

# CONTEMPORARY SCHOOLS OF INSIDE PAINTING,PART II

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In this two-part article I have addressed four points:

1. The history and genealogy of the Five Schools of Modern Inside Painting.
2. The main characteristics of the Five Schools
3. Quantum leaps in painting **skill** over the past fifty years
4. Quantum leaps in painting **creativity** over the past twenty years

The first two points were covered in Part I of this article, which appeared in the Spring 2015 issue of the *Journal*. In Part II of this article I now come to the last two points, which in my opinion will particularly appeal to those collectors who regard inside painting as a real form of art rather than just a craft.

In Part I of this article I showed the main characteristics of all the Modern Schools with the exception of the Ji School. I could not realistically go into any depth to illustrate the Ji School because of the very large number of famous Ji School artists, many of whom have their own individual and often very original styles.

Therefore the best I can do to illustrate the richness and depth of the Ji School is to use examples from some leading Ji School artists to demonstrate my last two points: the quantum leaps in painting skill and creativity in the past decades within the Schools of Modern Inside Painting.

In order to show the quantum leaps in painting **skill** over the past fifty years I have used paintings of cats, for the following reasons:

1. Cats are technically very difficult to paint because of their individual faces and fine fur, especially Persian cats.
2. We are familiar with cats. Everyone knows what a cat should look like.
3. At one time I had several Persian cat pets, so I know better than many people how the faces of these cats differ from the caricatured—almost cartoon-like—way they are often painted.

I also used cats because Master Wang Xisan himself used a cat as an example to explain how a bottle is painted in one of his most recent books, *Masters of Chinese Arts and Crafts: Wang Xisan* 中国工艺美术大师：王习三 (2014). The example in **figure 1** was painted in 2006 by Master Lu Jianguang 卢建广, who was a pupil of Wang Xisan from 1980.

I start from the first decade of Early Modern inside painting, 1960–1970 (**fig. 2**), showing two early works by Wang Xisan when he was still a member of the Jing School. (The two early Jing School bottles in **figure 2** are also



Fig. 1. How to paint a cat inside a bottle: Lu Jianguang (2006).



Fig. 2. Cats through the decades: 1960 to 1970.



Fig. 3. Cats through the decades: 1970 to 1980.



Fig. 4. Cats through the decades: 1970 to 1980.



Fig. 6. Cats through the decades: 1980 to 1990.

usually attributed to Wang Xisan.) Going on from there it is easy to see the growth of painting skill as we move through the following two decades, 1970–1980 (**figs. 3 and 4**) and then 1980–1990 (**figs. 5 through 8**).

Of particular interest is **figure 7**, in which it is obvious that master artists Ai Qi 艾琦 and Wang Qian 王千 have both copied from the same original Western oil painting. Also of interest is **figure 8**, in which the rapid improvement in skill over just three years between 1986 and 1989 can be seen in the work of Cao Huimin 曹慧敏, the first Ji School woman artist.

Note that up to 1990 I have selected only bottles painted by master artists. Therefore these really were the best paintings of cats in the first three decades since the start of the whole Modern period *per se*.

All the artists whose works are shown going forward from **figure 4** are from the Ji School, and one can clearly see huge improvements in painting skill from decade to decade.

Strangely, I could not find any paintings of cats by well-known artists from 1990 to 2000. This may be because bottles of cats painted during this period were not particularly outstanding and so were not included



Fig. 5. Cats through the decades: 1980 to 1990.



Fig. 7. Cats through the decades: 1980 to 1990.



Fig. 8. Cats through the decades: 1980 to 1990.



Fig. 9. Cats through the decades: 2000 to 2010.





Fig. 10. Cats through the decades: 2000 to 2010.



Fig. 11. Cats through the decades: 2000 to 2010.



Fig. 12. Cats through the decades: 2010 to today: Zhang Keqin.



Fig. 13. Cats through the decades: 1970 to today.

in publications of collections. However a more likely explanation is that master artists were turning to more creative themes by the end of the twentieth century, as I will explain later.

The first decade of the twenty-first century evinces another quantum leap in painting skill (figs. 9 through 11). Compare Master Ai Qi's work in 1986 with his later works in 2004 and 2005 (figs. 6 and 9). The other examples of cat paintings that I have shown in figures 9 through 11 are by younger Ji School artists. Liu Bingshan 刘丙山 (fig. 10) does specialize in painting cats with his unique grey-tone style, while Zhang Keqin 张克芹 (fig. 11) paints animals in general. However Shi Xingzhou 史星洲 (fig. 9) is much better known for his Chinese landscape paintings, while Nie Lei 聂磊, also known as Yi Ding 一丁 (fig. 11) is one of the most famous micro-calligrapher painters of the Very Modern period. Wang Shijia 王思佳 (fig. 11) at the

time he painted this Persian cat, which I personally commissioned from a photograph of one of my pets, was just a senior student of Li Shouxun 李守训 in Hengshui. Nonetheless, there is no comparison between his student painting skill in 2009 and the skills of the masters from half a century before.

