

From “**Paintings of Zhiwei Tu**”  
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**Introduction**

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The experiences of childhood often exert an important influence throughout an artist’s life time.

Zhiwei Tu was born in a poverty-stricken mountain village in Wengyuan county, Guangdong province, China. His painting, *Lunch* (1984), depicting a peasant couple who were taking a lunch break by the field, probably embodies some impressions from his childhood.

Among people living in remote districts (in contrast to city-dwellers), there still remains many of the old tales and legends. This is

perhaps one of the reasons why Zhiwei Tu in his later career has been interested in historical events. But it is more important to note that he has been, in his art, seeking the expression of the honesty, naivety and primitive vitality inherent in the people living in these remote districts, which can be seen in whatever he depicts – in his historical paintings, and portraiture of the Tibetans, the oriental and the occidental, even in rendering of nudes.

Tu received his BA and MA degrees from the Guangzhou Institute of Fine arts, and served for seven years as an art assistant professor at the same institute. Some senior professors in the institute had gone to various countries to make study of 19th and 20th century western art including Realism and French Impressionism. By learning from them, Tu laid a solid foundation in his basic skills and the use of colors. In 1987 Tu came to the U.S. to make further study of oil painting and was granted a second degree of MFA at Drake University in 1990. There he was greatly encouraged and inspired by his advisor Prof. Jules Kirschenbaum. In the process of studying contemporary American art, Tu has gradually formed his own style. His work has been exhibited many times and has won several awards including three golds and one silver medal.

Collected in this album are mainly figure paintings by Tu. Most of them have been done in the last ten years [1986-1996- ed.]. Some were conceived more than fifteen years ago, however.

## The Seven-Step Poem

The dramatic work, *The Seven-Step Poem*, represents the historical event that occurred in the 3rd century. The suspicious emperor of Wei, Cao Pi, worrying about his gifted younger brother Cao Zhi's threat to his throne, ordered Cao Zhi to compose a poem in the time that it took to walk seven steps. Failure would result in a death sentence for "insulting the throne." Cao Zhi read aloud his poem within the allotted time and thus wittily defeated his brother. The famous poem was:

Boiling bean with beanstalk firing  
In the pot the beans are crying.  
Born of the same root  
Why make such a relentless seething.

The artist depicts various characters in different states of mind. Officials are astonished, sorrowful, or deep in thought. Even the soldiers with weapons in hand dare not to look squarely at Cao Zhi. The Emperor is outwardly strong but inwardly weak; while the young but gifted Cao Zhi, in this grim situation, looks nervous but angry, sharp and brave, showing the beauty of humanity in defiance of the power of authority.

## Dancing With His Sword

In 202 B.C., Xiang Yu, the king of Chu, was surrounded by the army of Liu Bang, the king of Han. Only several hundred guards, his lover Yu Ji, and his loyal horse remained by his side. Before his last attempt to break through the encirclement, Yu Ji performed a sword dance to lift the spirit of the soldiers. After the dance, she killed herself to lighten his worries and burdens.

For two thousand years Xiang Yu has been regarded as tragic but beloved hero because of his honesty, kindness, as well devotion to his lover. In comparison, Liu Bang the conqueror, seems deceitful in his abuse of power and scheme. This reflects the common people's sentiments on historical figures. In his work, *Dancing with His Sword*, Zhiwei Tu recreates this moving and tragic scene, and makes a striking comparison between Xiang Yu, with tears running down on his face at the grievous moment and Yu Ji, who is resolved to take her own life.

In traditional Chinese opera and painting, Yu Ji always performs her sword dance with a pair of light and handy swords for women. But in Tu's work, she takes Xiang Yu's heavy sword. This not only shows her deep affection for Xiang Yu. But also the heavy burden on her, spiritually and physically, at that very moment.

As one historian put it, "All history is the history of the present." People always view historical problems in terms of contemporary ideas. Artists interpret and choose historical events according to their own emotional needs and life experiences. It is through this creative work that they offer their viewers fresh feeling and pleasures.

## **A Peaceful Life Marked By Dance and Music**

In his work, *A Peaceful Life Marked by Dance and Music*, Tu provides us a happy and joyful image of Wang Zhaojun, as opposed to the tragic depiction of this figure by most poets and artists of different periods.

In 33 B.C. the Han Emperor betrothed Wang Zhaojun, a court lady, to the chieftain of the nomadic Huns in Northern China to promote friendship and peace between the two countries. It was a rather good thing, but frequently considered as shameful in the nationalistic eyes of some men of letters. Therefore, they emphasized the miserable and dreary life of Zhaojun far away from the Han Palace. Few people except Wang Anshi, a poet of the Song Dynasty, dared to say:

Zhaojun probably lived a much happier life in the tent of the nomadic Huns than in the vast imperial harem of Han. I don't imagine Tu has ever read the poem by Wang Anshi, but great minds think alike. In the depiction of a joyous scene of singing and dancing, Tu shows us the elegance and beauty of Zhaojun.

