

The Extraordinary Life of Zhiwei Tu:

From Peasant to Master Painter

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Very few artists can claim the honor of having an entire art museum named in their honor during their lifetime. How much more extraordinary it is that Tu Zhiwei (or Zhiwei Tu, as westerners would have it by placing the surname last) has risen to such heights after his extraordinarily humble beginnings. Mr. Tu's life story, as well as his artistic work, bears testament to true genius, personal courage, determination, hard work, and generosity of spirit.



Boyhood Life in a Farm Village

Mr. Tu was born in 1951 to peasant parents in a remote rural village in Liu-Li Township, Weng-Yuan County [also spelled Wengyuan]



Tu Zhiwei revisits his boyhood home village

County in northern Guang-Dong Province, China. Like other boys of the village, as a child Tu helped to work the land, barefoot most of the time, and performed the menial tasks expected of every peasant child. He spent his days herding sheep and gathering food. Thus, his early life was much the same as that of his ancestors.

When he began attending the local village school Tu was issued a slate, chalk, rough paper, and pencil for school work. With these crude instruments he early demonstrated an extraordinary talent for drawing which captivated the attention and wonder of his teachers. In the village of his youth, however,

drawing was an amusing pastime with no practical application or use, and so the young boy received little encouragement.

Prodigy

It was not until the equivalent of high school age that Zhiwei first saw oil paints being used to create brightly colored images. The way this discovery came about is truly a remarkable story.

The government in Beijing had dispatched an experienced artist to the village to create a

huge picture of Chairman Mao Tse-tung. Young Zhiwei happened by one afternoon and saw the painter at work. Fascinated, he watched for hours on end and finally asked the man if he could have samples of his paints. Zhiwei took them to the equivalent of the village pharmacy. There, he acquired cans of paint which he mixed at home into more than a dozen different shades.

The next day, instead of going to school Zhiwei returned to the site where the artist was still at work on the portrait. The boy boldly set up a work space next to the artist and began painting his own portrait of Mao. When both the artist and the boy were done, the village elders were shocked to discover that Zhiwei's portrait of Mao was far superior. They even selected it for public display instead of the artist's own painting.

Flowering of Genius

After this introduction to the wonders of oil painting, Zhiwei was overcome with a feverish drive to paint. He worked as if possessed, painting everything he saw or could imagine in his mind. Entirely self-taught, the young boy's keen eye and phenomenal ability to transfer what he saw and imagined into works of art stunned all who knew him. To their credit, his teacher and parents gave the boy latitude to continue expressing himself in this way.

Soon, word of the extraordinary young boy with the astonishing artistic gift spread well beyond the village. Museum directors, art professors, and government officials traveled from hundreds of miles away just to see the phenomenon with their own eyes. Among scores of important visitors was the director of the Wengyuan Cultural Center, who offered Zhiwei a full scholarship if he would agree to undertake formal studies there.

Zhiwei Tu entered the university in 1972 and earned a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts in 1975. Afterwards, he worked for a time at illustrating children's books for publishing houses while trying desperately to continue serious painting in what spare time he had. But he had to work in secret, under cover of darkness.

The Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and lasted about ten years, did not enhance Chinese culture, as its name would imply. Instead the opposite occurred. China's intellectuals were publicly harassed, forced to work in the fields, to clean toilets, and to stand endlessly in shame at public bus stops or march through the streets wearing "dunce" caps with placards hung around their necks proclaiming their "sins." Many were severely beaten. Everyone was required to study Mao's teachings and read only approved books about him. Students denounced their teachers, children denounced their families, neighbors denounced each other.

The only art that was tolerated involved subject matter that glorified the revolution. It was considered counter-revolutionary to address personal or inspirational themes in one's work. Any artist who wanted to express his individual talent through painting, sculpting, or other art forms

did so only at great risk to himself.

Once, while Tu was creating a painting to his own liking, someone suddenly pushed open the door to his room and saw it. A report was made at once. As his punishment, Tu was forced by Red Guards to tend cattle on a distant farm.

Because all graduate schools were closed as the Cultural Revolution reached its zenith, Tu's studies were interrupted. With time hanging heavily on his hands, he became a vagabond. For months he wandered through many distant parts of China and along the way learned a great deal about Chinese culture, history, and the contemporary customs of the many localities and ethnic groups throughout China. These experiences inspired him to create hundreds of paintings and sketches of the people of Tibet and other remote and nearly inaccessible areas. It was during these travels, too, that he was inspired to undertake the painting of a heroic-sized work depicting the monarchy of the ancient courts of China.

