

Celebrating legacy of Zheng Wuchang at Shanghai Haipai Art Museum



A landscape painting by Zheng Wuchang featuring his distinctive artistic signature of willow trees with long, slender branches

Yang Yujie and Wang Jie

The “Special Exhibition Commemorating the 130th Anniversary of Zheng Wuchang’s Birth” concluded yesterday at the Shanghai Haipai Art Museum.

The exhibition featured 130 of Zheng’s paintings on an unprecedented scale. Zheng (1894–1952) was a leading player in the Haipai (Shanghai-style) school of painting, as well as an accomplished calligrapher, painter and art historian in modern China.

He not only painted landscapes, flowers and figures, but also blended poetry, calligraphy and painting into one. He was known as “the man of the three greats.”

For many local art followers, the exhibition provided a unique opportunity to see the “three greats” among his works.

It is a common saying in the traditional art world that it is not difficult to paint a tree, but incredibly difficult to paint a willow tree. However, Zheng’s exceptional painting technique overcame the challenge and earned him fame for painting willow trees.

He preferred to depict a high number of willow trees in landscapes, which became his artistic signature. He painted willow with long, slender branches, and the delicate and exquisite leaves descend from the top of the tree with vibrancy and energy.

The willow leaves in “Swallow and Willow” wave lightly in the wind, while four swallows fly up and down the branches.

“I won’t miss any exhibition of Zheng Wuchang,” said Xu Hong, a visitor at the exhibition. “Look at these fine brushstrokes. It is so charming and elegant, reflecting the master’s passion for life and nature. I could feel the spring breeze through the vivid depiction of the willows.”

Aside from calligraphy and painting, some of his fan paintings were on display.

Zheng is also largely regarded as the founder of the history of Chinese painting. He was a professor at the National College of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art), and served as the editor of literature and history, as well as the director of the China Bookstore’s fine arts department.

In 1929, he published “A Complete History of Chinese Painting,” which “integrates the best of the best” since the inception of Chinese painting.

In 1932, he established the Hanwen Zhengkai Printing Bureau in Shanghai, which was the first publishing house in China to produce the regular moveable type, shattering foreign businesses’ stranglehold on the publishing industry.

Cai Yuanpei lauded Zheng for his “great contribution to the Chinese cultural industry.”

The ties between Zheng and Jiading began in the 1930s, when Zheng married Zhu Yan, a Qianmentang native from Waigang Town. Following their marriage, the pair lived in Shanghai and Qianmentang.

Zheng left an everlasting mark on Jiading’s painting history. Zheng Xiaotong, Zheng’s son, revealed that his father, together with Liu Haisu, traveled to Germany in 1934.

“They took their works to an exhibition in Berlin and toured many cities in Europe, promoting the art of Chinese painting to the West,” Zheng Xiaotong said.

“In 1939, one of my father’s Chinese paintings received the Golden Award at the New York International Art Exposition, which was attended by artists from 72 countries. He was the first Chinese artist to be recognized in world art history.”



In addition to calligraphy and painting, a selection of Zheng’s fan paintings were also exhibited. — Photos by Yang Yujie



Published in 1929, Zheng’s book “A Complete History of Chinese Painting” (left) incorporates the finest works since the inception of Chinese painting.