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NEW INK PAINTING *Laurence Tam*

An art museum that Hong Kong deserves

Hong Kong should have a new museum to display visual culture, and it should be called "M+" (Museum Plus): that recommendation was made to the government in November by an advisory group.

It called for separate sections to showcase design, moving image, popular culture and visual arts – including ink art. That specific mention of ink art showed that the group was well aware of the cultural importance of ink art in Hong Kong.

But I would go even further: I support the idea of a Hong Kong museum dedicated to ink art alone. That would transform the image of this city's artistic heritage. It would no longer be seen as a mere offshoot of the South China Lingnan painting school, but as a driving force among 20th-century modern Chinese painting movements.

Hong Kong's indigenous New Ink painting movement does indeed hold an impor-

tant place in the development of modern Chinese painting.

China underwent two major reform movements in the past century that tried to revive the spirit of its art. The first came soon after the fall of the Qing dynasty, and developed from the idea of "borrowing from the west to revitalise the east".

But that approach created a sense that modern Chinese art was riding on the coat-tails of western art trends. Further, it failed to review or correct the traditional approach to training painters – through copying and imitation – so those practices continued to be tolerated.

The second reform movement took place in Hong Kong in the 1960s, leading to the emergence of the New Ink movement in painting. It called artists to follow the true spirit of Chinese painting tradition, which emphasised following one's own mind to develop individual styles.

Hong Kong's New Ink painters showed

the world a totally new face of Chinese painting. Their movement promoted the reform of art education by encouraging the concept of individual creativity, and constituted the most significant reform effort in Chinese art history.

In contrast to the first, "borrow from the west" reform, the New Ink movement aroused interest in and respect for the aesthetic theories of Chinese painting tradition, promoting a new creative consciousness.

It led to the emergence of individual, creative thinking for not just a few, but all Chinese artists. Its influence was felt on the mainland and in Hong Kong through the second half of the past century, and continues today.

The importance of the New Ink movement warrants a museum in its own right. Only that – rather than a mere gallery in the M+ complex – can acknowledge the historical significance of Hong

Kong's contributions to the development of Chinese art. That is the only way to give Hong Kong's cultural role its due.

A gallery for Hong Kong ink art within the M+ complex would constitute an exhibition activity; whereas the opening of a Modern Ink Museum would make a definitive statement and heighten Hong Kong's cultural image on the international stage.

There is a big difference between the two. If we want to achieve both goals, one possibility is to establish a Modern Ink Museum that is independent from M+. If M+ wants to include ink art in its exhibitions, the necessary art works could be borrowed from the Modern Ink Museum.

Lending art works between museums for exhibitions is a common practice.

There are museums of modern art in many major cities around the world, but few have the right historical and artistic

environment to build a modern ink museum.

Should such a museum be built in Hong Kong, it would attract immediate attention from our Asian neighbours, such as Japan and Korea, who have long histories of ink art.

It would be the centre for exchange exhibitions on ink art from all over the world.

Hong Kong would quickly become the focus of international ink art movements. But that will happen only if the authorities concerned take early action to realise the establishment of this special museum symbolising Hongkongers' contribution to the mainstream of Chinese culture.

Laurence Tam is former chief curator of the Hong Kong Museum of Art. Copyright: The Hong Kong Economic Journal Monthly