

The resurgence of Chinese ink painting

A reinvention of ink painting is being currently developed in China, spearheaded by innovative artists who are pushing the boundaries of this traditional medium. At the beginning of the 20th century, due to the increasingly influence of Western culture, ink painting was somewhat distanced from other visual arts. A dedicated group of painters, schooled in traditional ink painting, saw the potential to create a new form of painting. Since then ink painting has continued to gain ground on the international auction market.

Chinese traditional ink painting is more and more nourished by Western and oriental art, ancient and modern art. Chinese painters, within the framework of contemporary art, « using the vocabulary of ink to reinterpret classical ink painting, convey their perceptions of the external world, express their concern for human life, and manifest their spiritual pursuits ». by reinterpreting classic ink painting, express their perceptions of the outside world, their concern for human life and defend their spiritual quests. Their works range from contemplative to the emotional, abstraction to naturalism. Developing and expanding the visual and technique language of ink painting has always been a challenge for Chinese artists. Each artist reuses traditional methods of ink while investigating the possibilities of this medium, opening a new space for artists in the 21st century and beyond.

Li Gang, one of the most renowned ink painters, abandoned the traditional “brush work” and developed the technique of “imprinting” as his painting medium. He works with folding papers, sprinkling water, soaking the papers in ink, patchworking, etc. to create his images. His works combine the ideology of traditional Chinese ink painting with the abstraction of Western style. Li Gang pioneered a new aesthetic style of art with a combination of Chinese ink and contemporary art.

Others artists like Lui Shou-Kwan, Liu Kuo-Sung, and Liu Dan are also well known. Works by Lui, a key figure of the New Ink movement that took place in Hong Kong, were sold around HK\$100,000 (\$13,000). And an ink work by Liu Kuo-Sung « Scenery of Hong Kong (1987) fetched HK\$16.8 million (\$2.2 million) at Christie’s Hong Kong in 2014.

Liu Dan mixes his deep knowledge of the canons of Western art with the legacy of Chinese painting from 2000 years ago. It represents amazing landscapes, rocks, old cypress or still life paintings, painted in ink with both lightness and depth and delicacy.

Cai Xiaosong inks are also very popular in the contemporary art world. “My work, the artist explains, tends to be a fusion of classic and contemporary. From stones, its major topic, to the large painting installations, Cai Xiaosong uses language that finds its essence in the tradition of the ink.

Galleries and auctions houses in Asia also found an audience for contemporary ink painting in recent years. Sotheby’s Hong Kong started to organize sales dedicated to this category in 2013, followed by Christie’s the following year. “Contemporary ink art isn’t just about ink on paper but also works with a conceptual base,” explained Katherine Don, head of the contemporary ink art department at Sotheby’s Hong Kong. “These works are profoundly related to contemporary art and buyers from Asia and beyond are refreshed to see artworks that are truly unique to Asia.” According to Daniel Eskenazi which exposes Liu

Dan, "at the beginning Chinese collectors wanted something new. Then they wanted something old. Ink painting is a medium term. "

At Sotheby's Hong Kong's Contemporary Ink Art Sale in April 2017, paintings in ink sales went up to 30.4 million HK\$ (3.9 million US\$). Among them, Liu Dan's work stood out significantly: a work by the artist, "Poppy", a monumental ink on paper (dated 2008), of Origo collection (Switzerland), was sold for 6.9 million HK\$.

Some dealers, like Beijing-based Ink Studio founding director Craig Yee, point that there remains a need to educate global audiences if they are to truly appreciate this unique art form. The M+ visual culture museum should prominently feature contemporary ink art when it opens in Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District in 2019.

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In summer 2017, a mega exhibition "Crisscrossing East and West" : « The Remaking of Ink Art in Contemporary East Asia », at MoCA Yinchuan (Chine) focused on the redefinition of ink practice in East Asia. It included a selection of 27 artists, 120 works and four galleries. It also exposed emerging artists like Xu Bing, Shang Yang, Lee Yi Hong, Lin Yan et Wang Tiande, among others.

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