

古元木刻選集

SELECTED WORKS OF GU YUAN'S
WOODCUTS



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蔡若題

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吃的是
青草
挤出的是
奶汁



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古元的木刻艺术

张作明

古元是一位在国内外素有盛誉的著名版画艺术大师，被公认为中国新兴木刻，尤其是解放区木刻的优秀代表，中国人民美术事业中出类拔萃的天才。

在近半个世纪的创作生涯中，古元与人民息息相通，一贯坚持用自己的艺术反映人民的心愿，创作出许多优秀的作品，奉献给伟大的祖国和亿万质朴的劳动人民。古元的艺术属于人民。著名诗人艾青指出：“古元同志是和新中国一同成长的画家，他是新中国杰出的歌手之一。”

古元从事木刻创作的艺术历程，大致可以划分为三个时期。

第一个时期：延安时期(1939—1945)

1919年8月5日，古元出生于广东省中山县农村一个小康之家。他孩提时代曾饱尝田园生活的乐趣，上中学后酷爱上美术，十分崇敬法国十九世纪“农民画家”米勒。米勒描绘农民生活的作品，对古元日后的创作有着深远的影响。

三十年代后期，全民族的抗日战争牵动每一个炎黄子孙的心，召唤有血性的中国青年加入抗日救国的洪流。1938年，十九岁的古元，告别南海之滨的故乡和亲人，长途跋涉，奔向举世瞩目的红色抗日根据地——延安。在陕北公学分校接受短期训练，初步树立革命世界观以后，于1939年初进入延安鲁迅艺术学院(1940年改为鲁迅艺术文学院，简称“鲁艺”)美术系学习。1940年6月到“大鲁艺”——社会实践中去，参加农村基层工作，体验生活。在距延安城九十里的延安县川口区碾庄乡，古元担任乡政府文书。他在那个只有四十二户的小村里，与农民、干部朝夕相处，逐渐熟悉了中国社会的一个细胞——陕北农村，熟悉了那里的人们革命前后生活状况和心理变化的特征。当地的风土人情、农民群众对生活的态度和审美趣味，以及他们每个人的性格脾气、音容笑貌，他都了若指掌。古元由衷地敬佩劳动人民勤劳、智慧、淳朴、憨厚的品德，从他们身上发现了独特的美，从而激发起要用版画表现他们的强烈欲望。

因为古元对农民有了深厚的感情，在他眼里，农民的一举一动，一头牛一只羊，就都有了表情，成为优美的图画。他最初刻的《挑水》、《运草》和《羊群》等抒情小品，就像涓涓小溪从清泉中流淌出来，饱含着他对农村生活朴素、淳真、深情的爱。后来，随着观察、体验和思考的深入，古元进一步发现在平凡生活中包含着不平凡的意义。看到农民把收获的谷子倒进仓里，他想到：过去打下谷子要交到地主老财的仓里去，现在不同了，是倒入自家的粮仓了。从一个背影，他窥见了农民内心的喜悦，于是刻了《入仓》。古元在乡政府工作，常常接触区政府干部。他见区政府办公室只是普普通通的一孔窑洞，几只木头桌凳，区干部都是庄户人。区长在听一个妇女反映情况，干部们有的在看账本；有的在写材料；有的在给外出的人开路条……这确实是人民自己的政府，干部是人民选举出来，为人民办事的公仆，与地主官僚衙门有天壤之别。于是，他刻了《区政府办公室》。当他看到青年男女不再俯首贴耳，听从父母之命，媒妁之言，终身大事要由自己做主、自由恋爱，到政府来办理结婚登记；或者不甘心“嫁鸡随鸡，嫁狗随狗”任凭丈夫和公婆虐待的妇女，挺起腰杆来政府申请离婚时，他切实感到了革命给陕北农村带来的深刻变化，于是创作了《结婚登记》和《离婚诉》。

延安是党中央所在地，处于相对安定的环境之中。古元正当青春年华，思想敏锐，精力充沛，确立了共产主义思想信仰和革命世界观、艺术观，创作热情十分高涨，作品就像春雨滋润的庄稼一样，日新月异，迅速达到革命美术前所未有的一个高峰。其优秀作品不胜枚举，最富代表性的当推《哥哥的假期》和《减租会》。

