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Italian sculptor eyes China's changes

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Italian sculptor Dionisio Cimarelli poses with a 1.5m-high bronze sculpture of Italian adventurer Matteo Ricci, which was made for the Italy Pavilion at Shanghai World Expo in 2010 CREDIT: PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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By **China Daily**

Following the path of the Italian adventurer Matteo Ricci, sculptor Dionisio Cimarelli first visited China in 1986 before returning in 2004 for a decade-long stint in his adopted home

When Italian sculptor Dionisio Cimarelli arrived in Beijing via the Trans-Siberian Railway at the age of 21, he might have been one of the first foreign artists to visit China after it was opened to the outside world in the mid-1970s.

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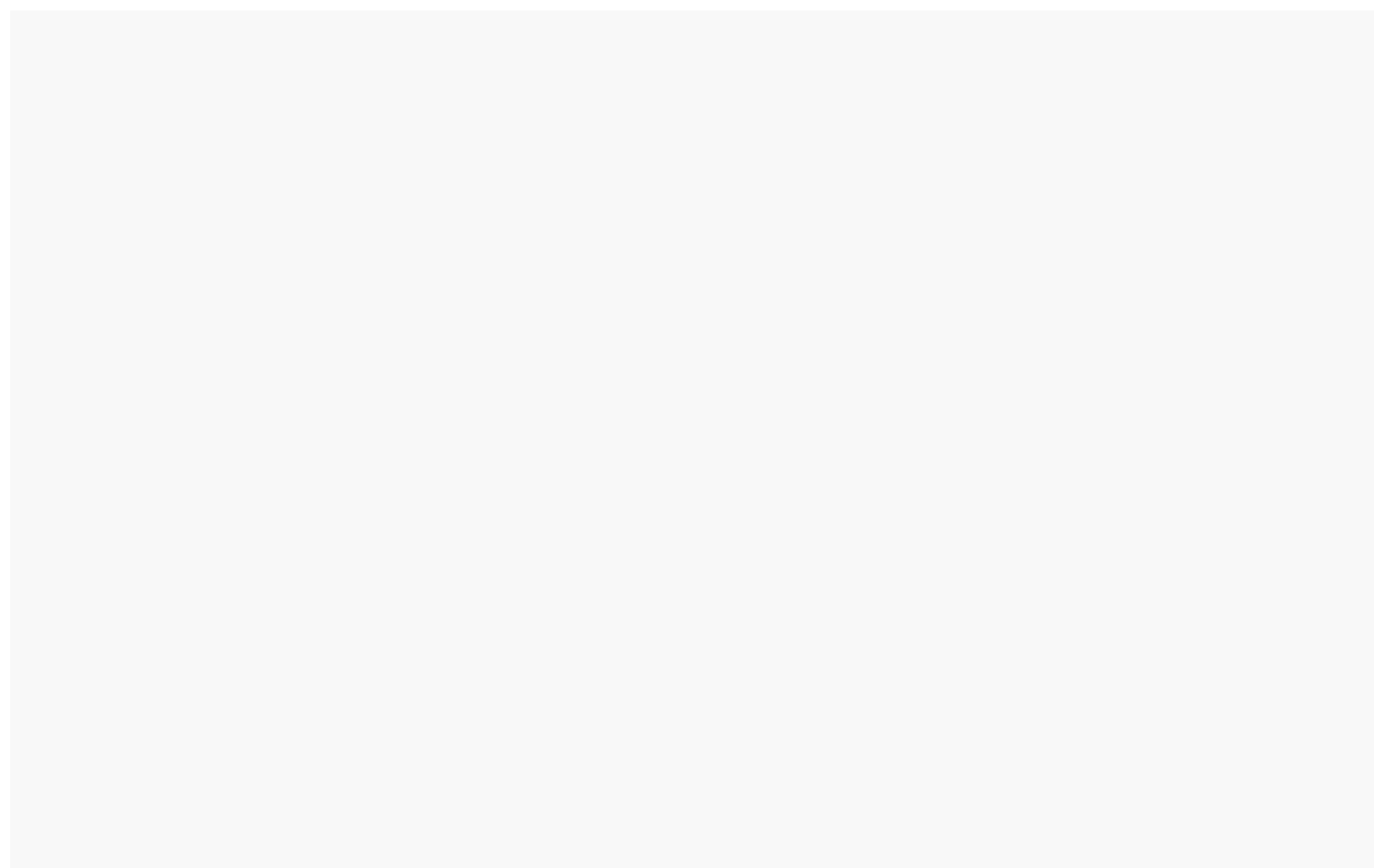
“That was a very incredible trip, and I spent four months traveling and gathering information for my college thesis in China,” said Cimarelli in his studio at the Art Students League of New York, where he teaches sculpture.

