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For Immediate Use

The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia
Opens at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Oct. 5, 2003

Rice is a staple food for more than three billion people, mostly in Asia, but this staggering statistic only hints at the immense cultural significance this grain has for Asian peoples. In many Asian languages, when inquiring if a guest is hungry, the literal translation is, "Have you eaten rice?" In fact, the growing and eating of rice have become intimately bound to aspects of personal identity; notions of family, community, and state; systems of religious belief and ritual activity; and forms of expression ranging from the courtly to the popular, from the past to the present.

'The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia' — on view at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History from Oct. 5, 2003 until April 25, 2004 — is a wide-ranging, traveling exhibition that examines the interplay between rice and culture in Asian society through a study of the visual arts, including works from China, Japan, India, Indonesia, Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and other Asian countries.

More than 200 objects on view range from Japanese Zen paintings to intricate Indonesian textiles to modern works created for popular festivals of the agricultural cycle, and include ceramics, sculptures, puppets, paintings, prints, textiles, furnishings, architectural elements, and ritual paraphernalia. The exhibition includes a "festival theater" showing video footage of many Asian rice festivals, such as the offering of the first grains of the new harvest to Buddha in a northern Thai monastery.

Visitors to 'The Art of Rice' are greeted with a scene from a shadow puppet play that depicts a key moment from Javanese mythology, when the beloved rice goddess Dewi Sri creates the sacred grain. In Javanese agricultural communities, this play was traditionally performed annually at harvest time. These puppets, commissioned for the exhibition from puppet master Kik Soleh Adi Promono and made by Daniel Mulyana, cast a striking landscape in black and white in the exhibition entry, and their fine craftsmanship is displayed in the final gallery of the exhibition, where visitors are treated to the puppet-master's view.

The opening gallery features two displays in rotation; the first is a Japanese screen dating from the Edo period (1603–1868), depicting rice plants heavy with grain in the autumn. The screen epitomizes the concept of seasonality in Japanese art and the Japanese reverence for rice agriculture as an idealized landscape. It is so delicate that it can be exhibited for only six weeks. In December it will be replaced with another exceptional work: ten Chinese woodblock prints (c. 1723–1735) made during the early Qing dynasty.

These famous scenes of rice agriculture, known as the Gengzhi tu, were first painted by Lou Chou during the Song dynasty, but his original paintings no longer exist. During the Qing dynasty, the Gengzhi tu was reproduced in many

forms, most notably as a series of woodblock prints like the ones on display. So important was the Gengzhi tu — both practically as a farming reference and symbolically as a metaphor for a well-ordered Confucian society — that each successive emperor produced new editions of these illustrations more than five hundred years after the scenes were first painted.

Over a vast region stretching from India to Japan, rice agriculture regulates the rhythms of rural life. In many cultures, the “months” are named for agricultural activities or rituals that take place during that period of time. A Balinese calendar painting illustrates that the 210-day cycle of the rice plant defines the human calendar in Bali, as well. (Ironically, new fast-growing grains created by modern agricultural science have now played havoc with this traditional growing cycle.)

The consideration that goes into the making of functional objects on display — like harvesting tools, such as delicate knives once used to reap rice one stalk at a time, and an exquisitely carved wooden mortar from Borneo — further attests to the tremendous significance of rice.

Vessels, from humble ceramic pots to wooden rice chests and granaries that look like miniature homes, also play an integral role as containers of the precious grain. Exhibited are numerous examples of granaries from across Asia, including a full-size, beautifully carved and painted wood granary facade made by the Toraja peoples from Sulawesi, Indonesia. A gallery that explores rice as a sacred food displays a delightful, seldom-seen collection of Japanese sake bottles from the 17th-19th centuries.

In many Asian countries, the origin of rice is attributed to a goddess who bestows the sacred grain to humans. Though details of the stories of the rice goddess differ from culture to culture, she is generally considered the personification of the spirit of rice. Throughout India, Lakshmi is known as the goddess of prosperity, but she is also associated with rice. Inari, a Japanese deity for rice, has also morphed into a deity for corporate success in modern times. A gallery in ‘The Art of Rice’ features numerous representations of Asian rice goddesses as well as figures made as receptacles for them, and includes popular commercial prints, figures made of coins, and commissioned life-size sculptures depicting a scene of Bengali deity Annapurna giving rice to Shiva.

The pervasiveness of rice culture is underscored by examining lifecycle and domestic objects like an early 20th-century Japanese bridal robe decorated with sake imps (shojo) sipping from giant cups, and a pair of Chinese Han dynasty funerary jars that would sometimes be filled with rice and placed in the tombs of the wealthy. Even a 40-ft-long partition wall from a large Javanese house, elaborately carved and painted, mimics the recessed “bridal chamber” in the rear of a central Javanese farmhouse, where bundles of rice representing rice deities would be installed after the harvest.

Contemporary pieces — like the mixed media work *Golf Plan* by Alfredo Esquillo, Jr. of the Philippines and the painting *Mr. Rhu* in Eunhang Dong by Korean artist Jonggu Lee — comment on the role of rice agriculture in modern society to complete this comprehensive exploration of Asian art, food, culture, philosophy, religion, history, and economics.

‘The Art of Rice’ is the result of six years of research by an international group of twenty-four anthropologists, arts and museum specialists, and artists, under the direction of the curator of this exhibition, Roy Hamilton, curator of Asian and Pacific Collections, the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History. After its Fowler debut, this exhibition is scheduled to travel to other venues, including *Copia: The American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts* in Napa, California and the Honolulu Academy of Arts. A same-titled book (ISBN 0-930741-98-6, \$60) by Hamilton will be published by the Fowler in November 2003, and distributed by the University of Washington Press.

This exhibition is made possible by major funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, dedicated to promoting excellence in the humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Getty Grant Program, the Henry Luce Foundation, and the UC Pacific Rim Research Program. Educational programs and outreach are made possible by the Yvonne Lenart Public Programs Fund and UCLArts.

‘The Art of Rice’ will be on view Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA’s School of the Arts and

Architecture, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for \$7 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361.

Related Events:

October 19, 2003 12-5pm

Rice Fest!

An afternoon of rice-related culture and creativity, featuring:

Chinese erhu virtuoso Chi Li, art-making workshops, classical Indian dance (kuchipudi) by Sumathy Kaushal, Korean farmer's band music directed by ethnomusicologist DongSuk Kim, rice candy sculptures with Chan the Candy Man, your name on a grain of rice!, and rice tastings. Free; no reservations required. For Rice Fest! information, the public may call 310/825-8655.

November 9, 2003 2 pm

Slide Lecture: Who is the Goddess of Rice?

Murder! Incest! Immolation! Join 'The Art of Rice' curator Roy Hamilton at this slide lecture presentation as he tells the stories of Asia's rice goddesses and explores their origins in the spirit beliefs and rituals of rice farming communities. Free; no reservations required.

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