



'The Lady on a red sofa' (above) and 'Ling, the lady on the chair' (opposite page)

Moments in Reverie

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Their expressions are always wistful, sometimes even a little sad. But one can only guess the thoughts of these ladies, forever immortalised in resplendent portraits painted by Chinese realistic artist Xue Yanqun. There is something enchanting about them, which is hard to put a finger on. You can't help but feel there is more

to them than meets the eye.

"The thoughtful expression on their faces tends to evoke different feelings from different people, according to their experiences. I paint them like that because it leaves people more space for imagination," said Xue.

Clothed in impeccable outfits, be it an elegant evening gown or a cheongsam

(Chinese traditional dress for ladies), the richness of the fabric and its striking colours is simply dazzling. So lifelike are the portraits you can almost feel the texture of the cloth; in a surge of empathy you feel compelled to reach out and comfort these beautiful strangers.

It is this innate talent that has enabled the 53-year-old Xue to draw more than





'The Teacher' (above) a 'Portrait' (below) 'The Dancer' (opposite page)

300 oil paintings. Of these, almost all are found in the collections of art galleries, individual organisations and private buyers. "I am told people like the silhouette, the way light is depicted, the fine accents and the tranquil beauty of my oil paintings. Maybe it's because they are seeking something more than the noisy, material world we're living in," said Xue.

Born in Dalian, China in 1953, the world that Xue first remembered was one of turmoil. "My parents were both teachers but my family, like every other Chinese family in those days, were involved in the political upheaval. So they, together with many of my elders, were imprisoned. The result was I had to live with my grandparents from young."

Ironically, it was during the times of hardship that Xue turned to what eventually became his lifelong career – drawing. "My grandmother was afraid of the government and did not talk much. Surrounded by such an environment meant that I only started talking when I was

almost three. Even so, my main mode of expression was through drawing on every available piece of paper I could lay my hands on.

"I remember the frequent walks I took with my grandmother. When I went home, I would draw what I saw on those walks. As the years progressed, my home filled up with my drawings. My childhood was a story told on those pieces of paper," Xue reminisced.

Xue hardly saw his parents in his younger days. While serving their prison sentence, they could only verbally encourage Xue. But it was more than enough for through them he developed a love for drawing. "Their encouragement opened a window for me to communicate to the world," remarked Xue.

His family situation and the government's discrimination meant he had virtually no chance to progress. Drawing appealed to him as a form of escape from the hurt and suffering. His talent was soon recognised by others and earned him the praise he





'The Day Dream' (above) and 'Summer' (right)

deserved. Through whatever little bit of success he encountered, he found his self-respect and gained confidence. "I decided then that it was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life," said Xue.

It was in his primary school years that Xue drew his first piece – *The Beautiful City*. "The top floor of my schoolhouse was a little art studio which faced north. The view was unobstructed by the dilapidated roofs of the city. In the distance I could see a bay where ships would sail. I passed much of my time there after school and it was there that I created my first painting."

As he left his primary school years behind, China plunged headlong into the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese government commissioned him to create many posters. Each proclaimed the positive aspects of the revolution and glorified then leader Mao Zedong. "The people in the

posters had dramatic actions and the colours used were unreal! But admittedly, I came into contact with many different drawing mediums and was thus able to refine my technique."

Xue was eventually posted to work in a factory during which he lived in an apartment. His workplace provided him with an array of different materials to work with. "Even with my meagre income, I could practice my drawing. I didn't realise it but I was unwittingly preparing for my future re-entry to school." Fate dealt Xue a kind hand, for when he eventually did he emerged as the top student in his city and was accepted into the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art in Shenyang in 1977.

It was during the years of the Cultural Revolution that he met his wife. "After my father was released from prison, he was transferred to a lower level job in a factory.

Father was put in charge of artistic performances. I still remember the beautiful dancer who choreographed the dances and trained the dancers. She was kind, friendly, humble and professional. Everyone trusted and respected her.

"She was also a frequent guest at my house and was captivated by my piano and drawing skills. Eventually she became my girlfriend and stayed with me despite me repeatedly moving house. We got married soon after. Now when I look back, it was probably all meticulously arranged by my father; our union was supported by both our families!"

Xue went on to complete his graduate studies and received a Masters of Fine Art in 1989. He became a professor in an art school and a member of the Chinese Artist's Association. Six of his pieces were shown and sold in the auctions of





'The Poem' (above), 'Linda's Portrait' (below)

Christie's Swire in Hong Kong and Taipei.

If you ask him why creating a piece of art, either as a drawing or painting, appealed to him, Xue will give a simple answer, "I just like it!" He likens the instance of sitting in front of an empty drawing pad to meeting his bride. "I'll wait for the lines and colours to appear. And when they do, it is like lifting the veil of my bride."

The trick, he says, is to concentrate on what you are feeling, focus on the sign that repeatedly appears and follow its prompting. Then will you reach where you finally want to go. Xue warns of obstacles that might get in the way but says it should never prevent the completion of a drawing.

Perhaps the greatest influence he has had was from the Russian Society of Travelling Exhibitions. "Their attitude towards life and drawing techniques attracted me deeply. It was through the exhibition that I started to seek reality and depict the lower class of society. My style became more natural and true to what I saw. However, I must add that my interpretations were far from similar to

what met the eye. There's a piece I painted in the Chinese National Art Gallery entitled 'Teacher' that has strong influences of their style."

He's spent many an hour visiting the museums of Beijing, especially the Forbidden City's art museum. A great admirer of Chinese artist Chen Yifei, Xue sings his praises. "At the age of 21, Chen did oil paintings that shocked the country. His profound skill in oil painting, unending quest for beauty, constant yearning to improve his skills and love for his friends are admirable."

In addition to the great masters of art, Xue also speaks of his admiration towards Italian artist Sandro Botticelli in his school days. "Botticelli's style was refreshing. It was probably because of that and my gentle nature and love for drawing people in the traditional Chinese realistic painting style that the figures in my oil paintings started to change."

As the years progressed, Xue acknowledges the evolution of his drawing style. "I started to mix the traditional Chinese realistic painting style with the modern western painting style of the great masters. Gradually my portraits started to take on the definite shape that is what you see today."

These days Xue resides in Vancouver, Canada, where he is a full-time artist. He works from his home studio, occasionally teaching children and travelling in his free time. "I'm not like the run-of-the-mill artist. I see myself more as an art teacher. I don't believe in letting go of reality or being self-centred as many artists tend to be. I love my family and am quite content to stay at home and work on my oil paintings."

As an artist, he believes sincerity and the persistent act of seeking beauty is the order of the day. "I'm not one easily influenced by criticism and will not try to change myself to suit others. So you can tell that I'm not too interested in the latest art trends. Beauty motivates my performance and that is an element that is very strong in my oil paintings."

His philosophy in life is summarised in four simple phrases – love the people around you, respect yourself, be yourself and leave a legacy. It is the very same philosophy and values that have propelled Xue through his 53 years. As the Chinese artist prepares to paint yet another portrait of a beautiful lady, you can be sure it will be another spellbinding masterpiece. ☺