Mr. Klock

— By Su Xiaobai

From 1989 to 1999, there was a phase in my work where ink paintings on paper emerged. These works, created on extremely thin Chinese rice paper with mixed ink and watercolors, were something I had never painted before and never returned to afterward. This period lasted over a decade, but the pieces were small, only about half a square cubit in size. Few people ever saw them. Some were destroyed in a fire during an exhibition at an art festival. Today, only around 200 works remain known and preserved.

I no longer recall exactly why I began ink painting back then. Looking back, it was 1989, when I was still a student of fine arts at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. There were no assignments or deadlines, but occasionally we gathered in the studio for professors to review students' works. I decided to experiment with an unfamiliar technique to demonstrate my calmness and skill in confronting a blank sheet of paper. Combining my understanding of ancient East Asian painting and classical calligraphy with the structure of modern art, I created ink works. To add mystery, I crumpled the finished rice paper, smoothed it again, and mounted it on larger white paper, tracing a clean, delicate line along its edges with a 2H pencil. The professor approved, and my peers acknowledged it. At that academy, earning classmates' recognition was its own honor.

But 1989 was not a year of leisurely painting for me (because of what have happened in Beijing that year). Later, a certain stillness returned, and I fell into a state of melancholy. I continued dedicating myself to large-scale oil paintings—not only because I loved and excelled at painting but also because they sold. I seized every opportunity to exhibit them, seeking attention, securing a livelihood, and gradually building recognition.

Though my ink works were paintings, they were often labeled as "drawings." Unlike oils, prints, or watercolors, they were seen as sketches and rarely taken seriously in formal exhibitions. In hindsight, this seems naive, but at the time, I couldn't think otherwise.

Mr. Klock stumbled upon these surprising ink paintings at the Kulturwerkstatt Meiderich. He lived in Duisburg, near Meiderich, a small town. It was Friday, February 27, 1990, a clear, sunny winter day after snowfall. Snow reflected light, brightening the public library's rooms where my paper works hung between bookshelves. Though modestly displayed, it counted as an exhibition in 1990. There was no opening ceremony; library readers were the audience. A recent journalism graduate wrote his first article about it, published in the weekend edition of *Rheinische Post*. That local paper ensured my playful ink sketches continued.

Mr. Klock held the newspaper while viewing the walls. He spent the entire morning there. In the afternoon, he returned—to retrieve his forgotten walking stick. The stick lay untouched, as did the unsold paintings. I desperately needed someone to buy them, but perhaps no one noticed. Mr. Klock reclaimed his stick, tapped it twice firmly on the floor, and resolved: he would follow this painter.

That painter was me. Being “followed” motivated me to keep painting, though infrequently, as the technique was unfamiliar. Most days, under natural light, I worked on large oils. Evenings, cold and dimly lit, I sat near the heater. What to do? I cut rice paper into stationery-sized pieces and brushed ink onto them —writing letters, words, calligraphy, chaotic and aimless. I copied texts like *Zheng Wengong Bei* or recipes, drew lines, circles, let tea-soaked ink bleed into crumpled paper. It was freedom. Joy. I watched water stains shift, improvising light and shadow into image-like forms. Not proper paintings but indescribable shapes. Perhaps this intrigued Mr. Klock.

When we first met, we were polite and spoke little. My German vocabulary was limited; I explained complexities in simple sentences. But he avoided words I might not know. I showed him my works, yet he fixated on the small ink drawings. He called them “dimly alluring,” possessing a pull he termed “little time.” I never grasped his meaning. Our communication often misfired, yet it didn’t hinder our friendship.

Mr. Klock visited my studio almost monthly, taking at least one piece each time. He carried a sturdy portfolio (60x50 cm). My ink works, mounted to fit,

slid inside perfectly. Larger pieces he admired but left—likely too big for his case.

His payment method was unique: checks. After inquiring about prices, he meticulously filled them out, often suggesting, “Shall I add a bit more?”—like when he noticed my camera lacked a flash. Writing checks was a solemn ritual for him.

Once, he asked if I regretted selling him smaller works while keeping larger ones. He proposed a contest: who would preserve their papers longer in the world?

Mr. Klock loved paper.
He believed paper held a special magnetism—*one needs paper*. He adored reading, books, paper’s softness, the rustle of pages. He missed computers and cellphones, perhaps intentionally. He ignored non-paper media, rooted in the past. His knowledge was anchored in his era. I often watched his pale, slender fingers tremble near page edges, as if paper breathed and shivered with him.

When writing, he traced each letter twice, as if checking whether ink had wounded the surface. His job as a Klöckner accountant involved daily paper, yet his home wasn’t book-cluttered. His few books were carefully wrapped.

