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PAINTING WITH SCISSORS

During the summer months a seven foot tall calligraphy brush drew the eyes of visitors to the HKDI campus and led them to work by Wu Guanzhong (吳冠中, 1919-2010), a Chinese painter who is suddenly back in vogue as a new generation of artists appraise his contribution to contemporary art. **DAISY ZHONG** reports.

IN 1935 A YOUNG ENGINEERING STUDENT met the love of his life, an event he later recorded in his autobiography: "At the age of 17, I threw myself into the power of her, into the magical universe of beauty... I was obsessed, enchanted, and bewitched. From then on she controlled my life, all the way until today, when I am already silver-haired."

The enchanting "she" in this memoir was no misty eyed maiden, but the world of art, and the engineering student was Wu Guanzhong, who would go on to become a foremost practitioner of contemporary art and one of the most influential Chinese artists of the twentieth century.

Wu was recently the subject of a major retrospective in New York City, where the Asia Society hosted an

exhibition titled *Revolutionary Ink: The Paintings of Wu Guanzhong*, featuring work by the artist from the 1970s until 2004. And Hong Kong's Museum of Art celebrated the artist in April with an exhibition titled *Painting-Dance-Music*, which examined the relationship between movement, rhythm and emptiness that characterise Wu Guanzhong's paintings. Three paintings from this exhibition were on display at the HKDI from June 22 to September 14.

The degree of attention Wu's work receives has intensified since his death in 2010, as the art world began to appraise how great a talent had been lost, an artist who brought Impressionism to traditional Chinese landscape painting and survived the Cultural Revolution intact, despite having to burn decades worth of his work



ABOVE AWAKENING (2010) INK AND COLOUR ON PAPER (《夢醒》, 水墨設色紙本) BELOW WU GUANZHONG SPEAKING IN SUZHOU CITY, 18 JUNE 2008

and being forced to labour in a rural camp where he was forbidden to paint.

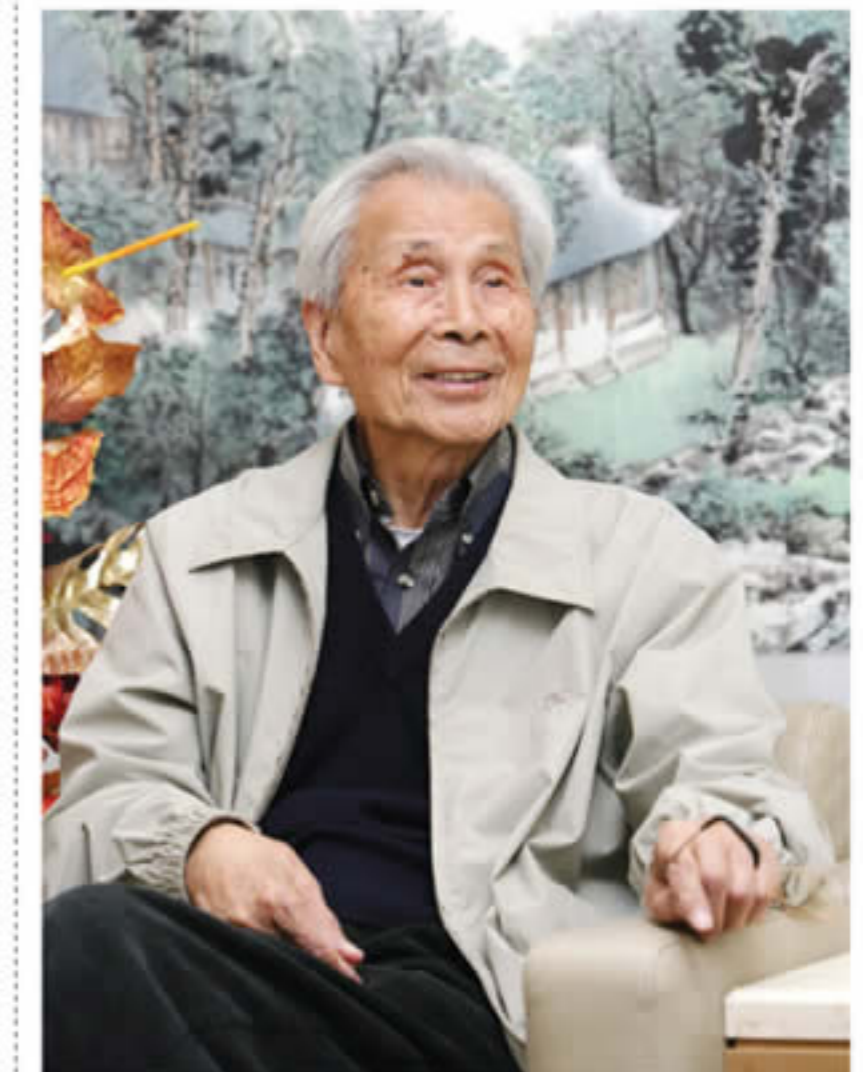
When Wu described his 1930s life-changing moment in an autobiography titled *I Owe Painting* (我負丹青), published 50 years later, it was obvious that the power of his first love was still strong: "I saw images and sculptures that I had never seen in my life. I got a first glance at beauty. It was so attractive, and easily captured a young heart, the owner of which became most willing to be enslaved by her."

