

Bloomsbury Auctions, London, England

The Mao Market

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Bloomsbury

"You're opening yourself to a bigger story than you probably planned for," Justin G. Schiller wrote me in an e-mail before my planned visit in August 2012 to Kingston, New York, where he lives with his longtime partner, Dennis M.V. David. I went there to see what remained of the couple's collection of Red Chinese propaganda, which was jammed into a storefront gallery not far from their house. The rest, including their choicest pieces, had been consigned to an October 4 sale at Bloomsbury Auctions in London. The 287 lots consisted of paintings, prints, posters, textiles, ceramics, books, artifacts, and plain old kitsch from before, during, and after the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution. There were some Mao images created by both Western and contemporary Chinese artists. Yes, Andy Warhol was one of them.

An auctioneer called the bids in a Bloomsbury salesroom. There was also a live feed to the Internet, where I watched the results unfold. They were mixed, with many of the most aggressively estimated pieces failing to sell, while some of the kitsch did inexplicably well. But the story is bigger than the prices realized, just as Schiller said it was.

This is a new market and new collecting field. It will be interesting to watch where it goes. Schiller has been a market maker in the past—for rare children's literature—and he has been trying to do the same thing for 20th-century Chinese propaganda for the last few years. It almost goes without saying, however, that *Alice in Wonderland* is one thing; *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong* is quite another. In fact, the top lot of this sale, going at \$21,994 (including buyer's premium), was not a piece of Chinese propaganda at all but one of the artworks from the West—a 1968 collotype of Mao's face by Gerhard Richter (German, b. 1932).

Collectors know what to do with a Richter, whose works are bringing huge prices on the art market today. (On October 12, Sotheby's sold one of his abstract oils in London for \$34.19 million. It is the new auction record for a work by a living artist.) They may not be so sure where or in what spirit to hang, say, an unsigned Chinese oil on canvas from about the same year, *Mao with Revolutionary Army in Jinggangshan*. Painted to com-

memorate a historical event, Mao's 1927 establishment of an organization of local bandits whose seed would grow into the People's Liberation Army, it was passed (est. £40,000/60,000).

In a post-auction deal, a 1974 oil on canvas by another Western artist, Erró (Icelandic, b. 1932), sold for \$69,902. It is titled *Mao Entering New York Harbor* and shows exactly that—Mao in a bathrobe, standing on the deck of an open boat. He is flanked by smiling, young followers, some in military uniforms, others in swimsuits. The image is an ironic nod to Mao's famous swims in the Yangtze River. It was inspired by actual poster designs from the Cultural Revolution. The artist, however, took a few liberties. For example, along with the Empire State Building, the Yangtze's Wuhan Bridge is in the background.

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"There is nothing you cannot do if you are serious about it," Mao said after one of these swims, which were actually more like floats. The power of the river's current was so strong, he simply lay on his back and let himself be carried along, rarely moving his chubby legs or arms. But that reality didn't stop the Xinhua News Agency from reporting: "On July 16, 1966, the Great Leader of the Chinese people...with a favoring wind rippling the waves took a swim in the Yangzi River. In an hour and five minutes he swam about fifteen kilometers...The people said: 'Our Beloved Leader Chairman Mao Zedong is so healthy. This is the greatest happiness for the revolutionary peoples of the whole world.'"

