

## Art beyond Boundaries: Interview with Edward Luper

Ting Guo

Ting Guo: I know you were trained at SOAS and then Oxford in Sinology, but when and how did you start drawing?

Edward Luper: I've actually been drawing for as long as I can remember. My earliest memory of drawing was in nursery; I drew a pirate ship and maps of the world, I was always interested in exploration. Early in primary school I was diagnosed with learning difficulties and while reading and writing came to me rather late in life (I didn't read a book until I was 13), drawing was always my main form of expression. I would draw battling ships, for example, that parodied my own inner battles and frustration with trying to vanquish my greatest foe: the multiplication tables.

T: What kind of topics, objects, or themes interest you most?

E: I'm interested in people and cities. Currently I am interested in capturing change and nostalgia in fast pace moving cities like Beijing. I used to live there for a year in 2008/9 and have been back almost every year since to witness the incredibly fast pace of change. I suddenly realised that my drawings of daily life from that time became a sort of historical document and the only point of memory for things which no longer exist, such as shoe-repair men on the street, horse-pulled carts selling fruit from the

countryside, and vendors barbecuing lamb skewers on the street. Many of my favourite old haunts have been literally bricked up or knocked down. Yet my time and experience there was so important to my growth and development that I have always yearned for that world which strangely seemed to disappear so quickly and left me with a feeling of loss and nostalgia. My attempts to capture Beijing have also been attempts to understand myself too, what this city meant for me and how I changed along with it too.

T: I know you like to try different genres, such as fan painting, sketches of street scenes, portraits, and so on. Could you share with us your experience with those very different genres and materials, and what is your favourite?

E: I use quite a wide variety of media depending on the purpose and mood I want to achieve. For portraits, I find nothing captures the translucency of flesh and skin better than oils. For street scenes, you have to be quick and it needs to be convenient, so a simple pencil and sketch pad is probably best. Although with advances in camera technology on smartphones, it is so convenient to take photographs from your phone and then work in the studio. This way, I don't feel too self-conscious standing in some spot with everyone peering over my shoulder judging me or my work. Also, in fast



"Self-portrait" © Edward Luper

**Ting Guo** teaches at the University of Hong Kong, and is an active researcher and writer interested in (post)secularism and political religion, and religion and gender, technology, and popular culture. She was a winner of Edinburgh Innovative Grant, and has worked for the University of Oxford and Purdue University before fate brought her to Hong Kong. She is currently writing a book on love as a political discourse in modern China in relation to political and popular religions. Her Chinese-language manuscript on British art movements, 審美的政治, will be published in Taiwan and China simultaneously.

**Edward Luper** was born and raised in London. He graduated from SOAS (BA Chinese) before continuing with a Mst and D.Phil in Chinese studies at Oxford University. He works for Bonhams auctioneers as a specialist of Chinese art but continues to draw and paint. His works have been exhibited in Nanjing, Jiangsu Provincial Museum and at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge.

moving cities, you need to take photos if you want to capture a particular moment. Since I'm also making images of things that don't exist anymore, I often use and rely on my old photos of Beijing. The distance of time (even just ten years) is an essential ingredient in my work on nostalgia and change in Beijing. I'm also fascinated by woodblock carving. This was the primary method of artists and craftsmen in Edo Japan when depicting life in their city and is perhaps the most democratic of art forms. One of my ambitions is to do a series of woodblock prints with views of London. My favourite is just pencil and paper though.

T: Your ink paintings are gorgeous; was it your sinology training that introduced you to Chinese or Asian art? Do you have a favourite painter, artist, or artistic era?

E: It was the other way round actually: my interest in Asian art led me to China and sinology. While I was in my teens I would copy Chinese ink paintings from books, making mistakes and learning along the way. The Japanese artist Hokusai was my first teacher in some ways. A book of his prints and paintings was in my high school library and I copied a lot from him. I loved not only the dynamism of his ink drawings but also how he combined Eastern and Western elements, took inspiration from people in ordinary life around him in the city of Edo, and depicted them with great wit and humour. Hokusai still has

the strongest influence on me, in so far as I wish to depict the lives of ordinary people in cities too. I still have a huge passion for Ukiyo-e woodblock prints and have learnt Japanese woodblock printing myself.

With regards to ink paintings I was essentially self-taught though, until I went to Beijing when I finally had the opportunity to learn with a real master at Beijing Normal University. My teacher Chen Xiaolin started teaching me the proper techniques for painting orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums and plum blossom. I was extremely enthusiastic and looked for more books to copy from. That's when I came across the work of the Ming dynasty painter Xu Wei (1521-1593). I thought his painting of a crab was genius: in a few simple strokes he captured the movement and essence of the crab in a painting that could be considered modern. I started trying to learn his techniques, such as adding peach-sap glue to the ink to create that glossy and wet effect on the paper—it didn't work at all. So although his paintings look quick and perhaps easy, they are actually incredibly difficult. I'm inspired by the expressive power of Xu Wei's painting.

T: As someone who grew up in Britain, would you compare Chinese art with British or European art?

E: The short answer is no, they are for me completely different artistic traditions and should be appreciated as such. There are some interesting comparables

between Chinese art and European art: Bada Shanren and Goya, for example. Bada Shanren witnessed the Manchu invasion of China, Goya the French invasion of Spain; Goya's painting of a large-eyed dog staring up at the large empty space of canvas is strangely reminiscent of Bada Shanren's large-eyed birds or fish also gazing up above at large amounts of space. They're both similar in that they seek to capture that awkward sense of displacement and loss that comes with war. Some of Rembrandt's ink drawings are also perfect examples of xieyi painting; loose, quick and sparse brushstrokes that evoke the subject—an aesthetic quality greatly admired by the Chinese literati.

Someone I knew once commented to me how a painting by Michelangelo was just obviously superior to any Chinese painting master. I was shocked. Why should a painting by Xu Wei, Bada Shanren or Shitao be considered less worthy than a Renaissance master just because it doesn't employ single point perspective or chiaroscuro? Xu Wei created images that were just as beautiful to anything Michelangelo did, but they are just different. Chinese art and Western art both have their different aesthetic values and should be appreciated accordingly, without one being placed higher than the other; they're different ways of seeing and understanding the world and both can tell us different things.

T: You currently work for Bonhams, one of the most well-known auctions houses in the world. Do you collect art pieces yourself?

E: I have a huge passion for Japanese prints and have quite a few now in my collection including prints by Hiroshige, Hokusai, Eishi, Kuniyoshi etc. For the most part, Japanese prints are still reasonably affordable. My first job when I was 18 was at the Japanese Gallery in Angel. I wasn't paid a salary but I was paid in prints. Japanese woodblock prints exert an incredibly strong artistic influence on me.

T: My favourite British artist William Morris advocated the social and even spiritual meaning of art. What is drawing, or art, to you?

E: For me, the essential element of art is creativity, and I interpret creativity as *sharing*. When an artist is creating, they are essentially sharing their view of the world with you, about what it means to be human etc. Therefore, we either like a work of art by an artist because we share their view of what it means to be human in this world, or we don't share their view and don't agree with it or "understand it" as some would say. The great thing about art is that we can learn something new and different from each artist about ourselves and the world around us. Art for me therefore, is about trying to understand what it means to be human. ▣





“Entrance” © Edward Luper



“Hutong Roofs” © Edward Luper



“Beijing Street” © Edward Luper



“Muslims in Beijing Niuji Mosque” © Edward Luper



"Beijing Night I" © Edward Luper



"Beijing Night II" © Edward Luper



"Fan Painting of a Bird" © Edward Luper



"Fan Painting of Bamboo" © Edward Luper