

Wu Guanzhong and Modern Ink

Erato Zhang

(ARHT 6937)

During the dramatic transformation of Asian art in the 20th century, Wu Guanzhong, with his unique artistic practice, opened an unprecedented path between traditional ink and modern formal dialogue. He was not only a painter, but also a cross-cultural art thinker. By combining the traditional spirit of Chinese painting with the formal aesthetics of Western modernism, Wu Guanzhong creates a visual language that is both highly personal and contemporary. In the context of global contemporary art's increasing emphasis on cross-media, cross-cultural, and transnational identities, revisiting Wu Guanzhong is not only a retrospective of the artist, but also a reinterpretation of the nature of Modern Ink Painting and its cultural geography. This exhibition, *Wu Guanzhong and Modern Ink*, is based on the artist's self-reports, his representative works and others Asian modern artists. This essay is centred on three core issues: firstly, how Wu Guanzhong struck a balance between tradition and modernity; secondly, the evolution of his artistic style from the 1970s to the 2000s; and lastly, his representation of the complex identities of Asian artists at the crossroads of multiple cultures. Through these elements, we hope that viewers will not only see works, but also a way of thinking about modernity in ink, as an expression of contemporaneity that constantly reinvents itself and crosses the boundaries of time and place.

Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) was one of the most influential Chinese artists of the 20th century, whose career spanned the war years, the founding of New China, the Cultural Revolution and the early years of globalisation. Born in Yixing, Jiangsu Province, he was educated in engineering and later enrolled in the Hangzhou National Art College, where he received training in both Chinese and Western art under Lin Fengmian, and in 1947 he went to the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, France, where he systematically

studied Western modernist painting and was particularly influenced by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Matisse and others. After he returned to China, on the one hand, he promoted the concept of 'Formal Beauty' in his teaching and creative work, and on the other hand, he continued to explore how to combine Western visual composition principles with the spirit of traditional Chinese ink painting. This cross-cultural background has profoundly shaped his artistic approach and ideological direction. He is neither completely attached to the traditional Chinese painting system, nor does he accept the simple westernisation of Chinese painting. On the contrary, through his paintings, he tried to find a path that truly belongs to modern Chinese art. As he said in his later years, 'I do not use Western painting to paint Chinese subjects, nor do I use Chinese painting to express Western landscapes, but I use my own language to depict the world.' This artistic stance is not a compromise, but a response to the dual challenges of time and cultural identity through self-reconstruction. In his teaching and creation, he has developed a painting language based on line, colour and structure. Which is neither entirely realistic nor abstract but conveying his inner emotions and cultural memories by refining the rhythm and motions of the landscape. This practice not only reflects his own cultural stance, but also indicates the direction of the later development of Modern Ink Painting art. In his works, viewers can easily see how he replaces the traditional landscape painting's chapping, composition and three distant methods with the organisation of dots, lines and surfaces, responds to 'emotion' with 'form', and replaces 'structure' with 'emotion'. 'structure' instead of "brush and ink". This contrasts with the 'simple co-existence of tradition and modernity' that Chang Tan criticised in his discussion of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Ink exhibition. Tan points out that the presentation of contemporary ink works in parallel with traditional ancient paintings, without proper theoretical translation, can easily fall back into the cultural stereotype of 'Oriental mysticism' (Tan 2015). Wu Guanzhong's own creations, on the other hand, have been transformed on a linguistic level, so that tradition is no longer inherited as a style of the past, but rather internalised into the body of art as a methodology.

Wu Guanzhong's artistic creation experienced a remarkable stylistic evolution between the 1970s and the 2000s, a process that both reflected the deepening of his personal aesthetics and responded to the dramatic changes in China's social and cultural environment. The second part of the exhibition presents Wu Guanzhong's continuous transformation from

