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Seventy years after his last exhibition in Singapore, Chinese artist Xu Beihong's works are reaching out to a new audience, writes **Clara Chow**

# A little horseplay

A generation of students in Singapore read about Xu Beihong and the magnificent, spirited horses he painted in their standard Chinese-language textbooks. Now they have the chance to see up close what the big deal is about Xu — 70 years after his last major show on the island.

Close to 100 works by the modern Chinese master artist (1895–1953) are on show at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) until July 13. Titled Xu Beihong in Nanyang, the exhibition is jointly mounted by the SAM and Beijing's Xu Beihong Museum, and focuses on the artist's output and friendships during his sojourns to Singapore, Malaya and India before the second world war.

Insured for US\$50 million, the exhibited works come from public and private collections from the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Canada, Singapore and Malaysia. Billed as a blockbuster, the show's poster-work is *Put Down Your Whip* (1939), a 144cm-high, 90cm-wide oil painting that fetched US\$8.2 million at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong last year. It depicts, life-sized, Chinese actress Wang Ying in character as a starving performer in the anti-Japanese

street play of the same name. The exhibition opens with *Slave and Lion*, which fetched US\$6.9 million at Christie's Hong Kong in November 2006. This 1924 oil, painted when Xu was 29, is based on the Roman story of the lion which refused to attack a slave who had removed a thorn from its paw. Apart from the classical subject matter, the composition is also reminiscent of the intriguing light and shadow-play of Renaissance masters.

Exiting the exhibition, visitors are confronted by the epic 1940 ink painting, *The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains*, which pans out like a comic strip, evocative of both Greek heroic nudes and mythical figures from Chinese folk art.

Co-curator Low Sze Wee says Xu constantly sought to reinvent China's art, pushing its boundaries with new techniques and international aesthetics. "During the 1950s, 60s and 70s, China saw a lot of political turmoil. Artists there didn't have the space to practise modern art, like abstraction and realism. It was really its artists overseas who had the opportunity to further Chinese art into newer areas."

Between 1939 and 1941, Xu visited, worked and exhibited in

Singapore, India, Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh, meeting luminaries such as poet Rabindranath Tagore and leader Mahatma Gandhi, and helping to raise funds for war relief efforts in China.

Such was Xu's influence in the early 20th-century Chinese art scene, that many of Singapore's pioneering artists such as Chen Wen

[Xu was] larger than life, and took an active interest in art, love and life. And we can be inspired by a person like that

Low Sze Wee, curator

Hsi, Lee Man Fong and Chen Chong Swee saw him as a mentor or worthy peer. Low says many of them subscribed to his advocacy to closely observe nature and inject realism into Chinese painting.

Xu's famous horses, however, only appear in 10 per cent of the paintings and drawings on display.

The museum limited the horse paintings to a few representative examples to show off Xu's range.

Passion — and a whiff of salaciousness — can be found in the show's contents. *Portrait of Miss Jenny*, a 1939 oil painting on loan from a private collector, shows a woman in a cheongsam seated in a rattan chair with a quietly challenging look on her face. One can only wonder at the relationship between her, a Cantonese dance hostess, and the then-vice-consul of Belgium to Singapore, who had commissioned the painting. So pleased was he with Xu's work that he held an unveiling ceremony for the completed portrait.

More moving is a draft of a love letter written by the artist himself. Around 1939, Xu had made clear his intention to leave his first wife Jiang Biwei for one of his art students, Sun Duoci. But Sun's parents opposed their marriage and packed her off to Lishui in Zhejiang province. In his desperate missive to Sun, while he was on his sixth visit to Singapore, Xu wrote: "I am filled with anguish... Ultimately, you are still a coward. When I delve into the rot of the matter, your sudden love, no matter how passionate or true, can only be described as ephemeral as the



reflection of the flower in the mirror or the moon in the water."

He ends with poetic resignation: "Once broken, a mended bowl will not help matters. I return to my feelings this time last year. Since I cannot have what was not meant for me, then its denial cannot be considered a loss."

Commenting on the allure of Xu to a younger generation of museum-goers who may not be familiar with him, curator Low says: "If viewers were to read up on him, dig deeper into his story and thoughts, then they would discover a person who was deeply charismatic. Very warm, very romantic, larger than life, and who took an active interest in art, love and life. And we can be inspired by a person like that."

The subtext that runs through this ode to Xu's mastery, however, is that of patronage and its relationship with art. On one level, the SAM show is a showcase of Xu's creations in the region — works which might otherwise have not existed without the sanctuaries and benefactors he found on his travels. Eight items in the show,

belonging to the family of Loh Cheng Chuan, a friend of Xu's in Penang, have never been publicly exhibited before.

The show was mooted four years ago, after Singapore's Minister of Information, Communications and the Arts, Lee Boon Yang, met the second wife and widow of Xu, Liao Jingwen, who is also the director of his memorial museum in Beijing. Work began in earnest a year ago. Among the 25 private collectors who eventually agreed to lend their works, the Loh family took some persuading to temporarily part with pieces from their collection. For a year, the curators made phone calls, sent faxes and wrote to the patriarch Loh's sons with their request.

"We were very patient, kept calling and asked them how we could address their concerns," says Low. "It was perseverance, without being pushy. And they saw that we just wanted to present the work with no ulterior motive."

The curator recalls seeing an ink painting of a sick horse during a meeting with Loh Sun Min, the youngest son of the elder Loh (who

contributed a catalogue-essay about his boyhood remembrances of Xu: "When they first unrolled it, I was just, 'Wow! It wasn't the usual horse painting. It was very sober-looking. I knew it was something very special.'"

Unlike Xu's other horses — which adopted heroic stances and were appropriated as symbols of the bold, resilient Chinese spirit — *Sick Horse* (1941) evoked an air of melancholy and dejection. The story goes that Loh Cheng Chuan, moved by the struggles of life and death, old age and sickness, asked Xu to make an exception and paint the ailing animal for him. The latter acceded, alluding in an accompanying poem to how the sick horse is a metaphor for his difficult years in Europe as a struggling painter.

In a written message, Xu's 84-year-old widow calls the show an extension of her husband's efforts to build friendships and promote cultural exchange between China and Singapore. "We believe this exhibition will evoke fond memories in Singaporeans of those times, and they will derive great enjoyment from the beauty of these works."



Xu Beihong's *Standing Horse* (1953, top) and *The Foolish Man Who Removed the Mountains* (1940, above) were sought after by patrons and admirers