Why Art and Design Matters

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modern art.

cover photograph by Luo Yang
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When the world is most chaotic, and when everything seems hopeless, people turn to art - whether they realize it or not.

Art is more than just a fun indulgence. Art has power and influence. Art tells incredibly important stories. Art and design is influenced by the world around us, but also helps directly shape our world: culturally, politically, and socially.

China and its artwork is one of the greatest examples of this. China is one of the world’s oldest civilizations, with a written history dating back over three thousand years. As a result, this nation has produced thousands of years of art and design. This magazine is dedicated to China’s rich artistic culture, and the incredible power of modern Chinese art, which is considered by many to be one of the most impactful artistic movements of the 20th and 21st century.
In China, calligraphy has always been highly appreciated as not just a method of communication, but as an art form. Chinese does not have its own alphabet; rather, every single word is represented by a unique character or group of characters, written in a specific sequence of strokes. Calligraphy was the most valued art form in ancient China. Chinese characters have undergone many changes over the years. The first characters were markings etched into animal bones thousands of years ago. The system of characters underwent many major revisions over the next several thousand years. “Regular Script” was designed around 220 AD, and is still used to this day, in both traditional and simplified forms. Simplified characters are the standard in mainland China, while countries such as Taiwan and Hong Kong still utilize traditional characters.
“DRAGON”
CHARACTER
EVOLUTION

Oracle Bone Inscriptions
Shang Dynasty
1600 - 1046 B.C.

Bronze Inscriptions
Shang/ Zhou Dynasty
1046 - 256 B.C.

Small Seal Characters
Qin Dynasty
221 - 207 B.C.

Official Script
Han Dynasty
206 B.C. - 220 A.D.

Regular Script
Han/ Tang Dynasty
420 - 907 A.D.

Cursive Writing
Han Dynasty
Artistic Style

Semi-Cursive
3 Kingdoms/ Jin Dynasty
Artistic Style

Simplified Characters
People’s Republic of China
1950s - Today
Chinese characters with their many variations are ideal for use within design and art. They are versatile, and can be written and arranged a million ways while still remaining legible. In the thirties, China’s cities saw a huge rise in print production and advertising, which led to breakthroughs in impressively designed posters and book covers utilizing Chinese typography. Today, we see even more avant-garde uses of Chinese type - the beauty and uniqueness of Chinese characters remains a powerful aspect of modern Chinese design.

OPPOSITE

Top Left: **Unnamed**, WILD FIRE_D, 2022
Bottom Left: **Song Typography**, Kizz Lau, 2022
Top Right: **Font Design**, Xin Wei, 2021

Top Right: **Design Festival Poster**, Chao Zhu, 2013
Bottom Right: **Shadow Play is Fun!**, Qian Qian, 2005
Above: **To Go Against the Current**, Wáng 2Mu
毛泽东

无产阶级文化大革命全面胜利万岁

紧跟伟大领袖毛主席奋勇前进！

祖国山河一片红

MAO ZEDONG & PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGNS
“THE MORE ARTISTIC IT IS, THE MORE HARM IT CAN DO PEOPLE AND THE MORE IT SHOULD BE REJECTED”.

- CHAIRMAN MAO

The quote above was said by Mao Zedong, the first leader of the Chinese Communist Party, and is indicative of the way art was utilized in China during his reign. The beginning of the 20th century was an important time for art and design within China. Citizens and intellectuals wanted to develop a new national identity, and many believed art was one of the best ways to accomplish this goal. With the rising popularity of the Chinese Communist Party, designers stopped focusing on growing middle class consumerism, and instead focused on the liberation of the Chinese nation. This was an indication of the power of art and design to invoke national change.

However, when the Chinese Communist Party fully took power in 1949, the art world suffered. Mao Zedong stripped artists of their individuality and personal expression, instead requiring them to exclusively create propaganda and pro-socialist pieces. He sent government officials to the Soviet Union to study their propaganda methods. His “Hundred Flowers Movement”, originally designed to encourage intellectuals to voice their opinions, backfired and resulted in hundreds of artists, writers, and intellectuals being persecuted. Mao’s following “Great Leap Forward” program was the most extreme propaganda campaign in Chinese history. When Mao passed and Deng Xiaoping enacted his “open door policy”, the art world in China shifted once more. Since then, artists and designers have enjoyed much more freedom of expression within their art practice, though the government still engages in censorship and persecution of those whose voices are highly critical.
Mao En Route to Anyuan, Liu Chunhua. 1967
Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan, Gordon Cheung. 2016
AI WEI WEI
ARTIST & ACTIVIST
Ai Weiwei is a contemporary Chinese artist and human rights activist. He grew up in northwestern China where living conditions were poor, due to his father being exiled by the government. His childhood heavily influenced his work, which is highly critical of the Chinese government; focused on commentary of Chinese society and culture. He has investigated and publicized incidents of Chinese governmental corruption, leading to direct lashback from the current government. Ai Weiwei left China in 2015 and is currently living in Portugal.

