



T'ANG HAYWEN ARCHIVES

Les Echos

The little-known T'ang Haywen,
a great modern Chinese artist living in Paris



It is essential to rediscover T'ang Haywen before the retrospective exhibition that the Guimet Museum will devote to him in a year's time. Long forgotten, this great Chinese painter who lived in France resurfaces thanks to an auction at Artcurial of 50 of his works sold by the State. Maximum estimate: 4,000 Euros

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Around the time of the Second World War, several Chinese artists who would go down in history made what they considered an initiating boat trip from Shanghai to Marseille. Their dream was to settle in the city that was then the Epicenter of world art: Paris. Among them was Ai Qing (1910-1996), the father of the artist and political opponent Ai Weiwei, who arrived in France in 1929. He deviated towards a literary career until he became one of the great names of modern Chinese poetry, inspired by Verlaine among others.

The two celebrities of Franco-Chinese art, Zao Wou-Ki (1920-2013) and Chu Teh-Chun (1926-2014), arrived in Paris in 1948 and 1955 respectively, but it would be worth mentioning another key figure who constitutes a bridge between the cultures of the two countries. This is the painter T'ang Haywen (1927-1991), who also arrived in France in 1948.

Relative anonymity

On 5 April 2023, the auction house Artcurial will sell 50 of his works at the request of the French State, which manages his estate. This is an event for the market of an artist whose valuation is much lower than he deserves. The relative anonymity in which this remarkable painter was confined can be explained by several reasons. According to specialists, starting with the author of his catalogue raisonné and responsible for his moral rights¹, Philippe Koutouzis *“T'ang was not driven by a desire for success. He was not an opportunist. The fact that he was homosexual did not work in his favour either, in a still conformist society.”*

T'ang Haywen travelled a lot. He did not have an influential gallery who would have defended his interests. This music lover who did not benefit from major exhibitions in institutions was content to live modestly in the 14th arrondissement of Paris. At his death, victim of the AIDS, he had no will and his property went to the State, which proceeded in 1992 and 1993 to a massive dispersal during several auctions, not very valorising for the work of the painter, under the hammer of the auctioneer Yves-Marie Leroux. There was no catalogue or even a list of works.

The 5 April sale at Artcurial is a late development of this episode. The works concerned had been sleeping, it seems for thirty years², in the warehouses of the Domaines. It is worth noting that after his death, a retrospective exhibition was devoted to T'ang Haywen at the Oceanographic Museum in Monaco in 1996, and, in Paris, the Guimet Museum showed a selection of his works in 2002. A long-running legal dispute over the legitimacy of Philippe Koutouzis, opposed to the gallery owner, Enrico Navarra, who died in 2020, ended with the official recognition of the author of the *catalogue raisonné*, and created, for a time, a climate of suspicion on the market for the Chinese artist.

¹ Clarification: Philippe Koutouzis is not responsible for the moral rights of T'ang Haywen and has never claimed them. However, he has become, since 22 September 1995 and by notarial act, the beneficiary of the reproduction rights on T'ang Haywen's work and is registered as such at the ADAGP since 3 October 1997.

² Note: The D.N.I.D, i.e. the Direction Nationale d'Intervention Domaniales, also known as *Les Domaines*, manages the property of the French state. The works of T'ang Haywen, subject of this sale, were entrusted to the Domaines, less than three years ago, following a seizure by the courts following a court ruling.



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Record price at 378,000 euros

In the spring of 2024, the Guimet Museum will once again devote an exhibition to T'ang Haywen. The institution has just acquired 200 works by donation from the French government. It should be noted that the very influential M+ museum in Hong Kong, which opened its doors a few months ago and is expected to play a major role in Asia, owns several of his paintings and drawings, and amongst them the record price for the artist: an abstract canvas from 1964-1966 sold in 2015 for 378,000 euros.

Let us mention that according to the Artprice database, the record prices for his contemporaries are 24.6 million euros for Chu Teh-Chun and 56 million euros for Zao Wou-Ki. But unlike them, T'ang Haywen painted rarely on canvas and, because of his very nomadic nature, often produced small-scale works. Moreover, he did not receive any artistic training in China. His grandfather only taught him traditional calligraphy.

In Paris, this native of Fujian attended the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, in the Montparnasse district, which gave him the rudiments of Western art: free representations inspired by living models, use of canvas and oil. *"His work is clearly inspired by Paul Gauguin, Paul Klee, Jackson Pollock and Joan Mitchell,"* observes Valérie Zaleski, curator of the upcoming exhibition at the Guimet Museum. *"He is an important artist who is also very influenced by his Chinese roots. Influential American museums, such as the Menil Collection in Houston and the Art Institute of Chicago, have acquired some of his works. I'm particularly fond of his period from the 1980s until his death, when he creates in a spare manner."*

Outrageously low estimates

T'ang Haywen expressed himself in his early years in a purely figurative style, like this watercolour dated 1956 offered at Artcurial which represents a bouquet of flowers. Done in shades of red on a white background, it is signed in Chinese and estimated at 1,000 euros. More generally, the estimates for this sale are outrageously low: between 800 and 4,000 euros. *"We wanted to give attractive estimates",* explains the expert of the sale, Sophie Cariguel. *"And then we are talking about small works on paper".*

However, if the operation generates the response it deserves, prices should be significantly higher. One of the most remarkable works in this auction is a watercolour and gouache from 1983-1984 composed in a diptych of multi-coloured strokes (estimate: 1,500 euros). In the 1960s, he imagined polychrome landscapes that flirted with abstraction. The sale includes numerous inks from the 1970s and 1980s that play with contrasts and transparencies by recycling traditional Chinese techniques into abstraction (estimate: around 1,500 euros).

Many of the lots on offer this 5 April are modest in appearance but of great beauty.

5 April 2023, Paris, artcurial.com



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Judith Benhamou, a highly respected French art market observer, has written, for the weekend magazine of *Les Echos*, first daily French financial newspaper, an article on the auction of 50 T'ang Haywen paintings from the French state collection. She is notably the author of: *Art business: the art market or the art of the market* (2001, ISBN 978-2-84323-305-0) and *Artists have always loved money* (2015, ISBN 978-7-5100-8806-3)