《哥哥的假期》描绘一个八路军战士休假回到家乡，乡亲们都来看他。他兴奋地讲述部队的战斗生活，宣传共产党八路军的政策。乡亲们被他的话所吸引，边听边连连赞叹。小姑娘抓着战士的胳膊，一笔一划地认臂章上的“八路”二字；学步的小弟弟，戴上大哥哥的战斗帽，挎上背包和水壶，扎起宽大的武装带，学“八路”的样子给老人敬礼，好像真是一个“八路”。那雄纠纠的模样中透着稚气，画面充满家庭欢乐的气氛。通过这些生动的艺术形象，揭示了八路军是人民子弟兵，“军队和老百姓，咱们是一家人”的本质。

著名画家、美术教育家徐悲鸿先生于1942年10月在重庆参观全国木刻展时，对古元的《运草》和《哥哥的假期》给予了极高的评价，并在报纸上撰文向社会推荐。他写道：

“我在中华民国三十一年十月十五日下午三时，发现中国艺术界中一卓绝之天才，乃中国共产党中之大艺术家古元。我自认不是一思想有了狭隘问题之国家主义者，我惟对于还没有二十年历史的中国新版画界已诞生一巨星，不禁深自庆贺。古元乃他日国际比赛中之一位选手，而他必将为中国取得光荣的。……”

诚如徐悲鸿先生所预言的，古元日后为中国取得了越来越大的光荣。

中国是个农村人口占百分之八十以上的农业国。解决好土地问题是中国革命的一个关键。抗日战争时期，为了广泛团结一切可以团结的力量，组成抗日民族统一战线，中国共产党提出对地主富农实行减租减息的政策。

木刻《减租会》描绘世代受剥削最深重的贫雇农，用算细账、讲道理的方法，与地主老财展开减租斗争的情景。狡猾的地主被问得张口结舌，在太师椅上坐不住了，立起来战兢兢地，编造出“天地良心”等等一派胡言，赌咒发誓，妄图蒙混过关。那个肚里装满苦水的老汉，气得说不出话来；几千年来，在政治上经济上毫无地位的妇女，如今也登上了政治舞台；中农既关心这场斗争，又胆小怕事，不敢出头露面，只躲在个角落里观望。贫雇农正在向他揭露地主的罪恶，启发他觉悟。这幅画的构图、人物形象刻划、黑白和刀法处理，无一不精，堪称典范。以构图来说，《哥哥的假期》活泼；而《减租会》严肃，如两军对峙，地主处于孤立被包围之中。两幅画刻划人物尤为成功。画中众多人物，虽然只有蚕豆大小，笔墨简约，然而每个人物的阶级性与个性，包括相貌、性格、表情、动态、服饰以及道具等等细节，都刻得极其鲜明、生动，具有高度艺术概括力和典型性。使读者如闻其声，如见其人，从中受到感染与启迪。

在这方面，可称为《减租会》续篇的《逃亡地主归来》，也是一幅杰作。当时有的地主，由于不了解、不相信共产党的政策或听信反动宣传，因为害怕革命而逃亡在外。后来，经过事实的教育，他们认识了党的政策，又返回家乡。画上那个牵马的长工，受地主欺蒙盘剥了一辈子，变成了驼背，形象上烙着当牛做马的印记，深刻揭示了地主阶级极端残暴的本质。骑在马上地主老爷、太太、少奶奶和手脚麻木下地走走的地主少爷，这一家人的相貌、神态和穿戴，从上到下，由表及里，都十分典型。靠压榨劳动人民的血汗养肥自己的人，却偏偏要在胸前挂个十字架，一副伪君子相！一贯饱食终日，此刻却惶惶不安，少爷太阳穴上贴着块大膏药，也治不了使他头痛的心病。牲口驮着箱子，不用说里边装满了金银细软……，这一切真实可信，刻划得入木三分。

古元的早期木刻，艺术形式上受西方木刻的影响，特别是为鲁迅先生所推崇的德国女版画大师凯绥·珂勒惠支作品的影响，着力表现体积与明暗，画面上笼罩着较为浓重的阴影。老乡们看了不习惯，“解不下”，把人物脸部的阴影说成是“阴阳脸”，看到刻人脸用的排线，说是“长毛毛”。古元非常重视这些善意的批评，认真改进自己的作品。尤其在1942年参加延安文艺座谈会，明确了革命化、民族化、群众化的目标之后，他从研究、借鉴陕北剪纸等民间美术入手，进一步探索为群众喜闻乐见的表现形式。1943年春天，他特地去三边走门串户，欣赏和收集剪纸。回到延安后创作了二十四幅新窗花。舍弃自己已经熟练掌握，并创造了为社会广泛承认的优异成绩那样一套表现形式，重起炉灶，这需要很大的决心与胆识，古元毫不犹豫地这样做了。为的是使自己的作品能让劳动群众一

