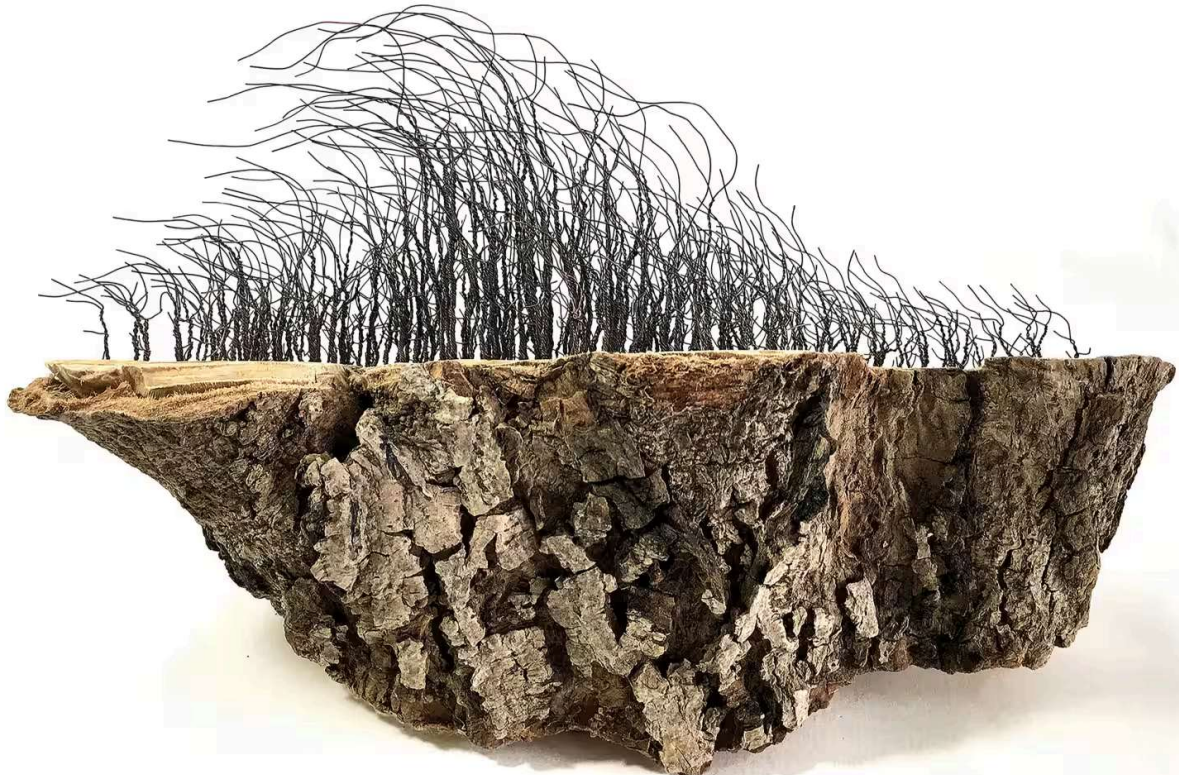


ARTS

Old ink, new tricks: Hong Kong reboots a classical medium

From sculptural to AI-powered creations, Chinese ink art is evolving fast



"Tranquility 2" (2017) by Margaret Yeung Kwok-fan: Yeung makes no distinction between her sculptural work and ink art, saying, "If our art can show ink spirit, then we are doing ink art." (Courtesy of the artist)

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HONG KONG -- In this fast-paced international city, cosmopolitan urbanites might be expected to focus on the latest artists from London or New York, leaving classical paintings to gather dust.

The city is Asia's contemporary art hub, home to the regional headquarters of the international auction houses Sotheby's, Phillips and Christie's, the major contemporary art museum M+ and more than 60 commercial galleries. Asia's largest art fair, Art Basel Hong Kong, took place in March.

Yet amid the modernity there is continued interest in ink on paper, perhaps the most quintessentially Chinese form of art. All the auction houses have regular auctions dedicated to Chinese ink, which spans a great range of subject and technique, each with associated vocabulary. For example, paintings of soaring mountain ranges clad with pine trees, perhaps with a solitary boatman on water, are known as *shanshui* (literally mountain water).

Delicately colorful images of birds and flowers are termed *gongbi* (derived from the Chinese word for "tidy"), while straight-lined architectural paintings in which buildings play a starring role are called *jiehua*. These are paintings in which the planned emptiness (*liu bai*) plays as much of a role as the ink, where paper and ink are locked in a dynamic interplay of harmony and balance.

Phillips, located in the city's West Kowloon district, has recently concluded a special exhibition of work by the contemporary Chinese ink artist Liu Dan, centering on beautifully methodical calligraphy and "scholar's rocks."



The Phillips auction house, bottom left, and neighboring M+ contemporary art museum are seen in the West Kowloon district, with Hong Kong Island visible across the harbor. (Courtesy of M+)

The scholar's rock is not a modern subject. In imperial times, these rock forms were highly prized, seen as a miniature version of the world around us. They were an accompaniment to the life of the poet or artist in his studio, a focal point of literati gatherings, and the subject of intellectual discourse in their own right. The Emperor Huizong Mi, who reigned from 1101 to 1126, was an obsessive collector.

