

Terracotta Army: Legacy of the First Emperor of China

The VMFA exhibition, detailing the story of the First Emperor and the evolution of Qin culture, will be presented in three parts:

- **First Emperor of Qin and the Unification of China:** At age 13, Ying Zheng came to the throne of Qin during the Warring States period (475-221 BC). After his Qin army defeated six rival states, the young king declared himself First Emperor of Qin. Turning to Chinese cosmology and the Five Elements, he selected water and its corresponding color, black, to represent the dynasty and ensure its future success. Under his orders to simplify surviving writing styles of the former six states, officials adopted the Qin script, or small seal script, as the new universal writing system. Currencies circulated in other states were replaced with a national currency, and revised weights and measurements, as well as new inter-state roadways, promoted trade across the burgeoning empire. To defend the unified nation, the First Emperor linked the existing walls of former states along the northern border to create what is known today as the Great Wall of China.

This part of the exhibition will feature objects excavated from the First Emperor's mausoleum complex, including a bronze chariot, a battle bell, a sword, and gold and silver horse ornaments. Other works shown in this section include bronze coins, a unit of weight and measurement, bronze seals and seal clays with Chinese characters in seal scripts, and a model of a granary, representing the Qin dynasty's agricultural development.

- **Birth of the Qin Empire:** First settling on China's mountainous western frontier, the Qin made a living by herding and breeding horses, and making salt. After a Qin ancestor received fiefs, or land, and a royal title from the king of Zhou in 770 BC, the tribe began migrating east to fertile lands, and over the next 500 years evolved from a submissive state into a powerful empire. Archaeological finds at ancient capitals and in northern Shaanxi reveal the Qin's evolution and interaction with its neighboring states, and nomads.

These galleries will present how the Qin adopted Zhou traditions, borrowed practices from nomads and neighbors, and established its own style. Highlights include ritual musical instruments and vessels, jewelry, and household objects, and objects from nomadic cultures. Mythological animals and botanical designs, which conveyed symbolic meanings in ancient China, decorate ritual and domestic objects, as well as architectural components, reflecting the Qin people's expanding footprint and their rich cultural diversity.

- **Quest for Immortality:** The First Emperor's mausoleum complex—a necropolis for the ruler's afterlife—stands at the foot of Mount Li. Construction began shortly after he ascended the throne as king of the Qin state and continued for more than 38 years. China's largest tomb site, the mausoleum consists of ritual structures, palace buildings, an armory, an entertainment arena, stables, and a garden pond. After more than 2,000 years, his tomb continues to be one of the greatest mysteries of modern archaeology, and its contents have remained undisturbed. The Qin dynasty collapsed in 206 BC, three years after the First Emperor's sudden death. Qin culture and the First Emperor's influence, however, continued to shape succeeding dynastic systems.

Offering a glimpse into ancient China's deep belief in the afterlife, this final section will display the life-size terracotta figures, including a rare figure of a general, along with a cavalryman and archers. Some stand more than 6 feet tall and weigh more than 400 pounds. These monumental figures, which will be shown alongside other works of art, such as stone armor, bronze weapons, and a bronze water bird, represent the emperor's warriors, officials, and servants as designated by their distinguished poses, headdresses and uniforms, all of which are rendered with a detailed realism and astonishing attention to detail that make them among the most important works of art to have survived from the ancient world.