

"...ink art is really a concept, not just a medium."

—Maxwell K. Hearn

Ink Art: A Conversation with Curator Maxwell K. Hearn
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

By **Vivi Ying He**

An Interview with the curator Maxwell K. Hearn, whose exhibition, *Ink Art*, is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, through April 6, 2014. The landmark exhibition presents works by 35 artists born in China, featuring 70 works in various media, that were created during the past three decades.

I heard that this exhibition has taken more than five years to prepare. That's a long time to work on one topic. I've been thinking about contemporary for at least seven years. But the idea of this exhibition started maybe three or four years ago. I started to think about how to integrate contemporary art into an exhibition program. So what I realized is that the contemporary works that



Ink Art Curator Maxwell K. Hearn speaks with M Asia editor, Vivi Ying He, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2013.



GU WENDA *Mythos of Lost Dynasties Series—I Evaluate Characters Written by Three Men and Three Women*, 1985. Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 285 x 178 cm. Private collection, Hong Kong. Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



speaking to Western audiences don't always relate to traditional Chinese art. And conversely there are many works of contemporary Chinese art that are very rooted in the traditions and that's the area that I wanted to explore further. This exhibition is really enabling an audience to see how these works may be related to a tradition that spans back over 1000 years.

I see. So that's why this exhibition is entitled Ink Art, although many of the artworks I'm not in the traditional meaning of ink art. You have extended the boundary of...

That's right. So I started thinking that it would just be an ink art show. But then I realized that ink art is really a concept, not just a medium, that ink art can represent a traditional way of painting, either calligraphy landscape and even abstract art, even a photograph or video. The format often take shape of a hand scroll, it may look like a traditional painting but simply with the new technology. So I thought just because it's new technology doesn't mean it's not relate to tradition. The monochrome pallet of the photographs still resonates with traditional pink



painting. So ink, whether it's from an ink jet printer or from a brush is still ink.

I see. One of the artists here whose work is digital, very good at technology, but it still has the feeling of traditional painting. Exactly. We have a long hand scroll in the exhibition that looks like a 13th century painting. It's only when you get up close that you realize that it's a computer generated landscape made of buildings and power lines. So that's exactly the kind of double meaning that I wanted to discover in this material.

You divided this exhibition into four different categories in which different kinds of works arranged. Did you spend a lot of time trying to divide this working two different categories, because I think maybe during the time that you are preparing the exhibition the range became wider and wider. That's right, you're exactly right. The written word and landscape we're very early on important components, as was abstraction. But then I realized that there were other works of art, whether it was furniture or even a robe, all of which related to traditional



(Top) SONG DONG *Printing on Water (Performance in the Lhasa River, Tibet, 1996)*, 1996. Thirty-six chromogenic prints, each 60.5 x 39.9 cm. (Bottom) YANG JIECHANG *Crying Landscape*, 2002. Second of five triptychs; ink and color on paper, each 300 x 500 cm. Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



(Top) SONG DONG *Beautiful Dream 7*, 2008. Ink on cardboard, 29 x 44 cm. (Bottom) YANG JIECHANG *Crying Landscape*, 2002. First of five triptychs; ink and color on paper, each 300 x 500 cm. Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

forms, though they were using new material. I felt that there was something called an ink aesthetic that was still operating. That these works of art really belong to a traditional Johndra's even if the materials had changed. So I wanted to include them as well too show the exciting diversity of contemporary works of art that is still rooted in the past.

I'm not sure if it is a coincidence that recently, in the past two years, that there is more focus on ink art in the academic world. . For example there was an exhibition of ink art at the Boston Museum of fine arts, and also on the market side, like you know, Christie's or Sotheby's, they had some exhibitions accounting for ink part two, and most people are looking forward to these exhibitions. Is that a coincidence that people are so focused on this area now or is this a trend? I think there was a general trend. I like to think that the idea I had for the exhibition predates much of this activity, and everybody likes the term Ink

Art now. I think it really is a new development because in the west these types of artworks were not has accessible to the Western audiences. Therefore they were not as prominent in the marketplace as works of oil painting, political pop. So I think their time has come. People are recognizing that this material which has deep connections to China's past is also very meaningful and very worthwhile.

What is the age range of the artists? I haven't actually charted people's age. In fact most of the artist, I think all that to at three, were born after 1949. So they really are all artists who grew up in the new China.

The new China. I see. Will this exhibition travel? There are no plans to travel to the exhibit, this is the one place it'll be on view.

I see. Thank you very much.

Thank you. **M**



SONG DONG *Shadow*, 2009. Rosewood, 89 × 103.5 × 103.5 cm. Courtesy : Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



WANG DONGLING *Untitled*, 1999. Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 245.7 × 146.1 cm. Private collection, New York. Courtesy : Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.