CULTURE

Art crosses boundaries to exciting era

Exhibition gives panoramic view of intricate skill and design in China, offering vivid portrayal of ordinary people, **Lin Qi** reports.

The elliptical Hall No 1 on the ground floor of the National Art Museum of China in Beijing is normally saved for events of great importance, often exhibitions by historical artists of luminosity.

Entering the expansive room today, you will find a painting hung in the center created by Shen Xiaoming, an ink artist from Zhejiang province who is pursuing a doctoral degree in classical Chinese painting at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province.

In his piece titled *Golden Land*, Shen, 38, depicts and speaks for his peers — people whom he has come across on the streets, construction sites, factories and restaurants, and those hoping for a better life in big cities.

"They come from rural places. Their grandfathers and fathers, back in the villages, have devoted their lives to farming. My peers are 'farming' on a different kind of land in the cities," Shen says.

"The figures in the painting are real people I met when preparing the work. I talked to them for a long time and felt that, although they moved to cities, they are emotionally attached to the land their families have worked hard on for generations," he adds.

Thus in the painting, he positions the people not against the background of urban landscapes but an extensive field of agricultural harvest and portrays them as if monuments rising from the field.

"Young people have a new attitude, a temperament their predecessors do not possess. They are more confident and active in embracing changes and facing challenges," Shen says.

His fine brushwork reflecting the emotions of the migrant generation reached the hearts of the juries of the 14th National Exhibition of Fine Arts, organized by the China Artists Association, who awarded the piece a gold prize.

Held every five years since 1949, the National Exhibition of Fine Arts gives a panoramic view of fine art and design in the country.

This year, it returned to the National Art Museum of China and National Museum of China, where prizewinning works such as Shen's *Golden Land* and various other entries are on display until Oct 24.

Works displayed include paintings, sculptures, prints, installations, animations, mixed-media and graphic and industrial designs to show an intensified integration of art and technology.

They exhibit how art has been applied to transform people's lives, such as uniforms for Chinese astronauts and the visual designs — graphics and color systems — for the 19th Asian Games held in Hangzhou in 2022.

Depicting the greatness of ordinary people and hailing their spirit is at the core of the National Exhibition of Fine Arts, says Fan Di'an, chairman of the China Artists Association.

He says that focusing on people offers a vivid life portrayal in the works selected for the exhibition — those who engage in poverty alleviation, rural vitalization, environmental protection and major national construction projects.









Clockwise from top: Award-winning works and entries at the 14th National Exhibition of Fine Arts are on show at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. BY ZHENG BINBIN / FOR CHINA DAILY The exhibition includes works as *Beautiful Xinjiang*, by Li Dan, Liu Zihan, Liu Rui and Liu Lijuan; *Golden Land*, by Shen Xiaoming; and *Through Thick and Thin*, by Luo Yuxin. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Fan adds that on a microcosmic level, people can reflect on the past five years' historic moments, such as the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China and the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, to feel the spirit of China and the country's empowered people.

Liu Wanming, an ink artist who heads the China National Academy of Painting, says he is surprised that "many painters insist on exploring creation in large format, a challenging undertaking to blend techniques and content well".

An example at the exhibition is *Through Thick and Thin*, 2.4 meters in height and 2 meters in length, which won Luo Yuxin, an ink painter from Guangdong province, a gold prize at the exhibition.

On a technical level, she presents the brilliance of the minimalist style of classic Chinese painting in which a painter utilizes varying shades of black and white, and a serene mood accentuated by the *liubai* technique — applying white to create areas of "blankness".

Luo created the work out of concern over the years for endangered species and biodiversity and to raise awareness for the biology of the polar regions. It depicts a peaceful scene in which a family of polar bears enjoy a moment on the ice and below the water with fish swimming joyfully.

The composition is employed from the flower and bird genre of classic Chinese painting, which Luo specializes in, while reminding people of a pressing environmental problem that "can take a toll on the future of humanity", Luo says.

She adds that she seeks to enrich naturalism in traditional ink art by addressing the coexistence of people and other life and the construction of an ecological civilization.

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Classical pianist hits new notes online and onstage

By CHEN NAN
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Tony Ann's music journey began at 11 years old when his schoolteacher showed his class a documentary about German composer Beethoven and his life. That inspired the boy who was born in Beijing and had moved to Toronto, Canada, with his family when he was 6 years old.

Watching Beethoven grapple with gradual hearing loss and how he communicated his struggles and suffering through his music resonated with Ann and made him want to write music.

Ann asked his parents for piano lessons not because he was particularly interested in the instrument but because he wanted to use it as a tool to write songs.

Classically trained, the pianist studied at two music schools in the United States — Berklee College of Music for composition and production and the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he studied classical piano. However, he is part of a rising number of global young musicians with classical training who also possess modern sensibilities that appeal to the masses and see social media as a tool to get their talent noticed.

The pianist was 14 when he started his YouTube channel and uploaded short clips of his live performances and piano covers of popular pop songs.

His most popular content series "#PlayThatWord" was launched in 2023. In the series, he writes the 26 letters of the alphabet on his keyboard, with one letter on each key. Then he asks his followers to suggest a word for him to play and composes a piece based on that word.

This year, Ann completed his first European tour and is touring worldwide until early 2025. On Sept 4, he made his debut at Beijing's Blue Note as part of his ongoing world tour, where the pianist also played the game with the audience. Ann also performed in Shanghai on Sept 5.

Ann notes that the show in Beijing was special to him because it's the city where he was born.

"I really enjoyed the concert and talking with the fans. Speaking Mandarin onstage was a first for me and definitely a highlight," he says.

During an interview that day, the pianist says that the idea for "#PlayThatWord" came from his father, who suggested he do a video for International Pi Day on March 14, dedicated to the famous mathematical constant.

"I had the idea to write out the numbers on the piano keys and create a melody using the digits of Pi (3.14…). After that, I moved on to the alphabet and the series took off from there," says Ann, who has more than 6 million followers on social media.

"Classical music has made a huge impact on me. It shaped a lot of my techniques and my musical thinking. I try to be as authentic and original as possible online — whether it's in the way I caption, message or interact during livestreams," he says. "Being genuine is really important to me. My fans inspire me with their messages and stories, especially during concerts.

"I think the key to grabbing attention online is presenting content that's both familiar and unique, something that resonates but also sparks curiosity," he adds.

During the shows in Beijing and Shanghai, he performed his original pieces in the trilogy of EPs released last year under Decca Records: *Emotionally Blue*, *Emotionally Red* and *Emotionally Orange*, which were created in a similar way to *Lost, Time, Anxiety,* and *Love* — exploring diverse human emotions.

Ann often takes his keyboard to landmarks and natural scenes around the world. During his trip to China last month, he played it on the Great Wall in Beijing, filmed himself playing at the historic landmark and shared the videos online.

Besides landmarks, the pianist often performs in public spaces, such as airports. Whether it be the setting or the people watching, he becomes inspired by the locations.

Now, he is working on a project titled *360°* where he creates a song for each star sign. The 12-song album focuses on the 12 horoscope signs with themes relating the emotions and personalities of each star sign set to music.

"I've tried to make each piece unique, reflecting the distinct qualities of each sign. All 12 pieces are finished and will be released during the corresponding zodiac months. The full project will be out by February next year," he says.



Pianist Tony Ann performed at Blue Note Beijing on Sept 5 as part of his ongoing global tour. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY