

Lin Gang

Lin Gang, Born in September 1925, Ningjin, Shandong province. Lives and works in Beijing, China
Professor of the Oil Painting Department in the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing
Director of CAFA Oil Painting Studio II (1964 - 1986)
and Studio IV which was founded by Lin Gang in 1985
From the 1960s to the 1990s, advisor of post-graduate students in CAFA, Beijing.

A member of the China Oil Painters' Association
Honorary Professor, I.E.Repin Academy in Leningrad, Russia



1943

Together with his younger sister ran away from the Japanese invaded and occupied areas of Jinnan, Shandong province and became a student in exile

1944

Entered in Mianyang No.6 Middle School, Sichuan province where he participated in the revolutionary students' movements. He was attacked by the Nationalists and expelled from the school . He made his way to the liberated area.

1946-1949

Studied in Fine Arts Department of Huabei United University, Zhangjiakou, Hebei Province.

1949

Huabei United University merged with Beiping Guoli Art School became the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing. Research officer at CAFA.

1951

MFA , the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Assistant professor.



1953

Studied Russian at the Foreign Languages School, Beijing

1954-1960

Studied drawing and oil painting in I. E. Repin Academy of Fine Arts, and the studio of B.V. Ioganson, in Leningrad, USSR. Upon graduation, officially awarded the title of 'Artist'

1960

Returned to China.

1960 –1990's

Professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing

Selected exhibitions and awards

1951

The 'nian hua' painting Zhao Guilan at the Heroes Reception won the top national 'nian hua' painting award

1960-1979

More than ten major oil paintings on the subject of Chinese revolutionary history, subsequently collected by the National Museum in Beijing, and Hunan Museum, Hunan province

1979

Eventful Years [painted with Pang Tao] won second prize both nationally and in Beijing

1980s

Started to create the Desert Wind Series

1984

The Portrait of Artist Wang Shikuo was awarded the Guangming Daily Art Prize.

Paintings by Lin Gang and Pang Tao, published and published second edition in 1987

1985

Road was awarded honorary prize at the National Art Exhibition, and collected by Beijing Artists' Association

80s-mid 90 His style of painting underwent great change. Paintings were exhibited widely in many

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major exhibitions in China and abroad, collected by museums and private collectors.

1989-1990

Traveling to the United States

1993-1994

Received the 20th Century Award for Achievement by IBC [Who's Who], Cambridge, UK Distinguished Leadership Award for Extraordinary Service to the Teaching Profession by the ABI International Directory 15th Edition of Distinguished Leadership, US.

1997

The Storm Society and Post-Storm Art Phenomenon, with full color catalogue, Taiwan

1998

China 5000 - A Century in Crisis, Guggenheim Museum, New York.

2000

The Masterpieces of China's Modern Oil Painting Master - Lin Gang published
Art Span – Nine artists from one family 1930 –2000, Shanghai, part of Shanghai Biannual

2004

Lin Gang – Paintings from 1980's, Art Gallery of Beijing International Art Palace, Beijing, China

2010

60-year Restropotive, National Art Museum of China

From Records of Revolution to Questions of Life: The Development of Lin Gang's Painting

By Shui Tianzhong

Translated by Karen Smith, 2000

In the middle of the twentieth century, the mainstream of Chinese oil painting was realism. In the 1950s, a group of young artists appeared who both excelled in the techniques of realism and were sensitive to the great historic change of the moment. They also possessed great enthusiasm towards the new life of China, and were to become the representative artists of this middle period of the twentieth century. One of these was Lin Gang.



However, Lin Gang differed from those around him in that in the 1980s his work experienced a great change: He had brought together the language of abstraction and expressionism with his own creative approach to arrive at a new kind of art. Such a great and successful change at the time, amongst this generation of older artists, was very rare.

Lin Gang's artistic road can be said to begin with the painting "*Zhao Guilan at the Heroes Reception*"(pic.1). This "nian hua" painting took almost two months to produce. Although the composition appears to have been planned down to the minutest detail, the work still effuses naturalism. It radiates a sense of magnificence yet is not overly exaggerated. Amongst the many "nian hua" paintings produced at the time, this work stood out immediately, and carried off the trophy for the 1951 "nian hua" painting award.

