

# **CBS1CN29 Chinese Art and Design**

## Exhibition Review

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## Introduction

Artworks are bridges—connecting ancient to the present, sentimental and informational. They encapsulate artists' emotions, transcend time, and let them be experienced for centuries onward; they also hint at the artists' personal lives, unveiling the social landscape as well as the historical backdrop of their respective eras.

Featuring 29 selected artworks from the Xubaizhai Collection (Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2023), the exhibition *“Love Letters: Everlasting Sentiments from the Xubaizhai Collection (Phase II)”* at the Hong Kong Museum of Art is exactly about emotions. The exhibition explored a diverse spectrum of human emotions ranging from romance and family ties to teacher-student bonds, friendship, and patriotism, all of which were vividly expressed through the medium of Chinese painting and calligraphy (Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2023).

Personally, I find the visit profoundly therapeutic, constantly evoking resonance and fascination with the artworks. The overall compositions, right down to the individual brush strokes, felt as though the entire creative process of the artworks reanimated before my eyes, while the emotions of the artists were palpably present.

In this essay, I will be discussing the emotions in these artworks by analyzing the elements presented, the techniques used, and their overall compositions. Through exploring these emotions, I aim to grasp a broader contextual implication.

### “Farewell by a Stream at the End of the Year” by Shen Zhou

*“Farewell by a Stream at the End of the Year”* is a classic example of emotional expression. Standing 143 x 62.5 cm, this hanging scroll immediately catches viewers' attention with the poem at the top. This poem, authored by Shen Zhou himself, reveals that the painting was composed as an *“account of his cousin Wang Rui's departure to Chenliu (today's Kaifeng in Henan Province) to serve as its magistrate”*, serving as both an artistic and personal memento for this occasion (Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2023).

Moving our focus downward, we see a landscape of desolation. Crafted with Shen's signature *“rough-stroke landscape”* style (Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2023), combined with the winter setting, this painting immediately conveys a sense of somberness to its audience—barren trees, sprawling branches, and rocky hills, void of human traces.

In the foreground, a group of people can be seen bidding farewell. By the shore lies a boat, waiting to ferry him across the crossing mountains and waters.



**Figure 1:** Shen Zhou (1427-1509), *Farewell by a stream at the end of the year*, 1486, Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 143 x 62.5 cm, Xubaizhai Collection, Hong Kong Museum of Art

Viewing it as a whole, the vast backdrop of craggy mountains and sparse vegetation, juxtaposed with the tiny trace of humanity in the foreground, seems to symbolize the challenging journey ahead. Such a composition seems to suggest that, beyond the obvious emotion of Shen's reluctance to part with Wang Rui, there's also an undercurrent of Shen's concern for Wang Rui. Through his masterful brushstrokes, Shen successfully conveyed his emotions, offering us a glimpse into a personal moment of parting.



### “Lotus and Mallard” by Zhu Da

This painting, “*Lotus and Mallard*” by Zhu Da, is not only an expression of human emotion, but also an exemplary representation of how historical context can be integrated into seemingly simple scene.

Zhu Da, a descendant of the Ming royalty, adopted the name “Bada Shanren” (八大山人) after the fall of the Ming Dynasty and embraced monastic life (“Bada Shanren,” 2023). His emotion towards his fallen nation is clearly reflected in this painting.

The most interesting figure in this piece is the aloof mallard centered at the canvas. Its gaze, indifferent and robust, can be read as a reflection of Zhu Dai's indignation and resilience towards the current social-political landscape.

Sharply contrasting the mallard is the top-heavy lotus, teetering on the edge of collapse, “*reflecting his restless sentiments about the loss of his family and collapse of the Ming empire*” (Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2023). This unstable posture can also be read as a poignant metaphor of the instability and fragility of the Ming empire as well as the twists and turns of Zhu Da's personal life.

Piecing together these two emotions, we get a piece with contrasting themes—acceptance and rebellion, stability, and chaos. The careless gaze of the mallard against the falling lotuses, narrates Zhu Da's inner struggle—his sorrow at the loss of his dynasty and family, eager to rebel, yet marred by his powerlessness. Zhu Da's personal experience isn't one unique to him; it vividly captures the experience of countless individuals, navigating the turbulent of history, sorrowed by the loss of their dynasty.

**Figure 2:** Zhu Da (1626 – 1705),  
Lotus and Mallard, Not dated,  
Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 117 x  
52.5 cm, Xubaizhai Collection,  
Hong Kong Museum of Art

## **Conclusion**

By visiting this exhibition, viewers are granted a profound journey into emotions encapsulated in each of the displayed paintings and calligraphies. As evident in the two paintings discussed in this essay, not only allowing us to delve deeply into the realm of aesthetic appreciation but also into their vibrant their emotions, societal nuances, and historical contexts they embody. Each piece narrates a rich interplay of tales woven into their very fabric, offering viewers an enriching visual narrative.

## References

Bada Shanren. (2023). In *Wikipedia*.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bada\\_Shanren&oldid=1180482344](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bada_Shanren&oldid=1180482344)

Hong Kong Museum of Art. (2023). *Love Letters: Everlasting Sentiments from the Xubaizhai*

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<https://hk.art.museum/en/web/ma/exhibitions-and-events/love-letters-everlasting-sentiments-from-the-xubaizhai-collection-phaseII.html>