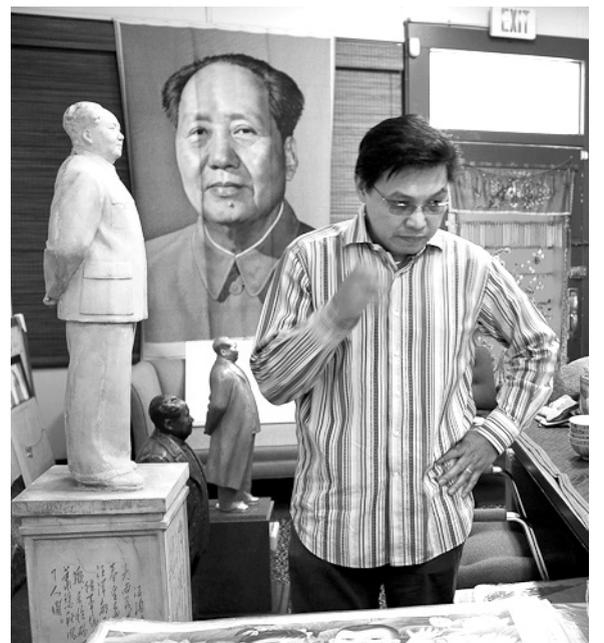
Never mind that Mao, a lifelong smoker, was 72 years old and not in good health at all.

Mao Zedong (1893-1976), a pivotal figure in the history of the modern world, helped found the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 and the People's Republic of China in 1949. He was party chairman until his death. Along the way, he was revolutionary hero, leader, icon, and idol, as well as, in the words of one historian, "one of the most evil men ever to besmirch the pages of the story of mankind."

Shelves of books have been written about him. A new one, *Mao: The Real Story* by Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine, published in 2012, is dense at 755



All the tea in China requires many teapots. They are stocked with Schiller and David in their Kingston, New York, gallery. Schinto photo.



Dennis M.V. David in the gallery. The Mao tapestry on the back wall is identical to the one that he and Schiller sold via sothebys.amazon.com for \$1500 in 2000. Photo courtesy Bryce Watanasoponwong.

Mao, Mao, Mao, and more Mao in the Kingston gallery.



Schinto photos.



Justin G. Schiller with a painting by contemporary Chinese artist Xiao Se (b. 1970). Another one by Xiao, *Mao with Young Pioneer*, was included in the Bloomsbury sale. It didn't find a buyer. Photo courtesy Bryce Watanasoponwong.



This print by Jim Dine (b. 1935) of Mao and Lyndon B. Johnson in drag, a photo-etching with color stencil on Saunders mold-made paper, signed and dated 1967, approximately 34" x 48", sold for \$6398.

pages, but I recommend it to those like me with only basic knowledge of Mao, the forces of history that produced him, and the modern China he created.

Schiller's interest in Red Chinese propaganda sprang from an attraction to propaganda in general, he said. It's interesting to note that propaganda and children's literature both depend on a strong graphic component and on make-believe world views. So maybe Schiller's prediction for both Alice and Mao isn't so random. At any rate, Schiller dates his Mao mania to the early 1990's, when he saw "terrific" examples, such as ceramics and oil paintings, at the private dining club and restaurant China Club in Hong Kong. These were from the collection of China Club founder Sir David Tang.

At the time, Schiller and David were already regularly traveling to Asia in search of art from the Han and Tang Dynasties, i.e., 206 B.C.E. - A.D. 220 and A.D. 618-907, respectively. Then, in Hong Kong in 1996, they paid \$1300 for their first 20th-century piece, a woolen tapestry wall-banner depicting Mao. They returned to Hong Kong the following year and began to buy a little more. Then in 1998 came their first trip to Beijing, where, said Schiller, "We were overwhelmed by the amount of Mao material we saw there."

Schiller established his eponymous rare children's book business (www.childlit.com) in the 1960's in Manhattan, where it remains today. In 1988 at the same Park Avenue address, he and David founded Battledore, Ltd., through which they began to promote the Chinese material. "We were one of the first dealers in the United States to handle Cultural Revolution artifacts," Schiller said.

The reaction wasn't uniformly positive. "At the beginning, we were getting incredible comments," Schiller recalled. "At the [New York Antiquarian] Book Fair, for example, people who didn't understand that dealing in Mao material didn't mean approval of him would say, 'What other murderers do you represent?'"

