

Teaching

Sun Xun

ARTIST

SUN Xun

(sun shun)

孙逊



Sun Xun

BORN

1980, Fuxin, China

LIVES & WORKS

Beijing

THEMES

History
Narrative
Symbols

“We are used to creating a boundary between the present and the past. But actually, history has no such boundary.”¹

ART MEDIUMS

Drawing and Painting
Film and Video
Installation
Work on Paper

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

Sun Xun was born in 1980 in Fuxin, which is located in Liaoning, a remote agricultural province in northeast China between Mongolia and North Korea. Fuxin was once known for its booming coal industry, but decades of overmining led to the eventual bankruptcy and closure of many mines. Sun’s childhood experiences in his hometown led to an awareness of how time affects the rise and fall of powerful forces, a lesson that remains a strong influence on his artwork.

When Sun turned sixteen, he moved to Hangzhou to study at the China Academy of Art. Compared to progressive Hangzhou, Fuxin seemed stuck in the past, and Sun felt disoriented by how two places in the same country could feel worlds, or even centuries, apart. Sun has described traveling to the big city as feeling like being “being transported from Pyongyang, in North Korea, to New York in a single day.” Film quickly became Sun’s preferred medium for exploring questions about how time and historical narrative can shape a place’s identity. Because he was too poor to buy a camera as a student, he started creating hand-drawn animations, using hundreds of ink drawings and woodblock prints to create his films. When Sun graduated from art school in 2006, he opened Pi Animation Studio and has since produced many films that combine traditional materials with new techniques.

Mythological Time (2016) is a large-scale, site-specific installation created for the Guggenheim

Museum. The work includes an animated film that is projected onto mural-sized drawings, which cover the walls from ceiling to floor. The drawings depict characters from the film, bringing the animation’s narrative into the space of the viewer. The film uses Fuxin and its coal mines as a starting point, and the image of a lump of coal appears throughout: at first, brought to life and given flight with a single feathered wing, then later on as a falling meteor, followed by a tail of fire. The work collapses past and the present, real and the imagined, as recent historical events are woven together with images of mythical creatures moving through a prehistoric landscape. Ultimately, the true significance of coal and the other symbols is left up to interpretation.

¹ Sun Xun, in Richard Vine, *Sun Xun: History as Myth*, exh. cat. (New York: The Drawing Center, 2009), p. 9. Available online: https://issuu.com/drawingcenter/docs/drawingpapers85_xun/71.



Sun Xun, *Mythological Time*, 2016. Color HD animated video projection, with sound, 12 min., 44 sec, and powdered pigments in gum arabic and casein paint on mulberry bark paper, two sheets: 4.7 × 15.6 m and 2.8 × 17.8 m. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection 2016.38.1-2. Installation view, *Tales of Our Time*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, November 4, 2016–March 10, 2017

View and Discuss

→ Go to [youtube.com/watch?v=1ovLTZIZASM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ovLTZIZASM) to watch a thirty-second time-lapse video of the site-specific installation *Mythological Time* (2016). For this site-specific installation, Sun created a twelve-minute stop-motion animation and drawings on large sheets of tree bark paper.

→ Sun often includes mythical characters in his artwork.

→ In one frame, eight figurines appear in an orderly formation that recalls the nine “crouching beasts,” statues of mythical creatures seen on the roof gables of Chinese imperial buildings. Sun depicted these creatures perched on top of the outstretched arm of Chairman Mao Zedong.

→ Go to [guggenheim.org/audio/track/mythological-time-by-sun-xun](https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/mythological-time-by-sun-xun) to listen to an audio clip about *Mythological Time*.

What do you notice about the installation?
How do the drawings relate to the film?

What characters do you see in the video?
What is a myth? Define myth as a folk tale or legend that often explains historical events with supernatural, spiritual, or magical means.
Did you see any characters that looked mythical or imaginary?



TOP: Imperial roof decoration in the Forbidden City, Beijing;
BOTTOM: Sun Xun, *Mythological Time*, 2016 (detail)

Why do you think Sun might have combined these two images?

In the audio clip, exhibition cocurator Xiaoyu Weng says that Sun engages with “all different historical periods” in the artwork. Why might Sun mix references to the past, present, and future?

Classroom Activities

Draw through Observation

Watch a video about Sun's art practice at guggenheim.org/video/sun-xun-theses-of-our-time. In the video, Sun says, "Sketching in the field is different from using photos or other mediums. Because painting embodies the warmth of one's emotions."



Sun Xun sketching the landscape, Beijing

Draw or paint a place from a photograph. Then visit that same location and draw or paint from observation. How do your two artworks compare? Do you agree with Sun's opinion in the quote? Why or why not?

Invent a Mythical Creature

In *Mythological Time*, Sun reinterprets mythical Chinese creatures, including a dragon, which commonly symbolized the emperor in traditional Chinese paintings.

What other mythical creatures do you know of from Western or Eastern mythology? Research one or more and create a creature inspired by what students learn.

Classroom Activities

Use Materials as Symbols

Watch this video created by the Metropolitan Museum of Art to learn more about Sun's relief-carving process: [metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/asian/sun-xun-printmaking-demonstration-astor-court](https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/asian/sun-xun-printmaking-demonstration-astor-court). To create unique three-dimensional effects in his animations, Sun first draws his image onto printing blocks and then carves it out.

Experiment with block printing by drawing an image onto a soft printing block, such as balsa foam or linoleum. Use a tool to remove or carve away all the negative space so your drawing becomes a raised relief that you can use to create a print.

Magic Realism

The 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez was a source of inspiration for *Mythological Time*. Both the book and the artwork follow the tropes of magic realism.

What is magic realism? Define it as a genre that combines a realistic representation of the world with fantastical elements. Using a magic realist style, write or draw a story about a place.

Resources

Videos

- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. “Artist Profile: Sun Xun.” November 3, 2016. <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/sun-xun-tales-of-our-time>.
- *Brilliant Ideas*. Episode 46, “Sun Xun: One of China’s Most Ambitious Young Artists.” January 31, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/260169077>.
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. “Time-Lapse of Sun Xun’s *Mythological Time*.” February 13, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ovLTZIZASM>.

Articles

- Davis, Anna. “Sun Xun’s Parallel Worlds.” Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, June 21, 2018. <https://www.mca.com.au/stories-and-ideas/sun-xuns-parallel-worlds/>.
- Khong, En Liang. “Animator Sun Xun’s Alternative Visions of New China.” *Financial Times*, February 13, 2015. <https://www.ft.com/content/79380f78-b12a-11e4-831b-00144feab7de>.
- Lau, Joyce, “A Chinese Artist Consumed by the Idea of Inevitable Change.” *New York Times*, December 1, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/01/arts/sun-xun-a-chinese-artist-consumed-by-the-idea-of-inevitable-change.html>.
- Pollack, Barbara. “Inspiration Far from Home.” *New York Times*, November 27, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/01/arts/design/a-chinese-artist-exploring-new-york.html>.

Books

- Weng, Xiaoyu and Hou Hanru, eds. *Tales of Our Time*. Exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2016.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from his given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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