

Wang Tiande:

Transforming Art by Collecting

Wang Tiande (b. 1960) is among China's leading contemporary ink artists. Trained in Chinese painting and calligraphy at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art), Wang is well versed in classical aesthetics and literati idealism, but remains conscious not to let tradition limit his creativity. After years of experimentation, one day during an art residency in Paris in 2002 he accidentally burned a mark on some Xuan paper and noticed its beauty. Recognizing the chance to develop a unique style, he devoted the next 15 years to evolving and perfecting it by using incense sticks to create silhouettes of calligraphy and paintings, one stroke at a time.

Wang attributes his most recent artistic inspiration to collecting. He rummages through ancient calligraphy, ink paintings and stone tablets for pieces that resonate with his creative impulse. His pictorial language, comprising burned marks on bast paper, meticulously layered onto an ink painting he has done on Xuan paper, and sometimes audaciously mounted over an original ancient work, invites reflection on the synthesis of past and present, technicality and spirituality, legacy and potential. His multifaceted approach to incorporating antiquity into his new works prompts criticism as well as admiration from both contemporary artists and antique collectors, and curiosity from all. In preparation for his forthcoming solo exhibition at the Guangdong Museum of Art, the artist committed himself to an arduous programme of solitary work throughout the summer. In the heat of August, Xin de la Guerrande visited Wang in his Shanghai studio on behalf of *Orientations* to discuss his experiences as a collector and the rationale behind his creations.

Xin de la Guerrande You started collecting around the time of your solo exhibition at Today Art Museum in Beijing in 2014. How did you come up with the idea to connect antique works to your own oeuvre?

Wang Tiande It all started by chance in 2013, when I saw a pair of small album leaves of calligraphy by Dong Qichang [1555–1636] at a friend's place. It dawned on me that it might be interesting to create works in connection with antique calligraphy and ink paintings. I titled my Today Art Museum exhibition 'Kai Men' because in old times good collections were regarded as great *kaimen* [lit., 'open door', an indication that a collection is authentic and valuable]. In December 2013 I went to an auction in Shanghai, where buyers were bidding relentlessly. Discouraged by the soaring prices, I felt like leaving, and stayed only because I was captivated by a Zhang Zhao [1691–1745] couplet. I decided to try my luck. Zhang Zhao was a native of Songjiang county in Shanghai, and my studio is in Songjiang. Also, his literati name



Wang Tiande



Couplet in running script
By Zhang Zhao (1691–1745)
Ink on paper

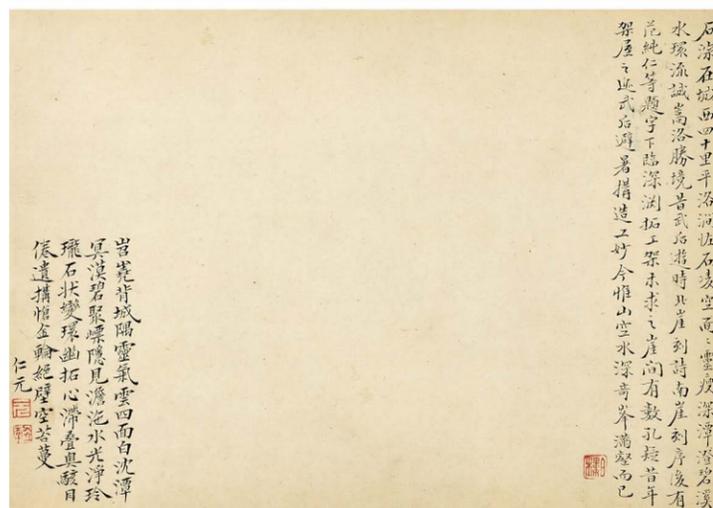
was Detian, a reversal of the characters in my given name, Tiande. I raised my paddle. A famous collector saw me bidding and stopped competing—perhaps he wanted to see an artist win the couplet. From that time on, collecting became an integral part of my life.

XDLG You remarked in a recent interview that art collecting transforms you. How has it transformed you?

