

# Li Keran bucks market trend

The artist has become a favorite at auction and his works are fetching record prices. But overall, the Chinese contemporary art market has cooled, **Lin Qi** reports in Beijing.

**L**i Keran (1907-89) took center stage at the spring sales with two historic works both crossing the 100 million yuan (\$16 million) threshold.

His 1974 painting of former chairman Mao Zedong's residence in Shaoshan, the revolutionary holy land in Hunan province, fetched 124 million yuan at China Guardian, in May.

Three weeks later his large-scale blockbuster of 1964, *Wan Shan Hong Bian* (Thousands of Hills in a Crimsoned View), was sold for a personal record of 293 million yuan at Poly International Auction.

Li, a prominent figure in 20th-century Chinese art, is recognized for innovating the mountain-and-water painting genre after the founding of New China in 1949. He is also remembered for breathing new life into art education.

Figures from the Beijing-based Art Market Monitor of Artron (AMMA) show the price per 0.11 square meter of Li's works has increased 175 percent, rising from 1.35 million yuan after the autumn sales in 2011 to 3.72 million yuan at the end of June.

This great leap makes Li an exception, compared with other modern masters such as Qi Baishi (1864-1957), Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) and Xu Beihong (1895-1953), whose works haven't generated the staggering prices seen in the spring boom of 2011.

The phenomenon is seen as a continuation of the market slowing down since the autumn sales, influenced by the credit squeeze policy and macroeconomic control.

For instance, Zhang Daqian grossed an auction turnover of nearly \$555 million in 2011, and replaced Pablo Picasso as top in the global artist ranking by auction revenue, according to the French art market information provider Artprice.com.

His *Lotus and Mandarin Ducks* sold for a personal best when it went under the hammer for \$24 million at Sotheby's 2011 spring sales in Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, his best performance in spring at the "Big Four" auction houses — Christie's, Sotheby's, China Guardian and Poly International — was 29 million yuan (\$4.62 million) for a re-creation of Song Dynasty (960-1279) artist Li Gonglin's painting.

"Most record-setting works by Qi Baishi and Zhang Daqian in previous auction seasons had formerly been owned by celebrated collectors or were the flagship creations of a certain period. Those paintings quickly sold out in a booming market," AMMA's director Guan Yu says.

The market, however, cooled in the latter half of 2011 and there was little confidence in spring 2012 because of an uncertain economic prospect. Guan says buyers have become more rational.

"Many elements are taken into consideration when deciding the value of an artwork, which include the artist's status, the hierarchy

and how representative the work is, in addition to the art publications and catalogues it has appeared in."

Though a record was set by *Wan Shan Hong Bian*, two other important paintings by Li were unsold, which came as no surprise for art collectors like Yan An.

"Both big players and new buyers are bidding for the best works of the blue-chip artists, while the market can't provide as many top-notch artworks and provide the reduced risks that people expect."

"This is because in the face of an unclear market, cautious owners would rather keep those items, which achieved skyscraping prices, rather than flip them at auction," Yan says.

It has become a tug of war between owners and buyers, he adds.

There is some reassurance for art dealers, collectors and analysts, however, and that is the category of modern masters in the 20th century will continue to serve as a powerful engine, because of its immense stock and wide price ranges — and acknowledgement of its artistic value among buyers.

Traditional painting and calligraphy have been pillars of the Chinese art market. The category accounted for nearly 60 percent of China's art market share in 2011.

The prices of Chinese modern painting and calligraphy have kept surging up over the past five years, and reached a climax in the spring sales of 2012.

"Although the market fell in 2011's autumn sales, the price is still on a high level compared to other categories," Guan says.

AMMA's statistics show that by June 21, Chinese modern paintings took up five positions in the spring sales' top 10 artworks, in terms of auction price.

"We are optimistic that the market for Chinese modern paintings will continue to grow, while newer buyers will mature as they expand their collection and gain experience in the market," International Specialist Head of Christie's Chinese Paintings Department Ben Kong says.