—历史的创造者，艺术评判的最高权威喜欢并满意地接受。从此，他摆脱了西方木刻的影响，创造出以阳刻为主，简洁、洗练、明朗、清新，具有鲜明民族特色与地方特点的独特风格。这种新的艺术风格一出现，立即带动了延安和全解放区木刻界，并在全国木刻界引起强烈反响。在中国新兴版画历史上，是开一代新风，具有划时代意义和重大而深远影响的突破。

《离婚诉》的变体，最能说明这个变化。第一幅作于1941年，采取特写式构图，剪裁别致，人物各具特色。以阴刻为主，刀法洒脱，色调丰富，不失为一幅佳作。但这种刻法群众不习惯，于是1943年古元刻了第二幅。这一幅选取平视构图，主次分明，有疏有密，脱开光影明暗，用极简练、概括的阳刻轮廓线条造型，把内容交代得清清楚楚，画面明朗，格调高雅，富于民族特色。达到了新的更高的艺术境界，更易于我国广大群众所欣赏。在国际版画艺苑中，也以具有鲜明的民族风格而独树一帜，引人注目。

在选择和处理题材方面，古元喜欢采取正面歌颂的角度。他的作品洋溢着淳朴自然的抒情诗意和浓郁的乡土气息。他追求一种平静的美。且不说《挑水》、《运草》、《羊群》、《入仓》、《骡马店》等抒情性作品，就是《部队秋收》、《人民的刘志丹》、《老炊事员的诞辰》和《调解婚姻诉讼》之类叙事性的作品，甚至像《减租会》那样斗争性很强的作品，古元也选择了正面描写的角度，力求自然、真实，充满生活情趣。而没有丝毫虚张声势、矫柔造做之处。

总之，古元在延安时期确立了革命世界观和艺术观，把艺术的根须深深植入人民的、民族的沃土之中，沐浴着民主的阳光。用古元自己的话说，陕北、碾庄是他艺术创作的“摇篮”，在那里，他迈出了“第一步”。我想，可以借用一句歌词，概括古元在延安时期作品的基调，那就是：解放区的天是明朗的天。

第二个时期：东北——华北时期(1945—1950)

中国人民浴血苦战八年，终于取得了抗日战争的伟大胜利。但是，人民还没来得及喘口气，国民党反动派就违背人民意愿和历史潮流，破坏国共合作，悍然发动了内战。彻底进行新民主主义革命的任务，又成为主要矛盾，摆在了全国人民面前。

1945年11月，古元随“鲁艺”告别了第二故乡延安，向东北解放区转移。经过长途行军到达华北重镇张家口以后，因前往东北的交通受阻，滞留在华北解放区。直到1947年5月，才绕道冀中、烟台、大连和邻邦朝鲜，进入东北解放区。

这个时期，正是中国人民推翻帝国主义、封建主义、官僚资本主义“三座大山”的统治，取得民主、解放，历史大转折的年代。解放战争势如破竹；土地改革天翻地覆；恢复和发展生产如旭日东

升。古元的木刻创作也进一步开拓了新的天地。其重要特点是：视野更广阔，节奏更强烈，战斗性更强而有力。这无疑是客观生活内容所决定，但也是古元主观奋斗进取的成果。其中，1947至1949年他又达到一个新的高峰。最有代表性的作品要数《焚毁旧契》和《人桥》。

《焚毁旧契》描绘轰轰烈烈的土地改革运动中，翻身的农民们冲进地主宅院，把被地主霸占土地房产的契约统统翻出来，放火烧毁。一把腾空而起的大火，宣告了地主阶级几千年封建统治的彻底灭亡。农民们打碎了枷锁，兴高采烈地敲锣打鼓扭秧歌，欢庆解放。古元曾在华北广陵县参加土地改革运动，深深为农民与地主不共戴天的深仇大恨和农民们获得解放欣喜若狂的激动情绪所感染。在1947年春节转移到冀中待命时，他抓紧时间完成了这幅具有历史意义的艺术杰作。