In the grip of his infatuation Wu gave up his engineering studies at Zhejiang University, and went to study at National Hangzhou Academy of Art instead, an act his family and friends condemned. At Hangzhou, Wu studied Chinese and Western painting with Lin Fengmian (林風眠, 1900-1991) and Pan Tianshou (潘天壽, 1897-1971) before traveling to Paris in 1947 to study at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts.

After graduation in 1950, he decided to return to China and devote himself to his homeland through art. For the next 60 years, he rose to become a pioneering artist whose hybrid style charts the changing face of Chinese art in the 20th Century.

The defining characteristic of Wu's work is the mix of East and the West, executed through the blend of Western oil painting techniques with the pen and ink aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy. Wu once wrote "Oil paint and ink are two blades of the same pair of

scissors." He later expanded on this thought in *Direction Unknown* (走向遠方), published in 2002. "Oil paintings are the foundation of my ink paintings, while ink paintings are the sinew of my oil paintings. The two are my lifelong companions, the obverse and reverse..."



《Oil paintings are the foundation of my ink paintings, while ink paintings are the sinew of my oil paintings.》—
Wu Guanzhong, *Direction Unknown*



of my art. At the same time, colour and black-and-white are locked in a perpetual wrestle and a perpetual embrace in my works. They are like a see-saw.”

“Wu established revolutionary aesthetics in Chinese painting, which demonstrate a crossbreed of Chinese spirituality and Western form,” says Szeto Yuen Kit, the curator of the HKMA, to which Wu donated more than 50 of his pieces. “Wu’s works are the bridge between Chinese and Western art, as well as the bridge between ancient and modern art.”

Wu Guanzhong compared his groundbreaking approach to ink painting to the way a kite is navigated: flying high but with a tether always connected to the ground. The firm foundation in the tradition of Chinese ink painting is revealed in his use of ink and wash, the compositions and varying types of brushstrokes utilised to present variation in texture. For instance, majestic mountains in Wu’s paintings can remind people of the monumental landscape masterpiece *Early Spring* (早春圖) by Guo Xi (郭熙, ca. 1000–1090), which is believed to have been painted in 1072.

On the other hand, a kite symbolises liberation in an unlimited sky and as such Wu’s paintings are fundamentally different from traditional work. While

traditional Chinese ink paintings underscore the grandeur of the natural landscape over man-made buildings, Wu preferred painting rural architecture. These paintings extract their geometric aesthetics from rural structures, and thus provide a more intimate experience as if the viewer is fully immersed in the landscape.

Another distinctive departure from traditional ink painting is Wu’s underlying formalism, which produced paintings that are marked by bright colours, liberal use of wash, and drastic compositions.

“It’s an ‘art for art’s sake’ approach to painting,” says Szeto. “His artworks are pure aesthetics, without any reference to political, social or ethical functions.”

Wu’s kite metaphor echoes the statement “Strokes equal nothingness” that he wrote in a highly controversial essay published in his early years, in which he explained that techniques or skills should always be subjugated to feelings and thoughts.

“What he meant was that he would not encourage pure formalism, the concept that a work’s artistic value is entirely determined by its form,” says Szeto. “But rather artists should strive to produce paintings with feelings that can touch ordinary people.”

That is the reason Wu had such high regard for Shi Tao (石濤, ca. 1641–1718), who advocated that being bounded by established techniques is not good for art. As Wu wrote in a commentary, “Shi Tao put emphasis on his feelings, and asserted that for each painting, skills were shaped by the feelings experienced by the artist at the time”.

Like Shi Tao, Wu’s works are about feelings and the two artists share a remarkable accomplishment: they won acclaim from both art experts and ordinary citizens. The link is through emotions. To Wu, whatever artists are painting, it is of utmost importance that they paint with feeling.

“The dots, lines and planes are painted in a way so that they express rhythm, which causes feelings such as ecstasy, fervour and liveliness,” says Szeto. “It doesn’t have to be depicting anything, but just the feeling and rhythms of feeling.”

