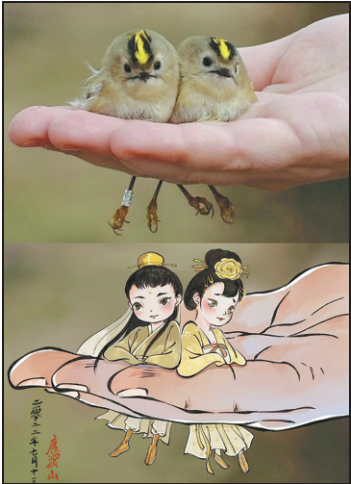


YOUTH

Artist with a bird's eye view

Imagination soars above the ordinary as illustrator paints a whole new world, **Li Yingxue** reports.



When Liu Jiayi looks at a bunch of sparrows, in her eyes, she imagines them as a group of schoolchildren in traditional clothes on a study tour, with each having his or her own attitude and characteristics.

With wonderful imagination and exquisite drawing skills, Liu, also known as illustrator Lumingshan, turns her wildest thoughts into lively paintings.

From girls and teenagers of yesteryear, she anthropomorphizes species of birds into different human characters. The 28-year-old's paintings are so adorable that they have attracted countless fans on the internet, and people online call her "the most beautiful illustrator who draws fairies".

Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin also forwarded her drawings on Facebook, describing them as "cute group portraits in traditional costumes by Chinese artist, based on photos of birds".

Liu recalls that, when she heard the news of her paintings being endorsed by Wang, she was so excited that she jumped out of bed. "I have been engaged in the creation of Chinese-style illustrations for a long time, and in the future, I'll stick to my creation style and hope more people from home and abroad like my works," she says.

Liu's route to becoming a professional illustrator was not an easy one, but it was fueled by her persistence in painting. She gave up being a doctor after eight years in college to work as an illustrator.

Born in Guiyang, capital of Guizhou province, Liu discovered her interest in painting during her childhood. "Painting has accompanied me for my entire childhood, and I learned from various painting books," she recalls.

In 2012, even though she liked drawing, she followed her parents' suggestion, and studied traditional Chinese medicine at Chengdu Sport University in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province. Five years later, she continued to study for her master's degree at the same university, yet she never forgot her dream of painting and devoted all her spare time to it.

The summer vacation before she became a postgraduate changed her life, as she found a part-time job working as an assistant for an illustrator in Chengdu.

"That's the period when I made the most progress. Besides improving my drawing skills, I also learned how to use Photoshop software, how to communicate with people who give me drawing tasks and how to take business orders," Liu recalls.

Liu says she likes classical things and she's a fan of the "retro" aesthetic. During that time, she found her interest in ancient Chinese culture, especially the epic literary work, *Shanhaijing*, or *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.

"The imaginary space for the book is huge, as the wording is beautiful and the stories are fantastic," Liu says, adding that she plans to publish an illustration book of *Shanhaijing* next year.

"I noticed that on the market, most of the illustrations of *Shanhaijing* are drawn by men, so I wanted to bring a feminine expression to the stories of the book," she says. "Some are romantic, and



Above: Liu Jiayi has been engaged in the creation of Chinese-style illustrations for a long time. **Left, from top:** Comparisons of birds with Liu's artworks featuring the characters they inspire.

“A painting must resonate with people and it is a good piece of work if it can help people heal. I want to draw something that makes people feel happy, carefree and comfortable.”

Liu Jiayi, 28, artist

I'll select the beautiful mythical creatures to draw."

After finishing her postgraduate studies in 2020, Liu decided that it was time to become a full-time illustrator, as she can support herself with the money made by painting. She is often commissioned by magazines, book editors and video game companies to draw for them.

During her postgraduate years, she also co-published a book, titled *Zhongguo Shenhua Ditu* ("a map of Chinese myths"), for which she drew 30 illustrations.

Liu likes to read stories, especially short fiction that inspires her paintings, and she finds that ancient Chinese fairy stories inspire her a lot. "Animal photography can also be revelatory to me," she says.

The anthropomorphic bird drawing actually came about by Liu casually killing time while taking care of her father, who was hospitalized last year. She saw a photo of some sparrows and decided to draw them into human figures.

"I think birds are lovely, like elves, and their feathers are like colorful clothes, so I was thinking what if I turn them into lovely girls and their feathers into *hanfu* (a traditional Chinese style of clothing)," she recalls, adding that she is a fan of *hanfu*.

It only took her a couple of hours to finish the painting.

After she posted the drawing online, it soon attracted praise. Liu is collaborating with an animal protection NGO to help them design anthropomorphic figures of different birds and to popularize science at the same time.

In November, Liu held her first exhibition in Guiyang International Fashion Release Center, which will last until Jan 15. The exhibition, titled *Mountains and Seas*, showcases around 120 of her works in three series, *Shanhaijing*, ancient Chinese myths and anthropomorphic birds.

She is proud that the exhibition can be held in her hometown and that the local government set up a special bus service for residents to go and enjoy the exhibition.

On the opening day, Liu's family and friends were there to support her and got a guided tour from Liu. It took over an hour to introduce all of her paintings to the audience.

"My parents were quite happy that day. The exhibition showed them what I've been doing," she says.

One Sina Weibo user, with the handle "Yunduanxiade Shengjiezhihuang" commented about the exhibition: "When I saw Lumingshan's anthropomorphic birds, I realized that they are such pretty, lovely, cute and playful elves! I hope she will become an artist known by everyone!"

Li Liu'an, general manager of China Railway Construction Real Estate Group's Guizhou branch, a sponsor of the exhibition, says: "The introduction of Liu's exhibition not only provides a space for artistic exchange but also adds color to the city."

Liu enjoys communicating with her audience through her paintings, she says. When she plans an illustration, she will design the outline of the subject and their emotions. "As an illustrator, you need to tell the audience the whole story in one single painting," Liu says.

Besides the actual drawing aspect, she also runs her own accounts on social media. "Thanks to the social media era, I can be known by more people, and this made it possible for me to make a living through painting," she adds.

Part of the sense of accomplishment that comes with being an illustrator is the continuous learning, she says. "You can always get in touch with new subjects, and you have to learn all about them," she adds.

When she finds that she needs to strengthen some of her painting skills, such as coloring and drawing the human form, she will find relevant books and courses to improve herself.

"A painting must resonate with people and it is a good piece of work if it can help people heal," she says. "I want to draw something that makes people feel happy, carefree and comfortable."

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From top: Liu's other paintings, including a depiction of a female warrior called "the mysterious lady of the nine heavens"; Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet Li Bai; and the Fengyun-3 meteorological satellite with "the vermilion bird", or "the god of the south" in ancient Chinese myths. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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