转移到东北以后，古元在五常县第二次参加了土改，创作出《破获地主武装》、《挖财宝去》等木刻作品。通过活生生的艺术形象，记录了那场急风暴雨式的社会大变革。

有一天，古元从报上读到一篇关于淮海战役的报道。报道中说，在双堆集战斗中，我人民解放军追歼逃窜的敌军，遇到一条河流横在面前，敌军炸毁了桥梁，妄图凭借天险，阻挡我军追击。英勇的我军指战员一个个毫不犹豫地跳入冰冷刺骨的水中，用肩扛梯子架成一座浮动的人桥，让战友们踏过去追歼逃敌。读完这篇报道，古元眼前仿佛看到了那惊天动地的英雄壮举，迅即创作了套色木刻《人桥》。画上，奔腾的河水，滚滚炮火硝烟，渲染出激烈战斗的气氛。烘托克服一切艰难险阻，踏过人桥奋勇前进的英雄部队。

1950年，古元又创作了表现军民协同，百万雄师过大江气魄宏伟的《打过长江》。这些惊天地、泣鬼神的英雄史诗，气势磅礴的历史画卷，是革命的、集体英雄主义的战歌。看了它们，使人振奋。耳边犹如响起了高昂的战斗歌声：“向前，向前，向前——，我们的队伍向太阳，脚踏着祖国的大地，背负着人民的希望，我们是一支不可战胜的力量！……”

此外，古元还创作了《恢复》、《鞍山钢铁厂的修复》和《秋收》等木刻。他这个时期的作品，是表现中国历史上两种前途、两种命运决战的壮丽画卷，是中国历史上那个伟大转折时代的一面镜子。

古元每创作一幅作品，都要花费很多心血，构思、构图，画许多草稿，反复酝酿、比较、推敲，努力寻找最巧妙的方案。他的木刻艺术技巧，在延安时期已经确立严肃的现实主义创作方法和具有民族特色的写实风格并已臻完备的基础上，这个时期进一步发展，达到得心应手，运用自如的境界。《鞍山钢铁厂的修复》把写生所得的素材，加以归纳、概括、加工，重新组织，层次分明，井井有条。便是一个突出的例证。

高度的思想性和艺术性的统一，使古元的许多作品成为中国革命史和中国现代美术史上，具有不朽的历史和艺术价值与深远影响的艺术珍品。

第三个时期：北京时期(1950—)

新中国成立以后,我国从人民解放战争转入和平建设的历史新阶段。随着社会主义建设的开展,人民的政治觉悟、经济地位和文化水平逐步提高,对艺术审美的需求也日益增长。客观上对美术创作提出了百花齐放的要求,为艺术家施展自己的才华开辟了宽广的道路。

古元像海绵吸水一样,永不满足地从人民生活中吸取营养,从古今中外优秀艺术中吸取精华,经过自己咀嚼、消化,提高和发展自己的艺术创作。他的题材日益广泛,艺术语言更多姿多采,达到了“随心所欲不逾矩”的自由境界。每有新作问世,总以其独特的意境令人耳目一新。

1957年以前,是新中国朝霞满天的年代。到处热气腾腾,各条战线欣欣向荣,国家蒸蒸日上。革命的胜利和美好的前程鼓舞着古元。他的创作热情异常高涨,以解放了的中国为主题,歌颂人民的胜利和创造性劳动,歌颂革命斗争的光荣历史和革命后的新生活。在木刻的艺术技巧方面,建国初期的一段短时间内,曾精雕细刻,富有装饰感。如《工人上夜校》、《北京劳动人民文化宫》等。后来就一变为简练、豪放的大刀阔斧,极其概括。如《祥林嫂》、《热情的印度人民》等等。1956年至1957年,古元的创作又达到了第三个艺术高峰,代表性作品可说是《甘蔗园》与《刘志丹和赤卫军》。

《甘蔗园》描绘江南水乡,河渠纵横,水平如镜。蔗园、木瓜,一片葱绿,掩映着农舍,倒影可鉴。莺燕自由飞翔。农民正在收获甘蔗。这样恬静、清新的景色,充满诗情画意。笔精墨简,刀刀状物寄情。多么美妙的和平劳动的图画,宛如一首悠扬动人的抒情乐曲。它代表了解放后古元一大批作品,如《绍兴风景》、《江南三月》等等的风格特点。浓郁的抒情诗意和深厚的艺术魅力,与四十年代表现陕北田园生活的作品,一脉相承。

