

# **Tumultuous Traditions: Chinese Ink Painting in the Twentieth Century**

After the overthrow of the last imperial dynasty in 1911, China entered a long period of political and cultural turmoil. Not only were traditions challenged by new generations struggling to cast off the past and establish a modern nation, but the very definition of “tradition” itself was in constant flux. As the uncertain Republic took form, the fledgling nation was forced to come to terms with a recent series of startling military, economic, and political defeats, prompting a deep debate on modernization to establish China as an equal with other world powers. Culture was not immune to this struggle, with both literature and art taking on socio-political implications. While some artists denounced tradition in favor of newly imported foreign styles, others sought to reaffirm it in the face of these assaults. Still others worked to reconcile these different approaches, creating a wholly new style of painting for a new nation and era.

The fate of traditional ink painting took an even sharper turn in the 1950s and 60s under Communist Party rule, culminating with the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76. During this time, traditionalism was rejected altogether as a remnant of the feudal past, while the more radical modern movements from the West were condemned as bourgeois decadence, leaving only the style of “socialist realism” as an acceptable approach to art. Artists had little choice but to walk a fine line that depended on the tenor of the political climate, and those who could not adapt to these unpredictable shifts in cultural mandate were often severely persecuted.

Ranging from early innovators to those who suffered greatly for their art during the Cultural Revolution, to present-day expatriates bringing traditional Chinese ink to the global conversation on modern and contemporary art, this exhibition examines notable explorations in Chinese ink painting of the twentieth century, as artists attempted to contend with the shifting currents of their craft, and the social ramifications that went along with them.

## **Jiang Zhaohe (1904-1986)**

### ***Peking Merchant***

China, ca. 1930s

Album leaf; ink on paper

Gift of Charles Soong, 2002

(27293)

Known especially for his monumental scroll of refugees painted secretly during the war against Japan, Jiang takes a similarly naturalistic approach in this portrait. The artist taught himself to employ techniques of Western realism in Chinese ink, but much like his realist counterparts such as Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), his strategy lay not only in a realistic rendering, but also in expressing a kind of social reality, exploring subjects from marginalized populations in society. As Jiang said, "Those who understand my paintings are the poor, and those with whom I sympathize are the people who starve to death on the streets." His experiments with realistic portrayal allowed for these strikingly human explorations.

## **Wu Changshuo (1844-1927)**

### ***Peach Blossoms***

China, 1924

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

Gift of Professor and Mrs. Pe-chi Chou, 1969

(3675.1)

Wu Changshuo was a later artist of the Shanghai School of painters, continuing the experimentation that this group fostered. Developing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Shanghai School is regarded as one of the key progenitors of modern Chinese painting, fusing traditional techniques of literati scholar-artists with fresh explorations in free brushwork, bold color, and popular subject matter. Developing in an environment of booming international commerce, this novel and decorative interpretation of tradition reveals the tastes of an emerging merchant class celebrating its newfound status.

## Qi Baishi (1863-1957)

### ***Cherries***

China, 1949

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

Purchase, 1966

(3421.1)

From his beginnings as an artisan-painter in the peasant village of his birth, Qi Baishi became well regarded for what was seen as a sort of expressive naivety, in which he used bright palettes and bold brushstrokes to capture simple, everyday subjects. In this sense, Qi was something of a populist painter such as those of the Shanghai School, and in fact took his inspiration from artists such as Wu Changshuo. A practicing traditionalist in a time when tradition was accused of being backward, Qi was likely spared from persecution because of his rural background, since peasants had been vital in supporting the Communist revolution.

The inscription on the painting opens with a quote from the Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei (701-761) extolling retirement from politics, followed by Qi's own poetry:

*A thousand officials meet beneath the hibiscus tower,  
Red cherries emerge above the banisters of the forbidden court;  
Behind the spring straw in the garden outside my bedroom,  
I care not for the scraps in the mouths of the Imperial Park's birds.*

- Wang Wei

*Tell the lady to apply [the cherry red] to her lips,  
When she speaks of matters of the heart, it always breaks the soul.*

-Couplet by a modern painter,  
the elder Baishi, at age eighty-  
seven.

## **Chen Dayu (1912-2001)**

### ***Grapevine***

China, mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

Gift of Shang H. and Nell Ho, 1991

(6614.1)

Chen studied under Qi Baishi and was heavily influenced by his style, but he also admired modern Western pioneers such as Matisse and Cézanne, and later, works by Abstract Expressionists. In a confluence of these impulses, the artist used fluid calligraphic lines and ink washes to create a composition revealing modern emphases on pattern and dynamic gesture.