The most beautiful painting of a cat I have ever seen was by Zhang Keqin 张克芹 in 2012 (fig. 12). I bought the bottle on the spot even though the back face of the bottle was only half-finished because I knew I would only want to display the magnificent front face, which Ms. Zhang told me she painted from an image in her mind and not as a copy from a photograph or any other picture.

I therefore hope that readers can see the quantum leaps in painting skill over the past fifty years based on these examples by both earlier senior and more recent younger Ji School artists (fig. 13).

Finally I come to my last of my four points, and the one that is closest

to my heart and guides my bottle collection: quantum leaps in painting **creativity** over the past twenty years.

*This is where craft really does become art!*

To illustrate this point I have used paintings of Chinese landscapes as examples. My reasons are as follows:

1. Chinese landscapes allow great freedom for creativity and new styles of painting.
2. Every collector of Chinese snuff bottles is familiar with Chinese landscapes.
3. I personally love Chinese landscape paintings. The great majority of my collection of over 300 Very Modern period inside-painted bottles are Chinese landscapes.

Note that in the case of paintings of cats it was hard to find examples by senior artists. However, there are so many good examples of Chinese landscape paintings by talented artists that I found it hard to choose the best ones to present.

I start with some examples of classic-style Chinese landscape inside-painted bottles from the past century by four great masters, Zhou Leyuan, Ding Erzhong, Wang Xisan and Liu Shouben (fig. 14), to lay the basis for what I will go on to say about Very Modern period landscapes.

If we jump ahead to the mid-2000s, we find that Very Modern period artists still often paint Chinese landscapes in this classic-style (fig. 15). However, as one would expect from the big improvements in painting skill over the past century, the level of detail is significantly higher. The three bottles in figure 15 are all in my collection and were painted by Song Yiming 宋义明. The first two bottles shown in figure 15 were in fact among the first *real* inside-painted bottles I bought, and I still consider them some of the best examples I have seen of classic-style Chinese landscape inside-painted bottles from the Very Modern period.

One way to paint Chinese landscapes in modern style is to commission copies of the works of modern watercolor- or oil-paint artists. In figure 16 I show two superlative examples of this kind of work that I commissioned from well-known Ji School artist Master Li Shouxun 李守训. This is part of a series of bottles copied from the watercolor paintings of semi-abstract Chinese landscape artist Zhang Yumao 张玉茂. Consider that the original paintings are nearly five feet tall and that the bottles were copied from a huge coffee-table-size art book. Condensing the image into a three-inch-tall bottle at a level of detail that requires a strong magnifying glass to resolve is truly high craftsmanship. But though the bottles are amazingly beautiful, I would argue that they are not true *creative art*.

In fact, until about 2000 the great majority of Modern period bottles were copies: whether of a Western canvas painting, a Chinese scroll painting, a photograph, a print or whatever. In J.H. Leung's landmark book titled *A New Look of Chinese Inside Painted Snuff Bottles* (Chinese version: 1988; English version: 1990), you can see that most of his collection, probably over 90 percent, were copy-painted as shown in figures 17 through 19. (Suo Zhenhai 索振海, who seems to have created his wonderful paintings from within his own mind, is a notable exception to this general statement.)

However, in fairness to the artists who painted prior to about 1990, it must be remembered that the major collectors at that time, such as J.H. Leung himself, often specifically requested inside-painted bottles that were copies of original paintings or photographs supplied as commissions. Therefore inside painting in that era was still much more of a commercial craft rather than a creative art.

In fact, by definition all commissioned portraits *must* be copies, as must be all bottles that are painted based on other works of art such as illustrations in wildlife books, catalogs of Chinese vases and bronzes, and photographs. These days many copy paintings are done from pictures downloaded from the Internet.

Thus we come to **creativity**, and this is where I think that Very Modern inside painting becomes exciting and *real art* at last begins! This is also why in Part I of this



Fig. 14. Chinese classic-style landscape bottles by four masters.



Fig. 15. Very Modern Chinese classic-style landscape bottles: Song Yiming.



Fig. 16. Commissioned copies of Modern Chinese landscape paintings.

