

# The Seventh Shanghai Art Fair

by CAO YIN

No sign of cadavers, elephant dung or, for that matter, risqué commentaries on Chinese politics. The annual Shanghai Art Fair, now in its seventh year, remains as much a test of what the market will bear as an exploration of the new. ([Image 1](#))

The commercial flavour is clear from the moment visitors step into the aptly named Shanghai Mart. This year, they had first to skip the temptations of the National Chocolate and Ice Cream Fair on the building's ground floor before reaching the art fair. Once inside, the patron is wooed by a 'townsfolk's edition' of an entire floor filled with low-priced decorative works intended to fit and fill the many high-rise apartment blocks newly gracing the city's skyline.

Only on the Mart's fourth floor did the real art begin in 'The Masters' section of almost 400 exhibit booths prepared by artists, art dealers and cultural organisations from within China and abroad. Here too commerce dominates. Many of the galleries' wares carried price tags alongside their descriptive titles, with foreign dealers in particular hoping to repeat recent sales to China's expanding legions of art-inclined wealthy individuals and companies. Then again, what should one expect from an art fair in an economy that, it is estimated, will grow by ten per cent this year, with Shanghai - for so long, the country's most Westernised metropolis - very much the dynamo of that growth? Well, quite a lot, actually.

The country's most established annual art event is becoming a showcase for emerging local artists experimenting with what it means to be Chinese in a nation opening up to the world. For other Chinese exhibitors though, that question is meaningless since so many of them now work from studios scattered around the world. And for foreign artists, this event offers a chance to communicate with an audience that has an ever increasing appetite for new ideas.

## Shanghai flair

With about 50,000 visitors to the six-day event, this year's event, the seventh of its kind, underscored the city's historic - and now economic advantages - that make it difficult for other Chinese cities to compete; a point acknowledged by some participants.

'When you compare the art fairs in Beijing and Guangzhou (formerly known as Canton) Shanghai started relatively late but has a much brighter future than others,' said Cheng Xindong, a Chinese art dealer with galleries in both Paris and Beijing, who has exhibited in each of the seven Shanghai art fairs. 'It is not only because the local government is paying quite important attention to it by making the Shanghai Art Fair a part of the International Art Festival. Shanghai also has a tradition of being open-minded and quicker to accept modern or western cultural ideas. They also have sharper business minds and so realize that art can generate a profit if one is willing to invest.' That allure is increasingly drawing artists to Shanghai for the fair, and also to set up studios and galleries to help promote their work. 'The fair is an opportunity for us to gain exposure for our work,' said Yi Yun, a painter originally from China's north-east region who also exhibited at two previous Shanghai fairs, and is opening a studio in the city. 'Shanghai is very developed, and it is easy to make one's name known widely,' echoed Le Longyao, a painter from the southern city of Guangzhou.

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Some of the foreign artist and dealer participants at the fair offered more cautious comments, noting that Shanghai's market, while making advances, still lags behind in terms of sophistication and range when compared to some of the other big markets in developed countries. For example, the fair is still dominated by paintings, with only a few exhibits using other media such as sculpture and none with video or computer.

#### **Foreign interest**

One lady from the Emmart Centre in Paris noted the widespread prediction that Asia's share of the global art markets is likely to continue growing, making Shanghai an increasingly important location to exhibit. The centre exhibited at the Shanghai fair for the first time, displaying works by well-known French contemporary artists, such as Jean Dubuffet, Vieira Da Silva, Roger Bissiere ([Image 2](#)), André Masson and Arpad Szenes. The centre also participated with the hope of scouting for fresh talent and discovering new artists.