Achievement and Acclaim as an Artist

By 1978 the Cultural Revolution had ground to a halt. China's universities reopened their graduate programs. The prestigious Guangzhou Art Institute, one of the most heralded art centers in the world, held an art competition that year. Top prize for the best artists was the chance to enroll as a graduate student.



**Sculpture of Hu Yichuan
Guangzhou, China**

Mr. Tu won the competition and entered the Institute for further studies. Two years later he was awarded a Master's Degree in fine arts while perfecting his technique and, incidentally, meeting his future wife, Danny Hu. Ms. Hu was a violinist with the Guangzhou Institute Orchestra and is the daughter of Hu Yichuan, then director of the Institute and one of the foremost Chinese painters of the Twentieth Century.

At the Guangzhou Institute, Tu was able to study under such notable artists as Guo Shaogang, Xu Jianbai, Yin Guoliang, Wang Zhaomin, and, of course, Mr. Hu. Shortly after earning an M.F.A., Tu's work began to receive recognition in some of the highest circles of the Chinese art world. Two paintings, *Child* and *Thinking*, received widespread acclaim in 1980 at the Guangdong Art Competition. *Child* won First Prize and *Thinking* was published in *Art Gallery*, the international art book. Tu was invited to become a member of Guangdong Artists Association and of the Guangdong Oil Painters Association.

In 1981 he received an appointment as Professor of Fine Arts at Guangzhou Institute. One

of his great masterpieces, Seven-Step Poem, was featured on Guangdong television as one of the prize-winning works from the Sixth National Art Exhibition. He also participated in three national exhibitions and as a result was invited to become a member of the prestigious Chinese Artists Association.

In 1986 the Guangdong Artists Association held a famous serial show called "the Galaxy Exhibition." The first show was titled, "Tu's Recent Paintings," and it was a huge success. His renown as one of China's most promising painters was assured. One-man shows followed in such leading Asian cities as Hong Kong, Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Taipei, and Bangkok. His works also were exhibited in international shows in Canada, Algeria, and France.

Zhiwei Tu's paintings have been added to the permanent collections of many notable Chinese museums, including the National Museum in Beijing. His works have been shown throughout China and featured in Fine Art magazine of China, Painter of Fine Art of Hong Kong, Artist Magazine of Taiwan, and various art books and magazines in the U.S. Articles about Tu and his paintings appear regularly in many major art magazines including Art Gallery of Guangdong, and Art Gallery of Tianjing, Jiangsu Art Magazine, Guangdong Pictorial Magazine, and Zhejiang Pictorial Magazine, as well as on China's television news and in many newspapers.



Art books collecting his work, such as Tu's Oil Paintings, Weng Shan Han Mo, and Zhiwei Tu, were published in Taiwan, China and United States, respectively. Many articles about Tu and his art have been written by well-known art critics and fellow artists. The former vice president of Guangzhou Institute of Fine Arts, Yin Guoliang, has said of Mr. Tu:

"When you stand in front of Tu's work, you are in an atmosphere filled with enthusiasm and unadorned spirit. Like a fountain, his abundant inspiration flows from his brush to his canvas. He is capable of expressing great emotion in his paintings. His work is uniquely his own. He finds a special way which belongs only to himself. He flies freely with full wings in the blue sky of art. Tu's paintings are simple in character. No cleverness, fashionable tricks, or superficiality appear in his work. He has opened up a special feeling in art which belongs only to him."

"Modern Chinese painting tends to be very representational. People seem to expect that style from me," Tu says. "I enjoy realism, of course, but my favorite style is what might be classed as impressionism." Tu is equally adept with the brush or palette knife, although he confesses to a special fondness for the rich, thickly laid-on paint of the knife. As U.S. art broker Don Auto says:

"The amazing thing about Zhiwei Tu is that although he employs diverse styles, he has

mastered each equally. His big, heroic, realistic canvasses are full of action and drama but even the more photo-realistic or smaller pieces are memorable. It is more than a matter of superb technique. He pulls out the emotions of his subjects no matter what style is being used. His mastery of color and honesty of vision entrance the viewer. It is more than dramatic impact, however, because of the extreme detail which even a camera cannot capture. It is not until you get within a few inches of the canvas that the tiny brush strokes become visible."



