

How oils cross oceans

By ZHU LINYONG

The art of oil painting was introduced by missionaries to the Chinese court during Emperor Qianlong's era in the middle of the 18th century. The most famous was the Jesuit priest Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), known by his Chinese name of Lang Shining.

However, the art was not widely accepted until well into the 20th century when young Chinese started going abroad to study. Within the space of just 50 years, it had become the most prestigious among contemporary art forms, a status it enjoys to this day.

Oil painting became popular in the 1920s when an elite group of Chinese artists, educated in Europe, Japan and the United States, returned to China at about the same time.

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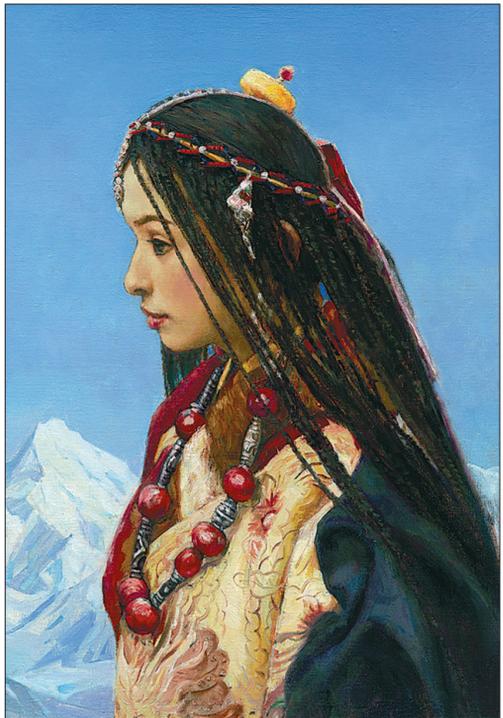
ZHANG ZUYING
OIL PAINTER

The exhibition is part of the Beijing Cultural Week running during the London 2012 Olympic Games, and is jointly organized by the Beijing Culture and Art Foundation and the Beijing Guozhijian Oil Painting Art Museum.

It will feature 100 selected oils by more than 60 veteran Chinese oil painters, who are witnesses and contributors to the development of Chinese oil painting since the early 20th century.

“The exhibition demonstrates the localization process of oil painting, which has become an important component of contemporary Chinese culture,” said Jin Shangyi, curator of the Guozhijian Oil Painting Art Museum and former dean of the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

Oil painter Zhang Zuying, who is a key organizer of the event, said: “We hope that, through these works, the Olympic audience from the United Kingdom and other countries can see the colorful visages of Chinese oil paintings and the unique Chinese cultural spirit.”



Above: *Tibetan Girl from Southern Garze*, by Yang Feiyun.

Below: *Drolma's World*, by Zhang Zuying.



Master and mentor

Editor's note: Beijing, host city of the Olympic Games in 2008, is launching a week-long culture event, from July 24 to 31, in London, to celebrate the United Kingdom's Olympic Games. More than 300 artists from China will present a variety of performing arts, such as Peking Opera, acrobatics, Western classical music, an oil painting exhibition and craftworks. In addition, there will be forums on culture development and heritage preservation. Reporters from China Daily interviewed the artists and culture officials behind the project.

He has taught generations of young Chinese oil painters, and his works are much appreciated in China. Now, an international audience in London will be able to see why Jin Shangyi has such a formidable reputation, **Zhu Linyong reports.**

Among the works to be exhibited in London during the Olympics, Jin Shangyi's oils will stand out. Many of his co-exhibitors will be, or have been, his students. He is widely considered one of the most successful and influential Chinese oil painters and art teachers of his time.

“As a student of Jin for years in the late 1970s, I gained a deep understanding of his art, which is hard to put into words,” said Yang Feiyun, president of the China Oil Painting Academy, who is also participating in the London show.

Yang believes Jin's artistic career in some way illustrates how oil painting, a Western art genre, took root in China and mainstream contemporary Chinese art.



Jin Shangyi

Many art historians agree that Jin's art mirrors the development of mainstream oil painting in China over the past 50 years.