At that point, they were still buying modestly and mostly from one middle-aged woman, whose family has been in the antiques business in China for three generations. The shop is in Liulichang district, Beijing's antiques row. "The trouble was, it was so crowded, you could barely see what she had," said Schiller. "She would have on the floor a pile of four thousand original posters, but there was no place to sit and look at them. You had to go into her shop sideways. Hanging down from the ceilings were Shanghai dresses from the 1920's and '30's—very beautiful, embroidered silk gowns, like you see in the old photographs. The other dealers disliked her because she was so good."

For the next couple of years, Schiller continued to buy from her at her shop and at her home, where she kept the more expensive material. Meanwhile, he had begun to realize that as much as 85% of what the other dealers were selling were fakes—reproductions. "Certainly she had a few fakes too," he said of his favorite dealer. "The problem is, eventually originals run out, and dealers, being 'resourceful,' would put certain editions back into production. There are now hundreds of Chinese posters out there that are 'wrong.'" So he learned to recognize the "right" material and continued to buy.

In 1999, when after much fanfare Amazon and Sotheby's launched their short-lived joint Internet venture, sothebys.amazon.com, they asked Schiller for items to sell on it. "They asked me for three items and said they would choose one," Schiller recalled. "They chose that first Mao tapestry we had bought and started it at five hundred dollars. I thought, 'Well, there goes that.'" Instead of losing money, however, Schiller made a little. It sold for \$1500. The buyer? An American businessman working in Hong Kong. So it returned to where Schiller had bought it.

Readers may remember that after sothebys.amazon.com, there was sothebys.com, hosted by eBay, for a few years. It called itself "the world's largest selection

of professionally authenticated and guaranteed art and antiques online." Schiller and David consigned more of their Cultural Revolution material to it. The response wasn't overwhelming, but Schiller read it as a comment on the post-9/11 economy more than on anything else.

China felt the effects of 9/11, just like the rest of the world. "Right after nine-eleven, everything stopped on antiques street in China," Schiller said. "And although the Chinese people understood that three thousand people had died in New York, with all due respect, in China you would lose three thousand people in a flood. The casualties in one of their disasters would be so immense, they didn't understand. They didn't understand why there were no more visitors. Americans didn't come—OK. What they really didn't understand was why there were no more Europeans either."

"After three months, mid-December, when there was still nobody, our favorite dealer, I found out later, went to her fortune teller," Schiller continued. "She asked, 'How can I bring back my luck?' That's how she perceived it. And the fortune teller said, 'If you want to be lucky next year, you must sell everything in your shop this year.' Now the woman had three warehouses, so it wasn't a big problem for her. She could always restock from the warehouses." But to whom would she sell the shop?

"Well, I arrived three days later," said Schiller. "I was one of the first people to return to that antiques market. She started saying, through my translator, 'Tell Justin he has to buy everything.' I just laughed. Second time, I smiled a little. Third, fourth time, it was getting a little annoying. Also, remember, you couldn't really see anything, since there were things behind things behind things."

Inevitably, Schiller said, "How much?" Hagglng ensued, and they agreed upon a price. "Whereupon, she picked up her pocketbook, threw a couple of medicine bottles into it, handed me two keys, and left, skipping down the corridor, singing, 'I sold my shop! I sold my shop!' Other dealers came to see who had bought it and saw me standing there and asked if I wanted to buy their shops too."

It took eight professional packers four days to empty the shop. "She would come by every day to see what was coming out next," said Schiller. "She hadn't seen some of it in who knows how long? Sometimes she would say, 'That belongs to my neighbor.' I would say, 'But you sold it to me. Give your neighbor fifty dollars, her share of the sale.' We ended up with things like a pair of brand-new red bedroom slippers in a box."

Three container loads were shipped to the United States. And did the woman's luck return? "The following year," said Schiller, "I went back and bought one and a half warehouses from her."

Schiller consigned 2400 of the posters in 553 lots to an auction at Bloomsbury in London on September 21, 2006. "Protestors were outside," he said. Hammer prices ranged from \$6783 for a group lot to \$9.50 for a single. "We also had several auctions here in Kingston. We're still currently a bit overwhelmed."

