

速寫生活

吴冠中

Wu Guanzhong
**Sketching
from Nature**

Learning kit
on-the-go

Introduction

The “Wu Guanzhong: Sketching from Nature” exhibition takes place at the Wu Guanzhong Art Gallery on the fourth floor of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, where around 30 sketches and paintings by Wu Guanzhong (1919 – 2010) are on display. These works are accompanied by quotes from Wu Guanzhong, offering you insights into the creative philosophy and emotional journey of the artist from his sketching trips. Whether you are at the exhibition or at home, you can discover Wu Guanzhong and his works through this learning kit. We hope it will inspire you to observe things through the eyes of an artist, and discover beauty in the familiar and the ordinary.

Wu Guanzhong Sub-unit
The Hong Kong Museum of Art



Do you recognise this man? At the exhibition, you will see many photographs of him painting or sketching. He is Wu Guanzhong, an artist who had devoted his entire life to art and produced countless masterpieces. Wu enjoyed drawing in nature and often travelled far and wide to seek creative inspirations. He said that he loved exploring new locations with his sketchbook on hand, as he felt like a hunter with a rifle searching for his prey. What kind of landscape did Wu enjoy sketching? What did he "capture" during his hunt?

Instagram filter: pen and ink



We are used to recording beautiful things on our cameras or phones nowadays. Wu Guanzhong, however, did not have this technology when he was young. Instead, he would carry a sketchbook and pen wherever he went, just so he would not miss out on any opportunity to capture a beautiful scene. Sometimes he would catch sight of something and want to record that special moment instantly, such as the sketch he made in Shitang when the fishing boats were returning to the harbour in anticipation of a storm. His most famous anecdote was one from 1980, where he was so overwhelmed by a beautiful white wall he saw during a stop-over in Ningbo that he had to sketch it down right away, and this made him almost miss his train! It seems that the great artist was just as crazy about "checking in" at locations as we are on social media!

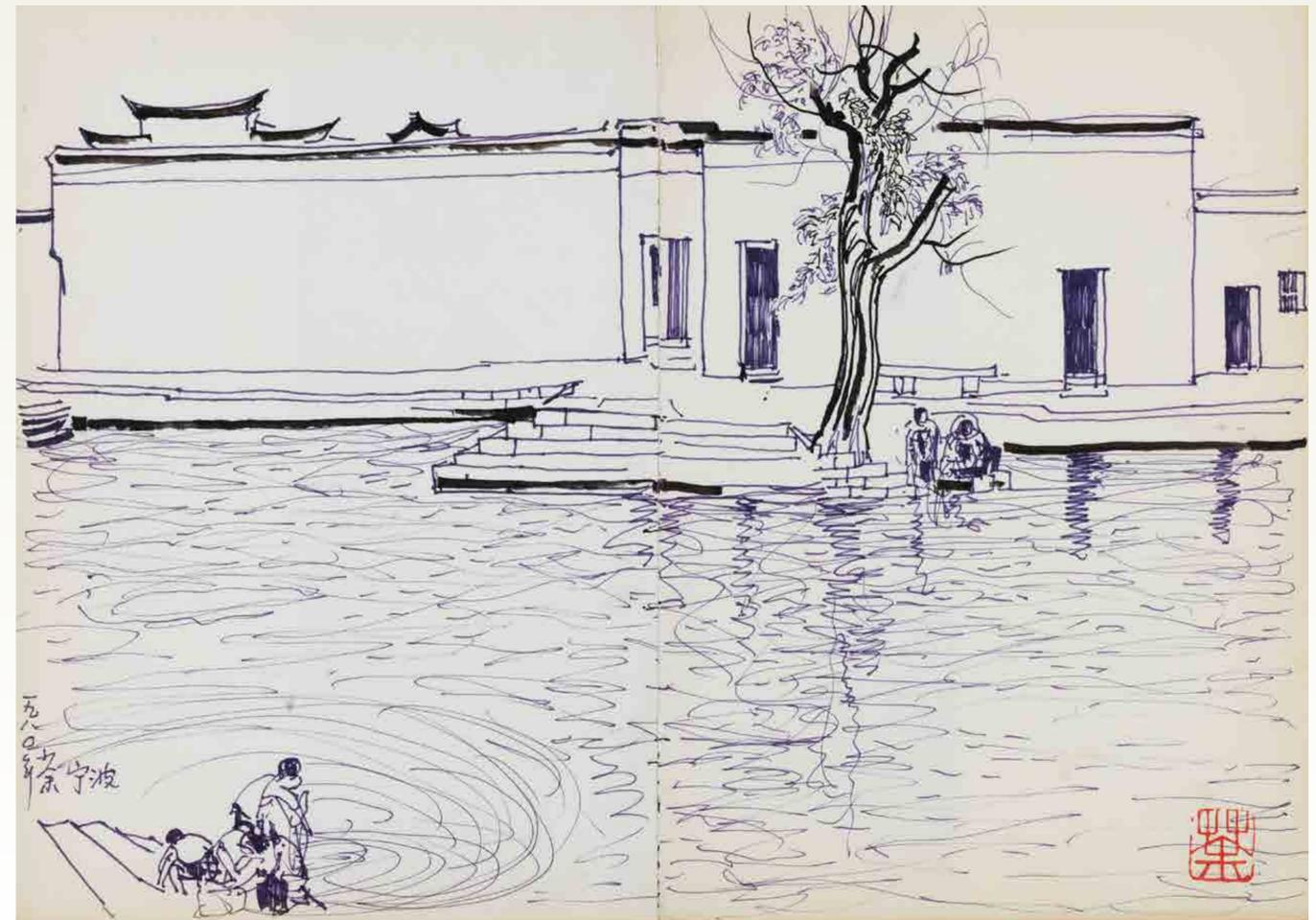




 Shitang 1982

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 Artworks currently on display in the exhibition

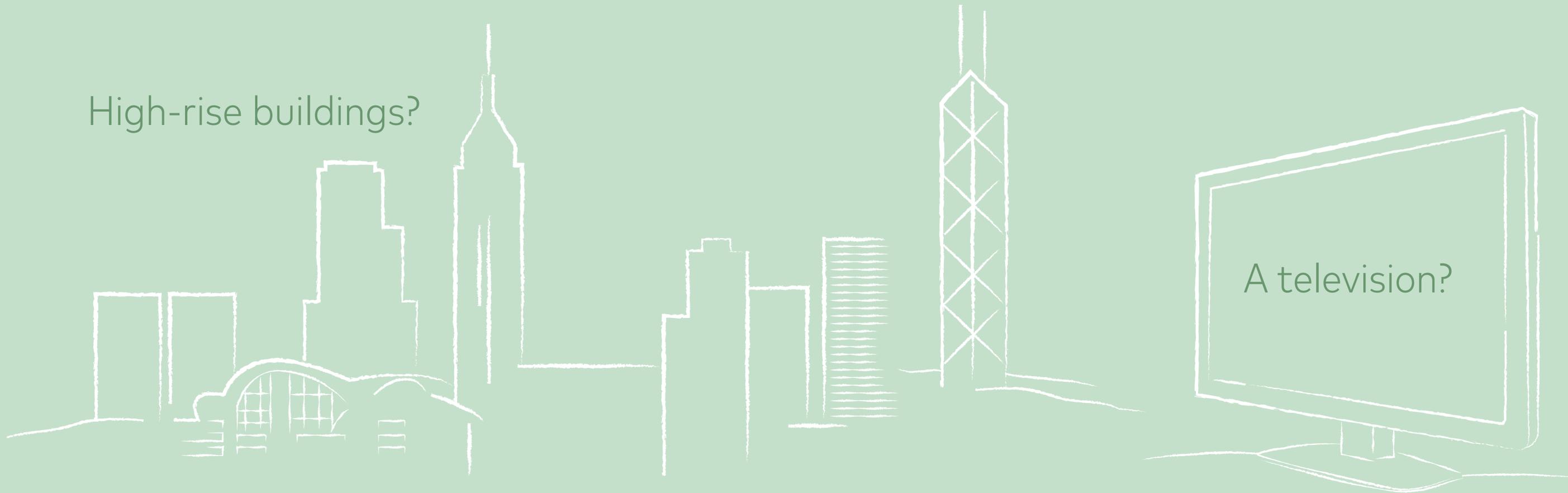


A riverside village of Ningbo 1980

Now take a look around you.

If you were to sketch anything, what would it be?

High-rise buildings?

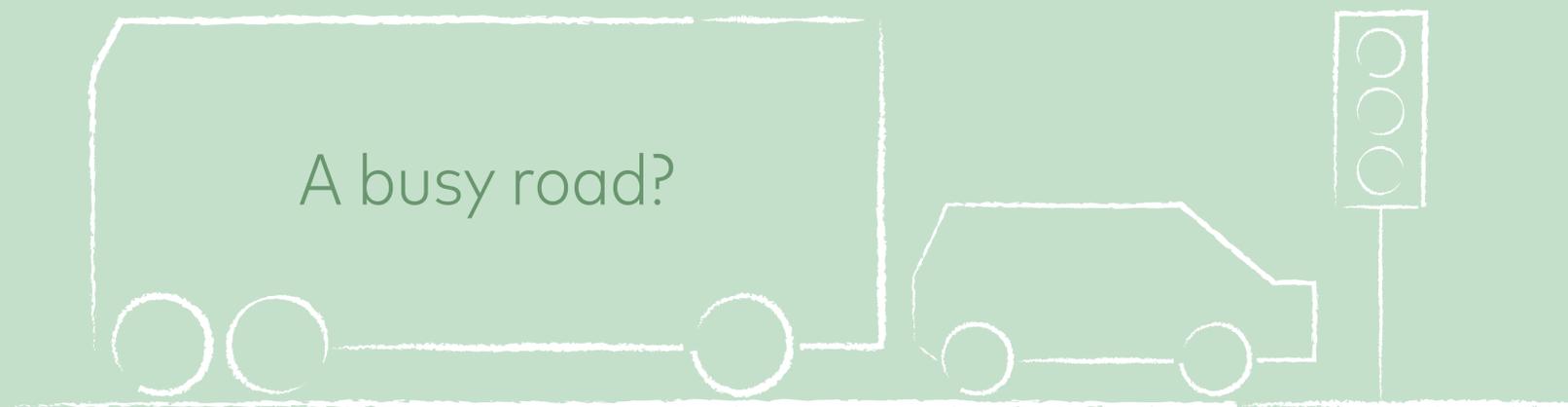


A television?

