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THE TAO OF GIVING

With help from HKDI, the Hong Kong Museum of Art has created a trail-blazing application that is set to galvanise the public's interest in its Xubaizhai Collection of traditional Chinese art. SUMMER CAO reports.

Collectors are often driven by an obsession to seek new acquisitions, something older, rarer or in a better condition but Low Chuck Tiew (1911-1993) was one of the few collectors who was motivated by pure love for the treasures under his protection. His philosophy was captured by the name Xubaizhai (Xubai Study)

that he gave to the study where he housed his trove of ancient Chinese paintings. The name is derived from the Taoist proposition that being free from desire is the path to enlightenment.

Collectors who are motivated by the monetary value of their hoard will often use every possible means to protect their treasures from ill fortune. While Low put his collection above himself when he risked his life to save one of Shitao's paintings from his bombed home in wartime Singapore in 1942, he could not bear to send all his treasures to the safety of London in the early 1980s when Hong Kong was on the edge of chaos. "I collected them because I don't want them to leave their homeland," he said to friends who tried to persuade him to send the priceless paintings to a safe haven in London.

The nature of the collecting process tends to make collectors possessive. They tend to want the sole privilege of enjoying their collections until death closes their eyes. But Low again took a Tao approach to his treasures, believing that we lose those things that we try to keep. Thus Low donated his entire collection, consisting of more than 600 pieces of art from about 600 AD to 20th century to the

Hong Kong Museum of Art in 1989, four years before his death.

The legendary stories behind the breath-taking Xubaizhai collection have attracted visitors from around the globe to the permanent exhibition room at the Hong Kong Museum of Art. And last year's 20th anniversary celebration exhibition was a success, creating a sensation with art connoisseurs throughout Asia. But the ambitious museum was not satisfied, hoping to enlarge the range of its audience and engage the younger generation and general public.

The result was a decision to collaborate with HKDI to make an e-book of the Xubaizhai collection.

ABOVE: FIFTEEN VIEWS OF THE GARDEN (園林十五景), LEAF NO. 3 BY WEN BOREN

« WHEN WE TOLD HKDI STUDENTS OUR STORY LINES AND IDEAS, THEY NEEDED TO MAKE TECHNICAL BREAKTHROUGHS TO MAKE THEM HAPPEN AND CREATE NEW IDEAS TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS. »

This is not the first time that the prestigious museum has cooperated with HKDI. In 2012 the two institutions collaborated to create *Imperishable Affection: The Art of Feng Zikai* for which the former had assembled a comprehensive selection of work by the famed Chinese cartoonist from other museums and private collections while the latter made an e-book introducing Feng Zikai and his work.

"We are more involved this time, not only in the sense of using our own collection, but also by providing input to content structure and animation story lines," says Dr Raymond Tang of Hong Kong Museum of Art. "The Feng Zikai e-book was excellent but it was linear and straightforward. For the Xubaizhai e-book, our museum has been like a movie director orchestrating different parts, having developed a concrete theme with each chapter closely related to each other."

The e-book was launched at the opening of the exhibition *A Journey into Chinese Painting: A Selection*

of Works from the Xubaizhai Collection on August 29th, and can be downloaded from the apps store using iPad for free. It contains 25 images of Xubaizhai paintings and consists of five chapters – foreword, garden touring, paintings, animation and articles. The interactive interface and creative animation along with elements of pop culture are high lights of the book.

The garden-tour chapter has eight paintings from Wen Boren's *Fifteen Views of the Garden* as its background and two children guide readers to explore other paintings, their styles, artists and related art schools. Animated icons can also be accessed as portals to additional information.

"*Fifteen Views of the Garden* is an important part of our upcoming exhibition," says Tang. "We chose it as a thread because the garden views give a relaxing feeling, inviting readers to explore more. It also has an interface of an online game, which will attract the younger generation."

The animation chapter is another example that combines traditional art with pop culture. The five-minute video is a romance, telling the story of a dancer who travels back to the late Ming Dynasty as the courtesan Li Xiangjun falls in love with the famous artist Yang Wencong whose work is included in the Xubaizhai.

"The two protagonists were real people living at the end of the Ming Dynasty," says Tang. "We have drawn inspiration from popular time-travel dramas that have become hits in the recent years. One of the most intriguing aspects is that the time travel begins and ends at the Xubaizhai exhibition room, and Wen Zhengming's *Cooling off in the Hot Summer* is the link connecting the two eras. The animation not only makes the e-book more lively, but also gives a glimpse of how people lived and thought in the late Ming Dynasty."

Besides the user-friendly interface and the popular plot, small details such as lifelike sound effects and the appearance of the characters was also given careful consideration to make the project accessible and popular. "We want the characters in the e-book to be connected to pop culture, so we have employed the shoujo manga style to cater to popular tastes," Tang says. "Even when introducing the classical arts, we are using an accessible approach. The book doesn't talk about the different schools of art in a dry tone, but reveals the important characters in each painting or stories from the life of an artist."

To create an e-book that incorporates art, the exhibition space, history and culture in an interesting way required ingenuity in story telling and technical creativity. "The biggest difficulty was the technical problems," Tang says, "When we told HKDI students our story lines and ideas, they needed to make technical breakthroughs to make them happen and create new ideas to solve the problems."



Some might say that projects like the Xubaizhai e-book sacrifice the purity of art in exchange for popularity but Tang believes that the two can be combined and it takes genuine courage to change the ways museums curate their exhibitions as technology advances.

"In the e-book, we have separated the entertainment from art where appropriate," Tang says, "The entertainment elements won't interfere with people viewing the original paintings. The animations are minimal in the painting chapters - just blinking icons to signal readers to explore more. For the animation chapter, the paintings are almost shown alone with a small touch of animation. The strongest entertainment twist lies in the time travel element."

The famous Chinese educator Chen Heqin once said, "There are no incapable students, only incapable teachers." It is encouraging that the Hong Kong Museum of Art has taken this idea to heart and is probing new ways to engage with a young generation steeped in digital technology. Other museums have much to learn from their example. After all, museums should be for the public, not the cultural elites, otherwise they are no different from those obsessive collectors who hoard treasures for themselves rather than those selfless collectors like Low who donate their beloved possessions while they are still alive to enjoy them. (D)



ABOVE SCREENSHOTS OF THE GARDEN-TOUR CHAPTER

The exhibition A Journey into Chinese Painting: A Selection of Works from the Xubaizhai Collection will be held from August 30th 2013 October 31st 2014 at the Hong Kong Museum of Art. The e-Book can be downloaded on iPad for free starting from the end of October 2013 by using the search terms "盧白齋畫遊記".