

Sun Museum

Chinese Art in Hong Kong

By Charlotte Chang

IN THE main hall of Sun Museum, two sturdy wooden benches stand in front of floor-length glass windows, offering a view of Victoria Harbour framed by a lush growth of roadside trees, a busy highway and Hong Kong Island's distinctive harbour front in the distance. As the glass is sound-proof, cars zooming past on the highway outside infuse the tableau that balances sky, sea, greenery and human activity with stimulating movement but no noise, turning the window into a dynamic composition. This calming view is what first greets visitors stepping into the museum from Hong Kong's busy streets – or what the museum director Yeung Chun Tong, a highly regarded Chinese art historian, educator and museologist, refers to as *chenshi*, the troublesome 'mortal world' of Chinese beliefs.

Since its opening in May 2015, Sun Museum has attracted more than 1,300 visitors, an encouraging number for a small-scale private museum in Hong Kong. Located on the East Kowloon harbour front, the museum has sought to position itself as an alternative destination to the galleries and art spaces that have sprung up in



View of Hong Kong Harbour from the main hall of Sun Museum

the area in recent years, focusing not only on diverse exhibition programmes but also on research and education. Their aim is to promote Chinese art and culture across historical, stylistic, thematic and philosophical contexts.

'We want to be seen as a proper museum, although a private one,' says Chloe Suen, chairwoman of the Simon Suen Foundation, which established the museum. 'Our family has been collecting Chinese art for years, and the foundation has supported Chinese classical studies at universities through research grants. We wanted to promote Chinese art

and culture by starting a new, impactful project that would benefit Hong Kong society and serve public art education on a larger scale.'

The plan to open an art space – initially meant to be a gallery rather than a museum – was formed almost immediately after the foundation was set up in 2012. As Chloe Suen recalls, 'We thought, if people came to Hong Kong and wanted to see works by Chinese masters, there were only a few places they could go, like the Museum of Art. We wanted to open a new space for people to appreciate and learn about the wealth of Chinese


art and culture that already exists in Hong Kong'.

Finding the right person to head the conceived project was difficult; but coincidentally, in 2012, Yeung Chun Tong had newly retired from the University Museum and Art Gallery (UMAG) of the University of Hong Kong after a 15-year stint as its director. After coming on board as the museum director, Yeung began working out the curatorial and research direction of the museum, securing collections for exhibitions as well as designing the museum space to reflect its dedication to Chinese art

in all its forms.

With his rich experience working with unparalleled collections of Chinese art and artefacts, Yeung has the unique knowledge and insight to head Sun Museum. Throughout his storied career working at the Hong Kong Museum of Art and directing the UMAG, Yeung curated numerous acclaimed exhibitions and broke new ground with his insight for acquisitions. Yeung talks fondly of how, while Director of the UMAG, his foresight led the University to invest in oil paintings by 20th-century

Continued on page 20



Sotheby's

**IMPORTANT CHINESE ART
AUCTION HONG KONG 7 OCTOBER 2015**

Viewing 2–6 October, Hall 3 Hong Kong Convention & Exhibition Centre

An exceedingly rare blue and white 'fish pond' brushwasher. Mark and period of Xuande
Estimate HK\$20,000,000–40,000,000 / £1,650,000–3,300,000. Enquiries Hong Kong
+852 2822 8128 London +44 20 7293 6442. Register now at sothebys.com



Victoria Harbour After the Rain by Lui Shou Kwan (1919–1975), dated 1965, ink and colour on paper, 95.5 x 372.5 cm

Chinese painters, a collection, which has attracted much wider critical attention in recent years and appreciated in value exponentially.

Yeung was heavily involved with Sun Museum from its conception, setting clear directions and policies so meticulously so that every decision has a deeper significance within Chinese culture, down to seemingly trivial matters like the use of colours on the walls. Yeung incorporated the five elements – metal, wood, water, fire and earth – into his core design concept, using different colours to delineate exhibition spaces and scattering the spacious patio area with furniture pieces that have auspicious meanings.

Above all, Yeung wants the museum space to have a simple but coherent design that reflects his curatorial vision. 'I always give off the vibe of an old-fashioned Chinese art historian,' says Yeung jokingly, 'but our museum is not only about traditional Chinese art. We also deal with contemporary art. Our small space needs to adapt constantly to our wide-ranging exhibition programs spanning vast periods of Chinese history'.

As a museum and not just a gallery space, Sun Museum needs to focus on research and public education. This proves to be a difficult task as the museum lacks a permanent collection at the moment – Yeung and his team often have to carry out research and cataloguing work for exhibitions through photographs, as many of the exhibited works come from private collections.

