

# The Story of the Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei Collection Through Eight Iconic Masterpieces

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By Marian Ang | Sep 20, 2023

A closer look at eight highlights from the legendary Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei Collection coming to Sotheby's Hong Kong this autumn.

Figurative masterworks by David Hockney and Alex Katz rub shoulders with a rare Georgette Chen still life, Wu Dayu's groundbreaking abstractions and a sculpture by Yayoi Kusama. Together, the works draw on cultures of the East and West and traditions of the past and present with eclectic aplomb. "We hope to push beyond the boundaries of traditional art...to provide the public with a global art education while also strengthening local cultural roots", says Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei of the encyclopedic art collection they have amassed over three decades. What unites the collection is an unmistakable sense of the iconoclastic – each work's artist is a giant of their time who has revolutionised their medium and method of choice, paving the way for innovative and mesmerising dialogues between eras, genres and subjects. We take a closer look at eight such masterpieces from the Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei Collection.



David Hockney, *a picture of a lion* | estimate: 42,000,000 – 55,000,000 HKD

One of the most influential British artists of the 20th century, David Hockney's practice transformed the rules of picture-making over six decades. *A Picture of a Lion* (2017) evinces the artist's fantastical and theatrical approach to painting, with schematic experiments and improvisations within the "picture of a lion" propped up between a row of pink curtains and forest backdrop, two blackbirds pecking around downstage, and a tuxedo-clad dancer who shimmies his way towards a distant sunlit horizon stage left. Pushing the boundaries of space and perspective, the hexagonal canvas nods to Hockney's experience designing theatrical sets for operas in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the time he spent immersed in the iconic landscapes of the Hollywood Hills, the Grand Canyon and East Yorkshire. Reality and fantasy collide and unfurl like the dynamic experience of viewing a classical Chinese scroll, a revelatory experience that Hockney sought to emulate in order to envelop and draw his viewers deeper into his vivid inner world.

"I'd been pushing the notion of the observer's head swivelling about in a world which was moving in time, but I'd really only just begun to try and deal with how to portray movement of the observer's whole body across space. And that's precisely what the Chinese landscape artists had mastered."

David Hockney



alex katz, *on time* | estimate: 12,000,000 - 18,000,000 hkd

*On Time* (2001) is an icon of American artist Alex Katz's seven-decade career. Painted the year following the birth of his grandchildren, Katz captures his family – amongst them his muse and beloved wife Ada, silver-haired and smiling wryly, and his son Vincent bathed in the eternal golden light of the late afternoon sun – with confident, sparing brushstrokes. He adds a likeness of himself at the centre of the monumental scene, a balding middle-aged man gazing wistfully into the distance, a loving witness to the passage of time. Executed at a monumental scale, Katz's unique aesthetic and bold simplicity made him a hugely influential forefather of the Pop Art movement and earned him several generations of distinguished artistic admirers – from Willem de Kooning and Philip Guston, to Peter Doig and Richard Prince. Cool and contemplative, Katz's idiosyncratic vision redefined the genre of contemporary portraiture.



Georgette Chen, *Orchid (Vanda)* | estimate:  
6,000,000 -8,000,000 hkd

The enchanting still life paintings of the visionary 20th century Singaporean artist Georgette Chen tell of the extraordinary life she led, from the bright lights of Paris as a rising star of the École de Paris set to the paradisiacal delights of Southeast Asia, where she gained renown as a pioneer of the Nanyang school. Likening herself to a “real tropical fruit” thriving in a “multiracial paradise of perpetual sunshine” after the vicissitudes of the wartime years and leaving her second husband to begin a new life in then-Malaya, *Orchid (Vanda)* (c. 1963) celebrates the beauty and bounty of Chen’s adopted homeland. The elegant and hardy flower is painted with joyful, expressionistic flair in electric shades of magenta and grass green. Potted in a simple wooden basket suspended by slender blue wires, Chen makes a playful allusion to her nickname “Basket Chen,” gained from an innate lifelong appreciation of the sublime beauty of the quotidian. Chen’s works are incredibly rare and only a handful of her oil paintings remain in private hands.



