

New Year 2019

Zhang Qing
Reflection #4
ink and color on paper
72 cm x 45 cm
2013

master strokes

the renaissance of
gongbi painting in China





Emperor Sung Hui-tsung (1082-1135)
Five-Colored Parakeet
section of a handscroll, ink and color on silk
53.3 x 125.1 cm
before 1126

China's most traditional and time-consuming ink technique, *gongbi* (工笔) painting combines fine black lines with multiple layers of both ink-shading and unmixed transparent and opaque colours.

Historically, the *gongbi* method was used to depict realistic bird, flower, and figure subjects, like Emperor Huizong of Song's masterful *Five-Colored Parakeet*.



In 1949, the incoming mainland government began developing a new visual culture to communicate and promote its political agenda.

The Party discarded centuries-old Chinese ink techniques, *xieyi* (spontaneous brush painting), and *gongbi* (fine line painting) in favour of Soviet-style Socialist Realism. Artists were urged to create work that imagined life in a socialist society.

Designer unknown (佚名)

Scatter the old world, build a new world

Dasui jiu shijie, chuanglei xin shijie (打碎旧世界创立新世界)

37 cm x 26 cm

1967



Lu Peng
Leaving the Garden of Dreams
ink and color on paper
132 cm x 103 cm
2008

After the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), China opened to the West and a deluge of information on contemporary western art, media, techniques and philosophies flooded into the country.

By the early 1990s, Western art galleries had entered China eager to deal in contemporary Chinese art. They preferred oil or acrylic on canvas painting, which had more commercial appeal in the West, and was more accessible to western art collectors who did not appreciate Chinese ink on paper painting.

In spite of western galleries' preference for oil and acrylic work, by the late '90s a new generation of young, traditionally trained ink artists emerged, revitalising the style and reviving the *gongbi* or fine line tradition.

The new *gongbi* artists successfully mixed *gongbi* ink techniques with their own to create new work that reflects personal concerns, as well as the changing society in which they live, making their work all the more surprising and compelling.



Jin Sha 金沙

Jin Sha grew interested in Renaissance art when he began studying at the Central Academy of Fine Art in 1988.

Parallels between the Renaissance and contemporary China attracted Jin. Both Europe of the Renaissance and today's China bear witness to revolutionary social change driven by explosive economic growth, the swift rise of the super rich, and subsequent emergence of a new culture built upon consumption, greed and corruption. Distinctive, groundbreaking art hallmarked both eras.

Jin Sha
Salute to the Masters: Conversation with Sandro Botticelli
ink and color on silk
73 cm x 60 cm
2013



Jin Sha
Salute to the Masters: Conversations with Piero della Francesca
 ink and color on silk
 47 cm x 33 cm
 2011

Renaissance masterpieces inspire Jin's series *Salute to the Masters* (2011–18), which offers a new take on celebrated Western art.

He imaginatively preserves the attire of his subjects, but eliminates their actual figures, leaving viewers to project contemporary figures in their place. Two of Jin's paintings are patterned after the well-known Northern Italian Renaissance diptych of the *Duchess and Duke of Urbino* (circa 1472) by Piero della Francesca (1415–92). Both portraits feature imposing profiles; the Duke was a mercenary commander turned patron of the arts.

Where Piero's original figures are whole, Jin removes their bodies altogether, meticulously depicting an empty red robe. An apple of temptation dangles before his Duchess, while Jin's Duke is shown with another enticement, a tobacco pipe. In both versions, the couple is juxtaposed against an extraordinary vista of the land they control. However, Jin transforms Piero's idyllic landscape into a vision of war, with mountains spewing pollution and submarines occupying the canal. Still, both Jin and Piero share a common concern: the pursuit of power and the greed of men.

Lu Peng 吕鹏

Lu Peng emerged on China's fledgling contemporary art scene in the mid 1990s with dynamic paintings that mirrored the restructuring of society and culture in response to westernisation and globalisation.

Born in 1967, Lu graduated with a BA degree in 1991 from Capital Normal University, followed by a PhD from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2003.

Using exquisite *gongbi* technique, Lu documents distinctive reflections of cultures as they overlap and collide.



