

# Tu Zhiwei

*A Modern Master*

---

Abbreviated Biography  
excerpted from [Missoula Independent.com](http://MissoulaIndependent.com))

His story sounds almost too impossible to believe: born to peasant parents in a remote rural village of Guangdong Province, China, in 1951, Zhiwei got his start in oil painting when the Beijing government sent an “official” artist to his village to create a public portrait of Chairman Mao Zedong. Then a teenager, Zhiwei watched the artist work for an entire day, then asked to borrow samples of his paints and returned the next day to set up alongside the professional and prepare his own oil portrait of Mao.

As the story goes, the villagers were so impressed by Zhiwei’s finished work that they chose it over the government artist’s portrait for display.

“It’s a long time gone now, almost 40 years,” Zhiwei says in a recent phone interview from his current home in Chicago, Ill. “But they did choose it, and it was on the second floor of the school building in my village, facing outside, for many years.”

After achieving widespread recognition and acclaim in China, and studying at the Guangzhou Institute of Fine Arts, Zhiwei traveled to the United States in 1987 to study at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. He was named president of OPA in 2004 and still travels back to China every year for exhibits and to collect his preferred painting supplies; last year he visited when his hometown opened a museum in his honor.

“I like impressionists—the color, the light,” Zhiwei says of his painting style. As to content, he says, “I’m very interested in Chinese history and the old stuff, and [more recently] the American traditions. American Indians, pioneers and mountain men—the look on their face, their beards, they are stone shaped and so strong.”