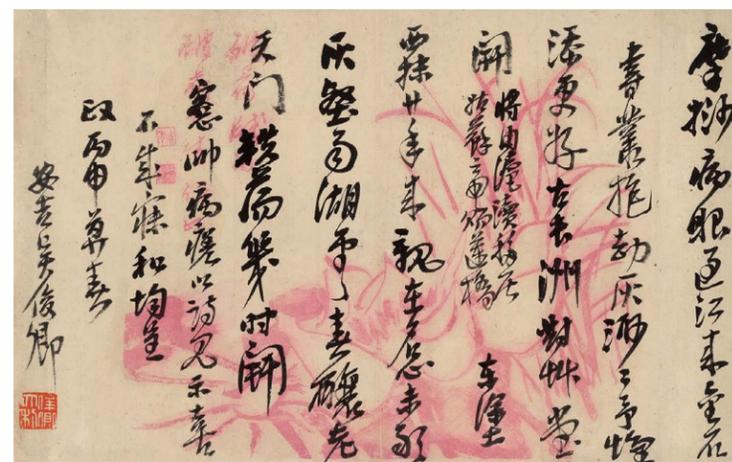
WTD Being a collector is like taking a journey in the dark. Authenticity is always a problem. Although I have studied calligraphy and ink painting, I still need time to examine each work. Through this process, I have become more knowledgeable about the Songjiang and Wumen schools of painting, and my work has been significantly informed by this understanding.

After I returned from a trip to Canada, I went to a sale in Beijing, where I bought *Visit to the Song–Luo Monuments*, a landscape album leaf by the Qing dynasty [1644–1911] artist Li Xuan [1821–50], as well as a calligraphic poem composed and written by the late Ming dynasty [1368–1644] patriotic intellectuals Xu Qian [1597–1645] and Yang Tingshu [1595–1647]. I created two handscrolls based on these works and mounted them over the original works to be exhibited in 'Kai Men'.

A seal carved by Wu Changshuo [1844–1927], which I bought in 2016, has an inscription reading 'Jia jin Yanyu Lou' ['Home by the Misty Tower']. This tiny seal comes with good associations. It was gifted



Visit to the Song–Luo Monuments
By Li Xuan (1821–50), 2014
Album leaves, Xuan paper, ink, bast paper, each 25 x 36.5 cm



Letter in running script
By Wu Changshuo (1844–1927), 1895
Ink on paper

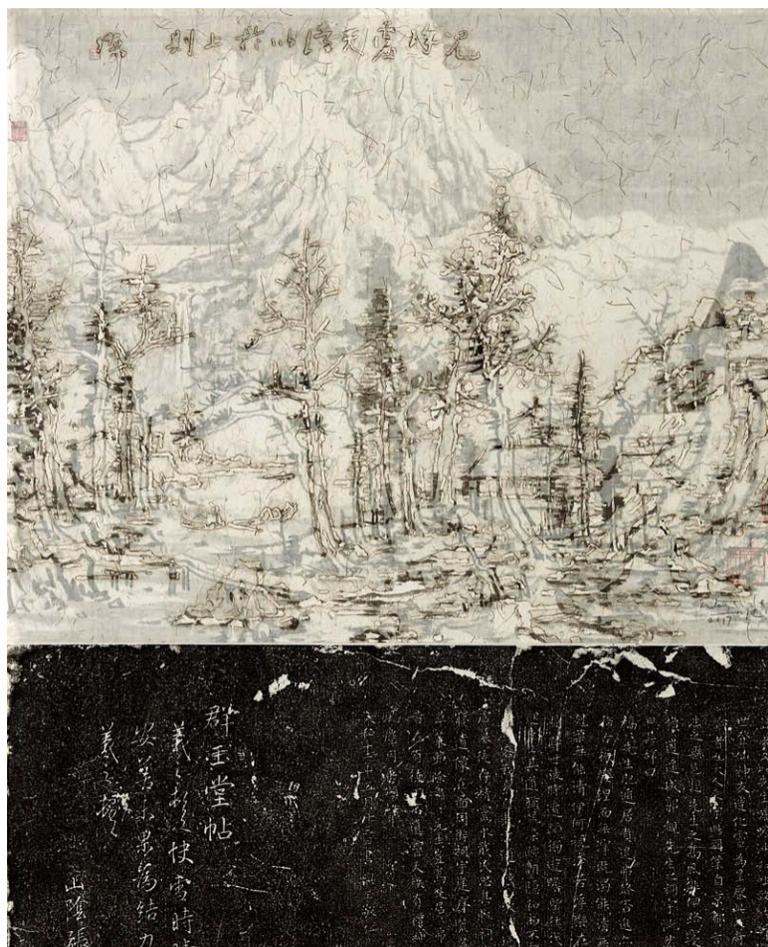
by Wu Changshuo to a friend and later collected by Wu's son. Yanyu Lou is located on the South Lake at Jiaxing, near Hangzhou, and my research confirms that the Qianlong emperor [r. 1736–95] visited the tower at some point. Coincidentally, my exhibition at the Guangdong Museum of Art will be on Yanyu Road on Ersha Island in Guangzhou. I will stamp this seal on one of my works for the exhibition.