That was Schiller's prelude to my visit to the gallery, where I was confronted with stacks and piles and shelves full of Red Chinese high art, low art, and kitsch of all kinds. It reminded me of Christmas fairs I attended as a Catholic elementary school student in the late 1950's. Here, instead of religious items, there were images of Mao—Mao on drinking glasses, Mao on biscuit tins, Mao on teapots, Mao on rice bowls, as well as Mao in prints, paintings, wall hangings, and posters.

Everywhere I looked there was Mao, Mao, Mao, whose fanatical followers erased so much of China's cultural heritage, obliterating museums, libraries, exhibition halls, and historical monuments, and subjecting traditional artists, especially ink painters, to public humiliation and sometimes torture, while their homes and artworks were seized and destroyed.

At the same time, Mao sought to create



Mao by Gerhard Richter (German, b. 1932) was the sale's top lot, realizing \$21,994. Approximately 33" x 23", it is a black-purple colotype on white light-weight card paper, signed, dated 1968, and numbered 18/22. It was published by Galerie h (August Haseke), Hanover, and printed by Hannoversche Lichtdruck. Based on a 1967 newspaper photograph of Mao, Richter's *Mao* predates Andy Warhol's 1972 silkscreen. A Mao portrait by Warhol (not pictured) was offered at this sale but did not sell.



The man down on one knee in this circa 1970 white porcelain group is a landlord figure being "re-educated" by a female Red Guard and young pioneer boy. "Down with the Gang who follows the Capitalist route," states the placard around the landlord's neck. Approximately 7½" tall, the piece sold for \$3999.

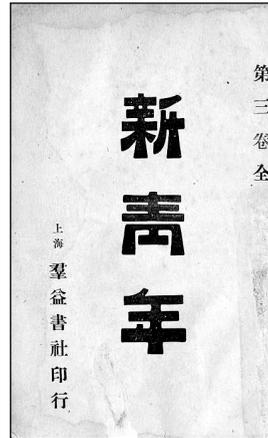
a new visual culture to communicate his goals and ideology to the Chinese people. This gallery in a town on the Hudson River, jam-packed as it was, was home to only a flyspeck-size fraction of this so-called art for the people. Maybe some of the better pieces that came out of that ideological debacle—the oil paintings, for example—could be characterized as art. They are literally history paintings, I guess. But what about the rest of it?

The co-curators of a groundbreaking exhibit at the Asia Society and Museum in New York City, *Art and China's Revolution*, which ran from September 5, 2008, through January 11, 2009, were the first to broach that complicated question. The Bloomsbury catalog introduction discusses it too, but in the end opted for the term "vintage propaganda," reserving the term "art" for the pieces by Richter and the other Western artists in the sale.

Perhaps the major piece of propaganda from the Mao era was the Little Red Book. "The National Library in Beijing taught me how to identify first editions," Schiller told me. "Nobody had ever asked them to, before. It dates from 1964. It was originally produced as a book of casual reading and discussion for members of the military, the People's Liberation Army, many of whom had very little schooling. It was really a compilation of excerpts from the various speeches—a primer."



Mao Entering New York Harbor by Erró (b. 1932), signed and dated 1974, oil on canvas, approximately 37 3/8" x 60", sold after the auction for \$69,902.



Mao's earliest appearance in print was this article on physical education. While still a student in 1917, he published it in a Shanghai magazine called *New Youth*. He wrote it under the pseudonym "Twenty-eight Stroke Student" (Mao's name in Chinese characters requires 28 strokes). Mao believed in the discipline of sport, but not for its own reward. "If our bodies are not strong, we will tremble at the sight of [enemy] soldiers," he wrote. Rebound, the article sold for \$1300.



A poster showing Mao against a backdrop of a flag featuring portraits of Stalin, Lenin, Marx, and Engels in profile, approximately 30½" x 42½", sold for \$2199. It was published in Beijing in 1953.

