

'Embracing the Uncarved Wood'

F&M exhibits unusual Chinese folk art

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By JAMES BUESCHER, Correspondent

The value of a masterwork by, say, Cezanne or Van Gogh lies in the brilliant stroke of a practiced hand — the mastery of a technique and the unique expression of an artistic ideal.



"Memory of the Door," a wood carving by Zhang Guoli.

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haunting, strangely beautiful wooden relief sculptures created by a group of deaf-mute artists from Shandong.

Taking its title directly from a passage in the Tao Te Ching, a classic Chinese religious text, the exhibit, Giblin said, encourages visitors to look deep into the art. The specific verse goes something like this: "Visualize simplicity and embrace uncarved wood."

"It's a very powerful piece of Chinese scripture that basically means to visualize what exists inside," she said. "I know a lot of people don't understand this, but many artists and sculptors claim that they don't create the pieces they carve. They say the art was already in the wood to begin with, and their job is to simply peel back what isn't needed.

"That's what the Tao Te Ching means in that particular passage," she said. "To take on what is there but does not yet exist."

In 1998, Christopher Zhu, a former assistant director of the Shanghai Art Museum, discovered the pieces and began curating exhibitions of the work from Shanghai to Dallas.

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"During the summer of 2005, two of our professors here at Franklin & Marshall [Virginia Maksymowicz and Rick Kent] were traveling through China and came across these pieces in Shanghai and were very taken with them. They're both art history professors, so they understood how rare and precious a find this was," she said.

"They immediately began working to bring the pieces here to Lancaster," Giblin said.

Varying in size from small panels to large-scale, mural-like pieces, the works fuse elements of traditional Chinese folk culture with abstract designs.

"These are intricate, complex and emotionally resonant pieces," Giblin said, "and it's incredible to imagine just how much concentrated effort went into making them.

"They're very moving, and almost everyone who comes in contact with them is affected in some way.

"Most people ... have never seen anything like what we're showing here with these incredible pieces," Giblin said. "Each one is its own masterpiece, almost like its own individual Van Gogh."

"Embracing the Uncarved Wood: Relief Carvings From Shandong, China" runs through April 12 in the Rothman Gallery of Phillips Museum of Art, located in Steinman College Center near the intersection of New Street and College Avenue on the F&M campus. The show is free and open to the public. Exhibit co-curator Christopher Zhu will give a gallery talk at 4:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 12. For more information, call the museum at 291-3879.

Folk art, on the other hand, draws its value from the personal passion and social tradition of its practitioners. The cultural stylings and whimsy of folk art reflect a humanity that people treasure.

"I think people are attracted to folk art because it's not about credentials. It's about what people do when they're sitting on the porch or around the fireplace," said Claire Giblin, curator of Franklin & Marshall College's Phillips Museum, speaking on Jan. 28.

"Folk art is the ultimate expression of 'outsider art,' but it's also made by people who are highly, highly skilled," she said. "And no matter what culture the artwork comes from, people can look at folk art and see in it ... a piece of themselves."

The Phillips Museum is displaying a unique collection of Chinese folk art through April 12 in an exhibit titled "Embracing the Uncarved Wood." The display contains

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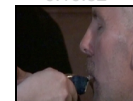
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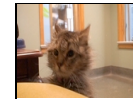
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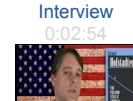
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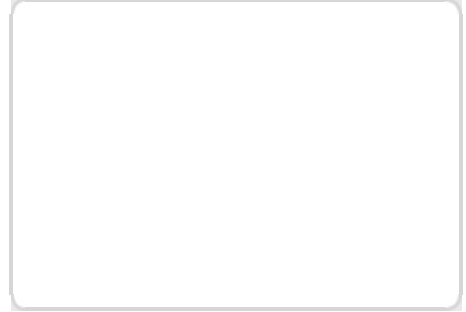
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