
Published in conjunction with a 2008, Asia Society (New York) exhibition of the same name, Art and China’s Revolution features sixteen essays and interviews; reproductions of more than 200 drawings, paintings, prints, posters, and sculptures; and historical photographs and documents. In her introductory remarks, co-editor Chiu argues that Chinese art produced between 1950 and 1970, consisting mainly of propagandist works by artists who, willingly or otherwise, complied with Communist ideology, has thus far received little attention from historians. She suggests that the art of this period merits historical consideration because it influenced the work of contemporary Chinese artists, who have made their presence known in today’s international art market.

Some of the book’s essays were written by artists who experienced life under Mao Zedong, Communist leader of the People’s Republic of China from 1949 to 1976. Shen Jiawei’s “The Fate of a Painting,” reflects the artist’s experiences in an “art creation training class” during the Cultural Revolution; although this training significantly developed his artistic skills and led to the creation of his 1974 painting, “Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland,” the artist’s account of working within the Party’s guidelines are unsettling. Zhao Yannian’s “Thunder Sounding amid the Silence,” references the 1967 incident in which the artist is humiliated by Rebel Factions, who force him to re-create his own denounced paintings. Given these and other conditions imposed on artists under Mao’s rule, it is a revelation to read that Liu Chunhua, in an interview with co-editor Zheng Shengtian, expressed his yearning to paint a portrait of Mao. Other contributors to the volume include historians such as Roderick MacFarquhar and Pan Gongkai, as well as Lu Jie, founder of the Long March Project, a multidisciplinary, collaborative artistic venture established in Beijing in 2002.

In addition to the essays and interviews, Art and China’s Revolution includes an appendix featuring fourteen pages of historical documents and photographs. Among the documents are selections from Mao Zedong’s speeches and writings that cover topics related to literature and art, a discussion with arts workers led by Jiang Qing (Mao’s third wife), and a summary of the proceedings of the Forum on Literature and Art in the Armed Forces. Immediately following this appendix is a chronology of key political and art events during the years 1949-1979. Recommended for those interested in twentieth-century, Chinese art and culture.

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