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# One Person, One World

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Jingsheng Chen

Xu Guohua is four years older than me. When I first met him, we were both just entering our thirties. His features were sharp and defined, exuding a certain toughness. His slightly curly hair cascaded down the back of his head like a waterfall, giving him an unmistakable artistic flair. Handsome and charismatic, yet genuine, his hearty laughter would often ring out.

He was a classmate of my close friend Lei Hongzheng at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. At the time, Lei had just ventured into the business world by starting an advertising and decoration company. Xu Guohua traveled from Beijing to Jixi City in Heilongjiang to help his friend get the business off the ground, playing a key role in its rapid and steady development.

Being close in age and finding plenty to talk about, we quickly hit it off. What impressed me most was his mastery of the brush—he could sketch scenes and figures from work with a few effortless strokes, producing lines that were smooth, bold, and full of energy, far from the awkwardness of a beginner. The advertising company had plenty of leftover adhesive scraps, and in his hands, a few snips and cuts would transform them into stunning works of art. One such piece, a collage titled *The Sound of the Sea* composed of an ocean scene and a seashell, became part of my collection and still hangs on my wall to this day.

We became friends. Around the year 2000, when he visited Jixi again, we drove along the Sino-Russian border to Xingkai Lake and the Ussuri River. Along the way, he was constantly taking photographs and sketching.

“These materials are incredible”, he said, “When I return to Beijing, I’ll create many paintings of the black soil of Northeast China”. At that time, I was certain Xu Guohua was destined to become an outstanding artist in Beijing—a belief that has been repeatedly proven true over the past two to three decades.

In Beijing, he took me to visit his studio, or perhaps it was the largest private studio in the city. Located in Daxing, Beijing, the studio was a complete siheyuan (traditional courtyard) left by his father for the family. While Xu Guohua occasionally did small advertising and decoration jobs to make a living, most of his time was devoted to painting. Driving out of downtown Beijing and into Daxing County (now Daxing District), a series of twists and turns eventually led to the siheyuan. He often spent entire days there, working on oil paintings, lacquer paintings, traditional Chinese paintings, or even welding discarded metal into unique art pieces. In this courtyard, his imagination soared, letting the wings of art take flight.

At the time, he was in one of the rooms working on a wall-sized lacquer painting titled *Market*. It depicted the vibrant culture of Yunnan—a group of Naxi people dressed in festive attire, leading majestic horses through a bustling marketplace. He explained that the inspiration came from photographs he had taken while serving as the art director for the film *The Knot* (*Yun Shui Yao*). He said he could feel the strength of the nation’s spirit in the scenes from the marketplace.

I also had the chance to view his other lacquer paintings. While many artists use traditional Chinese painting



Figure 1. Xu Guohua. *Drifting: The Melody of Love*. Lacquer painting, 180×180cm, 2006.

to portray the noble purity of lotus flowers, he chose lacquer painting to depict them. With black and green tones, delicate brushstrokes, a three-dimensional texture, and striking red highlights, he presents a unique lotus pond, breathtakingly beautiful. Some say his lacquer paintings have reached the pinnacle of artistic achievement.

At the center of the courtyard, a metal-welded sculpture resembling a locomotive and a musical instrument was taking shape—abstract yet full of tension. Guohua told me he is working on a series of sculptures, some of which have already been installed in locations

like Wangfujing.

Later, he created a series of metal-welded sculptures. Among them, *Melody Series – Serenade* was collected by the National Centre for the Performing Arts; *Steam Engine Series – Racing Locomotive* was acquired by Shandong SSS Group; and *Steam Engine Series – Crossing Time and Space* was collected by the city of Rutland, USA.

He continues to create, and his works accumulate continuously. The space in his home is increasingly taken over and compressed by his artworks, even including the bed meant for resting, to the point where



Figure 2. Xu Guohua. *Fantasy Tune*. Lacquer painting, 240×240cm, 2011.

his wife has to sleep in a storage room. He treats his paintings as life itself; everything else can be sacrificed, but the artworks are indispensable.

