

Jean Michel's Artistic Journey in China

By staff reporter MA YAN

HALF a year ago, I met up with an old friend, Jean Michel Stanislas Garczynski. He had just arrived in Beijing, having traveled 2,300 km from the southern city of Guangzhou, to attend the 19th Beijing International Art Exhibition at the Beijing Exhibition Center.

The contemporary French expressionist artist has lived in China for six years and loves everything about China: "The food, the cities, the people's lifestyles... Everything here is just perfect for me." His excellent works and charming personality have won Jean Michel many friends in China, and he is a popular artist – his Chinese fans call him Uncle Mi. This time at the art fair, Uncle Mi brought us new works that were just as impressive as his old ones.

Jean Michel started painting aged 12 and won first prize at the Young Artists Competition of Meudon in Paris aged 16. He graduated top of the class from Ecole Professionnelle de Dessin Industriel (EPDI) at 24, and soon afterwards was invited to attend the Palm Art Salon organized by Paris City Hall as one of the youngest artists. In the same year, he single-handedly completed a giant 25-square-meter mural, which was displayed at the Champs Elysées in Paris.

Born in 1957 in Paris, Jean Michel is now president of the Expressionist Art Academy of France, and a member of many French artistic associations such as Académie Internationale Des Arts de France (AIAF) and La Maison Des Ar-



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Jean Michel and his abstract works.

tistes. In China in 2014, he was awarded the title of Artistic Consultant of China Horse Industry Association (CHIA) in Beijing. To add more strings to his bow, he also holds other posts such as designer and creative director of French luxuries.

Destiny Brought Me to China

Jean Michel first came to China in 2008 to attend an art salon in Shanghai. In retrospect, he believes "destiny" brought him to China: "I made a friend who invited me to join an exhibition in China. It was not my plan, but God's." However, it was not a smooth experience. In 2008, Beijing hosted the Olym-

pic Games. When the Olympic torch relay came to Paris, several Tibetan separatists tried to sabotage the relay and the then French President Sarkozy met with Dalai Lama, a separatist leader of Tibet. Many Chinese felt offended by the meeting and tension between China and France rose. Localized resistance against all things French ensued. Jean Michel, therefore, entered the Chinese market at a bad time. Although his works drew lots of attention, they did not sell. His Chinese dream was indeed "off to a bad start."

Jean Michel went straight back to France. It was two years later in 2010 when he considered entering the Chinese market again to continue his artistic journey. "Despite the rough ride last time, I liked China a lot and wanted to



Jean Michel's oil painting *A Friendship of Half a Century*.

continue creating there." This time he went to the southern city of Guangzhou where he stayed for six consecutive years and set up his own studio. When asked why he chose Guangzhou, Jean Michel said he liked the climate and his works were well received there. "My paintings were becoming more and more popular among Chinese people." So, he spent six months of every year in China, travelling and painting and making friends with the local people.

Chinese Elements in Art

Jean Michel's works belong to the genre of expressionism, a modernist movement initially prevalent in poetry and painting stemming from Scandinavian countries at the beginning of the 20th century. It presents the world from a subjective perspective and seeks to evoke moods or ideas by distorting physical reality for emotional effect.

"An artist should not just copy nature, he should express the power and emotions of nature, his joy and sorrow,



Jean Michel attends the 19th Beijing International Art Exhibition at the Beijing Exhibition Center.

and tell the stories behind the subjects through his paintbrush!" These now famous lines describe how Jean Michel understands contemporary art.

Before coming to China, Jean Michel's painting style evolved from ab-

stract to figurative. He mainly painted abstract works but also incorporated abstract elements into some of his figurative paintings. "Abstract art is a great way of expressing our ideas in the contemporary world. I'm especially fond of expressing the universe in this way." But after he came to China, he found out that the Chinese prefer figurative paintings, so he adapted to the market and painted things derived from real sources such as landscapes. He also noticed that Chinese people prefer paintings with subtle gradations of colors. He made corresponding changes to his own works to show how different colors can blend and how the distance of objects can be depicted. Inspired by the poetic grace of Chinese artworks, he added more Chinese elements to his own creations.

Jean Michel's work is highly influenced by Chinese culture, too. For example, the magnificence of China's mountains and its beautiful scenery is a recurring theme. He has painted works depicting the Great Wall, Qingcheng



Printed scarves based on the paintings of Jean Michel.

Mountain, Leshan Mountain, and the landscapes of Guilin. What's more, traditional Chinese philosophical ideas such as *fengshui*, *qi*, and the *yin/yang* dichotomy are also manifest in his works.

Furthermore, he pays special attention to the use of numbers in his works. The number four is always avoided as he knows Chinese people don't like it. "When I am painting horses, for example, I will paint six or eight horses, not four." When it comes to choosing the colors of a painting, he would normally choose warm-toned or bright colors, which are preferred by Chinese people. As abstract art gains in popularity among Chinese collectors, Jean Michel has now returned to abstract painting, his most favored style.

Ambassador of Cultural Exchanges

Jean Michel is mindful of keeping open the lines of artistic communication with his Chinese counterparts, learning the painting techniques and characteristics of Chinese art and at the same time introducing the concepts of Western painting to his Chinese friends and fans.

China is always open to artists from other countries who seek to live here and experience firsthand the uniqueness of this country.

He feels he is doing his bit to promote cultural exchanges between China and France.

The year 2014 was the lunar year of the horse and also the 50th anniversary of Sino-French diplomatic relations. To celebrate the friendship between the two countries, Jean Michel created an oil painting named *A Friendship of Half a Century*, depicting two horses, one black and one white, standing intimately together. The black one was painted against a red background to represent China, while the white one stands against a blue background for France. A touring exhibition of the painting was held in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing and in many other cities in China, drawing a favorable reception

from the public. The same year, Jean Michel held a horse-themed exhibition at the Guangzhou Museum of Art and donated one of his works to a charity auction in support of a "Free Lunch" project for students in poverty-stricken areas in China.

On March 2015, Jean Michel held a joint exhibition of paintings in Guangzhou with Qiao Shiguang, pioneer of China's modern lacquer painting. It marked a moment of "East meets West" for art. "China and France have the most profound art histories in the world, while at the same time the differences between them are huge, which makes everything fascinating," said Jean Michel. He believes art needs to evolve, which requires painters to cross borders while preserving the essence of their predecessors.

In June 2016, together with Xuan Xinming, a well-known artist with Guangdong Art Institute, Jean Michel went to France to paint from nature and to exchange ideas with Xuan. At the end of August, they co-held an exhibition named "Borderless" in Guangzhou and published an album of their works together.

"People say art has no boundaries. A piece of art can be understood by people with different cultural backgrounds. Art links all of humankind." Jean Michel concluded: "When two artists who have grown up in different cultures begin to understand each other and paint together, their future creations have already changed. Inspired by another painter's curiosity, new directions in art will develop."

Jean Michel is confident of his future in China. France is the cradle of and a paradise for Western art, but the 2008 financial crisis threw the country into a recession. As a result, fewer people are willing or able to invest in art. At the same time, more and more Chinese people are learning how to appreciate art and have more money in their pockets, so the art market in China is gathering momentum. "China and the U.S. boast larger markets in the eyes of artists. And China is always open to artists from other countries who seek to live here and experience firsthand the uniqueness of this country," said Jean Michel. ■