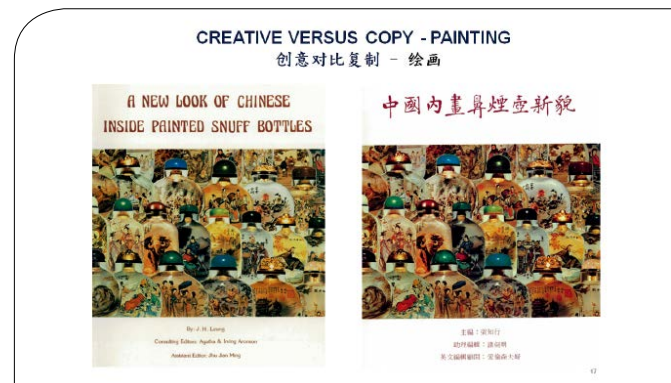


Fig. 17. Creative versus copy painting.



article I specifically segregated the Very Modern period from the rest of the whole Modern period from its origin in about 1960. It seems to me that true creativity within the Modern Schools of inside painting only really started at the very end of the twentieth century and then grew on a wider scale at the beginning of the twenty first century, with the tipping point being about the year 2000.

All the artists whose work I show from here onward belong to the Ji School because that is truly wherein lies the fount of creativity in the Very Modern period.

It is generally accepted that one of the earliest Very Modern period artists to break away from the copy-painting tradition was Liu Yizi 刘艺子 (not to be confused with his father Liu Ziyi 刘子艺 who was one of Wang Xisan’s first students in the 1960s). Starting in the early 1990s Liu Yizi began creating some of the most innovative bottles painted up to that time (fig. 20). Liu Yizi did not specially focus on Chinese landscapes, but I have selected four examples of his best works that are landscapes for consistency in this article. Even if one does not particularly like the style of these paintings, one must surely agree that these works are far more creative than most of what was painted previously by senior artists (e.g., see figs. 18 and 19).

Concurrently with Liu Yizi, one of the most talented artists of the whole Modern period I know of, Master Wang Guanyu 王冠宇, was creating new art forms inside bottles (fig. 21). I regret that by the time I started collecting seriously, Wang Guanyu’s works were already far beyond my budget. Note the radical difference between Wang Guanyu’s new works in the 1990s, many of which are in fact landscapes, and the copy painting he did less than a decade earlier in the mid-1980s (figs. 21 and 18). Wang Guanyu continues to paint in the same beautiful free, creative style (fig. 22).

The great majority of Wang Guanyu’s bottles painted in the 1990s and early 2000s were collected by the Nanyang Group in Singapore, which was far ahead of most of the

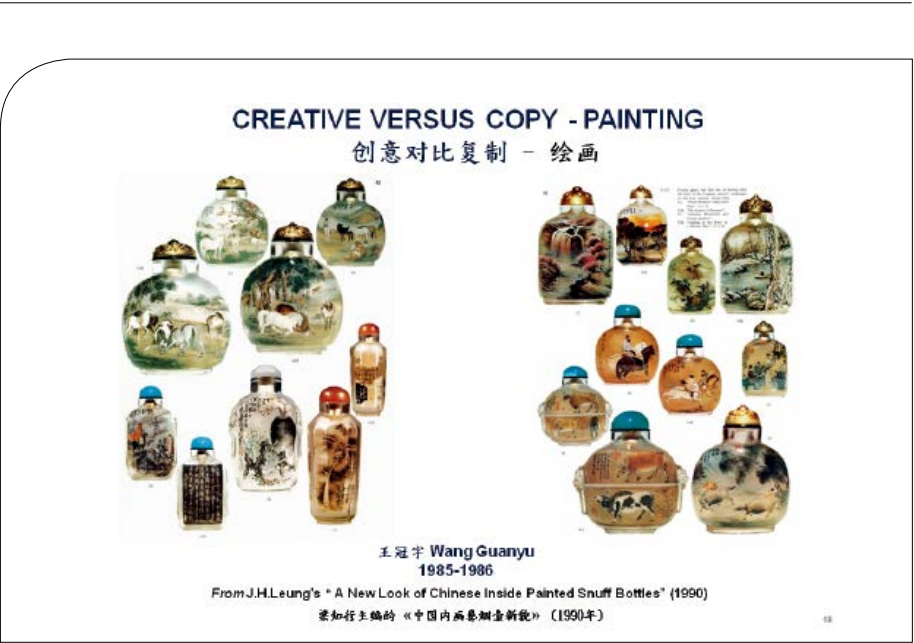


Fig. 18. Copy painting: Wang Guanyu (1985 to 1986).



Fig. 19. Copy painting: Fu Guoshun (~1986).

rest of the world in recognizing and supporting new creative talent among inside-painting artists. It is not just the older generation of masters who are now painting in this new, creative, abstract style. The latest generation of artists in their forties, thirties and even late twenties are doing so, using all the new painting skills that have been developed in the past fifty years and enriched by the free-flowing tradition of the Ji School.

