

The Cave Dwelling Artists Group Carries on the Heritage of the Lu Xun Art Academy in Yan'an

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The cave houses of Yan'an not only produced Marxism-Leninists but also artists. When the Lu Xun Art Academy (1940s) was in Yan'an, the cave houses nurtured many writers and artists in China. Although the Lu Xun Art Academy has moved from Yan'an many years ago, its spirit is deeply rooted in the yellow earth of Yan'an. Yan'an is still magnet attracting many writers and artists from all over China.

In the early 1950s a "cave dwelling painting style" was proposed. In recent years the idea was brought up again. Although the suggestion was never consciously implemented people nevertheless adopted the "cave dwelling painting style" in their art. Works like Ru Shilu's "Fighting to Northern Shaanxi," and "Dawn in the East," Cai Liang's "August 15th Night," Liu Wenxi's "Mao Zedong and the Shepherd," Jin Zhilin's "Nanniwan," and Guo Quanzhong's "Endless Words" all had an important impact. These paintings sparked young people's passion for Yan'an. Before and after the Cultural Revolution, many young artists left the big cities and moved to Yan'an. This included graduates from art institutes, sent down urban intellectual youth, demoted officials, retired military officers, and artists who volunteer to come to Yan'an. This led to a revival of art in Yan'an that had been dormant for several decades. With the mentoring of Li Xinshan, Zhang Jianwen, Jin Zhilin, and Li Zhonggui, along with their students, they created many excellent works of art by observing and engaging in the everyday lives of the local people. These works include Gu Yuan's "New Home," Ma Yun's "Paying a New Year Visit," Jin Zhilin's "Female Secretary," Yang Anle's "Three Drums of Yan'an," Feng Shanyun's "Date Village," Zhang Xiguan's "Yellow River Flask," Gao Yude's "Premier Zhou Returns to Yan'an," and Song Ruxin's "Delivering a New Movie." These works were all exhibited at national and regional art shows.

At the time, Yan'an was very poor. Government resources were used deal with production and livelihood problems. Artists did their work under extremely harsh condition. Some of them stayed in Yan'an for three to five years, and some of them were there for eight to ten years. Eventually, but reluctantly, most of these artists left the land of the yellow soil that they had been drawn to. Whether they left Yan'an or stayed behind, these artists had produced a great deal of original works and had built a solid foundation for their careers.

In the early 1980s, there were a few young artists attempting to revive the woodblock print style of the Lu Xun Art Academy. They started the "black and white woodblock youth movement." They eagerly researched the woodblock prints made during the Yan'an period and suggested the young artists of Yan'an seek to inherit the tradition of the Lu Xun Art Academy by engaging in the everyday life of the local people, extolling the hardworking Northern Shaanxi people, and focus on depicting life in the villages, local people's feelings, emotion, hard work, and local culture. Studying the artistic traditions of the people, these students create works that embraced strong local characteristics. Observing these principles, all the young artists experienced life among the peasants, sketching, creating, and learning studying woodblock printmaking. They had also organized field trip to follow to Mao Zedong's campaign to Northern Shaanxi. They drew numerous sketches and produced over two hundred works of art. They published a book titled "Black and White Woodblock Prints of the Yan'an Youth" and held an exhibition of their works in Xi'an in January 1985. During the exhibition some people commented that "this represented a post-Lu Xun Art Academy

tradition that represents the inheritance of the Lu Xun Art Academy of the 1940s.” The famous printer Xiu Jun said, “There is the Chang'an painting style in Xi'an, and there is cave dwelling style in Yan'an.” Some artists who visited Yan'an felt that “although the Yan'an woodblock prints expressed the life of the people, they were too conservative and too old fashioned and the artists should learn from modern art to improve their style.” Others thought “they should keep the tradition and never let it fade away and the unique characteristics would develop if the artists continue working for several decades.” Or, “only if they have a regional characteristic will they have an ethnic characteristic and thus have international value.” Because the artists in Yan'an were all young, they did not want to be conservative. So, they adopted a modern style deeply rooted the folk art of Northern Shaanxi to strengthen their own artistic talents. They believe that only through such an adaptation would they discover new ideas and feel contemporary.

In 1992, during the 50th anniversary of Mao's speech at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature, painters like Li Qun and Gu Yuan from the Yan'an Lu Xun Academy returned to Yan'an. The young artists of Yan'an were thrilled to display their new works and asked for comments from the two venerable artists. However, Li and Gu could not appreciate these works and wondered “why has art in Yan'an become ‘modern’? Does Yan'an have new wave of ‘modern art’?” In articles the two older artists harshly criticized these new works or art. At the time, some artists did not understand, and wondered, “our lives here are already difficult enough and now creating works of art a tough thing too?” Some of the young artists were disheartened and others just quit. Yan'an artists wondered how they should go about their work. What kind of art should we do?

