

Xu Beihong in Nanyang by Chen Jiazi

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This exhibition features 41 paintings by the distinguished Chinese painter Xu Beihong. Though the works span two decades –from 1929 to 1948, the majority were in fact produced within the three years between 1939-1941 during Xu's sojourn in the Nanyang region and India. Nanyang is a general term used by the Chinese to refer to the Malay Archipelago and Indonesia.

Xu Beihong grew up in an era with tremendous clashes between the old and the new, he managed to free himself from the bondage of tradition and merge with great success the fine points of Eastern and Western art to open up a new route for Chinese painting. The basic training in drawing he received in Paris and other European cities brought innovations to his work. Rice paper, Chinese writing brush, Chinese ink and traditional pigments were still the media, but oil painting techniques were adopted to give the works a unique character. Realism and physical likeness were of great concern; verve and vitality were of foremost importance. He ingeniously achieved both. With perfect precision, he controlled the pace and strength of his brush as well as the intensity of the ink and colours to work out lines with different expressions, washings with rich shades and gradations, or simply to leave voids wherever necessary.

Xu Beihong had a fondness for horses. Nearly a thousand drawings and studies survive as testaments to his good understanding of the animals' anatomy and his keen observation of its forms and postures. His horses are so vivid and spirited that they seem to be ready to jump out of the painting at any time. Han Gan of the Five Dynasties, Li Gonglin and Gong Kai of the Song, and Zhao Mengfu of the Yuan are also known for their horses. Han's horse has an air of aristocratic elegance while Li's

displays a mood of literati delicacy. Gong's horse is thin, bony and gloomy whereas Zhao's suggests leisure and ease. Xu's horses differ from them all by having new images, new sentiments, new meanings and new aesthetic interests. No matter what postures they are in – standing elegantly, galloping vigorously, neighing heartily, drinking or resting leisurely – they all look spirited, strong and full of vitality. Lines and washings of ink combine to form the images. They merge in such a way that it is not easy to identify individual strokes or blocks of ink. The artist's superb mastery of the ink and brush is well displayed. To depict manes and tails that go flying in the air, Xu would choose an oil brush made of weasel's hair, and thick and parched ink were used to create a unique sense of substance and quantity. While Xu was in Singapore, he often stayed in Jiangxiatang, the residence of Mr. Huang Manshi. He often spent the day composing poems and painting in the company of the Huang brothers: Huang Menggui and Huang Manshi. Apart from being connoisseurs of art, the Huang brothers had enthusiastically promoted the sale of Xu's works. Jiangxiatang was the place where thousands of magnificent horses on at least hundreds of paintings were created. The exact figure is unknown. Probably the artist himself had no idea of it. It is these horses that pushed Xu's artistry to its zenith and heralded the emergence of the innovative xieyi (arbitrary style) horses.

The majority of Xu Beihong's paintings are of animals. He developed an enthusiasm for animals in his early years through copying pictures of them printed on cigarette packs and painting from animal specimens in Japan. Flowers, birds and animals are popular themes in his paintings. From the exhibits, we can see vivid depiction of a vulture perching on a rocky outcrop, mynahs playing amid banana leaves, a pair of geese leaning closely to each other amid the reed by the side of the pond, a cat fascinated by fluttering butterflies and magpies singing on branches with red plum blossoms. Xu excelled in capturing the quintessence of the subjects he represented. A casual dot of ink below the frontal bone of the horse becomes a bright and piercing eye. In just a few strokes, the vulture's eyes are charged with anxiety. The fleeting expressions of the round-eyed leopard cat and single-eyed magpie are also successfully captured. White Plum Blossoms, one of Xu's finest flower paintings, was produced in 1940 for Huang Manshi. It depicts clusters of white plum blossoms blooming on the elegant branches of a thick old trunk to symbolise unyieldingness and uprightness. Some exhibits were jointly produced by Xu and other artists. An example

is Cat and Azalea. Zhang Shuqi painted the azalea in the spring of 1938 and ten months later in early 1939, Xu Beihong took the work to Singapore, added the cat and presented it to Huang Manshi as a gift. Magpie on the Cypress was painted by Xu and Chen Shuren in Nanjing for Huang Manshi. The small painting Loquat in 'boneless' style carries a humorous inscription: 'Next year I would purchase the lottery ticket. If I win the first prize I would use the money to buy loquats'.