“His paintings, particularly the oils, are visualizations of the many social ideals and cultural changes in modern China,” said Fan Di'an, a well-known art critic.

Jin said his success grew from a natural love of art. Born in 1934 to a primary school teacher in Jiaozuo, a small city in Henan province, Jin showed an early affinity and talent. He often made vivid drawings of figures from classical Chinese literature.

In 1947, he moved to Beijing where he entered a private school and received basic training in drawing. Two years later, at 15, he enrolled in the famed Beijing National Art School, the forerunner of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts.

“I did not expect to spend all my life as an art student, oil teacher, painter and educator,” Jin said in a biography published in 2000.

He studied under Xu Beihong (1895-1953), head of the art school, and in 1950, sought an apprenticeship with Chinese masters Dong Xiwen (1914-73) and Wu Zuoren (1909-89).

At 20, Jin became a student of former Soviet Union painter Konstantin Maksimov (1913-93) who introduced the Socialist Realist school of oil painting to China and whose influence affected the style of Chinese oil art for decades.

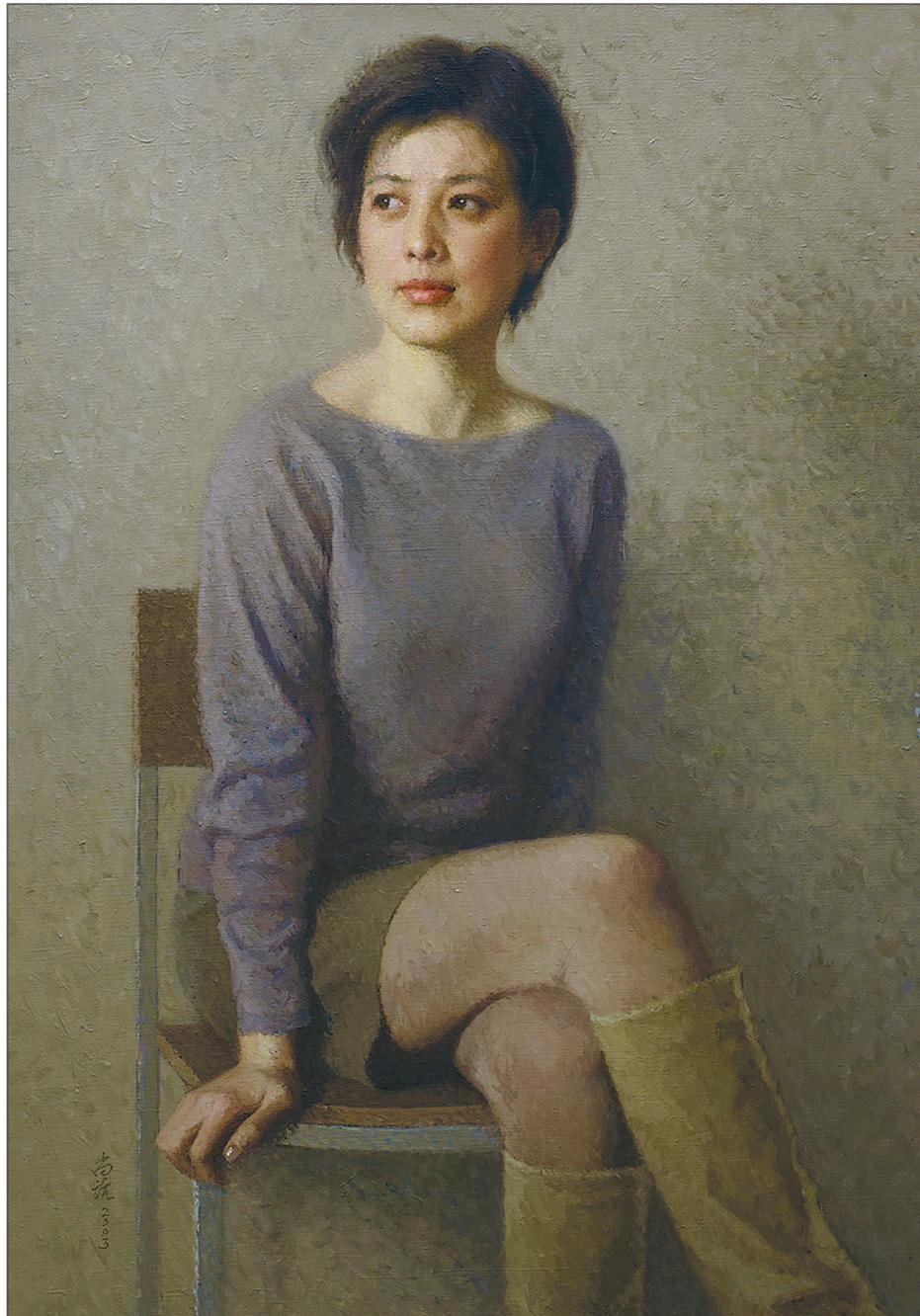
In 1957, Jin graduated from the academy with honors and became one of its teachers.