Today, few people understand the background story behind the painting "*Zhao Guilan at the Heroes Reception*". Putting that aside and looking purely at the development of "nian hua" painting in the 1950s, this work clearly exerted a distinct impact. It also reveals that Lin Gang was already ahead of others in thinking about certain issues in painting that needed to be resolved. He was keen to find his own way of representing everything from the form of the figures to the general environment, to the 'props' in the scene. Compared to so many of the propaganda images of the times, this painting exhibited both an individual aesthetic and an array of new ideas. Naturally at the time, "*Zhao Guilan at the Heroes Reception*" attracted wide attention from the people.

In 1954, Lin Gang was sent to the Soviet Union to study. He, and classmates Quan Shanshi and Xiao Feng, entered the Repin Academy in Leningrad. There, they followed two years of technical academic training, before Lin Gang moved to the studio of B.V. Ioganson, one of the most respected master-painters of the times. Ioganson placed strong emphasis on structure and unity, strength and substance, that an artist had to wrestle with the paint on the canvas, not take time to coax it along. From the perspective of Chinese traditional art, Ioganson's approach lent towards a more freehand style. In oil paint, he emphatically used colour to express space, relying on colour not drawing to carve out the form. In creating the space between background and foreground, he demanded the use of changing colour to effect pictorial distance: Ioganson believed that colour could be breathed. Regardless of the subject matter, a painting had to be constructed of rich yet subtle and carefully balanced relationships between colours, each enhancing the beauty of the next. For the Chinese students, grasping this notion of colour was far more difficult and challenging than formulating drawings. Lin Gang's greatest acquisition from Ioganson's studio was his sense of expression through colour. When he returned to China, as a professor in the Central Academy, this became a distinct element of his teaching.

Lin Gang was already 29 years old when he went to study in the Soviet Union. With the experiences of his 29 years, he was more mature than the other Soviet students in his class. But in art, he was an adolescent seeking knowledge. At the time, the atmosphere in Soviet art circles was both more open and lively than in China. Both within and without of the Academy, Lin Gang was witness to a multitude of artistic experimentation and

many opposing opinions on aesthetics. At the time that “Zhao Guilan at the Heroes Reception” won its award, Qi Baishi’s realism aesthetic had become the adopted style of China’s art. This alerted Lin Gang to the fact that two very different strands of art coexisted; the first was those works that received wide public promotion and praise. The second were simply good, if unrecognized, paintings. Through the six years he spent in Leningrad, Lin Gang clearly came to understand the notion of true art. He realized that his earlier works contained too many non-art elements or considerations. In drawing he admired Rembrandt; in colour he liked the Impressionists. He wished to bring these styles to a Chinese “xieyi” (freehand) approach. At the same time, he understood that art had to be the product of a synthesized state and not arrived at through academic training alone, which could only raise the level of the individual’s painting skills.

After returning to Beijing, he became involved in creating enormous revolutionary history works, such as; “Against the War”, “In Prison”(pic.2), “Joining Forces at Jinggang Mountain” (1975)(pic.3), “Investigation in the Countryside”(pic.4), “Funeral of Zhou Enlai” (1977)(pic.5), “Crossing to the East”, “Premiere Zhou, Our Great Friend” (1977)(pic.6), “Eventful Years” (1979)(pic.7), and “Road”(pic.8). Some of these were done in co-operation with other artists, but the composition and the colour scheme of the majority of the works were largely completed by Lin Gang himself. In some of them, he

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used the classical oil painting technique of building up an image through translucent layers of pigment diluted in oil. This was the first time such techniques had been employed for works of such enormous proportions in China. Naturally, the artists' main concern was the careful rendering of the history of the revolution, however, Lin Gang employed techniques that went beyond normal realism in an attempt to attain a free, pure approach to art.

