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The Cézannes of Shenzhen

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The 'knock-off painting' village of Dafen is a joke for most people, but as **Isak Ladegaard** reports, an original artist may soon emerge

I think most of the artists there are uneducated farmers and former factory workers," says a companion bluntly. We're on

our way to Dafen, Shenzhen's famous oil painting village about eight miles from the Lo Wu border. Shortly afterwards, her prediction is proven wrong.

The first artist we talk to is working on a massive copy of Ai Xuan's Sacred Mountain. "I went to art school for three years," says artist Tang Dijian, adding that the school was in Yulin Normal University, in Guang Xi Province. "I've been here in Dafen for almost three months. Before I came here I was in advertising."

Dijian tells us he makes up to \$3,600 a month. The Ai Xuan replica isn't finished yet but it's already clear that the 32-year-old artist knows what he's doing. "I like to paint portraits," he says. "Portraits tell stories. Portraits are difficult and I like challenges."

Dafen's genesis as a painter's commune began when Hong Kong artist Huang Jiang and his 20-man entourage of painters arrived more than two decades ago. Today, the village – which is a suburb of Shenzhen – is a giant oil painting factory. More than 700 painting studios are spread over two square kilometres (and growing), with about 6,000 painters copying artworks on an industrial scale. According to China Daily, Dafen's output 'now accounts for 60 percent of the global oil painting market'.

Despite the label of 'Copycat art capital of the world' one cannot underestimate the economic impact Dafen has had on Shenzhen. Last year, the first Dafen International Oil





Painting Expo and Fair grossed sales of HK\$788.2 million, according to the local government. According to financial news source, MarketWatch, the total art market value of mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan has doubled since 2009 and is now the second largest in the world, after the US.

Hong Kong is now considered the third most important auction hub in the world. At a Sotheby's auction earlier this year, a painting by famous artist Zhang Xiaogang sold for HK\$78.6 million – a record auction price for Chinese contemporary art. In Dafen, replicas of Xiaogang's work sell for \$260 to \$720 a piece. "Our customers are from all around the world," says Rose He, sales manager of the art store and painting studio, Shenzhen Songmei Art. "But most of them come from mainland China," she adds. "Mainland Chinese prefer traditional paintings – sceneries, flowers, still life and things like that, whereas Westerners prefer abstract painters or expressionist paintings." She says prices of replicas vary wildly, depending on quality and size, and how much the buyer is willing to pay (see sidebar).

However, there are signs Dafen will become much more than the art producing equivalent of "shoe city" in Dongguan or "furniture city" in Futian. In 2007, the Longgang municipal government built a HK\$108 million museum in Dafen, offering space for local artists to display original work. "Most of our customers buy replicas," says He. "But more and more customers prefer original work." Dafen is known for bringing knock-offs to the world – but it might also produce brilliant artists one day.

The folklore of top shelf artists is that they were born with talent, their 'gift'. But a long line of academics stand ready to counter this idea. Anders Ericsson speaks for many of them – he's the editor of the Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance, a 900-page-plus tome with contributions from more than 100 leading scientists who've studied 'top performance' in everything from surgery to sculpture. They argue that it's all about "deliberate practice".

Long Xianzhong, another Dafen artist, has been in town for two years. "I studied art at Ji Shou University in Hu Nan province," he says. "After three years there I came to Dafen to work as a painter." He's only 24, but already earns up to \$8,400 a month – more than twice as much as his older colleague. "I'm doing OK," he says, raising an eyebrow. "I'm paid per painting. How much I get depends on how difficult it is, and how well it turns out."

Ericsson writes that there are no shortcuts to achieving genuine expertise. His argument, which is backed by several studies, is that a minimum of 10,000 hours of intense training is needed to become truly great. If this theory is correct, Dafen could be a breeding ground for raw talent. "I usually work for about eight hours a day," says Dijian. It's the same deal for his colleague, Xianzhong. "I work from 8am until 4pm. And I paint my original work in my spare time. If the company likes it, they'll buy it." Dafen's painters are working at a pace that even the most obsessed college-trained painters can barely comprehend.

Rose He says her company pays its painters by the quality of their work. "Every painter specialises in one style of painting," she says. "The company tells me to paint the kind of art I like," adds Xianzhong. "So I paint Van Goghs and Monets. I learn a lot from the masters of expressionism."

Dafen's artists work day in, day out, and feedback to their art is instant – in aesthetics and paycheques. But odds

are that a handful of them have bigger ambitions. "I went to medical school for five years before I abandoned that career path, and went to art school," says Xianzhong. "I have a few big projects ahead," adds Dijian, "I just don't want to speak about them!" He then admits he will never, ever stop painting.

Additional reporting: **Shirley Zhao**

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