Yayoi Kusama, *Flowers that speak all about my heart given to the sky* | estimate:  
22,000,000 - 28,000,000 hkd

Yayoi Kusama’s towering bronze sculpture *Flowers that speak all about my heart given to the sky* (2018) is a typically unique reimagining of the still life genre from the famed Japanese artist. First presented at London’s Victoria Miro in 2018, this work evolved from a sculptural series entitled *Flowers That Bloom at Midnight* that was presented at Australia’s Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (2011) and then by the Louvre at the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris (2012). Bursting full of sentient and surreal life, Kusama’s animated day-glo flower arrests the viewer with its leafy limbs, bowed stem and blossoming

polka-dotted head. Her signature “infinity net” obliterates the flower’s capitulum. Whimsical yet disorienting, flowers are key to Kusama’s distinctive practice, nodding to her formative years spent on her family’s seedling nursery in Matsumoto, as well as her earliest hallucinatory experiences and constantly fluctuating feelings of reality and unreality.



nicholas party, *Still Life* | estimate: 20,000,000 - 30,000,000 hkd

Among the largest compositions by the artist to come to auction, Nicolas Party’s *Still Life* (2015) subverts the genre with unsettling glee: the jewel-coloured, uncannily flaccid fruit, articulated by their stems, flop around on a plain white tabletop. Situated somewhere between fact and fiction, *Still Life* epitomises Party’s assertion, “I don’t have much interest in what could be labelled as ‘reality’. I’m more interested in the signs, symbols, and codes we’ve created for reality.” Party pays homage to artistic modes of the past and future, rendering the futuristic and seemingly digitally-sculpted forms of *Still Life* with virtuoso use of his trademark pastels, a medium and method that ironically found most popularity around the turn of the 18th century and which requires the artist’s dexterous and intimate application with his fingertips. The allegorical wit of the 16th and 17th century *vanitas* genre finds itself situated unmistakably in our post-internet experience.

‘I guess the word “still life” (or ‘nature morte’) is a good example of what art tries to achieve: merging two opposite notions into one object. Life is not still and nature is not dead, but maybe a painting can be.’

Nicolas Party



mark bradford, *L.A* | estimate: 30,000,000 - 50,000,000 hkd

Mark Bradford's *L.A* (2019) presents a fascinating aesthetic investigation into the contemporary urban experience. Bradford's kaleidoscopic vision simulates the cyclical decay and regenerative vibrancy of Los Angeles, the artist's birthplace, home and muse. The lyrics to the 1965 Motown hit "Dancing in the Street" by Martha and the Vandellas – which was released at the height of the American civil rights movement – are threaded between the innumerable layers of collage and startling spatters of blue, orange and red paint. Part of a series of three monumental canvases unveiled at the artist's blockbuster solo exhibition at Long Museum West Bund in 2019, Bradford merges complex accumulations of personal and social history in *L.A*, pasting coloured endpapers from his mother's hair salon and scavenged texts into self-reflexive maps of Los Angeles' congested streets and urban sociology.



Kazuo Shiraga, *Kaien* | estimate: hkd18,000,000 - 25,000,000 hkd

The boundless, exhilarating energy of Kazuo Shiraga's *Kaien* (1999) recalls the fathomless depths of the ocean after which it is named in Japanese. Created during Shiraga's acclaimed mature post-Gutai years, it marked an era during which the artist's iconic foot-painting technique and powerful painterly expression had reached a visceral perfection, with frenzied yet elegant lyrical strokes of electrifying deep blue and inky black recalling classical Japanese calligraphy. Foaming touches of white at the periphery contrast with interjections of red and violet heavily reminiscent of Shiraga's earliest red hues. *Kaien* was exhibited at some of Shiraga's most acclaimed exhibitions at the turn of the millennium, including the Hyogo Prefecture Museum of Modern Art in Kobe, Annely Juda Fine Art in London and Tokyo Gallery.



wu dayu, *Untitled-19* | estimate: 11,000,000 -  
18,000,000 hkd

Considered the pioneer of Chinese abstract oil painting, *Untitled-19* (c.1980) embodies the pinnacle of Wu Dayu's artistic achievements and his theory of *Shixiang* (Dynamic Expressionism). Exposed to Fauvism and Cubism as a young student in Paris, Wu returned to China where at the Hangzhou National Art Academy he became the influential teacher of the three legendary masters of Chinese modernism – Zao Wou-Ki, Chu Teh-Chun and Wu Guanzhong. Wu perceived a lyrical abstract vitality rooted in the natural universe, painting blossoming flowers in the vibrant saturated hues of colourful Beijing opera masks. Cerulean blues and turquoise greens twinkle in fields of buttercup yellow and ochre. Dramatic chiaroscuro and distinctly sculptural interplays of light and dark nod to Wu's modernist teachers in 1920s Paris, the founder of Cubism, Georges Braque, and the sculptor Antoine Bourdelle.

## About the Author

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