XDLG So you think about how to incorporate an antique work into your own work before you buy. Take, for example, Wu Changshuo's and Wu Hufan's [1894–1968] letters and your 'Literati Gathering' series, which was exhibited in San Francisco in 2016. You knew when you bought them that the letters would become part of your future works.

WTD We live with opportunities within our grasp. The exhibition theme 'Literati Gathering' had been confirmed a year before. It was up to me to string together historical evidence on which to base my art. At a small auction I found a letter written by Wu Changshuo to the late Qing official and artist Wu Dacheng [1835–1902] in 1895. The emperor had demoted Wu Dacheng after the latter's defeat in the Sino–Japanese War [1894–95]. The letter has a painting by the late Qing artist Ren Bainian [1840–96] on it. Just one page of the letter holds the memory of three famous people of the late Qing. No one else seemed to have picked up on this detail. I had to buy the letter for its artistic and historical importance. Then at an auction in Hong Kong in 2016 I found a calligraphy fan that Wu Hufan had gifted to his student Wang Jiqian [C. C. Wang; 1906–2003] for his 50th birthday. The small characters in regular script on the fan are among the most beautiful of Wu Hufan's I have seen. I exhibited these two letters alongside my own works in San Francisco.



Calligraphy fan
By Wu Hufan (1894–1968)
Ink on paper



Houshan—Dream Stroke
By Wang Tiande (b. 1960), 2017
Ink, burned marks and tablet rubbing
on Xuan paper, 67 x 55 cm

I love diving into a work's historical and cultural background to unravel how artists influenced one another.

XDLG There have been famous artist-collectors throughout Chinese history. Wu Changshuo was among them. Is there a common characteristic among artist-collectors?

WTD We all have stylistic preferences. Artists in the rank of Wu Changshuo can judge works in the context of history. Collecting inspires artists to better themselves. The works they collect ultimately mirror their own cultural level.

XDLG How have you been influenced by the Wumen school? Do you think its impact extends beyond calligraphy and ink painting?

WTD When I was planning my 2014 exhibition 'Hou Shan' ['The Mountain Behind'] at the Suzhou Museum I had to contemplate what the Wumen school meant for us in the modern day. The Wumen school burgeoned in the Suzhou-Hangzhou area in the Ming dynasty, a time of cultural sophistication and material affluence. Intellectuals like Wu Kuan [1435-1504], Shen Zhou [1427-1509] and Wen Zhengming [1470-1559] mentored and inspired one another through painting or literature. It was also a period of timeless, refined designs in architecture, gardens, furniture, clothing and scholar's objects. The Wumen legacy is impactful up to the present day.

XDLG In 'Hou Shan' you highlighted the term 'borrow[ing a] view' [Ch. *jiijing*; incorporating existing views into a garden] and created new works

inspired by the Ming Wumen school landscape painter Wen Boren [1502-75]. What did you take from the 'borrow[ing a] view' tradition?

WTD Up until the early 20th century there were no tall buildings in Suzhou. One could 'borrow [a] view' by looking at the rockery in the garden and also climb up onto the rockery to see open fields and real mountains beyond the garden. I have visited the Suzhou Museum many times. The architect, I. M. Pei [b. 1917], is a master at the concept of 'borrow[ing a] view'. It was an honour to exhibit my works at the new Suzhou Museum. I was determined to make it innovative and memorable.

Good works by Wen Boren are expensive and hard to come by. I set my heart on a Wen Boren work that was owned by a friend. A famous collector was also interested, but my friend kindly reserved it for me. The painting is of the Western Hills near the Taihu lake area of Suzhou and is mesmerizingly beautiful. Imagine, steps away from the Suzhou Museum, a few hundred years ago, along the Pingjiang promenade, artists like Shen Zhou [1427-1509] came ashore, gathered for tea, and exchanged paintings and ideas. I created nine album-leaf paintings inspired by details from this painting, such as trees, pavilions and people. My new works, along with the original work of Wen Boren, effectively weave a cultural scene of a bygone era for the exhibition.

XDLG You've been working intensively on your upcoming Guangdong Museum of Art exhibition. Can you tell me about it?

