

The Bata Shoe Museum



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The Bata Shoe Museum Opens Exhibition Exploring Animal Power and Protection in Chinese Footwear and Costume

TORONTO, ON, March 7, 2006 - The Bata Shoe Museum is excited to announce the opening of *Watched by Heaven, Tied to Earth: Summoning Animal Protection for Chinese Children*, a charming new exhibition that is sure to win the hearts of visitors, young and old alike. Featuring over 200 beautifully crafted Chinese children's shoes and garments, drawn largely from the private collection of Mr. Glenn Roberts, other private collections and from the Bata Shoe Museum, the exhibition explores the many meanings and symbolism that Chinese mothers and grandmothers used to protect their precious children. With the majority of pieces never displayed in Canada, the abundance of colours and textures draw visitors into a playful world ruled by sewn, painted, appliquéd, and embroidered animals.

For more than three thousand years, animals helped define Chinese political, social and personal identity. Associated with the directions, the seasons, time of life, heavenly bodies, the years of the zodiac, gods and heroes of legends, animals were part of a rich symbolic language that conveyed wishes for happiness, good fortune, and protection for all members of the family, especially children.

During the first critical years of life, Chinese mothers, grandmothers and aunts traditionally dressed children in shoes and clothes that imitated the hides of especially powerful animals. These garments decorated with bared fangs and teeth to intimidate evil spirits and with long whiskers to symbolically tie children's lives to earth, symbolize animal protection.

Through an astonishing array of shoes, hats, bibs and accessories dating from the mid-19th century to the present, the exhibition explores these long-standing traditions and beliefs that continue to resonate in

China. These objects offer visitors insights into one of the world's oldest continuing cultures that once again has global impact.

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"This exhibition reveals an intimate and personal view of a little known and exotic culture" says guest curator, John E. Vollmer, an internationally recognized expert on Asian costume and decorative arts. "Good fortune and auspicious thoughts are central to Chinese life and culture. They believe that embellishing their homes and person with lucky objects and images increases their chances of happy and prosperous lives. Over the centuries a complex symbolic language evolved to express these ideas."

Designed as a traditional Chinese courtyard, visitors are welcomed into the gallery by two of the most frequently used protectors: the tiger and the dragon. Representing *yin* and *yang* respectively, these animals helped to ward off evil by invoking Heaven's watchful eye. Dragon and tiger booties for infants and tiger shoes for toddlers were the most popular animal garments worn by Chinese children, helping protect the tiny lives by bringing *yin* and *yang* into balance.

The Chinese zodiac was another element that played largely in the lives of children and on their clothing. Based on the year of one's birth, the twelve signs represented a variety of personality characteristics and influences that determined one's fortunes. Shoes, hats, bonnets, bibs and pocket purses for infants and toddlers bearing images of the twelve zodiac animals are the central feature of the exhibit. Arrayed in sequence by birth year, these objects illuminate the traits and destinies of their tiny owners.

Glenn Roberts, who generously loaned the majority of pieces in the exhibition, would like visitors to first and foremost enjoy the artifacts. "They are charming examples that make you giggle," says Roberts, "but they are more than that." Roberts goes on to say, "I would love the visitor to look at the artifacts and not only enjoy them but also try to understand how the Chinese used symbolism and imagery to depict wishes and beliefs for their children. That would be an accomplishment!"

Augmenting the displays of artifacts are photographs, paper cuts, and a video illustrating how shoes and garments were made and worn. A children's activity area completes the exhibition and features Chinese masks, puppets, games and animal picture books.

Watched by Heaven, Tied to Earth will open to the public on March 8, 2006 and will be on display until March 11, 2007.

The marketing of this exhibition has been financially assisted by the Ontario Ministry of Tourism.



Cultural Partners of *Watched by Heaven, Tied to Earth* include the Consulate General of the People's Republic of China and The Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto.



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Media sponsors of *Watched by Heaven, Tied to Earth* include *Today's Parent*, *The Great Toronto Getaway*, *Fairchild Television*, *Now Magazine* and *Ming Pao*.



Partnering with the Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto, a year-long celebration of Chinese culture and traditions has been organized at the Museum. Featuring Chinese artisans, demonstrations and musical entertainment, visitors will have the opportunity to enjoy a variety of workshops, events and lectures. For more information, please visit our website at www.batashoemuseum.ca.

The Bata Shoe Museum is also excited to announce an exciting partnership with the luxurious Sutton Place Hotel in Toronto. Commencing March 23 through to October 15, 2006, a combination of experiences that will tantalize the senses is being offered with an exceptional package entitled, *Heaven, Earth & the Enchantments of the Chinese Zodiac*. Focusing on *Watched by Heaven, Tied to Earth*, a value-added package is being offered which incorporates the museum experience, accommodations, a walking excursion of Toronto's old and new China Towns and a dim sum lunch at Bright Pearl Seafood Restaurant. Partners include Sutton Place Hotel, A Taste of the World Walking Tours, Bright Pearl Seafood Restaurant and ShopDineTour Toronto.

With an international collection of over 12,000 pairs of shoes and related artifacts, the Bata Shoe Museum celebrates style and function of footwear spanning 4,500 years of history in four distinctive exhibition galleries.

Other exhibitions currently on exhibit: *Icons of Elegance: The Most Influential Shoe Designers of the Twentieth Century*, *Beads, Buckles and Bows: Four Hundred Years of Embellished Footwear*; and *All About Shoes: Footwear Through the Ages*. Coming in June 2006: *Reason and Romance: Stepping Into The Age of Enlightenment*.

The Bata Shoe Museum is located in downtown Toronto at 327 Bloor Street West, at the southwest corner of Bloor and St. George Streets. For more information about the Museum, please visit www.batashoemuseum.ca.