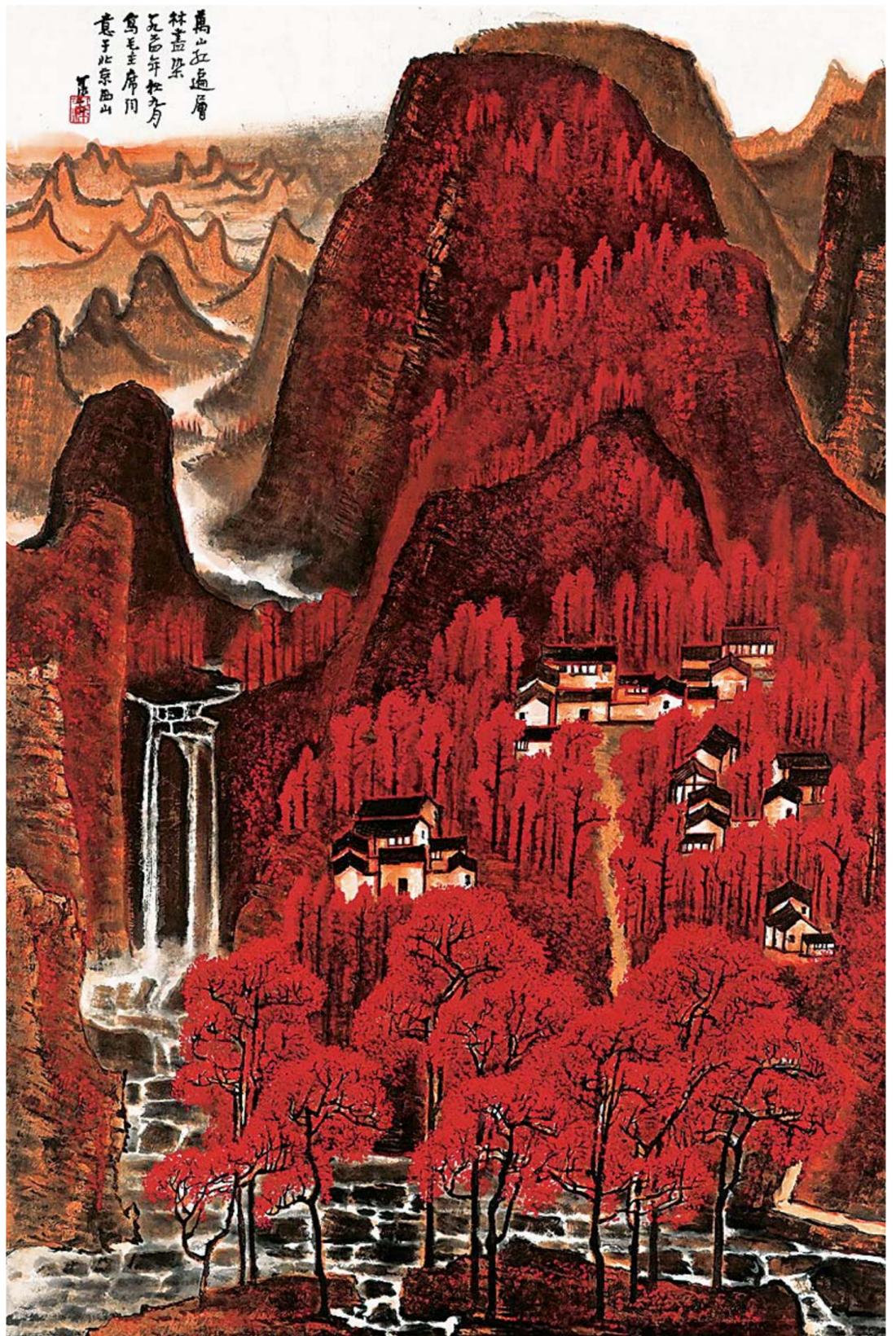
He stresses that it is important to have a normalized and healthy market for Chinese paintings.