Dina Zhang, Phillips' head of modern and contemporary art, China, says Liu Dan's works are "deeply rooted in traditional heritage and engage in a dynamic dialogue with contemporary visual concepts, establishing a new paradigm."

Next door at M+, there is an ongoing three-year exhibition titled "Shanshui: Echoes and Signals," drawing on the cornerstone "mountain water" subject of ink painting and exploring "the complex connections between landscape and humanity in our post-industrial and increasingly virtual world." The show includes an LED installation by Tatsuo Miyajima, a selection of electronics from M+'s design collection and video works by the artists Hassan Khan and Liu Chuang.



"Shanshui: Echoes and Signals," an ongoing three-year exhibition at M+, draws on the cornerstone "mountain water" subject of ink painting and explores "the complex connections between landscape and humanity in our post-industrial and increasingly virtual world." (Courtesy of M+)

So, if electronics may be understood as part of the ink universe, how is ink art defined?

"If our art can show ink spirit, then we are doing ink art," says ink artist Margaret Yeung Kwok-fan, chair of the Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Society. Her own art is sculptural, depicting landscapes with found objects. "I twist copper wire into trees, and I use storm-damaged waste wood to represent rock and mountains," she says.

The society was founded in the 1970s and has its roots in the New Ink Movement, when artists Lui Shou-kwan and Liu Kuo-sung emphasized individual expression and journeyed into abstraction. The pioneering New Ink Movement gave rise to a borderless reimagining of the concept of ink which is evident today.





Alisan Fine Arts' exhibition "Tradition Transformed" showcases contemporary artists who bring surprise and versatility to this ancient form. Among the works featured there are Fu Xiaotong's "3870,660 Pinpricks," top, and Wucius Wong's "Distant Thoughts 23." (Courtesy of Alisan Fine Arts)

Hong Kong's upcoming Chinese Culture Festival -- which will run from June to September -- is a case study of ink's adaptability. The 2025 edition, the second, has ink art front and center of its program.

The opening event is "Dongpo: Life in Poems," an immersive performance of the poetry and life of the literary giant Su Dongpo, integrating "music, dance, poetry and painting into a captivating show." Other events include "He The Rite of Spring," inspired by the ink painting of Kan Tai-keung, a Hong Kong artist also known for designing the logo of the Bank of China. A free exhibition, "The Power of Chinese Characters," takes place at the end of July in the Hong Kong Central Library. It will present the work of 60 of Hong Kong's "most representative calligraphers and painters."

Ivy Ngai Suk-ye, who is organizing the festival as chief manager of the Hong Kong government's cultural presentations section, praises ink artists' practice of "adopting new technologies and integrating tradition with new techniques."



Hong Kong's upcoming Chinese Culture Festival has ink art front and center of its program. Left: "He The Rite of Spring," which will be performed at the festival, is inspired by the ink painting of Kan Tai-keung. Right: Ivy Ngai Suk-yee is organizing the festival as chief manager of the Hong Kong government's cultural presentations section. (Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Festival, LCSD)

Crucially, Hong Kong's commercial gallery sector is also deeply entwined with the success of ink art. Galleries representing ink artists include Alisan Fine Arts, Ora-Ora and Grotto Fine Art. Alisan Fine Arts will hold a solo show devoted to the work of Lui Shou-kwan later this year, marking 50 years since his death.

In New York, the gallery recently concluded an ink art exhibition by Gu Gan, Lee Chun-yi and Wucius Wong, the great Hong Kong ink artist who was a student of Lui Shou-kwan. The paintings of Wong, 89, continue to mesmerize. As Daphne King-yao, director of Alisan Fine Arts, puts it: "They are abstract but could be looked at as a landscape. There is always that dichotomy."

Alisan Fine Arts' exhibition "Tradition Transformed," which opened on March 23 in Hong Kong's Central district, highlights several notable practitioners of the ancient form who revel in surprise and versatility. Artists on show include gongbi artist Cherie Cheuk Ka-wai, born in 1989, whose work pays homage to the past with gentle humor; Shanxi-born Fu Xiaotong, who makes pinpricks in rice paper to create shanshui (with no use of ink); and Peng Wei, who has evolved from ink painting into ink animation.



Left: Wong Chun-Yu's interactive work "For Which My Heart Beats" (2023). (Courtesy of the artist). Right: "Be With You" by Cherie Cheuk Ka-Wai is on display at Alisan Fine Arts' "Tradition Transformed." (Courtesy of Alisan Fine Arts)

Hong Kong's artist community has risen to the challenge of integrating ink into the modern world around them. Artist Wong Chung-yu has written ink software named "pure ink" to create digital forms of ink painting, and Victor Wong created A.I. Gemini, billed as the world's first artificial intelligence ink artist.

Local artist Hung Keung, meanwhile, lit up the facade of the city's Tai Kwun arts center in February with his "Garden of Reflection," an animated journey through calligraphy and ink art to celebrate the new year of the snake.

Ink's continued success may stem from its adaptability, embraced by its practitioners. As Yeung, herself a former student of trailblazing artist Liu Kuo-sung, puts it: "We know that Chinese art should move forward."

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