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edited by Lucinda Hahn

# Frontlines

## SOPHIA SISKEL STROLLS THROUGH THE FIELD

Museum—tall, blond, as classic-looking as the artifacts around her. But, at 33, she has put a fresh twist on her job as the director of exhibitions and education programs. Her breakout show was *Chocolate*, launched last February. Four months later, Siskel introduced *Pearls*. Next February, she offers up *Baseball as America*.

Critics have called these topics far afield of natural history. But the sniping quieted last April, when she completed a deal with China to exhibit 500 treasures from Beijing's Forbidden City—many of which have never before left the imperial palace.

Siskel, a resident of Evanston, grew up in Chicago, where her mother was an anthropologist. With two master's degrees—one in art history, from the University of Chicago, the other from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of

Management—she seemed destined to land at a museum.

When Siskel first approached China's officials in 2000, she found them surprisingly receptive. Still, the deal took a year of negotiations, two trips to China with

museum scientists, and a crash course in protocol. "I'm straightforward," she explains. "They negotiate layer by layer."

She took to the challenge naturally. "I've always loved doing puzzles," she says. "I like getting every piece in its place." Good thing. The exhibition, slated for March 2004, will re-create several key rooms of the 8,886 rooms in the Forbidden City complex, including an imperial throne room and a typical bedroom of one of the emperor's 40 wives. Siskel will oversee the arranging of each room and every artifact. Just the way she likes it.

—SHARON BARRETT



Front Runner

## Palace Coup

The Field Museum's Sophia Siskel nabbed an exhibition of never-before-seen treasures from China's Forbidden City



Portrait of Emperor Qianlong (detail)