

Spotlight : Lotus and Insects by Qi Baishi and Wenchang @ ACM

By Ruth Chen



The recent rearrangements within the China gallery in the Asian Civilisations Museum have led me to relook some of the artefacts found along the corridor leading to the “Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: Treasures from Famen Temple and The Tang Court” exhibition. These are the painting by Qi Bai Shi and the Dehua porcelain figure of Wenchang.



Lotus and Insects by Qi Baishi (1864 – 1957)

I am always impressed with how ink, water and a few definitive strokes can create such great art and beauty. This watercolour painting, “Lotus and Insects” by Qi Baishi is simplicity at its best.

Qi Baishi is a widely known artist in China and a master of freehand flower and bird ink painting. His painting style stands out for its strong connections with folk art. His compositions are usually simple but with strong graphic quality. Besides flowers and still life, Qi also painted landscapes and small creatures such as prawns, frogs, rats and insects.

He once said, “I learnt finger-painting in my youth; landscape painting after 30; and specialized in flowers, insects, and birds after 40.” After that, he resolved to paint all the insects and birds in the whole world. What a down-to-earth and humble statement that is! Qi’s humble beginning was probably the reason why he identified with the seemingly vulnerable and small.

His paintings indeed have an endearing quality which viewers can relate to, regardless of age or nationality. Here Qi displays his ability in executing the gongbi and xieyi styles of painting; the gongbi style refers to a technique in Chinese painting that requires meticulous brushstrokes and attention to detail while xieyi is used to refer to free hand brushwork. This painting is a

fine example of the combination of the two techniques – the detailed work of the insects contrasts with the free and exuberant handling of the lotus leaves and flowers.

With reference to the Famensi exhibition held currently, it is good to know that flower and bird paintings gained popularity during the Tang Dynasty and were most noted for their colours, both in its application and richness.

Wenchang (17th century)

This Dehua porcelain figure (extreme right, back row) of the popular Chinese Taoist god of literature sits snugly among several other artefacts in the Hickley Collection. This courtly deity was worshipped by scholars and examination candidates in Imperial China.

Besides having the same name as an oilfield in the South China Sea, Wenchang is also closely associated with the high seas and sea monsters. A well known legend tells of a scholar, Chung K'uei, who was very bright but unfortunately had facial deformities. At the official examinations, K'uei proved to be the best. According to the custom, the Emperor would present a rose of gold to the best scholar. However, the Emperor was shocked to see the deformities of K'uei and he refused to bestow the rose. In a moment of despair, K'uei threw himself into the sea and just as he was about to drown, a mysterious fish or monster 'ao', raised him on its back and brought him to the surface. K'uei ascended to Heaven and thus became the god of literature. The legend also gave rise to the expression "to stand alone on the sea monster's head", to describe someone who scores the best in an examination.



Wenchang can be traced to a local deity from Zitong, Sichuan, during the Western Jin Dynasty. The latter was from the Qiqu Mountain and had died for his country in a war. Stories about this hero spread and people established a temple for him and worshipped him as the Zitong god. The then Emperor bestowed on the Zitong deity the title "Imperial Sovereign Wenchang". That was how the Zitong deity and Wenchang deity were recognized as one and people consequently built the Wenchang temple on the Qiqu Mountain.

It is good to relook some of these wonderful artefacts and reexamine their stories and origins. As circumstances change, so do our perspective and choice of artefacts that we introduce to our museum visitors, and that is what makes this museum volunteering experience even more meaningful.