figuration to abstraction, from flatness to structure, and from image to mood, chronologically through key paintings from different eras. From the late 1970s to the 1980s, Wu Guanzhong's ink creations gradually shifted from realism to composition and formal expression. His works began to show a strong sense of rhythm and abstraction, demonstrating his continued exploration of formal beauty. In *Osmanthus*, the densely intertwined branches and flowers form an almost patterned image, demonstrating Wu's ability to organise visual rhythm with lines. The *Lotus Pond*, on the other hand, uses flat lotus leaves and interlocking stems, along with large areas of white space, to break the spatial layout of traditional landscapes and present a modern picture structure. *Spring Mountains in red and ink* is an important attempt to combine colour and ink, with the contrast between red and black making the whole painting full of expressiveness and emotional tension. In the 1990s, Wu Guanzhong's works showed a freer and more expressive outlook. He opened up more space for expression outside of traditional techniques, making ink painting a contemporary expressive tool that can be used to express modern experiences, cultural perceptions, and personal feelings. Among the works in this exhibition, *Tigers (I)* and *Pandas* depict a group of dynamic animals with splashes of ink and thick colours. Wu Guanzhong does not pursue realistic depictions of animals but rather makes the images vibrant and rhythmic through the fluttering of ink colours, twirling of lines, and scattering of spots. Animals became an important medium for him to express his emotion, interest and vitality. In *Zhangjiajie and Houses of the South*, Wu Guanzhong further combines ink blocks and colour dots, resulting in more abstract works and more open spaces. He used minimalist symbols and freely distributed brushstrokes to form images that explored the formal relationship between architecture, landscape and mood. In the 2000s, Wu Guanzhong's works displayed a freer and more abstract visual language. In *Gallop*, he used strong colour blocks and unrestrained brushstrokes to form a pictorial character 'horse', which is highly decorative and symbolic in form, showing the boldness and childishness of his art in his later years. At the same time, he also created more quiet and minimalist ink compositions such as *Rice Paddies* and *Prints*: the former uses a few clean lines to outline the order and space of the field, while the latter uses dots and blocks to form a rhythmic visual weave. In *Earth*, Wu Guanzhong combines figurative and abstraction in a more natural way, interweaving colour and ink and brushwork to construct a layered and rhythmic landscape of paddy fields.

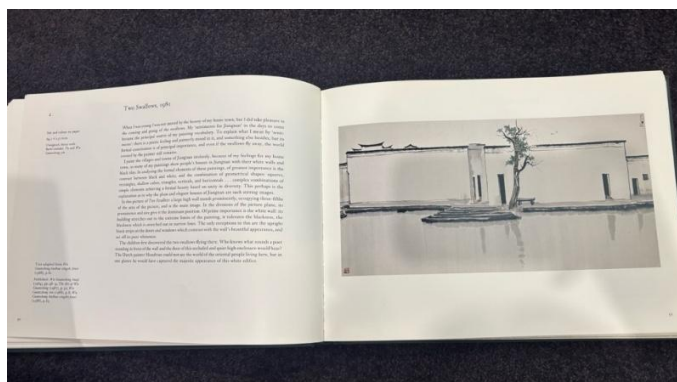
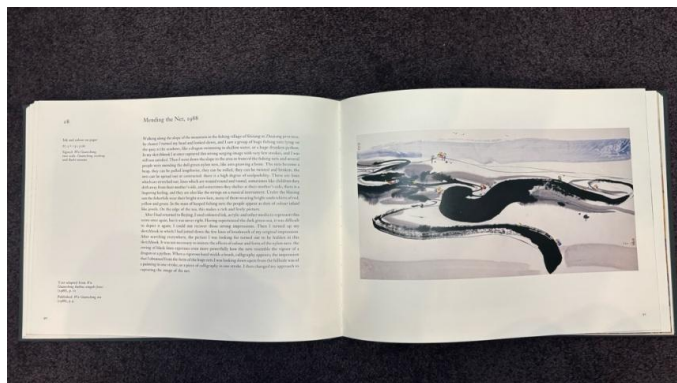
Wu Guanzhong's artistic identity is not only based on a simple fusion of the two between Chinese tradition and Western modernity but is also deeply rooted in the reality of transnational cultural flows. He is both a promoter of art education in New China and a representative of Asian art that is actively recognised and collected within the cultural networks of Singapore and Southeast Asia. Singapore played an important role in Wu Guanzhong's later artistic career. He frequently participated in exhibitions and cultural exchanges in Singapore, and his works have been exhibited at the National Gallery on numerous occasions and are in the collections of important institutions in Singapore. The high level of recognition he received in Singapore not only expanded his international reach but also provided him with a relatively relaxed cultural environment that allowed him to experiment with form more freely. Singapore, as a place of multicultural convergence, also provided Wu Guanzhong with a more open Asian perspective. Art is no longer defined by national boundaries but becomes a collection of Asian cultural experiences. As noted in the literature, curatorial and art historical writing in recent years has increasingly emphasised 'cross-cultural Asian identity' rather than 'national labels' (Antoinette 2019; Sato 2019). Wu Guanzhong's practice is a precursor to this trend. He is neither a Westernised artist nor a Chinese painter, but a modern Asian artist in the truest sense of the word - a figure who is constantly weaving in and out of local traditions, Western visual languages, and regional cultural networks to reconfigure his own mode of expression. His example reminds us that Modern Ink is a microcosm of how the whole of Asia deals with the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity in the context of globalisation. Ink, as a medium, has thus become a field of cultural intersection and reinvention.

