

A Tribute to Ding Yanyong: Introduction by Curator

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It is an honour and privilege to curate the fifth instalment of the Ink Society's "Tribute" Series with co-curator Catherine Maudsley. This year's exhibition celebrates the art and legacy of Ding Yanyong (1902–1978), a pioneer of 20th-century Chinese painting. Like many young, ambitious artists of his generation who studied abroad, Ding sought to modernise Chinese art through blending Chinese and Western artistic traditions. Born into a wealthy and cultured family in Guangdong Province, Ding studied Western oil painting under a government scholarship at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (now Tokyo University of the Arts). Upon returning to China in 1925, he taught Western art at various academies in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chongqing, before leaving for Hong Kong in 1949, where he remained until the end of his life. Ding's completely original ink-painting idiom was conceived from a unique synthesis of traditional Chinese brushwork and the sensibilities of European modernism, making him a seminal figure in modern Chinese art.

The exhibition focuses on Ding's ink painting and calligraphy practice from the early 1960s until the final year of his life. Although he began his career as an oil painter, he took an early interest in classical Chinese paintings and artefacts, and went on to study the works of master painters including Xu Wei, Bada Shanren and Shitao. Ding particularly admired Bada Shanren, and was an early collector of his work. *Orchid, rock and Starling* (1963) is particularly evocative of the Qing master's style. The monochromatic composition depicts a starling perched atop a steep, towering rock. The sparse, staccato brushstrokes which lend texture and dimension to the rock, contrast with the fluid calligraphic lines of the demure, flowering orchid below. In characteristic Bada style, the starling has a human-like expression. Staring over its shoulder, the bird's gaze is penetrating and possesses a certain self-deprecating air. *Duck* (1962) also resonates with Bada in its simple but expressive portrayal of its subject. Ding, however, has infused humour and warmth by animating the ducks with large eyes gazing upwards.

Not only was Ding inspired by Bada's artistic style, but he also identified with Bada's personal plight. Upon the fall of the Ming dynasty, Bada had channelled his resistance and defiant spirit into his paintings. Similarly, Ding, in his early years after arriving in Hong Kong, faced hardship and tragedy. In the early 1950s, his wife, mother and third daughter, who remained in

Guangzhou, passed away due to illness. To further add to his sorrow, his early works, as well as his cherished collection of classical Chinese paintings and antique seals that he had left in mainland China, were lost as a consequence of the Land Reform Movement. According to Mayching Kao, it has been said that "his loneliness and solitude are manifested in his paintings."¹ *Horse* (1967) could be read as an expression of personal anguish. Executed with forceful brushstrokes, the horse looks wild and tormented. Heightening its struggle is its sharply humped back, on which a bird with a similarly intense gaze balances. Ding's frogs—among his most representative painted subjects—have also been read to symbolize his sorrows. A striking composition, *Lotus and Frogs* (1977) depicts a lotus blossom and leaf suspended from long stalks that stretch across the width of the picture, leaving the centre void. Diagonally across is a cluster of frogs rendered in various poses, each with cartoonlike, mischievous eyes. The tonalities of the ink are varied, and enhanced by dabs of vibrant colour on the lotus petals and frogs. Two frogs clamber up the lotus stem, and others peek out from beneath the leaf. Ding's inscription, presented to an academic friend, contradicts the boisterous tableau: "... all the fellow frogs stand to attention to their superior...", suggesting concealed sentiments and satirical undertones behind the playful spirit.

Ding's landscapes, although relatively uncommon among his paintings,² are similarly varied. Depicted with alternating wet and dry brushstrokes, *Landscape* (1977) is a vivid but sparse composition, while the highly expressive rendering of the large pine tree is almost anthropomorphic in quality. Painted with bright colours, *Buddha Temple by the Lake* (1978) appears more contemplative and carefree—perhaps Ding, by the end of his life, had made peace with his past grievances.