《刘志丹和赤卫军》是1957年为庆祝中国人民解放军建军三十周年而作。刘志丹是深受陕北人民爱戴的领袖人物。早在1944年,古元就创作过木刻《人民的刘志丹》,建国以后,又作过一幅表现刘志丹的新年画。1957年创作的这一幅《刘志丹和赤卫军》,进一步表现了刘志丹与他所领导的武装起来的农民赤卫军,在战斗间隙畅谈的情景。画中洋溢着军民亲如一家的热烈气氛,刘志丹的形象英勇机智,深刻地揭示了人民军队、人民战争的本质。构图采取向心团聚的形式,以刘志丹为核心,人物从四角向核心聚拢,使刘志丹的形象处在人群环绕之中,既自然又突出。大块的黑白造成强烈对比,彼此映衬,虚实相生,巧妙而新奇。大圆口刀挥洒自如,质朴、浑厚,但不失精微。人物写意传神,跃然纸上。老羊皮袄、大枪枪筒等服装道具和背景刻划,寥寥几刀,看似漫不经心,却是惨淡经营,甚为精彩。像这样的大刀力作,倘没有深厚的功力与丰富的经验,很易流于空泛、单调,以致章法紊乱、主次不分而告失败。《刘志丹和赤卫军》的成功是开拓性的,标志着古元木刻艺术发展到了一个

新的更高洁更完美的一以当十的境界。因而在国内外获得很高的评价。成为当代版画艺术最高水平的代表作品。

正当古元专心致志施展他的卓绝才华的时候，意外的挫折从天而降。他因为向党组织提了几句善意的批评，被诬为“同情右派”而受到批判，下放劳动。自那以后，一次接一次的政治运动，干扰了艺术家的心境，创作的愉快只剩下零敲碎打星星点点了。1962年，在周恩来、陈毅等同志关怀下，文艺界开始有点起色。就在这时，古元创作了《玉带桥》和《探望老房东、老战友》。前者是在批判“游山玩水、闲情逸致、小资产阶级情调”之后，针锋相对，忠实于自己的感受和审美要求而作的。画面优美、清爽，令人心旷神怡。一种圣洁的情怀油然而生。后者是他为启发人们重温艰苦岁月党与人民同甘苦共患难的光荣传统而作的。古元从正面塑造了一个身居高位的军队干部，回到革命老根据地，探望当年掩护子弟兵，支援前线，与自己并肩战斗过的老房东、老战友的艺术形象。这些老乡亲，过去为革命建立了很大的功勋，现在依然是普普通通的农民，毫无特殊之处。事隔几十年，战友相见，地位虽然不同，但情深依旧。盘腿坐在炕上，畅叙别后生活，回忆艰苦岁月，充满家人团聚的亲切气氛。作者是有感而发，借助艺术形象，目的在于促人深省。

在长达十年“史无前例”的浩劫中，古元的木刻刀被迫搁置，作品也遭到“莫须有”的批判。这给他和许多正直的艺术家都造成了难以弥补的损失。但是，古元坚定地相信，历史的客观规律不可逆转。在他心中，信仰没有动摇，艺术之火没有熄灭。他默默地回忆延安时期党的好传统，好作风，倍感亲切，创作了木刻《回忆延安》和《枣园灯光》。“四五运动”一声春雷，使他振奋。1976年10月，人民赢得了又一次解放，“四人帮”一伙终于受到历史的严正审判。古元为之欢欣鼓舞，精神焕发。《十月的喜讯》、《悼念和战斗的诗篇》、《初春》、《瑞雪》等等新作接踵问世。

近十年，古元担任领导工作，社会活动也较为繁忙，使他不能集中精力于艺术创作。但他以“一闲对百忙”的精神，不懈地坚持“行万里路”，了解人民生活，讴歌祖国山河。古元近年的作品，更注重寓意。如《给人们甜蜜》，通过养蜂人和蜜蜂的劳动，表达这样的思想感情：“愿学蜜蜂的辛勤，为人民酿造精神的甜蜜。”透过有限的画面形象，引人无限的联想。《骆驼赞》刻划两匹高大的骆驼，配以题句：“负重任劳，取之甚少，予之甚多。不管炎寒风旱，总是昂着头迈着坚实的步子前进。”与1940年所作的《骆驼队》相比，其内涵显然丰富而深刻得多了。