Only two US galleries appeared at this year's fair: Emmanuel Javogue Fine Arts Company from Miami, Florida, and the Shona Gallery from Arizona. The former, the major agent of Renoir's works in the States, presented works by big name masters, such as Picasso, Gauguin, Raoul Dufy, Jacques Lipchitz, Richard Guino, Auguste Rodin, Diego Giacometti as well as Renoir himself. With such a stellar line-up, it is not surprising that the gallery attracted mobs of visitors, although Emmanuel Javogue said he was surprised by the enthusiasm shown by the crowds. ([Image 3](#))

Javogue had other reasons to feel satisfied. At the end of the fair, the main organizer of the event, the Shanghai Cultural Development Foundation, acquired a Renoir and Guino's '*Tete de la grande venus*' (1915) plus a drawing by Picasso, to add to its rapidly expanding collection of Western art. Emmanuel Javogue also made a bit of a splash of his own, promising that his company would donate a new cast of Rodin's '*Le Penseur*' next year. In a similar vein, the Shona Gallery sold two paintings by the artist Ken Freeman, depicting scenes of the American West. It also donated the rest of the paintings it brought to the fair - around 20 - to the Shanghai Red Cross. Among other big foreign artworks on display was a combined effort by the Korea Gallery Association, made up of the top ten galleries in South Korea. The collection showed off the work of some of the most popular Korean artists, such as Young-ha Park, Jin Hyeok, Jung-Ho Kwon, Myung-Bo Sim, Yong-Deok Lee, Sung-Tae Park ([Image 4](#)), Hye-Yong Jang ([Image 5](#)) et al. Wang Anwei from the publicity department of the Shanghai Art Fair welcomed the interest from abroad, saying the increase in both the quantity and quality of foreign galleries marked the defining characteristic of the seventh fair. Overseas galleries occupied more than fifty display areas, or more than a quarter of the total exhibition space.

#### **Mixed media**

Painting, whether on paper, canvas or other material, proved to be the overwhelming preference of artists and galleries exhibiting works, with a number of sculptures and decorative ceramics ([Image 6](#)) also on display. Sung-tae Park was one of the few to depart from that norm, with his 'horses' installation. Park's work created a three-dimensional image on the exhibiting board, by casting shadows on aluminium horse sculptures with lights shining through fly-screen wire sculpted on carved wooden models. Among the paintings, oil paintings of real-life images probably occupied the biggest single style on display. Xiong Zu Guo's portrait of a smiling Princess Diana drew crowds of viewers who admired the artist's skill in capturing the details of the late princess. Similar subject matter of so-called 'pretty faces' and scenery, aimed at pleasing the viewer with the familiar, was common among many of those displaying works. Such an approach made sense, said Mr Wang of the fair's publicity section, since exhibitors were appealing to a Shanghai audience very likely to want to decorate their homes with Western-style paintings. Artists such as Shanghai painter, Wang Xiangming

Many of the fair's publicity sections, since exhibitors were appealing to a Shanghai audience very likely to want to decorate their homes with Western-style paintings. Artists such as Shanghai painter, Wang Xiangming who understood that preference, succeeded in making many sales. Wang said his paintings typically favoured very bright colours aiming to fill his viewer with peaceful feelings, a style deeply influenced by the way he lives his own life. In terms of crowd pleasing, Wang's approach certainly seemed to have more success than some of the galleries and booths displaying more abstract works.

### **Overseas School**

Perhaps the greatest buzz of interest was generated by the so-called '*Hai Pai*' (overseas school) of painters. For example, works by Chu Teh-Chun and Fang Shichong (Julien Fang) were given unmatched prominence within the event by the organizer and thus attended by many visitors. Chu's success in the West is marked by being appointed as a member of the Academie des Beaux-Arts de l'Institute de France in 1977. Chu's paintings were described by critics as '*naturalisme abstrait*' and he himself as '*paysagiste abstrait*' and his works remind viewers of traits of Chinese paintings and calligraphy. Fang is considered to be a great master after Chu, from the second generation of Chinese artists in Paris. Fang was already a famous portrait painter before he left China in 1987. He is very skilful in conveying oriental ideas by Western means, and his mingled style incorporates both abstraction and accuracy.