Now, he has entered the ranks of the most powerful contemporary Chinese artists. His oil paintings, Chinese paintings, lacquer art, sketches, and sculptures have gradually formed a series. Among his sculptures, there are subdivisions like the *Ancient Series*, *Music Series*, *Industrial Revolution – Steam Age*, and *Figures Series*. The largest number of works belongs to the *Music Series*, with 50 “set” pieces, such as the “Round Zither” (similar to traditional Chinese instruments) and Western

instruments like the “Flute” “Tuba” and “Trumpet”, etc. This might be why his works were recognized by the National Grand Theatre.

Among the many works I’ve seen, his “Old Beijing Series” “Exotic Series” “Coastline Series” “Mountain Series”, etc., have also formed a scale. Some of his notable pieces include lacquer paintings like *Drifting – In Search* and *Ninth Symphony*, oil paintings like *Miao Village*, *Warm Seasons*, and *Florence Street Market*, as well as sculptures like *Melodious* and *Iron March*. Upon careful observation, each piece is a masterpiece.

Xu Guohua told me that every piece of my work is

the product of a collision between passion and thought. It is unimaginable without passion. Repetition, imitation, and copying are just about producing products, not art. Yes, every day, his creative thoughts are running at high speed, with ideas and passion colliding, and works are continuously being produced.

Xu Guohua has a deep and unwavering love for art, and he is obsessed with it.

In recent years, he has lived a simple life, dedicating large amounts of time and savings to his creative work. A few years ago, his family's courtyard house was demolished, and he received a considerable inheritance. This could have allowed him to live a carefree life, enjoying the luxuries of a wealthy man. However, he remains unchanged, steadfast in his commitment to art. All his energy is focused on sketching, creating, and holding exhibitions. He still spends sleepless nights for a single piece of work, still travels extensively, still endures

the fatigue of long journeys, and still lives modestly in a small corner.

At the end of 2023, he came to Guangdong with several painters from Beijing for a sketching trip. During this time, we met in Guangdong, and it had been another ten years since we last saw each other. It was a mix of sadness and joy. Despite still looking energetic, maintaining his Beijing accent, and speaking with wit and charm, he was no longer the dashing figure he once was. His body had become thin, and his walk had a slight deformation. During the three days we spent together, we toured Guangzhou, Shunde, Zhongshan, and Jiangmen, much like we did thirty years ago when we traveled to Xinkai Lake, Ussuri River, and Qilin Mountain in Northeast China. It felt as though time had stood still.

In truth, I was also looking forward to the works he would produce during his time sketching in Guangdong, hoping for the birth of another masterpiece. At the same



Figure 3. Xu Guohua. *Small Mountain Village*. Oil painting, 80×100cm, 2021.

time, I hoped he would take it easy and not exhaust himself for the sake of art, not letting each piece of artwork drain his energy and vitality.

I wish for him to remain deeply in love with art, for his art to remain evergreen, and for him to take care of his health and well-being.

XU GUOHUA, born in 1959 in Beijing, studied in the oil painting department's advanced class at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1988. He graduated in 1991 from the Department of Decorative Arts at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts

(now the Academy of Fine Arts at Tsinghua University). He is a member of the Beijing Artists Association, a member of the Lacquer Painting Committee of the China Arts and Crafts Society, a member of the Sculpture Committee of the China Arts and Crafts Society, and a member of the Royal British Sculptors Society. His works are collected by institutions and individuals, including the National Grand Theatre, Beijing International Sculpture Park, the Academy of Fine Arts at Tsinghua University, Taihu Park, and cities like Zhangjiakou, Qingdao, Daqing, and Tangshan. In 2013, his sculpture *Crossing Time and Space* was built and collected in Rutland, Vermont, USA.

Editor: Wang Jing