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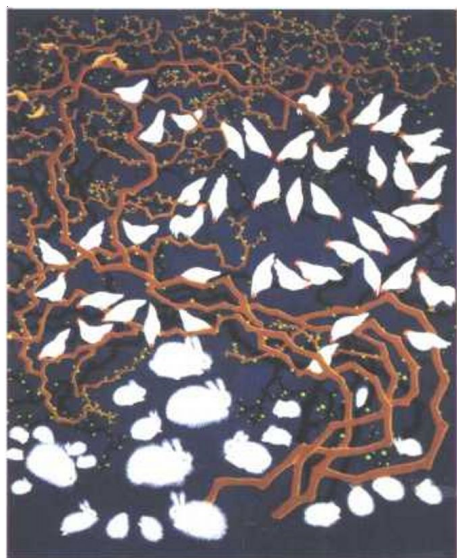
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Foreword

*Jiao Yongfu**

The two hundred and more paintings in this album were chosen from about ten thousand folk paintings done in recent years in various parts of China, so it is no exaggeration on my part to claim that they are the best. The aim in compiling them into an album is to give the art collector, connoisseur and general reader an opportunity to peruse the work of peasants, herdsmen, fishermen and housewives, familiar as they may be with the orthodox Chinese tradition, oils and graphic art; to take them into the mountains and the wilderness, to a world with a totally different charm and attraction from that of the secluded Palace of Art. It has also given us as compilers an opportunity to look back over the folk painting of recent years and to broaden our horizons.

In recent years folk painting has come very much into the foreground of cultural activities in China. One spring at the end of last century fifty-one counties notable for their output in the field were designated "Homes of Painting"

by China Social Culture Bureau of the Ministry of Culture. Since then dozens of others have applied for the title on the ground of distinguished achievements, and investigation has shown each, whether or not the title has actually been conferred, to boast anything from a dozen to a hundred painters working in forms varying from ethnic folk painting to traditional Chinese painting, oils, graphic art and cartoon. This album includes paintings from sixty-six counties and towns, mostly those designated "Homes of Painting." The work offers a general picture of recent folk painting in China.

One may be forgiven for wondering whether the sudden boom in folk painting in China is financially motivated, but it is not. Although several exhibitions of Chinese folk painting have been held at home and abroad in recent years and some pieces have fetched large sums from connoisseurs, this amounts only to acknowledgement of the artistic value of the paintings rather than any avarice in the painters. In a nutshell, the prosperity of folk painting in China simply reflects government concern for the happiness of the people.

* Jiao Yongfu is chairman of the Chinese Folk Art Association.

resulting in a more affluent peasantry seeking beauty and artistic satisfaction.

In the 20-some years since the end of the 1970s, when reform and an open policy have been followed in China, a socialist commodity economy has developed and the people's livelihood greatly improved. At the same time the spiritual vista of the broad masses of peasants, herdsmen and others has undergone tremendous expansion and uplift. They are no longer passive listeners to songs and viewers of paintings by others. They want to participate in creative life themselves. They sing before audiences and take up painting brushes in search of the value of life and to demonstrate their talents. I dare say that when readers skim through this album of paintings in a variety of styles they will be forcibly struck by the rich imagination and varied expression of these peasants, herdsmen, fishermen and housewives.

Some may ask how such unsophisticated people, who have never so much as set foot in an art academy, come to paint so well. It is because they are close to production.

They till the land, ride the vast plains, sail the rivers, lakes and seas and are intimately involved with nature, so that they have at their fingertips the rich material of productive activity, and this frees them from conformity. They paint their feelings or whatever they care to paint, freely, constrained solely by the need for fulfilment and tempted no further. This does not mean that they paint merely for their own enjoyment. On the contrary, they seek to reach out for sympathy. It seems that recently professional artists are increasingly interested in imitating and studying folk painting and that market traders are paying attention to its monetary value. Although this shows that this folk art form has acquired status in the eyes of professionals and laymen, it also causes unease that it may become mercenary and crude. Thus it was with mixed feelings of pleasure and anxiety that I urged the compilation and publication of this album and write this foreword, in the sincere hope that a book of the best in the field will not only draw attention to Chinese folk painting but also contribute to the preservation of its good name.