**Portrait of Jules Kirchenbaum
by Tu Zhiwei**

Emigration

Seeking to broaden his education and further his career, Zhiwei was granted a sabbatical from the Guangzhou Institute to accept a full scholarship at Drake University, in America's heartland, in 1987. There, he studied under the internationally acclaimed American painter, Jules Kirschenbaum, while also taking a full schedule of English language courses.

Today, Mr. Tu still treasures a letter he received from Professor Kirchenbaum which concluded, "You are a remarkable artist and there is not much you do not know about art. When you can speak better English we will talk about art, the philosophy of art, and learn from each other."

At Drake, Mr. Tu discovered an urgent longing for his homeland which he expressed in a series of astonishingly beautiful paintings drawing on memories of his travels throughout China. He also began creating other works of a different nature, however, inspired by the people he was meeting and the places he was visiting in the United States. Once, on a trip to see Mount Rushmore, Mr. Tu visited a Sioux Indian reservation in South Dakota. He was surprised to find scenes of Native Americans strikingly similar to those of some parts of rural China.

"I know, of course, that Native Americans originally came from Asia, but I was surprised at their resemblance to the Chinese peasants," Tu says.

While at Drake University, Mr. Tu lived on the tight budget of a graduate student, so he frequently had to drive his paintings to exhibits in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Kansas City. He says now, "It wasn't the recommended way to see America, but now I know all the highways and streets from one gallery to another across the Midwest!"

Family

Dan Tu, self-portrait Mr. Tu's wife, Dani, and son Dan joined him in the United States in 1988. In 1990 the family relocated in the Chicago area. Mrs. Tu, who is the daughter of the late 20th century famed Chinese master painter and print-maker, Hu Yichuan, teaches violin and



Dan Tu, self-portrait

piano.

Son Dan graduated from the University of Illinois and is now employed in the computer industry on the West Coast. He is also a highly talented artist in his own right, as a snapshot the self-portrait (left) demonstrates.

Early Success in America

During this time word of his work began to spread quickly across America, just as it had in China. Tu was accepted into more than twenty gallery and museum shows throughout the Midwest and the East Coast. In 1989 he won the Best of Drake University's 18th Annual Art Competition. An article entitled, "Artist's Works Illustrate Western Influence" was published by the Sunday World Herald in Omaha, Nebraska. Mr. Tu also won the "Best In All Media" at the Iowa Salon XII Show 1990. In 1993 he won the Second Prize in the Oil Painters of America Show and "Best In Show" at the Oil Painters of America annual in 1994. He has since been awarded many other prizes and distinctions in painting competitions throughout the U.S. and Asia.

By the time he received an M.F.A. from Drake, his paintings were being exhibited in prestigious galleries in New York, Boston, Detroit, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, New Orleans, San Antonio, Dallas, Taos, N.M., and Carmel, California, as well as across the Midwest. It was during this same transitional period in his career that he won the coveted Gold Prize at the World Cultural Convention in Algiers for his painting Dream of Children. Three of his large paintings also were selected by the GHK Company for the first major exhibition in New York City of present-day Chinese oil paintings.

In 1992, he was given prominent mention in the "Dictionary of Modern Chinese Artists and Celebrities." By the turn of the century in 2001, Mr. Tu had had 30 one-man shows and more than 50 group shows extensively in the United States, Guangzhou, Beijing, Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo, Paris, Taipei, Algiers, and dozens of other world cities. The list grows longer each year.

International 'Arts Education Ambassador'

Mr. Tu is represented in many fine art galleries throughout the United States, China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. He also exhibits widely internationally in Europe. But as he has achieved success, increasingly Mr. Tu devotes personal time, effort, and financial resources to promoting Chinese artists in the United States, American artists in China, and especially the arts education of the young in both countries. He has hopes of eventually raising enough money to establish a permanent art school for young people and visiting artists' institute on the banks of the Yellow River in northern Guangdong Province.



In 2006, the city of Shaoguan in Guangdong Province, China, held a celebration to dedicate an entire art museum honoring the works of Tu Zhiwei. The entrance is located off an interior courtyard inside the impressive Shaoguan Cultural Center.

In June, 2007, Mr. Tu was further honored when Beijing's prestigious National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) sponsored a solo exhibition of his paintings.

Mr. Tu now maintains working art studios in a Chicago suburb and in his home province of Guangdong, China. He travels extensively between the U.S., Asia, and Europe, yet remains one of the most prolific oil painters known to modern times.

His fondest dream is to establish a permanent Art Institute in China for young people of various world cultures to learn and work together to fulfill their own artistic visions.