

## The Chimei Museum in Tainan (台南奇美博物館)

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### What sort of museum it is ?

This museum is really a wonderful piece of old European charm in the middle of Taiwan. For a start, the museum is housed in a vast municipal park. The approach walk is like entering a European style garden much like the one in Versailles (France). At the entrance to the garden in front of the museum, there is even a proportional replica of the famous Apollo Fountain of the Palace of Versailles except that the French one is made of metal gilded with gold, whereas this one here in Tainan is of bona fide Italian Carrara Marble ----- yes, the type used by Michelangelo et al, you know. This is followed by a bridge with marble statues of the 12 Olympian gods (Zeus, Athena, Apollo, you name it) on both sides. So, this is Versailles in a smaller scale. The classic European atmosphere continues at the entrance to the museum when you are greeted with a building with a dome and columns ----- a mix of Greco-Roman and Neo Renaissance styles, looking rather like the National Gallery ( built in 1838) in London .

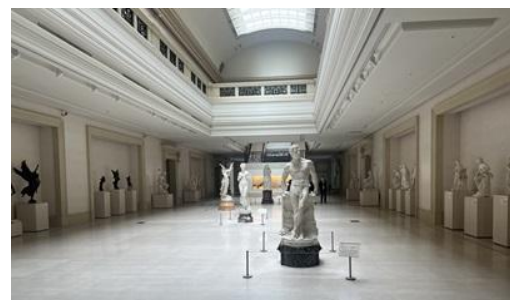


### Who built this museum?

This museum started originally as a private museum established by Mr. W L Shi (許文龍, 1928-2023) who was the founder of the big Chimei Group in Taiwan that has interests in petrochemical, electronics, food, health care, and a host of other things. The main building of the museum was built at a cost of NT\$2 billion in 2015 and has since been donated to the Municipal Government of Tainan. The vision of the founder of the museum is to provide an opportunity for people of all ages and social backgrounds to be able to learn and enjoy classical Western art without going abroad. In the word of Mr. Shi: *“My museum serves only one purpose: to exist for the public.”*

### So, what's in the museum ?

The layout of the interior is what you would see as in Louvre or other well-established museums in Europe with a Grand Hall showcasing classic marble statues . Apart from classical Western Art, there are different galleries showcasing arms and



armours, animal taxidermy and fossils. The section on classical musical instruments includes the world's largest (yes, the world's largest) collection of classical violins (Stradivarius et al) and several pianos from 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. There is even a Rodin Gallery. But what I like most about this museum is the large collection of classical European paintings from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century illustrating the evolution of Western Art over the ages. What it lacks in big names (of European painters), it more than makes up for it with high quality paintings from lesser-known painters, and, very importantly, each painting comes with a good in-depth explanation so that viewers can learn how to appreciate/understand the paintings. This is much better and more convenient than the cumbersome and tiresome audio-guides one needs to use in other European museums.

### Painters' Tales of the Low Countries

From 26/10/2024 to 31/8/2025, there is this special exhibition of the museum's own collection of 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century of the Low Countries paintings. The so-called Low



Countries refer to a geographical area that includes present day Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. From about the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, prosperity from the proliferation of trades in this area led to a huge demand for luxury items like paintings, and thus work opportunities for painters. The quality of works from this era rivalled the dominant Italian schools at the time. This exhibition in Chimei Museum provides an insider look at the socio-economical background for the boom of painters in this era: how could one learn to become one, what were their strategies in promoting their art works and, most interestingly, the gradual shift in the choice of subjects from previous (almost exclusive) emphasis on religious themes (for devotional purposes) to scenes of daily life, still objects and landscapes. But then, religious and moral messages are often still merged into the works to evoke the viewers' reflection on their faith. Take for example this painting called ***Kitchen Interior*** by **David Teniers the Younger** (1610-1690). While the painting seems to describe an ordinary kitchen scene, in fact the image of the pig carcass was an allusion to the Crucifixion of Christ, and the children playing with a pig's bladder to make a balloon was no doubt a reference to the transient bust and burst nature of human existence.



An exhibition not to be missed if you are in the area over the next few months.

### Need to know

1. There is currently no direct flight from HK to Tainan. One can fly into Kaohsiung (高雄) or Taichung (台中) and take the Fast Speed Train which would take you to Tainan in less than one hour. From the train station, there is a free shuttle bus that takes you to the museum in 10-15 minutes. So, a day visit to this museum is doable from either Kaohsiung or Taichung .

3. For the special exhibition , one has to buy a special ticket in addition to the general admission . I would also strongly recommend joining the daily 1- hour guided tour of the special exhibition which will give you a deeper insight of the exhibition.