

3. Silk Flowers

Artist Workshop

Artist Jin Tielang preserves his family's tradition of making silk flowers from his home in Beijing. Jin has made silk flowers for thirty years. He is now retired, but continues to make silk flowers with the goal of preserving the art form. Careful attention to detail has been a hallmark of Jin's art. He began winning awards for his work at age twenty-eight and has shown his flowers in the United States, but in turn feels much pressure to continue his success and perfection.

Artist at work

First, Jin takes wet, white silk and dyes it. To make the flowers look as real as possible, the petals are slightly varied in color and shading. A basic palette of yellow, pink, blue, light purple, and light green paints are used alone or in combination to color the petals. The wet petals are shaped with various tools that Jin makes himself. Jin also makes the glue for the flowers himself. Plain white thread is used to make stamens and ground rice is used to replicate pollen. Individual flowers are combined to form clusters that are typically commissioned by customers.

Jin approaches the creation of his flowers from a very specific aesthetic standpoint; his painstaking process ensures the highly realistic result he so values. His hands-on process allows him to consider the delicacies of a flower on an individual basis, and he seeks to understand each component of the plant. When creating a rose, for instance, he attempts to replicate the flower at its most beautiful moment, capturing the energy of the rose in bloom. By the time they are completed, each of his flowers are ideally flawless.

Cultural Heritage

Jin's ancestors belonged to the royal family of Manchu and crafted the flowers as a hobby. Jin once created flowers for the royal palace, and his father and grandfather made flowers for large royal ceremonies and festivals. His father and grandfather established a factory in the 1950s to produce the flowers on a large scale with machinery, but it was eventually shut down in favor of hand-made methods that yield higher quality results. Unlike much of Chinese folk art, Jin's silk flowers have always been quite expensive and are a luxury that most people cannot afford. The less expensive flowers sold at markets are made from synthetic fabric rather than silk.