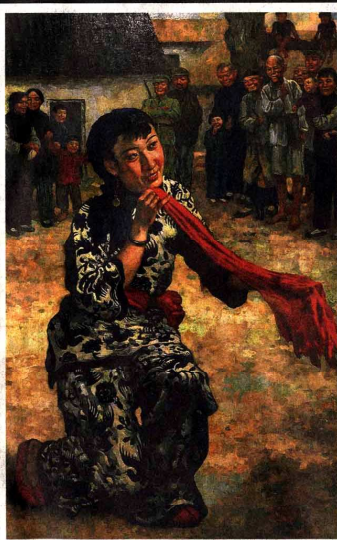




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BLOCKBUSTER SHOW

Now showing at the Singapore Art Museum: the world's most expensive modern Chinese painting to be sold at an auction. Xu Beihong's (left) Put Down Your Whip (far left) went for \$12.5 million last year. DEEPIKA SHETTY reports on the not-to-be-missed exhibition. **pages 4&5**

XU'S SWING THROUGH SINGAPORE

Master Chinese artist Xu Beihong, whose artwork fetched a record \$12 million at an auction, has a strong Singapore connection



Deepika Shetty

THE world's most expensive modern Chinese painting ever sold at auction is now on display in Singapore in a blockbuster exhibition by a master Chinese artist who had close ties here.

The oil painting by the late Xu Beihong fetched US\$12 million (\$12.5 million) at a Sotheby's auction in Hong Kong last year.

Titled Put Down Your Whip, it was painted in Singapore in 1939, during World War II.

The artwork is part of a collaborative exhibition between the Singapore Art Museum and the Xu Beihong Museum in Beijing.

The show here is a landmark one on many levels: > Xu is widely considered the father of modern Chinese painting. His work is highly sought after and some paintings in the show have never been seen in public before.

> No overall value was available on the 91 precious items at the exhibition – artworks, letters and vases – but just two paintings alone, Put Down Your Whip and another called Slave And Lion, are worth over \$20 million.

> Xu's works depict scenes of Singapore and portraits of movers and shakers on the local pre-war scene: > One, Portrait Of A Young Lady, is of Christina Lee Balsara, said to be one of Singapore's most beautiful women in the 1930s. Madam Balsara is now in her 80s.

The show, called Xu Beihong In Nanyang, is on until mid-July.

One art expert, Yang Shim-yi, 37, who is guest curator at contemporary Asian art specialist Ode to Art Gallery, enthused: "The exhibition recognises not just the importance of this Chinese master, but also explores the importance of Singapore as a place for writing the history of modern Chinese art."

Indeed, Xu painted Put Down



PICTURE OF POISE: Christina Lee Balsara next to a painting Xu did of her in Singapore in 1940.

PHOTOS: JIMMY LEE, SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

'We were friends'

AN INTRIGUING painting in the Xu Beihong exhibition now on here is Portrait Of A Young Lady, depicting Christina Lee Balsara, regarded as one of the most beautiful women in Singapore of her time.

The portrait was done in Singapore in 1940.

Many decades later – not to mention a world war, Singapore's Independence and other enormous historical changes – Madam Lee is alive today to pose next to the painting she inspired.

It's a remarkable image: the dark-haired young beauty in the portrait, and the woman she grew to be.

What's also striking is the ageless elegance and striking looks that Madam Balsara clearly possesses, and which no doubt caught the eye of the master painter.

His alluring oil painting is a picture-perfect image of feminine poise. It shows her seated on a wooden chair with a calligraphy work in the background.

Madam Balsara was the first wife of Cathay Organisation founder Loke Wan Tho. She later married entrepreneur Dadi Balsara.

In a phone interview with Life!, Madam Balsara, who is now in her 80s, recalls that she met Xu at a party and they ended up meeting a few more times.

"We got along quite well, but it was only after a couple more meetings that Xu asked for permission to paint me," she says.

She agreed almost immediately: "Xu Beihong was already getting to be quite well known then. I liked him because he was very humble and easy to talk to."

"We were friends and posing for him was not difficult, but my biggest regret is not having taken the first step. I did not ask him to paint me. Had I done that, I could have kept the painting with me."

