

Fowler

MUSEUM AT UCLA

Press Release

How To Make the Universe Right: The Art of Priests and Shamans from Vietnam and Southern China

July 30, 2017–January 7, 2018



Los Angeles—Organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA, *How to Make the Universe Right* presents a stunning installation of painted religious scrolls, ceremonial clothing, and ritual objects of the Yao, Tày, Sán Dìu, Sán Chay, and other populations of northern Vietnam, southern China, and nearby regions. These works of art, most of which date to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are central to the ordination and initiation ceremonies of new priests and shamans. These religious practitioners serve as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual worlds and between the community and deities. The rituals they perform help make the universe right. The exhibition offers a rare opportunity to explore an extensive collection of more than 200 ritual objects that serve to further the understanding of these little-known cultures.

Many of these communities originally lived in the southwestern and southern provinces of China, and began to migrate to the mountainous regions of northern Vietnam several hundred years ago. The Yao's practices are most prominently associated with Daoism, a religious and philosophical tradition of Chinese origin. For the other peoples, the beliefs and deities of Daoism are combined with aspects of Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. The resulting artworks offer highly detailed representations of a sophisticated pantheon, and are essential for invoking spirits during ceremonies and for transmitting knowledge between generations.

Examples in the exhibition include vibrantly colored and intricately embroidered ritual robes and headdresses, and a spectacular set of 18 scrolls of elaborately painted deities, made for those engaged in the higher levels of initiation. *How to Make the Universe Right* also features a display evoking the temporary shrines constructed for ceremonies; a film on contemporary religious practices in the region; a selection of scrolls highlighting recent conservation of the objects at the Fowler; and an interactive iPad display of 18 scrolls.

Three key images — the so-called High Constable, recognized by his white horse; the water deity known as Hoi Fan, identified by the serpent who accompanies him; and the Administration, representing the manifold deities of Daoism — appear throughout the exhibition to educate viewers how to see and understand the often complex iconography present on the scrolls.

About the Exhibition

The exhibition is organized in sections that correspond to the different stages in a Yao priest's practice.

The introductory section examines the first level of ordination, known as the Three-Lamp Hanging Ritual. After completing this ceremony, the initiate is given the ritual equipment necessary for priestly activities, including the displayed three-scroll set of the High Constable, Hoi Fan and the Administration. These scroll sets are among the central tools the priest uses to invoke the deities when conducting ceremonies.

The second section displays scrolls that introduce many of the complex hierarchies of deities and lesser spiritual figures connected to Daoism, Buddhism and other religious traditions. It features paintings of the Four Heavenly Messengers, which demonstrate the ways in which scroll sets are central to the work of priests on behalf of their communities. The Four Heavenly Messengers bear responsibility for all increments of time: years, months, days, and hours. This section also includes a film on contemporary religious practices in the region.



Objects related to the life of a high priest are featured in the third section of the displays. Yao men who wish to become fully ordained priests must undergo a higher-level ceremony known as the Seven-Star Hanging Light Ceremony. This rigorous process lasts multiple days and nights and involves the participation of seven high priests, seven assistants and many other helpers. Priests who have been ordained in this rigorous ceremony must commission a full set of scrolls representing the complete Daoist pantheon. The section also presents the elaborate garments that are a central part of the religious practices — robes elaborately embroidered with images of dragons, deities, saints, and other symbols of Daoism. Installed near the embroidered robes is a series of five headdresses with long banners streaming from the crown, worn by pùt, or female shamans, among the Tày peoples.

The exhibition's fourth section evokes the space of the shrines that priests create for ceremonies. The Yao, Tày, Sán Dìu, Sán Chay and other peoples typically do not construct and maintain permanent shrines or temples. Instead, shrines are constructed as needed in homes and other spaces, and center around the hanging of scroll sets, which often overlap one another. The shrine also contains many everyday objects a priest makes use of in ceremonies.

Near the shrine section, a small display invites visitors to examine the ways in which these artworks often begin to show the wear and tear of use. As part of the exhibition process, members of the Fowler's conservation team worked to evaluate and conserve many of the objects. Three scrolls on display demonstrate different stages in the conservation process.

The final section of the exhibition displays objects related to funeral rites, which are an important aspect of a high priest's work. Like other ceremonies, they take place in private homes. During funeral rites, the priest uses scrolls (often eight to nine feet long) to pray and help guide the spirit towards heaven. Horizontal scrolls are hung above a priest's standard set of Daoist deity scrolls, while vertical scrolls usually extend from the main entrance of a shrine to another altar within the home. The soul must pass through many gates, mountains, and dangerous places before arriving at the tribunal of the Ten Kings of the Underworld, who weigh their good and bad deeds and determine into which of six realms they will reincarnate.