古元确如徐悲鸿先生所说是一“卓绝之天才”。但古元的天才是天赋加勤奋，它来自对生活的认真观察，深入了解和周密思考，经过长期积累、孕育，一经触发，偶然得之。有一位在延安“鲁艺”与古元同班的同志回忆说：“给我印象最深的是古元同志。他在‘鲁艺’几年的时间里，除了许多别的活动之外，光是木刻就刻了一百多幅。他几乎是随时随地在构思，抓住任何一点零碎的时间来作画。

‘天才就是勤奋’这句话真是至理名言。要知道，在战争年代我们刻木刻并不像现在这么容易。刨木板、磨木板都是同学们自己动手。我们往往利用晚上的空闲时间把木板拿到大礼堂台阶旁边的水磨石上去磨，起码得磨上一两个小时才能把木板磨光，才能在上面动手来刻。试想，一百多幅木刻，光磨木板就需要多大的毅力，费多少时间啊！古元同志的成就比较突出，除了他有天才，确实还和他的勤学苦练分不开。”

中国新兴木刻运动的导师鲁迅先生说过：“美术家固然须有精熟的技工，但尤须有进步的思想与高尚的人格。”古元是一位品格高尚的革命美术家。凡是与古元有过接触的人，都会留下这样的印象：他朴素，老成，性格温和，沉静寡言。但目光敏锐，善于思考，智慧而具幽默感，话不多而耐人寻味，是个才华出众而内向的人。他的思想，作风，像他的作品那样，像他笔下描绘的农民那样质朴、自然、笃诚，脚踏实地。他实事求是，厌恶装腔作势，弄虚作假，哗众取宠，随波逐流。他真心实意地尊敬和钦佩劳动人民——他们是物质财富和精神财富的创造者，养育我们的衣食父母。古元通过自己的实践，坚信只有熟悉了解他们，和他们打成一片，才能有正确的立场、观点和健康的思想感情。古元一刻也没有忘记人民的利益，正如一位外国朋友所指出的：古元的心始终和中国人民的心脏连在一起的。

诗人艾青在1952年为再版《古元木刻选集》写的代序中有一段评论：“再没有一个画家能像古元同志这样丰富的反映古朴的中国农民参加民主革命的生活了。”

“出现在古元同志作品里的人物，农民、兵士、妇女、儿童都是为新的民主的阳光浸浴着的；他们不再是蒙受耻辱的奴隶；那横亘几千年之久的中国人民的愁苦，已从他们的脸上敛迹了。而中国广大人民的善良的、忠厚的、诚朴的风貌，都在他的作品里得到了十分适切的表现。”

古元的艺术是朴素的。他坚持按艺术的规律进行创作，反对以政治口号代替艺术的教条主义；也反对标榜“脱离政治”的形式主义和卖弄技巧，追逐趣味。艺术家从客观世界中把美提炼、加工、浓缩，通过朴素自然的形式再现出来，比原来更集中、更概括、更典型、更高也更美，使读者潜移默化地得到美的陶冶与享受、认识和教益。

古元的木刻艺术是中国人民革命和建设事业的历史画卷，现代中国人民生活的形象记录。艺术的语言是没有国界的。古元以他的天才为中国在世界上许多国家找到了知音与友谊，以他的作品为中国取得了光荣。他的艺术不仅在历史上发挥了巨大的作用，而且在今天仍有其积极的现实意义。我们坚信，他的这些杰作也必将像人类文明史上一切伟大而不朽的创造一样，在世界艺术宝库中永远放射出灿烂的光辉。

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Gu Yuan's Woodcuts

Zhang Zuoming

Gu Yuan is an outstanding artist of the new Chinese woodcut, a great master of wood-block prints, who enjoys a high reputation worldwide. During a career of nearly fifty years, he has created a large number of works dedicated to his country and people and to the lofty cause of defending world peace and guarding the sanctity of mankind. His woodcuts occupy an important position in the history of modern Chinese fine art.

Gu Yuan was born on August 5, 1919 into a well-to-do country family in Chongshan County, Gungdong Province, in south China. He tasted to the full the joys of an idyllic life during his childhood and fell ardently in love with art after he entered middle school, greatly admiring the 19th-century French "peasant painter" Jean Millet, whose paintings of peasant life exerted a far-reaching influence on his later development.

After the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japan in 1937, Gu Yuan plunged into the torrent of fighting against Japanese aggression for national salvation. In 1938 he bade goodbye to his home and dear ones and travelled all the way to Yan'an, the world-famous base of anti-Japanese resistance, and in 1939 entered the Yan'an Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art to study art. After graduation he went to work at the grass-roots level in the countryside to experience life. During this time he worked as a secretary in a township, with peasants day and night, gradually familiarizing himself with their life, feeling, aesthetic tastes, nature and character. He sincerely admired Chinese peasants for their sterling qualities of industry, intelligence, honesty and simplicity, loved them and discovered in them a unique beauty, which aroused a heartfelt desire to present them through the medium of the woodcut.

