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# A·R·T·S

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January 1986

The Magazine  
For Members of  
The Minneapolis  
Society of Fine Arts



## **Blindman's Buff**

Max Beckmann's vision of the game of life

## **Teaching in a Chinese Art Academy**

A report on a culture in transition

## **Design in the Electronic Age**

Drawing and painting with computers

January 1986

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ARTS is the magazine for members of The Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, the parent organization of The Minneapolis Institute of Arts and The Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

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11:30-1:30 Tu-Sat lunch

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts is the recipient of grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board with funds appropriated by the Minnesota State Legislature, and from the National Endowment for the Arts. A portion of the museum's general operating funds for this fiscal year was provided by a grant from the Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency that administers to the nation's museums.

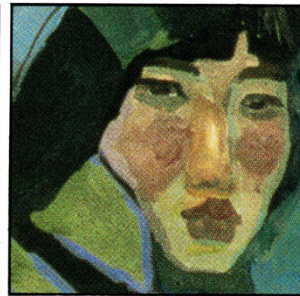
ARTS Magazine (USPS 116490), Volume 9, No. 1. Published monthly for The Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts by MSP Publications, 12 South Sixth Street, Suite 1030, Minneapolis, MN 55402. A one-year subscription, at \$7.50, is included in the cost of membership in The Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts. Second-class postage paid at Minneapolis, MN. Copyright © 1986 The Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts. Editorial inquiries should be sent to ARTS Magazine, 12 South Sixth Street, Suite 1030, Minneapolis, MN 55402; telephone 612/339-7571. Postmaster: Please send change of address information to: Membership Dept., The Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, 2400 Third Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55404; telephone 612/870-3155.

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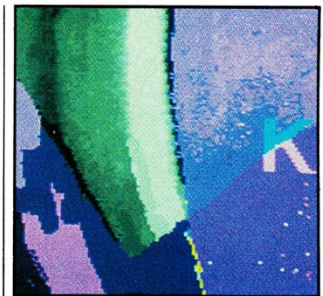
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**On the cover:**  
Detail: *The Performers*. Tapestry,  
French, 17-18th century. Woven  
at the Beauvais factory when it  
was under the supervision of  
Philip Behagle. From the  
permanent collection of textiles.  
The William Hood Dunwoody Fund.



# TEACHING IN A CHINESE ART ACADEMY



by Roman Verostko



Above: Painting students at Zhejiang Academy return from a picnic. Right: Verostko and his wife, Alice Wagstaff, with artist Yan Bo (center).



Note: Roman Verostko, a professor of Liberal Arts at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design for more than 17 years, taught a survey of modern art at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art and lectured at China's most famous art schools in spring 1985. His wife, Alice Wagstaff, a psychotherapist, traveled with him and lectured for professional groups in her field.

Because he was there during a crucial period of change in the educational system, he was invited to prepare a critical report based on his experience. This document, "A Rising Star: A Report on the Chinese Art Academy" (MCAD, 1985), is being translated at the Zhejiang Academy and distributed to arts educators in China.

When we arrived at Hangzhou last March via China Air's twice-a-week flight from Hong Kong, our friend Zheng Sheng-Tian was waving from the terminal. A painter and teacher who had been a visiting scholar at the University of Minnesota for two years, he recently was appointed director of Zhejiang Academy's Foreign Affairs Office. He dreams of Hangzhou as an international center for the arts.

It is no idle dream. Hangzhou, the silk capital of China, a picturesque city with many cultural monuments, parks and famous West Lake, is home to a growing national academy whose faculty have studied abroad and whose foreign students come from Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Japan and Colombia. I was invited to give faculty members a course on contemporary western art as part of a modernization program for teachers.

Several days later, at 8:15 a.m., I entered a fifth-floor classroom for my first slide lecture. The morning chill was considerable. About 45 teachers wearing coats and caps were packed into the small room. Eager faces, huddled forms and an awesome silence greeted me. Interest was high. This was the first time a course in 20th-century art history had been taught in China.