“At that time, it was very unusual to visit China – not many people went there.”

Following the path of Matteo Ricci, the Italian adventurer who is believed to be the first Jesuit missionary to set foot in Beijing's Forbidden City in 1601, Cimarelli didn't end his journey in China after his short visit in 1986. He went back in 2004 and stayed for 10 years.

“When I went back to China in 2004, I was very fascinated by the changes there,” Cimarelli said, adding that in those days China was a relatively poor country that was coming out of difficult economic and cultural times.

He recalled that in the mid-1980s, China had not yet fully opened to international travellers and it was difficult for foreign scholars like him to obtain a visitor's visa for longer than two weeks. China was still a developing country with many people living under the poverty level.



Figurative sculptures of a child made in porcelain by Cimarelli. He combines aesthetic elements of Chinese culture with his Western techniques CREDIT: DIONISIO CIMARELLI/CHINA DAILY/PBARLERA

Before China's reform and opening-up in 1978, people needed an invitation or work permit approved by the government to travel to China, Cimarelli explained.

Asked about the biggest changes he observed over the past three decades, Cimarelli laughed. “The changes are incredible, too many, I don't know where to start,” he said.

In large cities like Shanghai and Beijing, the skyscrapers are everywhere, the improvements to China's infrastructure are unbelievable, and there are many more cars and more traffic now.

“The change is everything, especially the people. When I went to China the first time, people they were dressing in green and blue, and now Chinese people are dressing like anyone else in the world, very fashionable.”

In terms of art, China has also changed a lot, he said. Back in the 1980s, China's artists were largely influenced by Soviet art. However, when he went back in 2004 he was excited to see that Chinese artists were starting to interact and exchange with artists from different countries around the world and galleries were full of Western art.

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In his own art, Cimorelli said he tried to combine aesthetic elements of Chinese culture with his Western techniques.

In 2010, at the invitation of the Italian government, Cimorelli spent more than six months creating a 5ft tall (1.5m) bronze sculpture of Matteo Ricci for the Italy Pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo.

“When I went to China, I wanted to make something that represents Chinese culture, and when anybody thinks about China, they think about porcelains”

Dionisio Cimorelli

“I’ve been inspired by the story of Matteo Ricci since I went to China for the first time,” Cimorelli said. “And Matteo Ricci was coming from the same region as me, a small city that is very close to where I was born, so the opportunity to make a sculpture of him was a great honor to me.”

He said he used Western sculpture materials and techniques and added gilded Chinese calligraphy to the work. The characters are actually Cimorelli’s name

written in Chinese.

“When I was in Italy, I’d been working a lot with ceramics, and I always liked it a lot,” he said. “But when I went to China, I wanted to make something that represents Chinese culture, and when anybody thinks about China, they think about porcelains.

“So, I moved to Jingdezhen [a town in Jiangxi province famous for Chinese porcelain] and opened my own studio and worked there for a couple of years to make my series of porcelain sculptures.

“It was very difficult and challenging for me,” added Cimorelli, who had experience in ceramics but knew nothing about Chinese porcelains at the time. “It was totally different.”

Since then, he has been making contemporary figurative sculptures in Chinese porcelain. His works include a standing child and a broken African mask, peppered with the gilded calligraphy of his name.

Having witnessed the great changes that reform and opening up have brought to China, Cimorelli is confident about the benefits the Belt and Road Initiative will bring to both Italy and China in the future.

Italy once played an important role in the ancient Silk Road, and has had a long history of close cultural ties with China since the Middle Ages, when Marco Polo (1254-1324) traveled there, he said.

“It’s great for trade, as the Silk Road already was fantastic more than two thousand years ago,” said Cimorelli. “The exchange between different cultures is like a bridge between peoples.

“We learn from each other and exchange ideas – that is the attitude of Matteo Ricci when he visited China. He didn’t go to China for teaching, but for learning.”

Cimorelli said he had the same attitude when he visited China – to get exposed to a new culture, to learn from it, to exchange ideas, not to impose his own culture on Chinese people.

“China is like my second home country,” Cimorelli said and showed off his Chinese by saying “I love China” in Mandarin.

“Of course I hope to go back to China in the future, anytime, I’m always looking for co-operation and exchange projects.”