

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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The Lichtenstein Take on the Song Dynasty

Jason Chow



Roy Lichtenstein's late-career fascination with ancient Chinese art is the subject of a new show at Gagosian's Hong Kong gallery.

The show, which opens on Saturday, features 30 works by the American painter that, unlike his better-known Pop art, was inspired by paintings from the Song dynasty, which took place from 960 to the late 13th century.

According to Nick Simunovic, Gagosian Hong Kong's managing director, Lichtenstein was a long-time fan of Chinese painting, even mentioning in a 1944 letter to his parents that he bought a book on Chinese art while stationed in Europe. It wasn't until he saw a 1994 exhibition of monochromatic prints by Edgar Degas that alluded to the Chinese style, however, that he attempted his own interpretations on the form.

"It inspired Lichtenstein to use his own visual vocabulary — the Ben-Day dots, the hard colors and the cross-hatching — to create a landscape that is reminiscent of these classical Chinese paintings," said Mr. Simunovic.

The dotted paintings are unmistakably Lichtenstein but depict mountains and mist, characteristic of Chinese painting. He also played on American stereotypes of Asian cultures, with crooked bonsai trees and a pointed coolie hat on some of the canvases.

The Estate of Roy Lichtenstein, which owns the pieces, wanted to rekindle interest in the artist's Chinese-inspired works. Some of them haven't shown publicly since 1999, when they appeared in a traveling exhibition that toured Boston, Singapore, Hong Kong and Washington, D.C. Others are being shown for the first time.

Only a portion of the show is for sale, and some of those pieces sold before the opening, Mr. Simunovic said. He declined to specify which ones, or to share prices for the works.

The Gagosian exhibition also includes collages and sketches that served as blueprints and preliminary designs for the larger canvases in the series. Mr. Simunovic said these pieces were included so that viewers can see Lichtenstein's artistic process.

"There's no other Western artist who was so studious of ancient Chinese painting," said Mr. Simunovic. "This isn't like the Chinoiserie of the 19th century. This is a sensitive and reverential take on Song dynasty works."

The exhibition comes at a time when Lichtenstein's works are hot items on the auction market. Earlier in the week, his Pop-art painting, "I Can See the Whole Room ... and There's Nobody in it," sold for \$43.2 million at a Christie's sale in New York.