

A sculptor's life journey

From dance shoes to paintbrushes and chisels, to cast iron, **Lau Kwok Hung's art is a bridge between cultures**



Drop by drop. Iron rods under a 5400°F torch flame. Hung lets each molten drop fall carefully and cool in its place until the intricate detail and the vivid facial expressions of his work take form

By AMY UELMEN

THE STUDIO WORKSHOP IS MODEST, TUCKED into the rolling hills of Tuscany in the village of Loppiano. A little row of bamboo trees at the door invites the visitor to enter an unexpected world. The medium is? To say iron is too reductive, for as I take in the sculptures what captures my imagination is the play of space: empowering facial expressions and hands in motion at play with iron in the form of a wispy brushstroke, suspended in air, suggesting here or there a limb or a movement, but with a dynamism all its own. The empty space becomes full — of light, of motion, music or dance itself.

On a beautiful spring day I spent some time with Hung in his studio, learning about the inspiration for his work. Lau Kwok Hung's roots are in China. The name "Hung" means "torrential waters, flooding or inundation." The word is also associated with fire, referring to the heat of a furnace or flowing lava. So it is not surprising that

Hung would have happened onto a synergistic form of art — drawing together fire and liquefied iron, cold and heat, and rooted firmly in the art, discipline and elements of Chinese calligraphy.

How did you happen upon this form of art?

I spent several years with the Focolare performing arts group, Gen Rosso, and had formal training at the Florence Academy of Fine Arts. Then, because of other responsibilities within the Focolare, I set aside the microphones, dance shoes, paintbrushes and chisels, and moved to the Philippines to work at the publishing house, New City Press.

It was a completely different rhythm of life, at times involving long hours at a type-setting machine. But this was what I had chosen, to be available to follow Jesus in the manner that the life of the Focolare proposed. I realized it was up to me to find new

ways to be creative and self-giving. Whether it is through writing, photography or graphic design, you always have yourself to give. This was my real "doctorate" in art — not so much in the sense of the know-how or technique — but in learning the essence of art and the ideas that animate me, with Jesus as the teacher and in dialogue with him.

Then I moved to Switzerland. At a certain point I observed a friend repairing something with an oxyacetylene torch. I was completely taken by the spectacle of the fire, and how it was able to make a material as tough as iron obey. It was a "ureka" moment in which I realized that from then on, this torch would take the place of my pens, pencils, erasers, brushes and chisels. I could already imagine some sort of airborne brushstrokes.

Have you been able to dedicate yourself to this art form since that time?

Immediately after that, a period of experimentation and invention followed. I had to develop a whole new discipline. At the time, I was also working on a commission for Chiara Lubich. I was touched by her understanding of the time-consuming artistic process. "Don't worry," she said. "An artist needs this kind of time." But a few years later, right at the time when I was happy with how the technique was proceeding, another specific need arose for the Focolare community in South Korea. So I dropped everything for several more years, to pick it up again in 2000 when this studio opened.

What is the inspiration for your work?