Guan says although several modern masters have ascended to the 100 million yuan club, fueled by huge influxes of capital in previous auction seasons, records are difficult to break. The market tends to seek breakthroughs in terms of works by more artists of different genres.

Kong says investment should possibly be secondary when looking at a painting, because "there is always a certain degree of risk in any investment activity."

"The primary focus for collecting is still the love and appreciation that one experiences or gradually learns," he says.

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Wan Shan Hong Bian, by Li Keran.

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# China's largest military art show of all time

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The National Art Museum of China is hosting a military art exhibition — the largest ever — to commemorate the nation's Army Day, which fell on Aug 1.

The exhibition also celebrates the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) 85th birthday.

"It encompasses the best military-themed artworks Chinese artists have created over the past five years," says Li Xiang, the exhibition's chief curator and deputy director of the Artistic Creation Institute of PLA.

The exhibition is co-organized by the Ministry of Culture, the Artistic Creation Institute and the Chinese Artists Association.

Over the past six months, a 60-member jury has conducted three rounds of selections.

A total of 568 works, including ink paintings, oils, prints, watercolors, posters, picture-story illustrations, sculptures, installations, videos, and



Kids enjoy the military art exhibition at the National Art Museum of China, in Beijing.

JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

other types of experimental artworks, have been singled out from more than 12,000 entries for the grand show. The exhibits are housed in nine halls

according to genres.

Viewers will be able to learn about the history of the PLA given their widely diverse styles and subject matters.

"These works offer the general public a glimpse of life and the inner world of military personnel," says Wu Changjiang, vice-chairman of the Chinese Artists Association.

Bai Zhiqiang, a visitor from Liaoning province, says he was most attracted to the ink depictions of young Red Army soldiers in the 1930s, as well as sculptures of Eighth Route Army soldiers and officers fighting Japanese invaders from 1937-45. He also likes the oil portrayals of Chinese military officers in peace-keeping missions and the Chinese Navy's convoy missions at the Gulf of Aden.

"For me, the art exhibition is like a vivid, intensive course about the development of the Chinese army over the past decades," Bai says.

These artworks not only present soldiers and officers on duty but also moments in their daily lives. For example, there are some which depict the romance between PLA officers and office girls.

Yan Junqin, a jury member and art historian with China Military Muse-

um says, the exhibition "reflects a great step forward in China's military art which holds a very long tradition."

"The show is the climax in terms of the range of subjects, genres and styles," Yan says.

Cangyuan rock paintings, found in January 1965 in the Cangyuan Wa autonomous county, Yunnan province, is widely believed to be the oldest military-themed painting in China.

Painted on a rock 10 meters above ground, the recovered sections of the painting illustrate scenes of people on battlegrounds about 4,000 years ago.

The battle motifs resemble those found on the surface of a variety of bronze wares, excavated in different parts of the country over the past century.

But the best-known military-themed ancient artworks are the Terracotta Warriors, discovered in the Mausoleum of the First Emperor of Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) in Xian, the provincial capital of Shaanxi, Yan says.

Before the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties, the favorite genre for military-themed artworks was ink paintings on rice paper or silk scrolls.

Since Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), wood-block prints have been a widely used genre depicting battles, heroes and wartime romances.

For example, some New Year wood-block prints produced in Yangliuqing township of Tianjin in the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) portray peasant-turned-soldiers scenes during the 1900 Boxer Rebellion.

Since early last century, military-themed artworks have evolved and became an integral part of mainstream Chinese art amid the nation's tumultuous history, laden with civil wars and wars against foreign aggression, says Li Yonglin, an art historian with Art Academy of PLA.

"Today, military-themed artworks focus on depicting the rise of China's military power as an essential force in safeguarding national security and world peace," Li adds.