A flowerbed?



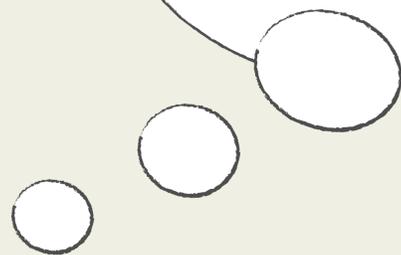
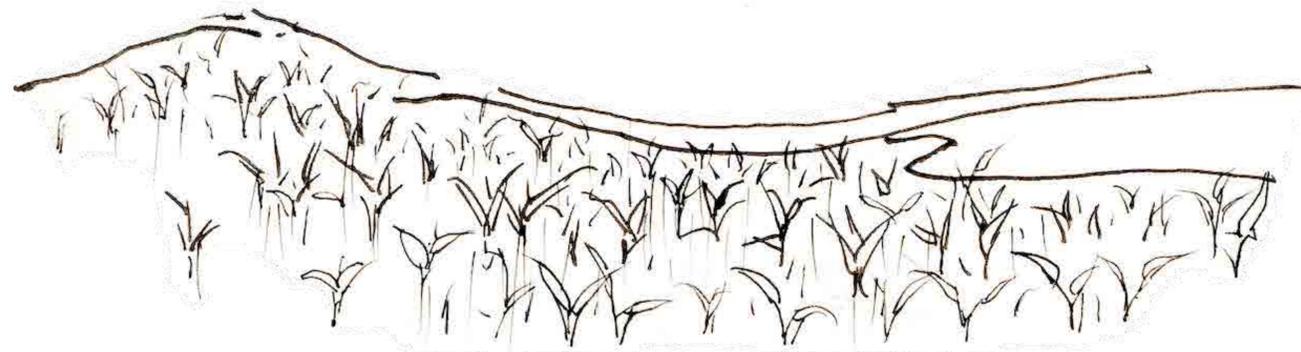
A busy road?

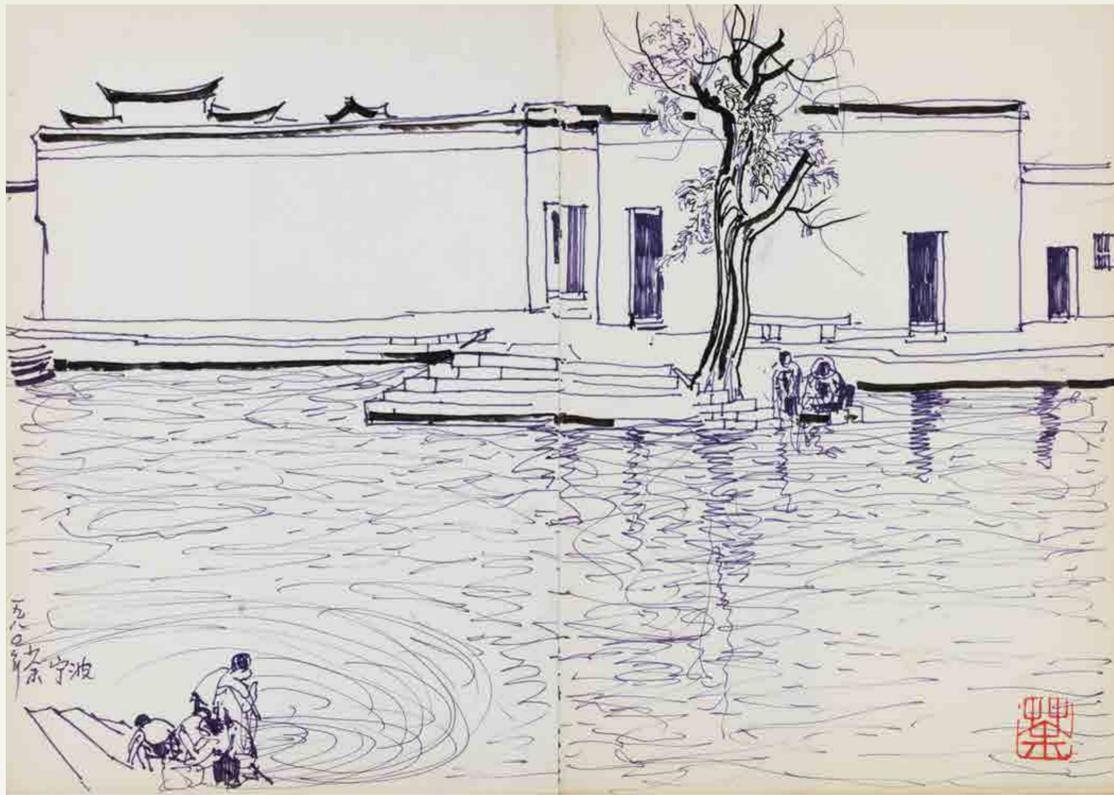


Nurturing beauty from nature

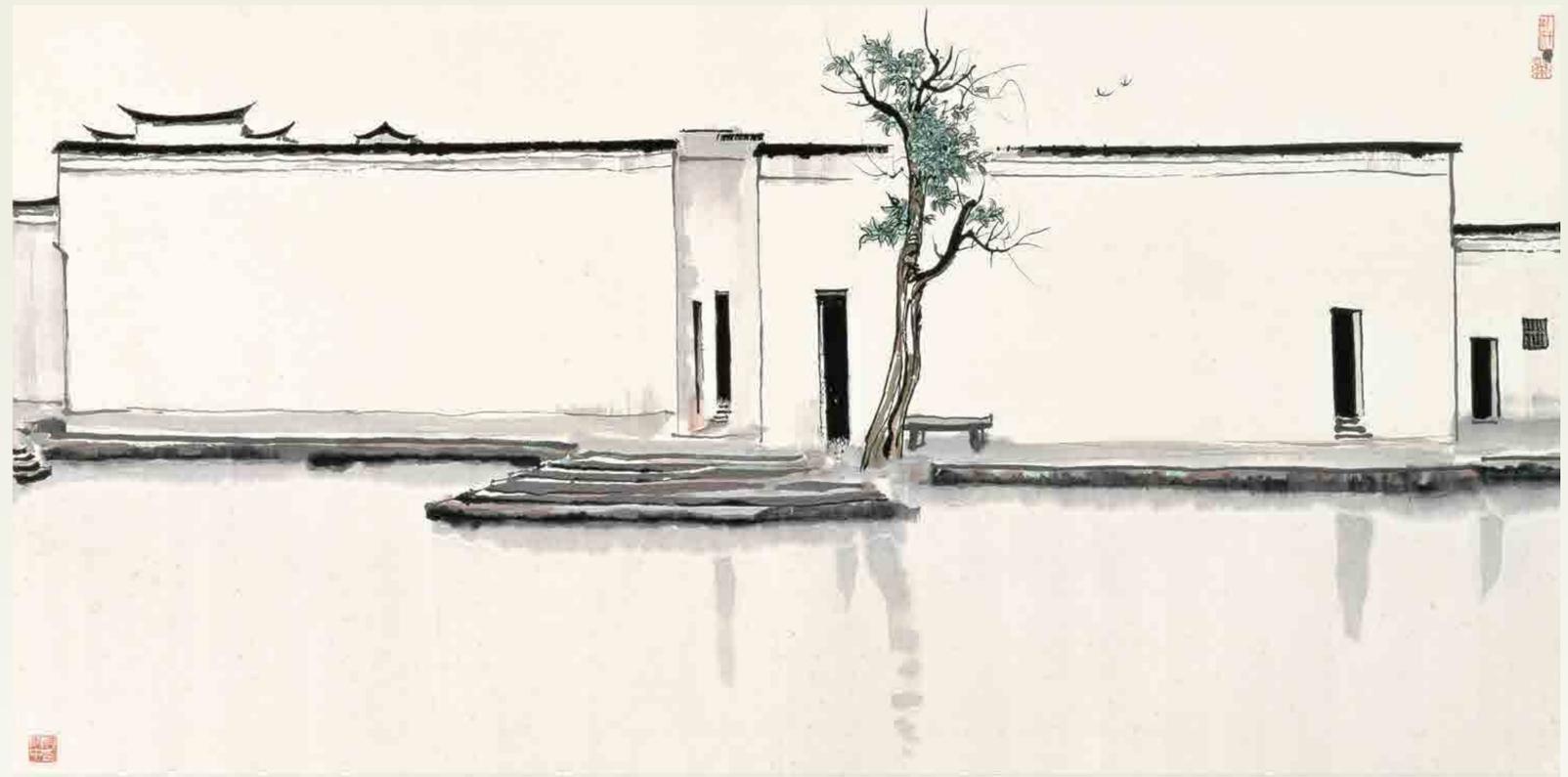


Besides the hunter-and-prey analogy, Wu also likened the process of sketching to that of carrying a baby. He said that when he drew, he always started with observing the environment, and then generated the idea and forming the image in his mind. The composition of a work was usually formed during the sketching process. From there the piece would be developed into a large-scale ink or oil painting. Needless to say, Wu saw sketching as an important step and source of inspiration in his creative process!