His early woodcuts like *Carrying Water*, *Transporting Cass* and *Flock of Sheep* were lyrical, simple and true to life, like clear water trickling from a spring. Later, as his observation of life, experience and thinking deepened, his woodcuts became more profound. The works he produced in this period, like *Storing Grain in the Granary*, *The Office of the District Government*, *Marriage Registration* and *Divorce Proceedings* depicted the very ordinary rural life in the Yan'an area, but explored the formidable theme that revolution had brought thoroughgoing changes to the countryside of Northern Shaanxi. In *Brother's Leave*, Gu Yuan portrayed a soldier of the Communist-led Eighth Route Army on leave excitedly telling his villagers about the militant life in the anti-Japanese resistance. The picture is imbued with a joyful family atmosphere, and the images of the characters are vividly cut, very lifelike. The celebrated painter Xu Beihong highly praised *Brother's Leave* and *Transporting Grass* when he visited the national woodcut exhibition in October, 1942, calling Gu Yuan "a genius in Chinese art", "a giant star of the new Chinese woodcut".

At the Meeting to Reduce Land Rent and *The Return of a Runaway Landlord* are Gu Yuan's two most representative woodcuts of this period. Set in the land revolution during the War of Resistance, they truthfully portray a group of images of various characters under differing yet typical circumstances. *At the Meeting to Reduce Land Rent* depicts how the poor peasants who had been exploited bitterly for generations fought back by squaring accounts and reasoning with the landlord for the reduction of land rent. Though the vivid characters are only the size of a broad bean, their features, fa-

cial expressions and motions as well as their costumes and property are clearly shown with highly generalized craftsmanship and typification. With its concise strokes and compact composition, this woodcut has been acclaimed as a model piece.

From 1939 to 1945 Gu Yuan produced many good woodcuts in Yan'an. The several pieces mentioned above and *The Inn with Sheds for Carts and Animals*, *Soldiers at Autumn Harvest*, *The People's Liu Zhidan* and *the Old Cook's Birthday* formed his unique style. He gradually extricated himself from the influence Western works had exerted on him in his earlier years in terms of emphasis on the presentation of bulk and light and shade, and created a concise, bright and novel form which had a distinct national and local character and which the masses of the people accepted and preferred.

Gu Yuan sought the beauty of quiet. He always chose and handled subject-matter positively, so that all his work was natural, poetic and strongly local in flavour. His style opened up a new genre, which aroused a great response in Yan'an at the time. It was of epoch-making significance. The Yan'an period constituted the first stage in his development.

After victory over Japan, Gu Yuan moved with the Yan'an Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art to the North China liberated area in November, 1945 and joined the land reform movement in Guangling County. In May, 1947 he went to the Northeast China liberated area via Yantai, Dalian and Korea, and took part in the land reform movement in Wuchang County. From 1945 to 1950 Gu Yuan made a number of woodcuts in the North and Northeast China liberated areas, such as *Burning the Old Land Deeds*, *Human Bridge*, *Capturing the Landlords' Armed Forces*, *On the Way to Dig Up Treasures*, *Advancing Across the Yangtse*, *Reconstruction*, *The Anshan Steel Plant Restored* and *Autumn Harvest*. This period was Gu Yuan's second stage. In these years, when China was witnessing great historical changes, Gu Yuan's vision was broadened, his rhythm became stronger, and his style reached maturity; he could carve whatever he liked with high proficiency.

As to content and form, *Burning the Old Land Deeds* marked a peak in Gu Yuan's art. A masterpiece of everlasting artistic value and far-reaching significance in modern Chinese art history, it has drawn great attention in woodcut circles both at home and abroad. It shows a group of emancipated peasants in the mighty land reform movement rushing into a landlord's house, searching out the deeds of the land and property he has seized from them and throwing them into the fire. The huge flames proclaim the doom of feudal landlord rule as it had existed in China for thousands of years; the peasants smash their fetters and excitedly strike up drums and gongs for a *yangge* dance to celebrate their emancipation. Carved in concise strokes, compact composition and sharp black-and-white contrast, the work has strong artistic appeal. Gu Yuan completed this masterpiece at Spring Festival, 1947, vividly recording the stormy changes that had taken place in China and reflecting the trend of historical development.

