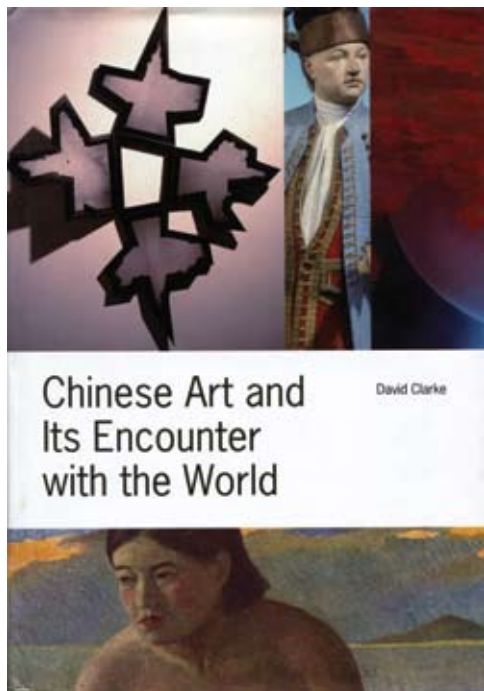


David Clarke
Chinese Art and Its Encounter with the World

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2011, 272 pp. illustrated with black and white and color photographs ISBN 978-988-8083-06-0

Many people involved in China's art world today accept only its surface reality, the immediate and dynamic present, without a glance backward. This is a pity indeed. To look back at history is, on many levels, to engage with the future. It also informs one's view on the euphoria of change, lends an historical perspective to the uniqueness of cultural development, gives voice to those on whose shoulders the artistic and cultural edifice has been built, and makes the present even more dynamic and fulfilling. There are indeed many questions about China's art and its relationship and meetings with the world at large that are difficult to answer and/or to understand, not least because the literature on it is so diverse and difficult to access. To speak clearly on China's complex art narrative and its meetings with the world, especially the West, is the challenge that David Clarke set himself in his most recent and thoroughly researched book, *Chinese Art and Its Encounter with the World*. He has clearly thought long about his subject (some of the material in his book has already been published elsewhere in various forms) and he achieves his aims with great clarity. An important dimension is added to his work by the fact that he has been an astute observer and participant in Macau and Hong Kong, both as a photographer and teacher.

As Chinese society opened up to the rest of the world in the 1980s and 1990s, through its own version of the market economy, so, too, did its visual arts community. Perhaps one of the most important encounters with the world was the formation of *The Stars (Xing Xing)* in 1979, which inspired a generation of cultural workers and alarmed



the State. Contemporary China's visual arts culture and society have not been the same since. The artists then quite simply demanded, after decades of conformity and repression, artistic autonomy, the right to show their own art openly and not that sanctioned by the State's official cultural bodies, and the right to congregate freely and to be individuals. As Ma Dasheng, a founding member of *The Stars* later pointed out, *The Stars* came about "to emphasize our individuality. This was directed at the drab uniformity of the Cultural Revolution."

Although today there is certainly no drabness in the Chinese art world, there is always uncertainty: many political, social, and cultural freedoms guaranteed under the Chinese constitution are still contested at one's own peril, as is clear in the jailing of numerous right-minded lawyers, labor activists, and dissidents. The rebellious spirit of the students and intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement (1919) is always alive and well in China, as was made clear at Tiananmen in 1989. Behind China's neon-lit cities and capitalist artistic branding a fresh, dynamic, and unique visual culture is ever

changing: at times, it seems, with lightening speed.

But from where has all this dynamism come? How have Chinese artists and society reacted to the outside world as they engaged with it at home and abroad? How has ordinary Chinese identity been affected by changes in artistic identity? How have Chinese societies in Hong Kong and Macau been altered? Who have been the protagonists in the tumultuous events that have shaped China over the past three centuries? How does the West continue to shape Chinese artistic destiny and identity? All of these questions and so many more come under Clarke's lucid scrutiny in this short book.