Though human figures, especially nudes, had long been a favoured subject of Ding's oil paintings, it was only when the artist was seventy that he began to feature them in his ink work too. Around this time he began to depict characters from Chinese opera, literature and cinema in his ink paintings. From his student days in Tokyo, Ding had gained a deep appreciation for Fauvism, particularly the works of Matisse. Drawing from these sources to nourish his own art, Ding painted his figures with bright colours and vigorous, expressive brushwork. *Opera Figures* (1972) and *Opera Singers* (1972) each captures the drama and theatrics of the stage. Buddhist and Daoist figures, Zhong Kui, the vanquisher evil spirits and the Eight Immortals formed an important part in his oeuvre. In *The Eight Immortals* (1977), the Daoist figures are vividly brought to life with comedic facial expressions. Executed with bold brushstrokes in dark, wet ink, and swathes of rich, contrasting

colours, the work is a testament to the artist's deft assimilation of Chinese and Western artistic languages.

Throughout his diverse body of work, Ding sought to attain the simplicity and childlike innocence of primitive art. He believed that it was only by returning to its original state that one could find richer meaning and modernise Chinese art.³ As for Western artistic traditions, Ding appreciated the late works of Matisse, as he believed they "embodied the best of primitive art."⁴ The distillation into simplified forms is exemplified in his "one-stroke paintings", in which he depicted an animal or bird with a single line. Although *Heavenly Horse* (1978) is not technically a one-stroke painting, the piece nonetheless shows the same finesse and creative use of lines and forms. Painted with fluid and unadorned lines, the galloping horse looks forward in a regal manner. The equine figure contrasts with the eccentric one discussed earlier, demonstrating not only the artist's versatility with ink and brush, but also his emotional honesty and directness.

Like his paintings, Ding's calligraphy shows the influence of works by earlier masters, including—in addition to Bada and Xu Wei—Zhang Xu, Huaisu and Mi Fu. Unafraid to take liberties in the structure and cadence of his characters, Ding forged his own signature running-cursive script style, as can be seen in Seven-character *Quatrain by Mi Fu in Cursive Script* (c. 1974–76). Displaying exuberant energy and rounded forms, Phil Chan has suggested that the number of missing characters or alternative characters were a result of reciting the poem by heart as he wrote it (see pages 44–45). Also charged with great graphic power is *Calligraphy couplet*, the artist's interpretation of a ten-character couplet written by tenth century Daoist sage Chen Tuan in standard script. Unbridled and bold, the movement of the strokes echoes the "outstanding heavenly horse" in the poem.

Ding's creativity extended into seal-carving, a practice to which he devoted himself from 1960 onwards. Wielding his carving knife as an extension of his inked brush, Ding imbued his seals with power and energy,⁵ as we see in the seals *Jin ling* and *Tian min*. To augment the antique feel, he would sometimes tap the surface to encourage natural chips and cracks.⁶ Unconstrained by traditional themes, he even carved his favourite painted subjects—Yang Guifei Bathing and nudes—into his seals, as shown in the two four-sided seals. Ding also carved many pictorial seals of animals. On closer examination of the seals complimenting the paintings presented here, we see seals carved with the horse, donkey, ox, goose and tiger. The tiger was the subject of quite a number of his pictorial seals, as he was born under its zodiac sign.⁷

Ding Yanyong's art was conceived during an era of great artistic upheaval and revolution. With abundant creative flair, Ding succeeded in assimilating Chinese and Western artistic traditions to form his own visual language. He was deeply committed to the artistic legacies of China. But like Bada and other individualist painters before him, he refused to conform to established canons. With wit and humour—often concealing his melancholy and sorrow—his work was highly personal and expressive. Capturing the times but also occupying the timeless, Ding stands among the small group of artists who contributed significantly to the development of modern Chinese art.

¹ Mayching Kao, "The East and the West in Harmony within the Mind's Source: The Oil paintings of Ding Yanyong", in Hong Kong Museum of Art, ed., *No Frontiers: The Art of Ding Yanyong*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2008, p. 24.

² Lang Shaojun, "Returning to the Past for Transcendence: Ding Yanyong's explorations with Chinese painting", in Hong Kong Museum of Art, ed., *No Frontiers: The Art of Ding Yanyong*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2008, p. 44.

³ Kao, op. cit., p. 22.

⁴ Kao, op. cit., p. 22.

⁵ Tong Kam-Tang, "Ding Yanyong's Art of Seal Carving", in Hong Kong Museum of Art, ed., *No Frontiers: The Art of Ding Yanyong*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2008, p. 55.

⁶ Tang Hoi-chiu, "Ding Yanyong", in *Modern Ink: The Nanshun Shanfang Collection*, Singapore, forthcoming.

⁷ Ibid.