

Digital Gavels, How China's Art World is Fighting Coronavirus

Richard Whiddington / February 24, 2020



By harnessing the power and reach of digital platforms, Chinese arts institutions are raising much-needed funds through online auctions. Image: Shutterstock

For one week during March, Art Basel turns Hong Kong into the center of the artistic universe. But the [fair's cancelation](#) this year, along with the postponement of spring auctions from [Christie's and Sotheby's](#), due to the coronavirus epidemic is indicative of the new squeeze facing the global art economy. But in Mainland China, where cultural events and public gatherings are on hold, museums, art institutions, and media organizations have rallied around an altogether different type of auction — one that's digitally promoted, executed online, and is raising funds to help fight the virus.

As the country continues to grapple with a health emergency that's affecting the lives of all its citizens, those in the culture and media spheres are using the power of art to engender meaningful action.

“Standing Together Through Thick and Thin”

Shanghai's [HOW Art Museum](#) has spearheaded a campaign to raise funds for primary school children and women: a group that makes up the majority of nurses and volunteers on the [frontline fight against coronavirus](#). “In light of the current outbreak, we vow to take responsibility in protecting children from the virus,” states the museum [press release](#) pledging all

funds to Shanghai Song Ching Ling Foundation, an organization that's focused on the welfare of women and children for three decades.

To facilitate the auction, organizers are collaborating with [Yitiao](#), a platform whose slow-panning videos of sleek, contemporary interiors have helped shape the aesthetic tastes for a generation of affluent Chinese urbanites. By combining short video production and e-commerce, Yitiao has disrupted established shopping and content channels, and in early March, it will continue this trend by occupying a realm that's traditionally been the purview of prominent auction houses. The auction is a strong example of the virtues of a cross-industry collaboration between museums, media organizations, cultural institutions, and online platforms. But first and foremost, an auction needs desirable products. Both the HOW Art Museum and the HOWStore have pledged to donate 30 items worth an estimated \$143,000 (1 million RMB). The hope is that a commitment from prominent names in the Chinese art world will [catalyze others to follow suit](#), with interested parties able to send artwork information and images digitally to the auction's organizers.



The digital poster for “Standing Together Through Thick and Thin”. Image: HOW ART MUSEUM

Among the international respondents is New York's [FOU GALLERY](#), a space for contemporary Chinese art, and the gallery's founder Echo He has been swift in committing artwork to the cause, “many of those represented by the gallery are Chinese artists who live or have lived abroad, our fates are entwined with China's, and the spread of this epidemic connects the whole of humanity,” said He via email, “Information about the virus has traveled as fast as the virus itself and ultimately affects everyone. As such, the art world's response must reflect this.”

Beyond auction lots, the event has a strong publicity reach through both traditional and contemporary channels. The involvement of [Modern Media Group](#) will see the event promoted across a vast number of its arts, culture, and news publications — a list that potentially includes The Art Newspaper, iWeekly, and Art Weekly. On the social media front, the well-connected partners of the online auction saw news of the event spread rapidly through arts-related WeChat groups and posts while official accounts will soon create even greater awareness with the general public (Yitiao alone, for instance, boasts more than 21 million [WeChat](#) followers.)

“Life is Priceless and Art is Powerful”

Yao Chen gained stardom in the 2000s for her longtime role on the martial arts TV show “[My Own Swordsman](#),” but her campaigning for social issues about everything from urban smog to food contamination have made her equally as celebrated in China. Yao regularly harnesses the power of her [83 million Weibo followers](#) through direct engagement, including reposting the missives of fellow citizens in need. Therefore, when Yao focused a post on the charity auction “Life is Priceless and Art is Powerful,” it played a significant factor in the auction’s campaign hashtags being used more than 6 million times. “Thanks to Yao for bringing in so many powerful figures and backing up more people,” said a Weibo user in response.

Indeed, spontaneous celebrity endorsements and the speed at which customized hashtags ([#lifeispriceless](#), [#artispowerful](#)) can become trends is one of the great strengths of [Weibo](#). While WeChat functions as a closed platform (meaning official accounts can only reach and engage directly with followers), Weibo is an open network platform that offers greater reach since users see trending content, even if they don’t follow the accounts.



Digital posters for “Life is Priceless and Art is Powerful” included QR Codes linking to the auction page. Image: iCouncil WeChat.

Aside from organic social media traffic, organizers such as the auction house Beijing Council International Auction, the independent bookshop and publisher One Way Street, and the lifestyle magazine Sanlian Lifeweek created 15 posters from auction artworks, linking the sale of them through the auction page and related [QR codes](#). Users were incentivized to share the posters across social media and were awarded ‘combat points, equal to 1-10 RMB’ per post, which helped determine the final auction price.

The online event was staged on Beijing Council International Auction’s App and [WeChat Mini Program](#) from February 14 to 15, accepted 117 artworks, and saw tens of thousands of netizens follow the bidding process. In total, \$185 million (1.3 million RMB) were ultimately raised with donated artworks spanning generations and including painting, calligraphy, and sculpture.

[Notable highlights](#) were a handmade leather jacket from designer Ma Ke which raised 27,000 RMB (\$3,844) and a Franz Liszt manuscript that sold for 32,000 RMB (\$4,556).

All proceeds are being donated to the [Beijing United Charity Foundation](#), which will buy supplies for front-line medical staff in Wuhan.

Auction Conclusions

The world of high art can often seem detached from the day-to-day reality of the general populace. Creating broad connections is paramount with HOW Art Museum stating its will to “inspire courage in times of suffering” and FOU Gallery’s He noting, “I am looking forward to the results of this auction. Many of those involved are not art professionals, but members of the public and so perhaps in some small way the auction can bring these two poles closer together.”

While art is still of secondary importance during these trying times, charity auctions show the speed and organizational powers of top Chinese arts organizations as well as an ability to harness innovative technology platforms for a vital cause.

<https://jingtravel.com/digital-gavels-art-china-auction-coronavirus/>