

Contemporary Chinese Ink Paintings

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By Simon de Burton, author and journalist who contributes regularly to the Financial Times, Daily Telegraph, GQ and Vanity Fair.

Dating back to the founding days of the Tang dynasty during the seventh century, Chinese ink painting is among the oldest of the widely collected art forms – but its ancient cultural roots are inspiring an emerging group of contemporary talents to adapt it for the present day. So says Michael Goedhuis, who has been collecting and dealing in the best of Chinese contemporary ink art for 30 years, having set his focus on the field during the early 1990s. Notably, Goedhuis was the first Western dealer to curate and organise a major exhibition of Chinese contemporary art, which he staged in a 20,000 square foot space at the top of Sotheby's York Avenue HQ in 2001.

Called 'China Without Borders', it attracted almost 3,000 visitors on the opening night. Anyone who is yet to discover the beguiling world of Chinese contemporary ink painting – and those who have already fallen under its spell – should certainly head to this month's Treasure House Fair, where Goedhuis will exhibit highlights from a blue chip collection put together by a Swiss connoisseur when he was living in Asia between the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Of the 18 works in the collection, Goedhuis hopes to show between six and nine – space permitting – each measuring around 100cm by 80cm. Between them they represent a 'who's who' of the best of the best of contemporary Chinese ink painters, among them names such as Lo Ch'ing, Wei Li Gang, Guan Zhi and Yao Jui-Chung. "To me, the really extraordinary thing about this genre is that, out of 1.4 billion people living in China there is a mere handful of artists working in ink on paper who have attracted an international audience – and, when I say a handful, I mean only 100 or so out of the country's entire population."

Below: Guan Zhi *Autumn Lake* 2023:



Goedhuis likens the emergence of this new order of ink painters to that of major European names of the early 20th century such as Braque, Picasso and Kandinsky who, he says, were able to create a new, contemporary language as a result of gaining knowledge and understanding studying the works of Michelangelo, da Vinci, Poussin and Delacroix. "This small group of internationally recognised Chinese ink painters is revolutionary, but in subtle ways," he says. "Britta Erickson [the American Chinese art scholar and founder of Beijing's INK Studio gallery] describes contemporary Chinese ink painters as 'the most idealistic and intellectually adventurous of any artists working in China today' – and I think that's right. "As with those great European artists of 100 years ago, so China's contemporary ink painters have absorbed the lessons of their country's old masters and then gone on to create something that is clearly inspired by them, but is also entirely new."

The comparison is upheld by the story of the aforementioned Lo Ch'ing. Now aged 76, he was introduced by his parents at a very early age – around 10 – to Pu Ru (1896-1963), cousin of China's Last Emperor, Pu Yi (1906-1967), to study classical painting in the 'Northern style' using coloured inks; the medium he still uses today. Lo Ch'ing's works and the others being offered by Goedhuis at the Fair range in price from around \$35,000 – \$100,000 which, says Goedhuis, makes them attractive to younger, 40-something collectors – most of whom hail not from mainland China but from the U.S. and Europe.

Below Lo Ch'ing *The Mirrored Landscape (2)*, 2017:



It seems likely, however, that the value of contemporary Chinese ink painting will rise when the area is discovered by more Asians, whose appetite for 'buying back' their culture has proved to be the driving force behind the growth in collecting categories ranging from porcelain and bronzes to postage stamps and, of course, more ancient forms of ink painting. And if the simple, succinct and often ethereal qualities of ink painting are your thing, the Treasure House Fair promises other buying opportunities, too. Elsewhere in this website's magazine section, you can read about 3812 Gallery, which will also be exhibiting. 3812 represents modern and contemporary Chinese artists at its spaces in London and Hong Kong, including Hsiao Chin, Paris-based Ma Desheng, (whose work can be seen in the Centre Pompidou and the British Museum, among others) and will exhibit ink art by Hong Kong's Raymond Fung at the Fair.