In the recent years, economic development in Yan'an has pushed cultural development. The number of artists has grown. People involved in creative endeavors continued to grow. In Yan'an city, there has about thirty artists. They are all graduates from art institutes. They are all locals and know the life style of Northern Shaanxi. They are emotionally attached to Yan'an and love oil painting. Gradually they have brought some energy to oil painting. They have painted many pieces based on the local villages and have painted several good works. They displayed some of their works at the Eighth National Art Exhibition, the National Scenery Oil Painting Exhibition” and other important exhibitions. Because we want to encourage the oil painting artists of Yan'an and the artistic traditions of Yan'an, we used these opportunities to exhibit Yan'an oil paintings in Beijing. We enjoyed broad support from other artists. Within one year, Yan'an artists taken nearly two hundred works to Beijing for exhibition. This art depicts the characteristics of village life in Northern Shaanxi. It also has the special features and theme of the “holy land” of Yan'an. This art also has a regional flavor based on the selection topics, methods of expression, and overall style. Therefore, it has been called the painting style of “cave dwelling artists group of Yan'an.” This group of artists want to attract more artists to participate in the Yan'an art movement and want more artists to settle down in Yan'an and make a contribution Yan'an's cultural development. Therefore, the exhibition of these Yan'an oil paintings in Beijing is very important.

The vigorous and simple village life of Northern Shaanxi is the ideal base camp for artists. However, there is the reality of the poor rural life of the region. This is what artists occasionally like to depict. But this confronts artists with a dilemma: art and reality. How can we deal with and solve this dilemma? This requires Yan'an artists make changes with an aesthetic perspective in mind. I believe that if we want to develop the “cave dwelling artists' style,” we must adhere to the special characteristics of Yan'an. We have to adopt a new aesthetic standard to understand and recognize life. The artist Yang Lizhou believes that

Yan'an oil painting should have the characteristics of the "holy land" of Yan'an. In other words, we need to use the old icons of the revolution to emphasize the characteristics of Yan'an. Thus, people can understand the different aspects of life in Yan'an through this art. This approach adopts the fundamental elements of Yan'an folk art and incorporates the rich local culture of the region. In this way, the cave dwelling artists group of Yan'an will establish itself in Northern Shaanxi.

The Yan'an artists are a young and energetic group. Although their art is still immature, some artists have already realized their own artistic voice. Qiao Zhengdong's "Wedding Picture" uses the yellow earth to express the ancient and rich culture of the region. Li Zhizhong's series village scenery is beautifully drawn and uses soft coloring to depict the bucolic but difficult village life of the people in Northern Shaanxi. Zhang Yongge's work incorporates the traditional style of papercuts and woodblock prints. Through experiencing and understanding local life, he expresses people's passion for life and their love for their land in paintings like "An Sai Waist Drum." He Cheng'an's art emphasizes the basic and honest characteristics of the region. He makes the effort to uncover the struggle between man and the nature in works like "Dry land," "Sunflowers," "West River in Winter." Ma Jianfei's art bravely depicts Shaanxi highlands. One feels like he is actually there and is embraced by the highlands. His oil paintings include "Mountain Village at Night" or "Spring Snow in Yan'an." Song Ruxin focuses on daily life. The characteristics of the typical village stand out in his paintings. This creates aesthetic feeling for traditional village life and a feeling of love for one's own village. Examples are "Baby with a Hair Bun," and "Village Girl." Many of the artists do not focus on drawing techniques and color. They use lively colors to portray the young and cheerful style of this historic region. Examples include Song Yanlong's "River in the Home Village," and "the Auditorium of the Lu Xun Art Academy." Yang Wensheng's "Village Head," Li Yanjun's "North Country," Gao Hong's "Fall Rhyme," Liang Lin's "Haystack," and Bai Shumei's "Nursing Baby." Local culture and lifestyles also characterize Yan'an art. The works that reflect the people's livelihood include Liu Yansheng's "Leading the Prisoner," Qiao Zhengdong's "Northern Shaanxi Funeral," Yang Nina's "Noisy Red Fire," Wang Wenquan's "Spring Along the Yan River," Zheng Jilin's "Cave Dwellings" and Liu Wuhong's "Morning Songs of the Highlands." Some works reflect the arduous life of the people of Northern Shaanxi. For example, Chen Xinmin's "Old Mason by the Yellow River," and Zhu Fu's "Resting." These works reflect the dominant themes of Yan'an art created by passionate artists in Yan'an who work under difficult conditions.

Nineteen Ninety-eight was the first time artwork from Yan'an to be exhibited in Beijing. The main purpose of the exhibition was to encourage the artists in Yan'an to continue the glorious tradition of the old Lu Xun Art Academy. These young artists can learn from the established artists and associates in Beijing. They pay attention to critiques so they can improve their art. This is the first step in bringing the art in Yan'an out of the distant hinterland. At the same time, allow the deceased and living old guard of the Lu Xun Art Academy cease to worry and realize that the legacy of the Lu Xun Art Academy continues on in the work of cave dwelling artist group of Yan'an.