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Mona Lisas by the dozen at China's fake art village

SHENZHEN, CHINA | BY NINA MEHRA



A painter works on copies of a painting at Dafen village in China's southern city of Shenzhen June 21, 2007. Head to Shenzhen in southern China where thousands of artists churn out reproductions of masterpieces by the dozen.

REUTERS/BOBBY YIP

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(Reuters Life!) - Coveting a Van Gogh but unwilling to break the bank or into a museum? Head to Shenzhen in southern China where thousands of artists churn out reproductions of masterpieces by the dozen.

China's talent for counterfeiting has created a booming art industry in Shenzhen's Dafen village, where studios are full of Mona Lisas and Impressionist works painted by young Chinese hoping to cash in on a nationwide art frenzy.

"Oil painting is a very big business in China. Around 60 percent of the world's oil paintings are produced in Shenzhen," said Zhang Jingxuan, CEO of Shenzhen GWJB Art, a firm specializing in art reproductions.

"We have 5,000 artists here, they paint everything from classical, Impressionist and abstract -- all the subjects."

Dafen artists' ability to produce paintings en masse means the replicas are sold for just a few dollars. And if you can't find that museum piece or landscape you're hankering for, the artists will rustle up a copy in no time.

"I loved painting and art when I was very young. So I chose this profession. And I love painting Venice," said Ma Haibin, a 33-year-old painter who has been working in Dafen for 10 years.

Recently, the studios have been producing more reproductions of Chinese contemporary paintings, testament to the growing popularity of homegrown artists in China and abroad.

International auction houses, including the world's largest, Christie's, have seen red-hot

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demand for Chinese artwork, especially contemporary paintings.

And sometimes, the odd visitor looking for an original stumbles into this replica-heaven.

"We do see some copying but I also see some talent blossoming and artists revealing their own creativity," said Tony Puleo, who was art shopping with his wife.

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