Thanks to Zheng's help, my hosts had procured black curtains for the windows, painted one wall white and built a ceiling booth for projectors. I was perplexed and flattered to learn that such action on

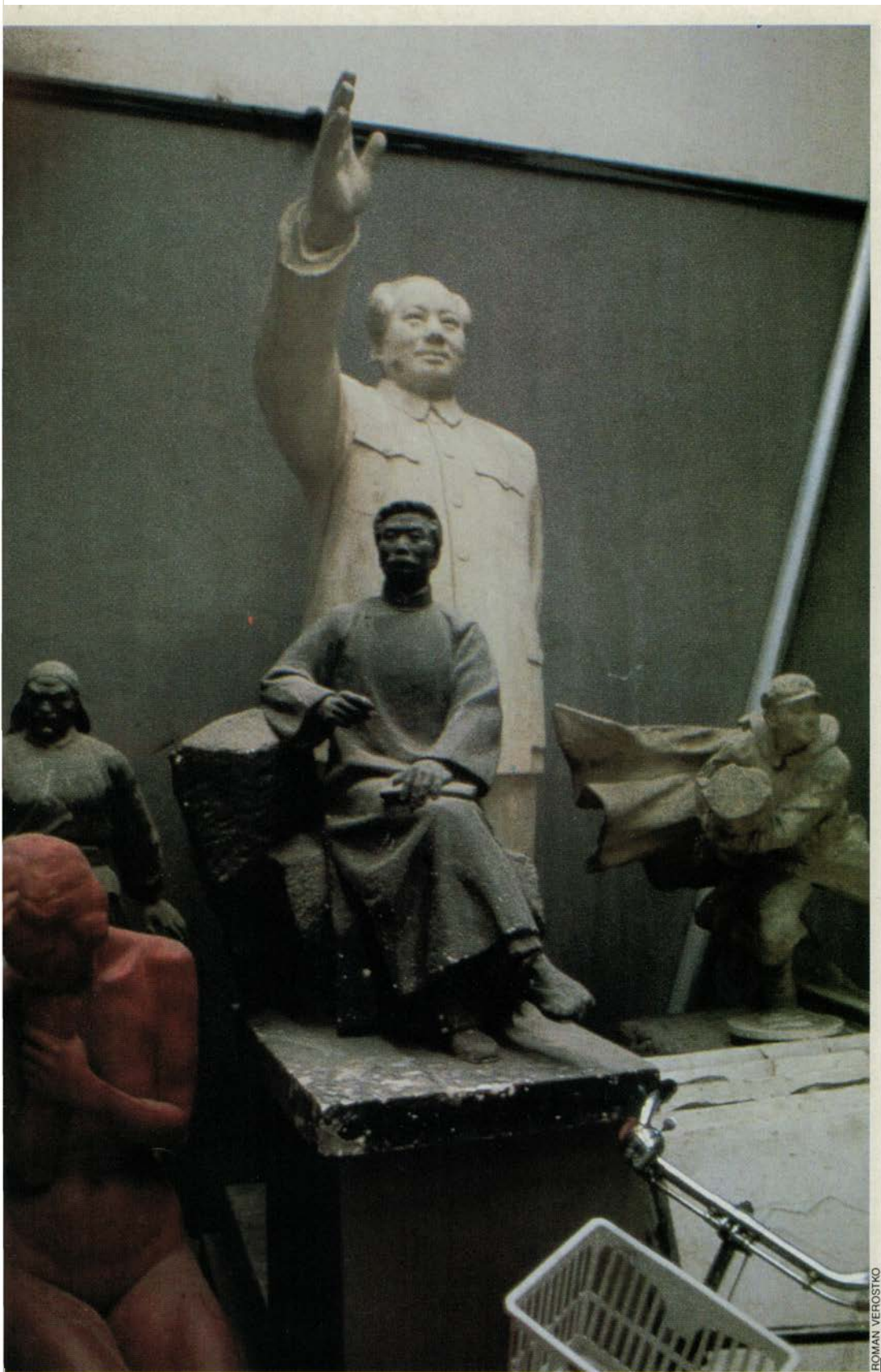
demand was unusual. A Chinese version of the syllabus already had been distributed, and my interpreter had previewed slides and terminology.

The homework paid off. Two hours later we knew the course would succeed.