A riverside village of Ningbo 1980



Two swallows 1981

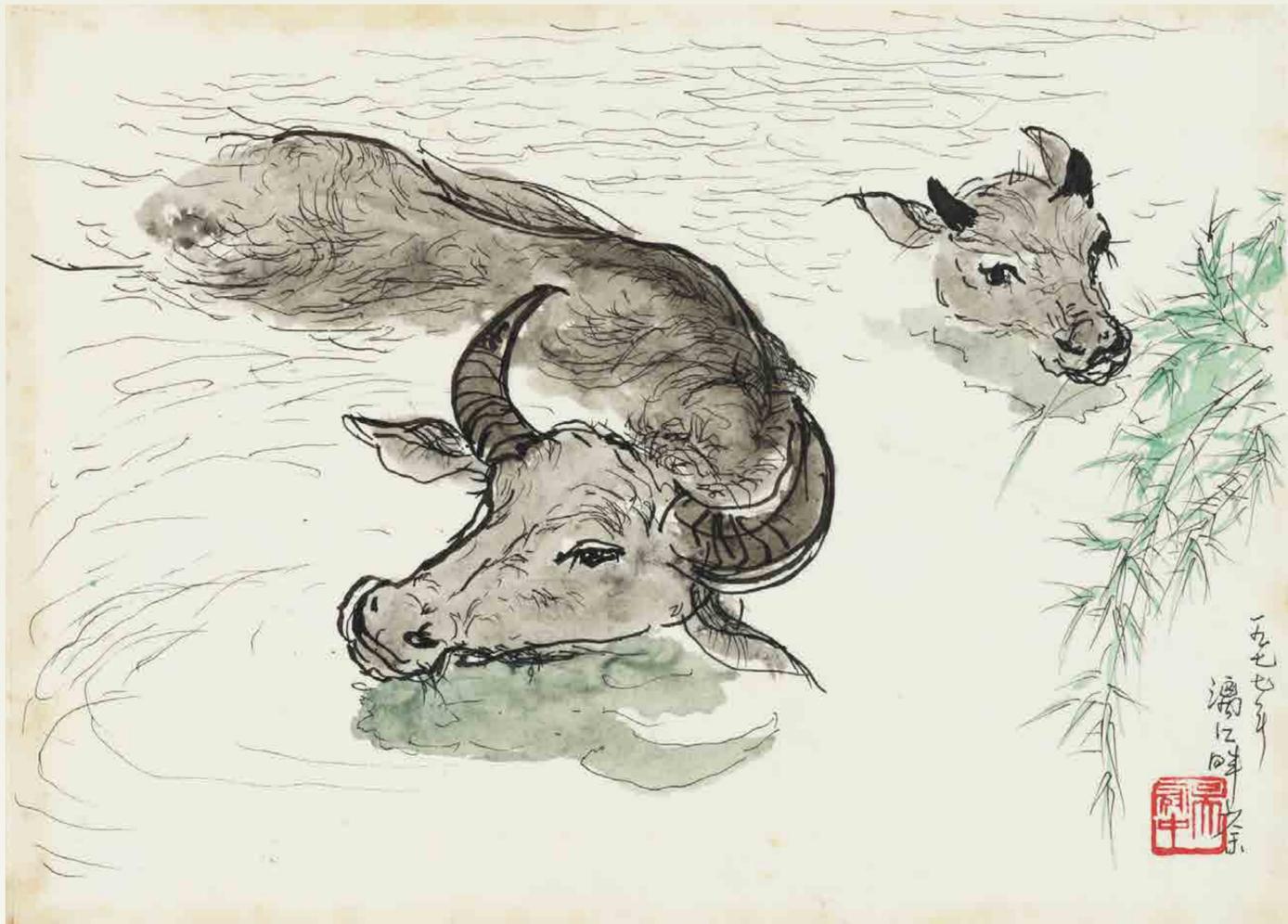
After sketching *A riverside village of Ningbo*, Wu Guanzhong began working on the piece and completed the ink painting *Two swallows* 1 year later. Compare the two works, can you tell what Wu had removed in the sketch? What did he add in the painting? Do you like this composition? Why?

Suggested answers:

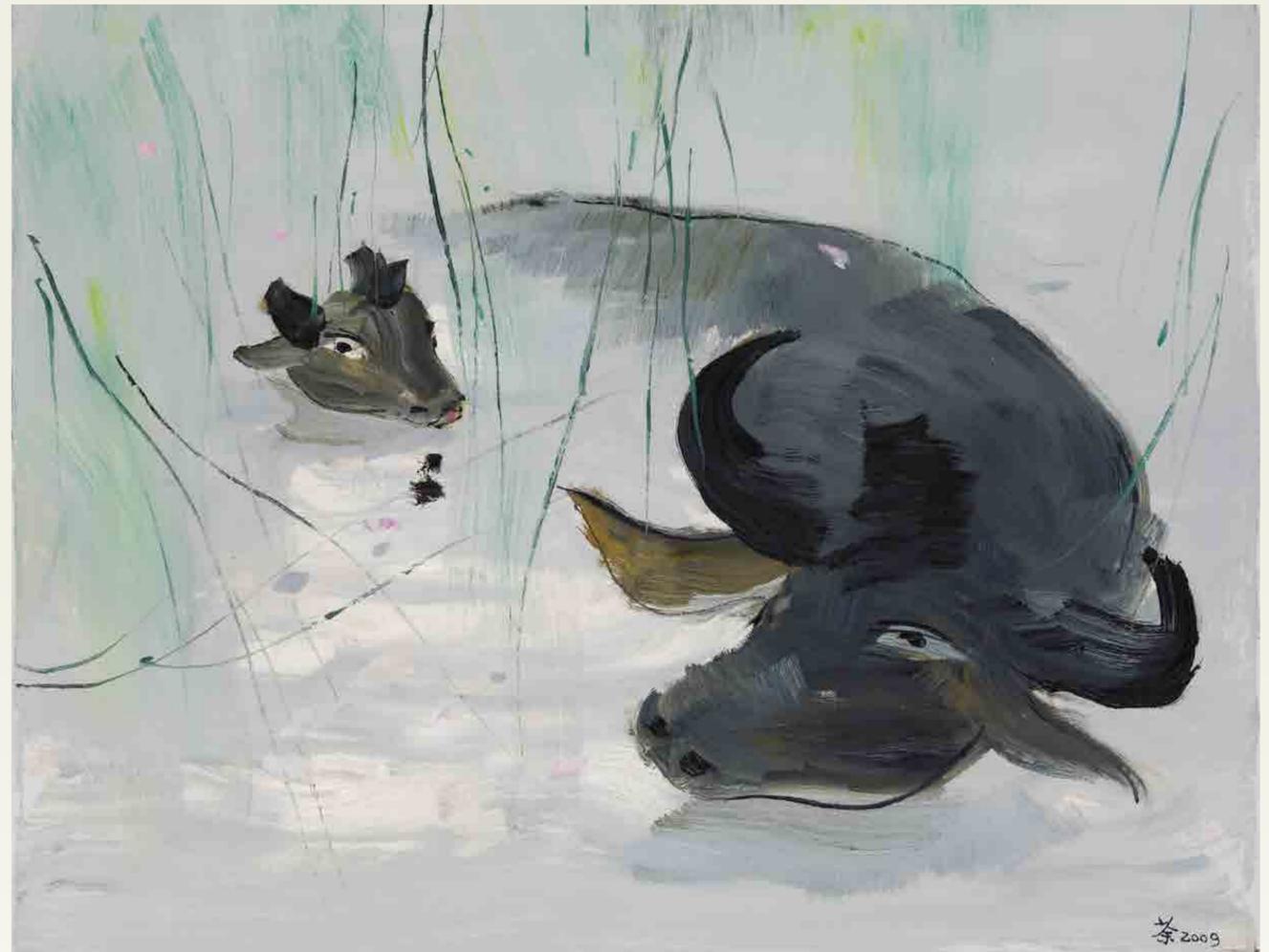
In the ink painting, Wu Guanzhong removed the people from the sketch to create a simpler composition and highlight the geometrical shapes of the architecture, generating a more serene atmosphere.

He also added a pair of swallows in the ink painting for a more poetic feeling.





 Buffaloes 1977



 Warm water 2009

Take a look at these two works which are currently on display at the exhibition. It took Wu Guanzhong more than 30 years of childbearing from the sketch to the oil painting! The painting shows a more abstract style which was the characteristic of Wu's later works. Most interestingly, the positions of the two buffaloes are switched! Why do you think Wu made the change? Do you like it?