Horse and Groom was painted in 1929 after Xu's return to China from France. The face of the groom and his bare limbs are delineated with powerful lines. Two paintings share the same title and theme of Zhong Kui and an imp. Emphasis has been put on the muscles of the demons. Xu's portraiture is diverse in style. During his stay in Nanyang, he painted many portraits for the Huang brothers and their families, Lim Bo Seng and his family, Ho Kwong Yew and his wife, Tan Kah Kee, the leaders of the overseas Chinese community, and many wealth merchants. The portrait of Sir Thomas Shenton, the British Governor adds an interesting anecdote to Singapore's art history. On 7th July 1939, the Governor came to Jiangxiatang, the residence of Huang Manshi at Lorong, to be painted by Xu Beihong. Xu did two small oil paintings for him. On 9th July, Sir Shenton went there for the second time. Xu painted his head directly on the canvas. Then he left his ceremonial attire, hat, decorations and sword to Xu and went away. Xu hung the dress up with a cloth hanger and continued with his portrait. The governor is shown standing solemnly in the centre of the picture with a classic British stone parapet to his left and an antique Chinese hongmu (literally, red wood) side-table with mother-of-pearl inlay to his right. The props, one of British style and the other of Chinese origin, appear simultaneously to suggest the typical cross-cultural situation of the Strait Settlement which Shenton was governing. Xu had given much thought to the set up but many people failed to perceive the implication.

The cream of Huang Manshi's collection is the group of Chinese folding fans with fine paintings done by renowned artists. Over a hundred fans are collected. The fan struts are of very fine quality. They are exquisitely carved and come in great varieties. Huang loved these works of art so much that whenever he went out he would carry a different fan for others to appreciate. He even named his studio Baishanzhai, or Hundred Fans Studio. At present all these fans are kept by Robert Kuok Hock Nien in remembrance of their original owner. On

display are ten folding fans with either painting or calligraphy done by Xu Beihong for Huang Manshi. Paired Cranes and Red Maple were painted in 1939 in celebration of Huang's fiftieth birthday. The fire-red maple leaves and the pair of flying cranes are meant to evoke blessings for him. Another fine example has on one side a pair of geese and on the other white peonies. The brushwork is superb.

In January 1939, Xu came to Nanyang from Hong Kong to hold solo exhibitions in Singapore, Malaysia and India in the hope of raising funds for the refugees in China. Upon his arrival in Singapore, Xu was warmly greeted by Huang Manshi, former Manager of the Singapore Branch of the Nanyang Tobacco Company and Xu's patron. He had subsidised Xu's study in Paris and helped him to struggle through those dark times. Support and assistance also came from many wealthy merchants, chambers of commerce, academic societies and individuals from many different sectors. His exhibition caused a great stir and was an unprecedented success. His fame and artistry attracted huge crowds to the exhibition. Visitors ranged from the governor to dignitaries and citizens, Chinese and Westerners, as well as students and people from the commercial and industrial sectors. 30,000 out of the 600,000 population in Singapore went to see the exhibition. After more than half a century, this exhibition is still remembered for the grandness of its scale, the overwhelming response of its visitors, the tremendous impact it produced and the huge funds it raised.

Six exhibitions were held during Xu's three-year sojourn in Singapore, Malaysia and India (once in Singapore, twice in India and thrice in Malaysia). At the end of 1939, Xu was invited by R. Tagore, the great Indian poet and Chairman of the Sino-Indian Cultural Association, to hold exhibitions and give talks in the International University and various places in India. He stayed in India for nearly a year and produced many paintings. From January to August 1941, Xu made trips again to Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh to hold exhibitions and sell his works. He travelled across the Malay Peninsula and made friends with many cultural and commercial elite. His original plan was to stay in India for no more than two to three months and then drop by Singapore before going home. However, the great success of the Singapore exhibition and the support he received here changed his mind and kept him in Nanyang for another three years during which he did a lot of painting. Many great works including Yu Gong Removing the Mountain, After a Poem of the Six Dynasties, A Hundred

Horses, Put Down Your Whip and Portrait of R. Tagore were produced within this period.

Singapore holds the largest collection of Xu Beihong's works outside China. Without those wealthy merchants, overseas Chinese, artists and art lovers who secretly hid Xu's works and his collections in safe spots such as dried up wells or burying them in private gardens during the Japanese occupation, such a large quantity of works would never have survived. Among them are works including Yu Gong Removing the Mountain and Portrait of R. Tagore now in the collection of Xu Beihong Museum in Beijing.

In the prime of Xu Beihong painting career, China was on the verge of chaos. Impelled by the love for his country and nation, Xu's artistic life reached its climax during his stay in the Nanyang region. The Nanyang people had contributed a lot to financing his studies, sponsoring his exhibitions, promoting his art and preserving his works. Singapore in essence became a haven to him. The forces of history brought Xu Beihong to Nanyang and wove the prime of his life into the history of the region.