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# Deconstructed Structure: Xu Guohua's Welded Metal Sculptures

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In mid-April 2006, during a trip to London for The 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Contemporary Cast Iron Art, I met Beijing sculptor Xu Guohua. My first impression of him was that he was genuine and unpretentious. Despite

his exhaustion, he carried a large plastic bag full of sketchbooks, drawing whenever something caught his interest—even during his visit to the British Museum, which caused him to miss out on viewing some exhibits.



Figure 1. Xu Guohua. *Western Yunnan in March*. Lacquer painting, 360×240cm, 2006.



Figure 2. Xu Guohua. *Drifting: Searching*. Lacquer painting, 180×180cm, 2002.

In London, he gave me a booklet featuring his welded metal sculptures. At the time, I thought it looked nice, but it was hard to grasp the scale and quality of his artwork.

Upon returning to Beijing, I visited his studio near the Yizhuang Development Zone. There were hundreds of welded metal sculptures with various structures—some up to three or four meters long, others just a few dozen centimeters long. Most of them were around two meters, which was very spectacular. While some Beijing sculptors create artwork through welding metal, often outsourcing the labor or producing only a few pieces, Xu's approach

is rare. He starts by purchasing scrap materials and handles every stage, from rust removal to final treatment, all by himself. Over nearly a decade, he has created hundreds of welded metal sculptures, a testament to his exceptional craftsmanship.

Originally a factory worker in Beijing, Xu transitioned to decorative work after leaving the factory to support himself. For the past ten years, he has been interested in selecting and welding metal scraps to create sculptures. Despite his working experience, Xu also has an educational foundation. He has been passionate about