Szeto believes that rhythm is the key word in



LEFT A 7-FOOT TALL CHINESE BRUSH AT THE WU GUANZHONG EXHIBITION AT HKDI HELD FROM JUNE 22 TO SEPTEMBER 14
ABOVE WU GUANZHONG AT HIS HOME IN FANGZHUANG, BEIJING, DECEMBER 1996

understanding Wu’s art. For example, in *Faces Unchanged* (朱顏未改), colourful dots were the only element in the composition. “Liberated from figural representation, the character and characteristics of the primary elements are augmented, such that they are no longer the parts serving the figural whole but important elements interacting with one another to become the whole,” Szeto wrote in the short introduction to the HKMA’s exhibition.

The rhythms of Wu’s paintings have also inspired the Hong Kong Dance Company to create a dance called *Two Swallows: Ode to Wu Guanzhong* based on 8 of the artist’s pieces. The epic dance poem depicts the freedom and solitude of the artist as he roamed the idyllic countryside along the Yangtze River.

“That’s why great art is great: its beauty is universal. The same rhythm, or beauty, can be presented in various ways – painting, dance and music,” says Szeto.

In Wu’s later years rhythms are particularly

enshrined, as his works became more abstract and focused on illusions of visual reality, states of being, emotions, and concepts.

In this late work Wu’s Western studies and oil-painting background show through most strongly. His exuberant mural *The Hua Mountains at Sunset* (夕照華山) (1997), which opened the New York Asia Society exhibition, “bristles with Abstract Expressionist brio,” according to the *New York Times* reviewer, who continued “Its snaking black lines and clustered dots look like Pollock-esque drips, even though they are actually the trails and resting points of a brush making full contact with paper.”

However, Wu’s work is never purely abstract. “In his early years a figural wall is clearly identified in his painting, and in his later years a wall becomes a white blob of colour,” says Szeto. “But even there, you can still see the feeling, and the real life reference for where the blob comes from. The root is there. And Wu’s greatest

《Wu's works are the bridge between Chinese and Western art, as well as the bridge betwixt ancient and modern art.》



WU TIM, THE GRANDSON OF WU GUANZHONG VIEWS AN EXHIBIT OF HIS GRANDFATHER'S WORK AT THE ASIA SOCIETY IN NEW YORK, APRIL 2012

skill was to distill pure beauty from ordinary life.”

The abstract works of Wu's late years were the focus of the HKMA exhibition, and the HKDI's Department of Design Foundation Studies (DFS) brought a trio of these paintings – *At Rest* (休閒), *Faces Unchanged* (朱顏未改) and *Illusion* (幻影) – to the HKDI campus for exhibition after the HKMA show had closed. The 7-foot tall Chinese brush that hung above an enlarged version of *At Rest* emphasised the Master's concept of creativity by bringing out the unrestrained freedom expressed by the painting's dynamic lines.

The installation at HKDI was designed “in order to enhance HKDI students' interpretation of Chinese culture and widen their perspectives on Chinese tradition and aesthetic values,” says Edwin Wong, a DFS lecturer and the curator of the exhibition.

In addition, a seminar and a workshop were held on June 18th, conducted by Dr Ma Kwai-shun, Senior Lecturer of the Department of Creative Arts of the Hong Kong Institute of Education. A group of 40 students attended and learnt some of the Chinese techniques for painting plants.

“Chinese cultural heritage is a great treasure for design students to explore and apply within modern

design,” says Dr Raymond Tang Man-Leung, Assistant Curator of Hong Kong Museum of Art. “In my conversations with HKDI students, I found that although it's easy for them to accept new, chic designs from abroad, it's not quite so easy when it comes to an older and more sophisticated culture.”

During Wu's studies in Paris, he took a great liking to post-impressionists such as Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cezanne. He said, “A young artist must fit him/herself into a master's shoes, walk for a distance, and take off the shoes. In the process of putting on and taking off, the artist finds his true self.”

For contemporary students to put on the shoes of Wu requires them to understand the deeper aspects of his work or that of other Masters, by gaining a wider comprehension of the Chinese tradition of scholar-painting, Western abstract art and formalism. It's a tough road, but one that Wu proved can pay enormous dividends in terms of enhanced creativity and artistic technique.

“Only when you have done some thorough research on these techniques can you start to fully appreciate Master Wu Guanzhong's unusual achievements,” says Tang. ©

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《MY CHILDREN, WHO RESEMBLE SWALLOWS, SHARE THE DEEPEST DESTINY WITH ME, AND IN MY HEART POSSESS EQUAL STANDING WITH DEITIES, STARS AND ART.》

WU GUANZHONG