Lu Peng
Rivers and Lakes
ink and color on paper
120 cm x 70 cm
2014



Lu Peng
Playing Chess
ink and color on paper
200 x 157 cm
2013

In *Playing Chess*, Lu is inspired by a Renaissance masterpiece, *The Entombment of Christ* (1603–04) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. His main subject is not Christ, but a bending nude woman, draped in a white veil reminiscent of that worn by Caravaggio's deceased Christ.

She is seen playing chess, encouraged by a figure who resembles the artist holding a paintbrush. The backdrop features a cast of attending figures, including China's God of War holding a light bulb radiating beams of insight, despite dark glasses inhibiting the vision of every Chinese character. An attentive long-life crane peers around the painter for a view of the scene, as attending figures applaud the young woman planning her next move in a difficult game against life in contemporary China.



Zhu Wei
Comrade Captain, No. 3
ink and color on paper
186 cm x 162 cm
1993

Zhu Wei 朱伟

The son of a People's Liberation Army (PLA) doctor, Zhu Wei was born in Beijing on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. His parents hoped that he would also enter the medical profession.

Zhu had other ideas, enlisting in the PLA at the age of sixteen. He then studied at the Art College of the PLA, where he excelled creating propaganda art and posters.

Graduating in 1989, Zhu then attended the China Painting Academy and the Beijing Film Academy, graduating in 1993. Despite his disparate academic art training, Zhu remains a diligent student of traditional Chinese art. He is acclaimed for developing his own variation of challenging traditional *gongbi* methods.



Zhu Wei
China China
ink and color on paper
186 cm x 162 cm
1997

The early 1990s was a particularly volatile time for artists in China. Like many of his colleagues, Zhu decided not to affiliate with official institutions or art academies.

While his contemporaries turned to oil or acrylic on canvas, Zhu chose to develop a signature *gongbi* painting style, employing both traditional and ingenious new techniques. Although initially appearing deceptively simple, even whimsical, many of Zhu's works are politically powerful portraits of PLA soldiers, Party cadres and ordinary citizens.

Most iconic is his celebrated *China China*, in which Deng Xiaoping is depicted with some irony. The inspiration is an idealised portrait of Mao Zedong, shown towering over the Yangtze River. The artist replaces him with Deng in a red Mao suit, created with multiple layers of red ink. Zhu is not charitable in his depiction: unlike the original of Mao, Zhu spares no detail in painting Deng's sagging and aging face, replete with moles, warts and wrinkles. Leaving Deng's eyes closed, the artist suggests he is blind to the consumer culture unleashed by economic opening.

Zhang Qing 张庆

Zhang Qing began his career designing cloisonné before beginning to study *gongbi* painting after matriculating at Capital Normal University in 1987. By the time he graduated in 1991, a number of Chinese artists had begun embracing Western art, media and techniques. Zhang chose instead to focus on reinterpreting classical, conservative Song and Ming dynasty bird and flower paintings.

