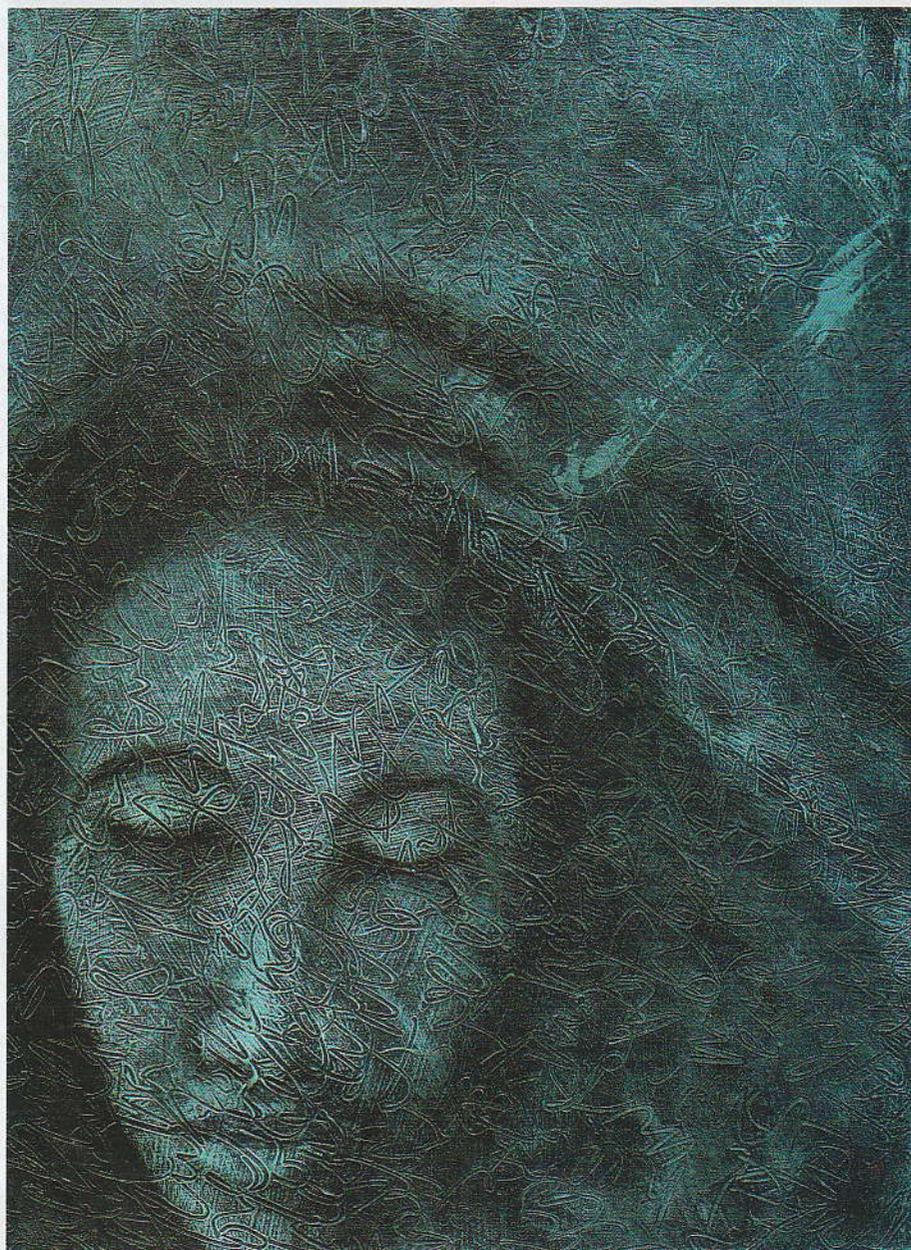


Journey to the East

British artist integrates Chinese elements in her work, seeking to balance East and West By Pan Jianing & Wu Yifei



A painting in Sophia Hurst's *Sisters* series

As a college student in Britain, Sophia Hurst happened to attend a summer school in Scotland, which later changed her life. She went to a presentation by Jene Bellows, a lecturer who had visited China and showed images taken during the visit. "Go to China," Bellows urged the students. "It is the country of the future."

The young student was irresistibly drawn to the faces Bellows showed during the presentation, finding "purity and sincerity" in them. Her mind was made up. She was ready to go to China.

Two years later, in 1995, Hurst arrived in Beijing, having obtained funding to research papermaking techniques in ancient China. So began her new life. "It was a great adventure for me, a young woman who had never been far from home," Hurst, now a 44-year-old mother of two, said. "I wanted to experience a totally different culture, something very different from my own."

She found a job at the Beijing Language and Culture University teaching English, and traveled around China to experience Chinese culture and tradition every vacation. "At that time, I was single, energetic and curious. I was able to travel to many different places. Every place I visited impressed me in a different way and increased my understanding of China," she said.

Finding love and inspiration

Her stay in China brought Hurst love too. She met Liu Wei, who was from Shenyang, capital of northeast China's Liaoning Province, and the two fell in love. They got married in 1999 and settled down in Shenyang. That is where the fine art graduate from the University of Glasgow finally set up her studio, painting every day and taking part in exhibitions in different Chinese cities. She has exhibited her work in Beijing, Chengdu and Dalian, besides Shenyang.

Her first painting, *Guardian*, a watercolor she did in 1995 during her student days, is an expression of her inner feelings. "As a teenager, I was very silent and often felt like an outsider at school," she said. "Painting became a form

“We can respect diversity and work for unity. Although we are from various nations and have different beliefs, we have the ability to come together to create a peaceful world.”

—Sophia Hurst, a Shenyang-based artist from Britain

of escape and a way to understand what was going on. It gave me confidence and strength. When I left home and went to art college, it was liberating and exciting at first, but quickly became lonely and confusing.”

But after she came to Shenyang, her painting style changed. Earlier, her works were dominated by grey and a sense of loneliness, frustration and sadness. Today, she uses bright, spring-like colors. Also, she is using more and more Chinese elements.

Fascinated by Chinese painting techniques, Hurst has been using them as well as calligraphy techniques in her paintings, searching for a balance between the East and the West. “I appreciate the intricate balance between ink and paper, black and white in Chinese paintings. The brush strokes and quality of ink vary according to the way the brush is held, the saturation of ink and the speed at which the brush is moved. I admire Chinese painting greatly and try to apply

these techniques to my watercolor paintings,” she said.

In 2012, Hurst created a series of acrylic works, *Jin* (meaning metal in Chinese), *Mu* (wood), *Shui* (water), *Huo* (fire) and *Tu* (earth), which are a personal interpretation of the “five elements” in ancient Chinese tradition. Hurst regards Chinese philosophy as an important source of inspiration.

“I love Chinese philosophy and traditional techniques. One of my aims is to combine the East and the West in my paintings,” she said. “Ancient Chinese philosophers conceived the idea of *datong*, meaning great harmony, the idea of coming together rather than splitting apart. If you look at the great artists, such as Picasso, they don’t stick to one style. They learned from both the East and the West, which gives them a unique balance in their works. They continued to learn all their lives and their styles constantly changed and developed.”