

The Power of Oil.

Oil Painting between Tradition and Transition – A European Perspective.

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Material, media, language – a short introduction

By way of my educational background I am ethnologist and archaeologist, so it is perhaps not surprising that my first picture comes from Lascaux. [PICTURE 1] The images from the cave of Lascaux remind us that pictures do have a really long tradition; that pictures can be regarded as a *material* to develop a visually-based communication; that pictures are the first and the oldest *medium* to communicate cross-generationally and, finally, that pictures are a form of *language* with a high density of meaning.

All art has been contemporary

„All art has been contemporary.“ The Artist Maurizio Nannucci makes it very clear¹: All pieces of art are contemporary, they are connected with the time period of their making. [PICTURE 2] As time goes by, pieces of art are transformed into parts of history, into parts of tradition. From this perspective, pieces of art are *time capsules of meaning*. From this it follows that you are always presented with three different time-layers when objects of art are presented at a museum: the past, the present and the future. The interpretation depends always on your own perspective, which in turn is based on your own biography.

A permanent conference

There is great diversity in the field of art. You will find drawings, engravings, paintings, sculptures, media-works, installations or conceptual works. Since the time of Charles Darwin we have been talking about the *struggle for existence*². In the arts, there has also been a creative contest between the poets and the artists since the time of antiquity: During the Renaissance the contest was between the painters and the sculptors – called *Paragone*³. And today you will find a discussion, if the relinquishment ((?)) of art is the highest form of art. It is a struggle of *dimensions*: Art deals with *translation*: between the two- and the three-dimensional. If you add the level of time and the level of meaning, there is a fourth- and fifth-dimensional competition. It is a *struggle* between tradition, transition, translation and interpretation. Joseph Beuys once said⁴: „Museums are places of permanent conferences“: A *conference* (a silent dialogue) between the object and the visitor, a self-referential *conference* (a silent dialogue) on the part of the visitor caused by the closer consideration of the piece of art and – if he or she is in a group – a *conference* (open exchange) between

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http://www.museumstechnik.de/projekte/detail/?tx_ffmt_pi1%5Bproject%5D=12&cHash=d5db980c4847dd9f14bb0314482deb50

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_darwin

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paragone>

⁴ Joseph Beuys: Das Museum – ein Ort der permanenten Konferenz. In: Notizbuch 3. Kunst. Gesellschaft. Museum, hg. v. Horst Kurnitzky, Berlin 1980, S. 47-74.

others about their own points of view, about their own suggestions, about their own experiences.

China and Europe – a reciprocal relationship

Often we talk about different styles: naturalism, abstractivism, symbolism, conceptualism etc. To analyze all of these different styles is the daily business for art historians. To get a broader perspective, we have to look into history. During the last 400 years there has been a difficult complex of relations between China and Europe - and, to be precise, there is a reciprocal relationship.

When we look at the tradition of oil painting, the first contact between China and Europe can be dated back to the 17th. century. This period is connected with the name of Giuseppe Castiglione. I like to designate this time as a *period of curiositiy*. Castiglione developed a special mixed-technique of painting but, in my view, the death of Castiglione was more or less the end of this influence. At the same time Chinese art gave significant stimulus to European artists, for example, when you look at furniture in *chinoise style*. And we should not forget the great influence of Chinese porcelain on the European market. And sometimes you can recognize that the influence is bi-directional: You will find Chinese porcelain and Chinese shape s– but, to fit the customer's taste, you will find European decorations and French text on it. Coming back to oil paintings, the period of socialistic realism – which mainly came from Russia – had a great influence on Chinese Oil Painting. **[PICTURE 3]**

But sometimes you have to be careful: You can see things of a similar kind, but of a totally different meaning and an other time period of production. According to Erwin Panofsky, it is necessary to recognize the *level* about which we are going to talk: about the phenomenology, the function or the meaning of a painting⁵. The following example illustrates this aspect very clearly: 28 years make a big difference if you are focused on the level of meaning . **[PICTURE 4]** In many paintings we can recognize the great influence of Western Pop Art and symbolism on Chinese oil painting. But unfortunately we haven't got the time to go into further detail. Therefore I want to show an interesting example of *tradition* and *transition*. You can see an art piece by the Artist Lei Hong. **[Picture 5]** It is connected with both sites: the suprematism of Kasimir Malewitsch and the tradition of ink painting in China.

Using art

I would finally like to draw attention to the aspect of *using* art. There are totally different ways to live with pieces of art. Here you can see a private room of the 18th century in Europe. **[PICTURE 6]** In contrast there is an other traditional Chinese way of appreciating a painting. It is often expressed by the words *du hua* – *to read a painting*. What do we learn from this?

In former times there was a completely different behavior in *using* art when we compare China and Europe. And nowadays you almost are unable to recognize, whether a piece of art is displayed in a Chinese or European museum **[Picture 7]**. And we should not forget that all kinds of personal AV-equipment changes the perception of art. These photos taken at the

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erwin_Panofsky

National Museum in Beijing show people perceiving the art through the lens of their mobile phone. [PICTURE 8]

Art always shapes society – and art is always a mirror of society. In my view there is a clear ranking of appreciation when we look at the arts in Europe: Painting, especially oil painting, was the leading material – and, I am sure, that oil painting will have a great future – in Europe, in China and the global art market.

The Circle of Power of Oil [Picture 9]

From all that has been said and as a way of summarizing I would like to draw ((?)) the *Circle of Power of Oil*. There are six different triggers for the *Power Oil Painting*.