He served as the academy's president between 1987 and 2001 and has held the chair at the Chinese Artists Association and the vice-chairmanship of the All China Federation of the Literary and Art Circles since 1996.

His desire to explore new avenues led to a period in the 1980s when he traveled abroad extensively and carefully studied the works of many Western oil masters.

“Unlike many of his contemporaries, Jin has for decades focused on exploiting the potential of classical, realistic oil portrait paintings instead of trying his hand at different genres,” said Professor Zhan Jianjun, a famous oil artist, who's one of Jin's old schoolmates and close friend.

“That helps him gain a much deeper understanding of



Jin Shangyi's oil painting *A Friend's Portrait* will be exhibited in London.

the language of oil paintings.”

In the 1950s and 1960s, Revolutionary Realism was in vogue and painting then covered such themes as war, revolution and Chinese enthusiasm for building a socialist nation.

Many of Jin's oil paintings in the late 1950s touched upon these themes. But Zhan noted that Jin found his own way to more vividly reflect the grand social reality in his portraits.

“After that, he directed his art to a more reserved, subtle and elegant style,” Zhan said.

In the 1980s, as China adopted a more open economy, Chinese artists were suddenly exposed to a wide range of Western art genres. “Many people were stunned by the brisk development of Western art over the years,” Zhan explained.

“Some lost confidence in traditional Chinese art. Some embraced trendy Western art forms wholeheartedly. But Jin remained cool-headed. He made his own choice when exploring the roots of Western oil painting.”

At that time, Jin began to focus more on human nature and individual lives in his paintings, much like one of his best known paintings, *Tajik Bride* (1983).

“Jin always manages to bring to life the inner worlds of the people he portrays. Wrought with seemingly simple skills, Jin's oil paintings give the viewers a lingering, poetic flavor,” Zhan said.

Jin once wrote in an essay: “The mission of the artist is to highlight and present to the viewer the beauty of

human life and human nature. A piece of good art can evoke the viewer's sweet memory of the past and also give him or her a strong faith in a brighter future.

“I believe an artist's paintings must be the visual expressions of his own emotions. In doing so, his or her work can be moving and unforgettable.”

As an educator, Jin not only tolerates but also encourages his students to get exposed to all forms of art.

“The fact that students who studied under his guidance also learned from other teachers at the academy and took widely different artistic approaches never displeases Jin,” said Yang Feiyun, recalling his student years with the master.

Jin once said: “Since the 1980s, Chinese art has been exposed to Western art on an unprecedented scale. Today, Chinese artists have experimented with almost every kind of modern Western art.”

Also, the artistic language of oil painting has become more implicit, lyrical and poetic under the brush of Chinese artists, Jin observes.

This is the result of artists' efforts to incorporate elements of traditional Chinese mural painting, folk art, calligraphy and ink painting into their oils. Jin applauds such trends because he feels that these have actually gotten closer to the Chinese aesthetic tastes.

Many of Jin's outstanding works have been collected by museums at home and abroad, and his works are part of the curriculums of Chinese art schools.

BEIJING CULTURE WEEK

PHOTOS FOR CHINA DAILY

The Beijing Song and Dance Company will open the Beijing Culture Week in London with the show *Dreamy Forbidden City*.

