The long history of imperial art collecting dates back to the Song dynasty in the 10th century. The enormous art collection, passed down from dynasty to dynasty, consists of thousands of paintings, calligraphies, ceramics and other decorative arts. When the Republic of China overthrew the imperial rule in early 1920s, the government confiscated the collection and transformed the imperial palace, also known as the Forbidden City, into the Palace Museum. The Japanese invasion during World War II forced the government to transfer part of the collection to southward to regions less affected by the war. Despite the military upheavals, the government loaned more than 700 pieces of works of art in the collection to the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London in 1935.

The outbreak of the Civil War following the defeat of Japan in 1945 prevented the transferred part of the collection from returning to Beijing. The Nationalist Party (Guomindang) lost the war and retreated to Taiwan with about one-fifth of the entire collection, which is now preserved in the National Palace Museum (NPM) in Taipei. Since then, the imperial collection has been split between Beijing and Taipei.

The NPM collaborated with art museums in the United States to host 2 traveling exhibitions of Chinese art in major American cities in 1961 and 1996 respectively. The Palace Museum in Beijing did not participate in either of the two exhibitions.