### **Dancing While Playing Pi-Pa**

When Zhiwei Tu went to Gan Su province in 1980 to make copies of the ancient wall paintings in Dun Huang Grottoes, he was deeply impressed by the wall painting of the Western Paradise of Amitabha in Cave #112. It was a brilliant product of the Tang Dynasty-the most glorious age in Chinese history, when the Indian culture was absorbed by the Chinese culture. With long preparation and frequent visits to museums. Zhiwei Tu at last completed his great historical painting, *Dancing While Playing Pi Pa*, bringing the heavenly scenery to the real world. Totally different from the Dun Huang wall painting the work breaks away from conventional religious art. It consists of more than one hundred figures with various characters, from which one can see the dancer's unique gesture of playing pi pa with her hands behind her head, and the female musicians playing all kind~ of ancient musical instruments.

### **Expansiveness and Harmony**

Ancient Chinese thinkers always related ceremonies with music because they thought that music could promote mutual understanding and friendship between people. In 1978, Tu went to Hubei province to see the newly unearthed "Group Musical Bells." He was astonished to find that the 65 pieces of bronze bells of 2,500 years in age were not only rich in sounds, but also advanced in the casting technique. It gave him the inspiration to create the huge painting, *Expansiveness and Harmony*, which took him 17 years of study and research. One can imagine the imposing sound of music produced by the combination of wind, string and percussion instruments. At the far right, one can see a panic figure standing with instrument in his hand that reminds us of the fabled Mr. Nan Guo.

(It is said that Nan Guo was unable to play music but passed himself off as one of the Yu – a type of wind instrument – players in an ensemble. Later, when Nan Guo hears that the new

emperor will ask players to perform solos, he runs away at once. This gives rise to the Chinese idiom, “Lan Yu Chong Shu,” or to pass oneself off as one of the players in an ensemble.)

Collected in this album are all realistic paintings. Apparently they are drawn in different styles and methods according to different subject matters and feelings that the artist want to express. Works like *Lunch and Neighbors* have already shown the artist’s ability in realistic drawing in his early days. They are not only rich in overall forcefulness (weight and volume), but also vivid in depicting the texture of various objects including the sun-burned skin and the glistening sweat. The use of plain color is in conformity with the poor, hard-working and unfortunate characters. It also shows the artist’s sense of humanity.

In the depiction of historical events, Tu places more emphasis on the changes of brush strokes as well as the visual effect of the striking contrast between bright and dark. The broad and heavy strokes and the vertical composition of *Seven-Step Poem* give it a solemn and heavy look, and the contrasting color makes Cao Zhi the focus of the work. Apart from this, *Dancing While Playing Pi Pa* and *Peaceful Life Marked by Dance and Music* are characteristic of romanticism. But the former highlights the dancer whose rapid movement is set off by the relatively motionless groups of people in the background; the latter, on the other hand, give prominence to Wang Zhaojun, whose image is in striking contrast to the joyous dancers around her. Both works are huge in size, and the artist renders the space and perspective with rich tones.

Bright and dark, warm and cold, rough and delicate, motion and motionless, hard and soft – by the use of such contrasts, Tu makes his work more significant and fascinating. This can be seen in *Expansiveness and Harmony*, where the bright part is set off by the dark, the glittering bells’ tones with the musicians in gorgeous silk costumes; the solid bells on the top are in contrast to figures at the bottom who are depicted in smooth and gentle lines.

### **Portraiture and Nudes**

Completely different from the historical paintings are a series of portraitures and nudes of young girls from Tibet and southern China. In order to give full play to the expression of color, Tu uses knives in addition to brushes to produce layer so as to keep the strength and purity of colors. He depicts the girls’ faces with vivid brush strokes while the clothes and background are painted in freehand. It is the strong sense of light, bright colors and leaping strokes that form a symphony in praise of youth and joyfulness.

When he went to Tibet in his early years to sketch from life, Tu was especially impressed by the vitality of the Tibetans. In recent year he has portrayed a series of Tibetans, giving prominence to their eyes by arranging the composition as a certain punctuation mark. What we feel from these decorative yet symbolic paintings, especially from those bright eyes, are the purity and the power of the primitive souls.

## **Bride**

From the work, *Bride*, for which the artist received a gold medal, one can see Tu's achievement in his technique and style. He combines superbly the beauty of delicate decoration and highly realistic depiction. The intricate ornament shimmering with cool silver light that forms a circle of green-gray color makes for a pleasing complement to the warmth of the bride's face. The lowered eyes and the hesitant, parted lips allow the viewers a glimpse at her mixed emotional state of mind – bashfulness, nervousness, and contained joy on the threshold of her new life as a married woman. The beauty of humanity, expressed by the depiction of deep and subtle psychology, has the power to attract and enthrall viewers today and for generations to come.

At the age of 45, Tu is in his prime of artistic creation. In his process of exploration we can expect him to produce many more good works.