I think it’s no exaggeration to say that most young artists today can paint better technically, i.e., more skillfully, in their late twenties than the masters of the Early Modern and “True” Modern periods could paint in their fifties. To paint creatively, however, is an entirely different matter. Only really great artists have the ability to create original masterpieces, and that is as true of inside painting as of any other art form.



Fig. 20. Creative Chinese landscapes: 1990 to 2000: Liu Yizi.



Fig. 22. Creative Chinese landscapes: 2000 to today: Wang Guanyu.



Fig. 24. Creative Chinese landscapes: 2000 to today: Suo Jing.

In figures 23 through 25 I present some recent Chinese landscape works by three younger artists whose highly original styles I greatly admire: Hu Xiaoran 胡晓然 (also known as Xiao Quan 小泉), Suo Jing 索境 and Sun Honglin 孙洪林. These three are just a few of a growing group of artists in the Ji School who are pioneering new



Fig. 21. Creative Chinese landscapes: 1990 to 2000: Wang Guanyu.



Fig. 23. Creative Chinese landscapes: 2000 to today: Hu Xiaoran.



Fig. 25. Creative Chinese landscapes: 2000 to today: Sun Honglin.

painting styles — and even new painting techniques, as is the case with Sun Honglin in particular. Other than some of the bottles by Suo Jing, which I have taken from other sources, all of the bottles shown are from my own collection.

Last, we come to one of the most talented and creative artists I know, Fu Guoshun 付国顺, who was recently awarded the title of Grand Master (fig. 26). Compare Fu Guoshun's recent works with what he painted in the 1980s (fig. 19). One of his finest works, shown in the middle of **Figure 26**, is the most beautiful bottle I have ever seen and is truly creative Very Modern inside painting at its very best — and certainly *real art*!

In summary, as we review the development of inside painting through the whole Modern period and into the Very Modern period we

can see quantum leaps not only in painting **skill** but also in **creativity** (fig. 27).

If space were sufficient, I would also introduce the recent works of Yuan Shijia 苑世甲, Wang Dongrui 王东瑞, Kang Fuchang 康福昌 and Li Aiqin 李爱钦 of the Ji School and Zhang Luhua 张路华 of the Lu School, examples of all of whose bottles were recently published in Li Yizi's landmark 2011 book titled, *Exploring the Unknown* 未知的拓展. Also I would introduce the highly individualistic style of Zhang Yong 张勇, also known as Da Yong 大勇, whom I personally regard as

one of the most influential younger artists of the Very Modern period. I am sure that other collectors of Very Modern period bottles in the Society would like to add several more names of artists whom they feel deserve wider appreciation outside China. I would endorse their recommendations to publicize those artists' works in the *Journal* in coming years.

I therefore do hope that my two-part article on Contemporary Schools of Inside Painting is certainly not the last word on this subject, but merely the first word.



Fig. 26. Creative Chinese landscapes: 2000 to today: Fu Guoshun.

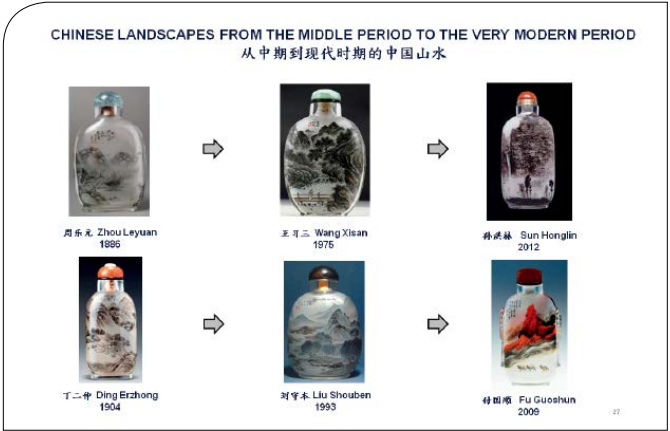


Fig. 27. Chinese landscapes from the Middle period to the Very Modern period.

### Contributors

(Continued from page 3)

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**Berthe H. Ford** is the president of ICSBS as of January 2012 and has edited the *Journal of the International Chinese Snuff Bottle Society* since 1978. She has a B.A. from Queens College of the City University of New York and an M.A. from the New School for Social Research in Political Philosophy. She is a passionate collector for the arts of South Asia and, with her husband, travels widely due to their interest in all Asian arts.

**Clare Chu** has been active in the field of snuff bottles for over thirty years and is a director of this Society. She is a dealer, consultant at auction, lecturer, and has published many articles, catalogues and books on snuff bottles and other areas of Asian art. Clare published the first e-book on Chinese snuff bottles at [www.thecranecollection.com](http://www.thecranecollection.com). Clare is also a regular contributor to the *Journal*. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband, Michael, and her son, Axel.