Credit

This presentation of *How to Make the Universe Right* was organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and curated by Terri Geis, Director of Education and Interpretation, and Matthew H. Robb, Chief Curator. We gratefully acknowledge its previous installations at the Bates College Museum of Art (Dan Mills, Director) and at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at the University of California, Santa Barbara (Bruce Robertson, Director). This presentation has benefitted from the accompanying publication by Trian Nguyen, Associate Professor of Art and Visual Culture and the Luce Junior Professor of Asian Studies at Bates College, and the earlier curatorial efforts of Barry Kitnick, Dan Mills, Mehmet Dogu (Exhibition Designer, AD&A Museum, UCSB), and Nguyen. All of the works on view are from the Barry and Jill Kitnick Collection, generously donated by the Kitnicks to the Fowler Museum at UCLA in 2015.

Related Programs

For a full calendar of exhibition-related programs, please visit www.fowler.ucla.edu/events

Curatorial Talk I Thursday August 3, 2017, 12pm

How to Make the Universe Right showcases a recent gift to the Fowler of religious scrolls, ceremonial clothing, and ritual objects of the Yao, Tày, Sán Diu, and other populations of northern Vietnam and southern China. What goes into mounting an exhibition of this rare and fascinating material culture? In this gallery walkthrough, Fowler Museum Chief Curator Matthew Robb and Director of Education and Interpretation Terri Geis share behind-the-scenes details about the exhibition planning process.

Tai Chi and Tea I Friday August 11 and Friday September 8, 2017, 11:30am–12:15pm

Originating from ancient Chinese Daoist principles, Tai Chi is an internal Chinese martial art form that helps create a healthy balance of Yin-internal energy with Yang-external energy. Master Peter Asco leads free Tai Chi lessons with basic training in Chi-Kung followed by tea in the Davis Courtyard and gallery viewing of *How to Make the Universe Right*. No experience necessary.

Performance: Lac Hong Performing Arts Group I Sunday August 20, 2017, 3pm

For this Sunday afternoon concert in the Museum's amphitheater, Lac Hong Performing Arts Group, a Vietnamese traditional arts organization based in Orange County, will present a cultural program celebrating the dance and musical traditions of Vietnam.

Workshop: Scroll Making with Debra Disman I Sunday August 20, 2017, 1–3pm

How to Make the Universe Right features large scroll paintings from Vietnam and China. Take in these magnificent art works and be inspired to create your very own scroll painting with marbled paper. Debra Disman of Artifactory Studio leads this drop-in workshop for all ages. No registration required. All materials provided.

Contemplative Art Viewing I Thursday September 14, 2017, 1–2pm

Mindfulness educator Mitra Manesh leads an art-viewing experience in the exhibition *How to Make the Universe Right*. Contemplative art viewing uses mindfulness practices to explore the relationship between art and the self.

Culture Fix: Christian De Brer on Conserving Daoist Sacred Objects I Wednesday September 20, 2017, 12pm

The objects featured in *How to Make the Universe Right* are drawn primarily from a major gift to the Fowler Museum. The scroll paintings and other ceremonial objects represent an unbroken link to the past of Asian mountain cultures whose roots go back 2,000 years. Learn from conservators Christian de Brer, Colette Badmagharian, and Chrysanthe Pantages how these objects were carefully conserved for their presentation.

About the Fowler Museum

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on works from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. Also featured is the work of international contemporary artists presented within the complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

Fowler Museum at UCLA

308 Charles E Young Dr N
Los Angeles, CA 90095
fowler.ucla.edu

Admission to the Fowler is free.

Hours: Wednesday 12–8pm and Thursday–Sunday 12–5pm

Parking available in UCLA Lot 4, 221 Westwood Plaza at Sunset Blvd. \$3/hr (maximum \$12/day)

Press Contact

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#howtomaketheuniverseright

Captions and Courtesy:

Left to right:

Pan Jin Min (Red Yao peoples, China or Vietnam)
The High Constable (Tai Wai), 1819
Handmade mulberry paper, paint, bamboo sticks, string
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2015.32.32; Gift of Barry and Jill Kitnick

Pan Jin Min (Red Yao peoples, China or Vietnam)
The Administration (Heng Fai), 1819
Handmade mulberry paper, paint, bamboo sticks, string
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2015.32.33; Gift of Barry and Jill Kitnick

Pan Jin Min (Red Yao peoples, China or Vietnam)
The God of the Sea (Minor Hoi Fan), 1819
Handmade mulberry paper, paint, bamboo sticks, string
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2015.32.30; Gift of Barry and Jill Kitnick

Artist Unknown (Tày peoples, Vietnam)
Robe (front and back views), late 19th to early 20th century
Handmade textile, embroidery
Fowler Museum at UCLA X2015.32.127; Gift of Barry and Jill Kitnick