On Modern Folk Painting

*Cao Zhenfeng**

In an article I wrote I renamed what had been called "peasant painting" "modern folk painting" on the grounds of the trend of development and the new elements in peasant painting as well as the changes in the ranks of the painters.

Modern folk painting is at once ancient and young. It is ancient because its mother body has an ancient history, one longer than any genre of painting; it is young because this particular genre of painting emerged less than thirty years ago. Although it embodies an ancient folk art form, it is totally free of staleness, has a vigorous artistic impact which is at once strong, sincere and bold. Its exaggerated modelling, distortion and surrealist treatment do not distort life but on the contrary give a feeling of truthfulness and closeness. Though colourful, it is simple and devoid of ostentatious pretension. Although its local flavour emits a light fragrance of mountain flowers in contrast to urban bustle and noise, it nevertheless conforms to the rhythm of modern life and meets the requirements of a new cultural level. It possesses the fervour, simplicity and straightforward qualities of the labouring people. Rather than ostentation and obfuscation, we see here the simple purity of childhood.

As one of the origins of art, folk painting is by no means

* Cao Zhengfeng is vice-chairman of the Chinese Folk Art Association and vice-curator of the National Art Gallery.

an exotic on the artistic scene, and it is natural that in the last two decades it has blossomed anew in more and more provinces of China.

It flourishes in the Liao and the Songhua valley in the northeast; on the Shaanxi-Gansu and Qinghai-Tibet plateaus and around the gobi in the northwest; beside the Yellow and the East and South China Seas; on the Zhongzhou Plain, the Jiangnan Plain and the Xiang valley in Central China; and on the Yunnan-Guizhou uplands of the southwest. Beside Han painters are those of the ethnic minorities like the Manchus, Huis, Tibetans, Koreans, Yis, Yaos, Uygurs, Miaos, Tujias, Bais, Hanis and Bouyeis. And the varied regions and ethnic groups from which the painters come account for the regional and national diversity of folk painting. Already in the 1970s the peasant painting of Huxian County in Shaanxi Province was known for its vigour, simplicity and typical Central Shaanxi flavour. Later the peasants of Ansai, Luochuan and Yijun were distinguished for their rich folk-art tradition and bold, mystic, strong and intrepid impact. The folk painting of Jinshan in greater Shanghai is characterized by scenes of fresh, tranquil Yangtze villages.



A training station in Sujiatun, Shenyang

The decorative Weifang new-year poster infuses painting of Linqu and Rizhao in Shandong. The style of Wuyang in Henan is straightforward, while that of Hami and other parts of Xinjiang depicts Islamic customs and habits. Liaoning and Jilin strive for a realistic depiction of the villages and snowy forests of the northeast. The style of Huanggang in Hubei and of Longhui in Hunan recall the culture of the ancient state of Chu. The style of the Miaos in Guizhou evokes their mystic past. Paintings from just north of Tianjin are either highly exaggerative or strongly rural. Longmen in Guangdong shows us the southern land, while the fishermen of the Zhoushan Islands in the East China Sea are as capricious as the raging surf.

The themes of modern folk painting are basically the customs, habits and legends and work of the various ethnic groups of China, with changes emerging as new aesthetic standards influence tradition. Although artistic styles differ from place to place, they are all intensely local and reflect the feelings of the labouring people. Where other artists may follow the modern Western vogue, departing further and further from everyday life, modern folk art sticks close to the land. Quality aside, modern folk painting has always followed its own path in creative awareness. Its history, though short, has been tortuous. It was in the autumn of 1958 that the first peasant painting from Pixian in Jiangsu which appeared in a Beijing art exhibition received favourable press reviews. In their enthusiasm for national and local construction the peasants had with clumsy elegance

sketched *The Monkey King Comes to the Fiery Mountain* and *Maize as High as the Sky*. They believed in the miraculous, that maize could block air routes and backyard furnaces form new Fiery Mountains. Shulu in Hubei and Huxian in Shaanxi made their names at about the same time. The spontaneous expression of the peasants' feelings in paint was understandable, but painting itself had been artificially boosted and led astray when everyone was called on to paint and urged to cover every wall with painting and poetry. The wishful thinking in output never came true. When economic boasting abated peasant painting and poetry plunged to a low ebb, except in Huxian, where peasants persisted in using murals to encourage rural work. Thus hundreds of peasant painters were trained, and a new style emerged.