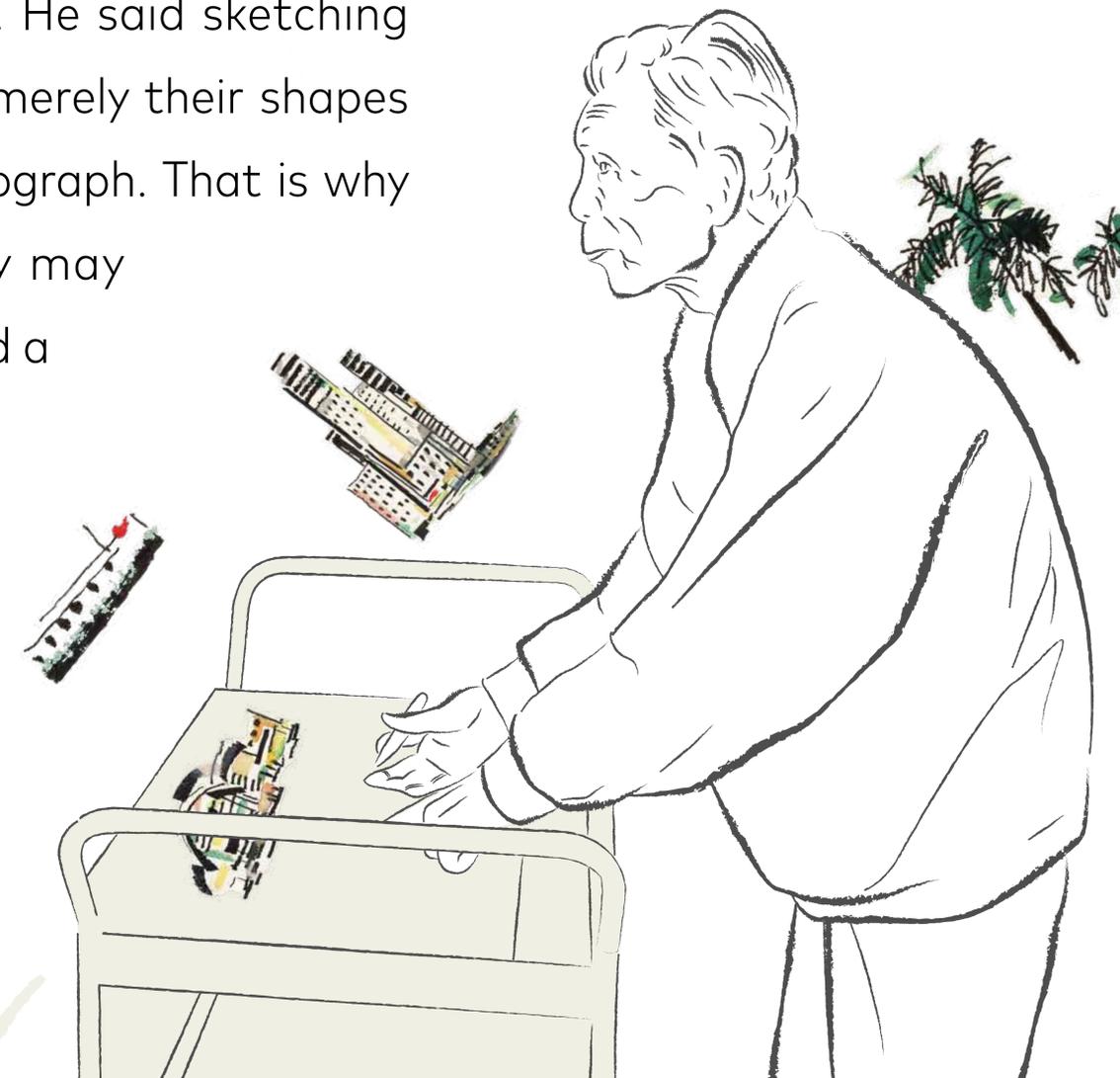
Suggested answers:

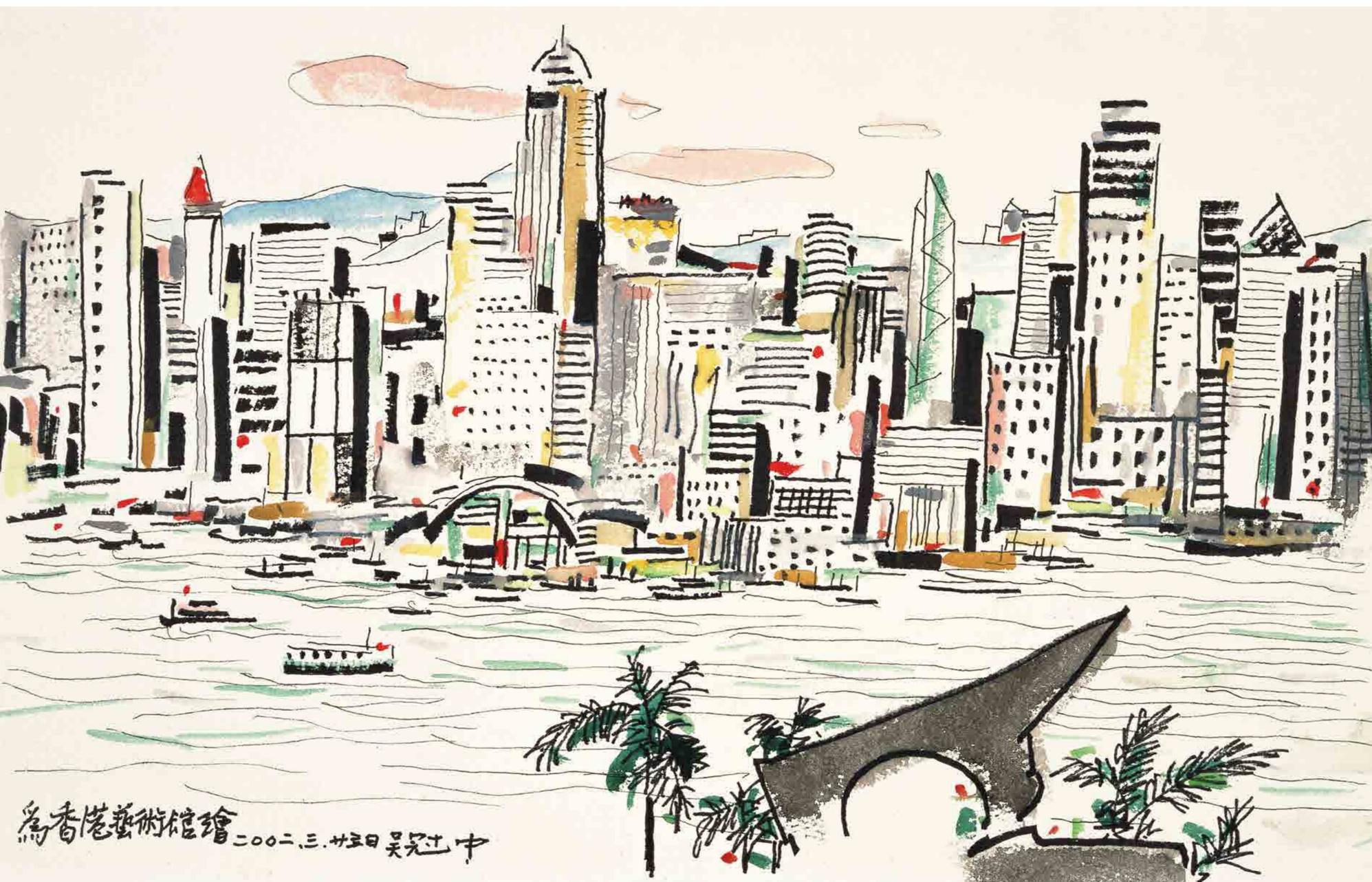
Based on the title of the painting *Warm water*, Wu was possibly seeking to convey the strong affection shown by the old buffalo and the calf, which are gazing at one another.



The master's image retouching skill

We can tell from the paintings above that Wu Guanzhong did not plainly sketch from reality, rather he liked to change the positions of objects and landscapes to enhance the composition of his works. This was the master's special image retouching skill and he called it "move-the-site sketching". He would extract the most attractive elements from a scene, then rearrange or reconstruct them to form the unique image he had created in his mind. He said sketching was about capturing the spirit of things, not merely their shapes and form which made no difference to a photograph. That is why his works are so beautifully composed. They may resemble the real landscape, yet it is hard to find a viewpoint that captures the precise scenery — all because he had reshuffled everything to create a new image!





Victoria Harbour 2002

This painting was made during Wu Guanzhong's demonstration of sketching Victoria Harbour at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2002. It was a rainy day and Wu could not see the harbour clearly. Nonetheless, Wu decided to draw the buildings based on his memory. He even included the sculpture and palm trees in the lower right corner of the painting, which were originally behind him at that time.

