

## Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa* A Citation

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### Professor Wu Guanzhong

“There is only one chance in a lifetime to make a choice. I insist on exploring along the direction that I have identified.” This is a quotation from *Qitu (The Deviant Way)*, a book by Professor Wu Guanzhong. Mr Wu’s choice has been to capture the landscapes of the earth and the varied faces of humanity with his brush. Over the past eighty years, he has worn out many brushes and developed through many styles, ever steadfast in his chosen direction, never ceasing to explore, always seeking breakthroughs. The ultimate rule is not be bound by any rules; thus Mr Wu created a new genre from the midst of Chinese ink brushes and western oils. His unique style combines the cool lightness of Chinese humanist painters and the vibrant colours of the Impressionists. His broad brushstrokes, spontaneous and nonchalant, integrate the essences of Chinese and western paintings. His creations have brought contemporary art to a new height that captivates and moves the human heart.

Professor Wu Guanzhong was born in 1919 in Yixing, Jiangsu Province. At the age of sixteen he was admitted to the National Arts Academy of Hangzhou, where he studied under masters such as Pan Tianshou and Lin Fengmian. In 1946 he obtained a government scholarship to further his studies in France, where he enrolled at l’Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-arts and received training in both classical and contemporary arts. By observing the development of western art from tradition to modernity, Mr Wu came to understand through visual experiences the novelty and the richness of expression in western art. This in turn elevated his appreciation of art, intensified his insight, and honed his technical mastery. The instruction of great teachers had broadened his vista and brought him to new heights; a precious seed had been sown, but he realised that the seed will only germinate, take root and flower in its own soil. He presented an oil titled *The Great Earth* for graduation, and as soon as his studies were completed he returned to China, where he embarked on a new career of art creation and teaching on the yellow earth of the Motherland.

In 1951 Mr Wu began to teach at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, in 1953 he moved to Tsinghua University, and in 1956 he taught in Beijing Fine Arts Normal College where he stayed until he joined the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts in 1964. During the Cultural Revolution he laboured in the countryside, and he was recalled to Beijing in 1973, when he resumed his painting career. From then on he exhibited frequently all over the country. It was in the 1980’s that Mr Wu’s ink and oil paintings first came to the attention of the art community in the West, and his works were successively exhibited in Asia, America and Europe. In 1991 he was presented with the highest honours that France could bestow on artists and men of letters, the Officier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. In 1992, the British Museum mounted an exhibition titled *Wu Guanzhong – A Chinese Painter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, breaking the Museum’s tradition and for the first time showing the works of a living Chinese artist. Over the years Professor Wu has published over a hundred albums of paintings as well as articles. He was a Member of the National Committee of the Sixth and the Seventh Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conferences (CPPCC), and has been a



Member of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC since 1994. In 1986 Professor Wu was the external examiner to the Fine Arts Department of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, and visited the campus. His valuable advice had over the years been of tremendous benefit to the development of the Fine Arts Department and the Art Museum.

Mr Wu had undergone the best training in both eastern and western arts. But, rising beyond his heritage, he has tried vigorously to explore, to seek an artistic direction of his own between Shitao and Bada Shanren on the one hand and Van Gogh and Cezanne on the other. In the process he began with water colours, using the genre as a medium of transition between ink and oil. With ink integrated with water colours there is much more buoyancy and mobility in the colouration, while water colours applied to oils impart to the staid solidity an ethereal dimension. Professor Wu thus said, “To me, oil and ink are one. They both help me to search for a way of my own.” Oil-Ink-Oil-Ink thus forms a ceaseless cycle and, as these genres interact in the *oeuvres* of Professor Wu and progress in a zig-zag way, their paths would cross and at the points of intersection their merits especially stand out. Professor Wu once worked in the Architecture Department of Tsinghua University, and he is apt to infuse the elegance of architectural designs into his paintings and drawings. He said that the dots and lines in his works were painted in such way that every stroke carried its own structural significance. The size of a dot, the length of a line – every detail is painted in a strict, disciplined manner, to be just right. Over several decades Professor Wu has experienced and explored and, as he puts brush to paper, numerous innovative images have appeared. From portrait to landscape, from still life to lyricism, from the concrete to the semi-abstract, and from miniature to large-scale works, every work of Professor Wu represents a newly created life. Within the western framework of forms and proprieties he has successfully depicted eastern philosophy and spirit. An all-embracing expressiveness, complemented by forceful brushstrokes and textures, has given boundless vitality and interest to his works.

Professor Wu often signs his works as *tu*. This is derived from *Wu Tu Cha*, a name he adopted when he was twenty years old, as a means to encourage himself to virtue. *Tu*, a bitter tea with a sweet aftertaste, is a true reflection of the bittersweet life that he has experienced in the course of his creative career. When he was a labourer in the provinces he would go around the countryside sketching, carrying a dung-basket for an easel – the locals called him the “dung-basket painter”. He has a passionate love for nature and humanity, and his efforts in their pursuit are untiring. Over half a century his style and enthusiasm have, like the *tu* plant, grown like wild fire and spread to the four corners of the earth, drawing praise and admiration from critics and art-lovers everywhere.

*Wu Feng* has been the theme of Mr Wu’s exhibitions in recent years. *Wu Feng* means Mr Wu’s personal style, but as a *double entendre* it also refers to the style of the *Wu* region, which includes Mr Wu’s native province of Jiangsu. The great master painter of the Tang Dynasty, Wu Daozi, was famous for his portraits, in which the subjects are adorned with flowing garments and elegant sashes depicted with round strokes. This is a famous feature of Wu Daozi’s human figures and is known as the *Wu Sashes in the Breeze*. Wu Guanzhong, on the other hand, creates breezes with his



brush; his paintings are rich with emotions and feelings, which take priority over technical virtuosity. He said, “All my life I have been, on and off, painting the scenes of Jiangnan.” The *Two Swallows*, one of his most representative works, is a scene from rural domestic life in the Jiangnan region, the houses there typified by white-washed walls and black tiles. The two swallows enter the picture at an angle on one side and the contrast of black and white, together with the horizontal cuts across the vertical lines, make for a picture of reserved elegance and yet intense spiritual significance. Mr Wu once compared works of art to kites: “A kite must be able to lift off; yet it must not break free from the lines.” Even as he roamed and explored, his heart, ever pure and simple, remained securely tied to the land of *Wu*.

In his mind and from his brush there are myriad features, myriad colours and myriad techniques, all readily at his disposal. While the two swallows roam the sky, the painter’s heart and mind are tied to his native land. Professor Wu is a great master of painting and an artist with a passion for humanity. Mr Chairman, may I present Professor Wu Guanzhong for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.