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CREATIVE REVIVAL

Differences in time and space can distance us from the great art of the past but the Hong Kong Museum of Art has used animation and e-books to bring a collection of ancient Chinese painting back to life. DAISY ZHONG reports.

Szeto Yuen-kit, the Curator of Hong Kong Museum of Art, recalls that when producing the e-book *Imperishable Affection: The Art of Feng Zi Kai* – a 2012 collaboration between the museum and HKDI – many participating students could not pronounce the “Kai” character in the cartoonist’s name correctly.

“This is not uncommon among today’s Hong Kong youngsters,” he says. “As a former teacher of art, I totally understand the situation – how can we expect the young generation to know anything about Wen Zhengming’s literati painting in the first place?”

Szeto believes that this is the greatest challenge for art education in Hong Kong. “Ordinary Hong Kong citizens are far from possessing a

comprehensive understanding of art. There is a lack of serious art courses that introduce the foundation, history and appreciation of art.”

But the same group of HKDI students who did not know anything about Wen Zhengming’s painting have now become a crucial creative force in helping the Hong Kong Museum of Art with art education among the general public in Hong Kong. Co-operating with the Museum, 19 students from the programmes of Printing and Publishing, and Digital Music and Media created an e-book entitled *A Journey into Chinese Painting*, and an animated short film to introduce works of the Xubaizhai Collection of traditional Chinese paintings.

The interactive e-book, consists of

eight chapters connected through *Fifteen Views of the Garden*, an important painting by Wen Boren representing the Wu School, a leading school of literati painting in mid-Ming that was located in what is modern day Suzhou.

According to Szeto, Chinese painting is one of the most difficult themes to curate. “Hong Kong citizens are particularly unfamiliar with this genre, which is closely related to culture and history. So how can we present such a refined culture in an engaging way, and change the popular view that Chinese paintings are ‘stuffy’? That is really challenging.”

Appreciation of traditional Chinese landscape paintings puts an emphasis on creative imagination, which requires the viewer to go beyond the imagery of the objects



ABOVE A STUDENT FROM HKDI SHOWING VISITORS THE EBOOK. OPPOSITE PAGE SCREENSHOTS OF THE E-BOOK.

in the painting and capture the “spirit” of the scene depicted. “It is about spiritual engagement with the painter, just like taking a journey in the landscape. That’s very much in line with the approach that HKDI students used in *A Journey into Chinese Painting*.”

To help modern viewers release the power of their imagination, HKDI students participated in the production, art direction, and illustration of the design, animation, publishing and accompany music for the e-book. Eve Tam, Chief Curator of the museum, says, “New trans-media storytelling technology was employed to illuminate the oldest art form. We use technologies that viewers have daily access to, which bring them closer to our exhibited items.”

Tam adds that the museum has two types of visitors, experts who already have in-depth knowledge about exhibited art; and the others being general visitors who are driven by curiosity for major events in the city. “There is a wide gap between these two categories in terms of demands and expectations, and it is very challenging for the museum to cater for both at the same time.



We need to provide sophisticated materials for the experts, but control the length of text explanation so that we do not frighten away ordinary viewers.”

Promoting art education among ordinary citizens, however, is at the core of the museum’s mission. Szeto says, “Low Chuck Tiew [the late Singaporean banker and art collector] donated his Xubaizhai collection to the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 1989 because he wanted to maximise its education value for the public. In these 20 years we have been continuously holding exhibitions, based on this collection, and helping with academic research. In recent years, we have been putting more emphasis on promoting the collection among ordinary citizens using a more engaging approach.”

Szeto notes that despite the use of popular elements in promotion, the ultimate purpose is to be able to appreciate the treasure

of traditional Chinese art. “We always face the risk of lowering the level of sophistication by accommodating popular culture. Therefore we always remind ourselves that we are ‘aiming low in order to ultimately elevate the level of the audience’. We wish visitors to discover a whole fantastic new world after that journey.”

And for HKDI students, there are endless possibilities in recreating traditional Chinese art in the future. “I think Feng Zikai and Xubaizhai are just the start of this ‘journey’.” He adds that next time students can try and explore caricatures made by the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, a group of Chinese painters known in the Qing dynasty for their individualistic styles and rejection of orthodox ideas about art.

“We are very delighted to see Hong Kong’s local creativity playing an important role in art education here.”

