An artistic marriage of great convenience
By YAN DONGJIE yandongjie@chinadaily.com.cn

Mark Cooper’s exhibition in Beijing on Jan 12

Mark Cooper makes art by marrying two cultures and various media, including rice paper, porcelain, wood and watercolors, to create the fantastical and the ornate.

In a recent exhibition in Beijing, the American sculptor played matchmaker in a slightly different way, uniting artistic influences from two Chinese cities, Shanghai and Jingdezhen, a city in Jiangxi province world famous for its pottery. And as if that partnership of cities needed an extra hand, Boston was brought in on the act as well.

This all came together under the intriguing title Yu Yu China Blue at the Yuan Art Museum in the Chinese capital on Jan 12, where visitors from many parts of the world marveled at Cooper’s abilities as artist and cultural ambassador.
Just as the works on display embodied the spirit of at least three cities, the exhibition’s title echoed the footsteps of Cooper’s artistic journey.

Cooper, 65, a teacher of ceramics at Boston College, visited Yu Garden in the old part of Shanghai two years ago, and what he saw on his stroll through its 2 hectares that day inspired many of the works shown in Beijing this month.

The exhibition’s title echoed names of previous shows of his, such as Yu Vietnam Blue, held at the National Museum of Art in Hanoi a few weeks earlier, Yu Yu Boston Blue and Yu Yu Columbus Blue.

“Yu Yu is a variation of Yu Garden, and the color blue reminds people of nature, of sea and sky,” Cooper said.

As for Jingdezhen, all the more than 500 works on display were made in collaboration with artists from there, Beijing, and the US, he said.

“I was inspired by a ceramics exhibition by John Singer Sargent (an American portrait painter of the late 1800s and early 1900s) in Boston, so I went to Jingdezhen, a town that boasts a long history of ceramics and that has influenced the world for centuries.”

He stayed there for two weeks in June, during which time he worked with artists at Jingdezhen University, and they produced most of the works shown in Beijing.

They included wood sculptures with elegant curves reminiscent of artificial rock formations and the interior of ancient buildings in Yu Garden.

Blue and white works came in all shapes and sizes, with some of the designs “as complicated as a woman’s body, and as simple as three parallel lines”, as one observer put it.

Yan Feng, an artist and associate professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts of China in Beijing, said elements of East and West had been assembled with artistic ingenuity, seeming to inspire a “conversation” between two greatly different cultures and art forms.

Cooper said it was exactly this conversation that he had worked so hard to achieve. In this exchange, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, he said.

In the wood sculptures, Cooper used Western-style iron hinges rather than Chinese hinges to hold the pieces together.

“He seems to have deliberately pieced together elements of different cultures in a violent way to create a conversation,” Yan said.

Cooper said: “I always engage myself in this process of collaboration as I learn to do things. This is because I firmly believe we can create greater things together than when we work alone.”

Cross-cultural collaboration was the highlight of the exhibition, he said.
Alan Clark, assistant cultural affairs officer of the US embassy in Beijing, said: “Many people talk about cross-cultural collaboration; I have had a deep and personal sense of it as it has taken place.
“Through his work, I can see Mark’s deep appreciation of Chinese art culture.”
Jiang Shangyue, a Japanese collaborating artist who gave himself a Chinese name, enthused of his pleasure in working with Cooper.
“Through our collaboration I have developed a better understanding of genuine communication. In Japanese, the word for blue and the word for love sound exactly the same. It makes me think that fate brought us to work together.”

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Mark Cooper, US sculptor and a teacher of ceramics at Boston College