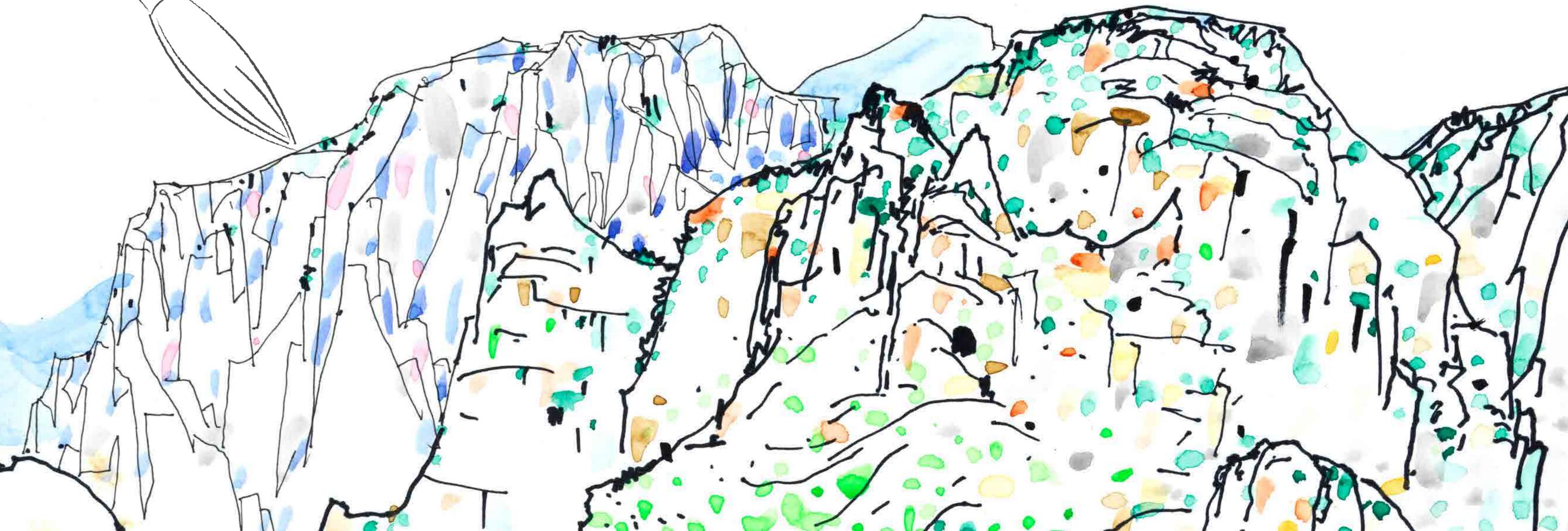
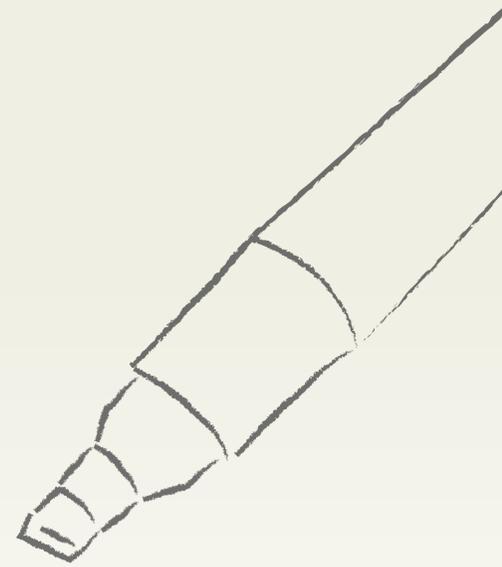
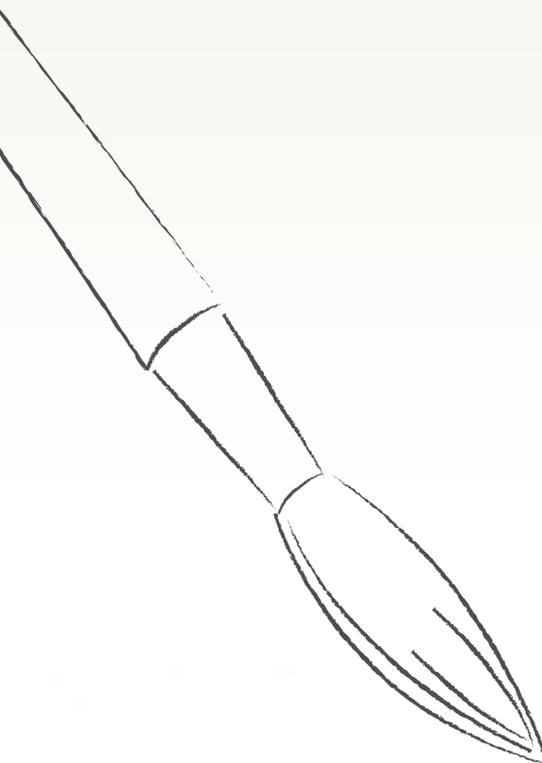


Tashilhunpo Monastery 1961

Wu already applied the "move-the-site sketching" technique as early as in 1961. During a bus trip in Tibet, he realised that speed could change one's perception of space and create an intriguing image through illusion while the bus was moving. The composition of *Tashilhunpo Monastery* was achieved by altering the distances and locations of objects and figures, namely the mountain, temples, trees and lamas in the painting.

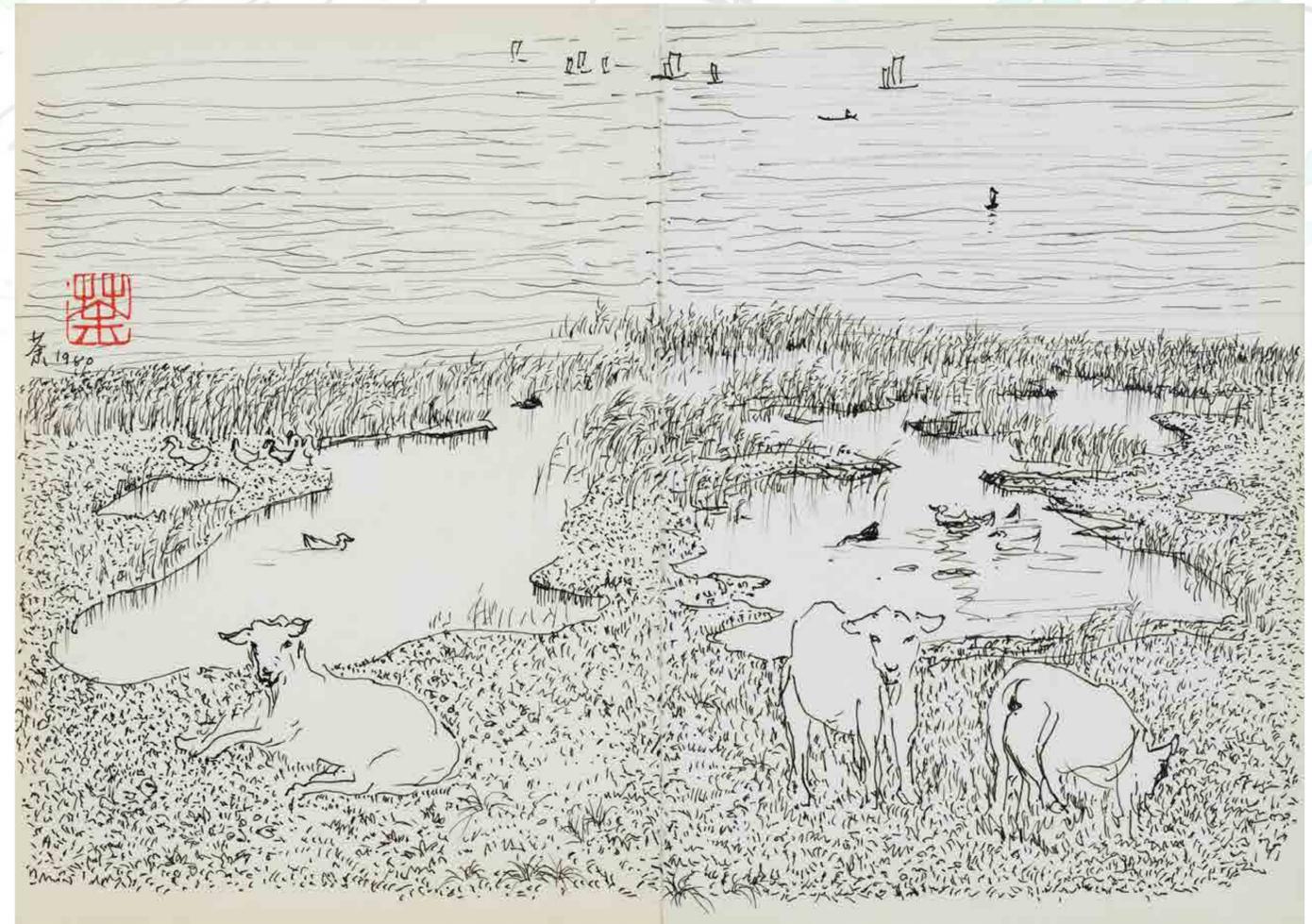
Sketching with colours

Besides pen and ink, Wu enjoyed using various media for his sketches, such as watercolour, markers and felt tip pens. He was able to capture the vibrant and lively atmosphere of a scene through his bold use of colours. On the other hand, his monochromatic sketches usually feature thin lines with more details, while strong brushstrokes highlight the shape of majestic mountains and rocks.