## **Fu Baoshi (1904-1965)**

### ***Winter Landscape***

China, 1956

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

Anonymous loan, 2002

(L38181)

One of the most remarkable Chinese modernists, Fu Baoshi traveled to Tokyo in the early twentieth century to study Japan's strategies of modernization, including Western art. Developing a personal style with a dense interlace of loose strokes and free washes of varying saturation, combined with a dynamic, dotted surface inspired by the Qing dynasty individualist Shitao (1602-1707), Fu became a highly distinguished painter. He was even initially celebrated by the Communist Party after they took power, collaborating on a mural in Beijing's Great Hall of the People in 1959. However, Fu struggled to fit his art into the increasingly stringent rules delineated by the Party, and he continued his experimentation and reference to tradition in tension with the new guidelines for art. Fu began increasingly to rely on alcohol as a means of escape from the new pressures placed on artists, and he died of an alcohol-related illness in 1965. During the subsequent Cultural Revolution, student bands of Red Guards contemptuously dug up the artist's grave and dispersed his ashes, but today Fu is recognized as one of the most important painters of the modern Chinese era.

## **Wang Zhen (1867-1938)**

### ***Landscape***

China, 1922

Hanging scroll; ink on paper

Acquired through exchange, 1971

(3849.1)

Wang Zhen was steeped in the deep tradition of literati painting, but he was also influenced by the changing artistic tides in Shanghai, where he lived and worked. The ink monochrome and monumental composition of this painting both recall the work of past landscape masters, but the striking simplicity in the spare brushwork and washes creates a surface pattern that abstracts and modernizes this age-old approach.

**Lin Fengmian (1900-1991)**

***Village Houses with River and Mountains in the Distance***

China, mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

Anonymous loan, 2008

(L40,546)

Among the most radical Chinese artists of the mid-century, Lin studied in Paris in the 1920s, and returned to China to take a distinctly modernist approach to ink, creating images infused with expressionistic ideas. This placed him in conflict with the Communist Party, as artists increasingly were directed to use realism and to speak more clearly to “the masses.” As such, Lin suffered immensely during the Cultural Revolution, was publicly condemned and jailed, and had many of his works destroyed. He secluded himself in Hong Kong, only reemerging in his later years as the art world began to recognize his pivotal contribution to the trajectory of modern Chinese art.

**Fu Baoshi (1904-1965)**

***Landscape***

China, 1963

Fan; ink on paper

Anonymous loan, 2001

(L37769)

On this side of the fan is a landscape painted by Fu near the end of his life and characterized by his trademark density of overlapping, agitated brushwork. On the reverse side is a painting of ships by the artist Qian Songyan (1899-1985), who criticized himself during the Cultural Revolution, affirming that his “ideology needed to be remolded,” and later painted one of the murals for Mao Zedong’s mausoleum in 1977.

**Cheng Shifa (1921-2007)**

***Figure with Calligraphy***

China, mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century

Fan; ink and color on paper

Anonymous loan, 2000

(L36482.18)

Cheng Shifa was influenced by both Fu Baoshi and techniques of Western draftsmanship, and won accolades from the government for his depictions of minority women. We can see his exploratory ink technique in the close observation of nature to render objects—such as mushrooms and basket—in a variety of positions and from multiple vantage points. On the other hand, such works are also a good point from which to consider the government's motivations for encouraging benevolent depictions of minority populations, especially ones subject to contention. The calligraphy on the back of the fan is a poem describing the idylls of spring.

**Wei Letang (John Way) (b.1921)**

**Born China; active United States after 1956**

***Three Seals with Ink***

Mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century

Album page; ink on paper

Anonymous loan, 2003

(L38486.1)

Hailing from Shanghai, John Way immigrated to the United States in the 1950s, finding himself in the heart of the East Coast Abstract Expressionist movement. Soon after, Way set to work finding a middle ground between Abstract Expressionism and Chinese calligraphy, an art form which similarly relies on expression through gesture. Here, ink strokes are allowed to dissolve into a purely abstract composition, while the artist's interest in designing and carving seals maintains a connection to the tradition of Chinese script.