After the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, Gu Yuan went to Beijing and began the third stage of his woodcut career. Since 1950 he has experienced vicissitudes but never wavered on the road of artistic exploration, consistently deriving nourishment from the people and absorbing the quintessence of Chinese and foreign art, giving full play to his talents, so that his art has reached the extent of its perfection. As his themes are daily widened and his artistic language becomes increasingly rich and colourful, each woodcut he makes is a refreshingly new concept in an original style.

Until 1957 New China was thriving on every front, her production ever more flourishing. The victory of the revolution and the prosperous future of the country encouraged Gu Yuan to make woodcuts with grater zeal. Taking liberated

China as his main theme, he created a large number of works, like *Workers Going to Night School*, *The Beijing Cultural Palace of the Working People*, *Cane Field*, *A Scene in Shanxing*, *South China in March* and *Liu Zhidan and the Red Army* to praise the victory of the people and their creative labour and the history of revolutionary struggle and the new post-revolutionary life. Among these, *Cane Field* and *Liu Zhidan and the Red Army* marked another high peak in Gu Yuan's art.

Cane Field presents a scene in South China, where rivers quietly crisscross the land as evenly as a mirror. In the green fields dotted with huts farmers are busily harvesting cane, while orioles and swallows fly freely overhead. Engraved in simple strokes, the woodcut is as lyrical as a moving musical passage.

Liu Zhidan and the Red Army was made in 1957 for the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Liu Zhidan was a popular leader in North Shaanxi. As early as in 1944 Gu Yuan had made a woodcut of him entitled *The People's Liu Zhidan*, and after the founding of the People's Republic he painted a New-year picture of him. The 1957 woodcut is perfect in ideological concept, the portraiture and presentation; it has been highly praised at home and abroad as one of the best contemporary Chinese woodcuts. It depicts Liu Zhidan and his Peasant Red Army talking between battles, subtly delineating the nature of the people's army. In composition, the work focuses on the main subject, with Liu Zhidan placed in the centre and soldiers coming from all around. Liu Zhidan is shown naturally and in clear relief. The use of sharp black-and-white contrast in large patches is ingenious and novel. The characters' expressions and clothes and the background are superbly engraved. Gu Yuan's delicate craftsmanship and profound experience made this woodcut a pioneering work.

Subsequent political movements, especially the "cultural revolution", greatly disturbed Gu Yuan's output. Although dejected, the fire of art never died in his heart, and his convictions never changed. The downfall of "the Gang of Four" in October, 1976 brought an end to the chaotic years, and Gu Yuan's enthusiasm was rekindled. Within a short period he made many new woodcuts, such as *Glad Tidings in October*, *Elegies and Militant Poems*, *Early Spring* and *Snow* to express his personal feelings and eulogize the victory of the people.

In the last ten years, although Gu Yuan holds many leading posts and busy social work takes up a lot of his time and energy, he has never put down his knife but has persevered unremittingly with his art. His recent works are pregnant with greater craftsmanship and meaning, as in *Giving Sweetness*, where the labour of bees and their keepers conveys the artist's message: "Labour like bees to make spiritual honey for the people." The emphasis is on the delineation of this concept, giving free rein to the imagination through limited images.

In *In Praise of the Camel*, Gu Yuan shows two great camels with the inscription: "They labour under heavy loads, getting little, giving much. In heat or cold, wind or drought, they march on with heads high." The camels describe the working people and reflect the nobility of the artist himself.

Gu Yuan is a high-minded artist. He is straightforward, experienced and prudent, earnest and down-to-earth. He is gentle, taciturn, keen-eyed, thoughtful, intelligent and witty. He loves the working people as the creators of the material and spiritual wealth of mankind, as parents who have fed and clothed him. His woodcuts show this. The well-known poet Ai Qing once said: "No artist but Gu Yuan can reflect so extensively the life of honest Chinese peasants in the democratic revolution. His models, be they peasants, soldiers, women or children, are all bathed in new, democratic sunshine; they are no longer humiliated slaves; the tribulations that the Chinese people bore for thousands of years are gone from their faces. His works well express their honest, sincere and kindly features."

Gu Yuan's heart has always been one with that of the Chinese people, and his art belongs to them.



延安“鲁艺”校园 The Yan'an Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art



播种 Sowing Seeds



挑水 Carrying Water