We occasionally read together. Sitting opposite, an open book between us, he’d read inverted text aloud, pointing with a swaying finger. He read me Bible passages fluently, as if rehearsed.

He once collected drawings by Düsseldorf Academy professors but stopped—perhaps due to rising prices or lost interest. Later, he amassed thirty-odd paper-cut works by a genius artist, stored neatly in a white cabinet.

Mr. Klock collected only paper-based art, never too large, never shared. He numbered them uniquely, stored in drawers, and “aired” them according to mood or season.

By modern standards, he wasn’t a true collector. He had no dedicated funds or connections. A recluse, he lived in his mother’s inherited apartment, investing saved rent into his modest collection.

He lived alone, family-less, friend-scarce, yet immersed in art and books.

Mr. Klock preferred small exhibitions. Luckily, his radius was the Ruhr region—vast enough for him. Yet even there, finding affordable, desirable art was rare. From 1990, he focused on paper drawings, leading him to my work.

His discovery of my ink pieces was my luck, the luck of small works and humble exhibitions. But it might not have been *his* luck. Every collector hopes their choices endure, but none can predefine “right” or “wrong.” Klock

consulted no one. Each purchase was final, errorless. In this, he was outdated. By the 21st century, his kind of collector had vanished.

During his decade-long focus on my ink works, I saw them merely as side income—funding grander projects. Did Klock know? Of course. Could he change it? Had it bothered him, his sharp mind (able to read/write backward) would've addressed it. He never asked. If he had, I'd have confessed.

Those ten years ended with the 20th century. By then, we were close friends, and he stopped collecting.

After meeting Klock, I moved my studio to an old schoolhouse in Weidingen, Eifel, for more space. Klock maintained his visits despite the arduous journey: Duisburg to Köln, then infrequent trains to Bitburg.

Bitburg's old station had a deep-green mailbox and a stone pillar engraved "235m above sea level." Each time when I picked him up, I noted that number.

Post-Berlin Wall fall (1993), U.S. bases downsized, leaving Bitburg quiet. Vacant homes dotted the area. My schoolhouse once housed American pilots who'd eloped with village girls—love stories now distant yet recent when I arrived.

Seeing me rush toward him, Klock squinted, then uttered something incongruous—as if resuming a conversation begun en route, regardless of my comprehension.

The drive home wound 20km uphill. Klock never drove, nor marveled at scenery. He never asked why I lived so remotely.

We climbed steep hills, navigated sharp bends, passed a tiny "miraculous" chapel, and reached the 1937 schoolhouse—stone posts, no gate, a dozen lindens older than the building. Wind swept the 410m-altitude grounds year-round.

Silent in the car, Klock once mused: *"One sees only what one knows."* A partial truth. He saw only the familiar; so did I, painting my perceptions, not known realities.

He was baffled by my tree-planting amid abundant foliage. German's *Blatt* means both "leaf" and "sheet." He advised focusing on "paper leaves" over "tree leaves." I noted Chinese distinguishes "leaf" (叶) and "page" (页), homophones but different characters. He stared, astonished.

He disapproved of my homestead efforts but never argued. On contentious topics, he paused, then changed subjects, believing all disputes were core-identical, differently phrased.

Yet in later meetings, he revisited it: *"A gust fells leaves en masse, but a floor

of foliage can't replace a single paper sheet."* By then, frail, he began entrusting final affairs—donating his Duisburg flat to the city, prioritizing his caretaker neighbor.

From a cardboard box, he produced two yellowed photos. One possibly depicted his father. Born in 1940 (wartime), Klock was his mother's secret, illegitimate child. The young man at the front never returned—no marriage, no engagement.

He handed me a paper scrap: *"Was that you last night? I heard knocking."* A girl's handwriting. Another crumpled note: *"The second-floor light was on…"* likely the young man's. These fragments, possibly from 1939, were also donated. *"My mother lives on in the city archives,"* he said.

As amazed by my drafting skill as by my painterly ambition, Klock withheld judgment on my oils. Pressed, he finally said: *"With such a respected teacher guiding you, I worry it's too grueling."* Hardly an answer. I half-doubted his sincerity, yet it sounded just like him—fretting over my toil (which it was).

Still, Klock kept visiting, effortfully. Each time, I ensured he left with something. His persistence prolonged my joy in Xuan paper play. Finding a favorite sketch, he'd glow as if unearthing a gem. He treated them as preexisting discoveries, not creations.

Yet he often grumbled about traveling far only to find two or three drawings. When I showed more, he'd shake his head: *"Intimidating, like an exam hall."* Then he'd spot one tucked in a corner, retrieve it tenderly, eye me sidelong, awaiting approval. Softened, I vowed to give him all he desired while resolving to create better works—for him.

