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Edward Snowden affair a rich canvas for Dafen artist Huang Haifan

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Dafen artist Huang Haifan in front of some of his portraits of NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden. Photo: Edward Wong

No one will ever know how much Edward Snowden's leaks cost the US government, but for one artist in Shenzhen, the image of the fugitive US whistle-blower is worth at least 10 times more than imitations of famous works by Van Gogh or Monet.

At the famed Dafen artists' village in Shenzhen, where cheap knock-offs of Impressionist masterpieces can be bought for as little as 200 yuan (HK\$250) each, a portrait of Snowden will set you back between 2,000 and 3,000 yuan.

"I see him as an idol," said painter Huang Haifan, who started his first portrait of Snowden on June 10 last year, the day he broke cover in Hong Kong as the man behind one of the biggest national security leaks in US history.

Huang, who has exhibited across Europe and studied oil painting at the China Academy of Art, has since painted four portraits of Snowden, each measuring about 1 metre by 1.8 metres.

Each is a close-up of Snowden's face and shows him in the grey dress shirt and glasses that he wore in the now-famous 12-minute video that introduced him to the world.

Three of the portraits include a distinct backdrop, each one depicting a location that is intrinsic to the Snowden saga: the Hong Kong skyline; Capitol Hill in Washington; and Russia's Red Square and the Kremlin.

Snowden came to Hong Kong to pass top-secret documents about the National Security Agency activities to reporters. He is now living in Russia where he has temporary asylum.

While Huang has yet to sell any of the Snowden works, he says he fields calls about the portraits at least once a week from art collectors in Germany,

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France, Denmark and Canada, and many of the prospective buyers are women. "They all said he's very handsome," the 38-year-old said at his studio yesterday. "I think many women like heroes who look cool and distant."

With his penchant for painting political icons – Marxist revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara and the former Cuban president Fidel Castro are two of his favourite subjects – Huang said he admired those who were not afraid to expose the darkness of the world.

Last November, one of Huang's Snowden portraits was exhibited at an art festival in the French city of Fontenay-le-Comte.

Huang said he adopted an expressionist style for the portraits, using a thick brush and broad strokes, because he only had newspaper-quality images as his inspiration.

Huang said that he planned to paint more detailed versions of the portrait for which he will charge even more.

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as Snowden affair a rich canvas for artist

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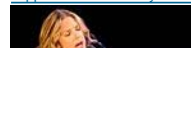
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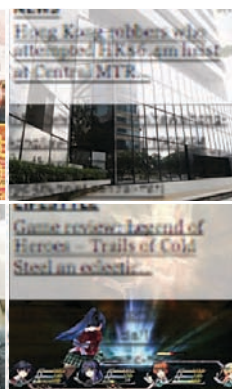
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