The precursor of the Little Red Book was also officially called *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*. A copy was offered at this sale (est. £10,000/15,000) but was passed. A third issue of the first complete edition sold for \$1999, while a Braille copy of Mao's *Selected Works* sold for \$800.

Rupert Powell of Bloomsbury's book department, the expert in charge of this sale, was asked for a general comment about the sale's results. "Overall I would say we (and the vendor) were disappointed," he wrote. Not only had they expected more from the major works, but they had also hoped for stronger participation from Mainland China. "That said, some of the prices we achieved for lesser material were quite staggering, and it was hard to pick out any rationale behind why bidders wanted certain things and not others—the ceramics, much of the kitsch, and many of the posters did well. Perhaps we are still several years ahead of the market."

Schiller said much the same thing in his e-mail. "Though mostly end results were on the low side, as bidders did not understand the current value levels for the material, it is nevertheless a good start, and now we see what follows."

For more information, contact Bloomsbury at +44 (0) 20 7495 9494 or see the Web site (www.bloomsburyauctions.com).



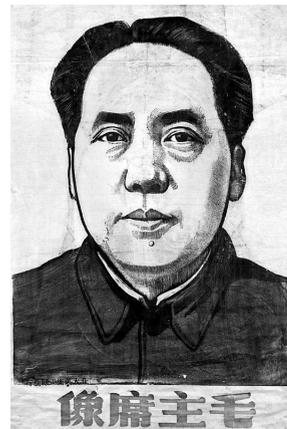
Printed in color by the Fenyang "Yimin" Bookstore and distributed by the Jin-Sui XinHua Bookstore for the People's Pictorial Publishing House, this early (1940) woodcut of Mao by Li Qiu, 20" x 14½", sold for \$2600. In this early period, portraits of Mao were most often woodblock prints like this one, although they varied greatly in style. In works of the Cultural Revolution period, between 1966 and Mao's death in 1976, he is often surrounded by a luminescence that seems to radiate from his body, like figures of Christ and the saints in the Christian tradition.



A multicolored silk-woven portrait of Mao, approximately 44" x 30½", sold for \$3999. It was published circa 1951 by the Suzhou DaZhong Silk Weaving Factory, which is in one of the great weaving districts south of the Yangtze River. According to the catalog, its quality silk products were often created as state gifts or to adorn official occasions. It is believed this finely woven portrait was created as a commemorative gift for patrons and high-ranking supporters of the Chinese Communist Party.



This 30½" x 21" portrait of Mao sold to an Internet bidder for \$2599. Bloomsbury believes it to be the earliest official portrait of Mao after the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. It was published circa 1949 by the Beijing Workers' Publishing House (Beijing) and Shanghai Xu Sheng Ji Printing Factory (Shanghai).



An early (1942) and large (36¼" x 25") woodblock portrait of Mao, designed by Wong Shi Kuo, sold for \$6598. It was printed by the Peking University Art Factory.



An Internet bidder paid \$6998 for this large (43" tall), circa 1966, half-bust white-plaster statue of Mao. The catalog noted that such images were usually situated in public places, such as government buildings and schools.



An approximately 13¾" x 22" color woodblock print of children playing soldiers sold to an Internet bidder for \$1600. The child in the top hat and striped shirt is meant to be Uncle Sam. The child below Uncle Sam is wearing swastika-patterned pants and a Chiang Kai-Shek mask. This was produced by a Beijing publishing house in the early 1950's.



A selection of 18 souvenir photo-portrait badges from 1943-48, all showing Mao, most measuring approximately ¾" x 1", sold for \$7198.