The painting – which Xu kept for himself and which is now part of the Xu Beihong Museum Collection – was done at her mother's house in Fifth Avenue, where Madam Balsara still lives.

While she cannot recall how many hours it took to complete the painting, she distinctly remembers it took three sittings.

"I dressed up for the painting, wearing one of my favourite dresses at that time," she adds.

She did get to see the finished portrait in 1940, but seeing it at the exhibition here this time was different.

"Coming face to face with the portrait again makes me feel rather ancient."

Your Whip while on a visit to Singapore during the turbulent third decade of the last century.

He was inspired by a street play of the same title, about a father and his daughter forced into exile by the Japanese invasion of China.

The life-size woman holding a red scarf in the painting was a Chinese actress friend of Xu's, Wang Ying. The title of the painting speaks of the pain inflicted by the Japanese invasion.

Put Down Your Whip (144 x 90cm) – said to have been bought by a private collector – topped the previous record for a Chinese oil painting of US\$6.9 million paid for Xu's 1924 work, Slave And Lion, at a Christie's sale in November 2006. Slave And Lion is also on display at the museum.

Xu, born in China's eastern Jiangsu province in 1895 and who died in 1953, is best known for his ink depictions of galloping horses and for combining Chinese and Western influences in his art.

He was one of the first Chinese painters to master both traditional ink on paper, charcoal drawing and experimenting with established styles.

His work also includes calligraphy, ink on paper, charcoal drawing and experimenting with established styles.

The works for the exhibition were sourced from the National Heritage Board Collection, the Xu Beihong Museum in Beijing and private collectors.

As well as Singapore, they also depict scenes from South-east Asia and

India.

In fact, the show's name – Xu Beihong In Nanyang – emphasises the South-east Asian aspect of some of his works. Nanyang is a Chinese term referring to the Malay Archipelago and Indonesia.

Xu is believed to have spent over three years in Singapore at different times. Between 1939 and 1942, he stayed in Singapore, Malaya and India for as long as three years.

One exhibition painting bound to be a talking point is the portrait of Madam Balsara. Xu had asked her to pose for him.

She was the first wife of Cathay Organisation founder Loke Wan Tho, and later married entrepreneur Dadi Balsara, who is said to have named the famous Singapore Airlines Singapore Girl perfume after her.

Before World War II broke out, Xu also received portrait commissions and the like from patrons in Singapore and Penang.

He secured portrait commissions from philanthropist and businessman Tan Kah Kee, noted architect Ho Kwong Yew and local war hero Lim Bo Seng's father Lim Loh, some of which are in the exhibition.

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Xu Beihong (1895-1953)



NOT only Xu's rich variety of styles is on display at the exhibition in Singapore – there are glimpses of his colourful love life on show as well. It includes a letter he wrote to a student, Sun Duoci, whom he was involved with while still married.

The relationship is believed to have started around 1930, when his marriage to his second wife Jung Biwei began to fall apart. The rocky marriage eventually ended in 1943. However, his involvement with Sun was not smooth sailing either – it was marked by anxiety, torment and pain, before ending in 1939. This is evident in a letter Xu penned but never mailed to Sun, and which can be seen at the exhibition. Part of it reads: "... I received your letter, which was unlike any of your other letters in the last eight to nine years. I was so stunned that I lost my wits... Although I could not stop crying, I complied with your wishes and wrote this final long letter."

Still, Xu went on to marry another student, 20-year-old Liao Jingwen, in 1943. He was 48. In 1953, after his death, Liao turned their residence and his entire collection of books, calligraphy and paintings into a museum, of which she is the director.

Must-see works



FIGURES (above) (1926)
Ink and colour on paper, 104 x 63cm
What: This demonstrates Xu's proficiency in ink painting and life drawing.
Why it is interesting: Xu's realism, through careful attention to the human body and the landscape in the background.

