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Own Original Chinese Copies of Real Western Art!

By **KEITH BRADSHER** JULY 15, 2005

SHENZHEN, China - Zhang Libing has painted more van Goghs than van Gogh ever did.

At 26, Mr. Zhang estimates that he has painted up to 20,000 copies of van Gogh's works in a paint-spattered third-floor garret here where freshly washed socks and freshly painted canvases dry side-by-side on the balcony.

A block away, Ye Xiaodong, 25, is completing 200 paintings of a landscape of pink and white flowers in another third-floor garret. And down the street, Huang Yihong, also 25, stands in an art-packed store and paints a waterfall tumbling gracefully into a pool, mixing the paints on an oval palette.

China's low wages and hunger for exports have already changed many industries, from furniture to underwear. The art world, at least art for the masses, seems to be next, and is emerging as a miniature case study of China's successful expansion in a long list of small and obscure industries that when taken together represent a sizable chunk of economic activity.

China is rapidly expanding art colleges, turning out tens of thousands of skilled artists each year willing to work cheaply. The Internet is allowing these assembly-line paintings to be sold all over the world; the same technology

allows families across America to arrange for their portraits to be painted in coastal China.

As in the United States and Europe, a handful of contemporary painters in China can command hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars for each of their highly creative works -- artists like Chen Yifei, Zhao Wuji and Wu Guanzhong. But the main push by China has been in the broad market for works that retail for \$500 or less, with painters who work from postcards or images on the Internet or, in Mr. Zhang's case, a large, dog-eared copy of an art book in English on van Gogh.

China's ability to turn what has long been an individual craft into a mass production industry may affect small-scale artists from Rome's Spanish Steps to the sidewalks along Santa Monica's beach in California, as well as many galleries and art colonies in between.

Artist groups in the United States are starting to express concern, questioning the originality of some Chinese paintings and whether they comply with American copyright laws.

Wal-Mart, according to Bill Wertz, a company spokesman, has opted not to stock any Chinese paintings for this reason. But retailers from Pier 1 to Bed, Bath & Beyond say they are importing Chinese oil paintings, as are Internet sites like Oilpaintings.com.

United States customs data show that imports of Chinese paintings nearly tripled from 1996 to 2004, with bulk shipments reaching \$30.5 million last year. Retail sales are several times that, as the customs data are based on the price that entrepreneurs pay for bulk purchases.

The biggest market for oil paintings from China turns out to be in Florida condominiums and other second homes being built as part of the global housing market boom. Hotels and restaurants also buy large numbers of Chinese paintings.

Many of the paintings depict scenes that Chinese artists have never seen. "European landscapes, like the Mediterranean or Venice or Paris, are the best

sellers for us," Moses Ben Herut, the president of Oilpaintings.com, said in a telephone interview from Alpharetta, Ga.

Mr. Herut's Web site does not publicize the fact that it buys many of its paintings from Xiamen in southeastern coastal China, instead putting "Georgia, U.S.A." at the top of its home page in red, white and blue to emphasize that it is an extension of a local gallery.

At the Canton Trade Fair in Guangzhou this spring, exporters surrounded by paintings filled an entire row of exhibits. Adrian Goldberg, the chief executive of the Ziganof Group, a wholesaler in Manchester, England, walked into one of the booths and in less than an hour had placed an order for six 40-foot shipping containers filled with paintings to be delivered this autumn to ports in Europe and the United States.

Standing outside the booth as crowds of buyers and sellers moved past, Mr. Goldberg explained that he was paying \$25 to \$30 for each painting, including the frames, and that it would cost him another \$1 a painting in shipping charges.

He plans to sell the paintings mainly to furniture stores for \$35 to \$40 apiece, and predicted that shoppers would eventually pay \$100 to \$125 apiece in Europe for the paintings, and up to \$160 each in the United States.

The economics of the Chinese oil painting industry -- very few watercolors or pastels are traded internationally -- are striking. Mr. Zhang and Mr. Ye, who both learned to paint by serving two-year apprenticeships after high school, each earn less than \$200 a month, plus modest room and board. Mr. Huang, who earned a four-year art degree from Jiangxi Normal University in east-central China, said he was paid \$360 a month, but buys his own food and housing.

Paints, brushes, canvases, frames and other materials are all available at low prices here in the Dafen artist village -- more than a dozen blocks of paintings stores with studios upstairs -- just across the border from Hong Kong.

Wang Yuankang, the paintings entrepreneur at the Canton Trade Fair who

received Mr. Goldberg's order, said his factory had 10 "designers" who do original paintings and 300 painters who copy these originals. Another 200 workers do the framing, he said.

Some operations are even larger. Vicky Leung, the business manager for the Chaozhou Hongjia Arts and Crafts Company, with a booth near Mr. Wang's, said that the company had two factories with a total of 10 designers, 250 painters and more than 500 framers and assistant painters.

One advantage of the larger operations is that they allow specialization, with simple assembly lines like those that Henry Ford brought to the automobile industry.

The larger factories have some painters specializing in trees, others in skies, others in flowers and so forth, an approach that not only improves "quality" but also increases output and reduces costs.

Mr. Ye, working by himself in a garret, has a similar approach: on a recent afternoon, he was painting the top half of each of dozens of white flowers on a series of canvases.

"It's quicker to do it like this, and after the paint dries, I'll do the rest," he said as he mixed a slightly darker shade of cream to paint the bottom, shadowed half of each flower.

More skilled painters in Xiamen, 400 miles northeast of here, produce portraits of American families from photographs sent to them over the Internet. About a tenth of the Chinese-painted portraits that Mr. Herut, the Georgia art entrepreneur, sells are returned by families who do not find them to be good likenesses; Mr. Herut has these portraits redone.

Northern New Jersey used to have a small but thriving cluster of businesses with artists churning out inexpensive paintings for restaurants, hotels and homes across the country. But these enterprises have been switching to imports, like the Dae Ryung Company, which had seven painters two decades ago at a studio attached to its offices in Hackensack, N.J., and let the last one leave four years ago without finding a replacement.

"In the beginning it was better here, because we were able to tell them exactly what we wanted," said Helen Cho, the company's purchasing and accounting manager. "But after a while, the Chinese caught on."

Exporters of Chinese paintings say that even though the paintings often imitate well-known works of art, the copies are inherently different because they are handmade, and so do not violate copyrights.

Robert Panzer, the executive director of the Visual Artists and Galleries Association, a trade group based in New York, disagreed. He said that the vast majority of paintings produced before the 20th century were in the public domain and could be freely copied and sold. But it is not legal to sell a painting that appears to a reasonable person like a copy of a more recent, copyrighted work, he said.

In any event, China is creating a fast-growing army of trained artists to produce both copies and original works. Art has become such a popular major in China that the number of art graduates from universities soared 59 percent last year, to 20,031, according to China's education ministry.

That growth took place even though Chinese universities, sensing a financial opportunity, now charge twice as much in annual tuition for arts majors as for engineering majors, said Jin Baoping, an art professor at Shenzhen University.

Mr. Zhang and Mr. Ye said they did not mind painting hundreds of copies.

But Mr. Huang, the university graduate in the street-front store, aspires to greater heights.

"I've never done more than four copies" of the same painting, he said proudly, adding that to do more, "would be boring and very tiring."