Yeung's long-term goal is to build a permanent collection based on a well-defined acquisition policy that spans different periods of Chinese art history. 'Our acquisition policy needs



Viewing the Waterfall by Zhang Daqian (1899–1983), dated 1963, ink and colour on paper, 134 x 68 cm



Azaleas Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010), dated 2000, Oil on canvas, 100 x 85 cm

to take into account practical concerns such as our lack of storage space, so we will focus on painting and other two-dimensional works,' says Yeung, 'but I would like to chart a path other museums in Hong Kong have not gone before, by collecting works by lesser known but promising Hong Kong artists'.

The inaugural exhibition of Sun Museum, entitled *Drawn of a Sunny Century*, is running until mid-October this year and features 40 works by 20th-century Chinese masters borrowed from Simon Suen's prized private collection.

Yeung's curatorial vision for the exhibition is simple but profound – he wishes to show how art is tightly intertwined with history. By positioning the 20th-century Chinese paintings within a broader historical context of modern Chinese history, Yeung shows the ways in which China's 'declining century' influenced Chinese painting and is also reflected in it. Even more importantly, he delineates how Chinese painters fused Chinese and Western painting traditions in this period as a result of increased exchange between China and the outside world.

Throughout the exhibition, Yeung has a way of condensing important Chinese art historical concepts into easily understandable narratives that allow visitors to appreciate the paintings even with no prior knowledge.

'To put it simply, the Chinese painting tradition focuses on what is in the "heart", from inside the artists

themselves, while the Western traditional focuses on what is out there in the world,' says Yeung, explaining one way of looking at the fundamental difference between Chinese and Western painting. 'Many Chinese painters here, like Wu Guanzhong and Lin Fengmian, studied abroad and were influenced by their Western training. They fused the Chinese and Western artistic traditions by painting the world realistically while expressing hope and longing at the same time'.

The fusion of the Chinese and Western painting traditions in 20th-century Chinese painting is reflected in many ways in the exhibition. In terms of medium and technique, many painters used a mix of ink and



Chinese Opera Performers by Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), not dated, ink and colour on paper 66.5 x 66 cm

THE INAUGURAL EXHIBITION AIMS TO SHOW HOW ART IS TIGHTLY INTERTWINED WITH HISTORY

colour on paper to expand the range of shades represented in traditional Chinese landscapes. In terms of subject matter, artists started to paint realistic scenes from everyday life – something not done in traditional Chinese paintings that focused on expressiveness. In the past, Chinese artists were always daydreaming. They would paint peonies to symbolise hope even if they had never seen such a flower,' says Yeung.

Yeung also stresses the importance of looking at art from our present perspective, as well as that of its historical context. Using the familiar works of Qi Baishi (1864–1957) to illustrate this, he says, 'Qi painted a lot of shrimps and crabs realistically in ink and colour, but at the same time, his paintings were laden with expressive meaning. He invoked the crab as a traditional symbol for longevity and the shrimp for its life and energy,' explains Yeung. From the perspective of earlier Chinese audiences, many of whom illiterate, Qi's paintings were at the same time relatable and refreshing in their subject matter and mode of representation.

Different works in the exhibition illustrate the interplay between Chinese and Western painting traditions differently. In Lin Fengmian's (1900–1991) *Chinese Opera Performers*, a Chinese subject matter is rendered in a Western style. The two female Chinese opera performers, with graceful motions and Chinese features, are depicted side by side with flattened bodies that recall Modernist compositions. A particularly prominent feature of the performers is their semi-transparent



Fish, Prawns and Crabs by Qi Baishi (1864–1957), dated 1937, ink on paper, 123 x 30.5 cm

drapery, which is accentuated by crayon, a Western medium, on an ink and watercolour foundation.

Ding Yanyong's (1902–1978) *Aquarium* fuses the Western tradition of realist painting with the Chinese tradition of painting from the 'heart' in another way. A work of ink on paper, the painting seems at first glance like a traditional Chinese composition, until one looks at the level of realistic detail in the fish, shrimps, crabs and frogs depicted, with their energetic whiskers, fins and claws enlivening the scene with motion. At the same time, the fish and frogs have large eyes, giving them almost cartoonish expressions that attract the viewer's attention. This exaggerated depiction is in keeping with the Chinese painting tradition of



Picnic by Xu Beihong (1895-1953), dated 1934, ink and colour on paper, 43.5 x 77 cm

rendering eyes the most prominent features, as eyes are thought to allow a glimpse into the painting subject's – and the artist's – heart.

