



From the Tiger's Mouth painted by Wu Yunhua

Zixuan Chen

School of Chinese and Humanities, Faculty of Art, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

1245705401@qq.com

Abstract. This article introduces Chinese contemporary artist Wu Yunhua's representative oil painting—From the Tiger's Mouth, and his painting career. Wu Yunhua is an outstanding representative of Chinese contemporary realism artists. Influenced by Soviet artistic concepts, his works are closely linked to the spirit of the times, historical trends and workers' heroism, and display a strong sense of romanticism.

Keywords: Wu Yunhua, From the Tiger's Mouth, Socialist, realism

1 Introduction

The development of Chinese contemporary art has been a tortuous process, with political, economic, and propaganda factors influencing artists' creations. Wu Yunhua is an experienced and prolific artist, whose creative style is a combination of Chinese, Western and Soviet genres. In this essay, we will start from analyzing his representative works, and gradually delve into the relationship between the realist expression and external factors.

2 Visual analysis

Chinese contemporary artist Wu Yunhua painted the oil painting named From the Tiger's Mouth (Fig. 1) on canvas in 1972. Excluding the frame, the painting is 221 cm in length and 201 cm in width^[1]. The painter intended the figures in the picture to be close to actual human size. Hence the scale of the painting is relatively large. This arrangement has the advantage of catching the viewer's eye at first glance and enhancing the realism of the people in the picture. Thus, it is visually striking and creates a sense of immersion.



Fig. 1. Wu Yunhua, *From the Tiger's Mouth*, 1972, on canvas, length of 221 centimeters and width of 201 centimeters, M+ Sigg Collection.

Wu Yunhua uses large-scale blurred blocks of color in the background to create a hazy atmosphere and reinforce the realism of the image^[12]. In the centre of the foreground, the artist depicts two workers as the prominent figures, with the highlighting of the image focused on them^[2]. The worker in front is in a position of a lunge with his left leg bent at the knee and right leg supporting his body, holding a pneumatic drill in his hands. The worker behind him is holding a stick, pounding the ore in front of him. The two workers did not look at the audience directly. Instead, they focused on the direction of the stick and the spray of water from the drill. In the background of the image, there are also five workers. The four workers in the painting's upper left corner and middle right side are studying the ore in front of them. Without exception, their eyes are all focused on the ore in front of them, showing the workers' unwavering focus and commitment to the task at hand. One of the remaining workers grips the ladder with both hands. As his eyes are looking down, it indicates he is carefully making his way down the ladder to somewhere deeper. Due to the presence of groundwater, the mine is at risk of flooding at any time. Nevertheless, even under tremendous potential danger, the workers' facial expressions show no signs of fear or hesitation, showing their remarkable courage and selfless dedication.

3 Artistic career of Wu Yunhua

Wu Yunhua was born in Heilongjiang Province in 1944, so he experienced poverty, warfare, and famine in his childhood^[2]. In 1956, he entered the Northeast College, affiliated with the School of Fine Art, to study. Then he entered the Industrial Arts Department of the Luxun Academy in 1963 and graduated in 1968. This school's

principle “creating art for the common people” has profoundly influenced Wu Yunhua's understanding of art and cultivated a sense of national responsibility^[2]. His *From the Tiger's Mouth* demonstrates Luxun Academy's spirit by reflecting worker's ideals and aspirations that pursue socialism with diligent efforts.

After graduating in 1968, Wu Yunhua was assigned to the Liaoning Provincial Art Creation Group. To finish the assignments, Wu Yunhua and other young artists were required to go to the frontline and live with the miners. Through close observation, Wu Yunhua truly felt the spirit of collectivism, heroism, and mutual helpfulness among workers and created two stylistic heroic figures in *From the Tiger's Mouth*. In the same period, he also created another painting concentrated on the common people—Chairman Mao's inspection tour in Fushun (Fig.2). This painting shows Chairman Mao and the coal miners looking towards a better future together. The workers are still wearing their work clothes, with white towels around their necks to wipe away sweat. Their faces are still wreathed in smiles. Because they believe that they are the protagonists in building the country and their work makes them feel joyful and honourable^[3]. The national art museum of China exhibited both works in the 1970s.



Fig. 2. Wu Yunhua, Chairman Mao's inspection tour in Fushun.

4 Socialist realism in Wu Yunhua's works

The principle of creating art to serve the people could trace back to Mao's talk at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1943. Mao also encouraged artists and intellectuals to engage with the lives of the urban proletariat and impoverished peasants^[11]. This is the way not only to communicate with the common people and experience the vernacular culture but also transform the ideology and identities of artists to align with those of the masses^[4]. The principle in Mao's talk considerably impacts a generation of artists including Wu Yunhua, as we can see the stylistic revolutionary realism in *From the Tiger's Mouth* and *Chairman Mao's inspection tour in Fushun*.

The Soviet Union's socialist realism also influenced Wu Yunhua's creation of *From the Tiger's Mouth*. On April 23, 1932, the Soviet Union's Central Committee of the Communist Party stated the expression of “socialist realism”. The Soviet critics

explain the form of art as the objective and realistic depiction of the common people's lives^[5]. The feature also appears in Wu Yunhua's *From the Tiger's Mouth*. Also, Chairman Mao's inspection tour in Fushun shares a similar composition of groups of people standing on the lands where they work, expecting a brighter future brimful with happiness, with Mylnikov's painting——*In Peaceful Fields* (Fig.3).