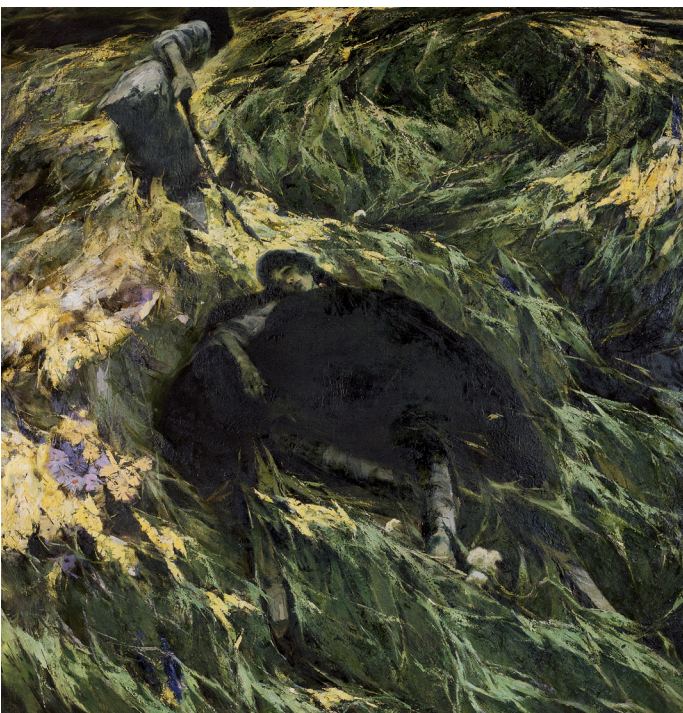


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The important works from the 1960s are Lin Gang's **small landscapes and sketches**. At the time, these were only produced as preparatory materials for larger works, unrealized because of the historical circumstances. Now, they are viewed as major works of the period. On a brighter note, because Lin Gang was only able to make such small drawings and sketches in those years, he was able to avoid interference from outside the sphere of art. Xibei's high plains, Jiangnan's leafy foliage, flora and fauna in the sunlight, country villages in the clouds, in Lin Gang's paintings these scenes and objects appear free, relaxed, simple and full of human warmth.

From the middle of the 1960s, from 1964 to be precise, China's artists lost anything like a normal art environment.

When the era of extreme leftism under the Gang of Four came to an end, China's artists experienced the second liberation and returned again to their own methods of creativity. For the first time in a decade, Lin Gang was not under order to create a history painting. However, for the first anniversary of Zhou Enlai's death on January 8th, 1977, he elected to take two months together with several other artists to produce three works



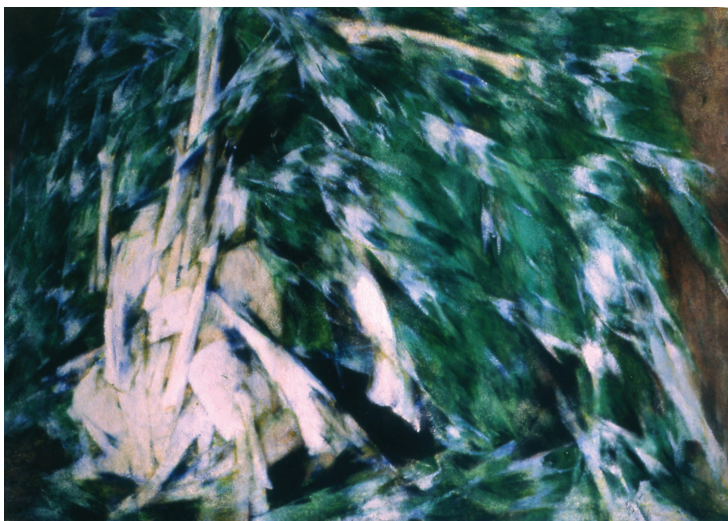
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commemorating the former premiere. The first two works were titled “*Funeral of Zhou Enlai*” and “*Crossing to the East*”. The idea for the third, “*Premiere Zhou, Our Great Friend*” was put forward by Su Gaoli. No long afterwards, Lin Gang participated in the History Painting Exhibition organized by the Museum of Revolutionary History. As his subject he selected “*Mao Writing a Poem on the Long March*”. When the print-maker Gu Yuan saw this work he changed the title to “*Wan Li Zheng Cheng, Shi Bu Jin*” (pic.9). The last time Lin Gang accepted the task of producing a history oil painting was to paint Zhu De’s third passing through the grasslands. The sadness of the faces in the picture plane is movingly depicted under a subtle guise. During this period, Lin Gang made great efforts to immerse himself in his work. However, due to the restrictions still imposed by history at the time, the work was never completed to Lin Gang’s satisfaction. His comment was, “One can be an individual in art, can alter the concept of art and change its language of expression, but it is very hard to go beyond the restrictions of the times.” This prompted Lin Gang again to consider hard the essence of art.

