

Wu Guanzhong

Seeing Through the Master's Eyes

By Mary George Rajkumar

The Changbai Mountains which separate China from Korea owe their name to the Baitou Summit, which remains perpetually white owing to the cover of white volcanic rocks in summer and the pristine white snow in winter. Below them are birch and larch forests where Siberian tigers roam. The poet Wang Jie once compared the mountains to Penglai, the Isles of the Immortals. Wu Guanzhong captures this imagery with a stroke of diluted ink wash to reveal the heavens above the mountains. Thus

does the heavenly abode of the immortals come alive and in the whitest of snow that lies below, the contours of a jade goddess appear stretched out. The forest, consisting of warrior-like trees that watch over her, is composed of dots, lines and splashes of ink that unveil the majesty of the scene. The artist's inscription on the work translates as, "No flowers bloom in this freezing world – Behold the white birches in front of the Changbai Mountains".

During China's Cultural Revolution, Wu Guanzhong's art was criticised for expressing the gloominess of farmers' and soldiers' lives. He therefore chose to abandon figurative painting and switched to the less controversial painting of landscapes. For a Chinese artist who had perfected his oil techniques and exhibited at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, 1950s China was not a welcoming environment. This was a period when socio-realistic art filled public spaces. Although Wu burned many of his western-influenced canvases between 1966 and 1969 for fear of Red Guard raids, he was separated from his family and sent to the Hubei countryside for 'reformation through labour' to change, as he said, "tendencies advocating decadent western art".

Wu continued to see beauty in everything around him. As he said, "Seeking beauty is my profession and obligation. It is the entire purpose of my life". Toiling in the hot countryside, he first planted, then watched the cotton and sorghum plants grow, their colours changing with the seasons, their heads swaying in the wind, outlined against the blue sky. In their cycle he saw, "human life in miniature, warning us



Birch woods at the foot of the Changbai Mountains, 1991, ink and watercolour on paper, collection of the National Heritage Board

that our lives are as brief as theirs". In 1972, when he was given materials to teach the army to paint, he used a manure basket as his easel and painted sorghum in greens and reds. Paintings from the reformation camps were shipped to Japan, but years later in 1995, Wu's remarkable memory enabled him to recreate the same green sorghum painting.



Green sorghum, 1995, oil on canvas, collection of the National Heritage Board

The Singapore Art Museum received this painting as part of a collection of 113 works from one of 20th century China's most important artists and art educators. Wu Guanzhong believed that art had to be seen by people from around the world and perceived Singapore as the embodiment of what he believed his art symbolised – a place where East meets West. In Wu's paintings, western oil techniques are incorporated into the more abstract and lightly poetic touch of Chinese ink, such that the inner spirit pours out at the final point where the ink touches the paper. "Oil and ink painting are like the blades of a pair of scissors, cutting out a new outfit for the times", he said. Modernising Chinese paintings was Wu's mission and although he was sidelined and criticised for this in the

early years, he is today considered to be China's greatest contemporary artist.

Mary George Rajkumar thanks the Singapore Art Museum for morphing an accountant into an art enthusiast. She also guides at the Asian Civilisations Museum and special exhibitions at the National Museum of Singapore.

Photos courtesy of the National Art Gallery of Singapore