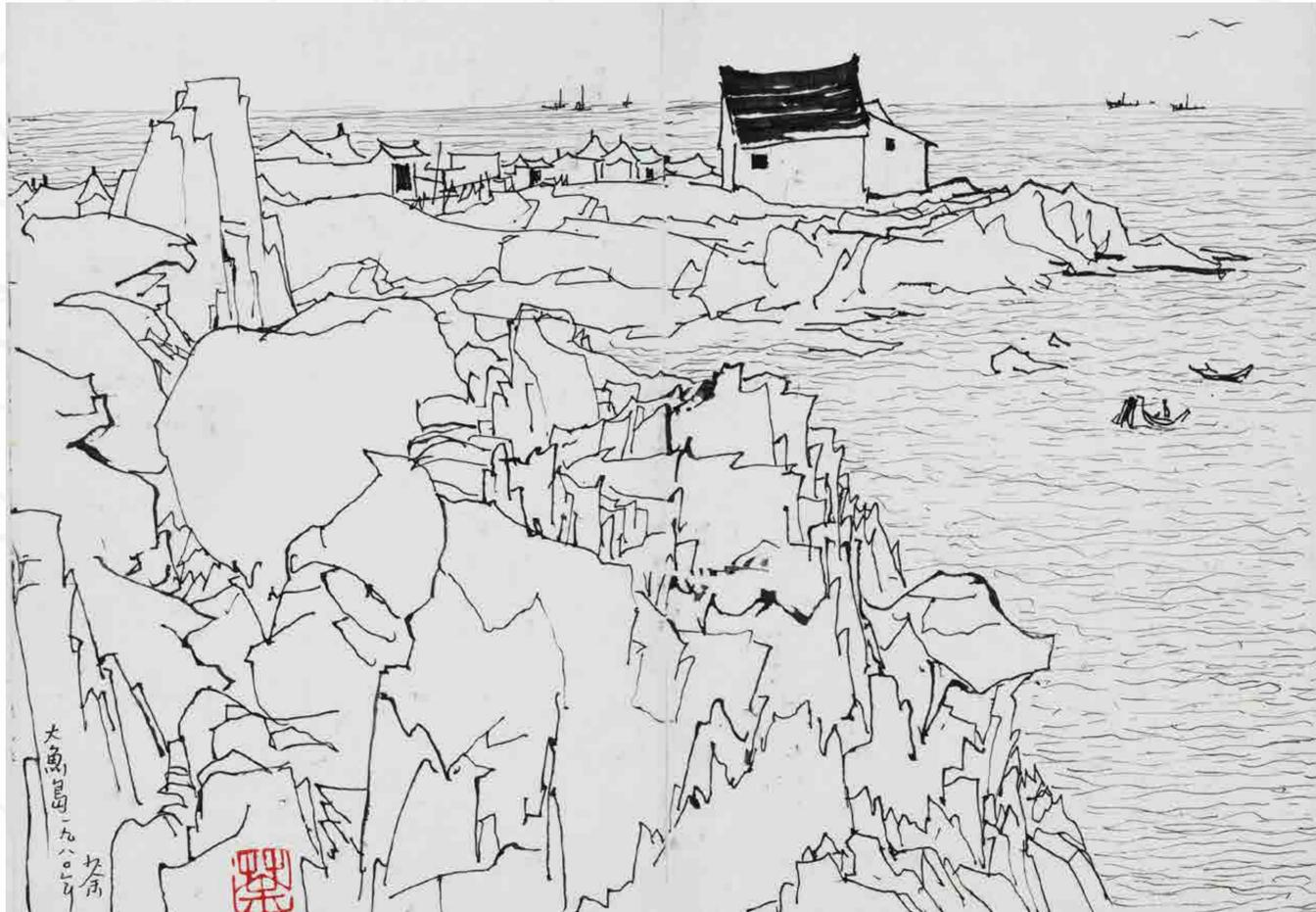




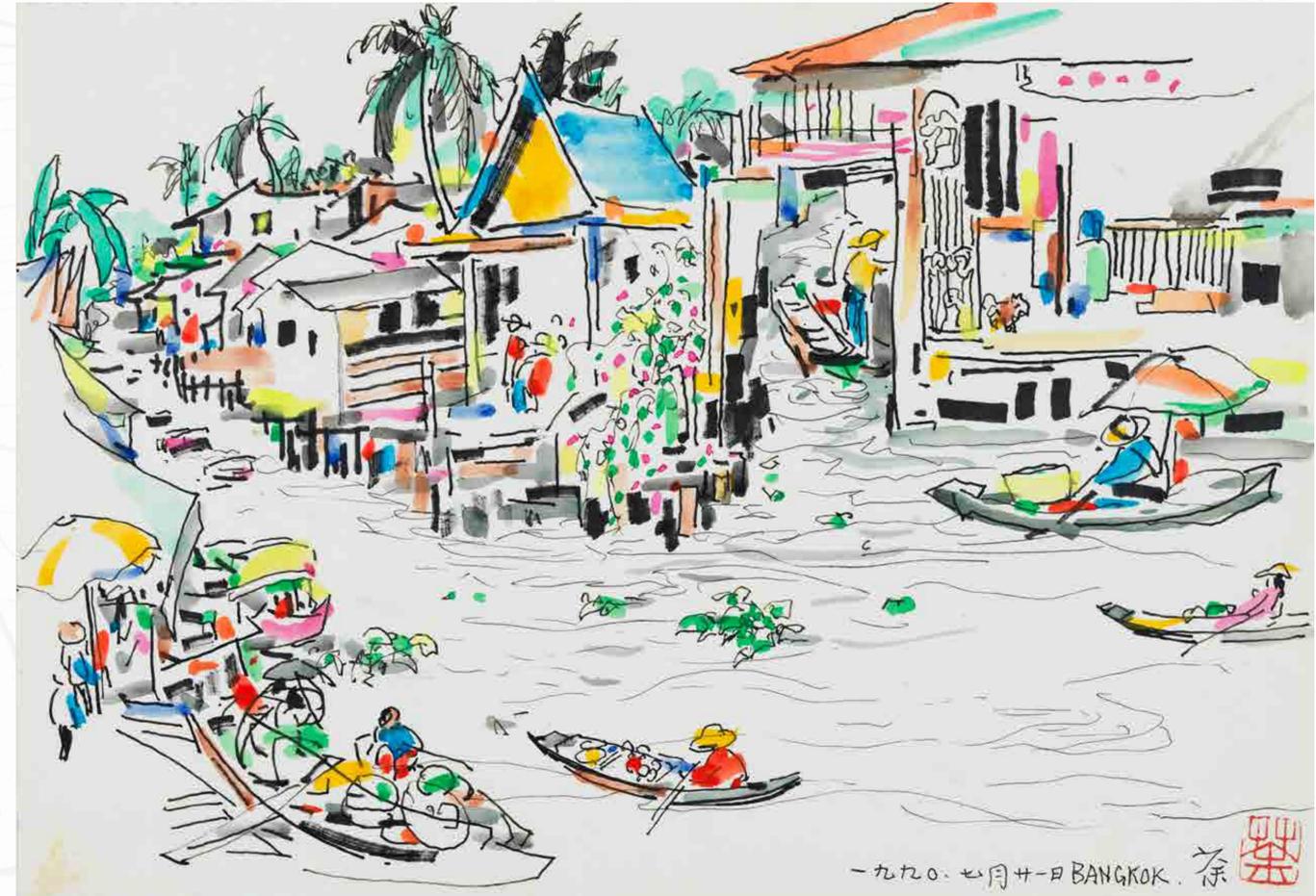
 A seaside scene of Kaohsiung 1997



 Beside Lake Tai 1980

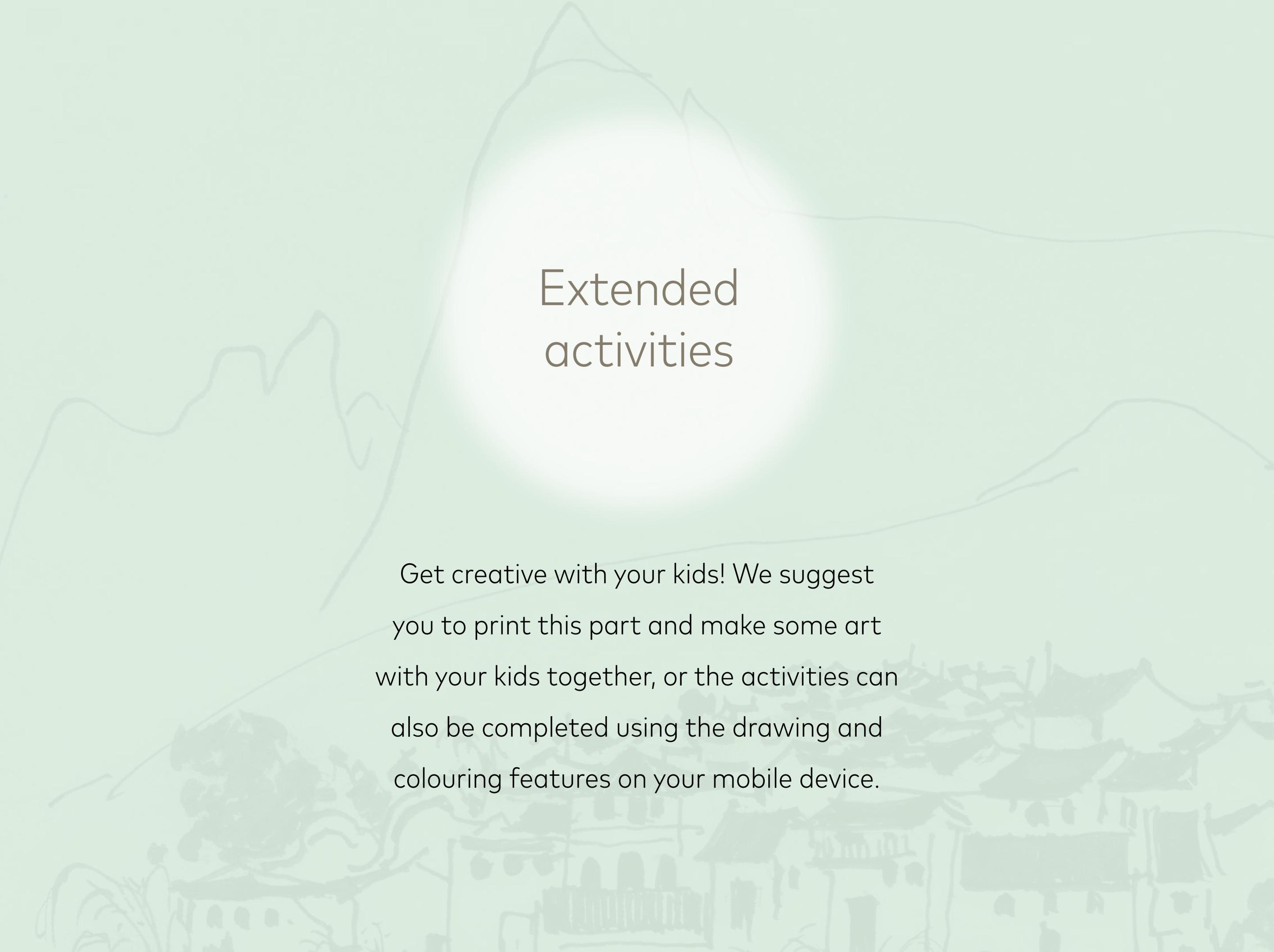


 *A cape of Dayu Island 1980*



A floating market in Bangkok 1990

Which ones do you enjoy more?
His monochromatic or coloured sketches? Why?
Feel free to share your thoughts.