Again after the period of extreme leftism, Lin Gang’s understanding of art had undergone another important shift in its concept. The lesson he had learned told him that art should avoid specific subjects and objects, directly using the painterly effects of form, colour and rhythm in a more general approach to reflecting the artist’s inner feeling. The works from this period, “*May Flower*” and “*Road*”, show an independent expressionist position and won much interest from art circles in China. The influence of these two works was carried through to several examples of Chinese



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painting and works in oil, but these lack the especial depth and poetic calm of Lin Gang's original work.

Around the 1980s, Lin Gang traveled widely. Several of the journeys were to make lasting impressions on his art. The first took him to the grasslands crossed by the Red Army on the Long March. Another to the far borderlands of the north-western provinces. A third trip took him to the US. The impression he received from the grasslands that marked the route of the Long March imbued him with the tragic aspect of the lofty (revolutionary) spirit. From what he saw and heard as he retraced the route, the spirit of the people and the spirit of nature both moved him greatly. The works "*Road*", "*May Flower*" and the later completed painting "*The Unnamed Dead*" (pic.10), imbue both the people and nature of this tragic part of history with this lofty spirit.



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In Xinjiang, the local culture and the daily living environment of the people left a deep impression upon him. But, what made the greatest impression upon his art was the stubborn shreds of tree roots, the infinity of the expanse and the steadfastness of the "huyang" trees and Chinese tamarisk trees that survived in the arid yellow desert. This was life's struggle for survival. Upon his return from Xinjiang, Lin Gang parted ways with literal plots and illustrative story-telling. He immediately embarked upon his "*Desert Series*" (pic.11). Of course, this was not a notion that took life with his trip. It was the result of long contemplation of life and art.



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In 1989, when Lin Gang went to the US he saw many works of Abstract Expressionism. The painterly approach of the New York School towards formal composition provided much inspiration. Even harder to forget was the grass that grew in the deserts of the Midwest. The fierce stalks of grass of the Midwest plains reminded him of Xinjiang. It is hard to imagine any other plant-life than these light grey strands of grass possessing the strength to survive in this arrogant desert land. It is hard to say whether it is the



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desert or the grass that endures there which has the greater life-force.

In the 1990s, Lin Gang produced one painting after another, expressing the struggle of life in the harshest of environments. The history of people in society was turned into the history of nature and life. Roots in a sand storm, the snow lotus on a frozen mountainside, strands of grass in the yellow desert... these elements became the focal point of Lin Gang's picture planes. In fact, the subjects of Lin Gang's paintings are all closely related. What he seeks to extol is a lofty spirit, compassionate and beautiful, even where tied to hardship. It is the light of life found in circumstances of hardship. Lin Gang enjoys the beauty of tragedy, of struggle, to the point of intoxication. He admires Yan Lugong's calligraphy and Rembrandt's figures, which both reflect beauty. But his art also contains another kind of temperament, a preference for freedom. This kind of temperament is distinct in his brush marks. However weighty or serious the subject with which he is dealing, it is possible to sense the forthright and free motion of Lin Gang's brush, which shows his inherent yearning for life.

In the 1990s, Lin Gang produced many expressionist works. From the 1990 works "*The Unnamed Dead*" and "*Yellow Flower in the Snow*" (pic.12), to the 1994 composition "*Grey Grass*" (pic.13 L), "*Construction Site*" (1998) and "*Flowers in Snow*" (pic.14) painted in 1999, it is possible to see his increasing attention to colour, rhythm, lines and plains, the fundamental expression of these painterly elements. He says "Painting is basically a visual art. I often remind myself not to get too involved in the painterliness of it, but also not to forget the form, the contrast within colour, the sense of space, force, rhythm and other important elements."

Lin Gang's works from the 1990s contain a certain amount of emotional content through descriptions of form, history and personal experience.

A Life Time of Questing

By Wen Lipeng

Translated by Karen Smith. 2000

In 1948, the Northern University, at which I was then studying, merged with Huabei United University at (Zhangjiakou in Hebei Province). The new university was located in the courtyard of the catholic church next to Zhengding Temple. The cultural and professional level of the Huabei United University students was higher than those from the Northern University. I looked enviously upon those double-charactered classmates: Feng Zhen; Li Qi; Ying Tao; Chen Zhi; Ping Shui; Gu Shou; Jin Feng; Deng Shu. Amongst them was a striking youth who went by the pseudonym of Shi Manzi (stubborn rock), and whose real and equally memorable name, was Lin Gang.

