

54. Mansheng Wang (b. 1962)

“Red Lotus 2015

Horizontal scroll, unmounted
Ink, walnut ink, and color on paper
77.7 x 214.6 cm. (30 5/8 x 84 1/2 in.)

Artist’s signature:
Bansheng zhi, “Made by Bansheng.”

Artist’s seals:
Wang Mansheng yin; Bansheng; Xian zhi



The colors of ink spread across the long expanse of paper leaving a battalion of lotus leaves in their wake. Traditional black ink merges and mingles with shades of brown from an unusual ink made from walnuts. Pencil-thin lines, sharp and intensely black, produce the skeletons of the lotus blossoms, which support the bright red pigment that forms their bodies. Wang’s arsenal of materials and implements is impressive and original, and yet he is still within the haloed confines of traditional Chinese painting. In basic materials, paper and ink, and in subject matter, his link to the past is clear. Yet he stretches the boundaries as he brings that tradition into the 21st century.

Just as Chinese painters from this great tradition will focus on a particular mountain, a particular place to represent in their works, and just as that place might become iconic in the artist’s oeuvre, so it is with the Mansheng’s series “Wind Over Lotus Ponds.” Yet not quite:

“Willows tall, cicadas loud, leaves of lotus huge and crowded. In the 1980s and 1990s when I worked in Beijing, I would often go in summer to sit beside a lotus pond, in the shade of willows, and listen to the cicadas. Occasionally, stirred by a passing breeze, the lotus leaves would bend in unison, creating a ripple of patterned motion across the pond. Such an experience has been rare since I moved to the United States 20 years ago. But a visit to Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens in Washington, DC brought back those memories and, with them, a desire to capture that feeling in a series of paintings called Wind Over Lotus Pond.”

An experience provided the stimulus for these paintings, which happened to become a series, now numbering ten. It began unintentionally. The first painting was done in 2010 with Mansheng being quite unaware that more were to come, that he would become a “serial painter” of “Wind Over Lotus Ponds.” We are glad he has.

As far as the walnut ink is concerned, according to Mansheng, it was essentially his love for the color brown that resulted in experiments that led to a successful pigment. The idea to use walnuts to produce this color in the first place was introduced to Mansheng by a friend of his, an artist who had been using walnut ink in her own paintings. Mansheng collects the walnuts in the fall, waits until the green husks dry and darken, and then boils them and stores the ink, which darkens with age. Little did he know when he embarked on this path that he was following in the footsteps of Leonardo, Rembrandt and even van Gogh who are

all known to have used ink made from walnuts in their work.

Born into a humble family in Shanxi province, Mansheng began his study of calligraphy and painting independently at the age of seven. A young teenager during the Cultural Revolution, he took refuge during those turbulent years in practicing calligraphy. Later he was a top student at Fudan University in Shanghai where he majored in classical Chinese literature while also devoting much of his time to the study of old master paintings in the Shanghai Museum. After graduating in 1985, Wang worked as a director of cultural programming at China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing, producing documentaries on the art and culture of China and Tibet. His position took him to Tibet, where he made a documentary and was profoundly affected by Buddhist art. In 1996 he immigrated to the United States where he began life as an artist, and today leads a relatively quiet but immensely creative life with his family in the Hudson River valley outside of New York City.