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Images from the Singapore Art Museum

A Chinese master of styles that straddle East and West

By Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop

SINGAPORE

Xu Beihong is widely recognized as the father of modern Chinese painting, both for his innovative ink works that did much to revitalize the traditional Chinese form and for his willingness to embrace Western techniques, particularly French Realism.

And he was a patriot. Xu helped to bolster Chinese morale during the Second Sino-Japanese War, subtly working anti-Japanese themes into paintings done during those years, especially between 1939 and '41, when he was at the height of his career and traveling throughout Southeast Asia and India hosting well-received shows. (He sent money raised through those shows back to support war-relief efforts.)

"Xu had an immense influence on the development of Chinese painting in the 20th century because he championed an expansive realism that included Romanticism and Expressionism," said Kwok Kian Chow, the director of the Singapore Art Museum, where an exhibition showcasing more than 90 of Xu's works opened this month. His style, Kwok said, was "predicated on the ocular world as opposed to the literary tradition of text."

The exhibition, "Xu Beihong in Nan-yang," runs through July 13.

Born in Yixing, Jiangsu Province, in 1895, Xu grew up in an artistic family and showed talent at an early age. In 1915, he went to study in Shanghai, then a melting pot of Chinese and Western

them very freely with either freehand ink painting or the more formal style," she said.

In 1919, Xu traveled to Paris on a scholarship from the Chinese government. He shunned the burgeoning experimental art scene of the Surrealists and Expressionists, and instead embraced Realism.

"He felt painting should be real and should be understood by people," Chow said, "which is why he remained very much grounded in Realism throughout his life."

After returning to China in 1927, Xu co-founded and taught at the then South China Art Academy in Shanghai. He would hold a number of important posts, such as chairman for the Central Academy of Fine Arts and chairman of the National Artists' Association of China, ensuring him prestige and influence within China until his death in 1953.

In late 1939, Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate poet, writer and philosopher who, at the time, was president of the Sino-Indian Cultural Society, invited the artist to hold exhibitions and give talks in India.

Through Tagore, Xu met Mahatma Gandhi, whose sketched portrait is included in the exhibition.

During his stay in India, Xu completed several works considered to be masterpieces, such as "Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore" (1940), in ink and color on paper, which is innovative because of its attention to details and the



lack of white space left on the paper. Another is "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" (1940), a 4.2-meter-wide, or almost 18-foot-wide, ink painting based on the Chinese legend of a man who persisted in trying to move a mountain that was in his way, arguing that if he did not finish the task his children, and then his grandchildren, would eventually

have to do so. "This work is quite significant," Chow said. "It was his way to encourage the Chinese people in the anti-Japanese efforts, encouraging them to persist in the face of adversity."

Another important painting, "Put Down Your Whip" (1939), which Xu painted in Singapore after having witnessed the staging of a patriotic street drama about a father and his daughter in wartime exile, also illustrates his passion and patriotism. (As with many of the paintings in the show, "Put Down Your Whip" comes from a private collection. It was sold last year at auction for a record 72 million Hong Kong dollars, or about \$9.25 million.)

Chow points out that many of Xu's paintings of animals carried very personal emotions, which are often explained in Chinese calligraphy set to the side. The ink and color "Lion and Snake" (1938) is a direct reference to the war between China and Japan, and a galloping horse full of energy and freedom expresses the way the painter felt after China won a particular battle.

"Xu is very well known for his horses and his ability to express his feeling through this animal," Chow said. She gave as example the painting "Sick Horse," (1941) in which the horse's tail is drooping and its head hanging down, as if in defeat. "The work is very much about himself," Chow said, "and the way he felt as a poor, lonely student in need of help when he was in Paris."



Xu Beihong brought both energy and experimentation to his work. Above, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" (1940), a response to the Sino-Japanese War; left, a portrait of the Indian writer and poet Rabindranath Tagore (1940); and far left, "Standing Horse" (1939).