In order to broaden the viewer's understanding of modern ink, this exhibition features an open reading area with illustrated catalogues and albums by a number of contemporary Asian ink artists. These artists include, but are not limited to, China, Singapore, Japan and Korea, and their works are neither reproductions of traditional Asian art nor Asian art created to suit Western perspectives. They respond to issues of tradition, material and identity in their own unique ways, demonstrating the diverse vitality of ink art in contemporary cultural contexts. It is hoped that when viewers browse through these works, they will be able to transcend the dichotomies of 'tradition and modernity' and 'East and West', and feel that modern ink, as an open visual language, continues to be generated, transformed, and vocalised.

Exhibition selections:

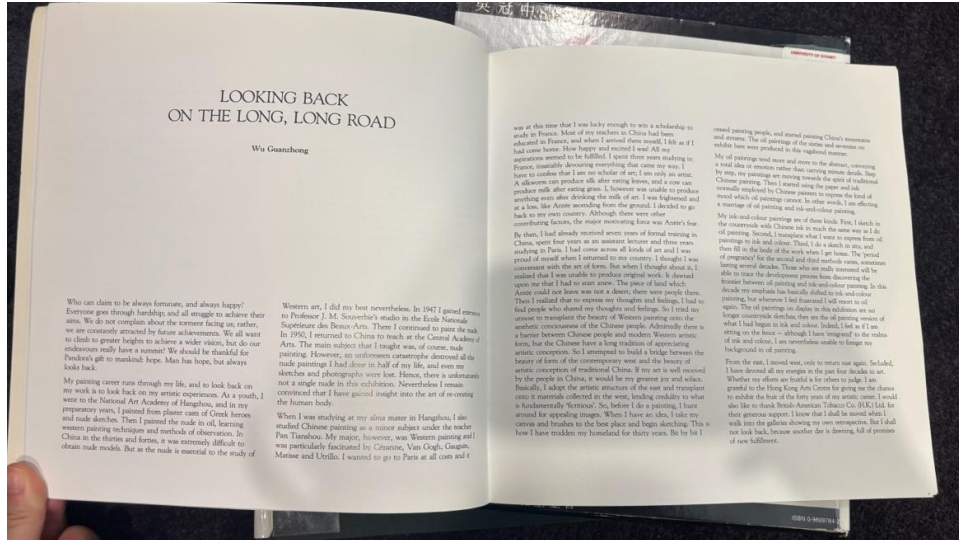
Book1: Wu Guanzhong : a twentieth-century Chinese Painter

Farrer, Anne.; Wu, Guanzhong.; British Museum. Trustees. c1992



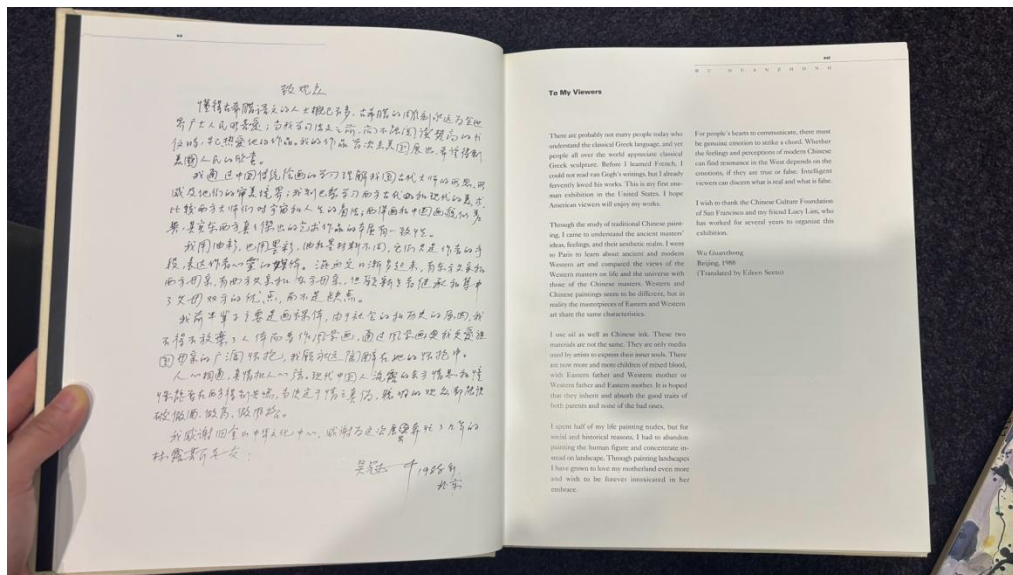
Book2: Wu Guanzhong : a retrospective

Wu Guanzhong; Mo Qihua; Hong Kong Arts Centre; 1987



Book 3: Wu Guanzhong: a contemporary Chinese artist

Wu, Guanzhong.; Lim, Lucy.; Chinese Culture Foundation. c1989



Reference list

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