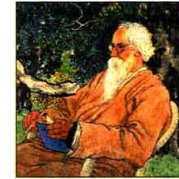


THE FOOLISH MAN WHO REMOVED THE MOUNTAINS (above) (1940)
Horizontal scroll, ink and colour on paper, 144 x 421cm

What: Completed in Darjeeling, India, this is based on the story of Beishan Yugong (The Foolish Man From The Northern Mountains) from the classic work, Liezi.
Why it is interesting: Said to have been inspired by a meeting Xu had with Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi. Unlike conventional Chinese portraits which focus on facial features, it shows everyday people in mid-action, like a snapshot.

BRILLIANT AS THE ROSY DAWN (left) (1940)

Ink and colour on paper, 96 x 45cm
What: Xu used bold ink brushwork to depict the branches, punctuated with red paint which evokes spring blooms.
Why it is interesting: Also on display is Xu's poetic flair. Part of an inscription reads: "As brilliant as the rosy clouds at dawn, As high as the clouds in the sky; Who is it that has an heroic air?"



PORTRAIT OF INDIAN NOBEL LAUREATE RABINDRANATH TAGORE (left) (1940)

Ink and colour on paper, 51 x 50cm
What: It shows poet Tagore in a moment of contemplation, pen in one hand, book in the other. The setting is Santiniketan, a university town in the Indian state of West Bengal, where Tagore invited Xu.
Why it is important: It is a significant departure from Chinese portrait painting as it makes extensive use of the natural background of Santiniketan's park-like setting.



PORTRAIT OF MAHATMA GANDHI (left) (1940)
Drawing, 23.8 x 20cm

What: With a few deft strokes delineating Gandhi's features and the outline of his clothes against a bare background, Xu's portrait echoes the leader's austere lifestyle.
Why it is important: Its subject, and the fact that it is signed by Mahatma Gandhi.

PHOTOS: XU BEIHONG MUSEUM, ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

Prized picks from private collectors

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Another time, he stopped over in 1939 on his way to India where he had been invited by poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

During that visit, Xu held an exhibition, the proceeds of which were donated to the wartime charity China Relief Fund.

This success and the warmth of his host, businessman and art collector Huang Manshi, persuaded the Chinese master to stay on a little longer in the region before heading to India, notes the Singapore Art Museum.

Museum director Kwok Kian Chow, 53,

says: "His connections with Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Indonesia through his friendship with artist Lee Man Fong, India through Rabindranath Tagore, and his earlier education and travels in Europe, point to a network of historical narratives, exchanges and influences of aesthetics and ideas."

Getting private collectors to lend works for the show was quite a coup.

Mr Kwok reveals: "To convince the collectors, we had to show our seriousness and thoroughness in presenting this significant period of Xu Beihong's artistic career."

One such collector is Hong Kong-based

Jack Bonn who has loaned two ceramic vases painted by Xu. Also from his collection is a draft love letter written by Xu to a student (see story on Page 4).

Another collector, Mr Loh Sum Min, 61, from Penang, has lent nine artworks. His father, Mr Loh Cheng Chuan, and Xu were close friends.

Mr Loh admits the museum was persistent, and in the end, it was the idea of tracking Xu's artistic journey through Nanyang that appealed to him.

He says: "I am a very private collector. Even though I have never showed these works before, many people have contacted me asking me if I want to sell them. I will

never part with these works, they are just too precious."

With private collectors opening up their collections, the museum has been able to categorise the various influences on Xu's life.

"It was an eye-opener for me," says Mr Dennis Lim, 35, an arts enthusiast. "It shows not just Xu's different styles, his mastery of oils and inks but also the different places and people who influenced him. His portrait of Mahatma Gandhi really appealed to me, as did the sheer size and the daring which comes through The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains."

Painter and gallery owner Tan Teo

Kwang, 68, says: "The fact that Xu stayed here and some of the work reflects that makes this exhibition very interesting."

Visitors to the exhibition get to see not just the works of an acknowledged Chinese master, but a small slice of their own history as well, he points out.

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> Xu Beihong In Nanyang is on at the Singapore Art Museum, 71 Bras Basah Road, till July 13 from 10am to 7pm daily. Free admission after 6pm on Fridays, and noon to 2pm on weekdays. Other times, adult entry fee is \$8; students and senior citizens, \$4.