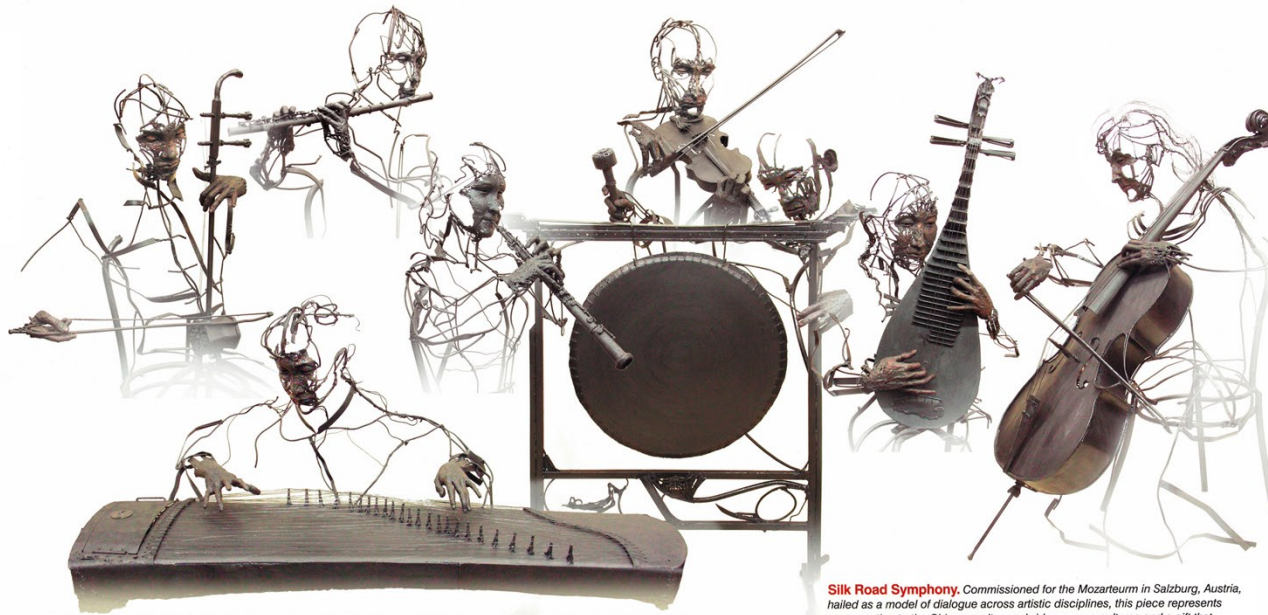
I like the Gospel passage about the talents — you gave me five, here is another five (see Mt 25:20). Art is like this; when you choose not to bury your gifts, you experience abundance in life. It's finding the "more" in what might seem to be less or what seems to be little.

At a certain point I realized that I had to respect the iron, to let it speak, to enter into dialogue with it. I stopped overworking my subjects, and let them grow with their own empty spaces. The sculptures are now more like "drawings."

I am also inspired by the Chinese figure of the "Mandarin" — one who realizes a mandate, one who lives in front of another — which strikes me as a call to respond to the inner voice.

Much of your work evokes the theme of a journey, physical or metaphorical. What does this image mean to you?

For me a journey represents a meeting among people. The "Silk Road" is a metaphor for my own journey, as I have reconnected with my own Chinese culture and discover what it means to be a bridge between cultures. It also represents the more universal encounter



Silk Road Symphony. Commissioned for the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, hailed as a model of dialogue across artistic disciplines, this piece represents reconnection to the Chinese culture, a bridge among cultures and a gift that endures the longest journeys



Inspiration. Chinese calligraphy is for Hung the medium and inspiration of his art. He starts each day practicing Chinese calligraphy. The ink itself, he explains, has its own power that he cannot control. He draws the line with his special pen, and the ink does its own manoeuvre, spreading or not as it wills, according to its density and the absorption of different papers.



Education. Hung, also an art educator, holds workshops in art and Chinese calligraphy for children and youth of various ages



"The survivor" by Hung

among people — despite its apparent fragility, silk is also a symbol of resistance as it can survive long journeys to reach its destinations of becoming gift for the others.

You live the Focolare spirituality of unity, which has a marked "communitarian" or "collective" dimension. Yet for the most part this art form brings you to work alone. How do you reconcile these dimensions in your life?

You might think that this has nothing to do with my work and was actually cutting into my time. In reality, the time that I spent gave me so much more, and this nourished my art. In a society which seems to have lost a sense of paternity, it also reconnected me with a healthy sense of that typically eastern devotion towards one's elders. Then when I go to the studio, I am more prepared to listen to that inner voice; God speaks when we are at peace.

comes out of my hands, expresses what I have lived. For example, the sculpture, "Empathy," emerged from my experience of spending several hours each day caring for our elderly friend who is blind and in a wheelchair. At this time he needs help with all the basics, in addition to just spending time together, listening to music, reading, taking walks.

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