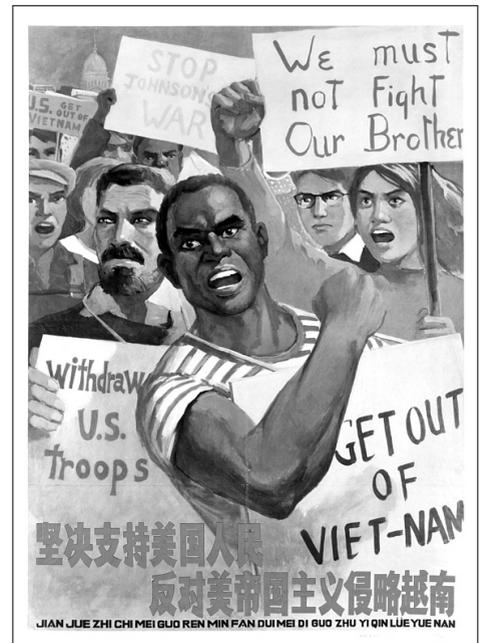
The caption translates, "You can forget rouge and makeup; I prefer my uniform." An approximately 30" x 21" color woodcut of a militia woman, this print sold for \$2399. It was published in 1964 by the Hebei People's Art Publishing House (Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province) and Hebei Province Wuqiang County Painting Collective Factory (Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province).



Two broadsheet posters (one shown), each approximately 15" x 21¼", sold in one lot to an absentee bidder for \$3999. Published by the Suzhou City Protecting World Peace and Anti-American Imperialist Invasion Committee (Suzhou) in 1951, they were designed to enlist support for the Chinese forces aiding the North Koreans in the Korean War. This one says of the United States, "Because it is a paper tiger, we can totally defeat it." On the silhouette of the tiger are listed all the perceived weaknesses of the Americans.



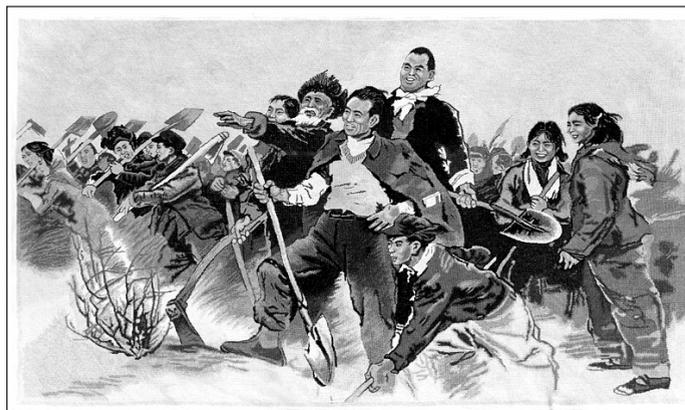
This original watercolor gouache from the late 1960's depicts two iron workers tending a furnace. The white-paper cutout-character caption reads, "Taking Our Root among the Masses/ Never Change Our True Color." Approximately 28¾" x 41", the poster design sold for \$14,996.



This first printing of a 1966 poster supporting anti-Vietnam War protesters in the United States sold for \$2399. The African-American front and center is at odds with the reality of the protests here. Nonetheless, its English-language slogans show it was intended for an export audience. Approximately 41¾" x 30¼", it was published by Cao You Wei and Meng Guang, Shanghai People's Art Publishing House, Shanghai First Printing Factory.



An original gouache watercolor drawing for a 1951 poster depicting the Chinese Volunteer Army overpowering American troops in Korea, approximately 20½" x 30½", sold for \$3999.



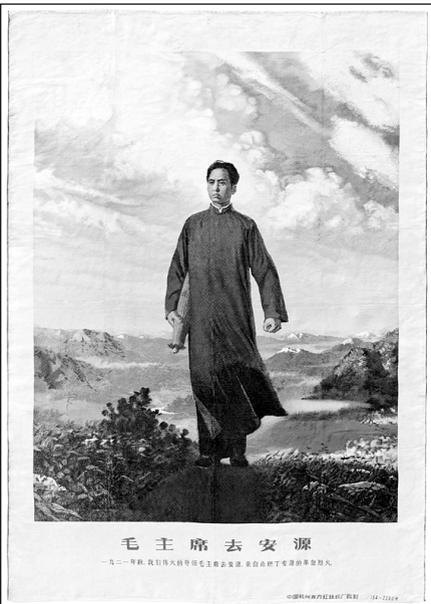
This circa 1965 embroidered cotton tapestry shows a smiling Jiao Yu Lu, who, despite suffering from lung cancer, was an effective leader of commune farmers. Here he is shown inspiring them to plant trees to prevent dust storms. Approximately 28¾" x 46¼", the image sold for \$7998, along with a 1966 book about Jiao's life. Mao named Jiao "model cadre" after his death in 1964.