**Wang Jiqian (C.C. Wang) (1907-2003)**

**Born China; active United States after 1947**

***Miniature Album***

20<sup>th</sup> century

Album; ink on paper

Gift of James H. Soong, 2004

(12956.1)

## **Xu Beihong (1885-1953)**

### ***Horse***

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

China, 1931

Purchase, 1934

(4058)

Like Lin Fengmian, Xu Beihong also studied in Europe and returned with a keen interest in synthesizing Eastern and Western painting. Given their similar backgrounds, the resulting vast differences in approach between these two artists demonstrate the divergent ways such a plan was ultimately implemented: although Lin favored expressive modernist techniques, Xu championed the incorporation of Western academic realism into Chinese ink painting, in which forms were modeled and foreshortened. Such disagreements would lead to bitter rivalries in mid-century Chinese art presses and educational institutions.

## **Wu Zuoren (1908-1997)**

### ***Three Goldfish***

China, late 20<sup>th</sup> century

Fan; ink and color on paper

Anonymous loan, 2001

(L37774)

Wu first studied under Xu Beihong, and then in Europe. Here he simplifies a vision of goldfish and lotus pads into broad planes of hue with swathes of ink and color wash, placed in an ambiguous space and seen from multiple vantage points. At the same time, he still relies on a close observation of nature to render his forms. During the Cultural Revolution, artists who did not produce realistic works celebrating revolutionary themes were often punished. Wu was separated from his wife and forced to become a pig farmer in the countryside, where he was frequently beaten.

**Ding Yanyong (1902-1978)**

**Born China; active Hong Kong after 1949**

***Eagle on Pine Branch***

1976

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

Gift of James H. Soong, 1998

(8973.1)

Having studied oil painting in the 1920s, Ding Yanyong was influenced by both Fauvist explorations and the individualist painters of the early Qing dynasty, such as Bada Shanren (ca. 1626-1705) and Shitao (1642-1707). Through his subsequent work, Ding drew on an affinity between the simplified forms of twentieth-century Western art and the highly unorthodox spontaneity of seventeenth-century Chinese painters. Strongly individualistic and modernist, he moved to Hong Kong after the Communists took power in 1949, just escaping their imminent restrictions to be placed on art.

**Wang Jiqian (C.C. Wang) (1907-2003)**

**Born China; active United States after 1947**

***Mind Landscapes Number Three***

Mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

Gift of James H. Soong, 1998

(8974.1)

A modern painter from Suzhou, Wang relocated to New York in 1949, where he began to study the mid-century abstraction developing in the United States. In the back of Wang's home, Frank Cho established the Mi Chou Gallery, the first institution in New York to focus on modern Chinese art. In this image, the artist draws on the traditional Chinese theme of "mind landscapes" (landscapes reflecting inner feelings), dating as far back as the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). However, Wang employs an experimental style emphasizing surface texture, color layering, and "controlled accidents" of ink to produce his vision.

**Huang Zhongfang (Harold Wong) (b.1943)**

**Born China; active Hong Kong**

***Listening to the Waterfall***

1996

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

Purchase, 1997

(8577.1)

As a painter, Harold Wong remains dedicated to the traditional Chinese landscape, but he also studied Western art in Europe, and his body of work has progressed from classical landscapes to increasingly abstract compositions. Like C.C. Wang, Harold Wong emphasizes surface texture, here comprised of a pattern of stippled ink bursting across the paper while simultaneously disintegrating in an interplay with negative space. From these modern tendencies emerges the time-honored motif of a remote and lofty mountain, while on a bottom ledge of this schematic design Wong connects himself to tradition by populating his abstracted vision with a contemplative scholar of the kind that has dwelled in such ink habitats for centuries of Chinese painting.

**Wang Jiqian (C.C. Wang) (1907-2003)**

**Born China; active United States after 1947**

***Level Ridge in the Shadow of Peaks***

Mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper

On loan from Ms. M.L. Harrison Mackie, 2006

(L38330)

**Chen Kezhan (Henri Chen) (b.1959)**

***Garden Blue 1 & 2***

Singapore, late 20<sup>th</sup> century

Hanging scrolls; ink and color on paper

Gift of the Artist, 2001

(11689.1a b)

An avid gardener, Chen is one of the leaders of the generation of ink painters in the second half of the twentieth century who work in a language of pure abstraction. In this contemporary scroll couplet, the artist takes the colors of his garden as inspiration, creating a work that combines traditional calligraphic brushwork with Abstract Expressionism. Although traditional Chinese ink painters often eschewed form-likeness, their images were essentially representational rather than abstract. Instead, Chen depicts the moods and feelings associated with a scene rather than the scene itself.