Hong Kong ink master Kwan's Lui Shou (1919-1975) *Victoria Harbour After the Rain*, a large-scale horizontal painting, also seems like a traditional Chinese landscape painting at first glance; but with its simple lines, the painting shows Western formal elements, such as well-defined contrasts created by tonal gradations of black, grey and blue colours. The composition shows an eye-line view of the Harbour, peaks and waterfront buildings as in a Western landscape, but also incorporates the dabbling of ink dots common as a refining touch in traditional Chinese landscapes. This intricate fusion of Western and Chinese techniques and compositional elements captures the majestic essence of Victoria Harbour after a cleansing torrent of rain.

A refreshing work on exhibition is Xu Beihong's (1895-1953) *Picnic*, which depicts the artist and friends relaxing in a Moscow suburb. In contrast to Xu's more famous compositions of horses, bulls or historical figures, this work depicts a clearly Western subject matter of an outdoor picnic, with realistic portrayals of himself and his friends casually sitting, standing and reclining. No figure stands out as in traditional Chinese paintings of people, and the proportions of bodies are accurate. Attention is also paid to perspective, with different intensities of ink creating a sense of depth, showing how a quintessentially Chinese medium could be used to render realistic everyday scenes.

As visitors come to the end of the

exhibition, they are led to the outdoor patio area, an imaginative space designed by Yeung to reference different aspects of Chinese culture. The floor, paved by black tiles, is the auspicious 'East Sea', in reference to Kwun Tong's location on the East Kowloon waterfront.

Other auspicious symbols are arranged on top of the East Sea to form a coherent story. The high fences around the patio are made of pine wood – pine, in Chinese song, recalls Mount Song, one of the Five Sacred Mountains of Taoism that symbolises longevity. Pots of moss plants arranged on the floor represent the common technique of applying moss ink dots to traditional Chinese paintings.

Several distinctive pieces of furniture resembling trees, on the other hand, symbolise the Queen Mother of the Heavenly Court's peach trees with fruits that confer immortality. Underneath these 'peach trees', a few stones are placed on coffee tables to represent fallen peaches, perhaps even the one that the Monkey King stole from the Heavenly Court in a famous story. All these elements are constantly rearranged into different symbolic constellations, demonstrating the high adaptability and artistic cohesiveness of the museum space.

After the inaugural exhibition, Yeung plans to exhibit works by Hong Kong oil painters in keeping with the museum's direction of promoting local contemporary art. Parallel to these diverse exhibition programs in the future, Sun Museum will also continue to develop its educational programmes. The talks designed for the current exhibition show the



Gourd and Grasshopper by Ding Yanyong (1902-1978), not dated, ink on paper, 64.5 x 30 cm



Aquarium by Ding Yanyong (1902-1978), not dated, ink on paper, 139 x 69 cm

THE NEXT EXHIBITION AT SUN MUSEUM WILL BE WORKS BY HONG KONG OIL PAINTERS

museum's dedication to educational engagement: Yeung himself gives lectures on the significance and aesthetics of the traditional elements of Chinese painting, including landscapes, people, animals, flowers and birds.

Under Yeung's directorship, Sun Museum has become an educational environment where everything is connected within a grand narrative of Chinese art and culture. Standing on the East Sea he created, Yeung points to the buildings surrounding the outdoor space and says meditatively, 'That is the "mortal world". Here, I have tried to create a secluded paradise where, hopefully, visitors can appreciate art and get away from the troubles of everyday life'.

Pandolfini

CASA D'ASTE dal 1924

MASTERPIECES FROM ITALIAN COLLECTIONS

AUCTION
1 OCTOBER 2015
FLORENCE



A cinnabar lacquer box and cover
Qing Dynasty, Qianlong Period (1736-1795)
€ 20.000/30.000



A Tibetan bronze sculpture
Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)
€ 15.000/20.000

DIFFERENT WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION ILLUSTRATE THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN PAINTING TRADITIONS



Zhang Kui by Xu Beihong (1895-1953), dated 1939, ink and colour on paper, 152 x 84.5 cm

Enquiries and Catalogues

FLORENCE
Borgo Albizi, 26
Tel. +39 055 2340888-9
Fax +39 055 244343
info@pandolfini.it

MILAN
Via Manzoni 45
Tel. +39 02 65560807
Fax +39 02 62086699
milano@pandolfini.it

LIVE ONLINE AUCTION IS ON PANDOLFINI.COM