Truthfully, I never concentrated on drawings. They were occasional diversions. My "main occupation" remained large paintings. The ink works existed solely for Klock.

When he selected a piece, I mounted it on same-sized card stock, framed it with a 2HB pencil, signed below—all under his gaze. Only then did I hand it over.

The transfer was quiet, solemn. My offering hand trembled; his accepting hand too. The shared paper quivered more, rustling fragilely. A ritualistic moment.

Perhaps 24 hours prior, I'd sliced that sheet from a six-foot Xuan roll, crumpled it recklessly, then smoothed it fearfully, observing light/shadow shifts before inking spontaneous patterns. Now, it was what it was.

Driving Klock back downhill (410m to 235m), he once requested a stop at a steep slope to savor the Eifel panorama. Standing, as if answering a question, he muttered: *"I don't know what to do with them either."*

No one knew—his “them” being the collected works. Useless, unsketch-like, they could only warp his cabinet drawers. *“What to do? Maybe a mistake. They belong elsewhere, a museum.”*

By then, he’d gathered 77 pieces, aiming for 100. Each would bear a small stamp: *“ZEITSAMMELN”* (Time Collecting).

Twenty years later, I saw the complete collection.
In 2016, at Duisburg’s DKM Museum. Klock had donated them without telling me. DKM founders, unfamiliar with me but aware of my appearances at Art Basel and other art fairs, contacted me upon receiving the mysterious trove. I flew immediately.

The 105-ink drawings were still there, as Mr. Klock had taken them from me, exhibited in a small room, distributed on the table, as well as in my studio and Mr. Klock's apartment – unchanged, without stamp. The dear Karl-Hermann Klock was also present, looked somewhat aged, held his walking stick and sat quietly, completely immersed in the surroundings, like an observer. An intern who had written the first report back then is now the editor-in-chief of a major newspaper and also present. This reporter had long forgotten that he had written this article, but what surprised him was that his name was clearly at the bottom of the newspaper section. Other unknown persons stood around a large table, often seen in art museums, pointing to the pictures.

Someone asked me to sit next to Mr. Klock, and someone took a photo – the only common picture of me and Mr. Klock in a noisy, busy moment.

From beginning to end, Mr. Klock did not once mention the donation of the pictures. I never asked for it either. It wasn't that I didn't want to ask, but I was afraid that his answer would be like any of our meetings, a casual remark that popped out of a random passage, as if answering my question. It was better not to ask and just keep quiet, go quietly with him. A short walk, but it made a big loop, three times as long as necessary. It wasn't until I remembered that he said, "Oh, I wanted to take a detour on purpose. "

I was also a bit cheeky and when asked why he had not received my letter, I said that there had been ice rain for two days and the mailbox was in the village (which is 500 meter away from the schoolhouse) – unlike for him in Duisburg would have been much more convenient .

In the second year after the donation of the pictures, Mr. Klock died.
The paintings collected by Mr. Klock during his lifetime were donated to Museum DKM. But what remained in my hands were hundreds of letters he had written to me, hundreds of memories, his poems, which he himself had collected in three book-sized, unbound volumes, a never published article and a quick booklet that had been broken off in the middle of the text, with the indication that I should destroy it.

The sound of his stick hitting the floor echoed with a dull "thump, thump." He was old, but he could still walk, his back was bent like that of a worm. Slowly he climbed up the stone stairs of the Duisburg City Theatre, with his head lowered and recited aloud Schiller's long sentences were clearly engraved on the roof of the theatre. I followed him, he did not raise his head, went on and read, completely forgotten that I followed him.
I never forgot Mr. Klock. I believe that his collection was truly a collection in the truest sense of the word. Collecting not only means bringing something from one place to another, the collector also collects himself.

Likewise, I never forgot the ink drawings I made. Really good pictures carry their own story in them. Some of the works resemble designs for today's large paintings. Every year, when I returned to Düsseldorf, I could see Mr. Klock again. He was obviously aging fast. I continued to paint my big pictures and worked hard just as he had predicted.
I no longer dared to talk to him about my work on paper, but secretly I kept some drawings I had made at certain times. If the old man asks, I would definitely leave the drawings to him. The ink pictures were made just for him, and that will never change.

I had also created four bound books with ink drawings. I had already given him one as a thank you for the article he had written about me. The other three, each with 40 pages of fully drawn work, were still on my bookshelf in Düsseldorf, stored in handmade leather boxes, along with the three volumes of Mr. Klock's poems.
Su Xiaobai, Spring 2025