During the fifty years of our friendship, I have never asked him why he had such a strange nickname. However, with fifty years' understanding of his character, and of observing him work so hard, I think the name rather speaks for itself.

“It is impossible to break free of the limitations imposed by any one era,” Lin Gang says with a heavy sigh. In fact, during what has been more than fifty years of artistic creativity, Lin Gang has constantly pushing forward and reflected upon his work, consistently gone beyond the limitations of his own history.

The painting “*Zhao Guilan at the Heroes Reception*” (pic.1), produced in 1951, represents the beginning of a new era for art in New China, and the setting of a new artistic standard. From this point of departure, Lin Gang worked through the next ten years, leaping into the 1960s with the work “*In Prison*” (pic.2)(1961). These works reflect two antithetical aesthetic standards and technical approaches to art. They also demonstrate Lin Gang's great leap forward. The broad chasm between eastern and western aesthetic concepts is also found here. Without a great deal of painstaking efforts and labour, the transition from one to the other could not have been achieved, nor could the difference between them be grasped. During this period, Lin Gang was sent to study in the Soviet Union, where he was a model student, achieving success after success, from his skillful descriptions in the realist vein to his expressive sensitivity. With masterful modeling in drawing and his own distinctive use of colour, Lin Gang greatly enriched the language of his oil painting; as he moved from a literary approach to telling and embellishing a story, through a search for poetic description, musical rhythm and melody,

the expressive power of his works became steadily stronger.

Lin Gang never ceased his quest for greater artistic heights. Within the special circumstances of China's history, he clearly realized that a certain utilitarianism was common to both eastern and western approaches to realism, and the limitations engendered by the demands placed upon it. For these reasons, unable to escape the inevitable limitations and contradictions of the times, artist like Lin Gang endured bitterness and confusion in their search for a new art.

With the ten years of chaos over, Lin Gang once again began actively seeking a path for development. He started to revolt against the bindings that had held his creativity in check, seeking to combine the fundamental requirements of revolutionary realism and the true essence of the multitude of elements of oil painting. "*May Flower*" and "*Memorable Years*" are two fine works that represent this period of his work. Following twenty years of experiencing the best and the worst that life had to offer, Lin Gang made another important leap forward. This time it was not only his approach to creating art and the development of his painting skills, but in the philosophical advances Lin Gang had achieved. In his concept of art, it was obvious that he already had both tragic and lofty elements in his field of vision, with which he expanded the sphere of aesthetics. In this way, he gave greater expression to his creative depths.

The period from the 1980s to the 1990s was one of enormous change and development in art in China. It was also the period in which Lin Gang steadily moved forward, with greater maturity and



Lin Gang
Solo Show in Beijing
2000



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confidence in himself. He entered into the search for a spiritual artistic energy, moving towards the realm of metaphysics as his artistic language developed more towards abstraction. From the “*Desert Wind Series*”, “*Road*” (pic.8) (1986), and “*Dunes Series*” (1983), to “*Grey Grass*” (pic. 13)(1994), “*White Hair*”(pic.15)(1996) and “*Black Night*” (pic.16)(1998), you can see the artist tirelessly working through concepts in his art. With back-breaking dedication, every day he worked silently in his studio, resigned to the aspersions society cast upon his art. But everyday, he still found time to take care of the development and experiments of the students in the oil painting department’s Number 4 studio at the Central Academy. He earnestly practiced what he taught, passing on his knowledge to his students, learning from them as much as they learned from him.



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Exploration and climbing have no end. No artist can exhaust the entire world of art. There are always higher peaks around the corner waiting to be summited. What is important is that the natural physical decline that befalls every body has had no impact upon Lin Gang’s mental faculties. The word ‘pause’ (let alone ‘stop’) does not exist in his vocabulary. Lin Gang’s art career has always maintained an attitude of charging forward.

If one does not recognize the limitations of the times and continues on oblivious, it is a pity. Knowing the limitations and being content only to work within them is a great tragedy. If you know the limitations of the period and seek to push beyond the boundaries, this alone is worthy of admiration.

The great transition from classical culture through to the contemporary period of art in China was an extremely grand but arduous one. It owes itself entirely to the hard work, creativity and exploration of each and every artist along the way.

Having Shi Manzi as a classmate made me very happy. Having Lin Gang as a good friend has made me proud.