The background features a light green color with faint, sketchy line art. At the top, there are several jagged mountain peaks. Below them, a series of rolling hills or a valley is depicted. In the lower portion of the image, there is a sketch of a village with several houses, some with gabled roofs, and what appears to be a fence or a path leading through the buildings. The overall style is minimalist and artistic.

Extended activities

Get creative with your kids! We suggest you to print this part and make some art with your kids together, or the activities can also be completed using the drawing and colouring features on your mobile device.

1.

Sketching the everyday life



Let us try to apply Uncle Wu's "move-the-site sketching" technique. Choose what you would like to sketch, rearrange the objects any way you wish, and complete a unique sketch using your preferred medium. Do you notice the environment and the colours around you? What catches your attention?

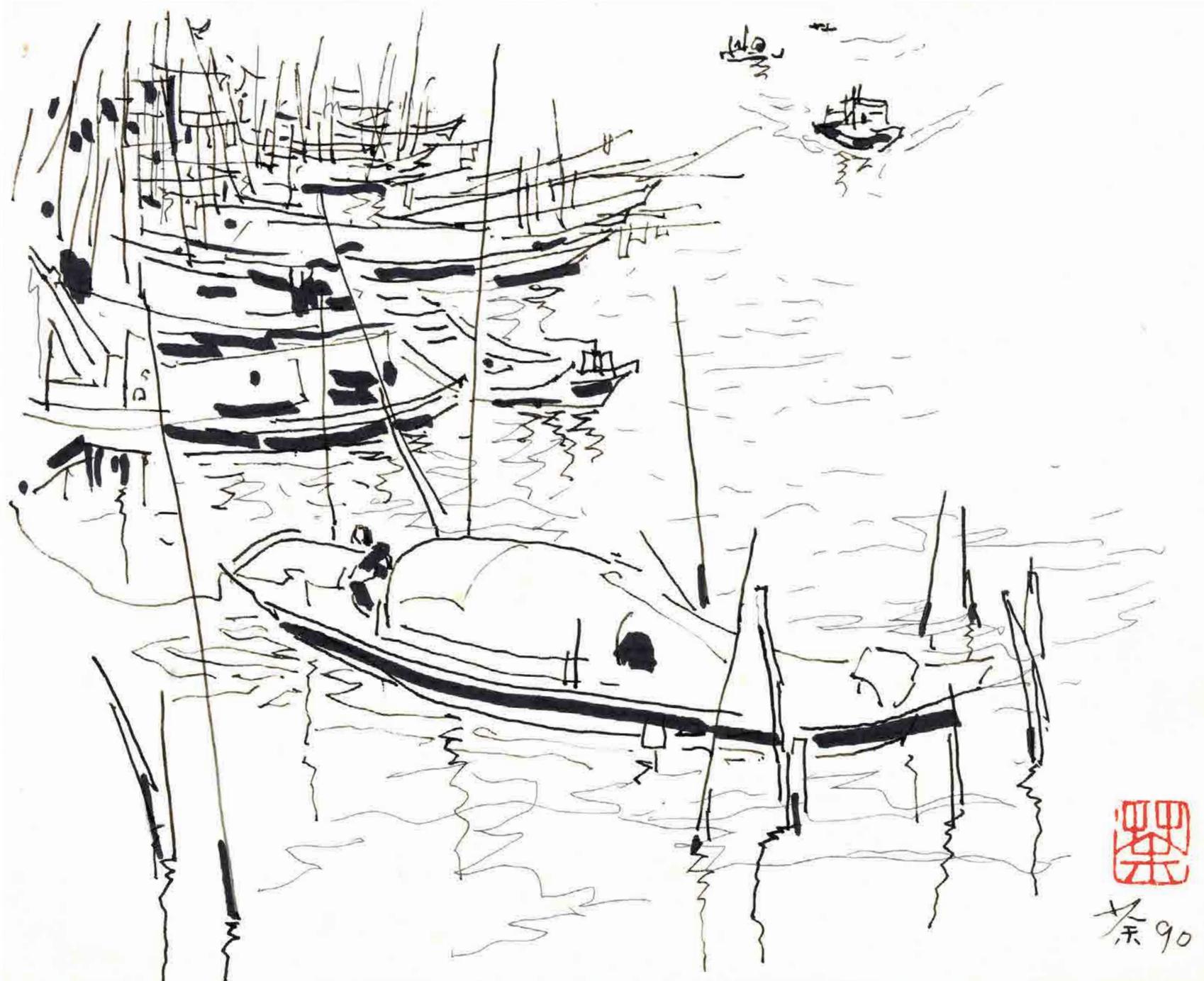
Weather: _____ (For example: a sunny/stormy day; hot/cold weather)

Time: _____ (For example: morning/evening/night-time)

Mood: _____ (For example: calm/excited/angry)



2. Colouring sketches



 A group of boats 1990

Let's add a bit of colour to Wu Guanzhong's sketches, shall we?

Do they look and feel different to you after you have added some colours?

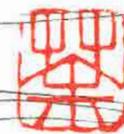
Example:



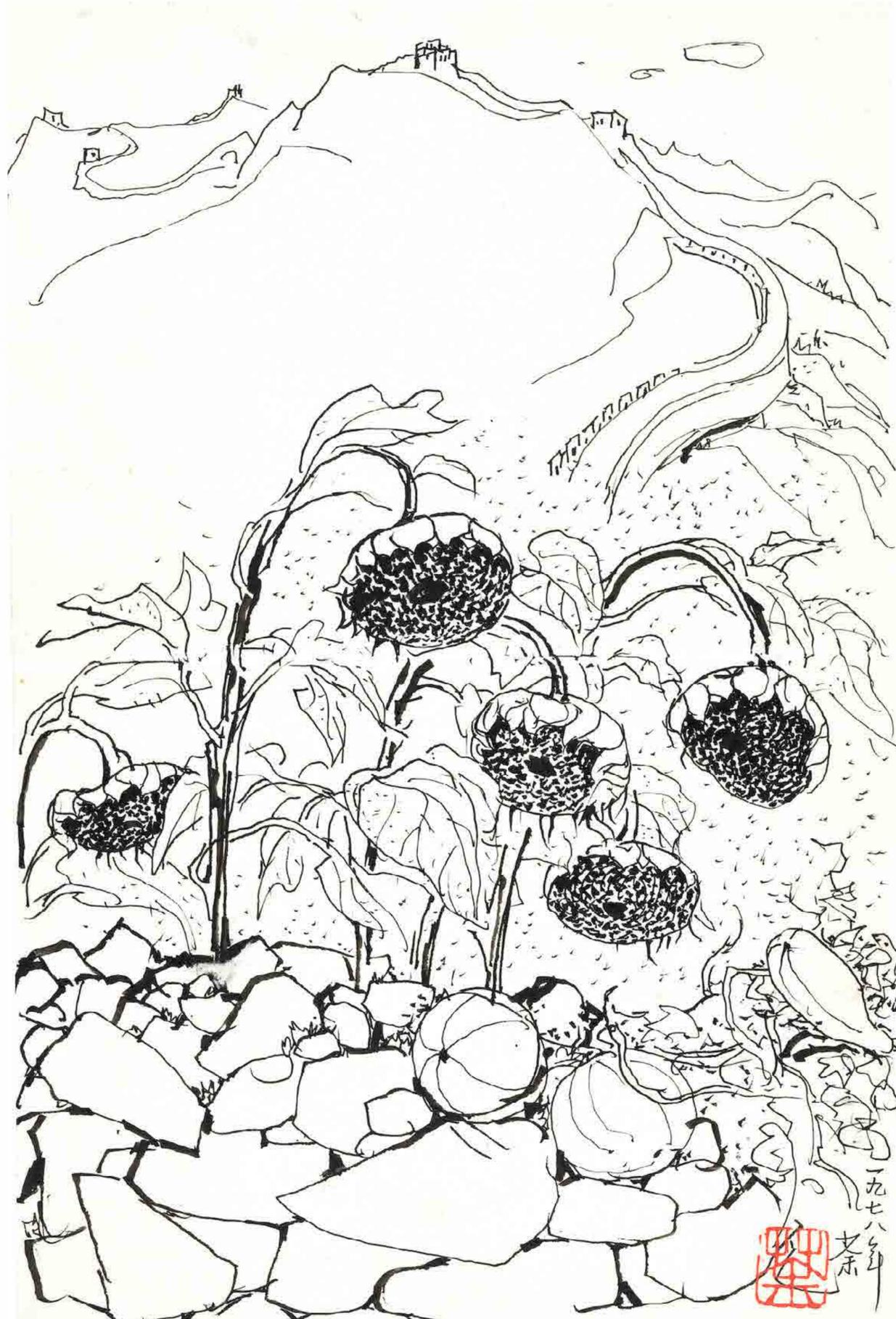
Boats in Indonesia 1994



大邑
一九七九

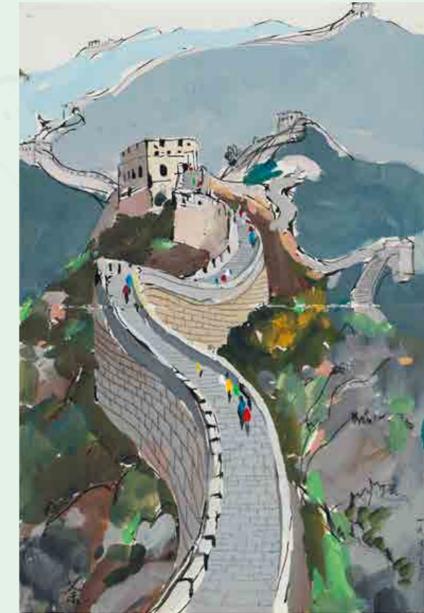


 A riverside scene of Da county 1979



 Sunflowers at the foot of the Great Wall 1978

Example:



