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ASIA SOCIETY MUSEUM PRESENTS FIRST U.S. RETROSPECTIVE OF ONE OF CHINA'S MOST IMPORTANT ARTISTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

REVOLUTIONARY INK: THE PAINTINGS OF WU GUANZHONG

On view April 25 through August 5, 2012

Media preview and private exhibition viewing: April 24, 2012 at 4:00 p.m.



Wu Guanzhong, *Pines*, 1995, ink and color on paper, H. 55.1 x W. 70.5 in. (H. 140 x W. 179 cm), Shanghai Art Museum.

Revolutionary Ink: The Paintings of Wu Guanzhong celebrates the sixty-year career of Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010), one of China's most significant and admired twentieth century artists. This first-ever major retrospective, organized in collaboration with the Shanghai Art Museum, traces the artist's development in the medium of ink painting from the mid-1970s through 2004. Exhibition works represent Wu's radical individual approach that integrates European modernism and abstract expressionism with traditional Chinese ink painting.

Wu lived in tumultuous times; persecuted during the Cultural Revolution at a time when western art was decried, he was

forced to abandon painting and he destroyed most of his works in oil. However, he persevered, continuing to paint and draw even when he was sent to the countryside for hard labor and reeducation.

“Wu Guanzhong is one of the most important artists of the twentieth century,” says Melissa Chiu, Asia Society Museum Director and Senior Vice President of Global Arts and Culture Programs. “He revitalized and reinvigorated Chinese traditional ink painting at a time when most artists were turning to western art for inspiration. We are grateful to the Shanghai Art Museum for collaborating with us on this exhibition, which celebrates his legacy as a modern master who pushes the boundaries of our understanding of how a traditional medium like ink can be made new for a new century.”

Revolutionary Ink: The Paintings of Wu Guanzhong is curated by Chiu and Lu Huan, Curator, Shanghai Art Museum.



Wu Guanzhong, *A Big Manor*, 2001. Ink on rice paper, H. 27 9/16 x W. 55 1/8 in. (H 70 x Q. 140 cm), Shanghai Art Museum.

About the artist

Born in 1919 in Jiangsu Province, Wu Guanzhong enrolled in the acclaimed Hangzhou Art School (today's China Academy of Art in Hangzhou) in 1936. At the age of 27, he left to study in Paris at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, where he studied western painting traditions and methodologies. After

three profoundly influential years, he chose to return to China for patriotic reasons, to teach at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Painting in oil, he developed an original style that combined both traditional Chinese ink painting and western techniques of watercolor and oil painting, and became a mentor to a new generation of Chinese painters.

However, his paintings, which were influenced by both western art and formalism rather than the then accepted style of Social Realism, along with his writings soon led to trouble with the authorities. As the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, Wu destroyed most of his works before the Red Guards searched his house and confiscated his properties. Wu was still heavily persecuted during the revolution as a bourgeois formalist and was forbidden to paint, write or teach for two years. He was sent to the remote rural countryside and subjected to reeducation through hard labor. Yet in spite of harsh living conditions, he continued to paint whenever he could, and eventually was allowed to teach an oil painting class for the army in Hebei province.

Finally in 1973, his living conditions began to improve when Premier Zhou Enlai commissioned him to paint a large mural in a Beijing hotel. Wu was reunited with his family, and also around this time, began to paint in ink. His resulting ink painting "Chongqing the Riverside City" launched a new stage of his career in a country now more receptive to his ideas. Somewhat ironically, Wu went against the tide in returning to ink at a time when many of his students, most born in the 1950s, became greatly interested in European and American oil painting and, they adopted subjects and compositions of Western European art and experimented in styles as diverse as surrealism and expressionism.

In 1978, at age 59, he had his first solo show since his return to China in 1950, which traveled throughout the country. He continued to paint in ink, creating landscapes distinguished by their expressive line and unusual application of color. In 1985, an exhibition of his latest works was shown at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, followed by a solo exhibition at the British Museum in 1992. Late in his life, he traveled widely throughout China and other parts of Asia, as well as to Europe, to attend a series of his solo exhibitions and to give lectures on those occasions. His prolific career as a writer on his philosophy of art has produced numerous monographic publications in various languages. Wu died in Beijing in 2010 at the age of ninety.

The exhibition

Revolutionary Ink: The Paintings of Wu Guanzhong is organized thematically into three sections that evoke Wu's approach to the medium of ink and account for distinct genres of his practice.

Landscape, the first, emphasizes the ink and wash painting tradition while showing the departure from tradition that some of his work represents, for example, in the random use of color. The section comprises paintings from the late 1980s and 1990s, representing views of high altitude mountains in vertical format, or expansive horizontal landscapes, in which he used ink to create an effect of flatness, in contrast to the traditional effect of depth and vitality.

The second theme in the exhibition is Architecture. Where traditional ink paintings emphasized the grandeur and majesty of the natural environment over small-scale pavilions or other architectural elements, Wu's paintings depict rural yet grand homes and towns and emphasize a constructed, man-made environment.

The final section of the exhibition is Abstraction, representing Wu's later period in which his landscapes became more abstracted. Most of these works are from after 1990 and show an intention to represent states of being, emotions, and concepts over more realistic representation. For example, rather than showing birds-eye or long-view perspectives usually associated with ink landscape paintings, the works provide a closer view as if the viewer is fully immersed in the environment.

Revolutionary Ink: The Paintings of Wu Guanzhong is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays by leading Chinese and American scholars. The exhibition begins a year of programming at Asia Society in arts and culture, policy and business that explores China's past as a window onto its present and future. For program updates, visit AsiaSociety.org/nyc

Exhibition funding

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About Asia Society Museum

Asia Society Museum presents groundbreaking exhibitions and artworks, many previously unseen in North America. The Museum is known for its permanent collection of masterpiece-quality works gifted by Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd and a contemporary collection launched in 2003. Through exhibitions and related public programs, Asia Society provides a forum for the issues and viewpoints reflected in traditional, modern and contemporary Asian art. Founded in 1956, Asia Society is a nonprofit educational institution with new multi-million dollar, state-of-the-art cultural centers and gallery spaces in Hong Kong and Houston, and offices in Los Angeles, Manila, Melbourne, Mumbai, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai, and Washington, DC.

Asia Society Museum is located at 725 Park Avenue (at 70th Street), New York City. The Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 A.M. – 6:00 P.M. and Friday from 11:00 A.M. – 9:00 P.M. Closed on Mondays and major holidays. General admission is \$10, seniors \$7, students \$5, and admission is free for members and persons under 16. Free admission Friday evenings, 6:00 P.M. – 9:00 P.M. The Museum is closed Fridays after 6:00 P.M. from July 1 through Labor Day.

AsiaSociety.org/museum