Fig. 3. A. Mylnikov. *In the Peaceful Fields*, 1950

After the Reform and Opening up, Wu Yunhua undertook further education in the oil painting department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts from 1985 to 1987. In this period, he broadly absorbed the skills of impressionism, expressionism, and abstract expressionism^[6]. Wu Yunhua applied western theories in his masterpiece *Miners Descend into Pit like jet black gold* in 1982 (Fig.4). In the 1990s, he enhanced his attention to visual form and investigated a series of traditional Chinese folk art^[7]. However, he continuously maintains the tradition that depicts the common people as the main figures in his painting^[8]. Now Wu Yunhua is a member of the China Artist Association and works as the Vice-President of the Artist Association in Liaoning Province.



Fig. 4. Wu Yunhua, *Miners Descend into Pit like jet black gold*, 1982

The depiction of workers is an easily acceptable mean for delivering the meanings of political slogan and propaganda^[9]. In Wu Yunhua's works, the heroic figures of miners show the dignity of labour and promote all the workers who view it to emulate the role models^[13]. A critical attempt to attract the workers and peasants is changing the artist's identity. Artists like Wu Yunhua were sent to learn from the worker's life as a "student". This process bridges the gap between two forces in the building of Chinese socialism and is one of Mao's significant actions to reform Chinese society^[10].

5 Conclusion

Around the time of the Cultural Revolution, the Communist government of China under Mao Zedong made it an important goal of artistic creation to strengthen the propaganda of the workers' principal position. Taking political factors into account, Wu Yunhua studied the Soviet Union's heroic portrayal of workers and developed his own unique artistic style. His socialist realism works demonstrate, at a level of romantic expression, the lofty honor of the workers of the time and the government's pursuit of ideological direction.

Reference

1. Li Y.(2009) Wu Yunhua, an oil painting master worthy of expectation. *Art Wide Angle*,(05):95-96.https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTIOAiTRKgchrJ08w1e75TZJapvoLK1VhrxuzbPOkd0C_i90jbo7pBSkFAuBulDraLaH644cWE-xHw2FSD5e&uniplatform=NZKPT
2. Li M.(2019) Pursuing the Pulse of The Times: Wu Yunhua's art creation and Practice . *With the time* ,(12):53-54.DOI:10.16129/j.cnki.mysdz.2019.12.025.
3. Zhou W.(2005) Wu Yunhua and his painting art . *Grand View of Fine Arts*,(03):6-7.<http://hs.kns.cnki.net.dr2am-2.wust.edu.cn/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTIOAiTRKgchrJ08w1e7F1IFNsBV5UsmToc34t0IoRXUAMY5BlgCQ0BHeZPfbQeelWmlm6Yvrur-tw7ok0rH&uniplatform=NZKPT>
4. Xu P.(2005) Taking Responsibility with Art -- Impression of oil painter Wu Yunhua. *Art Wide Angle*,(05):4+2+65.<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTIOAiTRKgchrJ08w1e7F1IFNsBV5Ut5D0nOVadfH-rPI6Xs3nzdjYmVVyKW0wlnlp0qx3JBRqp1E06D8naV&uniplatform=NZKPT>
5. Chen Z.(2005) Seeking both "Source" and "Flow", Painting Advancing with The Times -- A Brief discussion on Wu Yunhua's realistic Oil Painting . *Art Wide Angle*,(05):5-9..<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTIOAiTRKgchrJ08w1e7F1IFNsBV5Ut5D0nOVadfH-rPI6Xs3nzdLe1JGGS3BLU26nVN3J0aabonUq4YiL75&uniplatform=NZKPT>
6. Zhou W.(2005)Wu Yunhua and his painting art . *Grand View of Fine Arts*, (03):6-7.<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTIOAiTRKgchrJ08w1e7F1IFNsBV5UsmToc34t0IoRXUAMY5BlgCQ0BHeZPfbQemEUVXms61sZvuXpgNj1d&uniplatform=NZKPT>

7. Zhong H.(1996) Sweetness and Bitterness in Painting -- Wu Yunhua's oil painting. *Fine Arts Observation*,(10):29-19.<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTlOAIiTRKjKpgKvIT9NkZNMqNo4kSVoOhKw0ivNn8u1jAGemImqJE9gKYLI7XnjOmAdnvYPRYJV6e5FgBQZF&uniplatform=NZKPT>
8. Zhou W.(2005)Wu Yunhua and his painting art . *Grand View of Fine Arts*, (03):6-7.<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTlOAIiTRKgchrJ08w1e7F1IFNsBV5UsmToc34t0IoRXUAMY5BlgCQ0BHeZPfbQdmEUVCXms61sZvuXp gNj1d&uniplatform=NZKPT>
9. Zhou W.(2005)Wu Yunhua and his painting art . *Grand View of Fine Arts*, (03):6-7.<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTlOAIiTRKgchrJ08w1e7F1IFNsBV5UsmToc34t0IoRXUAMY5BlgCQ0BHeZPfbQdmEUVCXms61sZvuXp gNj1d&uniplatform=NZKPT>
10. Xu P.(2005) Taking Responsibility with Art -- Impression of oil painter Wu Yunhua. *Art Wide Angle*,(05):4+2+65.<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLTlOAIiTRKgchrJ08w1e7F1IFNsBV5U5t5D0nOVadFH-rPI6Xs3nzdjYmVVyKW0wINlp0qx3JBRqp1E06D8naV&uniplatform=NZKPT>
11. Gladston P. (2014)*Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History*. Reaktion Books,PAUL GLADSTON. London.ISBN 978-1-78023-239-0
12. Chin J D .(2021) ‘Global’ Discourse and the Transcultural Field of Contemporary Art in China. *Oxford Art Journal*,43(2).
13. Kharchenkova S.(2018)*The market metaphors: Making sense of the emerging market for contemporary art in China*. *Poetics*,71.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

