

IHSS Research Seminar Program 2024

Creating Amateur Artists: Problems of Skill in China's Great Leap Forward

Dr Minerva Inwald (The University of New South Wales, Sydney)

Chairs: Dr. Sarah Bendall & Assoc. Prof. Nell Musgrove

Tuesday 9 April, 12-1pm AEST

To be held in room 460.3.01 and online via Teams

Abstract: In March 1958, the Ministry of Culture called on cultural agencies and associations around the People's Republic of China to unleash the inexhaustible creative power of the so-called 'masses.' This mass art movement aimed to match the enthusiastic spirit, novelty, and magnitude of an emergent production drive that would come to be known as the Great Leap Forward. Cultural administrators set ambitious targets for 'amateur' art production, mobilizing professional artists to run amateur art training classes for workers and peasants.

During the mass art movement, professional artists were, ironically, called on to apply their expertise to 'de-skill' amateur art practice. Displays of skill, or indeed lack thereof, were marshalled as a means of making socialist class identities legible in artworks. 'Western' modes for depicting form, such as shading and linear perspective, were deemed alien and unnatural workers and peasants, and fine arts bureaucrats advised professional artists to instruct their students in simple representational techniques, particularly the use of outline and flat colour.

Channelling the varied artistic interests of workers and peasants into appropriate visual performances of mass creativity proved challenging in practice. This paper explores how peasant artists responded to, and even questioned, this limited conception of their creative capacities, exposing the underlying tensions of this project to enlist skill in shaping socialist class identities in Mao's China.



Bio: [Dr Minerva Inwald](#) is a historian of modern China. Her research explores the cultural history of the People's Republic of China through the lens of visual and material culture. Her current book project examines the relationship between the visual arts and socialist class politics in China's Mao era (1949–76). She is currently Judith Neilson Post-doctoral Fellow in Contemporary Art at UNSW, Sydney. Prior to joining UNSW, she held a Postgraduate Teaching Fellowship in the Department of History at the University of Sydney. Her research on cultural policy in the Mao period has been published in the journal *Modern China*.

Enquiries: IHSS@acu.edu.au