WTD Each exhibition exhausts me to my limit. It took me a year just to select a theme for the exhibition. I initially wanted to centre it on a piece of calligraphy by Huang Binhong [1865-1955]. Unfortunately, the script had been unsuccessfully treated for mildew and had paled beyond recognition so I didn't buy it. In despair, I told a friend that I would go with 'Over the Hill', which was one of seventeen possible themes I had come up with. It comes from the lyrics of a song by the Taiwanese singer-songwriter Li Zongsheng [b. 1958] and for me implies overcoming limitations and daring to see and try new things. Artists are wary of relating their works to pop songs. But there is no better theme to articulate my determination to break through. And some of the pieces will involve original works from masters such as the Qing artist Yi Bingshou [1754-1815].



Western Hills
By Wen Boren (1502-75)
Ink and colour on paper

XDLG Why do you mount some of your works over or alongside original works of Ming and Qing masters to create new works?

WTD People say I am being cruel. It will definitely disturb some people—collectors revere the original mountings. An antique work in its original mounting has an aura. The first time I asked a mounting expert to slice open an antique work from 200 years ago, he did not dare to pick up the knife. It takes courage to create new art. These works I have created are new at the moment—50 years from now, people may see

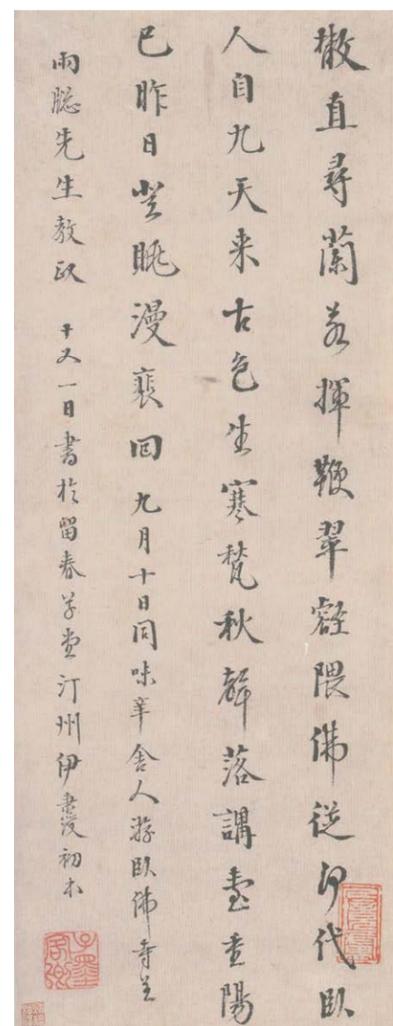
them as old. I collect works with my hard-earned capital, and I immerse my life and art in them. I feel at ease with experimentation. There are so many good artworks in the world. I just want to create in a new way and by doing so, enlarge the spectrum of life and art. I hope to create twenty to thirty works like this, then hold an exhibition and write a book to share my stories of collecting with a broader audience.

I am actually starting to use prints of masters' works, such as a Zhu Hui [act. Ming dynasty] work that I bought at a Christie's auction in spring 2017. I consulted the chairman of another auction house to confirm that this work had been documented in the Guangdong historical archives. This rare historical evidence of Zhu Hui has a preface by Wu Rongguang [1773–1843] and was collected by Wu's nephew. It was offered at Poly in 2014 but failed to sell. I bought it for just over HK\$70,000. If I reveal the results of my research, many collectors may regret missing the chance to buy it. This piece of work is so rare that I decided to exhibit a print of the original work along with a nearly 4-metre-long handscroll I created after this work for the Guangdong Museum of Art exhibition.