Peasant painting needed improvement and development. It needed to have its own language and form. These had long been problems. Well-meaning artists had tried to train

peasants in Western art teaching methods in order to lead them on to a "scientific" path. The results were not satisfactory. In some places peasants were coached in

An art centre in Zhejiang organizes a meeting for painters to exchange experiences





Wen Zhongli, a peasant painter in Liaoning

techniques used in the literary circles. This was a dead end, since the peasant aesthetics were different from those of the literati. Only in the late 1970s, bewildered by his many failures in coaching peasants,

did Jinshan painter Wu Tongzhang discover that the countryside had its own store of folk art resources. Many village women were skilled embroiderers and papercutters. During the slack season they embroidered hats and clothes for their children. Others modelled for their own needs. He urged them to paint freely, using colours as they would thread. Their hands, more accustomed to the pick and the hoe and to needle and thread, were at a loss with the brush and the palette, but after a short period of practice and patient coaching, real peasant painting blossomed, and the energy of folk art, pent up for thousands of years, was finally released. The Jinshan exhibition in the capital astonished the art world.

The changed face of peasant painting dispelled the biased belief in its inferiority. More importantly Wu Tongzhang had discovered the hidden treasure of folk art and blazed the trail to modern folk painting. Painters in other parts of China copied and improved on Jinshan, which was uniquely

necessary if modern folk painting was to emerge and prosper. The ranks of modern folk painters have swelled to include herdsmen, fishermen and students as well as peasants proper, and it would be unscientific to define the painting by the painters' occupations, to remain calling it peasant painting, though this is a minor issue. What is notable is that although modern folk painting has developed from traditional national folk art, it is not a growth from the original plant but a genetic manipulation of many kinds of art, the result of meticulous cultivation. Retaining the characteristics and qualities of the mother body, it is yet different, an unprecedented flower of art cultivated by artists with modern training working at grass-root level, excavators and conservationists of traditional folk art discovering and acknowledging on a new cultural level the academic values and artistic rules of a folk art overlooked for thousands of years. They make accessible an art handed down through generations, cull the methods of papercuts, embroidery, batik and painting and refine them. This assistance and cultivation are extremely significant. Although peasants are the creators and heirs of folk art, the limitations of their cultural background have restricted them in absorbing new aesthetics and formulating laws. Even after historic changes in their lot they fail to conform with the aesthetic trend. Folk art is mostly for self entertainment devoid of commerciality. It needs transformation to enter the cultural market. Folk art is extremely fragile, having been looked down upon for thousands of years. People are prone to give up the tradition

under the assault of a new cultural environment and with the transformation in economic and living standards. We must never forget the selfless dedication of field workers who have enabled this neglected national treasure of art to blossom in a new form and unknown labouring artists to achieve recognition.

Of course some coaches are less successful, and some centres do not progress as rapidly. Correct method and adequate attention to the tradition are needed for success. The coaches need to give peasant, fisherman and herdsman painters confidence in their artistic talent and inspire them to improve their powers of expression and to master technique. The coaches must never run the whole show themselves.

Strictly speaking, peasant painting did not originate in Pixian, Jiangsu. Finding out its distant history is difficult. More recently peasants in northern Shaanxi have a tradition of auspicious new-year posters to decorate their cave dwellings, hand-

painted new-year posters are found at Spring Festival markets in Hebei and Shandong, and peasants in Fujian and Jiangxi like to paint on their whitewashed walls. During the war

A studio in the Jinshan Peasant Painting Society



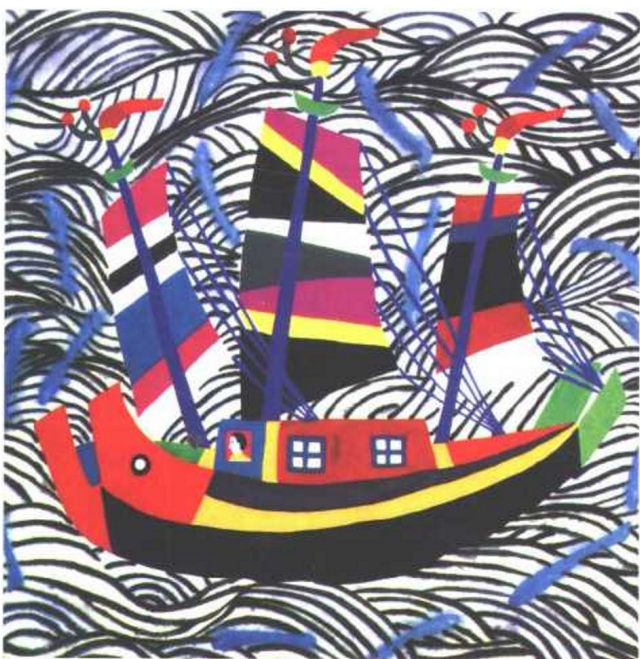
years soldiers of peasant origin painted the lives of their comrades-in-arms between battles. Much of this work appeared in newspapers, magazines and company bulletins, as is proved by the amount still extant. It was all done in a national style with the simplicity of folk art; it was merely not regarded as a genre at the time.

Nevertheless, the peasant painting of the past is not on a par with modern folk painting, the most important distinction being that modern folk painting has organically absorbed the essential folk language of embroidery, batik and papercuts as used on clothing and during festivals. The modelling and designs of peasant painting are not solely aesthetic decorations but symbolic wishes for luck, good marriage and sons, respect for ancestors and religion and charms against evil. Recreated by many, these became highly refined in expression but never an artistic language to be appreciated. This is what modern folk painting has begun to do. Rather than a reproduction of embroidery, papercut and batik, it is a new art form and a new channel of folk expression, showing that the artistic tradition of the people has great vitality, not simply in this art form, but as the mother body and origin capable of generating a newer and more artistic flowering of the modern national spirit. It also proves that the labouring people who create material culture, have phenomenal ability to create mental culture too.

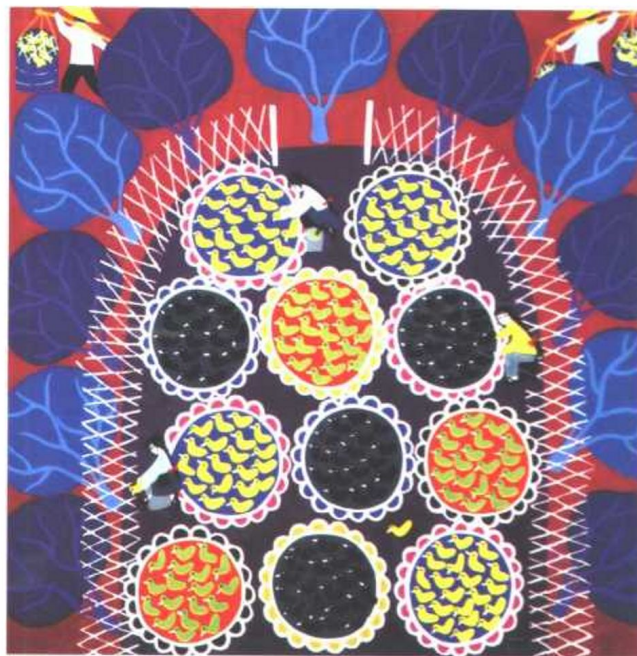
We can foresee a bright, peaceful spring for folk art. The industrious hands of the people are turning a brilliant page in folk art.

In 1977, painter-coached village women in Jinshan of Shanghai excelling in embroidery substituted paper for cloth, paint brush for needling, pigment for silk thread and painted whatever they fancied in their own composition. Since then, modern folk painting has flourished in Jinshan.

Sailing Boat 62 × 55 cm Shao Qihua from Jinshan



Raising Chicks 57 × 57 cm Zhu Suzhen (female) from Jinshan





Spring 67 × 65 cm Cao Xiuwen (female) from Jinshan