



Cultural embrace

A new generation of Chinese artists are drawing inspiration from Western techniques to develop a new style. Kathryn Grant looks at three artists who have successfully borrowed foreign ideas while remaining true to their cultural traditions.



Left: *Old Pine in the Jingshan Park in Beijing*, by Wu Guanzhong, estimate: \$153,800–\$192,300
Right: *Mist Clearing after the Rain*, by Zhang Daqian, sold for \$743,600





The 20th century saw great social and political upheaval in China, and this has necessarily been reflected in the preoccupations of the era's great artists. While China attempted to forge a new identity, embracing its traditional culture while finding a place for the modern world, its artists have also struggled to discover their new role.

As Chinese artists learnt more about Western art they were faced with the dilemma of whether to approach their art with traditional or foreign methods. A pioneering group chose to apply the new techniques they were discovering to produce traditional Chinese art. Absorbing ideas from Western movements, they blended them with Oriental styles to create a new image of their traditional world.

Abstract expressionism: Zhang Daqian

An exceedingly prolific artist of this period is Chinese master Zhang Daqian. Born in Neijiang, Sichuan province, Daqian is rooted in tradition. At a young age he became accomplished in traditional flower painting under his mother's tuition. He was also trained in Chinese calligraphy and painting in Shanghai by the Qing loyalists, Zeng Xi and Li Ruiqing.

Later, Daqian's meticulous and extensive study of early scroll paintings and Buddhist murals in the cave temples in the abandoned Silk Road city of Dunhuang resulted in a hybrid style in his work.



From far left: *Chinese Opera Series – Madame Snake White*, by Lin Fengmian, sold for \$772,720; *By the Lake*, by Wu Guanzhong, sold for \$889,200; *Water Bamboo Village*, by Zhang Daqian, sold for \$612,560

In the 1950s and 1960s Daqian spent a long time outside China, where he came into contact with Western modern art, including abstract expressionism. It is thought that this influenced Daqian greatly, giving an emotive fluidity and spontaneity to his art. However, far from being purely abstract and spontaneous, his work contains meticulously planned Chinese brushwork. He also remains faithful to the traditional Chinese interest in depicting the natural world and its beauty.

Among his best works are a series of large-scale ink studies of flowering plants produced late in his career. His love of flower painting extended throughout his life, and flowers feature in many of his most striking pieces.

Daqian is undoubtedly one of the most popular 20th-century Chinese artists and is often referred to as 'the Chinese Picasso'.

Post-expressionism: Lin Fengmian

Lin Fengmian effortlessly and successfully blends Chinese painting with Western influences. As with Daqian, he studied calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting from a young age. At 18 he travelled to France to learn the techniques of oil painting and to Germany where he became interested in European classical painters and post-expressionism.

Fengmian's work is characterised by movement and flowing shapes, using Western expressionist techniques to create an Oriental effect. Instead of typical Chinese brushstrokes, he uses the brush pen to create bold and lively lines, conveying a rhythmic quality and plenty of *joie de vivre*. Blending ink, water-

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colours and gouache, he has produced a distinctive colouring technique that creates a beautiful layering effect.

Fengmian's art strives to create a synthesis of not just the stylistic qualities of Western and Chinese art, but more importantly, their respective visions. He achieves this by drawing on the elegance and modesty of Chinese art and combining it with the bold confidence of Western painting.

The emotive and formal qualities within his work, particularly his regular use of roughly drawn geometric shapes, and the positioning of groups of figures, are reminiscent of great Western painters such as Matisse or Picasso.

Abstract modernism: Wu Guanzhong

Wu Guanzhong produces predominantly Chinese paintings that nod towards Western modernism. Using a large palette of Western-inspired colours, he creates abstract Chinese images that capture the spirit of the East. In particular, the tonal variations he draws from are inspired by Oriental art.

The peculiar beauty of Guanzhong's work derives from his skilful and delicate blending and contrasting of colour and tone. He eschews the objective representation that many other Chinese artists pursue in favour of a more evocative representation. Suggesting form, tone

and dimension with a seemingly effortless flick of a brush or a touch of colour, Guanzhong's work is sublime and all-encompassing. In *Seascape at Beidai* (1977), Guanzhong suggests the movement of the sea by painting out a number of lines with opaque white tincture, a technique borrowed from the West. The resulting effect creates an illusion of light reflecting upon the water and the movement of waves.

A market with great potential

Ruben Lien, head of sales in the Chinese department at Christie's, says recent sales of modern Chinese artworks have been performing very well. Prices and interest have risen considerably over the past decade and Christie's now holds sales of Chinese modern works twice a year in Hong Kong. To Western collectors some of the more interesting pieces are those that successfully draw on the styles of both East and West, remaining true to their traditional roots while embracing innovation and modernism.

There is an abundance of works and artists on the market. Although what unites them is their mix of East and West, their approaches are highly distinctive, encompassing the beauty and fluidity of Daqian, the rhythmic movement of Fengmian and the abstract, serene suggestions of Guanzhong.

As China increasingly finds itself part of a modern, globalised world it is developing a new



Hamlet, by Lin Fengmian, sold for \$947,440

identity. Its artists too are embracing this new world, reassessing their culture from a global perspective. At the same time, the Chinese elite are starting to appreciate this new movement, snapping up pieces by Daqian, Fengmian, Guanzhong and Qi Baishi.

As a result, the value of Chinese contemporary art is already rising and has the potential to go much higher due to the scarcity and quality of these works. For collectors, these paintings are skilfully executed, culturally valuable works that may well turn into a sound investment. ■

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