

Face lift for heads of state



PHOTOS BY JU CHUANJIANG / CHINA DAILY
Liu Xiao has just finished a portrait of US president Barack Obama and wants to present the carved porcelain to him when he visits China again.

A Shandong porcelain carver, who has made portraits of every US president, says he wants to boost friendship between China and the US. **Ju Chuanjiang and Dai Yan report**

An elderly man sitting by a table in dim light is hammering a chisel on a black porcelain plate. A picture of US president Barack Obama slowly begins to take shape.

Liu Xiao, 65, of Jinan, Shandong province, says he wants to present this portrait to the American leader when he visits China again.

In three years Liu has carved the portraits of all 44 American presidents.

"I want to boost friendship between the Chinese and Americans and promote this traditional porcelain art," he says.

He takes meticulous care to do his presidential portraits: gathering information about each president and finding representative photos and choosing the best porcelain plates, before starting the job.

Liu begins with the eyes, which, he says, reflects a

person's soul. Carving the expressions and attire call for particular care, as Liu has just a few centimeters of space to work with.

"Carving porcelain is like doing embroidery. It requires great patience and perseverance. The slightest mistake could ruin the entire work," he says.

Carved porcelain is a Chinese folk art that dates back to the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC), but saw its heyday during the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907).

Liu's carved portraits include those of Chinese leaders and world celebrities such as Albert Einstein. In 2005, when China celebrated the centennial of its film industry, Liu came up with the portraits of 24 film stars.

"I spent more than three months on former chairman Mao Zedong's portrait. I didn't allow myself a single mistake," Liu says, pointing at his favorite piece that

shows Mao at the country's founding ceremony in 1949.

Liu developed an early interest in painting and photography, but never got a chance at college. After completing his army service, he joined a factory making heavy machines. Thanks to his love of art, he was appointed art teacher in the factory's school.

In the early 1990s, Liu chanced upon some carved porcelain at an art market in Jinan and was fascinated.

He began carving on bottles, glass and bricks, to save money. One winter, when the flowers had all withered, Liu picked up the ceramic plates kept under the pots to carve on them.

He experimented with a variety of drawing techniques and plates of different colors. He found that black and dark blue plates were ideal for creating three-dimensional and lifelike images.

"I never use ink or color.

The thickness of the glaze is enough to give the portrait layers. This makes my works different from those by others," Liu says.

"He is crazy about carving porcelain," says his wife Jiang Xiaodong.

To find good plates, the couple regularly visits Zibo, a Shandong city famous for its porcelain.

Other people carve porcelain to sell, but Liu never sells his works, no matter how much he is offered. Jiang says they bought their refrigerator in 2000 and a color TV only in 2006. Their rented apartment is simply furnished with two simple beds and some wooden benches.

But Jiang understands her husband's passion for his craft. While taking care of their grandchildren, she also helps him manage a blog, which has attracted many young people eager to learn this art form.



Liu Xiao has carved the portraits of all American presidents to boost Sino-US friendship and promote his traditional porcelain art.

A winner of many awards, Liu was named a "master of folk arts" in Shandong in 2007.

Asked what he wants to do with his creations, he says: "I wish to donate them for charity."

Stories carved in stone

A collector of Han Dynasty bricks engraved with ancient scenes reconstructs a picture of the past. **Ju Chuanjiang and Wang Qian report**

In the early 1980s, a PLA officer was helping lay a road in Henan province when he noticed beautiful carvings on bricks that the farmers were smashing up and mixing with pebbles to pave it.

Fascinated by the patterns, he urged the farmers to spare them and exchanged two truckloads of pebbles for 18 intact bricks. Later, he found several more in the villagers' pigsties, kitchens and courtyards.

That was the start of Zhang Xinkuan's collection of more than 5,000 bricks dating back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), offering a rare peek into life in China more than 2,000 years ago.

Zhang's bricks are now housed in a private museum at the foot of the Laoshan Mountain in Qingdao, Shandong province.



Zhang Xinkuan and his wife Yang Min study the patterns carved on a Han Dynasty brick.

Over the past 30 years, Zhang, 60, has spent his entire savings collecting these relics, investing 1 million yuan (\$146,500) to build the museum in 2007.

According to Gu Sen, an expert on Han Dynasty paintings with the Chinese Academy of Arts, these carved bricks are found mainly in Henan, Shandong, Shanxi, Jiangsu and Sichuan provinces. They once decorated imperial palaces, ancestral halls and tombs, and are like an encyclopedia of ancient Chinese society. The

images they depict range from mythical dragons and phoenixes, to animals and plants and scenes of everyday life.

Zhang had no idea of the bricks' value until an artist friend, Hao Benxing, sent him a gift — rubbings of Han Dynasty carved bricks. Hao told him that when former president Jiang Zemin visited Russia, he took a set of such rubbings as a gift.

Zhang then began devoting all of his spare time and money to collecting these bricks.

Standing in front of his muse-

um, which features more than 10 exhibition rooms, Zhang proudly says: "It has only a third of my collection. Displaying all 5,000 bricks would require at least 20,000 sq m."

His wife, Yang Min, who quit a well-paying job in a joint venture to be the museum's curator, says: "He will hesitate to pay 200 yuan for a coat, but when it comes to these bricks, he is prepared to borrow, if necessary."

She adds that not all the patterns on these bricks depict Han Dynasty life. Many are

rather mysterious.

One brick, for example, shows hunters in clothes that resemble those worn by ancient Persians. Another depicts girls dressed in long flared skirts, typical of 18th-century Europe.

The couple's passion for preserving these relics has drawn support from many, including other Han Dynasty brick collectors.

Chen Zengsheng, vice-chairman of the Weihai Artists Association, sent Zhang a letter and five paintings after visiting his museum. "You are doing something great. Please sell these paintings to ease some of the financial pressure on you," Chen writes.

Last November, the first Han Dynasty Brick Cultural Festival was held in Qingdao. More than 60 experts studied Zhang's collection and put their value at more than 800 million yuan.

"What I am preserving is Chinese culture," Zhang says.

"Money will come and go, but culture can be handed down from one generation to the next."

He will never sell any of his bricks, he says.

Museum admission is free for primary and middle school students.



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A carved brick depicts details of military life in the Han Dynasty.



Han Dynasty brick carvings feature a cart carrying passengers (above) and a dragon (below).