Production

The *pictorial language* of a painting depends on the aspects of the place and period of production and the respective social and economical context. Besides contemporary art there are two other periods that are particularly preferred in the art market: The (European) Classic Modernity and the Old Masterpieces (European and Chinese). The *global canon* is driven by museums, some leading art fairs, galleries and private collectors. During the last 20 years, the importance of the private collectors and economic ((private?)) sector has increased.

Circumstances

The aspects of sacral, secular or ritual context in which the piece of art is produced has a great influence on the subject and the usage of the art piece.

Genre

Painting, sculpture, media, installation, conceptual art – the ranking of appreciation depends on the material (of the pieces of art), the name and the artistic mastery (of the artist) and last but not least on the subject. Beside these main aspects there are some practical reasons which have to be mentioned: The majority of traditional art museums are designed to display (oil) paintings (i.e. measure of walls, the lighting, visual axis). When you look into the sector of private collectors you will recognize that often paintings are the favorite type of art. Paintings are easy to display in living rooms or business offices. If you look into the storage-rooms of museums you will find a similar situation: The main construction is a hanging system for paintings. And even if we think about art-transportation for the global exchange of loaned art – paintings are the favorite type of art. This mixture of strong art-historical argumentation, tradition and at least practical reasons are important triggers for *The Power of Oil*.

Value

The world of art has been, since early times, a market place. In former times the clients of the artist were almost always members of the leading classes of society. Art had a great relevance in the field of social prestige. But apart from the social and economical aspects, a piece of art has always had a philanthropic, symbolic, a non-monetary value. The intrinsic value is often connected with the circumstances of production and is especially necessary for the curatorial decision whether or not to display a piece of art at an exhibition.

Usage

First of all it is interesting to consider whether a piece of art is made for public or private usage. Sometimes the original context changes over time. For example, when a piece of art becomes part of a public collection; or a painting that was made for display in a sacral context is now on display at a museum. But there are several other possibilities. For example a painting as a part of an educational context; part of a representative installation or art as a strategic financial investment. This special aspect of *usability* has a strong influence on the multidimensional *value* of art.

Perception

Some pieces of art are becoming – through tradition – part of the collective memory and identity⁶. When you look at European art history, the self-portraits of Albrecht Dürer (Oil Painting, 1500 a.d.) or Leonardo da Vinci (Sketch, 1512 a.d.) or the series Liz Taylor by Andy Warhol (1963 a.d.) are surely pieces of that kind.

To get a deeper sense of such paintings, you need a direct or indirect cultural education, because visual perception is a case of experiences made by yourself and based on a fundamental knowledge of the circumstances. And when you look at a museum visitor: visiting a museum is almost often a social act – you are in group with your family or friends. For that reason cross-generational learning is an important aspect.

Three parameters of improvement

If you try to improve the art sector and give it more relevance in the context of the social interaction of modern city-life, you have to pay special attention to three parameters:

- the condition of production
- the condition of the market
- the condition of perception

Artists need bright, inexpensive and sometimes cheerful surrounding for their working atmosphere. To grow up as a child with the vision of becoming an artist depends on a broad cultural education and appreciation of the arts in the society as a whole. Identity is not frozen status, it is an ongoing process which is connected to the knowledge of (your own) traditions, the anticipation of transition and the discovery of your authentic speed of development.

If the awareness of art is part of the broad public discourse, the relevance of the art market is increasing in all socio-economical levels of society; art is no longer a nice-to-have-aspect, art becomes a *wholesome foodstuff*, a relevant part of daily life.

Perception of art and artists is first and foremost a cultural process that has to be practiced from *cradle to grave*. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, the architect of the Altes Museum in Berlin once said „first enjoy – than instruct“ as an educational motto of museums work⁷. In our words of today that means: First of all you have to touch your audiences' hearts – afterwards you can teach them. Using this *emotional approach* the *Power of Oil* is an amazing trigger.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Assmann and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleida_Assmann

⁷ Kirsten Krumeich: „Erst erfreuen, dann belehren“. Eine preußische Bildungsdebatte und die Anfänge des öffentlichen Museums in Berlin. In: Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft 14 (2011) 19-29. <http://gfa.gbv.de/dr,gfa,014,2011,a,03.pdf>.

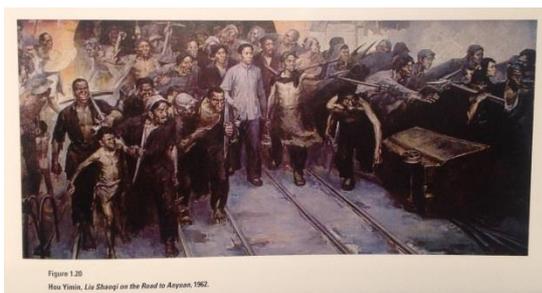
[PICTURE 1]



[PICTURE 2]



[PICTURE 3]



Hou Yimin, Liu Shaoqi on the Road to Anyuan, 1962

[PICTURE 4]

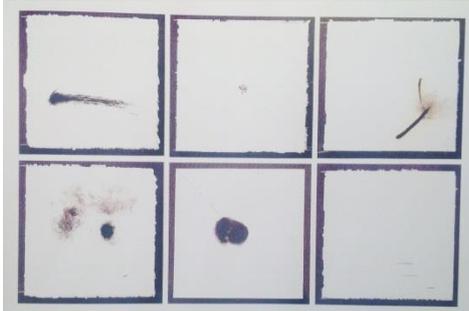


Sun Zixi, In Front of Tian'anmen 1964



Wang Jinsong, Take a Picture in Front of Tian'anmen 1992

[Picture 5]



Lei Hong, Absolution Series (2001-02)

[PICTURE 6]



[Picture 7]



[PICTURE 8]



[Picture 9]

