

Shopping & Style

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Camera obscured

First popularised by the iconic *Vogue* covers of the 1920s, fashion illustration is once again a highly sought-after alternative to run-of-the-mill fashion photography. **Selena Schleh** speaks to the illustrators spearheading its revival in Shanghai

Wang Youyi

Wang Youyi is a graduate of the prestigious Sichuan Fine Art Institute. Now based in Shanghai, the Chengdu native lends her illustration to advertising campaigns for the likes of Audi and luxury German jewellery brand Asmus. In 2009, she was shortlisted for online fashion magazine *Iconique's* Societas Award for excellence in fashion photography/illustration.

What drew you to fashion illustration?

I've been fond of art, particularly traditional Chinese painting, since I was a child, but I also love the beauty of fashion and its power to bring change. Art is drawn on canvas or paper and fashion is drawn on people's bodies. Fashion illustration is a way to combine the two.

How would you describe your method and style?

One of my friends once asked me, 'Why do contemporary Chinese painters paint the same old scenes of mountains, rivers, or an old fisherman sitting on his little boat? Why can't they produce a new style?' Since then, I focused on trying to create a totally new way of Chinese painting, using traditional skills, tools and techniques, but adding

some modern Western elements. Sometimes I'll use a pen or pencil, but I prefer using traditional tools such as Chinese paintbrushes, ink, rice paper and traditional pigments, and I take a sketchbook with me everywhere I go.

Is there much space for personal style in fashion illustration?

Obviously the subject matter can feel limiting, because you're painting models, but that's why it's important to develop a distinctive style. That's how you stand out and form the basis for people to commission work from you; in my commercial work, for ad campaigns and so on, clients have always asked for the illustrations done in my personal style.

Why do you think fashion illustration has such an appeal?

Normally, when an artist creates a painting, they not only draw the person in front of them, but add some of their own emotion, so the finished work is a lot more complex than just taking a picture. Also, the audience sees the work from their own perspective, so everyone standing in front of the painting has a different understanding of it. There's more room for imagination, on the part of the artist and the audience.

How difficult is it to break into fashion illustration?

It's like most things, really – you need to work hard and get a lucky break. At first, there wasn't a lot of demand, but in recent years the market for fashion illustrators in China has really started to grow. There are so many designers starting out here, and the clothing industry is so huge. I think we'll start to see Chinese artists bringing a really unique, Oriental style to the fashion world – something really different to the Western illustrators' work.

Which fashion illustrators do you admire?

Antonio Lopez, who did a lot of the illustrations for *Vogue*, *Elle* and *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1970s and Wu Guan Zhong, who isn't actually a fashion illustrator but has a great, unique style which incorporates Western oil painting techniques into traditional Chinese paintings.

If you could illustrate any designer, who would you choose?

Of the Western designers, I like the works of Karl Lagerfeld, Issey Miyake, and Miuccia Prada. Some Chinese designers I admire are Zhang Da and Ji Cheng.



Drawing attention Fashion illustrations from Wang Youyi (left) and Baiba Ladiga.



Baiba Ladiga

Latvian-born Baiba Ladiga is a former fashion design lecturer at the Raffles Design Institute who has exhibited her work in Los Angeles and London in addition to Shanghai, as well as featuring in various publications including *The Great Book of Fashion Illustration*. In April this year, she was commissioned to sketch shows by labels Seven Days, agnès b and The Thing at Shanghai Fashion Week.

How did you become a fashion illustrator?

It actually started out of a need to keep pace with my students [at Raffles], who had this amazing natural affinity for drawing. I started drawing at home to improve my style and eventually friends and colleagues starting asking if they could buy my drawings. Within three months of setting up my website, I was exhibiting in LA alongside all these top illustrators that I adore, such as Laura Laine. It was a shock because I still considered myself a beginner.

How is fashion illustration different from general illustration or the sketches produced by designers?

It's something in between fashion and illustration. We're not normal

illustrators – we have this 'fashion' tag attached to us – but we're not so much fashion either, because some of us don't even follow fashion and the images they create are based on 'mood' only. We also stylise the body: it's normally drawn around seven and a half heads tall, but we make it around nine and a half, so it reflects the fashion models you see on the catwalk. It's the same for fashion design, but there the sketch is functional, without much artistic value, with a focus on the clothes.

How do your pieces come together? How would you describe your method and style?

I start with sketches, or sometimes material, such as a papercut, then use anything from ink painting to marker pens, before I scan and 'clean' the final picture on the computer. I'm still trying to find my own style: I love mixed media, like the fashion photography and illustration hybrid I did with [Shanghai fashion photographer] Yocky Zhang. Ultimately, I want to find something that sets me apart.

Why do you think fashion illustration has such an appeal?

It was really popular in the 1920s, before photography arrived – think of those iconic *Vogue* covers. Then photography took hold, followed by digital photography, and Photoshop etc. So, in the end, just about anybody could take a 'fashion' photo. This comeback is partly because people are tired of fashion photography – it's become very predictable and boring. Big brands like Louis Vuitton want something unique that fashion photography just can't provide more.

Which fashion illustrators do you admire?

David Downton and Stina Persson, who uses really beautiful blended watercolours; Daniel Egnéus, an incredibly talented, self-taught illustrator; and Laura Laine from Finland. I also really like Conrad Roset, whose style is really unique – rough lines and very colourful. There's almost a geographical concentration of talented people in Scandinavia, Spain and Japan.

“Big brands want something unique that fashion photography just can't provide”

If you could illustrate for any designer, who would you choose?

I still follow fashion, and I like the minimalist Japanese and Belgian designers, but I also like the colourfulness of Christian Lacroix. A Chinese designer I love is Ma Ke Wuyong ('Useless'), who's showed at Paris Fashion Week. Her work is really conceptual.

How difficult is it to break into fashion illustration?

Financially, it doesn't cost that much. You just need a pen, pencil and a computer to scan the drawings, and talent, skill and passion. It's not like fashion [design], where only the rich succeed – drive is the most important thing. It's a friendly community, too – everyone tries to help out and we let each other know about new exhibitions or books. There's none of the snobbery of the fashion [design] world.