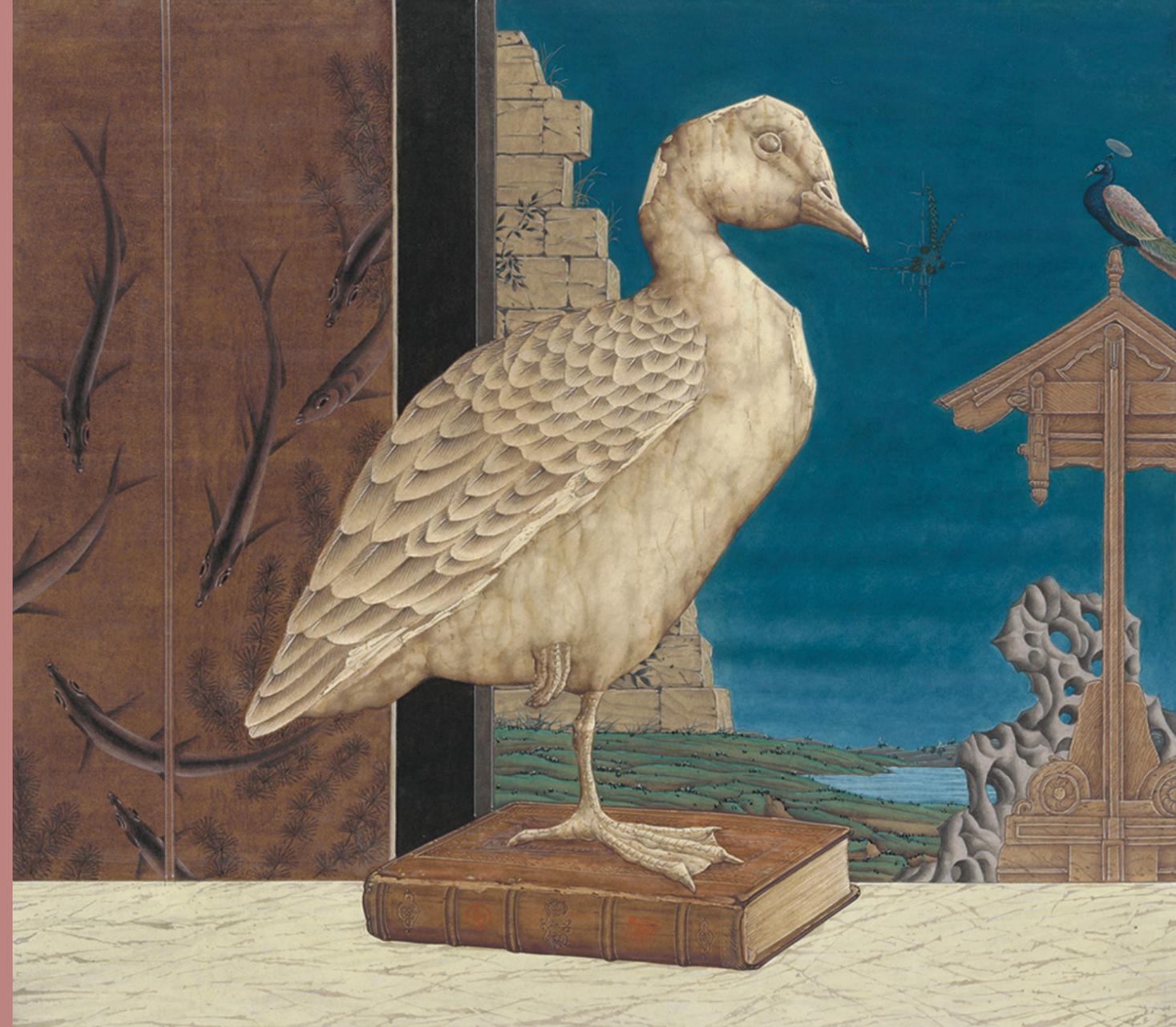
Fusing Eastern and Western concerns, Zhang responds to contemporary China with surreal and symbolic work. Fantasy birds, unlike any actual species in the natural world, serve as the focal point in each of Zhang's works. Depicted in static poses, his birds are illustrated soaring between shifting mountains and rivers, and revealed shuttling between ancient and modern times. In all of his work, Zhang employs a wide variety of *gongbi* techniques to showcase the life of his imaginary birds, and the exquisitely detailed feathers, mountains and vegetation that accompany them.



Zhang Qing
Similar
ink and color on paper
40 x 45 cm each
2014

A pair of paintings entitled '*Similar*' feature a single bird standing on an unnamed book, used to represent knowledge: philosophy, literature, religion, poetry and science.

Each bird in the pair of paintings is placed against a landscape scene, replete with flora, a crumbling wall, a Chinese pavilion and a Chinese doorway. Nodding to past *gongbi* masters, Zhang has illustrated a school of fish flanking the left side of each painting. One bird appears inquisitive, questioning, and active, depicted with a variety of finely detailed feathers and features, confident of its status in the world. The other is devoid of any individual details or decoration: it has become a mere fossilised version of its former self, reflecting the path not taken, adhering instead to the status quo and conventional expectations.



Zhang Qing
Similar
ink and color on paper
40 x 45 cm each
2014



Hang Chunhui
Prophet No. 2
ink and color on paper
83.5 cm x 78 cm
2013

Hang Chunhui 杭春暉

Born in Anhui in 1976, Hang Chunhui graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Art in 2005, and is currently completing a PhD in contemporary ink painting at the China National Academy of Art in Beijing.