To articulate China's changes Clarke has divided his book into three Parts, each with two Chapters. He is, as he notes, "rather than attempting to offer an all-embracing overview of modern Chinese art's encounter with the world... I have instead elected to present a series of separate in-depth treatments of particular themes." Given the sheer complexity of the subject this approach has paid dividends for both Clarke and the reader: he has made the history of each part easy to

digest and thus progress from one subject and theme to the other is smooth.

Clarke rightly begins in the 18th century with the artist Chitqua, from Canton, who experienced life in England, rare indeed then for a Chinese person under the control of the Emperor. Guangzhou (Canton), Macau, and Hong Kong represent the core cities for early Chinese art contact with the world. Numerous Western artists, such as George Chinnery, exerted an important influence on early modern Chinese art through their skills in oil painting and drawing. Many foreign artists also encouraged the production of China Trade paintings that promoted a particular and exotic view of China in the West. With the Chinese diaspora growing, especially in the early 20th century, Chinese artists' encounters with the world broadened and their influences, especially in Southeast Asia, have proven to be lasting and significant. Chinese artists' appeal and influences on West art cannot be compared, however, with Western influences on the development of modern and contemporary Chinese art.

Clarke's subject matter and themes are wide-ranging and engaging—even in his extensive explanatory endnotes. There are vivid portraits of people at the center and the periphery of Chinese art's development. Hong Kong and Macau are succinctly discussed and Clarke's photographs of these places add significantly to our understanding of how art changes location. The place of the nude and abstraction in contemporary Chinese art are communicated with clarity. One of the most important chapters in the book is that in which Clarke examines the special relationship between Teng Baiyue (1900–1980) and the American painter Mark Tobey (1890–1976). It is through their intense relationship and the exchanges of the realities of their cultures that one begins to understand just how much is achieved in personal art relationships, how much the art encounter is enriched for others.

Hong Kong and Macau

artists have always had easier access to the education and travel. Clark knows many of them well and brings an insider's perspective to the discussion of their work and ideas. These sections are well illustrated, with numerous photographs by Clarke himself, something that lends a valuable personal note. Clarke reveals Hong Kong and Macau afresh, even for someone, like myself, who has spent decades here. He captures the spirit and the great Chinese art encounter of both places at a time of great change by embracing not only the standard visual art modes and new media but also the role of architecture and object, and how artists have addressed the reality of other Chinese cities through their work. In the end, Clarke returns to the place he began, which is satisfying in such a well-rounded narrative: one feels, at times, that the journey was but a beautiful, turbulent dream.

Ian Findlay

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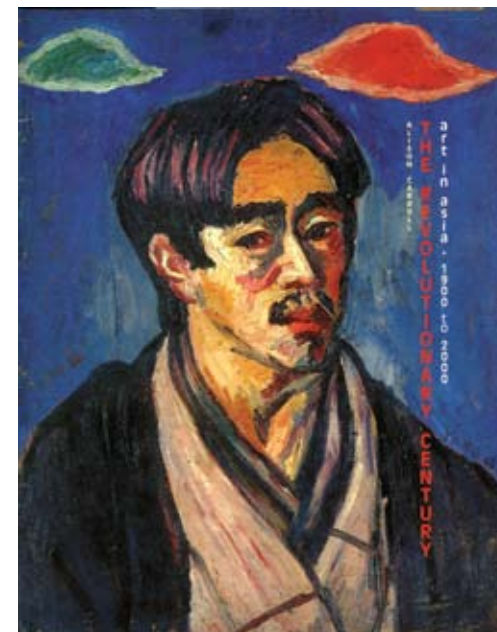
Alison Carroll
The Revolutionary Century: Art in Asia 1900 – 2000

Australia, Macmillan Art Publishing, 2010, 208 pp. illustrated ISBN 978-1-921394-17-1