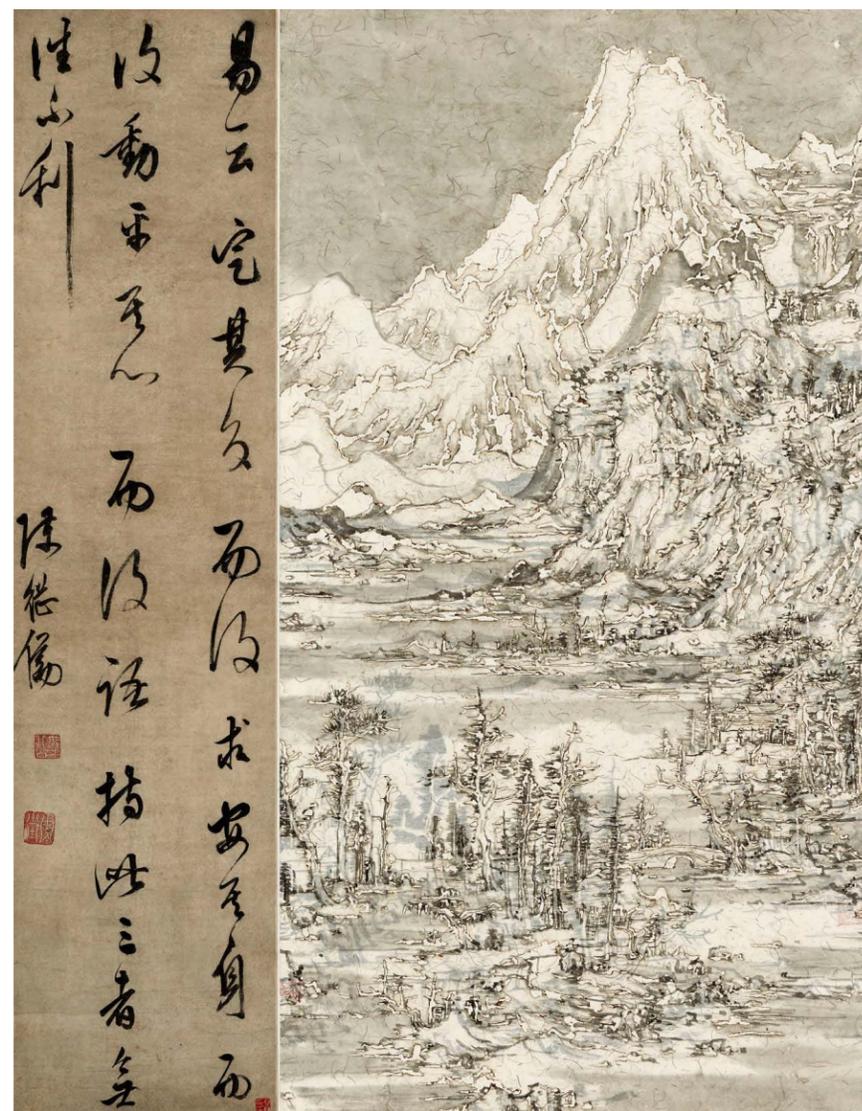
XDLG What does it mean to you to collect and incorporate antique works in your creations?

WTD Some people say my works will become too expensive. Actually they are reasonably priced. What's important is that I feel passionate and inspired to create and transform art by collecting. In the future, people looking at my works may appreciate that an artist has pushed himself to think outside the box. As an artist, my art comes first. I buy what is meaningful to me, rather than very expensive or popular items that are highly sought after. Take this *Calligraphy in Running Script* by Wang Duo [1592–1652], for example. It was archived in *Selected Calligraphy Works of Wang Duo* by Henan Fine Arts Publishing in 1992. The director of Xiling Yinsheng Auction in Hangzhou, Mr Lu, found a matching stone tablet in Luoyang. I bought the calligraphy and mounted it on the left side of a landscape painting I made for the exhibition 'Revolve' at the Palace Museum in 2015.

XDLG Some people have commented that you connect your works to masters' works out of materialistic calculations.



Running script
By Yi Bingshou (1754–1815)
Ink on paper



Houshan—Chen Jiru
running script on I-Ching
By Wang Tiande (b. 1960), 2017
Ink and burned marks on Xuan
paper, with calligraphy by Chen
Jiru (1558–1639), 111 x 87 cm

WTD Every artist will be judged or scorned at some point. If my works themselves are not culturally meaningful, then what I mount on ancient works will be worthless. 'Materialistic calculations' or not, people interpret a world of possibilities only to reflect their own view on life. I enjoy creating art as much as learning from masters. Only when you are in close contact with a piece of calligraphy or a painting can you perceive fine traces of history and the emotion of a master.

XDLG Many Chinese collectors lock away their treasures in storage. You, however, physically mount

antique works to your own works. What is the ultimate reward for you as a collector?

WTD I am new to collecting, but it makes my life meaningful and joyful. I nourish my brain with beautiful antiques, paintings and calligraphy, and I constantly reflect on my life and art. As we grow older, we have only ancient masters as teachers. Collecting is, for me, the best way of learning.

Xin de la Guerrande is a writer and collector and director of Xin Communications Company.