Hang's oeuvre is extensive and varied. His series examining butterfly identification features traditional *gongbi* flower painting. However, Hang has also begun using *gongbi* techniques in non-representational art, influenced by minimalist artist Donald Judd.

Hang is most celebrated for his ability to create ink paintings bathed in a shimmering, almost impressionistic light.

This unconventional style is referred to as 'vacant scene' (*xujing* 虚景) ink painting. Hang skillfully explores this difficult technique in a series of works illustrating a succession of young men.



Hang's Prophet series portrays contemporary male figures dealing with present-day China, and relates their spiritual and actual worlds. The subject's psychological or spiritual dilemma is explored in individual portraits, bringing their inner conflict literally to light with an effect similar to overexposed photography.

Hang employs traditional *gongbi* techniques in shading and outlining these surreal private worlds, showcasing distinctive yet subdued dreamlike figures, all of whom seem apprehensive about life today.

In Prophet 1, a solitary man interacts with a bird against a grey void background. Light saturates the man's body and face, revealing a questioning demeanour as he looks askance at the bird. Both bird and man appear to forecast an uncertain future.

Hang Chunhui
Prophet No.1
ink and color on paper
124 cm x 75 cm
2014

Peng Wei 彭薇

Peng Wei's distinctive work fuses her reliance on classic *gongbi* themes, motifs and techniques with the use of nontraditional materials.

Born in 1974 in Chengdu, Sichuan, Peng graduated from Nankai University with a BA in 1997, and earned a Masters in Philosophy in Aesthetics in 2000.

Peng's work ranges from new interpretations of traditional landscapes painted on hanging scrolls and albums of small folding screens, to more unconventional works on their patterned silk mountings, book covers and containers. She has also created an installation of large panels featuring Lake Tai rocks, and has collaborated with Italian shoemaker Sergio Rossi to fashion ten tall papier mâché boots, which she painstakingly hand-painted with traditional Chinese art motifs.



Peng Wei
Album of Tang Dynasty
ink and color on paper
70 cm x 30 cm x 22 cm
2008

‘Good things come in pairs’, an old saying often borne out, is the title of Peng’s shoes series (2003–06). In the series, Peng uses the inner surfaces of white silk shoes as a private backdrop for her intimate study of relations between men and women.

At first glance, the paintings in this series seem to have been inspired by the famous 16th century novel *The Golden Lotus* (Jin Ping Mei), a shocking tale of explicit sexuality featuring the exploits of three concubines as objects of erotic love, desire and intrigue. The great Ming dynasty *gongbi* painter Qiu Ying used eroticism as a theme in his painting *Palatial Bedroom Pleasure*. But rather than focusing on explicit erotic art, Peng’s intimate *gongbi* bedroom and garden scenes are populated with classical characters grappling with the complex, eternal problems of romance and intimacy.



Peng Wei
Good Things Come in Pairs
ink and color on the interior of a pair of silk shoes
24 cm x 17 cm x 5 cm
2011



Lu Peng
Dinner Party
ink and color on paper
252 cm x 466 cm
2018

All sharing the *gongbi* brush tradition, none of these contemporary artists is limited by it. Indeed, each has developed a distinctive individual practice, embracing a breadth of innovative possibilities far outside the confines of traditional *gongbi* motifs.

master strokes
continues our
annual arts series

2018



2017



2016



Chinese popular music

2015



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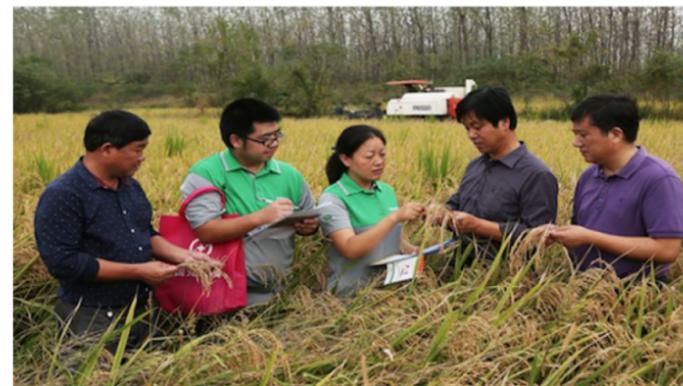
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