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In China, Art to Gogh

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CHINA DAFEN OIL PAINTING VILLAGE SHENZHEN VAN GOGH ON DEMAND WINNIE WONG



By KRISTIANO ANG



Dafen painter Zhao Xiaoyong's 30-minute process for reproducing a Van Gogh self-portrait. — Reuters

The southern Chinese city of Shenzhen is well known for the easy availability of cheap electronics and its bustling export-oriented economy. But when the city's authorities mounted a pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, they wanted to show a more cultured face. That's when they turned to the painters of Dafen, the subject of art historian Winnie Wong's recently published book "Van Gogh on Demand."

An urban village located within Shenzhen, Dafen has become known in recent years for a community of several thousand rural migrant workers who produce more than 100,000 paintings a year, many of which are now found in Chinese hotel rooms or in the homes of Western tourists returned from a trip. For the Shanghai fair, hundreds of these artists each produced a panel of art that when compiled formed a giant reproduction of the Mona Lisa. It fronted the pavilion's facade.

"There's a current vibe in China about the 'Chinese dream,'" Ms. Wong said in an interview, referencing a slogan popularized by Chinese President **Xi Jinping** last year. "The Dafen story kind of anticipated this because it's a story about migrant workers that have reached their dream and are simultaneously artists. That's what's so tantalizing."

Ms. Wong, a Canadian-Chinese assistant professor of rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, started working on the book six years ago when she was writing her dissertation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She subsequently immersed herself in the village, working variously as an apprentice painter and a dealer who helped her acquaintances procure paintings. "Everybody said they could paint anything in two weeks, and I realized that the only way I could test them was if I placed orders," she said.

Her curiosity was initially piqued by what she saw on a visit to Dafen in 2006: Workers from the Chinese countryside learning how to paint by copying the masterpieces of Western greats such as Van Gogh. (The book's title was inspired by how many apprentice

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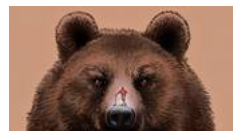
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artists in Dafen begin by imitating Van Gogh works such as “Starry Night” and “Sunflowers,” in part because his pieces are relatively easy to copy, but also because of a jump in the auction prices of his work in the 1980s, when painters began congregating in Dafen.)

“This kind of [replication] is part of a long history of art that goes back to the Renaissance,” Ms. Wong said. “Most of the workers don’t have a formal arts education, but my book argues that we should understand them pretty much as we understand all artists, no matter where they’re based, or what context or market they’re working for.”

Not everyone shares the same sentiment. Ms. Wong said that many artists — within China and elsewhere — and media have been critical of the imitations. When she first went to Dafen after reading news reports in Western media that portrayed the village as a den of copycats, she expected to see something along the lines of an assembly line-style factory producing cheap art. Instead, she found individual proprietors who were producing streetscapes and images of flowers that didn’t seem discernibly like copies of Western art. Additionally, the art pieces sold at Dafen aren’t necessarily cheap.



— The University of Chicago Press

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“Every painting is made by order, so the price depends on how long it takes to create,” Ms. Wong said. “It is possible to order a very realistic portrait for the same price that you might pay in a Chelsea gallery, though you could also find something for a dollar or two.”

The village’s most vicious critics may be Chinese artists themselves. When Ms. Wong hosted several older Chinese artists at Dafen’s museum of art in 2010, most of them declined to visit the village’s

workshops.

“They don’t even want to mention Dafen,” she said, attributing it to a “fear that everything is replaceable. Nobody holds the privilege of being a great painter when anyone can make an oil painting.”

Nevertheless, Ms. Wong said that she still considers Dafen a great triumph.

“The Chinese art world may see them as something lowly and unpleasant, but no matter what they think, this village is a success story,” she said. “It’s a place where rural, uneducated workers found an independent living as painters. Many of the workers who were painting back in the 1980s have become bosses themselves.”

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