On the following pages are photos of Ai Weiwei’s piece “Colored Vases”, in which he painted several ancient clay pots in bright neon colors. Many were upset by this piece, perceiving the work as destruction of important cultural artifacts. China is a country which highly values tradition and history, so this piece is a powerful statement about cultural values, and what China as a nation deems truly valuable. He has created several other pieces involving ancient Chinese artifacts. In one performance piece he takes an urn dated back to the Han Dynasty and intentionally drops it on the ground, letting it shatter. He has also imprinted ancient vases with the Coca-Cola logo, providing commentary on modern day capitalism and how it alters national culture. In 2010, he made a marble sculpture titled Surveillance Camera, meant to represent extreme rates of surveillance being used in our world today, particularly in China. Ai Weiwei also created this piece in a direct response to the Chinese government placing listening/surveillance devices around his studio, due to his outspoken criticism.

"AN ARTWORK UNABLE TO MAKE PEOPLE FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE OR...DIFFERENT IS NOT ONE WORTH CREATING."

- AI WEI WEI

Right: Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, Ai Weiwei. 1995
“ARTWORK... OR VANDALISM?”
Colored Vases, Ai Weiwei. 2010

"ARTWORK... OR VANDALISM?"
“Can’t Help Myself” is an installation created by artists Sun Yuan and Peng Yu in 2016. It is currently on display at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu created a robotic arm surrounded by a pool of blood-red liquid. The arm is programmed to push the liquid within a certain invisible boundary, and once it has completed this task it performs a motion from a list of pre-programmed movements. These movements are meant to resemble human motions, such as waving or dancing. However, the liquid always slowly seeps back out of the boundary, so the robot’s task is never-ending. Watching this robot perform its task, slowing down and degrading as the years have gone on, has elicited strong responses from viewers. Some have said it’s like “watching a caged animal”, while others pity the robot and describe its movements as “sad” and “exhausted”. The artists hoped to ask who is more vulnerable: the humans who create machines, or the machines themselves?
PHOTOGRAPHER & ARTIST
FROM A NEW GENERATION

LUO YANG
Luo Yang is a contemporary photographer living in Beijing, who specializes in film portraits of young people living in China and other parts of Asia. Her famous ongoing photography series “Girls” captures candids of young women who belong to an emerging new youth culture that rebels against traditional expectations of gender, sexuality, and other imposed stereotypes. She discusses femininity in her work and how she seeks to break past the expectations that both China and the world pushes onto young people, particularly young women. Artist Ai Weiwei has praised her work, citing her as a powerful emerging artistic voice in China. Her photography series has expanded to include models who are male, trans, non-binary, and who otherwise embrace their true selves and rebel against the status quo.

“I’VE BEEN SHOOTING ‘GIRLS’ FOR A DECADE. I’VE SEEN CHANGES OVER TIME, FROM THE 80s, 90s, 95s, OR EVEN 2000s. EACH GENERATION BECOMES MORE OPEN”.

- LUO YANG, ARIST
“我觉得我面对到的问题也是每一个中国的女性面对的一些问题。”

“I FEEL AS THOUGH THE PROBLEMS I FACE, ARE THE SAME PROBLEMS ALL CHINESE WOMEN ENDURE.”
"IN MY OPINION, FEMININITY IS NOT JUST ABOUT BEING ‘FEMALE’. IT COMES FROM THE INSIDE, FROM A DEEPER FEELING".
Zhang Huan is an influential Chinese artist whose work explores themes of culture, heritage, and personal and national identity.

In his piece below, “Family Tree” (2001), his face is progressively inked with names of family members, personal stories, thoughts, and tales relevant to his life. Words related to the ancient Chinese practice of physiogamy, which involves divining the future based on a person’s facial features, were also inked onto his skin. By the end, his face is completely coated in ink and each individual word is unreadable. Chinese tradition emphasizes family, lineage and history, and Zhang Huan demonstrates how his personal history can both define and completely obscure his own personal identity.
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