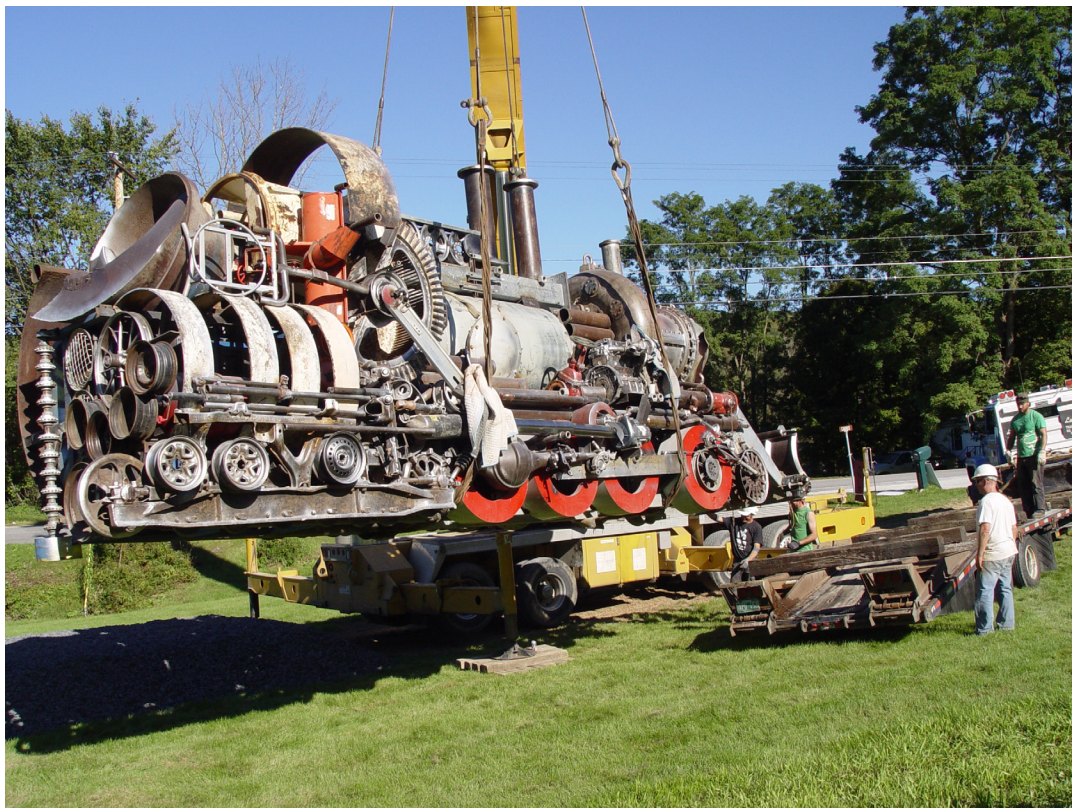


Figure 3. Xu Guohua. *Steam Engine Series: Crossing Time and Space*. Metal welding, 1200×250×560cm, September 2013, Collection of Rutland, Vermont, USA.

Figure 4. Construction Site of *Steam Engine Series: Crossing Time and Space*.



Figure 5. Xu Guohua with Friends at work, 2013.

art since childhood and has been self-studying for a long time. He took one year of formal classes in painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1988, and he studied decoration design for three years at the Adult Education Department at the Central Academy of Art and Design, earning a diploma. These educational experiences gave him insight into academic art training and professional knowledge. However, Xu's pursuit of sculpture is driven purely by personal passion, not for fame or profit, reflecting his dedication to his craft. Otherwise, he could not be in a suburban farmhouse for ten years day in and day out with the scrap metal, dealing with the formation of a spectacular scene: hundreds of pieces of artwork crowded in five rooms - nearly 200 square meters space.

Xu's artworks are divided into several series. The most extensive collection is the *Music Series*, with fifty pieces resembling traditional Chinese instruments like the round zither and Western instruments such as the flute, tuba, and trumpet. The *Ancient Series* includes twenty-five pieces modeled after prehistoric creatures like dinosaurs, fish, seahorses, crocodiles, and mythical creatures

like dragons. The *Industrial Revolution* series features five or six train-like structures depicting the steam era's locomotive boom. Other series include *Furnace Worker*, which consists of five pieces representing people, and the *Compressed Space* series, made from compressed and welded scrap motorcycle parts and gasoline cans. There are also the *The Clock*, *The Parrot*, and *The Chorus* series. Inspired by the digital age, Xu recently began developing the *Network Series*, featuring computer, phone, and chip-themed sculptures.

In recent years, various institutions have exhibited and collected Xu's artwork. The Beijing International Sculpture Park holds his pieces *Double Fish* and *March?*, while the Beijing Aquarium has *Wander*, and the government of Penglai, Shandong, owns *Flying*. Several public and private institutions have also collected his artworks.

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Xu's welded metal sculptures blend abstraction with



Figure 6. Xu Guohua. *Miao Village*. Oil on canvas, 90×120cm, 2021.

figuration, deconstruction with structure, and integration with separation. His artwork spans installation art and assemblage, scrap art and machinery, embodying multiple forms of artistic expression.

In contemporary China welded metal sculpture emerged in the 1980s paralleling its development in Western art, starting with the Cubism movement which started in the early twentieth century. Cubism itself involves deconstruction and reconstruction, traits that are fundamental to welded metal sculpture, combining realism with fantasy. American art historian H.H. Arnason notes that the inclination towards fantasy appeared early in twentieth-century sculpture, with Pablo Picasso being a prime example. By 1928, Picasso had developed an interest in sculpture and, with the help of sculptor and friend Julio González, began creating welded metal artworks. Their efforts marked the advent of direct metal sculpture as a significant modern technique.<sup>1</sup> Picasso's notable artwork from this period, *Woman in the Garden*, used welded steel plates and wires to create forms of people and plants. Arnason observed that Picasso's

artwork provided a particularly substantive contribution to contemporary sculpture, not just through the use of metal and found objects but also through an expanding use of fantastical themes.<sup>2</sup>

In welded metal sculpture, González pioneered steel, introducing a new era in sculpture with his airy, linear structures. Although Picasso and González used new metals, the first to use scrap metal for welding sculpture was the almost-forgotten American artists Morton Livingston Schamberg and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who made an artwork called *God* from used water pipes and valves, initiating the 1960s assemblage and junk art movements.

