


11-5-2009

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"Around the Web: Art and China" (2009). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 512.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/512>

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Around the Web: Art and China

November 5, 2009 in [The Five-List Plan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [3 comments](#)

A few of the stories related to art that have caught our eye recently:

1. The big story in Chinese art this week was the unveiling of [a new Mao statue](#) in Changsha (thanks to [Shanghaiist](#) for that link), which depicts the future Great Helmsman as a 32-year-old. The Mount Rushmore-esque monolith shows Mao as a romantic young revolutionary, gazing resolutely into the distance as his unusually long hair blows in the wind. Although one member of the design team said that they "were particularly concerned with differentiating it from past images," the statue evokes the feel of "[Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan](#)," the famous 1968 propaganda poster. Reaction to the new statue has been divided, but generally seems to fall on the negative end of the spectrum: some Chinese bloggers have compared it to the Sphinx, Malcolm Moore of the *Telegraph* reports that one of his colleagues said that "it looks more like Lord Byron than Mao," and a commenter on [the China Daily BBS](#) remarked on the statue's resemblance to Beethoven. [Danwei](#) translates part of a Chinese newspaper article about the design and construction process, and also has a large photo of the statue . . . so you can decide for yourself whether or not it really looks like Mao.

2. Our Southern California readers might be interested in checking out [an exhibit at Pasadena's Pacific Art Museum](#), which features artwork that combines Chinese calligraphy and American street graffiti under the title "Across the Divide." This "calligraffiti" challenges viewers' assumptions about the nature of "high culture" and "street art," explains the exhibit's curator:

The exhibit features a variety of pieces that focus on the essential idea of writing within art, exploring the similarities between traditional Chinese calligraphy and graffiti. The Museum brought together several prominent modern Chinese and Latino artists who collaborated on the show's hallmark pieces.

"High calligraphy and graffiti are usually looked at as two very different paradigms," said Collette Chattopadhyay, guest curator for the exhibit. "But what is being posited in this exhibition is that they are two sides of the same coin."

One artist discusses this in more depth:

"I found pieces of my language that are parallel and synchronistic with another language: the language of street writers and graffiti artists," [Minette Lee] Mangahas said. "It's about dialogue, it's about play, it's about speaking across differences and similarities, it's about discovery and experimentation; we spoke the same language even though one is 4,000 years old and one is 60 years old."

Readers who can't see the exhibit in person can take a short video tour of the artwork, found at the link above.

3. Another noteworthy exhibit, also with a significant online component, is "[Imagining China: The View from Europe](#)," at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., through January 9. On November 10, the library will host an event titled "Perspectives on China: The Perpetual Discovery," which will feature a discussion among Rachel DeWoskin (author of *Foreign Babes in Beijing* and [Repeat After Me](#)), *Atlantic* correspondent James Fallows, and Orville Schell of the Asia Society. See [here](#) for ticket details.

4. We recently linked to Peter Hessler's [audio slide show](#) at the *New Yorker* that takes a tour of a knockoff art workshop in Lishui, where Chinese workers reproduce famous Western paintings for export. The October issue of *ARTnews* features [an article exploring the historical dimensions of this topic](#) (h/t Danwei), pointing out that Chinese artists routinely produced copies of Gilbert Stuart's famous George Washington portrait and sold them to American art collectors. Museums today aren't quite sure how to deal with these copies; after the New Britain Museum of American Art received one, a great debate ensued, shares the museum director, Douglas Hyland:

"The painting was donated by a Connecticut woman, Caroline N. Dealy," Hyland said. "She said her mother had died and that members of her family wanted to give the painting in memory of their mother. Since we are the oldest museum of American art in the United States, we were really thrilled. The museum has wanted to acquire a portrait of George Washington for many years.

"As soon as it went on display, it became the subject of a great debate: Should it be at an American art museum? Is it an American work of art? The truth is that it's a copy of a Stuart made by a Chinese artist for an American collector. It's a compelling story. It was painted 200 years ago, and 200 years later we're dealing with the same issues. There are still works being pirated in China today—movies, books, CDs."

5. Finally, we like [this site about the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*](#), which is complete with examples of the magazine's illustrations and an introductory essay that places *Dianshizhai* within the context of nineteenth-century Shanghai culture:

Both in its form and its genesis, the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* and its parent daily newspaper, *Shenbao*, encapsulated the cultural hybridity and social change that epitomized Shanghai during the late nineteenth century. . . . *Dianshizhai* was by no means a product of wholesale "Westernization", as even a cursory glance at any of its pages will hint. Usually the illustrations were rendered by professional artists with a background in traditional Chinese painting techniques but who also frequently copied pen and ink sketches from foreign magazines such as *Harper's*. The written commentary, meanwhile, was provided by *Shenbao* writers and editorialists. These men tended to have classical literati educations, but by virtue of their place of residence (Shanghai) and their occupation (newspapermen), they were somewhat set apart from the world of late imperial officialdom. Thus on the one hand *Dianshizhai* items show a love for Shanghai in all its hybrid splendor – the nouveau riche, the foreign, the slightly risqué, the odd – combined with an occasional disdain for the backwardness of other locales. But on the other hand, one can easily find in its pages a reliable dose of what might be called conventional morality: respect for order and authority, reinforcing of standard gender roles, and so on.

Tags: Art