

PRESENTATION OF THE SOLO SHOW OF ZHOU WUSHENG, PALAZZO VELLI, ROME, MAY 2015

The growth of Chinese art in the last few decades has been very fast indeed: a growing number of galleries and a larger number of highly rated Chinese artists bear witness to this trend. The first to become enamoured of Chinese art were foreigners, and only recently has an internal Asian market started developing. Nonetheless, traditional and ink-made paintings are an art form still greatly appreciated by Chinese buyers, who consider this type of painting superior to other painting techniques. As further proof of this renewed interest of the Chinese market in their roots, we can note a significant increase in the presence of ink paintings at Art Beijing (an ever growing important contemporary art fair now in its tenth edition) in the last few years, so that we could conclude that this openness towards what is new goes hand in hand with a resurgence of interest for traditional Chinese art. Zhou Wusheng, born in Baotou (inner Mongolia), who introduces for the first time in Italy his refined creations, is one of the major exponents of this artistic trend which borrows deeply from traditional Chinese figurative culture. Wusheng is the director of the Department of Traditional Chinese Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts of Tianjin, as well as the director of the research study "Birds and Flowers", fellow of the Association of Chinese Artists, and member of the Association of Chinese Art of Hue. His works are exhibited and published in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangzhou, Lanzhou, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. The artist will show at our exhibition 37 art works in several formats, which are at the same time deeply entrenched in traditional methods, while bearing original and innovative characteristics. Traditional Chinese painting, which 2000 years ago had already reached high-quality standards, reflects the history of the Chinese soul summarizing the essence of its philosophical thought. In ancient China painting represented "the perfection of knowledge", and the painter was not only considered a professional artist, but a philosopher, a wise man. The very soul of traditional Chinese painting is depicted in its artistic conception. The idea drives the paint brush: the mind conceives the idea, the brush translates it into form. So that the painter needs not only to reproduce reality accurately, but has to also show a representation of the "spirit" of what he/she is portraying. And since Chinese art is not only a portrayal of reality, but an interpretation of what surrounds us, the only way for the artist to portray all things beautiful is to get to the true essence of the object in question.

In Chinese culture painting has a precise educational mission through which it underlines life values, and it is considered an important didactical instrument apt at educating and developing in its users the fundamental values that regulate human relations. In traditional Chinese culture four main themes are present: landscapes, portraits, animals and birds, flowers and plants. While Man is seldom portrayed, nature is the favourite subject with its precise iconographic meanings (bamboo for instance represents long-lasting friendship and longevity, and is reminiscent of the personality of wise men since it remains green in all seasons, and resistant to storms...) As far as technique goes on the other hand, we can identify two main styles which are often combined together. The first one, free and impressionist in type, is more focused on the mood of the artist than on mere detail. The second one on the other hand, precise and meticulous, carefully focuses on composition and detail. Another fundamental characteristic of traditional Chinese painting is the strong connection with calligraphy, whose characters are born as simplified drawings of real things, stylised in order to convey the essence and meaning. Both forms are created with the same paint brushes, and the painter moves from one form of expression to the other, so that the two integrate each other. In the past the value of pictorial work was assigned on the basis of how poetry and calligraphy were combined, and success in these fields was what consecrated painters and their work as an art form. In Chinese painting the brush – used to draw a character by holding it perpendicularly to the sheet of paper, and drawing the characters with movements of the shoulder and elbow - has a major role. And if the brush stroke represents the immediate vehicle of the creative impulse, the ink is the means by which artistic ideas

are visualised. The Chinese artist paints on paper or silk rolls, horizontal or vertical, that he subsequently rolls up through handles fixed on its extremities. On the horizontal rolls, the composition takes place as in a film sequence, using a “travelling point of view”, in the vertical ones on the other hand, it is organised vertically in an “upwards” rhythm. In traditional Chinese painting, repentance is a non-existing concept, since the artist works directly on the base with ink and brush. Coherent with religious-philosophical thinking, the Chinese painter tries with his art to pass on the interior rhythm, and life: a life which is essentially “movement”, and that he expresses through the subtle use of lines, poles apart from the exterior transience of the real world. Traditional Chinese painting should be understood as the art of living, which seeks to bring back that sense of infinity which bounds and unites the primordial essence of Man to the cosmos surrounding him, in which he can paint, or contemplate a painting, allowing him to find back that sense of unity and belonging to the whole that we Westerners too often forget.

Elisabetta Giovagnoni

Rome, 16/05/2015