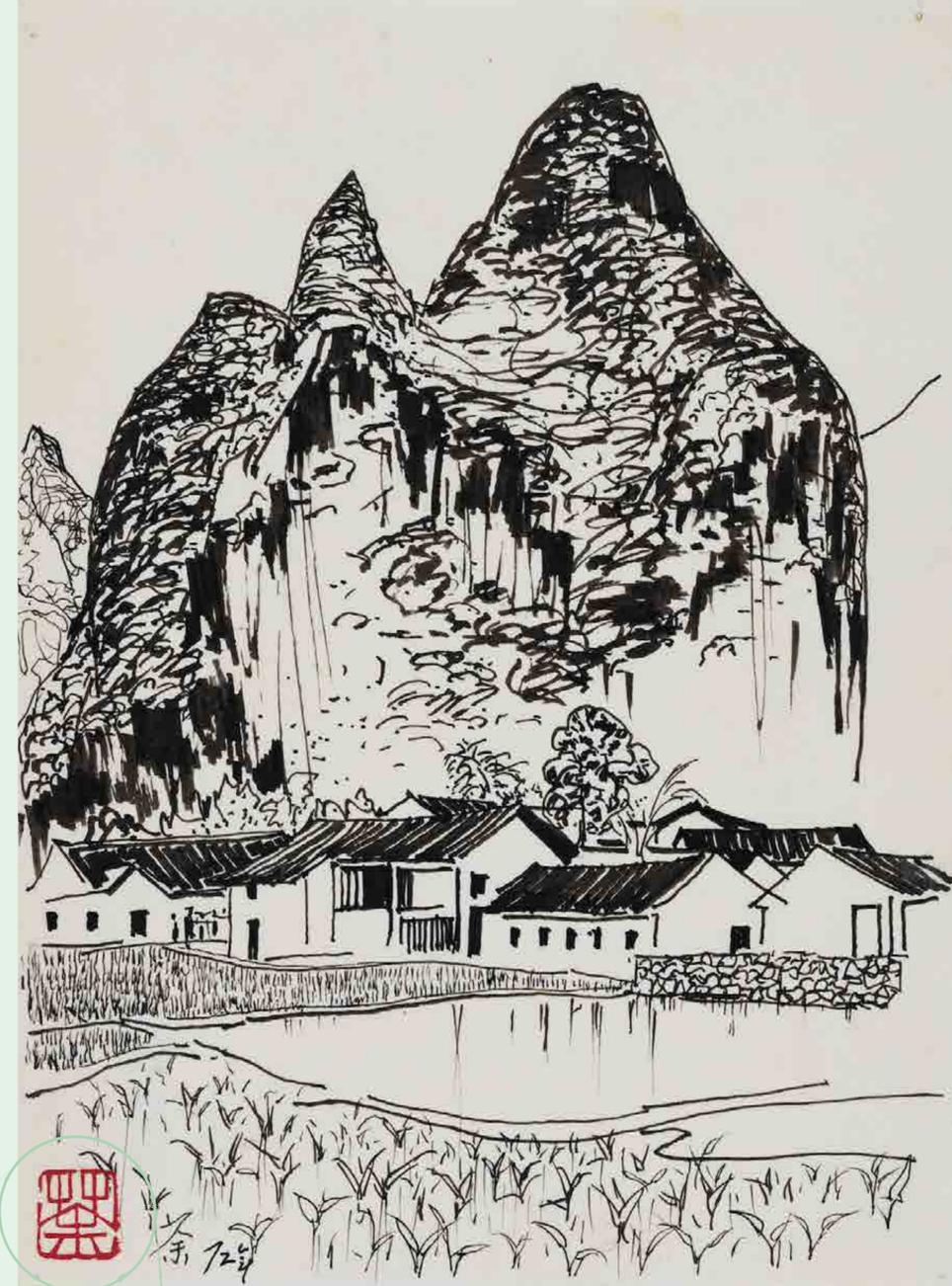
The Great Wall (II) 1978

3.

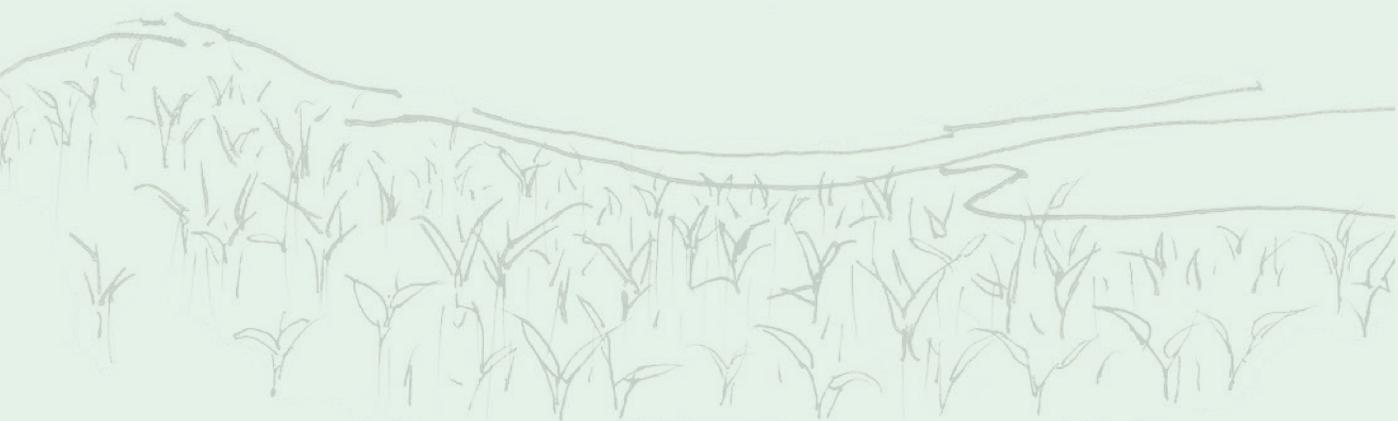
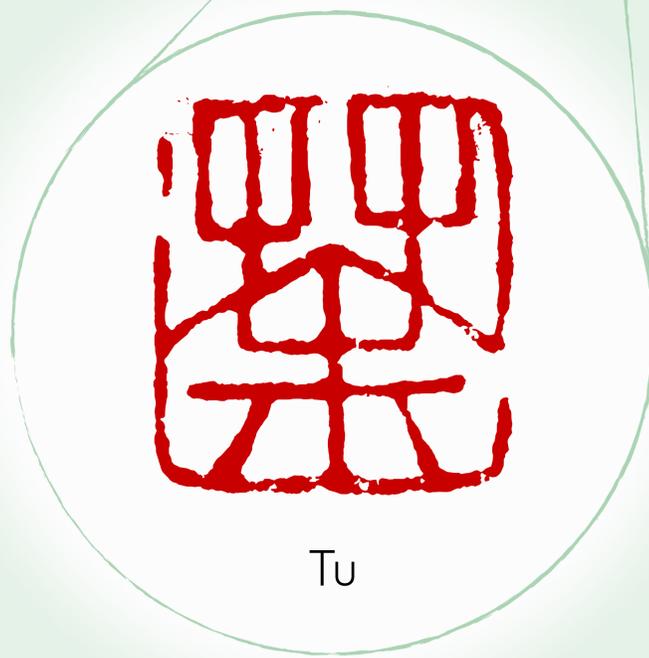
My pseudonym

Do you notice the red square seal that often appears in Wu Guanzhong's paintings? It is a seal carved in relief with the character "Tu". Tu (sow thistle) is a herb with a bitter flavour. Wu used it as a metaphor for his life — from experiencing war as a student, to coming upon the Cultural Revolution that broke out after his return to China from Paris. With all the sufferings and bitterness, he decided to use the character as his alias. Despite life's challenges, Wu did not grow to be resentful. Through adversity, he was able to pursue truth and beauty in the world, and his experiences became an endless source of inspiration for his art.

If you were to give yourself a pseudonym, what would it be? What best describes your personality, emotions and values?



Yangdi, a village of Guilin 1972

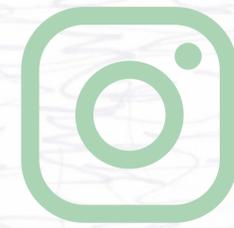


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Buffaloes 1977 (detail)