Assemblage art is a significant twentieth-century modern art form. In a certain sense, a history of modern art is a history of assemblage art, encompassing Cubist collages, compositions by Picasso and Futurists, and Dada and Surrealist artworks. Assemblage, as defined by William C. Seitz, involves artworks assembled rather than painted or sculpted, using pre-formed natural or artificial materials rather than traditional art

materials.<sup>3</sup> Assemblage art makes full use of existing objects, sharing similarities with Pop Art, Neorealism, and Happening Art. It emphasizes the materiality and sensory engagement of objects from everyday life. They “all belong to the world of sight and touch, a world of objects, a world of everyday events.” They are at once abstract forms and very symbolic, and therefore, counter previous abstract art forms with this overall abstraction and partial figurativeness. Assemblage art has many prominent artists, including Louis Nevelson. It is closely related to junk sculpture, as most assemblage pieces are made from metal waste. While many artists dislike the term “junk sculpture”, it involves creating art from discarded materials, with Kurt Schwitters as a classic example. Both junk sculpture and assemblage art connect to another modernist master, Marcel Duchamp, whose iconic *Fountain* is made from a readymade urinal, linking readymades, assemblage, installations, and mobile sculptures to his legacy.

Whether assemblage, installation, or junk sculpture, these forms possess a constructive quality. Xu's welded metal sculptures are constructive, sharing characteristics with constructivist sculpture, a style represented by American sculptor David Smith. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Smith created diverse series using discarded industrial materials, designing, fabricating, and painting them. Xu's artwork reflects a similar artistic pursuit, though it is not intended to compare him directly with Smith.

Firstly, he pursues the unity of figuration and abstraction. Unlike the welded metal works of Western artists, who try to avoid the figurativeness of the overall shape, Xu Guohua pursues the figurativeness of the overall shape, which is like the life of the works, with vividness. However, it can be seen that the symbolic nature is composed of countless abstract metal objects, fragments and parts. Xu's sculptures balance detailed

abstract components with identifiable forms, such as his *Music Series*, where each piece, though recognizable as an instrument, contains abstract elements. His *Ancient Series* also features metal parts forming recognizable prehistoric creatures, illustrating his aim to balance figurative and abstract elements. He believes that it is more accessible but less meaningful to splice together structures that are supposedly devoid of an overall image; how to be both figurative and abstract and get it just right is what he strives for. He believes it is relatively easy to assemble some so-called structure without a whole image. Still, it does not mean much about achieving both figurative and abstract and getting it right, precisely what he has been striving for.

Xu also strives for rhythm and nuance. Many of his artworks are composed of barrels, tubes, and round metal pieces of various diameters, i.e., the composition of his artworks is mainly the structure of a circle and different kinds of “lines”, and he attempts to convey an internal rhythm and musicality through the smooth flow of lines and circular forms. This quality is present in his *Music Series* as well as his other artwork. Unlike the often rational, cold, and disordered nature of Western metal sculptures, Xu's artwork conveys warmth, passion, flexibility, and order. Ultimately, his artwork embodies Chinese cultural and artistic characteristics, unmistakably representing Chinese creativity.

Xu works tirelessly in his Beijing countryside studio with his welding torch and mask, akin to a farmer tending his field. His hundred-plus artworks are a testament to his dedication, not just in number but in artistic quality. I believe his artwork is top-notch in China and proud among global sculptures. Xu exemplifies the creative spirit of Chinese artists—those who create solely for art's sake and personal enjoyment. Such individuals are indeed the backbone and hope of Chinese art.

## ENDNOTES

1. H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Western Art*, trans. Zou Denon and others

(Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1986), 371.

2. *Ibid.*, 371.

3. *Ibid.*, 599.