of art in a wide variety of media.

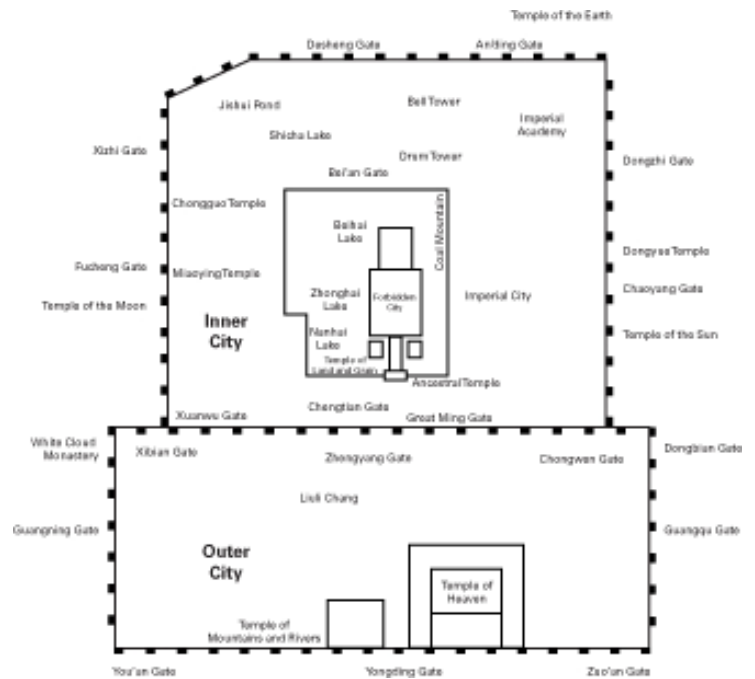
In addition to Ming porcelains, which have long been appreciated and desired in the West, imperial artists created paintings, lacquerware, metalwork and many forms of decorative art. The luxuriousness of the materials they used, their ingenious designs and the superior quality of their craftsmanship, all hallmarks of the best Ming court art, are evident throughout the exhibition.

During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Ming imperial court underwent a slow but decisive decline in political power, yet the arts continued to flourish. Even in the twilight years of the Ming dynasty, the fine and decorative arts produced displayed tremendous energy and expression.

When Ming troops overthrew the Mongols of the Yuan dynasty in 1368, the establishment of a capital city with an appropriate imperial presence became a high priority. The first Ming emperor settled in Nanjing on the lower reaches of the Yangzi River, an area that was China’s wealthiest and was home to many members of its educated elite. Nanjing (literally, “Southern Capital”) was the primary Ming capital until 1420, when the Yongle emperor (r. 1403–1424) moved the capital to Beijing (“Northern Capital”). For the remainder of the dynasty, Nanjing served as the secondary capital, with subsidiary administrative significance. The construction of each capital was an enormous undertaking, requiring the mobilization of massive labor forces and the amassing of great quantities of materials.



*Nanjing during the Ming dynasty*



*Beijing during the Ming dynasty*