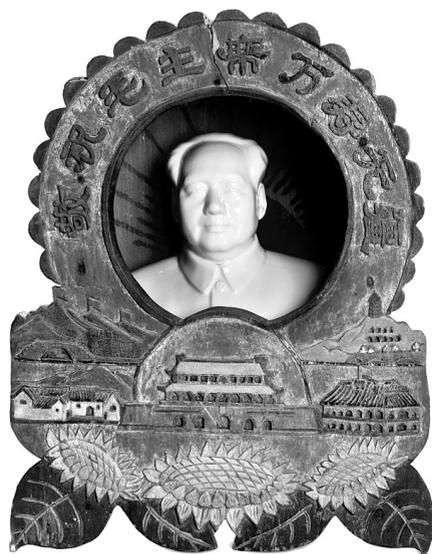
This 13 1/8" x 45 1/8" circa 1965 original gouache, ink, and watercolor of a busy Chinese market scene sold to a phone bidder for \$5598.



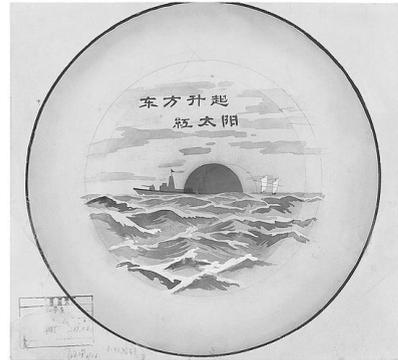
A room bidder paid \$6998 for this 1967 mixed media painting by Wu Xingqing, showing girls from many different ethnic backgrounds making images of Mao. It was sold along with an earlier poster on which the painting was based. The painting is 19 11/16" x 35 1/4"; the poster, approximately 22" x 30".



A very large (approximately 89" x 60"), multicolored silk portrait of a young Mao sold for \$7998. Dating from circa 1968, it was published by the China Hangzhou Dongfang Hong ("East Is Red") Silk Weaving Factory to commemorate Mao's trip to AnYuan, where he organized a coal miners' strike. This launched the Communist workers' movement. The caption reads, "Our great teacher Chairman Mao goes to AnYuan in the autumn of 1921, [where] he ignited the revolutionary fire by himself."



A circa 1960 porcelain bust of Mao in a wooden shrine sold to an Internet bidder for \$4399. The surround is incised "Long Live Chairman Mao." Besides the sunflowers, the decorations are five important landmarks of the new revolutionary China, including Mao's homestead in Shaoshan, Hunan Province. The shrine's overall height is approximately 15 3/4".



An original pencil, ink, and watercolor design for an enamel tea tray, along with one of the trays, achieved a surprisingly strong \$6798. Note the design change, ordained by an editor's note, which called for deleting the sailboats to the right of the setting sun and moving the sun to the right. Per the order, the sailboats are missing in the tray design and the sun is moved. The design diameter is 14 3/16"; the tray's diameter is slightly smaller.

The catalog described this as the earliest poster on the theme of the Vietnam War. Published just after the Gulf of Tonkin debacle on August 4, 1964, it features a worker holding the *People's Daily* dated two days later. The headline states that the People's Republic of China had issued a statement declaring the American aggression toward Vietnam equal to an act of aggression toward China itself. From an edition of 15,000, this copy sold for \$7198.



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