Through An Open Door
One of the most exciting periods in the history of contemporary Chinese art occurred in the years immediately following the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Chinese artists, breaking with thousands of years of traditional political ideology of the previous decades, moved in ever increasing numbers away from brush and ink painting and towards oil painting. Only officially accorded them by the policy, were they able to study Western art that began to enter their country in exhibitions presented by American and European museums. Given their own choice of subjects to paint and finally able to express their personal feelings about their changing society, it became a time of great experimentation for these artists. Their innate sense of their history and culture, and their rigorous study of the fundamentals of art, combined with
an enthusiastic interest in Western techniques and styles of painting, produced a unique blending of East/West sensibilities that resulted in a whole new genre of Chinese art. Since this time the developement of Chinese oil painting has moved at an amazing pace.

In Beijing in 1985, witnessing what he has called “an explosion of creativity releasing itself through the medium of oil,” American collector Robert A. Hefner III began what has become, twelve years later, the single most important collection of contemporary Chinese oil paintings from this important post-Cultural Revolution period. This exhibition focuses on 54 works representing 32 artists from Hefners’ permanent collection. While the majority of the paintings were produced in the mid to late 1980s, the earliest is dated 1964 and the latest, 1996. Included are transitional...
the last ten years. More recent paintings reflect an abstract as well as surrealist direction taken by a younger generation of artists.

This collection represents the determination and talent of a select group of individuals who took Chinese painting in a whole new direction during one of the most critical periods in their cultural history. It also represents the foresight of collector Robert A. Hefner III who recognized the importance of this unique moment in history.

Dislocation, 1995, Kuang Jian, Oil on Canvas 57" x 44"

pieces, showing a development from the mandated Socialist Realist style, common to Chinese oil painting from the beginning of the People's Republic through the late 1970s, to what Chinese critics have called Country Realism, prevalent in the early 1980s, and on to a neo-classical style by which many of these artists have become identified over

Opened Notebook, 1995, Cao Li, Oil on Canvas 73" x 98"
“Critics and historians define the cultural characteristics of an era by studying the arts produced by it’s generation. Immediately following the ‘Great Cultural Revolution,’ the first wish of most Chinese artists was to recover ‘artistic feelings’ as opposed to merely the freedom to be creative. In essence, the Chinese political democratization brought about the liberation of oil painting. It is therefore inevitable that we define the 1980s as a turning point and we cannot discuss this period without discussing the Hefner Collection as it represents definitive trends in the development of Chinese oil painting.”

Fan Dian, Chinese Critic

“This body of work is perhaps best representative of how the Chinese oil painters have managed, in the conflict of their times, to search out their own identity, while attempting to preserve the positive aspects of their past; arriving at a unique blend of Eastern and Western cultures and philosophy, expressed in a whole new genre of art.”

Jon Burris, Curator, The Hefner Collection

Winter Afternoon, 1988, Ai Xuan, Oil on Canvas 34" x 23"

Palace Door, 1996, Li Kai, Oil on Board 39" x 31"
Through An Open Door: Selections from the Robert A. Hefner III Collection of Contemporary Chinese Oil Paintings brings together 54 works representing 32 artists from the People's Republic of China focusing on the enthusiastic experimentation with a variety of styles and techniques these artists have explored from the years just following the Cultural Revolution through today.

The Catalog for Through An Open Door reproduces in full color, all of the paintings in the exhibition and includes sketches and details of selected pieces. In addition to portraits of the artists and excerpts from interviews regarding their works, essays by collector Robert A. Hefner III, curator Jon Burris and Chinese critic Fan Dian, tell the story of how this unique collection originated and has developed over the past decade. Included are biographies of all of the artists.

The Interactive CD-ROM Through An Open Door expands the information in the exhibition catalog to include video conversations with selected artists and collector Robert A. Hefner III. In their own words, the artists describe each of their paintings, while close-up zooms allow the viewer to study their works in detail. Biographies, accompanying photographic portraits, and pages from their sketchbooks give a more thorough view of the artists and photographs of modern day China add a sense of atmosphere.

To view paintings from the exhibition, and for additional information on ordering the Through An Open Door catalog and interactive CD-ROM, visit the Hefner Collection website at:

http://www.chinacollection.com

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