Four weeks later we were easily exploring Italian Futurism and pondering de Stijl theory. Class members wrote a Chinese poem using a surrealist technique, made a stab at automatism and enjoyed a "dada" improvisation. My apprehensions about discussing the Russian constructivists vanished when several remarked how much I looked like Lenin. They liked the American regionalists, Minneapolis's architecture and *Arcadia*, my audiovisual presentation on the four seasons in Minnesota.

Their curiosity was boundless. Describe a "happening." What is an "installation"? Is this kind of art popular? What is your basis for criticism? What about political motives in art? Religion? Philosophy? Psychology? The students were especially curious about psychology and psychiatry both in themselves and in relation to art.

My lectures included slides of work close to home. The students were entranced with the way Dale Eldred's installation for The Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts' centennial "painted" light on the Institute's white brick walls; and they wondered why it was taken down after all the effort and expense to put it up. They delighted in and were amused by Norman Andersen's music machines; praised Beverly Gold's costumes; were reverential toward Philip Larson's *Five Fingers* and moved by Annie Mohler's



*The sculpture studio still holds work from the Marxist era, including models of Mao Zedong and the writer Lu Xun.*

light work and poetry.

Some MCAD faculty members had sent drawings with me, and my friend Zheng remarked that their doing so meant a lot to the school's "leaders." To an art community that had been isolated from the West for practically a generation, such a gesture from foreign artists took on meaning; we don't realize how much they hunger for contact.

Most of my Hangzhou students were teachers ranging in age from about 25 to 55; some were from distant art schools.

Meeting them regularly led to familiar friendly conversation. Friendships grew, and eventually I visited studios and saw portfolios. I came to know the personal stories and struggles of particular artists.

Before this experience I had not known the magnitude of China's terrible struggle. In the last decade of Mao's life (1966-76), a "cultural revolution," intended to purge remnants of feudalism and rightist tendencies, fueled zealots and mindless youths to wreak havoc on China's intellectual, economic and political leadership.

Thousands of Chinese intellectuals experienced humiliations and torture. Some committed suicide. Some teachers, labeled "rightists," were held in confinement and suffered physical violence at the hands of their own students. Others were sent to work with the peasants and perform menial tasks as a way of cleansing their "bourgeois" tendencies. The history of those complex political intrigues and the tragic personal stories of artists, writers, factory workers and peasants are now becoming known in the West.

Sadly, many cultural monuments, viewed as vestiges of a feudal past, or as corrupting elements from bourgeois elitism, also were destroyed. Thousands of rare monuments suffered mutilation. In one instance I was deeply moved to see a shrine, near Nanjing, where someone had defecated by the decapitated Buddha. In the midst of this turmoil many artists made heroic efforts to preserve precious artistic treasures. Some with cool heads helped preserve such national monuments as the Lignin Temple near Hangzhou.

Ranked among China's most celebrated, this temple precinct, dating from the fourth century, includes a temple guardian carved from one piece of camphor during the Song Dynasty (960-1126). We learned from one artist how he had locked arms with others to form a living fence to prevent "reform"-minded students

context of today's euphoria, are the psychological wounds of the artists caught in the middle of that turmoil. Perhaps, having suffered through physical abuse and mental anguish, they can endure almost anything. You can only be humble in the presence of some of these men and women. Several artists, in their middle 50s, impressed me with their rebounding spirit. Following harrowing and humiliating experiences during the cultural revolution, they have taken up their work one more time with renewed energy. Seeing this makes one want to help too. But how?

Perhaps this is why I gave up the idea of a vacation following my course and, through the interest of the teachers and the help of Zheng Sheng-Tian, expanded my lecture route to other academies. With a compressed version of the course, I set out to do a series of roughly one-week stands in art schools in Nanjing, Tianjin and Chongqing. At Beijing, we added a session for the faculty at the Central Academy. My audiences grew as word of the course got around.

At Tianjin a special arrangement in the academy's gallery made it possible to accommodate about 300; sessions were videotaped and presented again in the evenings. By the time we arrived at Chongqing the academy had teachers coming from throughout Sichuan province. The crowd swelled to about 700.