Jin G Kam was another overseas Chinese painter whose paintings attracted special interest, especially among journalists and critics covering the fair for local news organisations. Kam, now based in the US, has drawn attention with his paintings of famous musicians such as Leonard Bernstein, pianist Horowitz, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and a whole range of jazz and blues artists such as Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. Kam calls on visitors to 'see the music...listen to the art'. ([Image 7](#))

Other overseas Chinese painters whose work was shown at the fair included Chiu Tak Hak, Luk Yan Shing ([Image 8](#)) and Kon Chin To from France. Inside the booth of painter Pan Qi Qun, a Chinese-born artist living in Los Angeles, abstract paintings with horizontal and vertical bands running through iridescent colours were shown together with stone sculptures which have similar colour combinations and help to enhance each other.

### **Chinese trends**

As might be expected at an art fair in China's biggest commercial centre, many of the paintings on display carried a distinctly Chinese style. Artists presented contemporary Chinoiserie and included depictions of costumes, motifs and even antique ceramics, all unmistakably Chinese. This type of painting tends to generate a good reception among Westerners, including those residing in the country.

Among Chinese artists willing to baffle convention, were the so-called (in Chinese criticism at least) realist-surrealist painters, such as Zhang Xiaogang, ([Image 9](#)) Xin Haizhou ([Image 10](#)) and Feng Zhengjie. As can be seen from pictures, the visions are eye-catching and provocative. Even so, the most likely buyers of such works tend to be other artists with similar interests, or cultural organisations, rather than common folk, at least according to staff from a gallery mainly selling this kind of contemporary art. Perhaps by offering up the works of traditional Chinese paintings, the Seventh Shanghai Art Fair was making a concession to art over commerce. Among the famous artists on display were some of the country's 'Old Masters' including Zhang Daqian, Xu Beihong, Fu Baoshi, Shi Lu, Xie Zhiliu, and Chen Peiqiu. Of those represented Chen Peiqiu's paintings in particular sold very well. Perhaps one reason for the popularity among buyers is price. 'Chinese artists are still undervalued,' said one Western buyer.

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According to Zhao Tongnai, a painter from the central Chinese city of Xian, the main reason that traditional Chinese paintings have lost their allure for Chinese buyers is that the physical limits of modern homes don't fit their form; low-ceiling apartments simply can't accommodate long scrolls. And it's not just size or the shape of pictures. Local buyers are less drawn to the ink and watercolour paintings; the black ink and pale colours are not the bright decoration sought by many homeowners. That means artists wanting to sell to them have no other choice than to adapt. Some switch to oil paintings completely, for example the three young painters from Kunshan Hua Yuan (Kunshan Institute of Painting) As for style, most people in the Jiansu Province bordering Shanghai still prefer Chinese paintings to Western ones, even if the materials have changed. For others, though, the effort to bring the elements of Western paintings into their art goes on.

### **Sculpture**

The art fair organizers might want to review the space - or rather, the lack of it - set aside for sculpture pieces; this year's event involved only a few works compared with the number of paintings, drawings and prints. Yet, the famous objects on display, both classic and modern, proved crowd pleasers, and may prompt greater space and prominence being granted at future fairs. Probably the success of selling '*Le Penseur*' and César's '*Thumb*' at previous fairs has convinced foreign galleries that there's a market for their objects in Shanghai - with large companies seemingly the most interested buyers.

France's Xin-Dong Cheng Gallery, which sold '*Le Penseur*' and '*Thumb*', was again audacious. It brought Jean-Pierre Ronald's work '*Red Base*' to exhibit, 1.8 metres tall and 2 metres in diameter, constructed with steel and cement. With an eye for the market, the gallery gave the piece a very auspicious Chinese name, '*Hongse Jubaopen*', (red basin for gathering treasure). Cheng hopes the bright red colour will lure Chinese collectors to make Shanghai its permanent home.

In summary, commercial concerns very much set the context of the fair and its contents. As Sun Liang, a Shanghai-based artist, noted, 'There are three kinds of Chinese art: socialist, anti-socialist, and commercial'. While the first two effectively eliminated themselves in the eyes of the organizers due to artistic or political considerations, the Seventh Shanghai Fair demonstrated there is enough of the third category to lure 50,000 visitors, some of them customers too.