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By Magical Hands

Chinese and European Papercuts – An exhibition project by the Museum Burg Zug

28th October 2007 until 27th April 2008

For the very first time, the Museum Burg Zug is offering a comparative insight into the magical world of Chinese and European paper-cutting. Masterpieces, cut with scissors or knives, from international museum collections and private ownership, offer the opportunity for a meeting of cultures of a very special kind. This encounter is realized by an artistic technique – the creation of pictures by paper-cutting. By making intercultural comparisons, the points of contact and also the differences in development, execution and subject matter, as well as the social milieu surrounding this characteristic art form, become apparent.

In various display rooms, the exhibition provides a fascinating overall picture of the art of paper-cutting in China and Europe. From a scientific point of view, the aim is to arouse awareness in, and enable reappraisal of paper-cutting as an art form. For a long time it was classed merely as a handicraft and as such was paid too little – far too little – attention, until recently. Twentieth century art succeeded in removing the value-based existence of a hierarchy in art forms and traditions, thus making way for an unbiased acceptance of the phenomenon

paper-cutting in all its detail. To the best of our knowledge, no exhibition of this size and on this subject has been presented anywhere else.

By exhibiting the works of Eastern and Western contemporary artists, who with conventional materials – paper and scissors or scalpel, – create innovative, progressive works (Hau Chun Kwong, Kara Walker, among others), the exhibition is consciously establishing a link to the present day.

This prodigious display also includes some of the Chinese and Swiss paper-cuttings that were shown in 2006 at the exhibition “The Enchanting Art of Paper-Cutting, Switzerland and Foshan, China” in Hong Kong and in Macao, China. The idea for the exhibition was proposed by the Swiss General Consul in Hong Kong, and implemented with the support of the Swiss Culture Foundation “Pro Helvetia”, in close collaboration with the Swiss Association “Friends of Paper-Cutting”.

Together with the varied programme that will run concurrently with it, this unusual exhibition strives to make a contribution towards the cultural exchange between China and Europe, and to create in the Museum Burg Zug a meeting place for people from the East and the West. It is, of course, equally intended for our visitors from Europe and Asia.

Chinese Papercuts

In China the tradition of paper-cutting is far older than in Europe. Excavation finds and references in ancient texts enable us to trace it back to at least the 6th century A.D. In the course of time it became one of the most widespread and vital forms of Chinese folk-art, especially in rural areas.

The exhibition will include examples of the major techniques ranging from monochrome scissor-cuts to the so-called knife-cuts executed with small scalpel-like tools. Some of the papercuts are then dyed in gaudy colours.

The aim is to give an overall impression of the large variety of styles as well as of the different forms of papercuts and their distinctive uses, by showing various types of ‘window-flowers’, decorations for doors, walls and ceilings, and also the delicate white embroidery patterns which were widely used in ancient Chinese society.

Focus will be given to a number of artists from among the peasantry: men who produce knife-cuts as a secondary occupation, and village women who excel in scissor-cutting to enhance their homes, and hence are highly respected in their neighbourhood. Another main theme



Traditional embroidery pattern: cat and butterfly, symbolizing the wish for a long and happy old age. Knife-Cutting by Master Zhao from the vicinity of Peking, 1981/82, Jutta Bewig Collection, Hamburg.



Driving Cattle to the Alp, Paper-Cutting by Johann Jakob Hauswirth, L'Etivaz (Canton Waadt, Switzerland), 1855, Musée du Vieux Pays d'Enhaut, Château-d'Oex.

will concentrate on displaying and explaining the most important features and meaning of traditional Chinese paper-cutting, which include rural life scenes, figures from popular legends, novels and stage plays, and in particular a large variety of magically protective or auspicious motifs.

In addition to the authentic, traditional paper-cutting, the exhibition will also include works of art which reflect the more recent development of this art since the middle of the 20th century. During the 1940s, artists in the communist movement began to collect papercuts and to use this art form to present new ideas and new picture content. Out of old local traditions grew state-administered paper-cutting workshops and handicraft centres, with products ranging from often excellently executed handicraft cuts to the creation of large-size papercut artworks with revolutionary and modern themes. A good example is the centre at Foshan in southern China, from where a number of the exhibits are on loan.

Over the past few decades, young Chinese artists have, in diverse ways, taken up the ancient art of paper-cutting, giving new interpretations of shape and content. They often create very large cuts or assemblies of cuts which are intended to fill complete rooms. Some of these Chinese artists have in the meantime moved to Europe to live and work.

For the Chinese section of this exhibition we are working with the German sinologist Jutta Bewig. Following her graduation from Hamburg University, she studied for four years at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Bei-

jing, specializing in Chinese folk-art traditions and their history. During that time she became acquainted with many paper-cutting artists, and repeatedly travelled to remote rural areas to visit folk-artists.

European Paper-Cutting

In Europe paper-cutting first came into being in the 17th century. Right from the beginning white paper or parchment was used to create the finest filigree work, reminiscent of costly lace, which like lace, was only for the wealthy. Family crests, people and landscapes were depicted and, in the 18th century, Chinese motifs too – once Europe's interest in China had been aroused. In convents, skilful nuns spend countless hours working by hand to craft parchment-cuttings of sacral subjects; the open-work design derives from lace patterns, which is why these masterpieces of paper-cutting are today called "lace pictures". The work is not done with scissors, but small knives and similar tools.

Since the second half of the 18th century, paper-cutting has developed into a branch of folk art. Using scissors, a variety of objects are cut: love letters, New Year greetings or decorative pictures to hang in living rooms, whereby the main subject in folk art is farming, and nature is depicted in conjunction with animals and people. A popular subject for the Swiss alpine region is the cattle procession to and from the Alps (when the farmer drives his cattle to the alp in the spring and down from the



*Museum
Burg Zug:
castle.*

alp in the autumn). A folding technique is also often used, i.e. the sheet of paper is folded at least once, resulting in a strictly symmetrical picture configuration. In Switzerland paper-cutting in its traditional form continues to be practised.

Since the 19th century, well-known artists such as Philipp Otto Runge, Adolph von Menzel, and, in the 20th century, Henri Matisse have been known to use scissors for their artistry. Hans Christian Andersen, the author of fairytales, used to cut paper pictures that hovered between fantasy and reality.

A quite separate art form is the silhouette picture, which has become very popular among the educated classes since the 18th century. Many people had a silhouette portrait made of themselves (shadow picture in profile). In the 1770s the Zurich priest and physiognomist, Johann Caspar Lavater, even propounded the theory that a person's characteristics could be read from his shadow. Apart from portraits, there are also silhouettes of historical subjects, group pictures and family scenes (people sewing, playing music, reading etc.). Shadow theatre and, later on in the 20th century, silhouette films emerged, combining movement with pictures – and these clearly illustrate the relationship to the Chinese shadow theatre.

For further information please contact:

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Facts about Museum Burg Zug

The museum in an old castle in the midst of Zug town gives you the opportunity to experience the past and connect it to the present. The cultural-historical collection, special exhibits, the cafeteria and the garden invite you to look and linger.

Hours

Tuesday – Saturday	2 pm – 5 pm
Sunday	10 am – 5 pm
1st Wednesday in the month	2 pm – 9 pm
Closed	Monday

Information

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Events and programmes

Opening exhibition with special guests
Series of special lectures relating to the exhibition and presented by national and international experts
Guided tours with Swiss and Chinese guides (available in German and English)
Chinese weekend (25.01. – 27.01.2008) with a wide variety of programmes and events
Demonstrations by artists
Programmes for families
Workshops and courses
Educational programmes for teachers