Despite my warm welcome, teaching in China was not easy. Only now do I realize the extent of our cultural differences. On several occasions my Chinese colleagues, wishing to be more

western, suggested that I speak openly. As one said, "Let us speak American, be frank." This meant a lot to me. But even as we wanted to speak "frankly" with each other we had difficulty. From childhood our cultural "sensors" had been conditioned differently. During one lecture, for example, I was showing and discussing one of Willem de Kooning's Woman paintings from the 1950s. These aggressive paintings have disturbing female references. When later I wanted to illustrate the way some expressionists spontaneously selected colors, I said, "For example, suppose the artist begins the day thinking to himself, 'Well, today I feel like making a yellow painting (a *huang hua*).'"

A perplexed response followed, and only later did I learn that *huang hua* referred to pornography. But I was thinking of a glorious morning sunrise and "yellow" had spontaneously come to mind. Later we mended our meaning. How many things I must have misunderstood -and how often I must have been misunderstood. Yet the response of those who took the course was overwhelming. Consider Wang Gong-Yi, a 38-year-old printmaker, teacher and noted woman artist in China today. Academy trained, she planted rice and cared for pigs during the cultural revolution. Like so many Chinese artists of her generation, having been pushed and pulled in several directions, she has been searching for a way to plant her artistic roots. She has been wrestling with modern western perspectives, Chinese traditions and the realities of contemporary China. She felt the survey of modern art helped her

focus on her own role as an artist. Now she feels more confident in following her own way.

Those between 35 and 45 years old, who were teenagers and young adults during the cultural revolution, are the ones who appear to need the most help and support. Through my course some artists in this bracket, with limited naive views of modern art, were learning for the first time about western-style individual freedom and responsibility. I felt they had been politically seduced. In their youthful zeal they were led to assume awesome political responsibility. With little or no artistic or academic background they were forced to make decisions and take actions for which few educated adults would feel competent. This could mean denouncing teachers and parents as well as destroying anything, including art, that could be associated with "stinking intellectual" tendencies or "rightist" inclinations. During this period the arts suffered as much as the sciences.

But there are two sides, the abusers and the abused. I have a vivid memory of one young artist-let's call him Li - who suffered isolation and humiliation throughout his childhood years. Even his teacher had singled him out because his father was accused of being a "rightist." The poor fellow saw so much suffering in both of his parents that he could not bear to tell them of the taunting and abuse he endured daily in school. To spare each other pain, they learned not to tell each other what they suffered. Such experiences buried deeply inside millions of this generation have left China with a deep psychological scar.



A painting studio at the academy.

from destroying this remnant of a "feudal" past. Since the cultural revolution the academy has helped restore paintings and sculpture and create replacements for monuments that suffered destruction. Those artists who helped in these restorations take pride in seeing their historic monuments revived.

But less obvious, in the



*Student work from a painting class. Inset: The model in ethnic dress.*

You can see the pain he endured in Li's body posture and, I think too, in his art, which appears delicate and fragile.

During my sojourn in China I became more understanding and supportive of this group of Chinese artists and teachers. Many older artists who suffered humiliations have worked to heal the wounds in a rebounding effort to build a creative China. I stand in awesome admiration of those who are leading this recovery. The art academies are China's hope for an artistic renaissance, a kind of oasis in what has been an artistic desert. In the arts, as in the sciences, we need to encourage more student and teacher exchange. Some resist the expense and the effort. But what makes more sense—the exchange of students and teachers or the exchange of bullets and bombs?

#### **Chinese Art Today**

Roman Verostko will discuss the social forces and artistic concerns shaping new directions in Chinese art in a four-part lecture series beginning Feb. 13 at MCAD. "The Artists in Today's China: Conflict and Change" will examine the labyrinth of cultural influences and conflicting ideologies that a new generation of artists must reconcile.

Topics to be addressed are: "Socialist Realism and the Aftermath of 'Mao Thought'" (Feb. 13); "Tradition: Binding or Life-Giving?" (Feb. 20); "Modern Western Art: Freedom and Threat" (Feb. 27); and "The Artist's Search for Identity" (March 6). The series is held from 7:30 to 9 p.m. in MCAD Auditorium 109. Cost is \$18 for MSFA members; \$25 for nonmembers.