There is a belief among many people in the West that Asia is one homogeneous whole. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. The sheer physical, cultural, political, social, religious, and artistic diversity of Asia is hard to imagine, even for those for whom Asia is considered their primary area of interest. Even many Asians do not have a clear grasp of the continent's diversity. Indeed there are many people who bridle at the very idea of Asia. As Alison Carroll notes, "The naming of such a large and complicated area with the single name 'Asia' was a convenience of the West." It was a convenience that has been at the heart of myriad misunderstandings and divisions, wars and revolutions. Saying that this is a Western concept that has no place in the 21st

century and that there are just too many differences for such diverse range of peoples and countries to be lumped under one heading is something that will be argued for a long time to come, but plays no real part in Carroll's rich, complex, and exciting survey of modern art and its development from 1900 to 2000.

Although Carroll excludes West and Central Asia from her survey, she provides an exciting overview of regional and foreign trends among artists, both individually and within geographical divisions. The Asia of the North, South, and East clearly have singular national differences, but their distinctness has also been altered broadly by the myriad regional and international influences, not the least of which was the European colonial experience during the 19th and 20th centuries. Although there are many national agendas that have changed little over time, rapid scientific and technological developments throughout the 20th century affected all levels of art production. As transportation and communications improved, so, too, did the flow of new ideas across borders. These fresh artistic ideas helped to create a similarity in the styles of many artists, say, in the production of political propaganda art, woodcut and printmaking, sculpture, and content techniques that many



people now define as Asian art.

Carroll's sweeping exploration of the century is neatly packaged in an introduction, five chapters, each of which is divided into at least four small sections, and, at the end of the book, a short conclusion focusing on the artistic diaspora of the 20th century, which has picked up pace since the 1970s with the opening up of China especially and the extraordinary economic growth across Asia that has afforded many the opportunity to study in the United States and Europe, with cities such as New York and Paris at the top of the list. It is to Carroll's great credit that she has packed so much information into an essentially short text, especially for such an immensely complicated and contentious subject. Each chapter is well illustrated in color, which makes a great difference not only to understanding the artworks themselves but also to adding to an appreciation of the text.

Twentieth century Asia has been blighted and exhausted by wars, revolutions, natural disasters, uneven economic growth, religious strife, and, at the end of the century, astonishing technological development. Artists have responded in myriad ways. In China, Vietnam, and Korea, for example, artists made some of the best socially provocative woodcuts and brilliantly colored propaganda posters one could imagine. In

Indonesia, Taiwan, and the Philippines political art was particularly relevant in the last two decades of the century and helped to educate people about democracy and social reforms. In South Korea and Japan artists were quick to see the potential of new technology and the power of performance art, and around South Asia and Southeast Asia there was a pull between maintaining the painterly narrative that was established under British colonial rule and looking for a way to continue local arts and crafts traditions.

One of the most striking things about the illustrations is just how dominant the figurative tradition is, be it in expressing a political event or gender politics or surreal dream, speaking to an intimate moment or the study of the anguish of poverty and the reality of hard physical labor. There are few works that seem to speak to the artist's personal world here. It is as if the collective voice or identity, the quirkiness of nationalist or revolutionary fervor is most important even with seemingly intimate works. There are few works that might be referred to as cutting edge, but this is not a criticism as much of what is contemporary art in Asia remains very conservative by Western standards. This has changed, of course, especially as Asian artists find their own voices within their own cultures and traditions beyond Western expectations.

This is a book that will serve well as a broad introduction to the art of a region that is frequently misunderstood, misquoted, misinterpreted, and generally disparaged by many Western critics who expect contemporary to mean cutting-edge Western art and ideas. They fail to see the bigger picture of modern and contemporary Asian art functioning within fluid societies that are constantly evolving fresh ways of dealing with the world. Anyone wanting to grasp something of the complex art world that is Asian would do well to read Alison Carroll's tightly written survey.

Ian Findlay